

One New Book for the Preacher—Make That Two

Brent A. Strawn

Duke University, Durham, North Carolina

Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Genesis 1-25A* (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2018), xxiv + 384 pages.

Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Genesis 25B-50* (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2020), xxvi + 280 pages.

After COVID-19 and recently renewed attention to other equally pressing societal pandemics like systemic racism and economic disparity, *trauma* seems to be the word of the day, or rather of the year 2020. Moving backwards in time, however, *trauma* could just as well be the word of the past decade—or even much longer ago than that, maybe the word of the 21st century thus far, not to mention a whole lot of the 20th (and still further back). The science fiction books and TV shows that I grew up on as a kid associated the 21st century with the most advanced developments in technology and human society; they did not associate that far off futuristic period with *trauma*. What gives, then, other than the apparent inability of human sciences (and societies) to produce all that they seemed to promise in the late 20th century?

On the one hand, *trauma* as a mark of recent days may be seen as the result of developments in knowledge that have allowed us to better recognize, diagnose, and treat trauma. This is a real upside; perhaps human sciences *have* delivered in some important ways. The downside, of course, is the “on the other hand”: the simple fact is that the 21st century (and so much that came before it) has contained more than its fair share of trauma. Trauma as a mark of recent days is thus not simply a matter of *trauma-recognition* or *trauma-treatment*; it is equally, and worse, due to our time being one of *trauma-causation* and *trauma-experience*. Witness COVID-19, systemic racism, economic disparity (and the list goes on). What is the church to do? What is the preacher to say?

Kathleen O'Connor, William Marcellus McPheeters Professor of Old Testament, Emerita, at Columbia Theological Seminary, has written one new book for the preacher “for such a time as this.” Her one book is actually a two-volume work, with the first part, *Genesis 1-25A* (1:1-25:18), appearing in 2018, and the second, *Genesis 25B-50* (25:19-50:26), released in Fall 2020.¹ There is much to say in praise of O'Connor's commentary, which, taken together, make it *the* book on Genesis for preachers in these latter days.

First, O'Connor's *Genesis* appears in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, a truly extraordinary series in format and design—the closest, or so it seems to me, that one could get to a web environment in standard print form. There are no hyperlinks, of course, but virtually every page is packed full of additional (hyper) information: there is the commentary proper, of course, along with the part designated “connections” (which offer potential applications of the exegesis), but there are also numerous sidebars devoted to original language, culture/context, interpretation, and additional resources. This does not yet mention the copious illustrations that accompany the commentary. It is not without good reason that each volume in this series includes

a section entitled “How to Use This Commentary” (*Genesis 1-25A*, xxi-xxiv)—the explanations and suggestions offered here are needed! An index to the sidebars and the illustrations is also a useful element. Finally, each volume in this series includes a CD-ROM containing a PDF of the book facilitating electronic searches, which is helpful given the sheer amount of information each book includes. My rough calculation of just O’Connor’s first volume yielded over 400 sidebars of one sort or another and approximately 140 illustrations. Simply put, O’Connor’s *Genesis* is a treasure trove of data; in fact, sometimes the pages are a lot to take in.

Second, there is O’Connor’s *pen*, which is both elegant and economical. The reader will be impressed again and again (as was I) with how she conveys deep learning with beauty and concision, not to mention profound insight. While there is a lot to take in on each page, no time is wasted here. I was repeatedly instructed not only by *what* O’Connor included in the tiniest of sidebars but also by *how* she included it. (As but one example, her sidebar “Land in Perpetuity” [Ibid., p. 14; cf. p. 210], only two paragraphs in length, is weighty in coverage and insight.)

Third, and most importantly, there is O’Connor’s *specific take* on Genesis. Preachers already know, or should, that O’Connor is one of our premier interpreters, with special expertise in some of the most difficult texts in the Old Testament. Indeed, her earlier books *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004) and *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012) laid the groundwork for this *magnum opus* on Genesis. She states at the very beginning of her preface:

For several years I set aside efforts on this Genesis commentary to complete a book about Jeremiah. This delay proved beneficial because my Jeremiah work gave me a surprising new lens with which to interpret Genesis; I had discovered trauma and disaster studies. To my astonishment, aspects of the national catastrophe so evident in that prophetic book—the fall of Judah and Jerusalem to the Babylonian Empire—left unmistakable traces across the book of Genesis and provided it with new urgency. The beautiful, perplexing, and astonishing accounts of the beginning that make up Genesis serve the “pastoral” purpose to help the people begin again in the face of the impossible. (Ibid., p. xv)

O’Connor’s introduction proceeds to outline her “trauma and disaster studies approach” to Genesis (see Ibid., p. 7). It is an exciting (if such an adjective is acceptable for such serious topics) and compelling approach. According to O’Connor, Genesis tells its stories “to assure its audience that the God who created, ordered, and gave life in the ancient past can recreate them now . . . in the aftermath of the national’s destruction under the Babylonian Empire” (Ibid., p. 2). Such a statement reveals, of course, that O’Connor’s fresh and lively interpretation depends on Genesis becoming “a work of literature sometime during the early Persian Period (539-330 BCE)” (Ibid., p. 3). It is that period, and none other, that is “the historical context that produced Genesis” (Ibid., p. 5). With this dating securely in place, O’Connor reads Genesis *after the fact*—the fact in question being the trauma of exile. In this reading, the stories of Genesis are viewed as “mirroring tableaux of historical suffering and beginning again,” but, O’Connor asserts, “The literature not only reflects aspects of Judah’s catastrophe but also helps the community cope with, understand, and move beyond it” (Ibid., p. 5).

Genesis, therefore, not unlike Lamentations, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Second Isaiah, can be seen as a kind of “theological first responder,” serving “survivors by providing language for and interpretations of destructive events that defy both language and interpretation” (Ibid., p. 6). Indeed, according to her, the Judean people survive in no small measure “because of the ‘pastoral care’ these books provide” (Ibid., p. 6). In the specific case of Genesis, O’Connor writes that “[b]ecause God does the impossible in Genesis, bringing life where obstacles are insurmountable, the book invites hope in the midst of international catastrophe and global terrorism; ugly, frightening politics; and the vast movements of people. The book affirms that God creates life where there is no life” (Ibid., p. 21). Paying attention to the traces of pain found in the book showcases, in the end, the book’s capacity for hope.

Throughout the commentary, O’Connor’s interpretive angle via trauma and disaster studies is *everywhere present* but *nowhere heavy-handed*. Both characteristics seem right to me. The former reveals how adeptly O’Connor has identified trauma related motifs and themes (e.g., “disaster narratives”; themes of impossibility like barrenness, famine, landlessness; and promises of new life including offspring, land, blessing, and a great name [Ibid., pp. 8-15]) throughout Genesis and its various units. Even when a passage is not obviously about trauma per se, O’Connor’s categories are almost always present in one way or another (see, e.g., Ibid., p. 209 on 13:7; eadem, *Genesis 25B-50*, p. 246 on Gen 47:29-30). That said, the fact that the trauma angle is nowhere heavy-handed in O’Connor’s work is also wise in my judgment, since this is not a monograph definitively establishing the Persian period dating of Genesis, coupled with O’Connor’s own understanding of how trauma and disaster studies inform such a socio-historical location for the book. Instead, this is and remains a *commentary* on the text of Genesis.

This latter point goes a long way to allay potential concerns. One could, that is, worry that O’Connor’s reading is *too* dependent on a specific historical reconstruction so as to achieve its results. If so, one might subsequently worry that, in the end, despite its helpful and cutting-edge qualities, O’Connor’s *Genesis* is as weighed down by historical-critical baggage as any other treatment of the book. I must admit at this point that I am not yet convinced that everything (or even *most* everything) in the Old Testament, or even Genesis alone, is generated by the traumas of defeat and exile, even if those are important nodes (and they most certainly are). This caveat duly entered, it is important to note that, despite her expert attention to the specific traumas of the 6th century BCE, I believe O’Connor’s interpretation ultimately *transcends* the Persian Period reconstruction she depends on. This is because her treatment is so remarkably resonant with our present historical moment with its rumors (and not just rumors!) of wars and disease—*especially* disease: diseases of body and spirit and society in 2020 and only God knows how far beyond that. In light of this rather stunning interpretive confluence, O’Connor’s interpretation of Genesis as a “pastoral text” that provides hope to people traumatized in any number of ways floats above or beyond its historical moorings, making its way eventually to us here and now where the traumas are not about invasion but intubation, not about exile but exhaling without a mask, not about Babylonian empire but white supremacy. O’Connor herself notes that her interpretation is somehow analogical or indirect: “I am not claiming that disaster episodes in Genesis were composed to ‘represent’ Judah’s traumatic history in any factual sense; rather they *function* within a literary arena as distant echoes of

similar destructions. . . . Disaster stories guide the ancient audience and modern readers to approach their suffering indirectly, gently” (*Genesis 1-25A*, pp. 10-11). Pastoral indeed!

And so, even if one deems O’Connor’s *Genesis* to be occasionally overly taken with a Persian date for the book, we nevertheless see the gift of Scripture (and of gifted interpreters of Scripture like O’Connor herself) to somehow transcend its (and their) historical locations, boundedness, and limits, so as to become a word in due season, on target, for the community that needs precisely that from the Lord. Every preacher worth her salt knows that that has always been the gift of Scripture and the task of the homilist. In this matter, as in so many others, O’Connor’s book is both model and means, example and right tool for the job.

Note

1 I am grateful to Smyth & Helwys for making an advance copy available to me prior to publication. Since it was an uncorrected draft, the pagination information offered here may be incorrect, vis-à-vis the published volume.