



Bill Moyers



GENESIS:
A LIVING
CONVERSATION

A VIEWER'S GUIDE

Athenä:



The Middle East

Booklet written and edited by Joseph D. Younger, Elizabeth Stocum, and Jennifer Coggins. © 2010 Acorn Media Group Inc.

INTRODUCTION BY BILL MOYERS

Noah and the Flood . . . God’s call to Abraham . . . Jacob wrestling with the angel. The stories found in the Book of Genesis captured our ancestors’ imaginations more than three thousand years ago—and they hold us today. What explains their power and endurance?

For one thing, to millions of people they are more than stories, they are sacred texts, sanctified over time by so many communities of faith that they resonate with a power and knowledge beyond our own.

They also challenge. These stories do not all have happy endings. They offer no easy answers to hard questions, and they can leave us puzzled. Reading the story of Noah and the Flood, I am haunted by the ordeal of the survivor. I find Noah after the Flood both mystifying and troubling: God had spared him because he was a man “righteous in his generation,” but he hardly behaves in the way we’d expect a model of righteousness to behave. His story is full of contradictions and divine mystery—just like most of the stories in Genesis, just like our own.

But these stories also speak to us today because they are so starkly human. The people in Genesis rage at one another and at God; they struggle with temptation; they are jealous, grief-stricken, patient, conniving, loving, and hateful. And the dilemmas they face are ours: sibling rivalry and family violence, infertility and surrogate parenting, husbands who fail their wives, parents who grow old and frail, and children who are coming of age. Because their emotions and struggles are so real, the people of Genesis come to life in every generation, and their stories live on.

Furthermore, because the action can spill across generations, the resulting space in the stories gives us room to read ourselves into them. We begin to connect to past generations and to better understand our lives and our relationships, to one another and to the Creator.

Of course, our own very different readings of the Bible have too often set us at odds with one another, but the potential is still there, as we discovered in taping our PBS series, for the stories of Genesis to provide us a starting place in a common discussion about life on this planet. We asked Muslims to participate in our discussions because, although this is not their book, it seemed important for Christians, Jews, and Muslims to address ways that our stories, which started in the same place with Abraham, went in very different directions. The stories of Genesis recall that common origin, summon from us a more powerful empathy, and enable us—even late in life—to find new paths to wisdom despite our differences.

The inspiration for this series came from Rabbi Burton Visotzky's Genesis discussion group at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York City. The evening I visited, I watched in amazement as a group of novelists, poets, screenwriters, literary critics, and Bible scholars—Christians and Jews—engaged in one of the liveliest, most provocative discussions I have ever heard on the Bible.

I had expected the Genesis group to be passionate about the Bible and the power of ideas—and they were. But I had not imagined that I would actually be able to see one person learn from another or that I would find so many smart, funny people—believers and nonbelievers alike—who were willing to challenge conventional opinion and one another, suggesting new ways to look at the text. I left the Seminary that night committed to trying to capture on camera what I had experienced firsthand, so that a far larger audience could experience it, too.

There are many reasons why I wanted to make this series. I hoped that it would serve to introduce (or reintroduce) many people to these stories and the role they have played in shaping our culture and our consciousness. I hoped that by watching a diverse group of interesting people wrestle with their own beliefs, with one another, and with some of the critical issues we face today, the rest of us might be moved to

engage in the same struggle. I hoped that by showing people of different backgrounds and beliefs learning from one another, the series would inspire us to listen to other people's stories and try to see the world through different eyes, to reach for what the novelist Alice Walker has called "the unifying theme through immense diversity . . . of growth, of search, of looking, that enlarges the private and the public world."

And, frankly, I hoped to demonstrate that a different kind of religious discourse is taking place in this country beyond the politicized rhetoric about God that has made it so difficult for us to hear one another. Yes, believers are also citizens who should take sides on issues important to their families, communities, and consciences. But an arrogance is abroad in the land about who has a lock on God, a partisan spirit permeates the dialogue, and we are talking at, not with, each other. In one of her poems Kathleen Norris acknowledges that "we are God's chosen now," but goes on to pray "God help us" because of it. The call is to responsibility, not privilege, to humility instead of pride. This spirit prevailed in the discussions for our series, as participants of different faiths listened closely and respectfully to others and even bowed occasionally to the democratic necessity of deferring to the knowledge and opinions of other people.

A television program can introduce ideas, but only people can make things happen. As you read and think and talk about these stories, you will learn new things about yourself and the world. This matters. The more each of us knows and understands, the better our chances for living purposeful lives, creating strong families, building solid communities, and forging a more tolerant and vibrant democracy . . . together.

THE CONVERSATIONS IN CONTEXT

The Genesis narrative's overall structure and themes

Certainly, the stories discussed in this series—from Adam and Eve to Joseph and his brothers—prove endlessly fascinating when considered individually. But they also constitute episodes in the larger narrative of Genesis, which moves from a general explanation of the human condition to the particular history of a community and its identity.

Most biblical scholars recognize two major divisions, or movements, in Genesis. The first, the primeval history (Chapters 1 through 11), covers Creation (Chapters 1-2), the origin and nature of humanity, and humankind's relationship with the Creator. It can be subdivided into the Fall and its aftermath (Chapters 3-5) and the Flood and its aftermath (Chapters 6-11). In a repeating pattern, both these sections tell of Creation's initial harmony and its eventual corruption by ambitious, rebellious humans.

The second major division (Chapters 12-50), an ancestral history, focuses on God's promise to Abraham and his descendants. It can be split into the patriarchal narratives (Chapters 12-36)—the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and the story of Joseph (Chapters 37-50). The saga spans several generations and tells of family strife—especially sibling rivalries, such as Jacob versus Esau and Joseph versus his brothers. In that sense, it echoes themes advanced powerfully in the primeval history's story of Cain and Abel. Some scholars contend that the ancestral history shows a gradual movement toward unification, in which the 12 tribes of Israel—all direct descendants of Abraham—inherit God's promise together as a people set apart.

As transitions between these sections and subsections, Genesis also includes so-called *toledot* passages—essentially, genealogies. These passages link stories that might seem digressive at first, but collectively show the emergence of a people under a divine pledge of protection.

THE GENESIS OF GENESIS

Who wrote the first book of the Bible?

According to traditional thought, Moses wrote the book that we now know as Genesis, along with Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—collectively called the Pentateuch. Today, many believers in all three Abrahamic faiths hold fast to that thinking. But the Bible's first book doesn't come with a byline; nowhere does the text name Moses as its author. So the question of who wrote it remains an intriguing mystery for biblical scholars.

The ancient Hebrews did not attach the same value to authorial recognition as do modern readers. In their culture, wisdom came down through the community. As such, successive generations revised, reshaped, and added to the Pentateuch anonymously. These five books became canonical during the Babylonian exile (6th-5th c. BCE), when the oral traditions, laws, and stories of the ancient Hebrews were copied and compiled into their present form. The tradition that the Torah is revealed literature—dictated to Moses directly from God on Mt. Sinai—seems to have been established by 400 BCE.

In 1753, however, the French physician Jean Astruc proposed a revolutionary new idea. He suggested that Genesis had been assembled from at least two sources, distinguished by the divine names used in the text: *Yahweh* (rendered simply as “God” in most modern translations) and the more formal *Elohim* (usually translated as “Lord God”). By the 19th century, the German scholars Karl Heinrich Graf and Julius Wellhausen proposed multiple sources not only for Genesis, but also for the other books in the Pentateuch, and advanced possible dates for compilation. This theory, refined by scholars over the years, eventually became known as the documentary hypothesis.

In its most widely recognized form, the documentary hypothesis holds that Hebrew editors shaped Genesis from three major sources: a Priestly account (known as “P”) composed around 500 BCE, a Yahwistic source (known as “J”) that dates from about 950 BCE from the southern kingdom of Judah, and an Elhoistic source (“E”) written down between 900 and 700 BCE in the northern kingdom of Israel.

The differences between J and E go beyond their names for the Divine—they portray God in different ways. In the J material, God has distinctly human qualities, albeit larger-than-life ones: “walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze” (Genesis 3:8), showing disgust at humanity’s corruption of creation (6:12-13), and shutting the door of Noah’s ark (7:16). E, on the other hand, depicts a more remote, supernal deity—one who speaks through angels, for example.

Although the documentary hypothesis has dominated biblical scholarship for more than 100 years, it has also sparked lively debate among experts over the relationship between the Priestly and non-Priestly material. Was the Priestly material created as a framework on which to graft the E and J sources? Or did it already exist separately, letting the editors weave Genesis from the disparate texts they had at hand?

Furthermore, scholars disagree on the precise timeline and sources for the non-Priestly material. For example, some date the J source much, much later than originally thought—maybe even to the time of the exile. Others doubt the very existence of E as a distinct source; instead, they see the material coming from a variety of independent texts telling the stories of Jacob, Joseph, and other figures. Still other scholars dismiss the documentary hypothesis entirely, contending that Genesis comes from a single source. For instance, a computer analysis of language patterns in Genesis by Yehuda Radday of the Israel Institute of Technology seems to lend credence to the single-author viewpoint.

Nearly all scholars can agree on one thing: the roots of Genesis run deep into prehistory, springing from oral traditions passed down for centuries. The rest—like the message of Genesis itself—becomes a matter of interpretation and faith.

ONE STORY, FOUR VOICES

An overview of biblical translations used in this series

To prepare for the discussions in *Genesis: A Living Conversation*, Bill Moyers and the show’s producers asked participants to read each story in four translations: the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), the Schocken Bible, the King James Version (KJV), and the New Jewish Publication Society (NJPS) edition. Storytellers Mandy Patinkin and Alfre Woodard recite from only two, however: The stories of Creation, the Fall, the Flood, Abraham and Isaac, and Jacob’s wrestling come from Schocken. Cain and Abel, Abraham’s call, Hagar and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph in Egypt come from the NRSV. Below is a bit of background on all four translations.

New Revised Standard Version: Episcopalians, Methodists, and members of other mainline Protestant denominations in the United States will probably recognize the NRSV as their pew Bible. First published in 1989 (a Catholic edition appeared concurrently), the NRSV represents a complete revision of the Revised Standard Version (1952)—which, in turn, had completely revised the American Standard Version (1901). The NRSV incorporates late-20th-century changes in scholarship and language, such as gender-inclusive wording for some passages. An ecumenical, international committee of translators—including Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish members—supervised its preparation over 15 years and still functions as a continuing body. Working under the motto “As literal as possible, as free as necessary,” the committee attempted to

balance word-for-word and thought-for-thought approaches to translation. The NRSV has a reading level accessible to U.S. high school sophomores and above.

Schocken Bible: Translated by Everett Fox of Clark University and published by Schocken Books in 1995, the first volume of the Schocken Bible comprises the Pentateuch, or *The Five Books of Moses*, as its formal title indicates. Fox worked under the principle that the Hebrew Bible was meant to be spoken aloud—even for solitary reading. As a result, he followed what he termed a “rhetorical translation method” that attempted to capture the sound and rhythm of the original text and to preserve rhetorical devices such as puns, alliteration, and repetition wherever possible. The translated text looks like verse on the page; it also uses the original Hebrew names for people. For example, Moses appears as *Moshe*; Cain as *Kayin*; and Abraham as *Avraham*. “Rather than carrying across



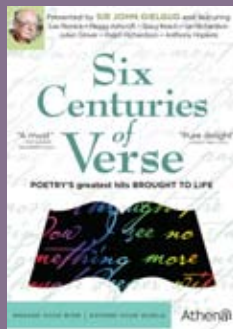
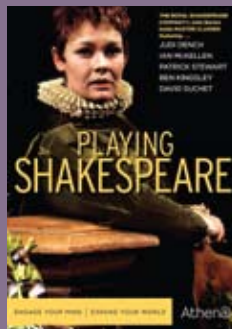
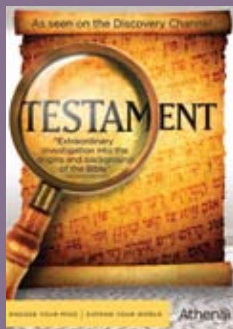
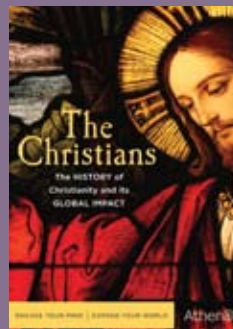
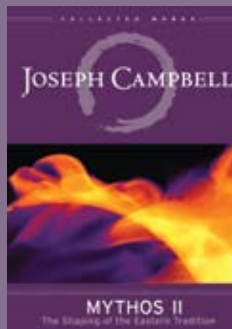
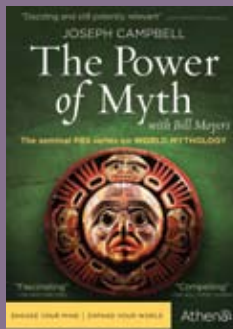
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(“translating”) the content of the text from one linguistic realm to another,” wrote Fox, “I have tried to involve the reader in the experience . . . of returning to the source and recreating some of its richness.” In 1999, Fox employed the same guidelines in his translation of the book of Samuel, *Give Us a King! Samuel, Saul, and David*.

King James Version: The granddaddy of all English Bibles, the Authorized Version of the King James Bible (1611) remains the only acceptable text for certain Protestants. Some KJV-only proponents object to the gender-neutral or inclusive language of more modern translations; others believe that only the Authorized Version conveys the inerrant word of God. However, its 17th-century English diction and syntax make it difficult for many modern readers. More than 50 translators worked for seven years on this literal, word-for-word translation. The result was a Bible with a 12th-grade reading level—higher than more recent translations. The Bibles placed in hospital and hotel rooms by Gideons International are KJV.

New Jewish Publication Society: Directed by editor in chief Harry M. Orlinsky, the NJPS was completed in 1981 and represents a completely fresh English translation of the Hebrew Bible, based on Hebrew Masoretic texts that took their final form in the Middle Ages. Most previous efforts had relied on Christian translations for style and diction. The translation teams included representatives of Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed Jewish traditions; they worked for 19 years to translate all of the books of the Hebrew Bible. Published together as the *JPS Tanakh* in 1985, the NJPS has become the most widely used version among all Jewish sects. Editions released since then include a bilingual Hebrew-English version (1999) and the gender-sensitive *Contemporary Torah* (2006). The specific edition used by *Genesis* participants was *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* by W. Gunther Plaut (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981).

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