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0521445434 - Origins of Narrative: The Romantic Appropriation of the Bible

Stephen Prickett

Excerpt

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## Introduction

‘The history of appropriation’, writes Jonathan Bate in *Shakespearean Constitutions*, ‘may suggest that “Shakespeare” is not a man who lived from 1564 to 1616 but a body of work that is refashioned by each subsequent age in the image of itself’.<sup>1</sup> If that is true of the Romantic use of Shakespeare, it is doubly so of the Bible, which during the eighteenth century underwent a similar but altogether more profound ‘refashioning’. Though, for obvious reasons, this did not involve the same liberties with the text, an increasing use of the Bible (as against the classics) in almost every form of public and private discourse was accompanied by a largely unnoticed shift in reading and interpretation so radical as to make of it virtually a new book from a hundred years earlier. Even as formal religious observance was by the end of the century declining towards a nadir unequalled at any time since,<sup>2</sup> the prestige of the Bible as a literary and aesthetic model had risen to new heights. Not merely was Romantic thought in England, Germany and even France, steeped through and through in biblical references but, less obviously, Romantic criticism, its accompanying concept of ‘literature’ and even the theory of hermeneutics was no less biblically derived. The Romantic Bible was at once a single narrative work, an on-going tradition of interpretation, and what I have called in these pages a ‘metatype’: a kind of all-embracing literary form that was invoked to encompass and give meaning to all other books.

But though this construction was unique – and in some ways uniquely potent – it was, as many critics were aware, by no means the first time such a reconstruction had occurred. Historical criticism, much of it dating from the second half of the eighteenth century, was

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Bate, *Shakespearean Constitutions: Politics, Theatre, Criticism 1730–1830*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> See the statistics in Robert Currie, Alan Gilbert and Lee Horsely (eds.), *Churches and Churchgoers: Patterns of Growth in the British Isles Since 1700*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977.

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already beginning to suggest that the text of the Bible, so far from being, as contemporary pietistic and Evangelical rhetoric was wont to claim, a rock of certainty in a world of flux, was itself a midrashic composition of endless revisions and appropriations of earlier writings. In that, it could be, and was seen by some as, a paradigm of our entire literary culture – and ultimately of the collective hermeneutical process by which any culture develops and inculcates its distinctive way of understanding the world. For the young Friedrich Schlegel, as for Coleridge, the Bible was the central literary form and thus the ideal of every book, a new supreme genre, which provided a goal for representatives of all other genres.<sup>3</sup>

Reading has never been a simple or straightforward activity. It has always been accompanied by a theory of how a piece of writing should be read and interpreted. Each change in the practice of textual interpretation has required corresponding changes in theory. Such theories, taking a wide variety of social, political and religious forms, have always been used to justify the long sequence of shifting hermeneutics that forms the invisible sub-structure to any particular cultural milieu. Coming to consciousness within our apparently secular world, it is not always easy for us to see the ways in which it has been shaped by that longwinded and somewhat quirky product of an ancient Semitic people we call by our generic word for ‘book’, yet the fact remains that the Bible, simply in cultural terms, has been the most important single book in the history of Western civilisation, if not of the world. As the Romantics were well aware, we owe to it even our idea of a book itself. The Bible was traditionally ‘the Book of Books’: an ambiguous phrase implying both that it was a collection of works somehow contributing to a mysterious unity greater than the sum of its parts, and, at the same time, *the* pre-eminent and superlative book – as it were the class-definer, the book by which all other books were to be known *as books*. The importance of this for the development of European literature and thought can scarcely be over-estimated. To begin with, it suggests a curious ambiguity between implied pluralism and effective singularity. Thus the English word ‘Bible’ is derived, via the French *bible*, from the late Latin *biblia*, a feminine singular noun that meant simply ‘the book’. In its older Latin form, however, *biblia* was not understood as the feminine singular, but as the (identical) neuter plural form, which was, in turn, derived from the Greek *ta biblia*,

<sup>3</sup> See Jack Forstman, *A Romantic Triangle: Schleiermacher and Early German Romanticism*, Misoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977, p. 22.

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which meant ‘the books’ – essentially no more than a collection of individual works. This shift in meaning reflects the changing physical conditions of the book (or books) themselves. Before the invention of the codex, or bound manuscript volume, the biblical texts were held as individual scrolls often stored together in a wooden chest or cupboard. Under such conditions the question of what works did, or did not constitute the scriptures, or their exact order, though it might have been a matter of doctrinal debate, was not an immediately practical one. Individual scrolls could be read in whatever order one chose. The invention of the codex, however, with its immediate practical advantages of compactness, ease of handling and storage, meant that potential flexibility was lost. From then on the books had to come in a specific order – and it is significant that the process of creating a canon for both for the Hebrew Bible and for the New Testament coincides historically with the widespread introduction of the codex. Even so, in a world of laboriously transcribed manuscripts, content and order of books remained relatively unstable until as late as the thirteenth century<sup>4</sup> and only the introduction of printing in the fifteenth completed this transition from utterance to artifact.<sup>5</sup> What began as ‘the books’ had, literally and physically, become ‘the book’ – and in the process a new dimension had been added to the notion of narrative.

As a result the idea of what constitutes a book came to include within itself that notion of unity with diversity, of openness and plain meaning with secrets and polysemous layers of meaning.<sup>6</sup> The concept of narrative that was to evolve with the novel assumed the possibility of many parallel stories – sometimes apparently unrelated; it took for granted sub-plot and main plot; stories within stories; parallel, complementary and even contradictory stories that may link thematically rather than by direct influence. It is no accident, for instance, that many of the foundational works of English literature: Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* or Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* are also, in effect, collections of stories relating in various ways to a single common theme. The same kind of structures were used by Boccaccio in Italy and Rabelais in France. Similarly, the frequency of two or more

<sup>4</sup> See Teresa Webber’s review of *The Early Mediaeval Bible* (Cambridge, 1994), *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 January 1995, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> See Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: the Technologising of the Word*, Routledge, 1982, p. 125. (Apart from publications of university presses, the place of publication, if not given in the reference, is London.)

<sup>6</sup> A point made by Erich Auerbach in his comparison between biblical and Homeric modes of narration. See *Mimesis*, Princeton University Press, 1953, p. 19.

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thematically related plots in Elizabethan drama – and most notably in Shakespeare – emphasises the origins of English drama in the biblical models provided by the mediaeval Miracle Plays. Again, popular drama had similar origins on the continent – in Italy, France and Germany; it was only later that the French Court imposed on a francophile Europe a taste for the more austere and concentrated classical unities.

Though, as we shall see, there has always been a powerful classical influence, even on the reading and interpretation of the Bible, it is primarily to this biblical idea of a book that we owe our peculiar set of expectations about the world. Because the biblical writers took it for granted that there was a meaning to the whole cycle of human existence, and later interpreters developed this to assume that every event described in the Bible, however trivial it might seem, had a figurative, typological or, as we would now say, symbolic relation to the whole, it became habitual in other areas of existence also to look for narrative, with a pattern of hidden meaning, rather than expect a mere chronicle of events. This expectation runs very deep in Western society, affecting not merely fiction, but biography, history, law and, of course, science – that distinctive product of a belief in a rational and stable universe where every part has its meaning in relation to the greater ‘story’ of the whole. Ironically such a belief in the grand narrative of science was common to both Newton and his most trenchant critic of the Romantic period, Goethe.<sup>7</sup> It is still rarely appreciated (especially by those puzzled by Newton’s obsessive interest in biblical history and prophecy<sup>8</sup>) that the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century owed as much to Hebrew mysticism as to Greek rationality.<sup>9</sup> Similarly alongside the open, rational, tradition there have always co-existed others, arcane and hidden, whose essence is secret meanings and the capacity to interpret signs totally invisible to the uninitiated.

But whether open or secret, we find the idea that a book was, by its very nature, interpretative. This was a quality already present in the Hebrew Bible, but the Christian project of appropriating the Hebrew scriptures and presenting itself as the legitimised heir to Judaism gave the process a new urgency. After the first generation, the Church

<sup>7</sup> See Roger Stephenson, *Goethe’s Conception of Knowledge and Science*, Edinburgh University Press, 1995, p. 68.

<sup>8</sup> Among other works by Isaac Newton, see, for instance, *The Chronology of the Ancient Kingdoms Amended* (1728) or *Observations on the Prophecies of Daniel and St. John* (1733).

<sup>9</sup> See E.A. Burt, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*, Routledge, 1933.

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Fathers – Ambrose, Augustine, Cyprian, Jerome, Tertullian and the rest – were not Jews but classically trained scholars coming to the Bible with a quite different set of aesthetic and philosophical assumptions from the Apostles. In its literal sense, much of what now became the ‘Old Testament’ bore little or no relation to the superstructure constructed upon it. In many cases, indeed, its narratives and even ethical teachings actually seemed to contradict those of the New Testament. The need to interpret texts was thus not an incidental phenomenon of the new religion, but a response to a problem that was essential to its foundation and subsequent development. In this sense at least, critical theory was what Christianity was all about.

Moreover, because Christianity began with a sense that it differed radically from the world that preceded it, and that even its own sacred texts had to be effectively defamiliarised, the interpretative function of narrative was uniquely central right from the start. When the Greek historian Herodotus visited Thebes in Egypt, he gazed with awe at 300 generations of high priests of the Theban temple listed in its inscriptions, as he realised that they went back for thousands of years before the dawn of Greek history. J.H. Plumb has contrasted this disturbing experience, which began to give meaning and shape to the idea of history for the Greeks, with the untroubled serenity of the Chinese chroniclers, for whom the succession of one emperor after another for upwards of 5,000 years was simply a sequence of time.<sup>10</sup> In contrast with the Chinese, the compilers of the New Testament, like Herodotus, saw in the past not merely a sequence of events, but a problem with a meaning that had to be explained.

This sense of the past as a problem was compounded by the events of the first few centuries of the Christian era. The biblical world was never a monoculture existing in isolation from surrounding societies. On the contrary, it clung to a marginal existence at the intersection of great powers, and Jewish political and cultural life flowered only in the brief intervals between the waning and waxing of foreign imperial ambitions – Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and Romans. One reason, perhaps, why Christianity, rather than its many rivals, was able to ride out the destruction of the Roman Empire was that it already contained within its own literature models not merely for the destruction of empires, but for something much more important: a *meaningful* pattern to their rise and fall.

<sup>10</sup> *The Death of the Past*, Macmillan, 1969, p. 111.

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It is therefore hardly surprising if, in our biblically based culture, the inherent expectations of a book include not merely narrative but *revelation*: a sense that some hidden mystery is to be unfolded and even explained. Even the sense of antiquity, the realisation of the age and alienness of the biblical texts served to reinforce this sense of a tradition of wisdom handed down from generation to generation. The concept of intertextuality is, in effect, as old as Western civilisation itself, for Europe's past is rooted in a translated book – not merely a translation for modern Europeans, but essentially and in its very origins. As the Romantics were quick to recognise, this is as characteristic of the internal structure of the Bible as it is of its later history. Though the Bible is presented as arising from the peculiar experience of one particular people, it is in fact itself a palimpsest of languages and contexts. If the Old Testament, for instance, is written almost entirely in Hebrew, substantial parts of it incorporate translation or paraphrase of other Near Eastern texts – Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Canaanite and others. Because it has taken its very existence from the intersection of other languages and cultures, the Bible has always been at once marginal and assimilative: culturally meek, perhaps, but fully prepared to inherit the earth.

In short, so far from being simply instrumental, our idea of a book has always been one of our most powerfully and ideologically charged cultural constructs, affecting the whole basis, and even the metaphysical legitimacy of our civilisation. European literary criticism was born from the problematic relationship between the Hebrew and Christian Bibles and the biblical writings and the classical literature of Greece and Rome. But if this duality of Europe's past, its conflicting ideologies and their different interpretations of human destiny<sup>11</sup> had worried such classical scholars as, for instance, Augustine and Jerome, from that problem was to stem, not merely our hermeneutics, but our peculiar sense of history, many of the great questions of Western philosophy, and, not least, the peculiar dynamics of our literary tradition.

That sense of a dynamic literary tradition stemming from many sources, but above all from the Bible, lies at the heart of Romantic literary theory. If, on the one hand, it was to transform cultural awareness of the Bible itself from a God-given monolith to a living and changing interpretative tradition, it was, on the other, to involve a similar rereading of all subsequent literature. In the following pages we

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

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shall be tracing first of all the romantic inheritance: a book whose earliest myths rested not merely upon appropriation, but on Jacob's blessing – that peculiar and paradoxical myth of mis-appropriation. It was a dynamic that was to be repeated with the Christian appropriation of the Hebrew scriptures, and arguably yet again with the Reformation. In the second part we shall be looking at how the contingencies of the aesthetic, political, intellectual and religious context of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe led towards a quite new way of reading the scriptures that was to reach its most explicit form in Schleiermacher's hermeneutics. But it would be a mistake to see this sea-change as being solely or even primarily theological – at least in any institutional sense. One of the most significant facts about the Romantic appropriation of the Bible was its freedom from any ecclesiastical or doctrinal control, Protestant or Catholic. Though we shall be looking at some sermons, they will range from those of that most anarchic and undoctrinal clergyman, Laurence Sterne, to the equally unorthodox 'speeches' of Schleiermacher to his anti-clerical friends. As befits the holistic strivings of the fragmented Romantic sensibility, we shall also be looking at many other fields affected by the shift in biblical theory: landscape gardening, novels, painting, psychology, revolutionary and counter-revolutionary polemic – not to mention Swedenborg's impressively detailed reports on the prevailing class distinctions among angels. If the particular examples seem on occasions arbitrary, selective and historically disparate, they represent the tradition at least in terms of that archetypal Romantic metaphor of a prism whose fragmentary incompleteness reflects an essentially unachievable totality. In the words of Julius Hare: 'Is not every Gothic minster unfinished? and for the best of reasons, because it is infinite.' There is always more.

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PART I

*Jacob's blessing*



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CHAPTER I

*The stolen birthright*

GENESIS

We begin, fittingly enough, with the story of a blessing and an imposture: that of Jacob and Esau.

And Rebekah took goodly raiment of her eldest son Esau, which were with her in the house, and put them upon Jacob, her younger son: and she put the skins of the kids of the goats upon his hands, and upon the smooth of his neck: and she gave the savoury meat and the bread, which she had prepared, into the hand of her son Jacob.

And he came unto his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I; who art thou, my son?

And Jacob said unto his father, I am Esau thy firstborn; I have done according as thou badest me: arise, I pray thee, sit and eat of my venison, that thy soul may bless me . . .

And Isaac said unto Jacob, Come near, I pray thee, that I may feel thee my son, whether thou be my very son Esau or not. And Jacob went near unto Isaac his father; and he felt him, and said, The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau. And he discerned him not, because his hands were hairy, as his brother Esau's hands: so he blessed him. And he said Art thou my very son Esau? And he said, I am. And he said, Bring it near to me, and I will eat of my son's venison, that my soul may bless thee. And he brought it near to him, and he did eat: and he brought him wine, and he drank.

And his father Isaac said unto him, Come near now, and kiss me my son. And he came near, and kissed him: and he smelled the smell of his raiment, and blessed him, and said, See the smell of my son is as the smell of a field which the Lord hath blessed: Therefore God give thee the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine: Let people serve thee, and nations bow down to thee: be lord over thy brethren, and let thy mother's sons bow down to thee: cursed be every one that curseth thee, and blessed be he that blesseth thee.

And it came to pass, as soon as Isaac had made an end of blessing Jacob, and Jacob was yet scarce gone out from the presence of Isaac his father, that

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Esau his brother came in from his hunting. And he also had made savoury meat, and brought it unto his father, and said unto his father, Let my father arise, and eat of his son's venison, that thy soul may bless me.

And Isaac his father said unto him, Who art thou? And he said, I am thy son, thy firstborn Esau. And Isaac trembled very exceedingly, and said, Who? where is he that hath taken venison, and brought it me, and I have eaten of all before thou camest, and have blessed him? yea, and he shall be blessed.

And when Esau heard the words of his father, he cried with a great and exceeding bitter cry, and said unto his father, Bless me, even me also, O my father.

And he said, Thy brother came with subtilty, and hath taken away thy blessing. (Genesis 27: 15–35, AV)

Some 3,550 years later (according to the most accurate count then available),<sup>1</sup> in September 1791, the Revolutionary French National Assembly was formally presented by its Secretary, the former aristocrat Constantin-François Chassebœuf de Volney, with a short monograph entitled *Les Ruines, ou méditation sur les révolutions des empires*. The enigmatic title gave little clue to its real thesis, which, in the form of a mythological vision, concerned the origins of religion, and in particular of Christianity. According to Volney, not merely all Indo-European and Semitic religion but even astrology as well could be traced back to a common origin in ancient Egypt at least 17,000 years ago.<sup>2</sup> All modern forms of supernatural and revealed religion were, he claimed, in reality nothing more than the misplaced products of primitive nature-worship, time and the accidents of historical diffusion. Thus the gods of Egypt had been appropriated by the Aryans into their own pantheon before being eventually reduced to a single deity in Persia in the sixth century BCE. This new syncretistic monotheism had in turn been adopted by the Israelites when released from the Babylonian captivity by the Persians, transmitted to the Christians and thence eventually to the Bedouin tribesmen of the Arabian desert: 'Jews, Christians, Mahometans, howsoever lofty may be your pretensions, you are in your spiritual and immaterial system, only the blundering followers of Zoroaster.'<sup>3</sup> In keeping with the uniformitarian assumptions of the Enlightenment, miracles were attributed to the power of

<sup>1</sup> *The History of the Old and New Testaments Extracted from the Sacred Scriptures, the Holy Fathers, and Other Ecclesiastical Writers . . .*, 4th impression, 1712, p. 31. Though it does not say so, I assume that the particular calculation is made on the basis of Archbishop Ussher's dating – which was still in use in such conservative quarters as the Cambridge Theological Tripos as late as the 1840s.

<sup>2</sup> *The Ruins: or a Survey of the Revolutions of Empires*, T. Allman, 1851, pp. 135–6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 113.