Rewriting Genesis

Biblical Reception and the Case of Barnett Newman

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Abstract

Barnett Newman's abstract paintings are often explicitly linked to biblical narratives by their titles. In particular Newman regularly revisits the Genesis creation story. In the wake of the destruction of the Holocaust, Newman sets out to tell a revitalized story of creation in order to establish a new artistic beginning for the Jewish people (and modernism) in twentieth century New York. Through careful and nuanced visual analysis of Newman's Genesis paintings, it is possible to construct a detailed mystical retelling of the creation story that is rooted in Jewish scriptures and develops a new receptive tradition. These paintings give Newman the opportunity to recreate the world through proverbial wisdom, Kabbalistic mysticism, and Hebrew scriptures in order to create a new and hopeful vision for the future in the wake of tragedy.

Keywords

Newman, Barnett – painting – mysticism – Genesis – abstract expressionism – Judaism – reception – modernism

בְּרֵאשִׁית, בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים, אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם, וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ. וְהָאָרֶץ, הִיְתָה תְהוֹ וְבוֹהוּ, וְחָשֶׁךְ, עַל-פְּנֵי
תְהוֹם; וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים, מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. Now the earth was unformed and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.¹

Gen. 1:1

In the wake of the devastation of the *Shoah* and in the centre of a bustling urban environment, unformed void—*tohu vebohu*, took on new meaning in the minds of Jewish thinkers in booming American cities. The primordial “darkness” had returned to the tattered earth. As Barnett Newman himself said, “the history of my generation begins with the problem of what to paint. During WWII it became nonsensical to get involved in painting men playing violins or cellos or flowers” (Zeidler). For Newman, it was ludicrous to try and depict the material relics of a destroyed world, he argued that the progression of art must “free itself from the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend and myth,” stripping away the isolating separation of figurative representation. Newman was not pushing abstraction to its extreme, but rather making a new creative artistic beginning.

When European Jews, like Newman’s parents, came to the United States, they encountered an urban frontier dominated by the cityscape (Koltun-Fromm 130). Even though the majority American culture viewed the city as a perversion of the American project, for the new American-Jews the anonymity and diversity of the metropolis provided a canvas for the creation of a distinctly American Jewish civilization (Koltun-Fromm 131). This civilization, as coined by Mordechai Kaplan, created the possibility of the explicit elevation of art to a spiritual plane.

Newman, undoubtably influenced by the Jewish thinkers of his time, viewed painting as an opportunity to both evoke the emotional resonance of the Jewish people’s traditional history and—to borrow the language of Abraham Joshua Heschel—build a fortified palace in time (Heschel 15). In the 1940s, realizing that his earlier work did not live up to the call imposed on him by civilization and time, Newman destroyed all of it to create a new beginning for himself (Shiff 436). This new beginning was explicitly influenced by Kabbalistic understandings of the Genesis creation narrative and at times even attempts to transform the text through visual commentary and translation. While it is

¹ Biblical translations all JPS 1917 Edition unless otherwise noted.

difficult to “read” nuanced theology from an image, Newman’s paintings and titles that explicitly reference Jewish themes help construct a source of legible mystical theology in the wake of destruction and tragedy. Through a thematic reading of Newman’s paintings, as opposed to a chronological presentation, this paper explores the theoretical development of a visual mystical theology in Newman’s works. This is not a description of Newman’s personal theological development over time, but rather it is a conceptual mapping of the mystical ideas developed in his work across his career.

Newman’s abstract paintings are not illustrations of biblical narrative. As Jean François Lyotard explains,

A canvas by Newman draws a contrast between stories and nudity. Everything is there—dimensions, colours, lines—but there are no allusions. So much so that it is a problem for the commentator. What can one say that is not given? It is not difficult to describe, but the description is as flat as a paraphrase. The best gloss consists of the question: what can one say? Or the exclamation ‘Ah’. Of surprise: ‘Look at that.’ So many expressions of a feeling which does have a name in the modern aesthetic tradition (and in the work of Newman): the sublime. It is a feeling of ‘there’ (Voilà). There is almost nothing to ‘consume’, or if there is, I do not know what it is. One cannot consume an occurrence, but merely its meaning. The feeling of the instant is instantaneous.

LYOTARD 80

Newman’s paintings compensate where words fail. He strives to transform their material surfaces into temporal expressions of inspiration and creativity. To explain the impact of Newman’s color fields in words is to deprive them of their potential impact. In a sense, Newman depends on Jungian biblical archetypes to heuristically identify underlying biblical ideas in his abstract paintings; however, his work goes beyond the traditional textual narratives to construct new realms of theological thought. Newman’s artistic message lies in the experience of the encounter with his painting. He is not rearticulating the black text of the Bible, but rather is trying to convey the sense of what the Kabbalists refer to as the *white fire*, the unwritten meaning between the explicitly written *black fire* of the letters (Green 125).

The struggle of the *black fire* is to articulate a multitude of ideas in the limited capability of written language. In 1961 Newman took upon himself the pictorial equivalent of the challenge of the written word to express “the living quality of colour without the use of colour” (Temkin and Shiff 246). Like most of Newman’s paintings, *Black Fire I* (fig. 1) is deceptively simple. A vertical expanse of

solid black paint covers slightly more than half of the white canvas on the left side. Abutting the wide swath of black is a white band contained by a slim black “zip.” The black bands bow and recede into and away from the white canvas as if the two are battling for representational space. As the viewer’s eye wanders from top to bottom the white band seems to breath bringing balance and movement to the work. The black dominates the field, but it is the white that brings the vitality to the image and the white light which contains the spectrum of life and color within it.

In 1968, Newman focused exclusively on the vitality of the aforementioned blank space in *White Fire IV* (fig. 2). In this painting, which harkens back to Malevich’s Suprematist canvas *White on White* (a work claimed to represent the end of representational painting), Newman wedges a thick vertical beige band between two solid white borders. The edges of the beige band are far straighter than those in *Black Fire I*, but the struggle for meaning in white absence is far more subtle without the contrast of black presence. *White Fire IV* is an attempt to read absence within absence which, like in the work of Malevich, is actually to find unity and creation in material deconstruction. The divisions between the white and black, and white and white, reveal their ultimate unity—an expression of the Kabbalistic notion *Tzim Tzum*. To witness a canvas by Newman is not to read content but to experience a moment that is beyond clear expression. As Newman wrote, “The point of view maintained by the new painter, that an art form must be used purely, has the virtue of making it a tool for the refined expression of concepts that cannot be handled by lesser methods, to the end, paradoxically, that it is able to express the most abstract thought” (Newman et al. 141).

The ideas contained in *Black Fire I* and *White Fire IV* are the culmination of a series of paintings Newman made in attempt to articulate the “white fire” of the Genesis creation story. Newman painted dozens of canvases with direct reference to the biblical narrative in constant attempt to articulate the ineffable ideas contained in the narrative transmitted through Kabbalistic literature: namely creation as the placement of a veil of separation between the divine and the world. A separation that only becomes manifest within the restrictions of time, without which the distinction would be immaterial.

Before considering the notions of black and white fire, Newman makes the unity of the universe apart from time explicit in his 1951 painting *Day Before One* (fig. 3). Towering over a viewer at 11 feet tall, the canvas is less of a painting and more of an immersive experience. Newman explicitly wanted viewers to stand close to his large paintings (Newman et al. 178). From a close distance, the viewer is consumed by the painting, becoming one with the work. The vibrant blue of the canvas reflects on the viewer’s skin, painting her in a colored hue.

FIGURE 1
Barnett Newman, *Black Fire I*,
1961. Oil on canvas, 114 × 84
in. (289.5 × 213.3 cm.), private
collection
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The rolling saturation of dark and light blues organically flow over the expanse of the canvas. At the top and bottom of the painting are two purple bands. The blue center of the canvas seems to both hover in front of an imagined purple background while simultaneously being contained by the hard borders. The blue is a space apart from the material world, one into which a viewer can step and experience the unity of the world before the separation of light and dark: the uncloaked *Ein Sof*. The space between the viewer and the object is dissolved as the two are joined together in a single unity, a non-differentiated and self-contained work of art. The all-consuming air of the painting evokes the language of Proverbs' description of the creation of wisdom, "When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water" (Prov. 8:24).²

FIGURE 2
Barnett Newman, *White Fire IV*,
1968. Oil on canvas, 132 × 50 in.
(335.6 × 127.3 cm), Kunstmuseum
Basel

MARTIN P. BÜHLER, © 2021
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FIGURE 3
Barnett Newman, *Day Before One*,
1951. Oil on cotton, 132 × 50 in.
(334.7 × 127.3 cm), Kunstmuseum
Basel

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Day Before One illustrates the time of the Proverbs' personified wisdom's birth; the time before material creation when there was nothing but God, wisdom, and creative potential. Newman invites the viewer to go back to the days before the beginning to embark on a new creation in the wake of destruction. The artist positions himself as wisdom inhabiting the unformed space with God looking towards the *Beresheet* of Genesis 1:1.

The meticulously planned 1946 painting, *Pagan Void* (fig. 4), provides a context in which to understand Newman's conception of the Genesis account of biblical creation. Still in the early stages of his interpretive paintings, this image is more illustrative than others but also represents intensive engagement with Kabbalistic biblical commentary. The painting is a representation of Genesis 1:2, the initiation of creation read in light of Kabbalistic thinking. The painting's title is derived from *tohu vebohu* (often translated as unformed and void). As seen in *White Fire*, "void" for Newman is not expansive emptiness but unmediated unity, a world before the application of the *Tzim Tzum*. The formless white void of the painting has blue elements of the untamed within it, but these elements have poorly defined edges and bleed into the unified void reflecting the blue green waters of the background which peer through the white paint. The black disk, or *black fire*, hovers above the white void and green waters. The disk seems to push away the beige-white, soft-blue, and grey into the void where they are entrapped within the growing red borders. The red then may ultimately contain and cloak the white void. The black disk, a recurring motif in Newman's paintings, is the first point of the *black fire*: the artistic articulation of the Kabbalistic wisdom—*sifrah* "*Hokhmah*."

This Kabbalistic conception of wisdom is also tied to the primordial wisdom of Proverbs and similarly helps bring structure and order to the world through the creative process. As Arthur Green explains in his introduction to the Zohar, *Hokhmah*, meaning "wisdom," is also the primordial teaching, the inner mind of God, the Torah that exists prior to the birth of words and letters. As being exists here in this ultimately concentrated form, so too does truth or wisdom. The Kabbalists are building on the ancient Midrashic identification of Torah with primordial wisdom and the Midrashic reading of "In the beginning" as "through Wisdom" God created the world (Green 100).

The black disk in *Pagan Void* is the first symbol of order in the world, the organizing force behind the ultimate distinction between time, space, and material that become manifest through creation. Near the centre of the disk, preserved in the protective red border, is a white dot, an element that shall remain untouched by the black fire of *Hokhmah*. This unaffected white dot can be conceived of as an articulation of *Keter* delineated from *Hokhmah* by the tetragrammaton. As Green explains, the miniscule physical form of the letter

FIGURE 4 Barnett Newman, *Pagan Void*, 1946. Oil on canvas, 33×38 in. (83.8×96.5 cm), National Gallery of Art, Washington. Gift of Annalee Newman, in Honor of the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art

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yod is an indication of its mystical significance as the *entrée* into the realm of existence, and of its role in the initiation of the creative process.

As the primal point of existence, *Hokhmah* is symbolized by the *yod*, the smallest of the letters, the first point from which all the other letters will be written. Here all of Torah, the text and the commentary added to it in every generation—indeed all of human wisdom—is contained within a single *yod*. This *yod* is the first letter of the name of God. The upper tip of the *yod* points toward *Keter*, itself designated by the aleph or the divine name EHYEH (Green 100).

The red border elsewhere in Newman's oeuvre is emblematic of the *yod*. Here the red protects an unchanging glimmer of the permutant *Keter* linking the mortal and divine realms through the first letter of the divine name. Red paint bursting into a composition to contain other elements is established in

FIGURE 5 Barnett Newman, *The Name I*, 1949. Oil and magna on canvas, 48 × 60 in. (122 × 152.5 cm), Daros Collection, Switzerland
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reference to the divine name, YHWH, in Newman's later 1949 *The Name I* (fig. 5). In the painting, four red zips (one for each letter of the tetragrammaton) delineate contained and expansive grey space in the canvas. The mere existence of the lines designates the boundaries of space that only exists in reference to the red bands. In *Pagan Void* there is a single semi-circle of red paint at the centre of creation, the *yod*, which serves as a focal point of *Hokhmah* and a reference to *Keter*.

This understanding of *Pagan Void* is further justified when viewed in relation to the almost contemporaneous 1946 painting, *Genesis—The Break*. This painting can be read as an articulation of the moment of separation described in Genesis 1:6–8, the second day of creation. The painting can be construed as a detail of *Pagan Void* from a moment and vantage point after the separation of the heavenly and earthly waters. In the world of *Genesis—The Break* the viewer is situated on the border of the disk from *Pagan Void* on the lower left where the blue and grey outlines have been severed from the disk by the narrow white arc. The viewer herself is the subject of the painting—she is asked to step inside the

landscape and experience the remoteness of the black circle. The viewer stands across this slim white void in opposition to the disk of *Hokhmah* within the blue and grey material, with more white-void visible to the left.

From this perspective *Hokhmah* seems like a separate and distant entity, but the white dot of *Keter* is still visible with its concentric white ring. Space has been warped in the image to create a feeling of distance from the disk. The vertical bands of mangled blue, black, and white create another barrier between the viewer and the source of divine wisdom. Like the bars of a prison, these vertical bands trap the viewer in a remote earthly realm, isolated from the source of divine wisdom. The ominous dark lines swirl together, like bats swarming in a cave, creating a sense of anxiety of what the experience of a world separated from *Keter* and *Hokhmah* could be. The separation of heaven and earth is manufactured by the divine and rooted in a universe of time (Novak 371, 373). At the moment of *Genesis—The Break* the ultimate unity of heaven and earth, void and *Hokhmah*, is hidden, but in the moments and views before time the unity, or *Ein Sof*, is self-evident. With this painting Newman makes an important step away from illustrative explanation of biblical narrative towards experiential commentary on the underlying meaning of the text (a shift from *black fire* to *white fire*). It is not enough to see an image of the far-off black disk; the viewer must experience the sense of separation from the source of wisdom through an encounter with the art object.

While forcing the viewer to experience the inherent distance between God and humanity engendered through material creation, *Genesis—The Break* also encourages the viewer to feel the drama of Adam and Eve's later expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The dark swirling lines conjure images of both trees and bars, setting the viewer in sight of the lush garden while explicitly denying her access to it. Through the trees, off in the distance past the garden, the viewer can catch a glimpse of the black disk and its associations with divine intimacy. What was unmediated unity in *Day Before One* has become a symbol of dissociation. Wisdom and knowledge, the core of Adam and Eve's transgression, must now forever remain distant and out of reach along with the fruit of the Tree of Life "lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever" (Gen 3:22).³

The longing to overcome God's imposed distance that keeps humanity arms-length from the divine is expressed in the painting, and along with it the futility of the mortal attempt to reach back out to it, especially after the final literary "break:" "Therefore, the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to

till the ground from whence he was taken" (Gen 3:23).⁴ The painting describes the untold moments of Adam and Eve leaving the garden and looking back on all that was left behind.

Newman's ultimate language of emotional engagement and communication is clearly articulated in 1948 with the creation of his ground-breaking painting *Onement I* (fig. 6). This is the first painting he made that singularly focused on his signature vertical "zip." *Onement I* signifies what Newman referred to as his transition from "pictures" (a visual representation of an event rendered using discreet pictorial elements) and "painting" (the creation of a singular unified art-object) (Temkin and Shiff 158). Whereas *Pegan Void* and *Genesis—The Break* articulate a moment in history, *Onement I* creates a moment in the present. Newman's early works have to be slowly deciphered and visually read, like a text unfolding, as the viewer decodes the meaning of the representative symbols strung together to convey an idea. Pictures as conceived by Newman, like texts, exist in a realm of time. A painting, as idealized by Newman, is not untangled and understood in time, but rather is a mode of instantaneous communication and union between viewer, object, and creator. The viewer joins Newman on a creative journey, the results of which are untold at the onset. There is no distinction between the painter, viewer, and object. As Newman explained, "I'm the subject, I'm also the verb when I paint, but I'm also the object. I am the complete sentence" (Shiff 436).

In describing the creation of the zip in *Onement I*, Newman said, "Suddenly in this particular painting, *Onement*, I realized that I had filled the surface ... I did not make an arbitrary, abstract decision" (Shiff 442). In creating *Onement I*, Newman mimicked the divine creation on the first day of creation in the Genesis narrative. In one fell swoop he brings the orange zip down into the brown plane. The zip simultaneously illuminates the painting and divides it into balanced halves. The rough and uneven application of the zip generates a sense of kinetic energy that flows through the band, fighting to keep the surface illuminated even as the darkness contends for space in the upper left corner. When Newman finished the painting, he looked upon what he had created and saw that it was good and continued to focus on the zip for the rest of his career (Shiff 442).

The division created by the zip, however, is artificial and temporary. The zip is painted onto masking tape which theoretically could be removed, reunifying the canvas in a void of undifferentiated darkness. The imposition of the light allows for the viewer to recognize the ultimate singularity of the space of

FIGURE 6 Barnett Newman, *Onement I*, 1948. Oil on canvas and oil on masking tape on canvas, 27 1/4 × 16 1/4' (69.2 × 41.2 cm). New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Gift of Annalee Newman. Acc.n.: 390.1992

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the painting. The viewer could peel back the tape and reunify the image at any time. It is not an illustration of the first day of creation, it is a re-enactment of it. Thinking back to Newman's explanation of his creative process, it is the subject of the painting being distinguished from the object by the verb. The grammatically illustrated distinctions are arbitrary because they are all, in reality, manifestations of different expression of the singular Barnett Newman. Newman demonstrates the distinction of the *sefirot*, divine attributes, that emanate from and are contained within the unified deity. The action of creating the zip only serves to highlight the notion that the entire enterprise is a part of a singular experience. Newman had successfully "filled the surface," there is nothing other than him—*Ein Od Milvado*.⁵

Perhaps somewhat circularly, the undifferentiated self needs distinction in order to be understood. The white fire needs the black fire as reference and grounding. The ability to create distinctions and contrast is one of the key features of language for Newman. Newman, himself a prolific writer, believed in the ability of language to simplify complex ideas. He wrote hundreds of pages explaining his works and aesthetic opinions despite his artistic attempts to reach beyond the bounds of standard language.

As Newman worked his way towards *Black Fire I* and *White Fire IV*, he began to incorporate an abstract notion of language into his painting. In *The Word II* (1954), Newman recalls God's primary mode of creation: language. In Genesis, God uses speech to distinguish between and create new earthly elements imposing borders between light and dark, heaven and earth, etc. These distinctions, the ordering of the primordial chaotic void, initially provide earthly structure but ultimately allow for the formation of hierarchy and violence between differentiated entities. Seeing the world of the mid-twentieth-century Newman cannot help but be reminded of the power of words to distinguish once singular groups. The labels applied to people created space for discrimination and violence. The world had become so differentiated that perhaps it was not worth creating to begin with. With the initial utterance, *yehi 'or*—יְהִי אֹרֶךְ—let there be light, the first seeds of destruction were sown.

The Word II is an artistic manifestation of Newman's linguistic anxiety. On the right side of the painting, a wash of robin's-egg blue covers the canvas from the centre to the edge. The light blue is bisected, and the right half is covered over in a darker blue, but the light blue pokes through the uneven darker coat and the border between the two is straight but brushy, allowing the colours to flow into one another; they are distinct but not separate. The left edge of the

light blue region is framed by two parallel zips. The right zip's brushy imperfection is reminiscent of the energetic band of *Onement I*. It balances the lighter half of the blue space while creating a dynamic relationship between itself and the border between the light and dark blues. The left zip, however, is almost completely engulfed in the dark matte black paint that covers the left half of the canvas. This zip, far thinner than its partner, is a single, rigid, dark line with a hard edge. It has been muted by the heaviness of the encroaching black as the zip seems to fight to keep the blackness at bay. The black paint lets nothing through. It draws clear and immutable distinction between itself and its surroundings. It gives no hints to the underlying unity of the single canvas; its heaviness almost creates two images: one of colourful light difference and the other heavy and dark distinction. The white fire has been extinguished, lost in the rigidity of the written black word. The blackness, which represents the black ink on a scroll or the black fire, embodies the ultimate end of the creation narrative: the recording of history in indelible ink. So, when faced with the question of what to paint, for Newman there is only one answer, to return to the moment of creation, before distinction, and to chart a new future.

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