

*Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard* Reviewed in *Review of Biblical Literature*, SBL, 10/2003. Roy E. Gane, Andrews University

At first glance the subtitle of Paul Borgman's *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard* (252 pages, including selected bibliography plus subject, author, and scripture indices) looks pretentious. After all, the analyses of Genesis over hundreds of years and the plethora of recent commentaries coming at it from a variety of scholarly and popular angles, how could we not have heard the story of this biblical book? Haven't sensitive and astute literary critics, such as Robert Alter (*Genesis: Translation and Commentary* [New York: Norton, 1996]), alerted us to every nuance on several levels?

Borgman delivers on his subtitle. The contribution of this English professor is to convincingly expose a web of narrative/literary connections that reveal dynamics of human and divine repetition and change within the context of a unified drama. Rather than viewing Genesis as a series of exegetical, literary, theological, or devotional bits and pieces, Borgman perceives under the surface of the whole book a powerful clarification of human experience that can transform hearers or readers by involving them in the narrative.

Although Borgman's volume could be regarded as a commentary in the sense that it systematically interprets the text of Genesis, his unwavering concern is with tracing major themes and their permutations rather than with explaining all the details. So he covers the entire primeval history (Gen 1–11) in a single chapter (ch. 1) comprising part 1, "The Prologue," which introduces the normal human tendency to self-aggrandizement that began with wrong choices of Adam and Eve when they attempted to improve their relative position. Cain and Lamech followed the same destructive pattern. Even after God took drastic remedial action by wiping out all except Noah and his family through the massive force of the flood, the pattern of self-absorption vigorously revived in the builders of Babel. So God was back to square one. What could he do to break the cycle? Following his brief sketch of the human problem as described in the primeval prologue, Borgman devotes the remainder of his book to an alternate approach that God adopted

during the patriarchal era (Gen 12–50). He patiently called, coaxed, and challenged Abraham and Sarah (part 2), Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah (part 3), Joseph and family, and Judah and Tamar (part 4) into partnership with himself to reverse the curse of selfishness by providing blessing to all families of the earth. Although the divine aim remained constant, the Lord adapted his tactics to effectively meet the individual needs of different personalities. He always respected human free choice but provided opportunities and tests to lead people toward better choices that would benefit others and not only themselves.

Development of Abraham's partnership with God was paradigmatic. An ordinary man, Abraham's trust in God was undermined by fear for his own skin, to the extent that he was willing to compromise his wife's sexual purity by telling Egyptians that she was his sister. Through a series of seven encounters with God over a number of years, he progressively learned to trust God, to let go of his fear, and to seek the well-being of others, beginning with his own family and extending to people of other nations. When he trusted God enough to relinquish his own son, God confirmed the covenant promise that all nations would be blessed through him (Gen 22; compare 12:1–3). Although Jacob was less willing to let go than Abraham was, God led him through tough circumstances to the point that he agreed to give up his beloved son, Benjamin, to the uncertainty of a trip to Egypt. Joseph began as a normal, self-centered lad, but through experiencing a series of "pits"—a dry well, slavery in Egypt, and prison—he became the culminating partner with God in the book of Genesis, providing life for his family and blessing to other nations.

The most impressive feature of Borgman's book is the way in which he finds narrative/literary links between various parts of Genesis and derives their meaning within the overall drama of divine-human relationships. For example, the way in which Joseph tested his brothers echoed God's test of Abraham and also of Jacob. Borgman writes: "What the brothers learn from Joseph's testing is the same complex and demanding lesson that their great-grandfather Abraham learned from God: letting go of the normal and parochial ways of being in the world. The Genesis God, and Joseph, are not inscrutable or capricious. . . . God and Joseph both want individual

reorientation and a measure of reciprocity from those over whom they have power; each desires blessing for all peoples. Herein is a Joseph easily mistaken. Herein is a God we haven't quite recognized. This is the story we haven't heard." (240).

Although he is an English professor, Borgman's interpretations unobtrusively draw on rich knowledge of the Hebrew text and scholarly literature. While he does not attempt to provide definite answers to all the tough questions that he raises, he is prepared to parry scholarly opinion and make a plausible, balanced case for a minority conclusion. For example, while many exegetes view the way Joseph took the land of the Egyptians in exchange for grain and set up a 20 percent tax on future crops (Gen 47) from a modern perspective as ruthless machination for the benefit of Pharaoh, Borgman puts this policy in perspective: the Egyptians are grateful that Joseph has kept them alive; strong management can avert future disasters; a 20 percent flat tax is relatively light; and the text affirms Joseph's concern for households and "little ones" of the Egyptians, just as he has sustained his father's household, including the "little ones" (215–18). Thus, without resorting to circular reasoning, Borgman finds the character of Joseph at this point to be consistent with the larger picture of Joseph's exemplary partnership with God.

To point out connections in Genesis, Borgman frequently interrupts the chronological flow of his exposition, and some chapters overlap in order to examine parts of the same stories from different angles. This could be confusing, but in addition to the clarity of his non-technical language and generally simple but often profound sentences, Borgman keeps the reader on track by means of a brief transition (in italics) at the end of each chapter of his book, which succinctly wraps up the theme(s) of the chapter and looks ahead to the next chapter. His approach inevitably generates redundancy as he looks at episodes from various directions and points out narrative echoes of God's anchor promise to Abraham throughout Genesis. However, he maintains interest by focusing on what is new and fresh by comparison with what is past and familiar.

Some aspects of Borgman's interpretation, such as his characterization of Isaac as passive

and rather incompetent or of young Joseph as “a perfectly hateful youngster . . . a tattletale and a braggart” (238) may seem slightly exaggerated and discomfort a reader who is accustomed to holding the biblical patriarchs in reverential awe. Even more disquieting are implications for our own lives as Borgman’s Genesis draws us into its story, probes the recesses of our souls, and lays bare the same kind of ancient drive to promote ourselves at the expense of others that has cursed our world since the time of Adam and Eve. Nevertheless, the accounts of the patriarchs, beset with faults and foibles as they were, engender hope that God can guide ordinary people to partnership with him for the sake of cosmic blessing.