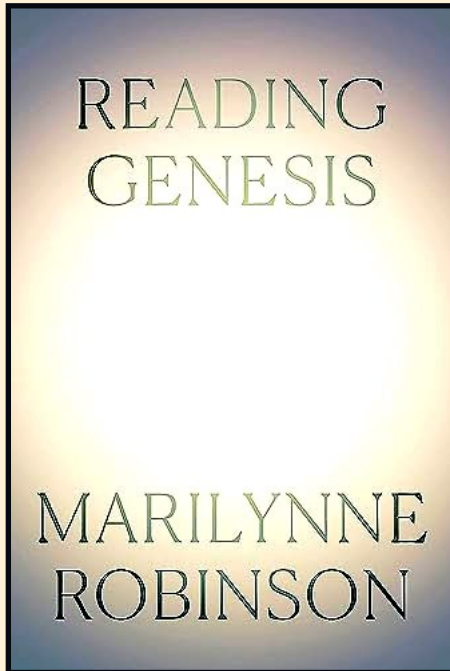


Reading Genesis

Marilynne Robinson's new book, *Reading Genesis*, reads the first book of the Bible in the light of comparison with other ancient Near Eastern works. She amplifies the uniqueness of Genesis, but also shows its similarities and responses to texts such as the Babylonian epics of *Gilgamesh* and *Enuma Elish*.



Robinson's writing is dense—this is not light reading—but her insights makes me feel as though I am reading *Genesis* for the first time. If you're interested in scripture study, and you feel up to wrestling with scholarly erudition, I recommend this book.

The book has far too many themes to enumerate here, but I'd like to touch on just one that resets the stage for how we view ourselves as a species on this planet. Concerning our relationship with God, Robinson states:

We are not the images of angels or lesser gods, but of the Creator Himself. And we are crowned "with glory and honour." I propose that our conception of *humankind* is too anthropomorphic, *too narrowly defined*—as physical, mental, or moral—*as mortal*, either damned or saved, but not as the over-whelming power we are as a creature, a species. Every day we are confronted with the actual and potential effects of this power, but we are never properly in awe of it.

This is a profound statement. We don't just anthropomorphize God; we anthropomorphize ourselves! That is, we not only assign human traits to God, but we do not adequately claim our own Godlike character. I suspect we limit our claim to godliness because we fear we would be presumptuous. But we do so at our peril.

When we cleave to our creatureliness, we can dismiss our awesome responsibility to "[b]e fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Genesis 1:26-31) In so doing, we risk the extremes of carelessly despoiling the bounty of the earth or seeing the human race as pariahs who have no right to earth's fruits. On the one hand, some industrialists believe the riches of the planet are theirs for the taking without regard to the damage they do. On the other, some environmentalists see all human encroachment as violating the earth's natural order.

Robinson's placement of human beings as made of the stuff of God, yet born of the earth, emphasizes that we are a special case. Like it or not, we are responsible for martialing the earth's resources for our benefit and simultaneously conserving them for the integrity of the planet.

We are not boastful or claiming false pride when we figuratively take our seats next to God. We are assuming the place God has assigned us with all its privileges and responsibilities. Concretely this may mean that we continue to judiciously use fossil fuels until alternatives mature for use. It can also mean stepping back from promising new technology (e.g., artificial intelligence) until some of its consequences are sorted out.

Nobody said this would be easy, but part of the splendor of our place in God's creation is that He has given us the intellect, will, heart and faith in Him to get on with the task.