

General Introduction

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TO most educated modern readers the Bible probably seems both familiar and strange, like the features of an ancestor. They will know, if only in a general way, of its central importance in the history of the culture they have inherited; but they will also be aware that in its modern forms that culture has denied the Bible the kinds of importance it had in the past. They will very likely see modern fundamentalism as dangerous and atavistic; yet to repudiate the biblical inheritance altogether must strike them as barbarous. Here is a miscellany of documents containing ancient stories, poems, laws, prophecies, which most of us cannot even read in the original languages, and which we probably know best, if we are English speakers, in an English that was already archaic when the King James (or "Authorized") Version was published in 1611, and may now often seem distant and exotic: "that old tongue," as Edmund Wilson once vividly expressed it, "with its clang and its flavor." Yet, as Wilson went on to say, "we have been living with it all our lives." In short, the language as well as the messages it conveys symbolizes for us that past, strange and yet familiar, which we feel we somehow must understand if we are to understand ourselves.

It might of course be argued that the centrality of the Bible in the formation of our culture is the result of historical accident. That is a view to which two centuries of modern biblical scholarship have, willingly or not, given much support. The motives of the scholars, Christians, Jews, and secularists alike, were understandable: a small body of writings, first in Hebrew, then in Greek, produced in a narrow strip of the eastern Mediterranean littoral during a period of roughly a dozen centuries, continued to have the most far-reaching consequences because these writings were accepted as revealed truth; and in the interest of *historical* truth it became a duty to try to understand the processes by which this literature emerged from its original historical situation. Broadly speaking, literary criticism was of small importance in this undertaking, which treated the biblical texts as relics, probably distorted in transmission, of a past one needed to recover as exactly as possible.

Over the past couple of decades, however, there has been a revival of interest in the literary qualities of these texts, in the virtues by which

they continue to live as something other than archaeology. The power of the Genesis narratives or of the story of David, the complexities and refinements of the Passion narratives, could be studied by methods developed in the criticism of secular literature. The effectiveness of this new approach or approaches, for the work has proceeded along many different paths, has now been amply demonstrated. Professional biblical criticism has been profoundly affected by it; but, even more important, the general reader can now be offered a new view of the Bible as a work of great literary force and authority, a work of which it is entirely credible that it should have shaped the minds and lives of intelligent men and women for two millennia and more. It is this view of the Bible that the present volume seeks to promote.

It will be clear, therefore, that we do not seek to duplicate the work of traditional historical scholarship—to consider the origins of a text or to ask what may be inferred from it concerning the life and institutions of ancient Israel or early Christianity; though our contributors certainly do not neglect such considerations when they are relevant to their more literary purposes. It would be absurd to lay down the law about what is and is not relevant to these purposes, or to prohibit the use of insights deriving from comparative religion, anthropology, philology, and so forth. Nor should it be supposed that we are careless of the religious character of the material under discussion simply because our aims are not theological and not in the ordinary sense related to spiritual edification. Indeed we believe that readers who regard the Bible primarily in the light of religious faith may find instruction here along with those who wish to understand its place in a secularized culture.

If we were asked to state more positively why we have approached the subject as we have done, we should reply as follows. First of all, the Bible, considered as a book, achieves its effects by means no different from those generally employed by written language. This is true whatever our reasons for attributing value to it—as the report of God's action in history, as the founding text of a religion or religions, as a guide to ethics, as evidence about people and societies in the remote past, and so on. Indeed literary analysis must come first, for unless we have a sound understanding of what the text is doing and saying, it will not be of much value in other respects. It has been said that the best reason for the serious study of the Bible—for learning how to read it well—is written across the history of Western culture: see what happens when people misread it, read it badly, or read it on false assumptions.

The desire to read it well has broad cultural justifications which remain quite apart from religious considerations. By this we do not mean merely that the Bible is probably the most important single source of all our literature. That is certainly the case, and an increasing neglect of the Bible in our secularized times has opened a gulf between it and our general

literature, a gap of ignorance which must in some measure falsify the latter. Very few of us have the unconscious assurance of an educated Victorian reading Milton; Matthew Arnold, for example, would have received as he read biblical allusions we have to look up, as well as the silent counterpoint of Greek and Latin syntax. Milton is especially biblical, but the point applies in varying measure to almost all the major writers in English. The revived interest of secular writers in the Bible does stem in part from a sense that secular literature is in some degree impoverished by this lack. But there is a more striking development: the Bible, once thought of as a source of secular literature yet somehow apart from it, now bids fair to become part of the literary canon. The coming together of religious and secular criticism has taught practitioners of the former that their studies may be greatly enhanced by attention to secular methods; the latter have benefited by discovering that the Bible, to which few of the most influential critics had of late paid much attention, is simply of such quality that they have neglected it to their immense cost.

Indeed, it seems we have reached a turning point in the history of criticism, for the Bible, under a new aspect, has reoccupied the literary culture. How have we reached this point? If we look back to the Enlightenment we notice that men of the caliber of Lessing and Herder did not suppose that they must specialize in secular or in religious literature. We remember Lessing as a dramatist, an influential critic and theorist of drama, an aesthetician; but we remember him also as a daring biblical critic. Herder's influence on the development of German literature is enormous, but his biblical studies are hardly less important. Yet it was in the time of these extraordinary intellects, and partly in consequence of their achievements, that the historical-critical method characteristic of specialized modern biblical scholarship was developed. This "scientific" criticism was of great cultural and doctrinal importance; but, as we have said, it diverted attention from biblical narrative, poetry, and prophecy as *literature*, treating them instead as more or less distorted historical records. The characteristic move was to infer the existence of some book that preceded the one we have—the lost documents that were combined to make Genesis as it has come down to us, the lost Aramaic Gospel, the lost "sayings-source" used by Matthew and Luke, and so on. The effect of this practice was curious: one spoke of the existing books primarily as evidence of what must once have been available in an original closer to what actually happened. That was their real value—as substitutes for what had unfortunately been lost.

The analytic work that goes by the name of the Higher Criticism, as well as the minute textual labors of nineteenth-century scholars, occupied minds of high ingenuity and great intellectual force. It was something new (though the methods employed owed much to classical scholarship), and it dealt in the truth, which is why it fascinated George Eliot and Matthew Arnold and others who felt that the recovery of true religious

feeling required an immense detour through modern scholarship, and the establishment of forms of belief thus "demythologized." The strength of the movement seemed virtually irresistible, and the new interpretation of the Bible became for many a scientific discovery that had to be reconciled with whatever religious or quasi-religious opinions one happened to hold. Yet the fact remained that the biblical texts were valued less for what they actually were than for what they told us about other putative texts or events to which there was no direct access.

What has happened now is that the interpretation of the texts as they actually exist has been revalidated. This development has not been simple or single, and it has not been merely a reaction against the modern tradition of professional biblical scholarship. It comes of a need, felt by clerical and secular students alike, to achieve a new accommodation with the Bible as it is, which is to say, as literature of high importance and power.

A landmark in this process was the publication of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1946, English translation 1953), an extraordinary, polymathic study of European traditions of realism. It was, one might say, a providential work. Auerbach, a savant of the old European school, wrote the book in Turkey during the Second World War, with no good library except the one in his head, while just out of range European civilization was trying to destroy itself. As time goes by there are increasing reservations about much in *Mimesis*, but it was nevertheless crucial in showing the way toward a reunion of the secular with the religious critical tradition. The first chapters, comparing Old Testament narrative with Homeric narrative and meditating on the unique relation of ordinary-language realism to high "figural" meanings in the Gospels, not only offered new perspectives on the Bible itself but also suggested new connections between the achievements of the biblical writers and the entire tradition of Western literature. Auerbach showed that the old simple contrasts between Hellenism and Hellenism were misleading, that the realisms invented by the writers of the Bible were at least as important to the European future as was the literature of ancient Greece. It was no longer a matter of equating conduct with Hebraism and culture with Hellenism; and when the Bible could be seen as a source of aesthetic value, vast new questions opened, not only about revising the relations of Greek and Hebraic, but also about the exploration of texts that paradoxically had been neglected even as they were venerated and studied. And in due time scholars attended to such matters as the intellectual habits of first-century readers, while critics looked at the Bible with the eyes of the twentieth-century reader; and the two might come together to demonstrate all manner of new possibilities, a revision of past readings, a modern Bible.

Since the time of Auerbach there have been great changes in the style and method of literary criticism. Among them are the many varieties of Formalism, Structuralism, and their descendants. It is unnecessary to spec-

ify these methods here; what they have in common are a skeptical attitude to the referential qualities of texts and an intense concern for their internal relationships. Contributors to the present volume are aware of these developments, and they give a high degree of attention to the texts (studied, of course, in the original languages). "Narratology" is a word so new that it escaped inclusion in the *OED Supplement* of 1976, but the poetics of narrative is a subject at least as old as Aristotle, and poetics is the right description for what happens in this volume; indeed our contributors might, if they wished it, call themselves "poeticians," a word that postdates the *OED Supplement* of 1982. Modern criticism is a fine breeding ground of neologisms; we avoid them for the most part, and are content to call our contributors critics. We are writing to serve the interests of the educated general reader rather than those of some critical party.

We have not imposed uniformity of method on our contributors, but all involved in this project share a broad consensus of purpose as literary critics. We assume that literature is a complex language, not necessarily unique, not without significant overlaps with other kinds of language, but distinctive nevertheless, and that the constructive critic will in one way or another direct otherwise wandering attention to the operations of this language. Its syntax, grammar, and vocabulary involve a highly heterogeneous concord of codes, devices, and linguistic properties. These include genre, convention, technique, contexts of allusion, style, structure, thematic organization, point of view for the narratives, voice for the poetry, imagery and diction for both, and much else. The complexity of this interplay of elements certainly calls for expert literary appraisal and also guarantees that there will be no unanimity of approach or of interpretative conclusions. No critic, then, is an unquestionably dependable guide, but many can be helpful in different ways in showing us how to parse the language of literature. In the case of the Bible, guidance is especially necessary because so much time has intervened since this particular literary language was a living vernacular, and because so many other kinds of discourse have been superimposed on it by the subsequent tradition of interpretation.

This sketch of the operation of criticism covers much but by no means all of the ground now claimed by the various schools of contemporary criticism. It stresses the role of the critic as someone who helps make possible fuller readings of the text, with a particular emphasis on the complex integration of diverse means of communication encountered in most works of literature. An orientation of this sort seemed to us particularly appropriate for our volume because at this moment in cultural history there is an urgent need to try to learn how to read the Bible again. Certain varieties of contemporary criticism are not represented here because we think they are not really concerned with reading in the sense we have proposed. For example, critical approaches mainly interested in the

origins of a text in ideology or social structure are not represented here; nor is Marxist criticism (which in any case has been applied to the Bible solely on historical issues) or psychoanalytic criticism. Given our aim to provide illumination, 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 who seek to demonstrate that the text is necessarily divided against itself. The general validity of such approaches is not at issue here, only their inapplicability to our project as we have defined it.

Our own notion of criticism is pluralist, and the label that best fits most of our contributors is eclectic. There are no doctrinaire proponents of a particular critical school among them. Our chief concern was to choose the contributors who would be likely to write the best essay on the subject, not what critical approach would be used. We turned with equal readiness, though with no intention of striking a numerical balance, to literary critics interested in the Bible and competent to discuss it, and to biblical scholars interested in literary criticism. The result, we should like to think, is a happy union of the two disciplines that has instructive things to say both to students of literature and to students of the Bible.

Literary criticism, long thought to be peripheral or even irrelevant to biblical studies, has emerged since the mid-1970s as a new major focus of academic biblical scholarship in North America, England, and Israel, and it has also shown a few notable signs of life on the Continent. It was natural, then, that ours should be an international undertaking. Our contributors were drawn from seats of learning (in all but two instances, secular universities) in the United States, Canada, England, Israel, Italy, and the Netherlands. They variously derive from Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish traditions. Some are committed by faith to the texts they study, and others would regard themselves as essentially secular critics. But they speak a common critical language, the differences among them stemming far more from individual sensibility and intellectual preference than from religious background. In many instances, we sought to recruit writers who had already made some notable contribution to this field of inquiry, but we did not hesitate to turn as well to several younger scholars whose initial work seemed to us to offer great promise. The volume, then, is a meeting-ground not only of nationalities and faiths but also of scholarly generations. The resulting variety of perspectives, joined with a unity of general purpose, provides a lively overview of the more than thousand years of diverse literary activity represented in the Bible.

The purpose of this book will now, we hope, be clear. We no longer live in the age when literate persons had a daily intimacy with the Bible on the basis of shared belief; individuals must now attune themselves to the book, which is today rarely assimilated in early youth. To help them do so is our main object.

In trying to accomplish it we have made certain assumptions. What we are here calling "the Bible" is really only one of several Bibles, and to some it may appear that our choice has theological implications, though the grounds of our choice are entirely literary. (The variations in biblical canons are touched on in the essay "The Canon," below.) We need say no more about the kind of scholarship that regards the biblical canons as more of a nuisance than anything else and prefers to think of the Bible as a collection of independent books more or less fortuitously assembled. There remains the difficulty that the Catholic Bible is not identical with the Protestant, nor the Bible of Greek Judaism with the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, it is obvious that Jews will not attach much religious significance to the New Testament, though as a matter of critical fact the relations between the two Testaments, so potent and interesting in the first centuries of the era, are profoundly interesting now, if not for quite the same reasons. But we have chosen what is virtually the Protestant Bible for literary reasons only; it is, more than the others, the Bible of the central anglophone tradition, the single book that most easily comes to mind when we speak of the Bible. We can claim that it includes all the books recognized by modern Jews as constituting their Bible, and all the books that Christians agree upon as parts of theirs.

The books of the Old Testament are not treated in this volume in exactly the order familiar from the King James and subsequent Protestant versions. We have instead followed the order of the Hebrew Bible, except that for reasons of genre Ecclesiastes is joined in a single essay with Proverbs. It is for similar generic reasons that we have departed from the more familiar King James order. Whereas Ruth appears in that order after Judges, we have preferred not to interrupt the course of the so-called Deuteronomic History, which here runs from Deuteronomy to 2 Kings, as it does in the Hebrew Bible. The essays on the prophets are not interrupted by Lameness, regarded in the traditional versions as an appendix to Jeremiah. Daniel, the last written work of the Hebrew canon, is not here treated as belonging with the classical prophets. The Hebrew Bible groups its books in this sequence: Pentateuch, Former Prophets, Latter Prophets, miscellaneous Writings; and it suited our purposes to adopt this order. The essays on the New Testament follow the conventional sequence of books, with considerations of the Pauline Epistles gathered into one general article, and the Catholic Epistles treated in the essay on Hebrews.

We have as a rule used the King James Version in translations, and our reasons for doing so must be obvious: it is the version most English readers associate with the literary qualities of the Bible, and it is still arguably the version that best preserves the literary effects of the original languages. But it has serious philological deficiencies, and its archaism may at times be misleading; accordingly, our contributors have sometimes

felt obliged to revise it—indicating their changes by [AK] (author's revision)—or to provide their own translations—marked by [AT] (author's translation) or accompanied by an endnote indicating that all the translations are the author's. A few contributors have referred to the New English Bible (NEB), the Revised Standard Version (RSV), or the New Jewish Publication Society Bible (NJPS) instead of the King James Version (KJV, AV). There are two typographic departures from the King James Version. Italics are not used for words merely implied in the original, because this convention is more confusing than helpful to modern readers. When poetry is quoted, the text has been set as lines of verse. In some instances the responsibility for decisions about line breaks rests with the editor of the Old Testament section.

TRANSLITERATIONS from the Hebrew and Greek are simplified and do not correspond to scholarly convention. Diacritical marks have been limited to *h* for Hebrew *het* (roughly corresponding to the light, aspirated fricative *j* of New World Spanish) and *ō* and *ē* for Greek *omega* and *eta* to distinguish them from *o*, *omicron*, and *e*, *epsilon*. *Kh* in transliterations of the Hebrew indicates a fricative something like *ch* in the Scottish *loch*. No attempt is made in the transliterations to indicate features of the original that are primarily grammatical and the notation of which would not convey useful phonetic information to the reader. In a few instances, consistency has been set aside in the interests of what needed to be shown, as when, for example, a contributor wanted to indicate through transliteration that consonants are shared by two different forms of a word, something evident to the eye scanning the Hebrew page, though the actual pronunciation of a particular consonant may change slightly as a word is conjugated or declined (like the shift from *b* to *v* in the Hebrew *bet*). Transliteration between languages with partly incompatible phonetic systems is always a difficult business; what is offered here is no more than an approximation, intended to serve as an adjunct to the purposes of literary criticism.

Older scholarly convention spells out the Tetragrammaton or ineffable Hebrew name of God as *Yahweh*. Here we adopt a more recent convention of indicating the consonants only: *YHWH*. The vowels of this name are in any case somewhat conjectural, and transliterating just the consonants also accords with traditional Hebrew practice.

THE OLD TESTAMENT