

Introduction

It is increasingly fashionable for interpreters of the Bible unfamiliar with the original languages and the relevant ancient history to pursue literary approaches. Even the legal material is commonly evaluated in literary terms. No scholarly effort is independent of fashion in the sense of a cultural trend and of idiosyncrasy in the sense of a personal bent. An often unspoken assumption is that because so much research into linguistic and historical backgrounds of the biblical texts has occurred down the centuries little scope is left to say much that is new. There is a measure of truth in this notion. Despite an abiding commitment among a coterie of German scholars, more often than not scholars pay but lip service to the longstanding historical-critical theory about the Graf-Wellhausen JEDP four source make-up of the Pentateuch. The approach's long history illustrates the not infrequent phenomenon of a critical theory perpetuating itself even when its *raison d'être* has been lost sight of. It is, however, precisely a lack of confidence about uncovering new meaning in the original sources that provides a major impetus for this volume. The essays reflect the efforts of scholars who, by and large, not committing to old order ways, enable them to advance imaginative ones of looking at the Bible. The goal is to modify and reshape many preconceived notions about the contents of the Bible and also its role in selected areas of Western literature. Another aim is to stimulate further questioning on the part of the reader. There is good reason to do so. The German philosopher, Friedrich Schlegel, speaks of a classical work as one that cannot ever be fully understood, but those who are educated and who seek to enhance their education nevertheless through engagement with such a work learn more and more.

The sophistication and insights of ancient authors can never be underestimated. An all too detrimental attitude to the past is one the social historian E. P. Thompson voices when he speaks of "the enormous condescension of posterity." Clouding critical judgment, the attitude is born of two contradictory stances on the part of modern

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inquirers: a tendency to look down on the “primitives” from the height of our progress and, contrariwise, a proclivity to look up to them from the depth of our decadence. Burdened by the complexity of contemporary society and its focus on inwardness, there is admiration for those ancients who seemingly engage in simple, direct, often clever actions free of inhibitions. Both attitudes are largely groundless and distort the ancient texts. Neither stance is embraced by the contributors to this volume.

In uncovering the richness of the biblical texts clearly and engagingly, each contributor demonstrates just how supremely cultured are the ancient authors and those later writers who use the Bible for their own literary creations. Part of the endeavor is to say something new about both and in doing so offer insights pertinent to current fashions. Even where later literary works seem to misuse a biblical source, that need not be a bad thing. The misreading often proves fundamental to understanding a later writer’s thinking so that it matters but little what the text may have meant originally. We can, for instance, reflect upon later Western authors’ ideas about suicide reflected in their reading of the Bible. Hamlet complains about the Old Testament and wishes God had promulgated no law against the act (“O that the Everlasting had not fixed his canon against self-slaughter”). Shakespeare has in mind “You shall not murder,” assumed in his time to extend to self-killing. Few scholars today go along with Shakespeare’s understanding of the original commandment but as far as an appreciation of Hamlet’s monologue is concerned that is beside the point. Noah curses his son Ham for looking on a father’s nakedness when drunk with the consequence that Ham’s offspring are to become servants of the descendants of the two other brothers, Shem and Japheth (Gen 9:18–27). Later interpreters used the curse in defense of racial downgrading, viewing the “wicked” Ham as the ancestor of black Africans, the “decent” Japheth of Europeans, and Shem of Semitic peoples. However bizarre the view, it is nonetheless crucial for understanding an influential if abhorrent stance in recent centuries.

No matter how often an ancient text has been studied, respect for the unknown composer calls for ever closer reading. If we acknowledge how difficult it is to read any text and think about it at the same time, a disciplined focus yields new and original results. The philosopher Alfred Whitehead defined a professor as an ignorant person thinking and the image is one worth cherishing. Even if accompanied by an unavoidable measure of naiveté, the exercise of our native intelligence in reading a text enlivens. The goal in this volume is not to emphasize the

acquisition of scholarly expertise but to foster search before research. Questions abound. What precisely is the idea present in the texts; to what can we compare the idea in other material, biblical or otherwise, and to what can we contrast it; is it a strange notion in light of our own experience of things; on reflection not so strange but just that the ancient dress makes it appear so? What is puzzling about the material? Why is the curse the penalty for some offenses but not for others? Why is the deity sometimes brought into some texts, legal and literary, but not into others? The greatest thriller (perhaps) before the work of Edgar Allan Poe, the Book of Esther, has no reference to God. Can we formulate our puzzlement? To acquire an eye for genuine problems and a knack for avoiding non-problems constitutes real advance. The pursuit of themes is usually to be avoided. To commit to developing them leaves one vulnerable to looseness of thought, failure to see inconsistencies, and an often fatal tendency to pass over telling details. To generalize is often to omit, even worse, to distort. “Nothing is so useless as a general maxim” warns the English historian Thomas MacAulay; “I care nothing for the systems – only the insights,” comments the most influential of all American jurists, Oliver Wendell Holmes; and the contemporary legal scholar Randall Kennedy urges “a skeptical attitude towards all labels and categories . . . and to appreciate instead the unique feature of specific persons and their work.”¹

The aim of the essays is to arouse in an inquiring mind the beguilement of curiosity and the allure of a puzzle laid out in every which way to indicate just how real a puzzle we have engaging our attention. In studying biblical literature, it is relatively easy to concentrate on small amounts of intelligible, largely self-contained material. Eminently desirable is the value of Goethe’s remark that “thinking is more interesting than knowing but less interesting than seeing.” It is reported that he once threw up his hands in despair when he learnt that the Weimar newsheet he read once a month was to appear bi-monthly. How could he possibly take in so much information? To do so would interfere with his capacity to relate what he read to matters past and present and to anticipate future developments. Today, information comes instantaneously from all over the globe, an enormous encroachment of space – at the expense of time. The words of Ecclesiastes convey the challenge: “Is there anything whereof it may be said, See, this is new? It has been

¹ Lord MacAulay, *Miscellaneous Works*, ed. Lady Trevelyan (New York, 1880), 1:100; *The Holmes-Laski Letters*, ed. Mark de Wolf Howe (Cambridge, MA, 1953), 1:331; Gerhard Casper, *The Winds of Freedom* (New Haven, CT, 2014), 52.

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already of old time" (Eccles 1:10). Especially pressing is the need to capture change and bring it into the realm of shared understanding. An intimate acquaintance with biblical and outstanding literary texts inspired by the Bible well contributes to such an effort.

Any written text makes a claim upon a reader's attention, sometimes little, other times much. No body of texts has made claims down the centuries to the extent of those in the Bible, especially in the New Testament, and particularly by those who affirm its sacred character. It is not our intent to pursue such a view of the material. The Bible as a sacred text is an ideological construct that conceals its complicated, historically obscure, and multifaceted origins. The process of canonization has tended to erase the very notion of various composers who lived in quite separate periods of time. The secular reader does not make the same assumptions as the religious thinker: that the texts are canonical and therefore authoritative; that they exhibit unity with each part implying every other part; and that the New Testament is a fulfillment of the Old. Yet, to complicate the picture, in order to understand much that is written in the New, we have to heed how the biblical authors, in pursuit of lending authority to their own work, do assume such an interdependence of texts in the Hebrew Bible (or in its Greek translation, the Septuagint). There is an approach that owes much, in fact, to the treatment of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as inspired texts containing all wisdom and requiring the application of often convoluted rules to extract it from the Greek texts.

A considerable difference exists between a literary presentation of events and a historical one. Over the past few centuries the historical school of criticism has dominated biblical scholarship with its attempts to detect the historical, social, and political background of the biblical books. But as far back as the eighteenth century, the founder of Utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham, opined that the historical school represents "erudition deprived of thought." Bentham's claim may be harsh but there is no question that what appears to be historical writing in the Bible is more often than not an indirect mode of communicating ideas of one kind or another. Unlike the Greek, Latin, German, and English languages with their capacity to add prefixes and suffixes to a word – a book can be un-put-down-able – and thereby aid analytical and philosophical inquiry, the Semitic languages do not lend themselves to philosophizing. With no capacity to add prefixes and suffixes, they instead exploit a word's root by modifying it – 'abhadh, "to perish," 'ibbedh, or he'ebhidh, "to cause to perish," "to destroy." Doing so often deepens and adds complexity to its sense. This characteristic feature of the

Hebrew and Aramaic languages encourages the use of storytelling to convey meaning. Chronological and biographical “facts” are, despite appearances, often only secondarily but brilliantly employed to relay ideas and values.

When we focus on the Bible as embodying different literary products of ancient times and places, the results can be surprisingly different from what orthodoxy of opinion has disseminated down the centuries. The Adam and Eve story illustrates. It can be read not, as it often is, to describe a descent into original sin but to celebrate the rise of humankind from an animal-like state to godlike status with the capacity to know and to discriminate, in a word, to be enlightened. The interpretation of the story as a “Fall” shows up in the time of Second Temple Judaism (530 BCE to 70 CE) and the Church father, Augustine (354–430 CE) makes it a central tenet of Christian belief. Read without Jewish and Christian spectacles, we observe that the author of the story highlights how the *conscious* appreciation of nakedness, a sense of shame, is of the essence of civilization and distinguishes us from the doom of the brutes. Far from being a blot, the awareness is a boon, the greatest there is since all others, cognizance of gender difference and accompanying insight into the manifold complexities of social relations, depend on it. On this reading, the deity represented in the Genesis myth stands, as the gods in early Greek literature do, for supernatural, anti-progressive forces at work in the world, an unsurprising stance given the ancient world’s attempts to come to terms with the often overwhelming, harsh conditions besetting humans and animals.

The volume is necessarily selective in content. It takes up texts spanning Genesis through 2 Kings (the Primary History), the Prophetic literature, Wisdom literature, the Gospels, the Pauline letters, and Apocalyptic writings. Equally selective is the limited number of major authors of Western literature and the role of the Bible in their work: Shakespeare, Milton, a few Romantic poets, Shelley in particular, Herman Melville, and contemporary writers like Toni Morrison. The goal is to have readers engage with texts that the contributors assume they may not even have much or any acquaintance with.

In sum, the volume seeks to stimulate questioning about the complex and subtle character of biblical stories, ethical and legal texts, parables and the like, and what has been made of them in later Western literature. I recall a teacher reading *Hamlet* aloud in class but at no time making a single comment. Come the last act, the last scene, the last line of the play, he closed the book, looked at the class intently, and said, “A good play *Hamlet*, a good play.” Bewildered, some pupils read the

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play again to see why the teacher might think there was anything good in it. There was. The intent of the volume is to communicate the excellence of a past author's thinking and to see the study of the texts as an adventure, to recognize that "there is sleuthing in scholarship as there is in crime, and it is full of mystery, danger, intrigue, suspense and thrills." Vladimir Nabokov underscores the vital requirement: "At a time when American readers are taught from High School on to seek in books 'general ideas' a critic's duty should be to draw their attention to specific detail, to the unique image, without which there can be no art, no genius, no Chekhov, no terror, no tenderness, and no surprise."²

² On scholarly sleuthing, see Harry Wolfson, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle* (Cambridge, MA, 1929), VI:x; on Nabokov, see *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940–1971*, ed. Simon Karlinsky (Berkeley, 2001), 331.