



The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis

Leon R. Kass

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Imagine that you could "really" understand the Bible...that you could read, analyze, and discuss the book of Genesis not as a compositional mystery, a cultural relic, or a linguistic puzzle palace, or even as religious doctrine, but as a philosophical classic, precisely in the same way that a truth-seeking reader would study Plato or Nietzsche. Imagine that you could be led in your study by one of America's preeminent intellectuals and that he would help you to an understanding of the book that is deeper than you'd ever dreamed possible, that he would reveal line by line, verse by verse the incredible riches of this illuminating text -- one of the very few that actually deserve to be called seminal. Imagine that you could get, from Genesis, the beginning of wisdom. "The Beginning of Wisdom" is a hugely learned book that, like Genesis itself, falls naturally into two sections. The first shows how the universal history described in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, from creation to the tower of Babel, conveys, in the words of Leon Kass, "a coherent anthropology" -- a general teaching about human nature -- that "rivals anything produced by the great philosophers." Serving also as a mirror for the reader's self-discovery, these stories offer profound insights into the problematic character of human reason, speech, freedom, sexual desire, the love of the beautiful, pride, shame, anger, guilt, and death. Something as seemingly innocuous as the monotonous recounting of the ten generations from Adam to Noah yields a powerful lesson in the way in which humanity encounters its own mortality. In the story of the tower of Babel are deep understandings of the ambiguous power of speech, reason, and the arts; the hazards of unity and aloneness; the meaning of the city and its quest for self-sufficiency; and man's desire for fame, immortality, and apotheosis -- and the disasters these necessarily cause. Against this background of human failure, Part Two of "The Beginning of Wisdom" explores the struggles to launch a new human way, informed by the special Abrahamic covenant with the divine, that might address the problems and avoid the disasters of humankind's natural propensities. Close, eloquent, and brilliant readings of the lives and educations of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's sons reveal eternal wisdom about marriage, parenting, brotherhood, education, justice, political and moral leadership, and of course the ultimate question: How to live a good life? Connecting the two "parts" is the book's overarching philosophical and pedagogical structure: how understanding the dangers and accepting the limits of human powers can open the door to a superior way of life, not only for a solitary man of virtue but for an entire community -- a life devoted to righteousness and holiness. This extraordinary book finally shows Genesis as a coherent whole, beginning with the creation of the natural world and ending with the creation of a nation that hearkens to the awe-inspiring summons to godliness. A unique and ambitious commentary, a remarkably readable literary exegesis and philosophical companion, "The Beginning of Wisdom" is one of the most important books in decades on perhaps the most important -- and surely the most frequently read -- book of all time.

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