

1

A Literary Approach to the Bible

WHAT ROLE does literary art play in the shaping of biblical narrative? A crucial one, I shall argue, finely modulated from moment to moment, determining in most cases the minute choice of words and reported details, the pace of narration, the small movements of dialogue, and a whole network of ramified interconnections in the text. Before we weigh the theoretical considerations that may explain why this should be so, and also the circumstances of intellectual history that have prevented this essential literary dimension from being sufficiently observed, it would be well to follow the sustained operation of narrative art in a biblical text.

Let me propose for analysis a supposedly interpolated story because it will give us an opportunity to observe both how it works in itself and how it interacts with the surrounding narrative material. I should like to discuss, then, the story of Tamar and Judah (Genesis 38), which is set in between the selling of Joseph by his brothers and Joseph's appearance as a slave in the household of Potiphar. This story is characterized by E. A. Speiser, in his superb Genesis volume in the Anchor Bible series, as "a completely independent unit," having "no connection with the drama of Joseph, which it interrupts at the conclusion of Act I."¹ The interpolation does, of course, as Speiser and others have recognized, build

¹ *Genesis*, The Anchor Bible (New York, 1964), p. 299.

a sense of suspense about the fate of Joseph and a feeling of time elapsed until Joseph shows up in Egypt, but Speiser's failure to see its intimate connections through motif and theme with the Joseph story suggests the limitations of conventional biblical scholarship even at its best. I shall begin with the last five verses of Genesis 37 in order to make clear the links between frame-narrative and interpolation. My translation will at a number of points be awkwardly literal to reproduce verbal repetitions or syntactic peculiarities of the original for the purposes of analysis.

Joseph's brothers, one recalls, after selling him into slavery, dip his cherished tunic in goat's blood to show to their father.

"They had the ornamented tunic brought to their father [note the indirection of their approach to Jacob, even more marked in the Hebrew syntax], and they said: 'This [zot] have we found. Please recognize [*haker-na*], is it your son's tunic or not?' " (Gen. 37:32). The brothers are careful to let the contrived object, "this [zot]," do their lying for them—it goes before them literally and syntactically—and of course they appropriately refer to Joseph as "your son," not by name nor as their brother. Jacob now has his prop, and from here on he can improvise his own part: "He recognized it [*vayakirah*], and he said: 'My son's tunic! An evil beast has devoured him, / Joseph has fallen prey'" (Gen. 37:33). *Haker*, the verb for recognition (which we will be seeing more of), stated by the brothers in the imperative, immediately recurs in the perfect tense, Jacob responding at once as the puppet of his sons' manipulation.

It should be observed (I am not sure the scholars have) that when Jacob goes on here to invent a disastrous explanation, left unstated by his sons, for the bloodied tunic, his speech ("An evil beast . . .") switches into formal verse, a neat semantic parallelism that scans with three beats in each hemistich: *hayáh ra'áh 'akhaláthu / taróf toráf Yosef*. Poetry is heightened speech, and the shift to formal verse suggests an element of self-dramatization in the way Jacob picks up the hint of his son's supposed death and declaims it metrically before his familial audience. If this seems fanciful, I would direct attention to how Jacob's bereavement is described in the next two verses: "Jacob tore his clothes, put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned his son many days. All his sons and daughters tried to console him but he refused to be consoled, saying, 'No, I will go down to my son in the underworld mourning,' thus did his father bewail him" (Gen. 37:34–35). In two brief verses half a dozen different activities of mourning are recorded, including the refusal to be consoled and direct speech in which the father expresses the wish to mourn until he joins his son in death. (Later, ironically, he will "go down" to his son not to Sheol, the underworld, but to Egypt.) One can hardly dismiss all these

gestures of mourning as standard Near Eastern practice, since the degree of specification and synonymy is far beyond the norms of the narrative itself. Thus, just a few verses earlier (Gen. 37:29), when Reuben imagines Joseph is dead, his sincere sense of bereavement is expressed quite simply with "He tore his clothes"—in the Hebrew only two words and a particle.

Finally, the extravagance of Jacob's mourning is pointed up by the verse that immediately follows it and concludes the episode: "And the Midianites sold him in Egypt to Potiphar, courtier of Pharaoh, his chief steward" (Gen. 37:36). Modern translations usually render the initial *vav* of this verse with something like "meanwhile," but that loses the artful ambiguity of the Bible's parataxis. In this cunningly additive syntax, on the same unbroken narrative continuum in which Jacob is mourning his supposedly devoured son, Midianites are selling the living lad: "And his father bewailed him and the Midianites sold him"—for even the sentence break would not have been evident in the ancient text. The original syntax, to be sure, does indicate some opposition and perhaps a past perfect sense of the verb by placing the subject before the verb ("and the Midianites sold him"), not the normal Hebrew order, and by switching the verb form when the Midianites are introduced. In any case, the transition from Jacob mourning to Joseph sold is more nearly seamless, less relationally marked, than modern translations make it seem.

At this point (Genesis 38), with an appropriately ambiguous formulaic time indication, *vayehi ba'et hahi*, "at about that time," the narrative leaves Joseph and launches on the enigmatic story of Tamar and Judah. From the very beginning of the excursus, however, pointed connections are made with the main narrative through a whole series of explicit parallels and contrasts:

1. At about that time Judah parted from his brothers and camped with an Adullamite named Hirah.
2. There Judah saw the daughter of a Canaanite named Shua, married her, and lay with her.
3. She conceived and bore a son, whom they named Er.
4. She conceived again and bore a son, whom she called Onan.
5. Then she bore still another son, whom she called Shelah; he was in Chezib when she bore him.
6. Judah got a wife for Er his firstborn, and her name was Tamar.
7. Er, Judah's firstborn, displeased God, and God took his life.
8. Judah said to Onan: "Lie with your brother's wife and fulfill your duty as a brother-in-law, providing seed for your brother."
9. But Onan, knowing the seed would not be his, let it go to waste on the ground whenever he lay with his brother's wife, in order not to give seed for his brother.
10. What he did displeased God and He took his life, too.
11. Then

Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, "Stay as a widow in your father's house until Shelah my son grows up," for he thought, "He, too, might die like his brothers." And Tamar went off to dwell in her father's house.

The story begins with Judah parting from his brothers, an act conveyed with a rather odd locution, *vayered m'et*, literally, "he went down from," and which undoubtedly has the purpose of connecting this separation of one brother from the rest with Joseph's, transmitted with the same verb-root (see, for example, the very beginning of the next chapter: "Joseph was brought down [*hurad*] to Egypt"). There is thematic justification for the connection since the tale of Judah and his offspring, like the whole Joseph story, and indeed like the entire Book of Genesis, is about the reversal of the iron law of primogeniture, about the election through some devious twist of destiny of a younger son to carry on the line. There is, one might add, genealogical irony in the insertion of this material at this point of the story, for while Joseph, next to the youngest of the sons, will eventually rule over his brothers in his own lifetime as splendidly as he has dreamed, it is Judah, the fourthborn, who will be the progenitor of the kings of Israel, as the end of Genesis 38 will remind us.

In any case, the preceding block of narrative had ended with a father bemoaning what he believed to be the death of his son. Genesis 38 begins with Judah fathering three sons, one after another, recorded in breathless pace. Here, as at other points in the episode, nothing is allowed to detract our focused attention from the primary, problematic subject of the proper channel for the seed (since this is thought of both figuratively and in the most concretely physical way, I have translated it literally throughout). In a triad of verbs that admits nothing adventitious, Judah sees, takes, lies with a woman; and she, responding appropriately, conceives, bears, and—the necessary completion of the genealogical process—gives the son a name. Then, with no narrative indication of any events at all in the intervening time, we move ahead an entire generation to the inexplicable death ("he displeased God") of Er, Judah's firstborn, after his marriage to Tamar. The firstborn very often seem to be losers in Genesis by the very condition of their birth—the epithet "firstborn," hardly needed as identification, is asserted twice here, almost as though it explained why Er displeased God—while an inscrutable, unpredictable principle of election other than the "natural" one works itself out. The second son, Onan, however, makes the mistake of rebelling by *coitus interruptus* against the legal obligations of the system of primogeniture, refusing to act as his

dead brother's proxy by impregnating the widow in the brother's name, and so he, too, dies. Interestingly, after we have been exposed to Jacob's extravagant procedures of mourning over the imagined death of one son, Judah's reaction to the actual death in quick sequence of two sons is passed over in complete silence: he is only reported delivering pragmatic instructions having to do with the next son in line. If this striking contrast underscores Jacob's excesses, it surely also makes us wonder whether there is a real lack of responsiveness in Judah, and thus indicates how parallel acts or situations are used to comment on each other in biblical narrative.

After the death of the second son, the narrator gives us (Gen. 38:11) Judah's direct speech to Tamar as well as Judah's interior speech explaining his motive, but no response on the part of Tamar is recorded. This may suggest silent submission, or at least her lack of any legal options as a childless young widow, and it certainly leaves us wondering about what she is feeling—something which her actions will presently elucidate. There is one small but tactically effective hint that Judah is in the wrong: when he addresses Tamar, she is identified as "Tamar his daughter-in-law," an otherwise superfluous designation that reminds us of his legal obligation to provide her a husband from among his sons.

At this point we are given another time indication to mark the next stage of the story, in which the tempo of narration will slow down drastically to attend to a crucial central action:

12. A long time afterward, Judah's wife, the daughter of Shua, died; after being consoled, he went up toward Timnah to his sheepshearers, together with his friend Hirah the Adullamite.

All the information in this verse is essential for what follows. Tamar has been allowed to linger mateless "a long time," so that her own perception, reported two verses later, that she has been deliberately neglected is given an objective grounding. Judah has been widowed and the official period of mourning has passed—that is the meaning of "being consoled," but it is worth translating literally because it stands in contrast to Jacob's previous refusal to be consoled—so Tamar can plausibly infer that Judah is in a state of sexual neediness. Here begins her bold plan:

13. And Tamar was told, "Your father-in-law is coming up to Timnah for the sheepshearing." 14. Then she took off her widow's garments, covered her face with a veil, wrapped herself up, and sat down at the entrance to Eynaim on the road to Timnah, for she saw that Shelah

was grown up and she had not been given to him as a wife. 15. Judah saw her and took her for a harlot because she had covered her face. 16. So he turned aside to her by the road and said, "Look here, let me lie with you," for he did not realize that she was his daughter-in-law. She answered, "What will you pay me for lying with me?" 17. He replied, "I'll send you a kid from my flock." She said, "Only if you leave a pledge until you send it." 18. And he said, "What pledge should I leave you?" She replied, "Your seal and cord, and the staff you carry." He gave them to her and he lay with her and she conceived by him. 19. Then she got up, went away, took off her veil, and put on her widow's garments. 20. Judah sent the kid by his friend the Adullamite to redeem the pledge from the woman, but he could not find her. 21. He inquired of the men of the place, "Where is the cult prostitute, the one at Eynaim by the road?" and they answered, "There has been no cult prostitute here." 22. So he went back to Judah and told him, "I couldn't find her, and the men of the place even said, 'There has been no cult prostitute here.'" 23. Judah said, "Let her keep the things, or we shall become a laughingstock. I did, after all, send her this kid, but you could not find her."

Until this point Tamar had been a passive object, acted upon—or, alas, not acted upon—by Judah and his sons. The only verbs she was the subject of were the two verbs of compliance and retreat, to go off and dwell, at the end of verse 11. Now, a clear perception of injustice done her is ascribed to Tamar (verse 14), and she suddenly races into rapid, purposeful action, expressed in a detonating series of verbs: in verse 14 she quickly takes off, covers, wraps herself, sits down at the strategic location, and after the encounter, in verse 19, there is another chain of four verbs to indicate her brisk resumption of her former role and attire. (One might usefully compare this to the rapid series of verbs attached to Rebekah's activities [Gen. 27:14–17] as she prepares through another kind of deception to wrest the blessing from Isaac for her son Jacob.) Judah takes the bait—his sexual appetite will not tolerate postponement though he has been content to let Tamar languish as a childless widow indefinitely—and here we are given the only extended dialogue in the story (verses 16–18). It is a wonderfully businesslike exchange, reinforced in the Hebrew by the constant quick shifts from the literally repeated "he said" (*vayomer*) to "she said" (*vatomer*). Wasting no time with preliminaries, Judah immediately tells her, "Let me lie with you" (literally, "let me come to you," or even, "let me enter you"), to which Tamar responds

like a hard-headed businesswoman, finally exacting the rather serious pledge of Judah's seal and cord and staff, which as the legal surrogate of the bearer would have been a kind of ancient Near Eastern equivalent of all a person's major credit cards.

The agreement completed, the narrative proceeds in three quick verbs (the end of verse 18)—he gave, he lay, she conceived—to Tamar's single-minded purpose, which, from her first marriage, has been to become the channel of the seed of Judah. When the Adullamite comes looking for Tamar, he asks, decorously enough, for a cult prostitute (*qedeshah*), though Judah had in fact thought he was dealing with an ordinary whore (*zonah*).² The local people answer quite properly that there has been no *qedeshah* in that place, an assertion which receives special emphasis through the narrative contrivance by which it is repeated verbatim in Hirah's report to Judah. Nor, we may be led to think, has there been a *zonah* in that place, but only a wronged woman taking justice into her own hands. We are now prepared for the climax of the story.

24. About three months later, Judah was told, "Tamar your daughter-in-law has played the harlot [*zantah*] and what is more she is with child by harlotry [*zenunim*]." And Judah said, "Take her out and let her be burned."

The naked unreflective brutality of Judah's response to the seemingly incriminating news is even stronger in the original, where the synthetic character of biblical Hebrew reduces his deadly instructions to two words: *hotzi'uha vetisaref*. As elsewhere, nothing adventitious is permitted to intervene between intention and fulfilled purpose, and so the next two words of the text go on from Judah's command almost as if there had been no time lapse, as though there were no perceptible interval between magically powerful speech and the results of speech: Judah says, *hotzi'uha*, take her out, and the next two words, in a rare present passive participle, are *vehi mutz'et*, literally, "And she is being taken out." But this is the last instant before Tamar's triumphant revelation:

25. As she was being taken out, she sent word to her father-in-law, "By the man to whom these belong, by him am I with child." And she added, "Please recognize [*haker-na*], to whom do these belong, this

² In ancient Near Eastern pagan religion, there were special temple prostitutes with whom male worshippers consorted as part of a fertility cult. Their activity would not have had the base mercenary motives that impelled common prostitutes.

seal and cord and staff?" 26. Judah recognized [*vayaker*] them and he said, "She is more in the right than I for I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he had no carnal knowledge of her again.

The whole inset of Genesis 38 then concludes with four verses devoted to Tamar's giving birth to twin boys, her aspiration to become the mother of male offspring realized twofold. Confirming the pattern of the whole story and of the larger cycle of tales, the twin who is about to be second-born somehow "bursts forth" (*parotz*) first in the end, and he is Peretz, progenitor of Jesse from whom comes the house of David.

If some readers may have been skeptical about the intentionality of the analogies I have proposed between the interpolation and the frame-story, such doubts should be laid to rest by the exact recurrence at the climax of Tamar's story of the formula of recognition, *haker-na* and *vayaker*, used before with Jacob and his sons. The same verb, moreover, will play a crucial thematic role in the dénouement of the Joseph story when he confronts his brothers in Egypt, he recognizing them, they failing to recognize him. This precise recurrence of the verb in identical forms at the ends of Genesis 37 and 38 respectively is manifestly the result not of some automatic mechanism of interpolating traditional materials but of careful splicing of sources by a brilliant literary artist. The first use of the formula was for an act of deception; the second use is for an act of unmasking. Judah with Tamar after Judah with his brothers is an exemplary narrative instance of the deceiver deceived, and since he was the one who proposed selling Joseph into slavery instead of killing him (Gen. 37:26-27), he can easily be thought of as the leader of the brothers in the deception practiced on their father. Now he becomes their surrogate in being subject to a bizarre but peculiarly fitting principle of retaliation, taken in by a piece of attire, as his father was, learning through his own obstreperous flesh that the divinely appointed process of election cannot be thwarted by human will or social convention. In the most artful of contrivances, the narrator shows him exposed through the symbols of his legal self given in pledge for a kid (*gedi 'izim*), as before Jacob had been tricked by the garment emblematic of his love for Joseph which had been dipped in the blood of a goat (*se'ir 'izim*). Finally, when we return from Judah to the Joseph story (Genesis 39), we move in pointed contrast from a tale of exposure through sexual incontinence to a tale of seeming defeat and ultimate triumph through sexual continence—Joseph and Potiphar's wife.

It is instructive that the two verbal cues indicating the connection between the story of the selling of Joseph and the story of Tamar and

Judah were duly noted more than 1500 years ago in the Midrash: "The Holy One Praise be He said to Judah, 'You deceived your father with a kid. By your life, Tamar will deceive you with a kid'. . . The Holy One Praise be He said to Judah, 'You said to your father, *haker-na*. By your life, Tamar will say to you, *haker-na*'" (*Bereshit Rabba* 84:11,12). This instance may suggest that in many cases a literary student of the Bible has more to learn from the traditional commentaries than from modern scholarship. The difference between the two is ultimately the difference between assuming that the text is an intricately interconnected unity, as the midrashic exegetes did, and assuming it is a patchwork of frequently disparate documents, as most modern scholars have supposed. With their assumption of interconnectedness, the makers of the Midrash were often as exquisitely attuned to small verbal signals of continuity and to significant lexical nuances as any "close reader" of our own age.

There are, however, two essential distinctions between the way the text is treated in the Midrash and the literary approach I am proposing. First, although the Midrashists did assume the unity of the text, they had little sense of it as a real narrative continuum, as a coherent unfolding story in which the meaning of earlier data is progressively, even systematically, revealed or enriched by the addition of subsequent data. What this means practically is that the Midrash provides exegesis of specific phrases or narrated actions but not continuous readings of the biblical narratives: small pieces of the text become the foundations of elaborate homiletical structures that have only an intermittent relation to the integral story told by the text.

The second respect in which the midrashic approach to the biblical narratives does not really recognize their literary integrity is the didactic insistence of midrashic interpretation. One might note that in the formulation recorded in the passage just cited from *Bereshit Rabba*, God Himself administers a moral rebuke to the twice-sinning Judah, pointing out to him the recurrence of the kid and of the verb "to recognize" that links his unjust deception of his father with his justified deception by Tamar. That thematic point of retaliation, as we have seen, is intimated in the biblical text, but without the suggestion that Judah himself is conscious of the connections. That is, in the actual literary articulation of the story, we as audience are privileged with a knowledge denied Judah, and so the link between kid and kid, recognize and recognize, is part of a pattern of dramatic irony, in which the spectator knows something the protagonist doesn't and should know. The preservation of Judah's ignorance here is important, for the final turn of his painful moral education must be withheld for the quandary in which he will find himself later when he encoun-

ters Joseph as viceroy of Egypt without realizing his brother's identity. The Midrash, on the other hand, concentrating on the present moment in the text and on underscoring a moral point, must make things more explicit than the biblical writer intended.

Indeed, an essential aim of the innovative technique of fiction worked out by the ancient Hebrew writers was to produce a certain indeterminacy of meaning, especially in regard to motive, moral character, and psychology. (Later we shall look at this indeterminacy in detail when we consider characterization in the Bible.) Meaning, perhaps for the first time in narrative literature, was conceived as a *process*, requiring continual revision—both in the ordinary sense and in the etymological sense of seeing-again—continual suspension of judgment, weighing of multiple possibilities, brooding over gaps in the information provided. As a step in the process of meaning of the Joseph story, it is exactly right that the filial betrayal of Genesis 37 and the daughter-in-law's deception of Genesis 38 should be aligned with one another through the indirection of analogy, the parallels tersely suggested but never spelled out with a thematically unambiguous closure, as they are in the Midrash.

These notes on the story of Judah and Tamar are not, of course, by any means an exhaustive analysis of the material in question, but they may illustrate the usefulness of trying to look carefully into the literary art of a biblical text. This sort of critical discussion, I would contend, far from neglecting the Bible's religious character, focuses attention on it in a more nuanced way. The implicit theology of the Hebrew Bible dictates a complex moral and psychological realism in biblical narrative because God's purposes are always entrained in history, dependent on the acts of individual men and women for their continuing realization. To scrutinize biblical personages as fictional characters is to see them more sharply in the multifaceted, contradictory aspects of their human individuality, which is the biblical God's chosen medium for His experiment with Israel and history. Such scrutiny, however, as I hope I have shown, cannot be based merely on an imaginative impression of the story but must be undertaken through minute critical attention to the biblical writer's articulations of narrative form.

It is a little astonishing that at this late date literary analysis of the Bible of the sort I have tried to illustrate here in this preliminary fashion is only in its infancy. By literary analysis I mean the manifold varieties of minutely discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units, and much else; the kind of disciplined attention, in other words, which through a whole spectrum of

critical approaches has illuminated, for example, the poetry of Dante, the plays of Shakespeare, the novels of Tolstoy. The general absence of such critical discourse on the Hebrew Bible is all the more perplexing when one recalls that the masterworks of Greek and Latin antiquity have in recent decades enjoyed an abundance of astute literary analysis, so that we have learned to perceive subtleties of lyric form in Theocritus as in Marvell, complexities of narrative strategy in Homer or Virgil as in Flaubert.

In making such a sweeping negative assertion about biblical criticism, I may be suspected of polemical distortion impelled by the animus of a modern literary person against antiquarian scholarship, but I do not think this is the case. There has been, of course, a vast amount of scholarly work on the Bible over the past hundred years or more. It would be easy to make light of the endless welter of hypotheses and counter-hypotheses generated in everything from textual criticism to issues of large historical chronology; but the fact is that, however wrong-headed or extravagantly perverse many of the scholars have been, their enterprise as a whole has enormously advanced our understanding of the Bible. Virtually all this activity has been what we might call "excavative"—either literally, with the archeologist's spade and reference to its findings, or with a variety of analytic tools intended to uncover the original meanings of biblical words, the life situations in which specific texts were used, the sundry sources from which longer texts were assembled. Although much remains debatable—necessarily so, when we are separated from the origins of the texts by three millennia—the material unearthed by scholarship has clearly dispelled many confusions and obscurities.

Let me offer one brief example. The ancient city of Ugarit at the site of Ras Shamra on the Syrian coast, first excavated in 1929, has yielded a wealth of texts in a Semitic language closely cognate to biblical Hebrew, some of them strikingly parallel in style and poetic convention to familiar biblical passages. Among other things, the Ugaritic texts report in epic detail a battle between the regnant land god, Baal, and the sea god, Yamm. Suddenly, a whole spate of dimly apprehended allusions in Psalms and Job came into focus: an antecedent epic tradition had been assimilated into the recurrent imagery of God's breaking the fury of the elemental sea or shackling a primordial sea monster. Thus, when Job cries out (Job 7:12), *ha-yam 'ani 'im tanin*, he is not asking rhetorically whether he is the sea (*yam*), but, with a pointed sardonic allusion to the Canaanite myth, he is saying: "Am I Yamm, am I the Sea Beast, that you should set a guard over me?"

Excavative scholarship, then, demonstrably has its place as a necessary

first step to the understanding of the Bible, but until the last few years there was little evidence that much more than excavation was going on, except, of course, for the perennial speculations of the theologians built on biblical texts. A systematic survey of the state of knowledge in the field, Herbert F. Hahn's *The Old Testament in Modern Research*,³ delineates source analysis, anthropology, sociology, comparative religion, form criticism, archeology, and theology as the relevant major areas of professional study—but nothing at all that any literary person would recognize as literary inquiry. The uneven but sometimes valuable literary commentary occasionally provided by such scholars as Umberto Cassuto and Luis Alonso-Schökel (the former writing mainly in Hebrew, the latter in Spanish and German) was apparently deemed so peripheral to the discipline as not to be worthy of categorization.

Still more revealing as a symptom of the need for a literary perspective is Otto Eissfeldt's massive *The Old Testament: An Introduction*,⁴ widely regarded as one of the most authoritative general reference works in the field. Most of Eissfeldt's considerations, of course, are purely excavative, but when the nature of the biblical materials confronts him with literary categories, his apparent authoritativeness begins to look shaky. Thus, he divides biblical narrative into myths, fairy tales, sagas, legends, anecdotes, and tales, using these problematic terms with a casualness and a seeming indifference to their treatment in other disciplines that are quite dismaying. Or again, his eight-page summary of conflicting scholarly theories on biblical prosody painfully illustrates how the scholars have read biblical poetry with roughly the intellectual apparatus appropriate to the decipherment of cuneiform inscriptions, multiplying confusion by the invention of elaborate pseudo-mathematical systems of scansion or by the wholesale importation of terms and concepts from Greek prosody. The latest trend, moreover, in describing biblical prosody is a system of syllable-counting proposed by the American scholar David Noel Freedman, which reflects the most unlikely conception of how lines of poetry operate and also requires a dubious hypothetical reconstruction of the "original" Hebrew vowel-system. The inadequacy of all this becomes transparent when one compares it to the wonderfully incisive analysis of biblical verse as a "semantic-syntactic-accentual" rhythm by Benjamin Hrushovski—not a Bible scholar but a leading authority in the field of poetics and comparative literature—in his synoptic article on Hebrew prosody for the 1971 edition of the *Encyclopedia Judaica*. In a few packed paragraphs, Hrushovski manages to cut through generations of confusion

³ New York, 1954, 1st ed.; updated to 1970 through an appended bibliographical essay by Horace D. Hummel.

⁴ Rev. ed., trans. P. R. Ackroyd, New York, 1965.

and to offer a general account of biblical prosody at once plausible and elegantly simple, avoiding the far-fetched structures and the strained terminology of his predecessors.

Until the mid-1970s, the only book-length study in English by a professional Bible scholar that made a sustained effort to use a literary perspective was Edwin M. Good's *Irony in the Old Testament*.⁵ One sympathizes with Good's complaints about the general indifference of his colleagues to literary issues and with the reasonableness of his declared intention merely to make a modest start in the right direction. His book succeeds in doing that, but no more than that. (Good's most recent articles, however, reflect an admirable advance in literary sophistication over this early work.) *Irony in the Old Testament* is an engaging book, and one that offers useful local perceptions, but it has no clearly defined critical method, no way of adequately discriminating the complex distinctive forms of biblical literary art. The concept of irony becomes so elastic that it threatens to lose descriptive value, though perhaps one might argue that this is a problem almost equally perceptible in the work of many literary critics who discuss irony. Elsewhere, of course, we have had sensitive appreciations of the Bible's imaginative power by literary people like Mark Van Doren, Maurice Samuel, and Mary Ellen Chase. Good's book often seems more like such an appreciation than a rigorous literary analysis, though it has the advantage of being supported by a professional knowledge of Hebrew philology, source criticism, and ancient Near Eastern history.

Over the last few years, there has been growing interest in literary approaches among the younger generation of Bible scholars—in this country, especially those associated with the new journal, *Semeia*—but, while useful explications of particular texts have begun to appear, there have been as yet no major works of criticism, and certainly no satisfying overviews of the poetics of the Hebrew Bible. As elsewhere in the academy, the manifest influence of the vogue of Structuralism on these Bible scholars has not been a very fruitful one; and one too often encounters in their work rather simple superimpositions of one or another modern literary theory on ancient texts that in fact have their own dynamics, their own distinctive conventions and characteristic techniques. One sometimes gets the impression that scholars of this sort are trying manfully, perhaps almost too conscientiously, to make a start, but that literary analysis, after all those seminars in graduate school on Sumerian law and Ugaritic cult terms, remains for them a foreign language laboriously learned, whose accents and intonations they have not yet gotten right.

Three recent first books by Bible scholars may be partly exempted,

⁵ Philadelphia, 1965.

though only partly, from these strictures. Michael Fishbane's *Text and Texture*⁶ provides a series of sensitive close readings of a variety of biblical texts, but it does not propose any general critical method; it is often a little ponderous in its formulations and in its application of Structuralist or ethnopoetic notions; and it seems finally less concerned with poetics than with homiletics. The Dutch scholar, J. P. Fokkelman, in *Narrative Art in Genesis*,⁷ a book strongly influenced by the Swiss-German *Werkin-terpretation* school of literary criticism (an approximate analogue to the American New Criticism), gives us some brilliant analyses of formal patterns in the Hebrew prose and of how they function thematically; but he also shows a certain tendency to interpretive overkill in his explications, at times discovering patterns where they may not be, and assuming with a noticeable degree of strain that form must always be significantly expressive. Finally, the Israeli Bible scholar, Shimon Bar-Efrat, has attempted in *The Art of the Biblical Story* the first serious book-length introduction in any language to the distinctive poetics of biblical narrative.⁸ He makes a valuable beginning, offering some splendid readings of individual scenes and nicely observing certain general principles of biblical narrative; but whether out of an uncertain sense of audience or because of his own relation to the subject, rather too much space is devoted to belaboring the obvious, especially in regard to basic matters of how literary narratives work. These recent publications, then, indicate that things may be in the early stages of changing within the field of biblical studies proper, but also that the discipline still has a considerable way to go.

The one obvious reason for the absence of scholarly literary interest in the Bible for so long is that, in contrast to Greek and Latin literature, the Bible was regarded for so many centuries by both Christians and Jews as the primary, unitary source of divinely revealed truth. This belief still makes itself profoundly felt, in both reactions against and perpetuations of it. The first several waves of modern biblical criticism, beginning in the nineteenth century, were from one point of view a sustained assault on the supposedly unitary character of the Bible, an attempt to break it up into as many pieces as possible, then to link those pieces to their original life contexts, thus rescuing for history a body of texts that religious tradition had enshrined in timelessness, beyond precise historical considerations. The momentum of this enterprise continues unabated, so that it still seems to most scholars in the field much more urgent to inquire, say, how a particular psalm might have been used in a hypothetically

⁶ New York, 1979.

⁷ Assen and Amsterdam, 1975.

⁸ (Hebrew) Tel Aviv, 1979.

reconstructed temple ritual than how it works as an achieved piece of poetry. At the same time, the potent residue of the older belief in the Bible as the revelation of ultimate truth is perceptible in the tendency of scholars to ask questions about the biblical view of man, the biblical notion of the soul, the biblical vision of eschatology, while for the most part neglecting phenomena like character, motive, and narrative design as unbefitting for the study of an essentially religious document. The fact that such a substantial proportion of academic biblical studies goes on in theological seminaries, both here and in Europe, institutionally reinforces this double-edged pursuit of analyzed fragments and larger views, with scarcely any literary middle ground.

The rare exceptions to this general rule have often occurred, as in the case of the Hrushovski article, when a literary scholar with a grasp of biblical Hebrew has addressed himself to biblical materials, approaching them from some larger literary perspective. The one celebrated instance is the immensely suggestive first chapter of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*,⁹ in which the antithetical modes of representing reality in Genesis and the Odyssey are compared at length. Auerbach must be credited with showing more clearly than anyone before him how the cryptic conciseness of biblical narrative is a reflection of profound art, not primitiveness, but his insight is the result of penetrating critical intuition unsupported by any real method for dealing with the specific characteristics of biblical literary forms. His key notion of biblical narrative as a purposefully spare text "fraught with background" is at once resoundingly right and too sweepingly general. Distinctions have to be made for narratives by different authors, of different periods, and written to fulfill different generic or thematic requirements. An arresting starkness of foreground, an enormous freight of background, are beautifully illustrated in the story of the binding of Isaac which Auerbach analyzes, but those terms would have to be seriously modified for the psychologically complex cycle of stories about David, for the deliberately schematic folktale frame of the Book of Job, or for a late (in part, satirical) narrative like Esther, where in fact there is a high degree of specification in the foreground of artifacts, costume, court customs, and the like.

Moving beyond Auerbach toward the definition of a specific poetics of biblical narrative are four important articles by Menakhem Perry and Meir Sternberg, two young Israeli literary scholars, which appeared in the Hebrew quarterly, *Ha-Sifrut*. The first of these, "The King through Ironical Eyes,"¹⁰ is a brilliant verse-by-verse analysis of the story of David

⁹ Trans. Willard Trask, Princeton, 1953.

¹⁰ *Ha-Sifrut* 1:2 (Summer 1968), pp. 263-292.

and Bathsheba demonstrating—to my mind, conclusively—that an elaborate system of gaps between what is told and what must be inferred has been artfully contrived to leave us with at least two conflicting, mutually complicating interpretations of the motives and states of knowledge of the principal characters. This reading, which insists on a structural analogy between the story in 2 Samuel and Henry James's deliberate ambiguity in *The Turn of the Screw*, stirred up a hornet's nest of protest after its initial publication. The most recurrent theme of the article's critics was that the biblical story was, after all, religious, moral, and didactic in intention, and so would hardly indulge in all this fancy footwork of multiple ironies that we moderns so love. (Implicit in such a contention is a rather limiting notion of what a "religious" narrative is, or of how the insight of art might relate to a religious vision. This is a central question to which we shall return.) Perry and Sternberg responded with a rejoinder of over 50,000 words in which they convincingly argued that they had not imposed modern literary criteria on the Bible but rather had meticulously observed what were the general norms of biblical narrative itself and in what significant ways the story in question diverged from those norms.¹¹

More recently, Sternberg, writing alone, has provided a shrewdly perceptive analysis of the story of the rape of Dinah, concluding his discussion with a general description of the spectrum of rhetorical devices, from explicit to (predominantly) oblique, through which biblical narrative conveys moral judgments of its characters.¹² Finally, Sternberg, in still another lengthy article, has catalogued with apt illustrative explications the repertoire of repetitive devices used by the biblical writers.¹³ Anyone interested in the narrative art of the Bible has much to learn from all four of these articles. The rigor and subtlety of Perry and Sternberg's readings in themselves lend support to the programmatic assertion they make at the end of their response to their critics: "The perspective of literary studies is the only relevant one to the consideration of the Bible as literature. Any other discipline, real or imagined, runs the danger of inventing groundless hypotheses and losing touch with the literary power of the actual biblical story."

Having been taught so much by Perry and Sternberg, I would like to express two small reservations about their approach, one perhaps just a quibble over formulation, the other an issue of method. The notion of "the Bible as literature," though particularly contaminated in English by

¹¹ *Ha-Sifrut* 2:3 (August 1970), pp. 608–663.

¹² *Ha-Sifrut* 4:2 (April 1973), pp. 193–231.

¹³ *Ha-Sifrut* 25 (October 1977), pp. 110–150.

its use as a rubric for superficial college courses and for dubious publishers' packages, is needlessly concessive and condescending toward literature in any language. (It would at the very least be gratuitous to speak of "Dante as literature," given the assured literary status of Dante's great poem, though the *Divine Comedy* is more explicitly theological, or "religious," than most of the Bible.) Perry and Sternberg, answering their critics, characterize the biblical story as "a junction of purposes which generate relations of complementarity and tension." "One such purpose," they go on to say, "is the 'aesthetic' aim" to which at least one of their critics makes a gesture of concession. Rather than viewing the literary character of the Bible as one of several "purposes" or "tendencies" (*megamot* in the original), I would prefer to insist on a complete interfusion of literary art with theological, moral, or historiosophical vision, the fullest perception of the latter dependent on the fullest grasp of the former. This point has been aptly made by Joel Rosenberg, a young American scholar and poet, in an admirably intelligent general rationale for a literary perspective on the Bible published in *Response*: "The Bible's value as a religious document is intimately and inseparably related to its value as literature. This proposition requires that we develop a different understanding of what literature is, one that might—and should—give us some trouble."¹⁴ One could add that the proposition also requires, conversely, that we develop a somewhat more troublesome understanding of what a religious document might be.

One leading emphasis of the Rosenberg essay points to what I think is a methodological deficiency in Perry and Sternberg's otherwise apt analyses. They tend to write about biblical narrative as though it were a unitary production just like a modern novel that is entirely conceived and executed by a single independent writer who supervises his original work from first draft to page proofs. They turn their backs, in other words, on what historical scholarship has taught us about the specific conditions of development of the biblical text and about its frequently composite nature. Rosenberg, by contrast, is keenly aware of historical scholarship, and he sees its findings, in a way the historical scholars themselves do not, as aspects of the distinctive artistic medium of the biblical authors. Here is his comment on the Pentateuch, the set of biblical narratives most thoroughly analyzed into antecedent sources by the scholars: "It may actually improve our understanding of the Torah to remember that it is *quoting* documents, that there is, in other words, a purposeful documentary *montage* that must be perceived as a unity, regardless of the

¹⁴ "Meanings, Morals, and Mysteries: Literary Approaches to the Torah," *Response* 9:2 (Summer 1975), pp. 67–94.

number and types of smaller units that form the building blocks of its composition. Here, the weight of literary interest falls upon the activity of the *final* redactor, whose artistry requires far more careful attention than it has hitherto been accorded." The last clause if anything understates the case, since biblical critics frequently assume, out of some dim preconception about the transmission of texts in "primitive" cultures, that the redactors were in the grip of a kind of manic tribal compulsion, driven again and again to include units of traditional material that made no connective sense, for reasons they themselves could not have explained.

There is no point, to be sure, in pretending that all the contradictions among different sources in the biblical texts can be happily harmonized by the perception of some artful design. It seems reasonable enough, however, to suggest that we may still not fully understand what would have been perceived as a real contradiction by an intelligent Hebrew writer of the early Iron Age, so that apparently conflicting versions of the same event set side by side, far from troubling their original audience, may have sometimes been perfectly justified in a kind of logic we no longer apprehend. (We shall be considering this phenomenon more closely later, in chapter 7.) In any case, the validity of Rosenberg's general claim can, I think, be demonstrated by a careful reading of countless biblical narratives. Genesis 38, which we have examined in detail, is generally ascribed by scholars to the so-called Yahwistic or *J* Document after a mingling of *J* and *E* (the Elohist Document) in the previous episode. But even if the text is really composite in origin, I think we have seen ample evidence of how brilliantly it has been woven into a complex artistic whole.

Accustomed as we are to reading narratives in which there is a much denser specification of fictional data, we have to learn, as Perry and Sternberg have shown, to attend more finely to the complex, tersely expressive details of the biblical text. (Traditional exegesis in its own way did this, but with far-reaching assumptions about the text as literal revelation which most of us no longer accept.) Biblical narrative is laconic but by no means in a uniform or mechanical fashion. Why, then, does the narrator ascribe motives to or designate states of feeling in his characters in some instances, while elsewhere he chooses to remain silent on these points? Why are some actions minimally indicated, others elaborated through synonym and detail? What accounts for the drastic shifts in the time-scale of narrated events? Why is actual dialogue introduced at certain junctures, and on what principle of selectivity are specific words assigned to characters? In a text so sparing in epithets and relational designations,

why are particular identifications of characters noted by the narrator at specific points in the story? Repetition is a familiar feature of the Bible, but it is in no way an automatic device: when does literal repetition occur, and what are the significant variations in repeated verbal formulas?

Finally, to understand a narrative art so bare of embellishment and explicit commentary, one must be constantly aware of two features: the repeated use of narrative analogy, through which one part of the text provides oblique commentary on another; and the richly expressive function of syntax, which often bears the kind of weight of meaning that, say, imagery does in a novel by Virginia Woolf or analysis in a novel by George Eliot. Attention to such features leads not to a more "imaginative" reading of biblical narrative but to a more precise one; and since all these features are linked to discernible details in the Hebrew text, the literary approach is actually a good deal *less* conjectural than the historical scholarship that asks of a verse whether it contains possible Akkadian loanwords, whether it reflects Sumerian kinship practices, whether it may have been corrupted by scribal error.

In any case, the fact that the text is ancient and that its characteristic narrative procedures may differ in many respects from those of modern texts should not lead us to any condescending preconception that the text is therefore bound to be crude or simple. Tzvetan Todorov has shrewdly argued that the whole notion of "primitive narrative" is a kind of mental mirage engendered by modern parochialism, for the more closely you look at a particular ancient narrative, the more you are compelled to recognize the complexity and subtlety with which it is formally organized and with which it renders its subjects, and the more you see how it is conscious of its necessary status as artful discourse. It is only by imposing a naive and unexamined aesthetic of their own, Todorov proposes, that modern scholars are able to declare so confidently that certain parts of the ancient text could not belong with others: the supposedly primitive narrative is subjected by scholars to tacit laws like the law of stylistic unity, of noncontradiction, of nondigression, of nonrepetition, and by these dim but purportedly universal lights is found to be composite, deficient, or incoherent. (If just these four laws were applied respectively to *Ulysses*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Tristram Shandy*, and *Jealousy*, each of those novels would have to be relegated to the dustbin of shoddily "redacted" literary scraps.) Attention to the ancient narrative's consciousness of its own operations, Todorov proposes, will reveal how irrelevant these complacently assumed criteria generally are.¹⁵ Todorov bases his argument on examples from the *Odyssey*; but his questioning the existence of primi-

¹⁵ *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, New York, 1977), pp. 53-65.

tive narrative could be equally well supported by a consideration of the Hebrew Bible.

What we need to understand better is that the religious vision of the Bible is given depth and subtlety precisely by being conveyed through the most sophisticated resources of prose fiction. In the example we have considered, Judah and Jacob-Israel are not simple eponymic counters in an etiological tale (this is the flattening effect of some historical scholarship) but are individual characters surrounded by multiple ironies, artfully etched in their imperfections as well as in their strengths. A histrionic Jacob blinded by excessive love and perhaps loving the excess; an impetuous, sometimes callous Judah, who is yet capable of candor when confronted with hard facts; a fiercely resolved, steel-nerved Tamar—all such subtly indicated achievements of fictional characterization suggest the endlessly complicated ramifications and contradictions of a principle of divine election intervening in the accepted orders of society and nature. The biblical tale, through the most rigorous economy of means, leads us again and again to ponder complexities of motive and ambiguities of character because these are essential aspects of its vision of man, created by God, enjoying or suffering all the consequences of human freedom. Different considerations would naturally have to be explored for biblical poetry. Almost the whole range of biblical narrative, however, embodies the basic perception that man must live before God, in the transforming medium of time, incessantly and perplexingly in relation with others; and a literary perspective on the operations of narrative may help us more than any other to see how this perception was translated into stories that have had such a powerful, enduring hold on the imagination.

2

Sacred History and the Beginnings of Prose Fiction

THE HEBREW BIBLE is generally perceived, with considerable justice, as sacred history, and both terms of that status have often been invoked to argue against the applicability to the Bible of the methods of literary analysis. If the text is sacred, if it was grasped by the audiences for whom it was made as a revelation of God's will, perhaps of His literal words, how can one hope to explain it through categories developed for the understanding of such a fundamentally secular, individual, and aesthetic enterprise as that of later Western literature? And if the text is history, seriously purporting to render an account of the origins of things and of Israelite national experience as they actually happened, is it not presumptuous to analyze these narratives in the terms we customarily apply to prose fiction, a mode of writing we understand to be the arbitrary invention of the writer, whatever the correspondences such a work may exhibit with quotidian or even historical reality? In a novel by Flaubert or Tolstoy or Henry James, where we are aware of the conscious fashioning of a fictional artifice, sometimes with abundant documentation from the writer's notebooks and letters, it is altogether appropriate to discuss techniques of characterization, shifts of dialogue, the ordering of larger compositional elements; but are we not coercing the Bible into being "literature" by attempting to transfer such categories to a set of texts that are theologically motivated, historically oriented,