



The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis

By Leon R. Kass

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As ardent debates over creationism fill the front pages of newspapers, Genesis has never been more timely. And as Leon R. Kass shows in *The Beginning of Wisdom*, it's also timeless.

Examining Genesis in a philosophical light, Kass presents it not as a story of what happened long ago, but as the enduring story of humanity itself. He asserts that the first half of Genesis contains insights about human nature that “rival anything produced by the great philosophers.” Kass here reads these first stories—from Adam and Eve to the tower of Babel—as a mirror for self-discovery that reveals truths about human reason, speech, freedom, sexual desire, pride, shame, anger, and death. Taking a step further in the second half of his book, Kass explores the struggles in Genesis to launch a new way of life that addresses mankind’s morally ambiguous nature by promoting righteousness and holiness.

Even readers who don’t agree with Kass’s interpretations will find *The Beginning of Wisdom* a compelling book—a masterful philosophical take on one of the world’s seminal religious texts.

“Extraordinary. . . . Its analyses and hypotheses will leave no reader’s understanding of Genesis unchanged.” —*New York Times*

“A learned and fluent, delightfully overstuffed stroll through the Gates of Eden. . . . Mix Harold Bloom with Stephen Jay Gould and you’ll get something like Kass. A wonderfully intelligent reading of Genesis.”—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

“Throughout his book, Kass uses fruitful, fascinating techniques for getting at the heart of Genesis. . . . Innumerable times [he] makes a reader sit back and rethink what has previously been tediously familiar or baffling.”—*Washington Post*

“It is important to state that this is a book not merely rich, but prodigiously rich with insight. Kass is a marvelous reader, sensitive and careful. His interpretations surprise again and again with their cogency and poignancy.”—*Jerusalem Post*

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Kass, the chairman of the President's Council on Bioethics, offers yet another reading of the Bible's first book, contributing little that is new to the academic study of Genesis. For the past 20 years, Kass has offered a seminar on Genesis in which he and his students at the University of Chicago read it as a philosophical classic in the same way one would read Plato or Nietzsche. Thus, Genesis "shows us what is first in man ('anthropology'). It also invites reflection on what is cosmically first and how human beings stand in relation to the whole ('ontology')." From this philosophical perspective, we learn from the Noah story, for example, that humanity enjoys special standing not only because of its reason and freedom but also because it exercises those qualities in legislating morality. For Kass, the story of Abraham and Isaac illustrates children learning that their parents were right all along about certain moral principles. While his approach might seem unique, it yields little that is original or provocative. Many commentators before Kass, for instance, have asserted that the primeval couple in the garden gained moral self-consciousness from their act of disobedience to God by eating fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In addition, the academic tone and sometimes thick, impenetrable prose ("The open form of the text and its recalcitrance to final and indubitable interpretation...") limit this book's effectiveness and value.

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From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Unlike the many devout readers who approach the Bible to find salvation, unlike even the secular scholars who take up the Bible to advance linguistic and historical understanding, Kass comes to Genesis in pursuit of philosophical wisdom. And he finds it. As a distinguished researcher in molecular biology and bioethics, Kass well understands how modern science has rendered untenable many traditional readings of the holy book. But he also recognizes how scientific expertise has created dilemmas demanding anew the kind of moral insights that generations have gleaned from Scripture. And though he demurs as to its divine inspiration, Kass finds in Genesis a richly rewarding narrative challenging readers to explore the promise and peril of human life. Unfolding a unified series of pedagogical investigations (developed over two decades of teaching the text at the University of Chicago), Kass guides readers in profound reflections on natural and human origins: How did Eden's forbidden fruit deliver Adam and Eve to death yet simultaneously endow them with spiritual freedom? How did the failure of the Tower of Babel expose the limits of civilization--including our own? Kass must ask different questions once Abraham appears (in Genesis 12), for his covenantal relationship with deity transcends philosophic reasoning. Yet in limning the rise of the Israelite nation, Kass probes the meaning--and contemporary significance--of a communal commitment to reverence and justice. Readers unattached to church or synagogue may be surprised at how much the Bible still has to teach them. *Bryce Christensen*

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Review

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Sheila Cyr:

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Diana Rush:

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Linda Manning:

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