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During the late eighteenth century the Bible underwent a shift in interpretation so radical as to make it virtually a different book from what it had been a hundred years earlier. Even as historical criticism suggested that, far from being divinely inspired or even a rock of certainty in a world of flux, its text was neither stable nor original, the new notion of the Bible as a cultural artifact became a paradigm of all literature. While formal religion declined, the prestige of the Bible as a literary and aesthetic model rose to new heights. Not merely was English, German, and even French Romanticism steeped in biblical references of a new kind, but hermeneutics and, increasingly, theories of literature and criticism were biblically derived. The Romantic Bible became simultaneously a single novel-like narrative work, an on-going tradition of interpretation and a 'metatype': an all-embracing literary form giving meaning to all other writing.

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# ORIGINS OF NARRATIVE

*The Romantic appropriation of the Bible*

STEPHEN PRICKETT

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*For Maria*

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All the classical poems of the ancients are coherent, inseparable; they form an organic whole, they constitute, properly viewed, only a single poem, the only one in which poetry itself appears in perfection. In a similar way, in a perfect literature all books should be only a single book, and in such an eternally developing book, the gospel of humanity and culture will be revealed.

(Friedrich Schlegel, *Ideas*, 95)

the deeper we sound, the further down into the lower world of the past we probe and press, the more do we find that the earliest foundations of humanity, its history and culture, reveal themselves unfathomable.

(Thomas Mann, *Joseph and his Brothers*)

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## *Preface*

To start with what this book is *not*: it is not about the use of biblical plots or themes in Romantic literature, nor is it about the naturalising of supernaturalism associated with M.H. Abrams. Neither is it a literary analysis of the Bible of the kinds pioneered by Hans Frei or Northrop Frye. All are interesting topics, and much yet remains to be written on them. My theme, however, concerns the way in which the Romantics read the Bible itself: how it was responsible not merely for much Romantic literary theory, but had, in the process, been so irrevocably altered by the new hermeneutic assumptions it had engendered that it became for the nineteenth century virtually a different book from that of a century before. Beyond this lie other, more elusive, snarks: why, for instance, was the Romantic fascination with the evolution of self-consciousness so linked with notions of the origins of the Bible? And, perhaps even more important, how far is the creativeness and vitality of our literary tradition related to its biblical origins?

Moreover, as I began to trace this almost unnoticed Romantic transformation of the Bible, I quickly realised that it was far from being a unique event. Behind that particular and unusually well-documented story of hermeneutic re-interpretation lies another, of successive earlier appropriations resting upon one another, layer upon layer, until the question of an original biblical 'ur-text' becomes lost in the archaeology of time. Indeed, as any study of its textual history will show, the Bible is better described in terms of an on-going tradition of interpretation than as a specific individual work. It was then that the word 'appropriation' forced its way into my mind as being, if not a trap to catch a snark, at least a trace of a trace, as it were a footprint, of where it might have passed.

The Bible's own original myth of appropriation, that of Jacob and Esau, brought a second word to my attention: the word 'blessing'. As a

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gift, an inheritance, a tradition to be transmitted from generation to generation the Hebrew carried a much greater charge than the vague supernaturally sanctioned good wishes the modern English often seems to imply. But that original blessing of Jacob by his father, Isaac, highlights a profound ambiguity, latent in even the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) definition of ‘an authoritative declaration of divine favour’. On the one hand, it was experienced as an inalienable patriarchal tradition, passed from father to son, with full divine endorsement. On the other, it is perhaps more typical of patriarchy than many would like to admit that, in practice, it was not merely up for grabs, but its chronic vulnerability to such appropriative seizure was actually one of its central attributes, and was to become one of the strangest yet most persistent characteristics both of the Hebrew scriptures and of the Christian Bible. Not surprisingly, for the Romantics, Jacob’s blessing was to provide an almost irresistible nexus of imagery. Among its concomitant attributes were the idea of inspiration and a kind of consciousness of self and of personal identity that has been more often investigated by writers and literary critics than by theologians – who, if they have recognised it at all, have often been more prone to view it as a cause of sin than as a mark of divine favour. Those nineteenth-century critics as the brothers Julius and Augustus Hare, who attempted to discuss these developments holistically, were correspondingly marginalised.

Such marginalisation was only one symptom of the way in which the main European cultural tradition of textual interpretation had been deeply damaged at the end of the eighteenth century by the progressive separation of biblical from literary studies. In *Words and the ‘Word’* I epitomised this arbitrary amputation in Wilhelm von Humboldt’s decision in 1809 to separate the study of theology from that of the other humanities in the new University of Berlin. One (no doubt jaundiced) academic reviewer commented that this was possibly the only example in human history of the decision of a university administrator turning out to be of importance. Though it is unlikely that either Humboldt or anyone else foresaw the long-term consequences, the effect of his reorganisation was to isolate one form of literary study from all the rest. As a result, not merely was secular literary criticism impoverished, but theology also – though it has taken more than a hundred years for it to become aware of the ache in its missing limb. Only while theologians believed that their discipline was possessed of sources and ways of knowing that were, in some sense, immune from the processes

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normal in other, secular, literary traditions could it afford to stand aloof from developments in literary criticism. Ironically, it was precisely during this period in the nineteenth century that it fell prey to the most hard-headed and pseudo-scientific forms of materialist historicism. More effort was frequently devoted by liberal theologians to showing how and why particular miracles could not have happened than to investigating the nature and origins of the narratives and traditions in which particular miracles were embedded. When, for instance, in 1862, the liberal-minded Bishop of Natal, John Colenso, published the first volume of his *Critical Examination of the Pentateuch* (1862–79), arguing (what is now a critical commonplace) that the first five books of the Bible were not by Moses at all but dated from post-Exilic times, and were therefore ‘forgeries’, the Bishop of Cape Town excommunicated him (he was later re-instated). Even where, as in the case of the so-called ‘mythological school’, there was some awareness of how these narratives might have arisen, the idea of myth still carried with it suggestions of primitiveness and non-historical origins. Conversely, secular literary criticism rapidly lost any sense it might have had of the biblical origins of its craft.

As we shall see, though the twentieth century has done something to redress the historical imbalance, much remains to be done. I believe our most urgent critical task is now to try and reverse that surgery and see how the two separated disciplines might again be reunited – not in a return to the eighteenth century, but as a prelude to the twenty-first. This book is one step, at least, in that direction – though no doubt it is also about many other things that, with the help of others, I shall only slowly become conscious of.

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Anyone seeking to tackle an interdisciplinary and comparative topic spanning some four thousand years may plausibly be accused of asking for trouble. In so far as I have avoided it, it is due to the help and advice of many friends and colleagues. Without the constant stream of notes, reflections and ideas from Ward Allen, this book would probably never have been started, let alone completed. We have as yet never met: but he is one of the world's great correspondents. Others, too, have been unstinting in time and advice. Paul and Rosanne Weaver have opened my eyes to new and ancient intellectual horizons – and spotted numerous typos; Tim Clark has probed and reinforced my knowledge of contemporary critical theory; Donald Mackenzie's knowledge of the finer points of theology has been matched only by his generosity in expounding them to me; Colin Smethurst has kindly shared with me a fraction of his knowledge of Chateaubriand. Working with Iain McCalman, the finest of Romantic historians, has been a privilege and an education in itself. Christopher Burdon, Françoise Deconnick-Brossard, Elizabeth Jay, Robert Maslen, Roger Stephenson and Peter Walsh, have all kindly allowed me to make use of their research or shared ideas with me. Yet others, Jonathan Bordo, David Jasper and Werner Jeanrond, may even be unaware of chance remarks or observations that have set me off on new lines of thought. Finally, I should like to thank my wife, whose reading of the manuscript has saved me not only from errors of typography and grammar, but from needless ambiguity, unconscious solecism and occasional unnecessary obscurity.

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