



INTRODUCTION: GOD'S TWILIGHT ZONE

If God's mind is rich beyond comprehension, our world's origin—which God is said to have conceived—is not. Intended to be full of divine glory, the universe depicted in the Book of Genesis begins in an environment of *tohu va-bohu* (Gen 1:2), a desolation and confusion that might be imagined today as a nuclear holocaust, or the continued enslavement and destruction of entire peoples such as in the Bible itself were periodically reproduced, whether as a global flood, the incineration of Sodom, or the descent into Egyptian slavery. From this perspective, Genesis is less about beginnings than about how to avert the need for a new start.

Put differently, just as humans are themselves dust and to dust shall return, Genesis is a survival handbook in a world originating in desolation and threatening destruction. The heroes of the story, those that legend qualifies as Mothers and Fathers, survived conditions of extreme hunger and famine, endless wandering and homelessness and exile, in brief, all the dangers (rape, murder, enslavement, robbery, guile) associated with their existence as aliens. Instead of succumbing, they dreamed of better lives and tried to include others—indeed, the entire human race—in their own dreams. They dreamed those dreams as God's own plan for the universe, but their ways were those clear and *unmysterious* ones that still work today: human liberation, family and community building, labor, friendliness, justice and assistance for all, but with special attention and care for the weak and unprotected. Why these

were included rather than left to their own devices is because all people were, as the saying goes, felt to be family (Gen 12:3).

The dreamers par excellence were Abraham and Sarah, our parents, and their plan was focused: to keep *tsedaqah* and *mishpat*, righteousness and justice;¹ to behave decently towards *all* creatures so that the world can be saved. This still leaves room for God, of course, and throughout Genesis God is a major player in a field of dreams. But leadership is gradually handed down or over, so that while God is dominant at the start and rules supreme, by the end it is mainly Joseph (“Mr. Adding-on”) and Judah (“Mr. Thankful” or, “Mr. Contrite”) who run things. And God also learns a thing or two, so to speak, mainly how to deal with humans. For one thing, He learns tolerance for their evil and waywardness: what a transformation from the God of the Flood to the God who forgives even the Ninevites in the book of Jonah! For another thing, the venue of communication with humans has become enmeshed with their own projects. I refer again to dreams, to those nightly visions that speak ambiguously, perhaps about God’s plans but also about the strength of our hopes, the complexities of our character. Genesis is a book bracketed by dreams: at one extreme, Adam’s erotic dream of Eve and their one flesh; at the other, Joseph’s visions of personal power but also of sustenance for the masses in need.

The main protagonist is God, but a God whose powers are regularly questioned and tested and who, through constant dialogue and debate with humans, reveals other Names. As humans expand and create, He projects a personality both richer and more withdrawn. Readers of the biblical text are mistaken when they infantilize a complex deity or complicate God’s simple directives. Thus, on the one hand, the statement, “And God said to Abram” (Gen 12:1), seems so compelling that we wonder whether Abraham could possibly have refused God’s direct command, forgetting that the normal human way is to refuse and having no possible idea of what or how God speaks to us anyway. Maybe He spoke “directly” as in those old days of what Rabelais called “the Good Old God of Hosts (Armies).” But since there is no

¹Gen 18:19; Isa 5:7; 9:7; 56:1; Amos 5:7, 24; 6:12; Pss 33:5; 72:1; Prov 21:3.

clear prophecy today, how do we even begin to imagine? And if God, out of respect to human freedom and intelligence and initiative, draws tighter into himself, how is human contact to be maintained?

The complex relationship between God and humans emerges at the very beginning of the Bible, and its development unfolds within the dominant theme of creation and creativity. Since the transfer from divine to human creativity occurred very early, however (Gen 2:4), access to the divine patterns and prescriptions became paramount. These were traditionally apportioned to three different groups:

For instruction shall not perish from the Priest,
Nor counsel from the Sage,
Nor the word from the Prophet. (Jer 18:18)

When direct prophetic revelation expired with Malachi and the priestly duties with the destruction of the Temple, however, the vacuum was taken up by the third and only remaining category, the sages, whose duty was first and foremost to govern things down here in accord with the original plan.

This study examines how this transfer from divine to human creativity was recorded from the very beginning of the Hebrew Bible and remained a focus throughout. The texts discussed in this book are presented in the order in which they appear in the canonical Hebrew Bible. What follows is a brief synopsis of their contents.

The opening part of this book, “Creating and Maintaining a Righteous World,” is a study of the righteous and the wicked in Genesis and Exodus. The antithetical pair of *tsaddiq* and *rasha*^c, of righteous and wicked people as central concepts in the description of humankind’s purpose and possibility, is found in Ps 1 (see ch. 7). In the portions of Genesis and Exodus explored here, we learn that just as the *tsaddiq* is the human agent of the world’s existence, the *rasha*^c is seen as its destroyer.

The two chapters on Genesis bring new light to the dominant theme of righteousness. Across the spectrum of wisdom literature the Tsaddik is regarded as the “foundation of the world,” but it is difficult to find a critical and clear analysis of this concept. While current notions of “charity” and “freedom from guilt” remain

pertinent, the righteousness materials of Genesis focus on the earliest commandments of the Bible: being fruitful and multiplying, filling the earth, generating and saving families and entire peoples, and keeping families together. This is an important refocusing of this central wisdom concept.

In Exodus, Pharaoh's fear that the Israelites will "rise up from the land" (Exod 1:10) remains a crux. Through a renewed and expanded analysis of this expression, the central pillar of Pharaoh's counter-ideology of genocide is laid bare. Egypt's monarch is a self-confessed *rasha*^c or wicked person (Exod 9:27), the very antithesis of the righteous *tsaddiq*.

In the second part of this book, "Interpreting in the Twilight Zone," we study some of wisdom's literary methods as they are used in the composition and interpretation of central wisdom figures and texts. In the first of these chapters, we examine Samson, quite possibly the least beloved of Israel's judges, but for reasons that may have to do more with his critics than himself. The focus here is on debate through riddles (Judg 14), since it epitomizes the conflict of civilizations between the Israelites and one of their enemies, the Philistines. The issue is one of interpreting wondrous signs that occur and become reflected in the riddles: are they natural or sent by God? Such signs are ambiguous, as are other literary devices that were of interest to the sages: proverbs, dreams, oracles, and sayings. Samson's expertise in riddle-making alone qualifies him as a sage, no less perhaps than Solomon in the company of the Queen of Sheba. Add to this his innovative pay-as-you-go approach to warfare with neighboring ethnic groups, based not on petty vindictiveness, but rather, as God does on countless occasions, on the universal principle of measure for measure (see, for example, Judg 1:7). Set in the text between the extremes of Joshua's intended decimation of entire populations, at one end, and Saul's failure to wipe out only the really dangerous Amalekites, at the other, Samson's is a live-and-let-live policy regulated by a measured retaliation for wrongdoing. If that solution failed, this was due not to Samson but rather to those who were not up to his standards.

Just as the Samson story gives a privileged peek into the twilight zone of riddle formation and interpretation, so too does the Saul story in the related field of proverb creation. The famous proverb

about Saul in 1 Sam 10 and 19 (“Is Saul too among the prophets?”) may provide insight into what has remained a puzzle for proverb research since Archer Taylor’s resistant question “where do proverbs come from?” Specifically, do proverbs originate among sages or the common people? Here Samson’s debate in riddles is replicated as a “dialogue in proverbs,” suggesting an evolutionary model for the origins of wisdom itself. The dialogic model operates at another level as well, in the depiction and evaluation of Saul’s changing character and persona. For the narrative line is repeatedly challenged by a proverb that “perspectivizes” Saul from various points of view, from that of the local populace that longs for a king to the proverb’s particular external focus, that of prophecy. The Saul story can thus be characterized as a narrative in search of a proverb. For it is through the interplay of narration and proverb formation that Saul’s career is evaluated, modeling a dialogic relationship between sages and common people mediated by a wisdom perspectivism reminiscent of wisdom’s dual track in Qohelet. For is not one of wisdom’s chief interests to investigate how proverbs respond to and evaluate evolving contexts?

Unlike any other human being, Solomon was given a “wise and understanding heart” (1 Kgs 3:12), with the famous story of the split baby as proof (1 Kgs 3:16–29). We rush to a hagiographic reading (what a sage!) but without knowing why, and the typical “Because it was sent by God” only begs the question, because we still must understand how it was given, if only for pedagogical reasons. The narrative presents a case that cannot be solved by the usual means because of an intended total lack of evidence, and the woman’s cry (“Give her the baby!”) likewise gives no clear indication of guilt or innocence. The judge’s only and last resort then becomes one of wisdom’s ideology. Readers will be interested in exactly what that is.

There is consensus identifying Ps 1 as a wisdom text, and since it serves as an introductory prologue to the entire Psalter, its focus on righteousness is of particular importance. This psalm also introduces themes of central significance for the development of wisdom practice, notably pedagogy and a dialogue with God that is distinct from cult and prayer. The focus becomes a person’s “ways,” or daily behavior.

In the final part of this book, “The Rebirth of Vulnerability and Wonder,” we focus on vulnerability and then on wonder and its role as intermediary between heaven and earth. Since this sense of wonder arises particularly in later life, its connection to the vulnerability of old age presents an important aspect of wisdom’s optimism. In chapter 8 we focus on the famous “allegory on death and dying” found in the closing section of Qohelet (12:2–7), which is not only a literary masterpiece in its own right but also, paradoxically, the centerpiece of the book’s optimistic theology: a realistic optimism, based on what things really are rather than on what we would like them to be. This pedagogical text is intended to teach a youth two facts of life: that life is transient and to be enjoyed. This apparent paradox is not dissolved but rather theologically reinforced by reference to the Creator-God who has ordained the world so. The standard epicurean thesis of *carpe diem*, however, is of little value for those later years, when the youth will say, “I have little pleasure in them.” More pertinent are the wisdom concepts of life’s seasonableness and *puer-senex*, which aim to provide joy throughout one’s entire life, as per Qoh 11:8: “Even those who live many years should rejoice in them *all*.” And, in fact, the so-called “Allegory on Death and Dying” gives concrete descriptions of the joys to be anticipated from aging and even death.

Near the end of the book of Proverbs (30:18–20), an intriguing reflection is offered on four things that exceed human understanding and provoke wonderment, most notably the “way of a man with a woman.” The puzzle is compounded by a focus on the incomprehensible wonder of sexuality, including both that of the woman of valor and the adulterous woman.

At the heart of the matter, in all cases, is the meaning of the biblical text, not what we would like it to mean but what in fact it does mean. One crucial focus in this debate is whether it is possible to reach such a “primary meaning.” In John J. Collins’s opinion, postmodernists deny that such a meaning exists, and he implies that others—historical critics and especially religious folks—allow for and pursue such a possibility.² Between these ex-

²John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 14.

tremes lies a complicating but realistic compromise, and it is explored in this book. It involves a study of those texts in which the Bible itself speaks ambiguously and polyvalently, not merely for the esthetic purpose of making interesting reading or delightful literature but rather to make basic claims about the nature of discourse and the human condition.³

Just as the focus on the interpretation of wisdom's ways was viewed as a special skill by the sages, may our focus on both their life-supporting values and methods of textual interpretation help us recover their access to the twilight zone!

³For a recent example see T. A. Perry, "Cain's Sin in Genesis 4:1–7: Oracular Ambiguity and How to Avoid It," *Prooftexts* 25 (2006): 259–76.