John Day

From Creation to Abraham: Further Studies in Genesis 1–11

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John Day provides us with eleven essays discussing topics of scholarly debate in Gen 1–11. With his evaluation of the various controversial passages in each narrative, he deftly and succinctly evaluates the diverse viewpoints, often critiquing each of them and in turn presenting his own conclusions. In most cases he sequentially addresses each of these significant issues, so that most essays do not have a singular significant thesis. His arguments and interpretations are compelling. I wish I would have had this book in hand when I crafted my own commentary on Gen 1–11 more than ten years ago. Four of these essays have appeared in print in the past, and seven are new creations.

It is amazing how much he says and how many theories he surveys with such great economy of language. You must read his text slowly and carefully. His style is sometimes entertainingly crisp and brisk in response to those whom he engages. Though I do not agree with all of his arguments, the majority are almost always convincing and disarming. (I almost think I may burn my commentary.) His exposition also provides generous footnotes equally rich with insightful observations. This volume is a must read for anyone contemplating research on Gen 1–11. It has been said that in the future it will be impossible for anyone to write a commentary on Gen 1–11, considering the depth and breadth of the massive scholarship on those passages. That may be true. But John Day’s two volumes of essays on Gen 1–11 will suffice the desires of avid readers of these chapters, especially those who seek a review of the issues generated by the biblical text. (I include
in this allusion his From Creation to Babel: Studies in Genesis 1–11 [London: Bloomsbury, 2014], which must be used in tandem with this present volume.) His wide-ranging discussion of many of the issues means that he provides the reader with a wealth of bibliographic entries.

Of the myriad issues Day discusses, I mention but a few below that caught my attention. On so many of these issues I must concede that, at the end of the day, Day may have the final say. The following essays are found in this volume with reference to some of the conclusions provided by him.

(1) “Genesis 1.1–5: The First Day of Creation.” After a complex discussion of the passage, Day concludes that Gen 1:1 describes the first act of creation wherein God creates the empty world in which the later creative acts will shape things. The darkness on the face of the deep in Gen 1:2 refers to the first half of day one, for in the postexilic era, when Gen 1 was crafted, each day was reckoned as evening and morning (nighttime and daytime), not day and night, as in the preexilic era. The expression tohu wabohu simply means emptiness, not some mythic creatures or chaos; it refers to the empty world into which created things will go. Psalm 104 inspired Gen 1 more than the Enuma Elish.

(2) “‘So God Created Humanity in His own Image’ (Genesis 1.27): What does the Bible Mean and What have People Thought it Meant?” The “image of God” refers both to a physical and a spiritual likeness, as Seth was said to be in the image of Adam in Gen 5, and Day rejects the connection that scholars have made with Mesopotamia kings.

(3) “The Serpent in the Garden of Eden: Its Background and Role.” The serpent in Gen 3 shares the greatest similarities with the snake in the Gilgamesh Epic that eats Gilgamesh’s plant of rejuvenation, not fertility goddesses.

(4) “Wisdom and the Garden of Eden.” The man and the woman sought wisdom by eating the fruit with their own autonomy, not with God’s guidance, which is what they should have done, according to the rest of the Old Testament, which encourages the quest for wisdom.

(5) “Problems in the Interpretation of the Story of Cain and Abel.” Abel’s name means shepherd, not mist. A detailed analysis of the Kenite connection with Cain is discussed without particular conclusions being given. The temptation crouching at the door is indeed an allusion to a Mesopotamian deity.

(6) “The Enochs of Genesis 4 and 5 and the Emergence of the Apocalyptic Enoch Tradition.” Many theories concerning the Babylonian Enmeduranki’s influence upon the Enoch traditions are discussed, but the Gilgamesh Epic provides the truly significant parallels.
(7) “The Source Analysis and Redaction of the Genesis Flood Story.” Day reviews and affirms the traditional divisions of the text into J and P sources passage by passage in a detailed analysis. The flood account is a later addition to the Primeval History in Gen 1–11, but the J version still antedates the P version. Allusions to the origins of peoples prior to the flood (Kenities and Nephilim) who subsequently existed after the flood, Kenite cultural contribution to human society, and different portrayals of Noah’s three sons imply that the flood narrative is an interruption in the overall accounts of Gen 1–11. P is a source, not an editorial addition to J, and both J and P were brought together by a redactor, thus explaining the doublets in the flood narrative. Day refutes those commentators who seek to prove the flood narrative is a unified source by appeal to chiastic arguments for arranging the text. (I applaud this.)

(8) “The Covenant with Noah and the Noachic Commandments.” The rainbow is not God’s warrior bow. An excellent discussion of the later seven Noachic commands is provided.

(9) “The Table of Nations in Genesis 10.” Day provides a detailed and excellent commentary on the nations listed in Gen 10, responding critically to observations made by other scholars.

(10) “In Search of Nimrod: Problems in the Interpretation of Genesis 10:8–12.” After evaluating the many theories of Nimrod’s identity in Gen 10, Day concludes that it is the Assyrian god Ninurta. The source material used by J in Gen 10 can be dated to 800 BCE.

(11) “From Abraham of Ur to Abraham in the Fiery Furnace.” Day discusses the different theories for the location of Ur. He then provides a summary of the Abraham in the fiery furnace story in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions.

Readers are invited to use Day’s essays as a starting point for their own research on topics in Gen 1–11. However, so thorough is Day’s summary and evaluation on these selected topics that readers might be dissuaded from attempting to undertake a mere summary of scholarship, for it has already been done here.

Were I to dare to critique some of his observations, I would suggest that sometimes Day discusses the opinions of others or comes to his own conclusion by being perhaps a little too literal in reading the narrative. For example, he excludes too quickly the possibility that there might be some oblique allusion to the fertility goddess in the portrayal of the snake in the tree of Gen 3. Also, in his discussion of Cain’s response to God, “Am I my brother’s keeper?,” he might have observed that the biblical author may be placing some sarcastic wordplay on the lips of Cain. Perhaps Cain is saying, “Am I the shepherd of the shepherd?” Pursuing an overly straightforward, logical meaning of the text at times may miss the biblical author’s sense of wordplay or humor. Again, I am disinclined to dismiss the possible influence of the oracle of the man of Tyre in Ezek 28 upon Gen 3, for I date J to the postexilic era, later than he does. Finally, I also wish he had observed more
about the animals being included in the covenant with Noah (Gen 9) and that they are called “living beings” in the Hebrew, not just “living creatures,” as English translations are wont to do, which makes the animals lower than humans (the same is true in Gen 2). Such a discussion would be meaningful in today’s ecological crisis with the loss of animal species. But perhaps that would be churlish of me, for Day covered so many other issues with thoroughness in these essays. With most of his arguments, I find myself happily agreeing. In sum, his is a book that deserves serious attention from scholars and students alike.