

BOOK REVIEW

**SOL SCHARFSTEIN, *THE BOOK OF GENESIS*. REVIEW BASED ON
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Under the pseudonym of "Shenash," Sol Scharfstein has authored many Jewish books for Jewish lower schools, including "an easy-to-read Torah translation." The didactic purpose of that translation is expanded in this translation-*cum*-commentary. Modernity, the author realizes, has distracted the young Jewish mind from faith in Judaism and belief in the literalness of the Bible. The purpose of his effort is to redirect their minds. The readership here is Jewish youth (and older readers) who are intelligent, curious, objective, and/or merely interested, and who have only a modicum of Jewish learning, if that. This laudable purpose is seen in the translation, which is a racy narrative, and the commentary, which explicates the text in a clear, unsophisticated style. However, not all of Scharfstein's efforts avoid pitfalls and idiosyncrasy.

In a brief review, it is not possible to measure his success in detail. Yet, it is revealing to compare his treatment of two very different sequences in Genesis; Chapters 1-4, in which God is the major figure, and Chapter 27, which narrates a significant family problem involving only the descendants of Abraham.

Scharfstein's translation of the very first verse of Genesis hints at his intentions: *At the beginning Elohim created the cosmos, which included planet earth*. To begin with, he eschews calling the Creator by an Anglo/Germanic-derived appellation like "God." He prefers, instead, a pure Hebraic transliteration, "*Elohim*." This is Deity talking to Israelites, you see. When the Hebrew text later attaches the ineffable *YKVK* to *Elohim*, Scharfstein switches to *Adonai* as a synonym. He does not explain why he does this. Rashi on

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Genesis 2:5 explains the difference in the combined name, and the fact that Scharfstein does not cite him foreshadows a policy of citing traditional *par-shanim* only briefly and sporadically. In the main, when he does cite an authority, it is a modern one.

To demonstrate that the Bible is relevant today, Scharfstein in the first verse employs the terminology of astrophysics in his translation, and his first commentary cites (with attribution) Natan Aviezer's big-bang theory as reflecting the original text. While the JPS translation of "*rakiah*" is a vague "expanse," Scharfstein translates it as "sky," defining it in modern style as "atmosphere, a gaseous envelope of ozone-oxygen to filter-out the harmful ultra-violet rays." In a rare reference to an ancient commentary, Scharfstein remarks that the Zohar says that as part of the Creation of nature in the first six days, "Elohim created the fourth dimension – time" (2:2), perhaps as an obscure reference to Einstein.

There is, however, no allusion to Darwinian evolutionary theory in Chapters 1-2. By this omission, Man is depicted as created from dust and going directly into a partnership with his Creator (1:26-28). Man was given the ability to be an inventor, a creator in his own way, who can improve the natural world. He carries the special responsibility of preserving the natural environment, a mission truly relevant today. Modern medicine is saluted by referring to "Adam [as] the first tissue-donor" (comment on 2:22), when the Creator took one of his ribs to create Eve.

A modern idiom labels the serpent that seduces Eve into eating from the Tree of Knowledge as a "snake-in-the-grass," forerunner of everyone who tempts people to experience forbidden fruits (3:6, 14). Commenting on this story, Scharfstein makes sure to suggest to his readers the moral principle that free will includes the freedom to deny oneself what is prohibited – an important lesson in our age of license.

For Chapter 27, comprising the story of Jacob's deception, Isaac's blessings to his sons, and the machinations of Rebecca, Scharfstein comes down from the cosmological to imply the moral problems inherent in earthly life. Here, the translation and commentary are eminently readable and flowing, as if in a novel. But, as with the first chapters of Genesis, they display idiosyncrasies and missed opportunities to advance his purpose. A glaring example is in 27:20. Isaac, suspicious of the son attending on him, asks how the food could

be prepared so quickly. Jacob, in the guise of Esau, replies in the literal translation (JPS 1916), 'Because *the Lord thy God* [my emphasis] *sent me good speed.*' Scharfstein truncates the verse and translates it simply: 'Adonai was with me.' Rather weak, as well as unscholarly. It is Rashi who explains, in his comment on 27:21, why Isaac's suspicions are not allayed; it is the fervent *Lord your God* in the mouth of the supposedly religiously rebellious Esau. Scharfstein does not explain why he took the liberty of abridging the biblical text, nor does he take up Rashi's cue to explain the responsibility one must use when realizing thought in words.

On the other hand, Scharfstein does impress his readers in his commentary that the Hebrew Bible, unlike scriptures of other religions, is unafraid of revealing the weaknesses and imperfections of its heroes. Here, we are witnessing a family problem, a conspiracy of deceit. Rebecca and Jacob face the moral dilemma of whether laudable ends can justify deceitful means. Scharfstein impresses upon his readers that, notwithstanding, sinful acts demand retribution: "This act of deception which [Jacob] was about to perform would haunt him through the rest of his life" (comment on 27:12). There is no escape from an immoral act, not even for this patriarch who fathers an eternal, Elohim-intoxicated nation. No one in the Bible is perfect, but that is no cause for not fulfilling the will of God to the best of one's ability. It is in such passages on human relationships that Scharfstein concretely fulfills his role of teacher rather than scholar.

Scharfstein's *Genesis* fills a niche that has become wider in the 20th and 21st centuries. His version is intended to instill or re-ignite faith in the Hebrew Bible and its Creator among those afflicted with ignorance or doubt. The style of translation may not be in the dignified tradition of the King James Version of 1611, and the commentary may be expressed familiarly in popular tones. This version may not become a prized book in its reader's library. Yet it can serve as a stimulant to go on to a more literal translation and sophisticated commentaries, to a more knowledgeable, mature and warmer relationship to the Jewish faith. Thus, it will have fulfilled the enviable purpose of the translator/commentator.