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## CHAPTER I

*Biblical narrative and the tragic vision*

Tragedy is alien to the Judaic sense of the world.

George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*

Of all ancient peoples, the Hebrews were most surely possessed of the tragic sense of life.

Richard B. Sewall, *The Vision of Tragedy*

This is a book about tragedy as we confront it in texts rather than as we abstract it in theory. It considers selected narratives from the books of Judges, Samuel, and Kings, arguing that in them we encounter a vision of reality that can properly be called tragic.<sup>1</sup> In appropriating notions of the tragic for the study of biblical texts, my aim is not to force the biblical material into Aristotelian categories, which are hardly applicable. Rather I am interested in exploring a particular dimension of biblical narrative, a dimension that reveals the dark side of existence, that knows anguish and despair, and that acknowledges the precarious lot of humanity in a world now and then bewildering and unaccommodating. Job experiences this dimension as the arrows of the Almighty, whose fierceness points beyond his physical suffering to the sudden, violent, and unprecipitated eruption of disaster into his life.

One encounters what I would define as the tragic vision in various biblical guises; for example, in the “jealousy of God” in the Primeval History of Genesis 2–11, or in the sufferings of the prophet Jeremiah, or in the book of Job – unless one choose to side with Job’s three friends in maintaining that the suffering, the misery, the evil, and the inexplicable in the world are part of an inscrutable, larger plan for the good. Already within current biblical criticism, one finds the idea well established that Saul’s fate is tragic, and one hears of the tragedy of Jephthah<sup>2</sup> and of David’s tragic lot.<sup>3</sup> Something in the stories of these figures makes them recognizably “tragic,” whatever meanings are assigned to that term. This book investigates that “something”

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– what I call their tragic dimension – in an effort to render it more accessible and to explore its resistance to resolution as a source of its particular narrative power.

My use of the term “tragedy” is heuristic: it provides a way of looking at texts that brings to the foreground neglected and unsettling aspects, nagging questions that are threatening precisely because they have no answers. I offer neither a theory of tragedy nor an investigation of the genre as such. There exists a considerable body of criticism on the subject and no consensus. The idea that a work is tragic if it displays certain predetermined features, and not tragic if one or more of these features is missing, or even handled differently, cannot find support either in art or, for that matter, in the actual practice of criticism, where the description “tragic” has been claimed for works of widely different character. Since theories are based on existing tragedies, and then applied to other tragedies, they are neither absolute nor innocent; rather, the critic’s choice of examples guides the theory.

Discussions of tragedy frequently begin with Aristotle but routinely and justifiably attack him for having dealt inadequately with the topic.<sup>4</sup> Neither tragedy in general nor even Greek tragedy in particular can be contained within Aristotle’s conceptual framework, determined not just by his preference for *Oedipus Tyrannus* as a model but, more importantly, by his philosophical presuppositions. Michelle Gellrich, in a demonstration of tragedy’s particular resistance to theory, shows how “the essential premises about dramatic consistency, intelligibility, and unity articulated in the *Poetics* and later absorbed into the mainstream of literary study... can be effectively secured only if obstinately unsystematic and destabilizing movements of language and action in tragedy are bypassed or somehow brought to heel.”<sup>5</sup> In his attempt to treat tragedy systematically, Aristotle evades the problem of radical evil, the role of the gods, and tragic conflict – all important issues for critical discussions of tragedy and crucial issues for my investigation. And his insistence on rationality would deny the essence of tragedy, its representation of the irrational.

When one thinks of tragedy, what comes to mind as the supreme example is Greek tragedy as it flourished briefly in fifth-century Athens. Not that the experience of the tragic is unique to the Greeks, but by putting that experience into words, they gave us a rich and nuanced terminology to speak of it. Even Greek tragedy, however, is

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not of one fabric. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides wrote tragedies different not only in their dramatic structure, use of the chorus, characterization, and plot, but also in their very concepts of the tragic. Both Aeschylus and Sophocles, in their own ways, portray the gods in relation to some order beyond the apparent chaos, though one that can only be accepted, not understood. In Euripides the gods become incarnations of the irrational forces that determine our fates. They are more like us in their passions and pettiness – like his tragic heroes also, who are more often victims than the defiant protagonists whom Aeschylus and Sophocles present.<sup>6</sup> To Sophocles is attributed the claim that he portrayed people as they ought to be; Euripides, as they are.<sup>7</sup> As Euripidean characters, Electra and Orestes have lost the grandeur they had in Aeschylus. Aristotle considered plays with unhappy endings to be the most tragic. It is difficult to imagine a more tragic hero than Orestes, divinely compelled to kill his mother and relentlessly pursued by the Furies, yet the *Eumenides*, and with it the Oresteian trilogy, ends on a note of reconciliation with the prospect of harmony founded on justice. How unlike it is the violence of the *Medea* that Aristotle judged revolting, and how different again the *Bacchae*, where dionysiac frenzy triumphs. Though Aristotle called Euripides the most tragic of the poets, referring specifically to his unhappy endings, little Euripidean tragedy fits Aristotle's theory, and one modern critic can even claim that Euripides' works are not really tragic.<sup>8</sup>

Significant variety in the way the tragic vision is mediated can be seen in the corpus of another great tragedian. Regarding Shakespeare one scholar observes, "There is a greater resemblance among the Greek tragedies, those in the classic French or Spanish genre, or in the German Romantic tradition, or among the tragedies of Shakespeare's own contemporaries, than there is between *Macbeth* and *Timon of Athens*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *King Lear* or *Coriolanus*."<sup>9</sup> To appreciate the range of Shakespeare's view of the tragic, one need consider only the differences in temperament among his great tragic heroes – Lear, Hamlet, Macbeth, and Othello – and the vastly different tragic conceptions behind the plays that bear their names. As further illustrations of Shakespeare's tragic vision we might include his history plays, with their depiction of the rise and fall of princes and dynasties.<sup>10</sup>

That some purists would use the term "tragedy" only in a restricted sense, be it in reference to a dramatic form or in regard to

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a particular time or place, is no reason to abandon the word “tragic” for other works. The identification of tragedy with a dramatic form is far too limiting, as Northrop Frye observes:

Tragedy and comedy may have been originally names for two species of drama, but we also employ the terms to describe general characteristics of literary fictions, without regard to genre. It would be silly to insist that comedy can refer only to a certain type of stage play, and must never be employed in connection with Chaucer or Jane Austen. Chaucer himself would certainly have defined comedy, as his monk defines tragedy, much more broadly than that. If we are told that what we are about to read is tragic or comic, we expect a certain kind of structure and mood, but not necessarily a certain genre.<sup>11</sup>

Although there is no formula for deciding what constitutes the tragic, most people have a general idea of what tragedy is about. As George Steiner puts it so succinctly, “Tragedies end badly.”<sup>12</sup> Though matters are never so simple, as I seek to indicate below, it is commonly acknowledged that tragedy portrays the hero’s rise and fall, what Frye refers to as tragedy’s binary form.<sup>13</sup> The notion of the hero’s descent into misfortune is given its earliest expression in English literature by Chaucer in the Prologue to the *Monk’s Tale*:

Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,  
As olde bokes maken us memorie,  
Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee,  
And is yfallen out of heigh degree  
In to myserie, and endeth wrecchedly.

Tragedy involves catastrophe, and the catastrophic events that bring the tragic tale to closure are irreparable and irreversible. But the tragic is more fully articulated in some works than others. As H. A. Mason points out, there are “degrees” of tragedy. “We are,” he notes, “always ready to say, ‘this is more or less tragic than that’ ...”<sup>14</sup> In this chapter I shall describe what I take to be central ingredients of tragedy and the tragic vision. The following chapters develop and expand this notion of the tragic as it applies to the biblical literature through analyses of particular texts. In what sense do they share the tragic vision? What features do they exhibit that elicit the response, “This is more or less tragic than that”?

I use, then, terms such as “tragedy” and “the tragic” in this book to refer not to a literary form but rather to a broader and more

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versatile concept, the “tragic vision,”<sup>15</sup> what Miguel de Unamuno calls a “sense of life.” Susanne Langer writes about it as “the tragic rhythm,” and Karl Jaspers speaks of “tragic atmosphere” and a “tragic mood.” The tragic vision is a way of viewing reality, an attitude of negation, uncertainty, and doubt, a feeling of unease in an inhospitable world. It acknowledges, in Jaspers’ words, “the ultimate disharmony of existence.”<sup>16</sup> What distinguishes this vision from its opposite, the comic or classic vision, is that it lacks comedy’s restorative and palliative capacity. Comedy gives voice to a fundamental trust in life; in spite of obstacles, human foibles, miscalculations, and mistakes, life goes on. But tragedy, in contrast, confronts us with what Richard Sewall has called “the terror of the irrational.” The tragic hero is the victim of forces she or he cannot control and cannot comprehend, encountering on all sides unresolved questions, doubts, and ambiguities. Comedy may also embrace questions, doubts, and ambiguities, but, as Sewall points out, it removes their terror. The tragic vision isolates the hero over against an arbitrary and capricious world, a world in which – to get to the crux of the matter – the problem of evil is irreducible and unresolvable into some larger, harmonious whole.

The representation, *mimesis*, of this vision in a particular literary work becomes an attempt to tame it by giving it aesthetic form. The tragic is inexpressible, unintelligible, and inexplicable; the representation of it – the showing of the absence of meaning – is an act that gives meaning, that brings the tragic within our perceptual grasp. Like primordial chaos in Genesis 1, the tragic is named and classified and thereby brought under control, though its threat to order remains:

If what is tragic can be *said* to be so then it has been fixed, it has become meaningful, and if that is so then one can no longer actually participate in it: the lack of knowledge has been canceled out. As something *named*, the tragic is the creation of the discourse, tragedy. To be in a position to show the tragic presupposes an analysis which, in providing the terms in which human activity is to be deemed possible, circumscribes the domain of the meaningful. If this were not so the tragic could not be shown.<sup>17</sup>

Because the tragic work *shows* it to us, we know the impossibility of knowing, the limits of meaning and order, which is something the protagonist in a tragedy does not know. The protagonist cannot name her or his situation as tragic because to do so would assign it

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meaning.<sup>18</sup> Our knowledge spares us the protagonist's struggle – perhaps it is a source of our feeling of satisfaction in reading or watching a tragedy – but to what degree it eases our angst depends on how profoundly we ponder the tragic situation. For while a tragedy *represents* a vision of fundamental disorder and cosmic unintelligibility, it resolves it only aesthetically, leaving it thematically unrelieved.<sup>19</sup> The tragic vision is thus contained in an ordering discourse that it undermines from within by denying the very possibility of meaningful discourse.<sup>20</sup>

Tragedy is made possible when human freedom comes into conflict with the demands of the cosmic order. In its fully developed form it requires, on the one hand, human possibilities and frailties undiminished and pushed to their limits and, on the other, a cosmos concerned with human actions. For this reason, the designation “tragedy” has often been denied to modern works. Steiner, for example, thinks that modern tragedy is not possible because we have lost a sense of “the intolerable burden of God's presence.” Earlier in this century Joseph Wood Krutch published a major statement in the controversy over the “death of tragedy,” arguing that tragedy is no longer possible because we no longer believe in the grandeur of the human spirit or in the cosmic implications of human deeds. Ibsen's *Ghosts*, he asserts, cannot reach the tragic plane of *Hamlet* because “the materials out of which [Shakespeare] created his works – his conception of human dignity, his sense of the importance of human passions, his vision of the amplitude of human life – simply did not and could not exist for Ibsen, as they did not and could not exist for his contemporaries.”<sup>21</sup> In spite of such passionate and forceful arguments, the notion of tragedy has been profitably applied to a range of modern works by a number of critics.<sup>22</sup> And, of course, modern authors have continued to give expression to their own tragic visions. One thinks especially of Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller. Miller, in fact, has defended his tragic vision against narrow academic definitions of tragedy based on Aristotelian categories:

It matters not at all whether the hero falls from a great height or a small one, whether he is highly conscious or only dimly aware of what is happening, whether his pride brings the fall or an unseen pattern written behind the clouds; if the intensity, the human passion to surpass his given bounds, the fanatic insistence upon his self-conceived role – if these are not present there can only be an outline of tragedy but no living thing. I believe, for myself,

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that the lasting appeal of tragedy is due to our need to face the fact of death in order to strengthen ourselves for life, and that over and above this function of the tragic viewpoint there are and will be a great number of formal variations which no single definition will ever embrace.<sup>23</sup>

With the biblical literature, we remain in the world of bold assertions about the possibilities of freedom and the demands of transcendence. Yet even so, some critics would deny the presence of tragedy in the Bible on grounds of the biblical portrayal of God as just or, paradoxically, as merciful. Where there is justice there can be no tragedy, argues Steiner:

Often the balance of retribution or reward seems fearfully awry, or the proceedings of God appear unendurably slow. But over the sum of time, there can be no doubt that the ways of God to man are just. Not only are they just, they are rational. The Judaic spirit is vehement in its conviction that the order of the universe and of man's estate is accessible to reason. The ways of the Lord are neither wanton nor absurd.<sup>24</sup>

This may be true of some parts of the Bible but not, I believe, of others. And it could be said of some Greek tragedies. Aeschylus, for example, tries to reconcile the ideas of guilt and necessary suffering, especially in his appeal to divine justice at the end of the *Oresteia*. Interestingly, Steiner considers exceptional the Greek examples that might arguably fit his understanding of the Judaic vision (the *Eumenides*, *Oedipus at Colonus*), but he perceives the Bible as speaking univocally. For Baruch Kurzweil, who also denies the possibility of biblical tragedy, "a situation in Biblical narrative bereft of any hope of salvation, of God's mercies, is unthinkable."<sup>25</sup> At the heart of Kurzweil's argument is the conviction that, for the Bible, good and evil are clear-cut and absolute. There are no relative values, and since relativism is indispensable to tragedy, there can be no biblical tragedy:

... Biblical narrative by itself, if its essence remain unchanged and if it is not taken out of the sphere peculiarly suited to it – that is, the sacral sphere – lacks all the elements requisite to the tragic realm. The hero does not remain the captive of his self. Biblical narrative has no place for value relativism and no place for different truths equal in worth and importance. Biblical narrative defines what is good and what is evil in absolutely unambiguous terms, and that is something we do not find in tragedy.<sup>26</sup>

My disagreement with Kurzweil about relative values will become increasingly apparent in the following chapters. Good and evil are by



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no means unambiguous in Saul's case, or in Jephthah's. And we shall see how, in 2 Samuel 21, legitimate claims of the state come into conflict with the elemental claim of the dead to burial. Even the book of Job fails to resolve disturbing implications of the questions it raises. Job has a truth: his integrity. It prompts his quest for justice as well as his conviction that God treats him unjustly. God, too, has a truth: justice is not the principle upon which the universe is founded.<sup>27</sup> The relation between these truths is not entirely clear, since the book does not indicate the place justice should have in the scheme of things, or the principle upon which the universe is indeed founded.

Steiner and Kurzweil can extract from the Bible a unified and coherent view of reality only by excluding alternative interpretations of the biblical literature, by subsuming into their overall view texts that are at odds with their claims – thus Steiner's qualification “over the sum of time,” and Kurzweil's insistence that the Bible should be read as sacral art, not secular fiction. The same holds true for Northrop Frye's impressive attempt to read the entire Bible (mainly the Christian, but also the Jewish Bible) in terms of its central *mythos* or plot.<sup>28</sup> Obviously such broad perspectives can be useful and illuminating, but it is equally important to ask: what dissenting voices are repressed or ignored in the interests of an overarching view? what conflicting evidence is subsumed within the larger schema? To claim, for example, as Steiner, Kurzweil, and Frye do, that the book of Job is not tragic because Job in the end capitulates and is rewarded with more possessions than he had before is to ignore the terror of Job's experience: can a restored Job trust God again? (Moreover, a strong case can be made that Job does *not* capitulate.<sup>29</sup>) Such explicitly “final” readings as Frye's and implicitly comprehensive readings as Steiner's and Kurzweil's can always be challenged by close reading of particular texts.

My own study of the Hebrew Bible has led me to the conclusion that the Bible contains a profoundly tragic dimension, and we deny that dimension at the cost of our honesty about reality, and at the risk of losing a precious affirmation of the indomitable human spirit. I do not insist that the stories discussed in this book *must* be taken as tragic in order to appreciate their insights, rather I maintain that consideration of their tragic potential opens up a powerful and inspiring, albeit disturbing, narrative dimension, a fullness of insight into the human condition. It may be that there is a logical and natural evolution toward the comic or classic vision in biblical



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literature, but this is only by virtue of its open-endedness – the conditional nature of the future – and it does not lessen the tragic impact. Nor are there easy guarantees for a better future, only hopes. The entire Deuteronomistic History with its final dramatic gesture toward Jehoiachin, eating at the king's table in Babylonian exile, poignantly illustrates this point.

The tragic vision acknowledges those aspects of reality that we cannot incorporate into a comfortable, reassuring *Weltanschauung*. The Bible's particular resistance to closure, or to philosophical "neatness," has many sources. One is multiple authorship, reflecting diverse and sometimes contradictory viewpoints, spanning hundreds of years and held in marvelously redolent tension. Later redactors could give new meanings to their sources by giving them different contexts, but without necessarily silencing divergent voices. The Bible's eschewal of dualism further discourages systemization. If we seek the origin of evil, we find that it exists from the very beginning according to the creation stories. Darkness (*hosheq*) and the deep (*tehom*) are present when creation begins. Controlled and delimited by the deity in Genesis 1, they remain potentially threatening remnants of chaos. The forbidden tree of the garden of Eden offers knowledge of good *and* evil. God plants it; it is not imported into the garden. The prophets, too, recognize one source for both good and evil. "Does evil befall a city unless Yhwh has done it?" (Amos 3:6). "I make weal and create woe; I, Yhwh, do all these things" (Isaiah 45:7). And the "non-tragic" Job of the folktale can proclaim out of his piety, "Shall we receive good from God and shall we not receive evil?" (Job 2:10).

In the Bible, the association of good and evil within the divine provides fertile ground for tragic awareness to grow. An evil spirit from Yhwh torments Saul, driving him to despair and madness; and, as I argue below, Yhwh's spirit is implicated in Jephthah's fateful vow, in return for victory, to sacrifice the one who meets him. If there were no hint of divine involvement in these cases, if Saul's deterioration were entirely his own doing or if Jephthah's vow were a premeditated decision, the tragic power of these stories would be greatly diminished. By telling (and re-telling) stories rather than working out a philosophical system, the biblical authors bequeathed to us a multivalent, inexhaustible narrative world. To inherit the Bible is as if we had Sophocles without Plato, who, for his part, would have excluded tragedy from his ideal society.

At the core of tragedy lies the problem and mystery of evil. Paul Ricoeur captures the essence of the tragic in his discussion of the Aeschylean paradox of the wicked god and human guilt.<sup>30</sup> Fate and flaw present an essential combination in tragedy, though these terms can be misleading if understood too narrowly.<sup>31</sup> We describe tragic heroes as gripped by forces beyond their control. Ricoeur speaks cautiously of a “predestination to evil”; alternatively we may speak of hostile transcendence, arbitrary fate, an impending doom, a catastrophe waiting to happen. The tragic protagonist is caught up in a situation not entirely of her or his own making. At the same time she or he is also responsible, a guilty victim. Tragedy does not clearly distinguish guilt and innocence. Kierkegaard speaks of “authentic tragic guilt in its ambiguous guiltlessness.”<sup>32</sup> The heroes of tragedy are innocent in the sense that their misfortune is far greater than anything their deeds have provoked, and guilty both as members of a guilty society and by virtue of living in a world where such injustices simply happen.<sup>33</sup> This is Ricoeur’s “guiltiness of being” and Jaspers’ “guilt of existence.” As Ricoeur and Jaspers show, the tragic hero is *both* guilty of being *and* guilty of committing an act that need not occur and could also occur differently.<sup>34</sup> In the Bible, no one is innocent, except perhaps the Job of the folktale whose moral probity prompts divine boasting (“Have you considered my servant Job, how there is no one like him on earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?”). Whereas the hero is guilty, the guilt need not stem from wrongful acts (Antigone insists she does right by doing wrong) nor necessarily be incurred willfully (as Oedipus’ case demonstrates). Or the disaster that befalls the tragic protagonist may result from some sin or wrongdoing, a transgression deliberately pursued or innocently performed, a simple misjudgment, but in any case with the consequences out of proportion to the deed.

Nor is fate, though inexorable, simply mechanical. Bernard Knox shows the subtle but important distinction in *Oedipus Tyrannus* between fate predicted and fate predestined.<sup>35</sup> Tragic heroes do not consider themselves powerless when confronted with their fates. Oedipus leaves what he believes to be his home in order to avoid fulfilling the prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother. But because he does not *know* the identity of Laius and Jocasta the prophecy is fulfilled. His fate was not predestined, merely predicted; he could have killed himself or never married. Though he bears responsibility for what happens, because he acts in ignorance