

## *Preface*

This book had an origin somewhat unusual. I was having a conversation one evening with my wife, Anita Sullivan, about the creation story in Genesis, chapter 1, not a regular subject of conversation between us. Afterward, I thought that I ought to look again at the Hebrew text. Doing so, I was pleased to find that my knowledge of Hebrew, though somewhat rusty, had not completely abandoned me, and I thought I'd just try a bit of translating. Coming up for air several days later, I realized that I had drafted about twenty-five pages of a book that looked to turn into a reading of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. And here it is, mercifully slender and the product of some rather unaccustomed thinking about things I had not thought about for some time. When I retired from Stanford University in 1991, I thought I had published my last book about the Hebrew Bible, a sizable one on the Book of Job (*In Turns of Tempest: A Reading of Job with a Translation*, Stanford University Press, 1990). Well, I was mistaken.

If I read Genesis, chapters 1–11, with as much attention as I can, it may be one way to persuade those who read this discussion to do the same with their own eyes and minds. My point is not to set forth

the Final Truth about these chapters. I am pretty well convinced that there is no Final Truth to them, which is not to say that they have no truth in them. But sometimes truth makes its way most persuasively by being unfamiliar. Or a proposal's very unfamiliarity allows a reader to stop and ponder closely what she thinks—or has previously thought—is true. Then if she decides that she thinks something different from me, the thought may well be more precise, more focused, than it was before. One of my aims is to assist people to read with care and to make up their own minds more clearly.

Early in a long career of teaching at Stanford University, working with most amazing students and faculty colleagues in many fields of study, I had knocked out of me any notion that my duty was to turn them into my intellectual clones. That experience has spilled over into how I feel about readers of what I write, and this book is perhaps even more centered on that kind of presentation. Not that I will be shy about saying what I think. But I deeply desire readers to understand that my intention is not to provide them with a predigested “true perception” of these stories, but to show what in my own ways I have perceived. I have no difficulty with the idea that one outcome of that reading may be a level of disagreement with me. Fine. Use your own eyes and mind with all their capabilities and qualities, and see what you see. And I hope you will notice how many of my sentences end with question marks.

In fact, one of the surprises in pushing my way through the thickets of these chapters was how my perceptions have changed since I wrote earlier on the same material. There are some statements here that I could not have made twenty or thirty years ago. On the present trip through these texts I saw a good many things that I simply never noticed before, and I think some of them were for me at those times unthinkable thoughts. Other things I thought back then prevented my seeing some of what I see now. I am grateful to whatever elements of life and experience have made possible such change.

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