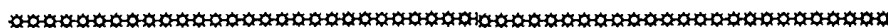


THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

An Introduction

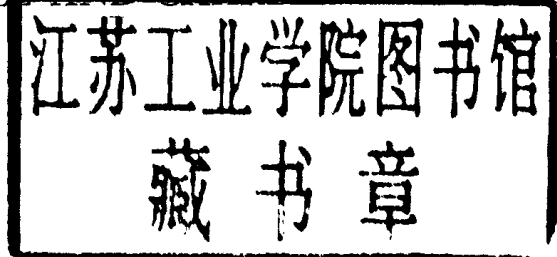
John B. Gabel
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JOHN B. GABEL AND CHARLES P. WHEELER



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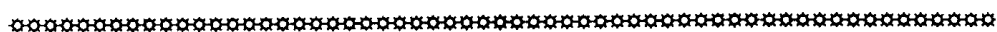
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THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

*Collegis optimis qui nos totiens de
his rebus audiverunt*



Acknowledgments

Our aim from the start has been to represent in this book, so far as it is possible, the consensus of modern biblical scholarship. Our debts to published writings are thus extensive. We have not attempted to acknowledge these debts in footnotes, which would have been only an impediment and a distraction for most of our readers. Informed biblical scholars will have no trouble identifying the sources of many of the views presented here—though it should be added that all writers on the Bible build with materials that are largely common and accessible. What counts is not whether the materials are old or new but whether they contribute to a proper understanding of the biblical text.

This work has been immensely favored by the informed criticism of several of our colleagues who have read the manuscript and offered constructive comments. Anthony York, Estelle Hunt Professor of Biblical Literature at the University of Cincinnati, went through every chapter with meticulous care and ornamented our margins with many detailed and useful suggestions. We are particularly grateful to him for not hesitating to challenge us when he thought us mistaken. As a result of his attention, the book is much improved over its original version. The entire manuscript was also read and criticized by Professor Edward P. J. Corbett, of the Department of English, The Ohio State University, and Professor Oliver Ferguson, of the Department of English, Duke University, and we are grateful for their help. Particular assistance was given by Professor Jack Balcer, of the Department of History, The Ohio State University, who read the chapter on the inter-

testamental period, and Professor (now emeritus) Denis Baly, of the Department of Religion, Kenyon College, who read the chapter on geography. All of these scholars tried generously to save us from ourselves; for the faults that remain, therefore, we take full responsibility.

Columbus, Ohio
November 1985

J.B.G.
C.B.W.

To the Reader

This book is a systematic general introduction to the study of the Bible as literature. It is intended to support such study by providing essential background information of the sort that few beginning students have either time or ability to piece together out of the enormous mass of published material on the Bible. Although this book at all points relates to the Bible, our primary text, it is self-sufficient in the sense that it does not itself have to be taught. We have tried throughout to make our work accessible to literate adults, feeling that the subject already has difficulties enough without our imposing others on it. The particular audience we have in mind—one that we have addressed for many years as teachers—is college undergraduates enrolled in a Bible course offered by a department of literature. We believe that the book can also be used in introductory courses offered in seminaries and theological schools as well as extramurally by persons studying the Bible on their own.

Before going further, we should make clear what this book is not. It is not a commentary on the Bible, either generally or on a book-by-book, chapter-by-chapter basis. There are several such works available that reflect the achievements of modern biblical scholarship (for example, *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* and *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary*). Nor is the book an attempt to impose an interpretive scheme or point of view on the Bible, for that would usurp the function of religion. Nor, finally, does it advocate or presume the value of the Bible as a vehicle of moral instruction or as a provider of religious insights or as a source of inspiration for the conduct of daily life. We

do not deny these values, but we shall not take them into account either. It is sufficient for our purposes that the Bible be—as it is—a fascinating human document of enormous importance to the culture and history of the modern world, a document that can speak volumes to humans about their own humanity. There is no need in the present study to go beyond this view, and there would be considerable danger for us in doing so, for everything beyond it is in the area of personal beliefs and is subject to sectarian controversy. Whatever else it may be, for the purposes of the present book, the Bible is human. Its contents evolved and came together as a result of activity by real people living in actual places over a period of more than a thousand years of human history, people subject to all the influences on culture that then existed. Hence the Bible is timebound. This much is certainly known and should be acknowledged. To what extent the Bible may also be timeless—supra-historical and super-natural—is up to the judgment of the individual reader or the religious interpreter, for whom we cannot speak and do not attempt to speak.

In recent years the world of biblical scholarship has been shaken by a number of major revisions in heretofore generally accepted views about the Bible and its background, thanks in part to the great increase in archaeological and epigraphical materials from the ancient Near East. This reminds one that even the Bible is not as well known as we had thought it to be and makes one wonder whether today's certainties will not also in time suffer the fate of yesterday's. It is a humbling thought. In this book we have done our best to take advantage of the latest and most respected impartial scholarship on the Bible. Although we have organized and expressed them in our own way, the views set forth here represent a consensus. In some cases we have expressed our own inclinations in order to represent this consensus. But nothing is absolutely guaranteed, and the last word on the Bible is far from said.

We begin the book with some background chapters on literary aspects of the Bible, the relation between the Bible and history, the physical setting in which biblical events occurred, and the process by which the Bible took shape. We then conduct a literary-historical examination of the Bible, proceeding in approximate sequence through the Old and New Testaments, with individual chapters on the Pentateuch and on the major types of biblical literature: prophecies, wisdom writing, apocalypses, gospels, and "acts" and letters. Between the Old and New Testament blocks are chapters on the intertestamental period and the Bible-like writings not found in the Bible; following the New Testament block are chapters on biblical translation and on the way the Bible has been characteristically made use of in religion.

Although the book thus has a logical overall order, we hasten to say that it need not be read in that order. Each of the chapters is sufficiently self-contained that it can be read independently. The instructor of a college course on the Bible may well decide to assign at the outset the chapter on the canonization of the Bible or the one on translation. Whatever the order followed, we can assure those readers who finish this book that they will have gained an understanding of how the Bible came into being, why it took the shape it did, and what has been made of it during the centuries of its existence.

In quoting the Bible, we have taken the New English Bible (NEB) translation as our text. The King James Version (KJV; also known as the Authorized Version [AV]), honored by time and the affection of countless readers, is unfortunately not satisfactory for our purposes. As a translation, the KJV is too often inaccurate, its language is archaic, and in the New Testament it is based on inferior originals. Of the numerous modern versions, we prefer the New English Bible because it uses modern English in a colloquial but dignified way—and with considerable stylistic flair. Also, it is available in an excellent study edition.

A brief preliminary remark needs to be made about certain of our terms of reference. We shall for the sake of convenience throughout this book speak of “the Bible,” though—as we explain at length in various places—there is not just one Bible but at least four. By the term we shall generally mean simply what most people mean when they speak of the Bible—the volume that one swears on in court and that is read from in religious services. When it is important to make distinctions, we shall refer to the Jewish or Catholic or Eastern Orthodox or Protestant Bible. We shall, likewise for the sake of convenience, refer to the “Old Testament” and “New Testament,” though, of course, the Jewish Bible has no “New” Testament and Jews do not think of their sacred text as being the “Old” Testament—it is simply the Bible. But the terms “Old Testament” and “New Testament” are established and familiar and serve as a kind of shorthand that will save us from bogging down in descriptive terminology.

We shall frequently in this book refer to the Hebrew Bible, an entity not to be confused with the Jewish Bible. The latter is simply the Bible recognized by Jews, the scriptures of Judaism, and can be found in any of the world’s languages. The Hebrew Bible, on the other hand, is *in* the Hebrew language and is the *source* of the Jewish Bible (as well as of the Christian Old Testament). Only for those who read the Jewish Bible in Hebrew are the Jewish and Hebrew Bible the same thing. In the following pages, in contexts where Jewish religion is under discussion we shall often have occasion to refer to the Jewish Bible. In

contexts where language and biblical translation are under discussion we shall refer to the Hebrew Bible.

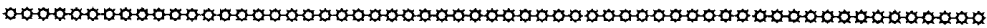
The reader will observe that throughout this book, except in a few direct quotations from (or references to) the English text of the Bible, we refer to the deity of ancient Israel as “Yahweh.” This is the standard form employed by scholars today to represent the personal name that appears in the Hebrew text of the Bible as four consonants, *yhwḥ*. Fidelity to the original requires that one not use “Lord” or “the LORD,” although English translations of the Bible continue to do so. Why these are incorrect and how the problem came into being are discussed in the Appendix, “The Name of Israel’s God.”

In historical references we shall, with some misgiving, use the abbreviations “B.C.” and “A.D.” Lying behind these familiar tags are, respectively, the phrases “before Christ” and “*anno domini*” (“in the year of our Lord”), phrases that reveal an obvious Christian bias. An alternative system of reference employs the abbreviations “B.C.E.” and “C.E.”—respectively, “before the common era” and “common era” (common, that is, to both Judaism and Christianity). Though we would have been pleased to use this religiously neutral terminology, we feared that for many of our readers its unfamiliarity would make dealing with biblical dates even more difficult than it already is. We are emboldened in our decision to employ “B.C.” and “A.D.” by the fact that many Jewish biblical scholars now employ them—and for the same reason that we do, their familiarity.

At the end of most of our chapters there is a brief list of books and articles, “Suggested Further Reading.” The lists are by no means bibliographies; true bibliographies for the very large subjects we pursue in this book would each run to many hundreds of items. The lists merely provide, for readers particularly interested in the subject of a given chapter, places to go to find out more about it. Although these lists are certainly not complete or final, the works included have been chosen with some care. We have excluded items primarily religious in nature or containing scholarship too technical for the lay reader; and we have passed over a good many valuable older studies in favor of others that represent the state of the art in biblical scholarship. Many of these works provide their own reading lists and thus can serve as the means for directing readers continually deeper into the subjects with which we have dealt.

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THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

I

The Bible as Literature

What does it mean to read the Bible “as literature”? Simply that for the time being one looks at the Bible in the same way that one would look at any other book: as a product of the human mind. In this view the Bible is a collection of writings produced by real people who lived in actual historical times. Like all other authors, these persons used the languages native to them and the literary forms then available for self-expression, creating, in the process, material that can be read and appreciated under the same conditions that apply to literature in general, wherever it is found. This view is not necessarily in conflict with the traditional religious one, namely, that the Bible was written under the direct inspiration of God and given to humans to serve as a guide to their faith and conduct. But it is clearly different, with its own requirements and its own aims.

Reading the Bible as literature should not be uncomfortable for persons who hold the religious view (though it may seem a little strange at first), and it places no demands upon the many persons who, for reasons of their own, take a skeptical or noncommittal view of the Bible. The Bible is the common heritage of us all, whatever our religious beliefs, and we should be able to study it, up to a point, without getting into religious controversy. Later—and separately—anyone who chooses

to should be able to return to viewing the Bible as a repository of religious truth. The important thing is to know what one is doing, to make one's choice explicit, and to follow it consistently. We are here going to look at a group of literary texts *as* literary texts.

Our position is that the Bible in some fundamental respects is not different from the works of, let us say, Shakespeare or Emily Dickinson or Henry Fielding or Ernest Hemingway. If we were actually studying the works of these authors, such a chapter as this would not be necessary—for who can imagine needing to read something called “Shakespeare as Literature” or “Emily Dickinson as Literature”? We assume that their work is literature; it needs no demonstration. But different assumptions have historically been applied to the Bible, and in many circles they are still in force. For millions of persons the Bible was and still is *the* book. In many households it was the only book to be found, and it was displayed as a proud possession—its mere physical presence was assumed to have some beneficent power. Such a household might also have owned the works of Shakespeare, similarly displayed, but the crucial difference is that no one in that household or any other would have thought to ask of Shakespeare's works, “Will they save us?” Even persons with no religious commitment, who do not believe the Bible at all, tend to assume that this work demands to be treated in a special way, a way peculiar to itself. Hence merely to say “The Bible is literature,” as though this answered all questions, is not enough. As a prerequisite to further study, we must attempt to make it clear why and how the Bible, as literature, belongs in the same category with all these other works.

We are using the term “literature” in its broadest sense. There is a narrower sense of the term that encompasses only what is known as *belles lettres*, that is, poetry, short stories, novels, plays, essays. Although the Bible does contain this kind of material, it also contains genealogies, laws, letters, royal decrees, instructions for building, prayers, proverbial wisdom, prophetic messages, historical narratives, tribal lists, archival data, ritual regulations, and other kinds of material more difficult to classify. We must acknowledge this remarkable diversity and be careful not to exclude any of it from the scope of our study. Otherwise we could not honestly claim to be considering the Bible as a whole.

WRITING AS
THE EXPRESSION
OF A SUBJECT

But if the literature of the Bible (or the Bible as literature) is, indeed, so diverse, can anything at all be said about it that will apply across the board?

Fortunately, one thing of fundamental importance can be said, that is, every piece of writing in the Bible expresses a *subject*: not an object, but a subject! The difference between the two is crucial. As ordinarily understood, objects are things that exist externally to ourselves and independently of us. They do not have to be material—objects can be ideas, events, even possibilities—but they are “out there.” In respect to a piece of writing, the object would be whatever portion of this external existence the author captured and put on paper. Such writing normally comes to us with at least some kind of implied truth claim: “This thing that I am telling you is so; it really happened.” We judge it, if we can, by its closeness to truth. This approach works poorly with most belles lettres, however, because such writing makes no claim to truth that can be taken seriously; in fact, we usually recognize such writing for what it is and do not even attempt the judgment. But the Bible does not so easily escape, for its writing seems to make constant and serious truth claims, ones that are taken at face value by a great many readers who look to the Bible as a true record of God’s dealings with humankind—that is, as accurate, objective reporting. Nevertheless, this approach works no better with the Bible than with most belles lettres because in so many cases we have no knowledge of the objects represented in the Bible apart from what the authors have written about them; thus we have nothing by which to judge the writing. In the absence of any objective means of determining the apparent truth claims of biblical writing, it might seem that we are left with the prospect of nothing beyond the usual futile arguments between believers and nonbelievers that never change anyone’s mind and that monopolize attention to the exclusion of everything else. The only way to escape this dead end is to rethink our conception of the literary situation, and it is for this reason that the alternative term “subject” has been introduced.

A subject is not something “out there” but something “in here.” It exists in the author’s consciousness; it is a conception of what the author wishes to express. This subject may be a private whim or fancy with no reference to objective reality, or it may have reference to something as solid, tangible, and generally shared as Solomon’s Temple. This matters not at all. Any communication about the Temple requires that this object first enter the author’s mind as a group of perceptions. These perceptions are modified by the author’s individual point of view and