Robinson, Marilynne. *Reading Genesis* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024). 352 pp. $54.86 hardcover.

Not a pardon, it is grace

In the first ever review of Marilynne Robinson's debut novel, *Housekeeping* (1983), Anatole Broyard commented on Robinson's 'close, careful fondness for people that we thought only saints felt'. In Robinson's latest work, *Reading Genesis,* an extended meditation on the first book of the Bible, we see the theological foundations for all the work she has published over the last four decades: seven books of essays, five novels and countless articles on cultural commentary. Through her tender treatment of the orphaned sisters, Ruth and Lucinda, and their eccentric aunt Sylvie in *Housekeeping*, we glimpse Robinson's Calvinist conviction that every human soul is worthy of honour; even itinerants, whom society eyes suspiciously for rejecting settled norms in favour of transience. In *Reading Genesis,* Robinson details God's tender attentiveness to a group of itinerant pastoralists, an 'absolutely singular providence' working itself out through generations of fallible people who cannot fathom the significance of their lives 'in the long course of sacred history.'

Robinson's modus operandi has always been to reject received opinion and to make use of her own mind, as the minister protagonist in her Pulitzer prize-winning novel, *Gilead* (2004), encourages his young son to do. While Robinson acknowledges that in commenting on Genesis she is anxious to 'magnify the Lord', she insists her primary obligation 'is to be faithful to the text.' She reads Genesis as a cohesive sacred narrative—although she makes modern literary asides about 'the rigorous realism' of the text and what a great point-of-view character Benjamin would make—bypassing theories like the documentary hypothesis, which holds that Genesis is a pastiche written by numerous authors whose factional concerns are so little reconciled to one another they appear as 'sutures in the text'.

To say Robinson reads the text as cohesive is not to say she dismisses the fragmentary nature of it as a collection of narratives, or the fact it alludes to or borrows from pagan creation myths. She acknowledges that Genesis freely appropriates the religion and literature of Egypt and Babylonia and reworks it for distinctive Hebrew purposes, but doesn't see this as cause for concern, or a reason why Scripture should not be read as a sacred text from God. Robinson reads Genesis as a sweeping multi-generational narrative and offers a thoughtful reflection that does not bow to commentary conventions of referencing chapter and verse. In earlier essays she explains that she prefers the discursive theologies of earlier centuries that allow for an 'open theology', making room for reverence and mystery, over the chapter-and-verse model of reading the text applied by some contemporary biblical scholars, which she believes leads to a 'closed theology' that equates adherence to doctrine derived from such readings with firmness of faith. She distances herself from the kind of literalistic reading

of Scripture that is preoccupied with certainty, orthodoxy, moral rectitude and belief, as she thinks it tends to 'warp, contract, harden' faith in favour of *a priori* doctrinal commitments.

For Robinson, the Bible 'does not exist to explain away mysteries and complexities but to reveal and explore them with a respect and restraint that resists conclusion.' Her thoughtful reading of Genesis denies any kind of literalistic reading of the text that would claim for the accounts of creation anything more than a poetic metaphysics intended to convey reverence for the creator God and to evoke awe in the reader. She contrasts similar creation myths and texts from different cultures to highlight that the Bible's account of creation is unique for the way it elevates humans as created in the *imago dei*—the image of God.

A 'piecemeal' reading of Scripture, Robinson argues, would overlook the larger structures, strategies, characterisation and arguments of the text. In her 2018 book of essays, *What Are We Doing Here?* Robinson meditates on an old philosophical word, *entelechy,* which means 'the active principle of wholeness or completion of an individual thing'. If we borrow Robinson's word *entelechy* and apply it to her reading of Genesis, the active principle she sees woven throughout the text is: God our loving father's gracious intent and restraint towards humanity, despite our many and varied failings, seen most clearly in the Lord's gracious dealings with Abraham and his descendants, the fruit of his covenant. She sees the same theme echoed in the human stories, of loving fathers seeking to bless their offspring despite brother injuring brother, as with Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, and Joseph at the hands of his jealous brothers.

However, the focus Robinson places on God's grace and patience tends to somewhat diminish the consequences of sin. It's not that Robinson denies original sin; she acknowledges that Adam and Eve 'disobeyed, doubted, tried to deceive' and that the repercussions of their choice to disobey God have reverberated throughout creation and history. But she views Genesis 3 as 'felix culpa, the fortunate fall'; the old theological term that means it is a more wonderful thing altogether to be a forgiven sinner than to have never sinned because it represents the dawn of human agency.

Felix culpa goes some way toward explicating sin within the economics of Robinson's theology, where the focus is always on the forgiveness of debt, rather than the payment of it. This is perhaps because Robinson upholds that divine intent cannot be thwarted, it is 'altogether determining', and is, ironically, served 'by just those steps that are taken to defeat it'. The example she offers is Joseph, whose brothers abandoned him in a pit because he was the favoured son of their father, Jacob, and because of the dreams he had of their sheaths of wheat bowing down to his. Joseph himself elevates the bitter event of his brothers' abandonment, which saw him sold into slavery, as God sending him to Egypt before them, to preserve their lives in the time of famine. On this basis, Joseph does not punish his brothers for their sins against him. Robinson makes the distinction that because Joseph treats his brothers as guiltless, his restraint 'is not a pardon. It is grace.' Robinson sees mercy as a lesser

thing than grace because it hints at a residue of guilt, whereas to her mind grace proceeds as if the offender is innocent.

In expounding her understanding of grace, Robinson defers to Shakespeare. In other essays, and in the third novel in her *Gilead* quartet, *Lila* (2013), she quotes Prospero's soliloquy at the end of *The Tempest* as the most eloquent articulation of grace in action that she knows:

> As you from crimes would pardoned be.
>
> My ending is despair, Unless I be relieved by prayer,
>
> Which pierces so that it assaults
>
> Mercy itself and frees all faults.

Robinson's emphasis on grace freeing the sinner of all faults does not mean she overlooks judgment entirely; it's more that she sees judgment as tempered by grace. She views the Flood as judgment for the violence humans had inflicted on one another since creation, even as she acknowledges the obvious borrowing of the Flood story from Babylonian literature. Again, this is not an embarrassment for Robinson, as she believes the borrowing of the flood story was done on purpose so that Genesis might add a 'very Hebrew coda' to the familiar narrative in the form of the law, which allows for human freedom yet upholds the 'divine intent' of humanity's sanctified status within creation by restraining the violence and injustice we inflict on one another. Instead of curbing our free will, Robinson sees that God chose instead 'to let us be, to let time yield what it will—within the vast latitude granted by providence'. Even so, she understands the problem we have in grappling with the implications of free will within the constraints of providence, 'especially when it is called by its other name, predestination.' But she concludes that 'the earthly and the providential are separate things in theory only'.

The issue with Robinson's understanding of judgment as tempered by grace is that she seems to overlook that the sacrifice of atonement is the grace that makes forgiveness possible; that grace is free for the one receiving it, but it comes at a cost. In reflecting on the story of Abraham binding his beloved son Isaac on the altar as a sacrifice, Robinson draws our attention away from the fact that Abraham acted in obedience to the Lord to focus on the fact the Lord intervened and provided the ram in place of Isaac. She contrasts this account with the practice, common at the time, of sacrificing children to the pagan gods, to highlight that the Hebrew God did not require child sacrifice. She also parallels the Lord intervening to save Isaac, with the Lord intervening to save Abraham's firstborn Ishmael, as he languished in the desert with his mother, Hagar. In the first account the Lord provides a ram, and in the second, the angel of the Lord provides water, but the point of both accounts is that the Lord provides so that His promise to turn Abraham's descendants into a great nation, should stand. She ignores the point that the Lord provided the ram because the sacrifice was required.

Robinson holds that the Old Testament 'scorns' the idea that God in any way 'needs' or 'hungers' for sacrifices like the pagan gods, but that His people engaged in animal sacrifice because it was a widespread norm among Mediterranean cultures at that time. She emphasises that the laws of the Torah turned ritual sacrifices into festivals that served to provide food, not just for the priests, but for 'the widows, orphans and strangers' as a way of contributing to the 'communal well-being', and on those grounds they may be pleasing to God. Robinson points out that the Lord repeatedly says he wants His people to learn mercy and justice so there would be no need for sacrifice, but her feel-good festival view of ritual sacrifice makes no mention that some sacrifices were performed to atone for the sins of the people. This omission fits with Robinson's preference, articulated in *The Givenness of Things* (2015), to see Jesus' death as an extravagant love offering, rather than a sin offering to atone for sin and propitiate the wrath of God.

Robinson tends to side-step the wrath of God as a concept throughout her corpus. She downplays any idea that God might be angry at sin and suggests that we do a disservice to the character of God when we ascribe to Him words accepted in modern translations, such as 'jealous', because of their negative connotations. In *Reading Genesis* and earlier essays, she defers to the Jewish Society's translation of 'passionate' as a better word choice. Even her protagonist in *Gilead*, Reverend John Ames, muses on this Old Testament translation dilemma as a way of explaining away the wrath of God as a human misunderstanding on a point of interpretation.

Three-quarters of the way through her commentary, Robinson poses what is her central question of Genesis: 'How can it be that a God of righteousness can be forgiving to the point of permissiveness or indifference?' She gives the example of God protecting Jacob from any consequences of swindling his brother out of his inheritance, except for the consequence of 'his own fear and shame'. This idea of characters living with the internal turmoil brought about by their sin as their only real consequence, is one Robinson explores throughout her *Gilead* series and essays.

In the same paragraph that talks about the permissiveness of God even when His people depart from 'any standard of righteousness', Robinson skims over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and focuses on Abraham's care that righteous strangers are not caught up in it. There's no mention of the shocking act of Lot's wife being turned to a pillar of salt when she looks back, for having disobeyed the angels of destruction. Robinson's priority might be to be loyal to the text, but she is clearly more loyal to the parts of the text that focus on the Lord's gracious restraint, than the parts that detail His righteous judgment. She doesn't deny God's judgment altogether; she acknowledges that He has claimed vengeance for Himself. But that 'the text conceptualizes the justice of God together with His mercy or grace or His loyalty to Creation.' Rather than draw attention to the judgment of God, Robinson draws our attention to the many instances the Lord withholds His judgment by His grace and states that: 'To refrain, to put aside power is Godlike.'

Perhaps the most generous aspect of Robinson's reading of Genesis is that she throws her net wide, drawing our attention to God's attentiveness in honouring the consciences of pagans like Abimelech, characters often overlooked in sermons and commentaries that spotlight the travails of the patriarchs and the Israelites. This is because Robinson believes the reach of God's covenant is wider than the promises made to Abraham and the nation of Israel, and that His consistency lies in His 'unshakeable will to be in covenant with willful, small-minded, homicidal humankind'. Robinson attributes to the Lord God, creator of heaven and earth, the same tender attentiveness to the slave, the widow, the outcast, as to his chosen people. In her reading of Genesis, God's loyalty is to humanity and the story of Israel is a narrative that demonstrates that His covenant with fallen humanity cannot be thwarted by sin, as the Fall is merely the felix culpa that kickstarts all of history.

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