The Book and the Text

The Bible and Literary Theory

Edited by

REGINA SCHWARTZ

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6.1 'These are the generations of . . .'
6.2 The major patrilineal descent in Genesis, and their ethnographic tripartition at the locus of epochal displacement and reorigination.

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Acknowledgments

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With the advice of readers from the publisher, I have added more essays, ones that approach the Bible in ways that were not represented at the conference, and I am grateful to those contributors for joining the project. Thanks to Patrick Melson for his meticulous work with the preparation of the manuscript, to Kim Didonato and Jan Chamier for helping with many details, and to Naomi Wood and Karla Shargent for their assistance in the final stages. The following essays have been reprinted with permission from their presses: Herbert Marks, 'On Prophetic Stammering', first published in *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 1, no. I; Robert Alter, 'Sodom as Nexus', in *Tikkun* vol. 1, no. 1; Regina Schwartz, 'Joseph's Bones and the Resurrection of the Text', *PMLA*, March 1988. Finally, I would like to thank the inspiration behind it all, James S. Ackerman, Professor of Hebrew Bible at Indiana University, whose teaching during my graduate Bible studies and whose summer institutes on the Bible as/and Literature at Indiana University in the seventies provoked this activity, and who led our discussion on the book of Numbers (his essay was published in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*) at the Colorado Conference.

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Introduction: On Biblical Criticism

Regina M. Schwartz

The essays assembled in *The Book and the Text* are not intended to offer a 'literary reading' of the Bible. Such studies, both the efforts by individual interpreters and collections by various hands, already exist: *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, edited by Alter and Kermode, is one of the more recent guides, and it is designed to take the reader by the hand through the Bible, book by book. The editors of that collection have carefully delimited their project, and what they have chosen to exclude offers an indication of what this volume on the Bible and theory includes. They explain that

> critical approaches mainly interested in the origins of a text in ideology or social structure are not represented here; nor is Marxist criticism . . . or psychoanalytic criticism. . . . we have not included critics who use the text as a springboard for cultural or metaphysical ruminations, nor those like the Deconstructionists and some feminist critics. . . . The general validity of such approaches is not at issue here, only their inapplicability to our project as we have defined it.[1]

Amid the growing focus on the Bible in literary studies, this book offers the complementary strain, for its essays are deliberately engaged in a dialogue between currents in contemporary theory – structuralism, deconstruction, semiotics, hermeneutics, feminism, psychoanalytic interpretation and political thought – and the Bible. In practice, what that means is that the contributors do not subscribe to a self-evident notion of what a 'literary approach' to the Bible might mean. There are only approach*es*, and even these are questions they engage rather than a collection of settled concerns.

When the Bible first made its way into English departments, there seemed to be some common understanding about what a course title like 'The Bible as Literature' might mean: there would be attention to figurative language, to characterization, to plot. In 1975, when

Robert Alter began to call the attention of literary scholars to the Bible in what was, at the time, a ground-breaking essay, he began with the observation that 'It is a little astonishing that at this late date there exists virtually no serious literary analysis of the Hebrew Bible.' Then he proceeded to describe what 'serious literary analysis' would constitute:

> By serious analysis I mean the manifold varieties of minutely discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, narrative viewpoint, compositional units, and much else; the kind of disciplined attention, in other words, which through a whole spectrum of critical approaches has illuminated, for example, the poetry of Dante, the plays of Shakespeare, the novels of Tolstoy.[2]

In the current theoretical climate 'literary analysis' no longer evokes such stable formulations; we speak more often of discourse, of textuality, and we derive the vocabulary of that discourse from decidedly extra-literary sources: from developments in continental philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, psychoanalysis and political theory. But if it is timely for the Bible to be brought into an encounter with literary theory, that does not mean that in the following essays theory will be 'applied' to the text. On the one hand, only the reduction of theories to 'techniques' could allow imagining such applications – we cannot *apply* gender studies, Marxism or hermeneutics any more than we can *apply* ideology – and on the other hand, most theoretical perspectives would concede that whatever the Bible is, it is not stable enough to receive any such application. Instead, theoretical problems are reconceived in their dialogue with the Bible, even as such reflection reshapes what 'the Bible' might be. In the essays that follow, the book and text are engaged in an encounter.

Furthermore, while the contributors were selected with the principle of theoretical eclecticism in mind, most would be leery of accepting any strict label. In some, the emphasis is on theory, with the Bible offering examples; in others, closer scrutiny is paid to the narrative workings of the text, and theory is left more implicit. As a key figure of the Tel Aviv school of poetics, Sternberg's debt to Russian formalism is clear, but his approach to the problem of how biblical narrative approaches chronology is his own.[3] Then, too, when we read Bal's work as feminist criticism, we still have not begun to categorize it: she has taken pains to distinguish herself from some obvious comparisons with biblical critical-historical feminist scholars;[4] besides, there are many feminisms. Here she explores how marriage

economies in biblical patriarchy result in the victimization of women and the silencing of the female subject in narrative. Bruns and Ricoeur share an interest in hermeneutics, in the interpretive function of narrative, but Bruns focuses on midrashic hermeneutics, arguing that it is a historical process, not a method, a 'social practice', not a logical exercise, while Ricoeur finds an 'indissociable union of kerygmatic and narrative aspects' in the passion account. If, from our historical position, placing midrash and the New Testament side by side in a common hermeneutics may appear like a quiet gesture, it is not.[5] Boyarin contrasts the activity of midrashic interpretation with the more familiar allegorical one of the Song of Songs. In their Marxist approaches, Eagleton and Briggs further the exploration of the relation between social practice and interpretation: in her discussion of the value of hermeneutics for praxis, Briggs focuses on the ways that Paul negotiates the conflict between baptismal identities and existing social identities in the early Church. Eagleton sees in Jonah the dilemma of how to constitute the subject as one who can act meaningfully. Nohrnberg is preoccupied with kinship structures in his essay but structural anthropology would not adequately describe his argument in which identity is constituted, and genealogy is drawn, by blood or by adoption. In his more structural approach, Alter speaks of the 'pointed activation of one [biblical] text by another', of intratextual allusion that forms a narrative design. Tolbert's focus is more historicist, setting the Gospel of Mark in the context of ancient popular culture to show how the gospel plays on expectations of ancient romance novels. If Marks's and my own piece are postmodern, Marks turns to sublimity – prophetic stammering concentrates attention on the status of the utterance, the hearer and speaker. My own interest is in postmodern process: the activity of forgetting and remembering allies my thinking with psychoanalytic dynamics of repression at the same time that it characterizes the biblical vision of history. But if these essays resist the categories imposed by the academy for the ready consumption of critical theory, that need not be frustrating; instead, their range may be the best testimony to their value.

Added to the difficulty of situating these essays in the contemporary critical climate is another problem: that context – complicated as it is – is not the only one where we should locate *The Book and the Text.* There is another dimension: not contemporary, but historical. If less well known to literary scholars, the history of biblical interpretation is no less central; for when we understand interpreting the Bible as an act of reappropriating, reconceiving and rewriting, we have attached ourselves to a long and illustrious lineage of biblical interpreters. The

vocabulary of medieval and reformation biblical exegesis may not be borrowed from continental philosophy or linguistics, but the issues are strikingly familiar: the authority for our interpretations; the relation of the text to the reader; the relation of the text to history; the political force of our interpretations; the question of the boundaries of the text and canon formation.

This story of biblical interpretation begins in the Bible, where the prophets rework the exodus narratives, the New Testament interprets the 'Old' (the construction of those categories was itself a major interpretive event), and Paul offers allusive remarks about the letter and the spirit that are to influence subsequent patristic principles of exegesis. Paul's 'The letter kills but the spirit maketh life' (II Cor. 3:6) leads to formulations and reformulations of what the 'letter' and the 'spirit' might be; if the letter refers to literal meaning and the spirit to figural meaning, what, then, do figural and literal mean? Even as the school of Antioch attacked the Alexandrians for their allegorizing of scripture, the two schools understood the provinces of allegory and literalism differently. The Alexandrians understood 'literal' to mean essentially concrete: the 'arm of God' meant that God has an arm, and at least one of the impulses informing their allegorizing was to combat such anthropomorphism. In Antioch, on the other hand, the literal meaning could include metaphor and with that broader spectrum of sense, such 'literal meanings' were less troubling to uphold. Nonetheless, Chrysostom, a key figure in that school of Antioch where literalism was advanced, writes that 'we must not examine the words as bare words else many absurdities will follow, but we must mark the mind of the writer'. Needless to say, this medieval version of intentionalism is fraught with the same problems its more modern versions confront: how do we gain access to the mind of the writer? In short, while the fourfold medieval method seems to have systematized interpretation formally, the bounds of allegorical, literal, tropological and anagogical exegesis were at least as blurred as our contemporary theoretical categories.

Furthermore, the disjunctions between medieval *theory* of exegesis and *praxis* show how troubling the 'application' of even medieval principles was. In the fifth century, Vincent of Lerins offered one of the most influential theories of exegesis. He asserted that 'the rule of interpretation be laid down in accordance with the norm of ecclesiastical and Catholic understanding' (*Commonitorium*, II, 3) and that this understanding is what has been held 'everywhere, always, and by everyone'. 'Everywhere, always, and everyone' meant tradition (with a capital T): the doctrines espoused by the Fathers, sanctioned by the medieval Church, hence, believed to be everywhere,

always, and by everyone. But even this effort to elevate the ideal of universal consensus to an exegetical principle did little to quell the factionalized debates over the meaning of the text. If the tropological meaning is the moral implication, what and who adjudicates it – in the absence of a consensus everywhere, always, and by everyone? Allegory was invoked to neutralize morally troubling passages: Bernard of Clairvaux explained the passage, 'the virgins love thee' from the Song of Songs, by elaborating why God is loved by angels, archangels, virtues, powers, principalities, dominions, cherubim and seraphim. But the functions of allegory were not always so quaint: on other occasions, allegorical interpretation was asked to serve, if not confer, political power. Bernard interpreted the two swords of Luke 22:38 as the 'spiritual' and 'material' weapons to be wielded respectively at the bidding of the clergy and the command of the emperor, and that interpretation was used as authoritative justification for the powers of pope and emperor.

In rabbinic exegesis the impulse was less to delimit meanings than to justify their proliferation. 'The exegesis of verses of Scripture defined a convention in Israelite life even before books of holy writings attained the status of scripture.'[6] Polysemy prevailed, both in the expositions of rabbinic law, *halakhah*, and in the more homiletic or narrative midrashim, *aggadah*. Nonetheless, all proceeds, for the Rabbis, from the 'oral Torah', that revelation at Sinai that accompanied the written one and is passed from generation to generation. According to the sages, this revelation included every interpretation of the Bible, even contradictory ones. 'Verses receive not just one but many interpretations, which indicates not the rejection of previous explanation but the simultaneous legitimacy of a number of meanings', says Judah Goldin.[7] That simultaneity of conflicting interpretations is evident in the famous portrayal of the fierce debates between the exegetical schools of Hillel and Shammai. Unable to agree for years about their interpretation of the law, the dispute was 'settled' by a heavenly oracle that decreed, 'The words of both Houses are the word of the living God, and the law is like the House of Hillel.' When the Rabbis asked why, if the words of both houses are the words of the living God, the law is decided by the House of Hillel, they answered, 'Because they were peaceful and humble men, and they taught the teachings of the House of Shammai as well as their own, and even more than that, they taught the teachings of the House of Shammai before they taught their own.'[8] Another frequently cited expression, 'Turn it and turn it, for all is in it', describes not only the sense of ceaseless activity on the book but also the comprehensiveness of the book. In halakhic commentary, where legal concerns and

prescribed courses of action were foremost, there was ostensibly close attention to what the sages called *peshat*, 'literal meaning'; philology and Hebrew grammar entered discussions; rules of interpretation were followed – of course, different rules for different schools.

Aggadah, the freer, more narrative mode of exegesis, had conventions of its own, stemming largely from its sermonic setting. The *petihta*, or proem, usually ends with the first verse of the weekly reading and begins with a verse from a very different context. The interpreter's virtuosity lay in connecting, in whatever roundabout way possible, the two verses. Scripture, then, was not only interpreted by recourse to tradition; whether halakhic or aggadic, scripture was interpreted by scripture. Rhetorical devices were common: punning, homophones, acronyms and methods borrowed from ancient dream interpretation. While these procedures may sound atemporal, political and polemical impulses informed Judaic scriptural exegesis no less than Christian. Judaism was being defined through these very acts of interpretation, defined and defended against such ideological cross-currents as the Christians, who claimed that they were the authentic inheritors of the biblical tradition, the Karaites, who rejected the authority of the oral Torah in favor of the written scripture alone, Greek pragmatism, and Alexandrian culture. Meanwhile, authorizing the tradition of interpretation – the oral Torah – shed new light on the canon. What constitutes the authoritative text is redefined when its interpretations are also authorized. That problem did not only belong to the Rabbis.

Biblical authority, the issue implicit throughout medieval debates over allegorical and literal interpretation, became explicit – and explosive – during the Reformation. Upon what authority does any interpretive activity rest? Luther denounced the view that interpretation belongs to the church alone, that the scripture must be mediated by the clergy. 'The Church', wrote Luther, 'is daughter born of the Word, not the mother of the Word.'[9] A doctrine of 'sola scriptura' could not solve differences in interpretation, and neither could professing the perspicuity of scripture. Given its supreme authority, the Bible may be more urgent to interpret, but no easier. At the Diet of Worms when Luther was asked to recant, he invoked the 'testimony of scripture' to distinguish his guiding authority from the church, but he also spoke allusively of the guidance of his reason and conscience:

> Unless I am convicted of error by the testimony of Scripture or (since I put no trust in the unsupported authority of Pope or of councils, since it is plain that they have often erred and often contradicted themselves) by manifest reasoning I stand convicted by the Scriptures to which I have appealed, and

my conscience is taken captive by God's word, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against our conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us.[10]

Later he would distrust reason, only to invoke the Spirit to help interpret the Bible. 'Scripture alone' may have meant without tradition, but it did not mean without bringing another principle to the text. Calvin laid even greater emphasis on the illumination of the Spirit. But even with the guidance of the Spirit, the Bible seemed to mean different things to different Reformers – a diversity of interpretations that only induced ever more acute awareness of ideological differences among them. Generally speaking, doctrine did not follow exegesis; doctrine came first, determining what the Bible ostensibly said. True enough, Luther spoke with conviction about the importance of the literal meaning (he called it the grammatical sense), with impatience about the allegorical excesses of Origen, but he would not hesitate to indulge in allegory himself when it suited his purpose. The Bible taught the doctrine of faith in Christ, and he found that doctrine not just in the New Testament but in Genesis and in the Psalms.

There was another consequence of this investment in the authority of scripture: it inevitably induced a new crisis over the text itself. When Calvin claimed that the Spirit was expressed in the Word, the transmission and corruptibility of the Word were at issue. He notes that Paul misquotes Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8, but, Calvin explains, that is because he is not interested in the words of the psalm, but in its sense. 'We see with what freedom the apostles permitted themselves to quote scripture passages. The apostles were not so scrupulous [in quotation] as to decline to accommodate their language to the uninformed.'[11] Throughout their proofs and counter-proofs of biblical inerrancy, and in their elevation of the 'grammatical sense' of scripture, the Reformers turned to the study of the original biblical languages. Renaissance humanism left the Reformers its legacy, with its painstaking Greek and Hebrew studies. These biblical exegetes were grammarians first; their interpretations required ancient language competence. Soon, biblical interpretation would be chiefly that, an exercise in language competence, and theology would begin to go underground in biblical studies. Even Calvin had formally separated his biblical commentary from his theology, the *Institutes*, thereby helping to usher in the distinction between philology and theology that would come to dominate interpretation throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries.

The distinction between scientific approaches to the Bible and theological ones deepened in the eighteenth century, a period that made an unprecedented investment in the 'factuality' of the Bible. The