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HIDDEN TRUTHS FROM EDEN

ESOTERIC READINGS OF GENESIS 1–3

Edited by

Caroline Vander Stichele and Susanne Scholz

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PREFACE

Once upon a time readers did not believe that the search for biblical meanings was limited to historicity or “what the text says.” They looked for different levels of meanings that usually began with the *sensus literalis* but moved quickly to the *sensus spiritualis* or the “spiritual” sense, which was subdivided into the allegorical, the tropological or moral, and anagogic or mystical meanings. Yet with the emergence of the modern worldview during the sixteenth century C.E. and the predominance of an empiricist scientific epistemology, the valuation of the *sensus spiritualis* lost traction while the *sensus literalis* gained popularity and credibility. After several centuries of hermeneutical contestation, historical criticism eventually became the authoritative method for most Protestant scholarly interpretations at the end of the nineteenth century C.E., and many Catholic and Jewish exegetes followed suit by the mid-twentieth century. As a result, spiritual or esoteric interpretations lost their status and were viewed as unscholarly and academically questionable within the field of biblical studies ever since. Yet despite their low regard during the modern era, esoteric biblical interpretations are not limited to that time period but have been emerging even today.

Interestingly, the epistemological and hermeneutical preference for the historicized quest of biblical meaning also consisted of a broad disregard for studying the extensive interpretation history of esoteric readings of the Bible. Accordingly, examinations on the history of esoteric interpretations are few within the field of biblical studies and not on the top of the field’s research agenda even today. The only exceptions that have gained respect in the field usually focus on gnostic literature in the early centuries of the Common Era of Christianity and Judaism, because they have led to provocative new views about the study of the biblical gospels and the historical figure of Jesus and were considered important for the reconstruction of early Christianity. Elaine Pagels’s bestselling book entitled *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979), investigating texts from the Nag Hammadi

library, certainly advanced the study of early Christian “secret” or esoteric literature. At the dawn of the post-postmodern period, then, we want to suggest expanding the exegetical repertoire again and include the study of esoteric biblical readings as part of our disciplinary agenda. We think that such a holistic hermeneutic will give fresh impetus to the academic study of the Bible in our multireligious, increasingly interconnected, and secularized world.

The present volume aims to contribute toward this goal. It includes discussions, comparisons, and analyses of esoteric appropriations of Gen 1–3 from antiquity to the present. The contributors developed essays on creation myths; gender; fate and free will; the concepts of knowledge, wisdom, and gnosis; the origin of good and evil; life and death; the idea of a “fall”; and the afterlife. They consider how esoteric interpretations address gender or race and other social categories, and they explore experiential esoteric approaches to Gen 1–3. As editors, we welcomed theoretical historical-oriented contributions on the integration of esotericism with biblical studies, as well as discussions of past treatments of esoteric approaches to the texts. In sum, we offer a volume that illustrates how future studies may want to proceed so that the vast universe of esoteric biblical readings will become part of the academic discourse in biblical studies. Eventually, the results may also be beneficial to a public that suffers so extensively from the literalist malady.

We would like to express our gratitude to several groups of people who made this volume on esoteric biblical interpretation possible. First, we thank the editorial board and general editor of *Semeia Studies* for agreeing to include this volume in their series, as well as the staff of SBL Press, especially managing editor Leigh Andersen and Kathie Klein, who worked with us on the publication of this volume, for doing such a wonderful job. Second, we are grateful to the contributors to this volume with whom it was our pleasure to work. We appreciate that they responded quickly and diligently to our correspondence and kept their deadlines. Third, we thank each other for a truly enjoyable collaboration process and our partners and feline friends who kept reminding us that there is more to life than work. Finally, we thank the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University for supporting the creation of the indices by providing funds for a research assistant in the fall of 2014. We also thank research assistant David A. Schones for his exquisite care and attention in building the indices.

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| ACW | Ancient Christian Writers |
| AJSR | <i>Association for Jewish Studies Review</i> |
| ANF | <i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> |
| BETL | Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologiarum Iovaniensium |
| BG | Berlin Gnostic Papyrus |
| British Library Or. | British Library Oriental Manuscript |
| CCSA | Corpus Christianorum: Series apocryphorum |
| CCSG | Corpus Christianorum: Series graeca |
| FC | Fathers of the Church |
| GCS | Die griechische christliche Schriftsteller der ersten [drei] Jahrhunderte |
| HR | <i>History of Religions</i> |
| HTR | <i>Harvard Theological Review</i> |
| HUCA | <i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i> |
| JAAR | <i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i> |
| JECS | <i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i> |
| JHI | <i>Journal of the History of Ideas</i> |
| JJS | <i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i> |
| JJTP | <i>Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy</i> |
| JR | <i>Journal of Religion</i> |
| JSJ | <i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods</i> |
| JSJT | <i>Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought</i> |
| JSNT | <i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i> |
| JSOT | <i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i> |
| JSOTSup | Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series |
| LCL | Loeb Classical Library |
| MS Vatican ebr. | Vatican Library Hebrew Manuscript |

| | |
|--------------|--|
| NHC | Nag Hammadi Codices |
| NovTSup | Novum Testamentum Supplements |
| NRSV | New Revised Standard Version |
| Oxyr. | Oxyrhynchus Papyrus |
| PL | Patrologia latina |
| <i>Proof</i> | <i>Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History</i> |
| SA | <i>Scientia Aeterna</i> |
| SAC | Studies in Antiquity and Christianity |
| SBLSP | <i>Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers</i> |
| SC | Sources chrétiennes |
| SHR | Studies in the History of Religions |
| SS | <i>Scientia Sacra</i> |
| <i>TJ</i> | <i>Trinity Journal</i> |
| TU | Texte und Untersuchungen |
| VV | Világválság (World Crisis) |
| ZAC | <i>Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum/Journal of Ancient Christianity</i> |
| ZKT | <i>Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie</i> |

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INTRODUCTION

Caroline Vander Stichele and Susanne Scholz

Esoteric interpretations of the Bible are a largely neglected research area in biblical studies. With this volume we want to draw attention to the knowledge that remains hidden in what for many scholars and readers of the Bible still is a *terra incognita*. In that light it may well be appropriate to start with the opening chapters from the Bible. Undoubtedly, Gen 1–3 is a key text for Jews and Christians. It had an enormous impact on Western thought in terms of the emergence as well as the rejection of science, attitudes towards human nature, and constructions of sociopolitical and cultural norms. Moreover, the opening chapters from Genesis were also widely commented upon in esoteric circles from antiquity to the present. Important topics that have been addressed time and again include creation myths, gender, fate and free will, concepts of gnosis, the origin of good and evil, life and death, the idea of a “fall,” the afterlife, as well as experiential approaches of Gen 1–3. As Elaine Pagels notes in her introduction to *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*,

Our spiritual ancestors argued and speculated over how God had commanded the first man and woman to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth,” and how he instituted the first marriage; how Adam, after he found among the animals no “helper fit for him” (Genesis 2:20), met Eve, with well-known and disastrous consequences. Such interpretations of the first three chapters of Genesis, as we can see, engaged intensely practical concerns and articulated deeply felt attitudes. (1990, xix)

This holds true for the whole spectrum of interpretations, including esoteric ones. In this volume some of these interpretations are discussed.

Yet perhaps it is wise to begin with a clarification of terminology, especially since the adjective *esoteric* is so loaded in colloquial usage. When

people say that something is esoteric, they usually do not mean it as a compliment. Rather, they indicate that the matter under consideration is difficult to understand, requiring highly specialized expertise that is not of general relevance and broad reach. Depending on the particular situation, the adjective esoteric may even include derogatory connotations. Such is, of course, not the usage of the term in this book. Derived from the Greek word *ἑσωτερικός* (*esōterikos*), a compound of *ἔσω* (*esō*; “within, in”), the word contrasts with *exoteric* (outside, out). As such it is often used to refer to an inward mode of thinking or being. However, if the adjective esoteric dates from antiquity, the substantive *esotericism* was only used since the end of the eighteenth century to denote a wide variety of movements from antiquity to the present. As such, the term is a modern concept, covering philosophical traditions, among them Hermeticism, traditional sciences such as alchemy, and theological speculative thought as found in Jewish and Christian kabbalah. “Western esotericism,” then, “is not a natural term, but an artificial category, applied retrospectively to a range of currents and ideas that were known by other names at least prior to the end of the eighteenth century” (Hanegraaff 2013, 3). In more popular use today, it is often applied to those religious phenomena and movements that are inner-oriented, sometimes identified as the “mystical” path, and differentiated from the “outer” processes of the world. Yet at other times, this distinction is not considered to be all that meaningful, as esotericism is also understood as an investigation about the various levels of consciousness and being.

In the modern Western era, esoteric thinkers and movements often found themselves on the margins of institutionalized religions. Nevertheless, many examples of esoteric religious practices and theories still exist, such as alchemy, astrology, Anthroposophy, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, Rosicrucianism, or Christian Theosophy. In the Western and European world, esoteric thinkers such as Jacob Böhme (1575–1624), Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), Eliphas Lévi (1810–1875), Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), Rudolph Steiner (1861–1925), George Ivanovitsj Gurdjieff (ca.1866–1949), and René Guénon (1886–1951) are among the key figures of Western esoteric thought. Other religious traditions, especially on the Asian continent but also among the indigenous peoples on the American and African continents, also exhibit great esoteric sensitivities, knowledge, and wisdom. Examples can be found in Sufism, Taoism, Buddhism, Tantra, or various traditions in what is called Hinduism. Western esoteric twentieth-century thinkers, such as Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998),

integrated many of the traditionally non-Western esoteric insights into their own philosophical, religious, and spiritual studies.

In esoteric thought and practice, the Bible surfaces all the time, as Western esoteric thinkers sought to uncover its esoteric meaning. The creation stories of Gen 1–3 have been popular texts in esoteric Bible readings, but Western biblical studies has shown little interest so far in investigating this particular branch of the Bible's history of interpretation. This lacuna is hardly surprising, because modern Western academia as a whole emerged in refutation of everything it regarded as “unscientific,” irrational, and in opposition to its own empiricist scientific principles of knowledge. So far, this volume on esoteric interpretations of Gen 1–3 is unique in academic biblical studies, and no comparable volume exists that concerns itself with a cross-historical investigation of the esoteric interpretation history of the Bible. We certainly hope that in due time this situation will change.

In the meantime and with the goal to inspire additional work, this collection contains nine case studies and examples from the wealth of esoteric approaches and methodologies. The volume introduces the topic to the academic field of biblical studies and invites scholars to explore esoteric approaches in relation to other biblical texts. Yet it also aims to awaken interest in esoteric perspectives, methodologies, and thinkers in general. A unique feature of our volume is that it brings together an array of different approaches and theoretical lenses to esotericism and the Bible by scholars in the field of both biblical studies and esotericism.

The included essays are intentionally diverse in method and scope, although all of them focus on Gen 1–3. The material is arranged in three parts, covering different periods of the reception history. This arrangement demonstrates the continued but also changing cultural impact of the creation stories. The first part deals with the different ways in which early Christian discourse engages these stories. In the first essay, Anna Rebecca Solevåg argues that the Acts of Andrew offers an esoteric interpretation of Gen 2–3, which values inner experience and a search for revealed knowledge mediated by the apostle Andrew, and that the relationships and actions among the main characters of the Acts of Andrew are presented as a symbolic reenactment of the so-called “fall” in which the tragic outcome is reversed. Next, Tuomas Rasimus explores why an eagle rather than a serpent appears to Eve and Adam in the gnostic Apocryphon of John, influencing them to eat of the tree of knowledge. In his view, the author draws more specifically on Roman imperial propaganda to represent Christ as an eagle offering salvation. In the third essay Peter W. Martens investigates

Origen's approach to another element from the story, notably the "garments of skin" (Gen 3:21) with which God clothed Adam and Eve. His reconstruction shows that Origen's literal and allegorical interpretations represent God in a way that befits him.

In the second part of the volume, the focus shifts from early Christian texts to interpretations found in the zoharic, kabbalistic, and alchemical literature. Elliot R. Wolfson examines the construction of gender typologies that emerge from the narrative accounts of the creation of woman and man, the nature of sin, and the implicit sense of rectification elicited from the Sefer Hazohar. In his view, the deep structure undergirding the kabbalistic construction of gender, including possible subversions of that structure, is that of a masculine androgyny. In the following article, Peter J. Forshaw begins with a discussion on the exegetical techniques used in kabbalistic texts, such as the Bihar and Zohar. He focuses on the opening words of Gen 1:1 ("In the beginning God created heaven and earth") and then examines Christian appropriations in the pioneering work of the Italian aristocrat and philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and several related Christian commentators. The essay by Georgiana (Jo) Hedesan highlights the notion of the uncreated *mysterium magnum* used by God to make the world in the interpretation of creation advanced in the treatise *Philosophia ad Athenienses*, attributed to Paracelsus. Hedesan also investigates some of the most significant responses to *Philosophia ad Athenienses* to explain how Paracelsian followers and opponents made sense of this ambiguous text.

The third part moves from modern to post-postmodern esoteric approaches. In her essay Susanne Scholz concentrates on the esoteric hermeneutics used by Emanuel Swedenborg, Rudolph Steiner, and Samuel D. Fohr to interpret Gen 1–3. She maintains that their esoteric interpretations may well provide a way out of the rigidly literalist worldviews, whether religiously or secularly defined, that are dominant in our post-postmodern age. László-Attila Hubbes in turn presents the work of Béla Hamvas, a Hungarian esoteric thinker, who sought to understand and actualize the message of Eden. Hamvas asserted that the *status absolutus* of the unspoiled human of the original creation appears in all narratives of origin. According to Hubbes, Hamvas's work should be read as a poetics of creation, which enriches our understanding of the biblical tradition with new insights. Finally, the programmatic essay by Hugh R. Page Jr. uplifts yet another marginalized tradition in Western thought, that of Africana esotericism. According to Page, more scholarly attention needs to be paid

to this largely neglected field. In light of the important role the Bible plays in the construction of African esoteric cosmologies and epistemologies, abundant opportunities exist for interdisciplinary research that have yet to be fully explored. This includes the relationship between African esoteric sources and their relationship to Gen 1–3.

Finally, in their responses to this volume, Elaine Pagels and Samuel D. Fohr engage the nine essays from their respective positions as a scholar of early Christianity and Gnosticism and as a philosopher, who reads, translates, and writes esoteric works.

This volume draws attention to largely marginalized esoteric discourses in the field. A lot of this material has hardly received attention as modern scholars have often concentrated on early Christian materials in their reconstructions of Christian origins and histories. Even then, however, one can observe the existence of a canon within the extracanon, as some texts have received much more scholarly attention than others. Boundaries have shifted, but they have not been questioned. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza notes, in order for a real paradigm shift to take place in the field of biblical studies, a critical rhetorical investigation of interpretation is needed to “understand the bible and biblical interpretation as a site of struggle over authority, values and meaning” (2007, 254). Putting esoteric biblical interpretations on the agenda, this volume aims to contribute to such a paradigm shift.

As editors, we hope that this collection encourages other scholars to view esoteric approaches to the Bible as an academically serious, intellectually rich, and culturally important area for further scholarly research. We therefore look forward to further investigations of this culturally, theologically, literary, and historically exciting material.

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