

Biblical Type-Scenes and the Uses of Convention

A COHERENT READING of any artwork, whatever the medium, requires some detailed awareness of the grid of conventions upon which, and against which, the individual work operates. It is only in exceptional moments of cultural history that these conventions are explicitly codified, as in French neoclassicism or in Arabic and Hebrew poetry of the Andalusian Golden Age, but an elaborate set of tacit agreements between artist and audience about the ordering of the artwork is at all times the enabling context in which the complex communication of art occurs. Through our awareness of convention we can recognize significant or simply pleasing patterns of repetition, symmetry, contrast: we can discriminate between the verisimilar and the fabulous, pick up directional clues in a narrative work, see what is innovative and what is deliberately traditional at each nexus of the artistic creation.

One of the chief difficulties we encounter as modern readers in perceiving the artistry of biblical narrative is precisely that we have lost most of the keys to the conventions out of which it was shaped. The professional Bible scholars have not offered much help in this regard, for their closest approximation to the study of convention is form criticism, which is set on finding recurrent regularities of pattern rather

than the manifold variations upon a pattern that any system of literary convention elicits; moreover, form criticism uses these patterns for excavative ends—to support hypotheses about the social or cultic functions of the text, its historical evolution, and so forth. Its identification of patterns needs to be taken to another level, as I shall try to show in this chapter. Before going on to describe what seems to me a central and, as far as I know, unrecognized convention of biblical narrative, I would like to make clearer by means of an analogy our dilemma as moderns approaching this ancient literary corpus that has been so heavily encrusted with nonliterary commentaries.

Let us suppose that some centuries hence only a dozen films survive from the whole corpus of Hollywood westerns. As students of twentieth-century cinema screening the films on an ingeniously reconstructed archaic projector, we notice a recurrent peculiarity: in eleven of the films, the sheriff-hero has the same anomalous neurological trait of hyperreflexivity—no matter what the situation in which his adversaries confront him, he is always able to pull his gun out of its holster and fire before they, with their weapons poised, can pull the trigger. In the twelfth film, the sheriff has a withered arm and, instead of a six-shooter, he uses a rifle that he carries slung over his back. Now, eleven hyperreflexive sheriffs are utterly improbable by any realistic standards—though one scholar will no doubt propose that in the Old West the function of sheriff was generally filled by members of a hereditary caste that in fact had this genetic trait. The scholars will then divide between a majority that posits an original source-western (designated Q) that has been imitated or imperfectly reproduced in a whole series of later versions (Q_1 , Q_2 , etc.—the films we have been screening) and a more speculative minority that proposes an old California Indian myth concerning a sky-god with arms of lightning, of which all these films are scrambled and diluted secular adaptations. The twelfth film, in the view of both schools, must be ascribed to a different cinematic tradition.

The central point, of course, that these strictly historical hypotheses would fail even to touch upon is the presence of convention. We

contemporary viewers of westerns back in the era when the films were made immediately recognize the convention without having to name it as such. Much of our pleasure in watching westerns derives from our awareness that the hero, however sinister the dangers looming over him, leads a charmed life, that he will always in the end prove himself to be more of a man than the bad guys who stalk him, and the familiar token of his indomitable manhood is his invariable, often uncanny, quickness on the draw. For us, the recurrence of the hyper-reflexive sheriff is not an enigma to be explained but, on the contrary, a necessary condition for telling a western story in the film medium as it should be told. With our easy knowledge of the convention, moreover, we naturally see a point in the twelfth, exceptional film that would be invisible to the historical scholars. For in this case, we recognize that the convention of the quick-drawing hero is present through its deliberate suppression. Here is a sheriff who seems to lack the expected equipment for his role, but we note the daring assertion of manly will against almost impossible odds in the hero's learning to make do with what he has, training his left arm to whip his rifle into firing position with a swiftness that makes it a match for the quickest draw in the West.¹

Some of the analogous conventions through which biblical narrators variously worked out their tacit contract with their contemporary audiences are perhaps, after three millennia, no longer recoverable. Let me be perfectly candid about the inherent difficulty of our project. The key problem is not only the centuries elapsed since this body of literature was created but the small corpus of works that has survived. Within this small corpus, certain narrative conventions that are observable on the "microscopic" level of the text, like the formulas for beginning and ending narrative units, can be identified with considerable confidence because one can locate fifteen, twenty, or even many more instances in the Hebrew Bible. Other conventions, however, that determine larger patterns of recurrence in the "macroscopic" aspects of the stories and that are not strictly tied to stylistic formulas, like the convention I shall now attempt to investigate, are bound to be more

Westerns...

conjectural because, given the limited corpus with which we have to work, we may be able to locate confidently no more than five or six significant occurrences. Nevertheless, I think that we may be able to recover some essential elements of ancient convention, and thus to understand biblical narrative more precisely, if the questions we ask of it assume a fairly high degree of literary purposefulness.

The most crucial case in point is the perplexing fact that in biblical narrative more or less the same story often seems to be told two or three or more times about different characters, or sometimes even about the same character in different sets of circumstances. Three times a patriarch is driven by famine to a southern region where he pretends that his wife is his sister, narrowly avoids a violation of the conjugal bond by the local ruler, and is sent away with gifts (Gen. 12:10–20; Gen. 20; Gen. 26:1–12). Twice Hagar flees into the wilderness from Sarah's hostility and discovers a miraculous well (Gen. 16; Gen. 21:9–21), and that story itself seems only a special variation of the recurrent story of bitter rivalry between a barren, favored wife and a fertile co-wife or concubine. That situation, in turn, suggests another oft-told tale in the Bible, of a woman long barren who is vouchsafed a divine promise of progeny, whether by God himself or through a divine messenger or oracle, and who then gives birth to a hero.

Different repeated episodes have elicited different explanations, but the most common strategy among scholars is to attribute ostensible duplication in the narratives to a duplication of sources or to a tapping of different traditions by one source, which amounts to a kind of recurrent stammer in the process of transmission, whether written or oral. One must grant that in quite a few instances this is the most persuasive explanation for the duplication—as in the case of the two banishments of Hagar, which have the distinct look of doublets. Pushing the notion of doublets even farther, a monograph by Robert C. Culley, *Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Narrative*,² first surveys some recent ethnographic studies of oral storytelling in the West Indies and Africa and then tentatively proposes that the same mechanism is present in biblical narrative. Since the students of oral narration have ob-

served that as a tale is told over and over, changes occur in it and even the identities of its personages shift, Culley suggests that the Bible may reflect the same phenomenon and that the somewhat distorted duplications of narratives in Scripture could well be evidence of oral transmission. To make his point graphically, he even lays out a series of tables with parallel episodes in which more or less the same elements of plot occur in different circumstances with different characters. As I stared at Culley's schematic tables, it gradually dawned on me that he had made a discovery without realizing it. For what his tables of parallels and variants actually reveal are the lineaments of a purposefully deployed literary convention. The variations in the parallel episodes are not at all *random*, as a scrambling by oral transmission would imply, and the repetitions themselves are no more "duplications" of a single *ur-story* than our eleven films about a fast-shooting sheriff were duplications of a single film.

In order to define this basic convention of biblical narrative, I am going to borrow a concept from Homer scholarship, though a couple of major modifications of the concept will have to be made. Students of Homer have generally agreed that there are certain prominent elements of repetitive compositional pattern in both Greek epics that are a conscious convention, one of which has been designated "type-scene."³ The notion was first worked out by Walter Arend in 1933 (*Die typischen Szenen bei Homer*) before the oral-formulaic nature of the Homeric poems was understood. Since then, the type-scene has been plausibly connected with the special needs of oral composition, and a good deal of recent scholarship has been devoted to showing the sophisticated variations on the set patterns of the various type-scenes in the Homeric epics. Very briefly, Arend's notion is that there are certain fixed situations that the poet is expected to include in his narrative and that he must perform according to a set order of motifs—situations like the arrival, the message, the voyage, the assembly, the oracle, the arming of the hero, and some half-dozen others. The type-scene of the visit, for example, should unfold according to the following fixed pattern: a guest approaches; someone spots him, gets up,

hurries to greet him; the guest is taken by the hand, led into the room, invited to take the seat of honor; the guest is enjoined to feast; the ensuing meal is described. Almost any description of a visit in Homer will reproduce more or less this sequence not because of an overlap of sources but because that is how the convention requires such a scene to be rendered.

Some of this obviously cannot apply to biblical narrative because the epic type-scene involves descriptive detail, while the Bible is not descriptive; and, concomitantly, the type-scene is a performance of a quotidian situation, and the Bible touches on the quotidian only as a sphere for the realization of portentous actions: if in the Bible someone is brewing up a mess of lentil stew, the reader can rest assured that it is not to exhibit the pungency of ancient Hebrew cuisine but because some fatal transaction will be carried out with the stew, which even proves to have a symbolically appropriate color (see chapter 2).

Nevertheless, I should like to propose that there is a series of recurrent narrative episodes attached to the careers of biblical heroes that are analogous to Homeric type-scenes in that they are dependent on the manipulation of a fixed constellation of predetermined motifs. Since biblical narrative characteristically catches its protagonists only at the critical and revealing points in their lives, the biblical type-scene occurs not in the rituals of daily existence but at the crucial junctures in the lives of the heroes, from conception and birth to betrothal to deathbed. Not every type-scene will occur for every major hero, though often the absence of a particular type-scene may itself be significant. Some of the most commonly repeated biblical type-scenes I have been able to identify are the following: the annunciation (and I take the term from Christian iconography precisely to underscore the elements of fixed convention) of the birth of the hero to his barren mother; the encounter with the future betrothed at a well; the epiphany in the field; the initiatory trial; danger in the desert and the discovery of a well or other source of sustenance; the testament of the dying hero.

My notion of a convention of type-scene, to be sure, is in some ways related to various conceptions of fixed and recurrent patterns that have been discussed at length in biblical scholarship, but I would argue that the recognition of pattern as literary convention leads to a different understanding of how the patterns actually work. The most influential approach to recurrent pattern in biblical literature has been the concept of *Gattung* ("class," "genre," or in some instances "subgenre") first articulated in the early twentieth century by Hermann Gunkel, which then became a key to form-critical analysis. But through the concept of *Gattung*, Gunkel and his followers have sought to determine the so-called life-setting of the various biblical texts, a line of speculation that decades of investigation have shown to be highly problematic—just as problematic as the concomitant enterprise of dating the texts by identifying an evolution from simple to elaborate versions of the *Gattungen*. In contrast to a *Gattung*, a literary convention may in some instances reflect certain social or cultural realities but is bound to offer a highly mediated, stylized image of such realities: in the literary convention, culture has been transformed into artful text, which is rather different from form-criticism's tendency to insist on the function performed by text in culture. What accompanies this assumption of public context and function in the notion of *Gattung* is a drive to identify common formulas in different texts. One of course needs to recognize the formulas if they are there in order to see what is going on in the text, but as I shall try to illustrate, what is finally more significant is the inventive freshness with which formulas are recast and redeployed in each new instance.

How all of this may bring us closer to an understanding of the artistry of biblical narrative will, I hope, become apparent through an extended analysis of one such type-scene. I shall focus on the betrothal, for it offers some particularly interesting and inventive variations of the set pattern. Conveniently, this is one of the examples of "duplications" that Culley sets out in his tables with schematic clarity. What I would suggest is that when a biblical narrator—and his predecessors might have been oral storytellers, though that remains a matter of

conjecture—came to the moment of his hero's betrothal, both he and his audience were aware that the scene had to unfold in particular circumstances, according to a fixed order. If some of those circumstances were altered or suppressed, or if the scene were actually omitted, that communicated something to the audience as clearly as the withered arm of our twelfth sheriff would say something to a film audience. The betrothal type-scene, then, must take place with the future bridegroom, or his surrogate, having journeyed to a foreign land. There he encounters a girl—the term “*na'arah*” invariably occurs unless the maiden is identified as so-and-so's daughter—or girls at a well. Someone, either the man or the girl, then draws water from the well; afterward, the girl or girls rush to bring home the news of the stranger's arrival (the verbs “hurry” and “run” are given recurrent emphasis at this junction of the type-scene); finally, a betrothal is concluded between the stranger and the girl, in the majority of instances, only after he has been invited to a meal.

The archetypal expressiveness of this whole type-scene is clear enough. The hero's emergence from the immediate family circle—though two of the most famous betrothal scenes stress endogamy (Gen. 24:10–61; Gen. 29:1–20)—to discover a mate in the world outside is figured in the young man's journey to a foreign land; or perhaps the foreign land is chiefly a geographical correlative for the sheer female otherness of the prospective wife. The well at an oasis is obviously a symbol of fertility and, in all likelihood, also a female symbol. (The poem in Proverbs 5 explicitly uses the well as a metaphor for female sexuality.) The drawing of water from the well is the act that emblematically establishes a bond—male-female, host-guest, benefactor-benefited—between the stranger and the girl, and its apt result is the excited running to bring the news, the gestures of hospitality, the actual betrothal. The plot of the type-scene, then, dramatically enacts the coming together of mutually unknown parties in the marriage. It may have ultimately originated in prebiblical traditions of folklore, but that is a matter of conjecture peripheral to the understanding of its *literary* use. And, in any case, as is true of all original art, what is really interesting

is not the schema of convention but what is done in each individual application of the schema to give it a sudden tilt of innovation or even to refashion it radically for the imaginative purposes at hand.

The first occurrence in the Bible of the betrothal type-scene is also by far the most elaborate version of it—the encounter at the well in Aram-Naharaim between Abraham's servant and Rebekah (Gen. 24:10–61). All the elements of the convention we have just reviewed are present here. The servant, as Isaac's surrogate, has been sent by Abraham all the way back to the family home in Mesopotamia to seek a bride for his master's son. The servant, combining, as it were, a knowledge of social custom with the requirements of the literary convention, carefully stations himself by the well toward evening, when each day the local girls come out to draw water. The *na'arah* who immediately turns up is, of course, Rebekah. She draws water for the stranger and his camels. Even before he assures himself of her family background, he loads her with jewelry; she runs home with the news of his arrival; her brother Laban comes out to welcome the stranger, sets a meal before him, and negotiations follow, concluding with an agreement to betroth Rebekah to Isaac.

The most striking feature of this version of the type-scene is its slow, stately progress, an effect achieved by the extensive use of dialogue, by a specification of detail clearly beyond the norm of biblical narrative, and, above all, by a very elaborate use of the device of verbatim repetition, which is a standard resource of the biblical writers.⁴ These strategies of retardation are important because in this particular instance the betrothal is conceived *ceremoniously*, as a formal treaty between two branches of the Nahor clan, and so the bestowal of gifts is specified here, and we are given the precise diplomatic language in which the betrothal negotiations are carried out. We also get a concise, devastating characterization of Laban—"And when he saw the nose-ring and the bracelets on his sister's arms, . . . he said, 'Come in, O blessed of the LORD'" (Gen. 24:30–31)—because his canny, grasping nature will be important when a generation later Jacob comes back to Aram-Naharaim to find *his* bride at a nearby rural well.

All these features are merely elaborations of or accretions to the conventional constellation of motifs. The role played here, on the other hand, by bridegroom and bride is a pointed divergence from the convention. Isaac is conspicuous by his absence from the scene: this is in fact the only instance where a surrogate rather than the man himself meets the girl at the well. That substitution nicely accords with the entire career of Isaac, for he is manifestly the most passive of the patriarchs. We have already seen him as a bound victim for whose life a ram is substituted; later, as a father, he will prefer the son who can go out to the field and bring him back game, and his one extended scene will be lying in bed, weak and blind, while others act on him.

As a complement to this absence of the bridegroom, it is only in this betrothal scene that the girl, not the stranger, draws water from the well. Indeed, the narrator goes out of his way to give weight to this act by presenting Rebekah as a continuous whirl of purposeful activity. In four short verses (Gen. 24:16, 18–20) she is the subject of eleven verbs of action and one of speech, going down to the well, drawing water, filling the pitcher, pouring, giving drink. One might note that the two verbs of rushing and hurrying (*rutz* and *maher*) generally reserved for the bringing of the news of the stranger's arrival are here also repeatedly attached to Rebekah's actions at the well, and the effect of rapid bustling activity is reinforced by the verbatim recapitulation of this moment with its verbs (verses 45–46) in the servant's report to Laban. Later, Rebekah will take the initiative at a crucial moment in the story in order to obtain the paternal blessing for her favored son, Jacob, and again she will be the subject of a rapid chain of verbs, hurriedly taking and cooking and dressing and giving before Esau can return from the field. Rebekah is to become the shrewdest and the most potent of the matriarchs, and so it is entirely appropriate that she should dominate her betrothal scene. She is immediately identified (verse 16) with unconventional explicitness as the suitable bride for both her beauty and her unimpeachable virginity. Then in her actions and speech we see her energy, her considerate courtesy, her sense of quiet self-possession. Exceptionally and

aply, the future matriarch's departure at the end of the type-scene is marked by the ceremonial flourish of a formal verse inset, the blessing conferred on her by the members of her family: "Our sister, become hence / myriads teeming. // May your seed take hold of / the gates of its foes" (Gen. 24:60).

How differently the same conventional motifs can be deployed is made clear in the next instance of the betrothal type-scene, Jacob's encounter at the well with Rachel (Gen. 29:1–20). Here the stranger comes not as an official emissary but as a refugee from his brother's wrath, accompanied not by camels and gifts but only, as he will later recall, by his walking-staff. At once, we are taken into the scene literally through Jacob's eyes (verse 2): "And he saw, and, look [*vehinne*], there was a well in the field, and, look, three flocks of sheep were lying beside it."⁵ This particular betrothal is very much Jacob's personal story, one that will involve a deep emotional attachment rather than a family treaty ("And Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed in his eyes but a few days in his love for her" [Gen. 29:20]), and so it is fitting that we come to the well through his point of view. The scene takes place by a well in the fields, not by a well in town as in Genesis 24, for the whole story of Jacob, his two wives, his two concubines, and his scheming father-in-law will unfold against a background of pastoral activity, with close attention to the economics and ethics of sheep and cattle herding.

Jacob questions the shepherds at the well about the name of the place and then about his uncle Laban. In stark contrast to the stately movement of the dialogue in Genesis 24, with its formal modes of address and its ample synonymity, the dialogue here is a rapid exchange of brief questions and answers that seems almost colloquial by comparison; this again is an appropriate prelude to Jacob's quick-paced story of vigorously pursued actions, deceptions, and confrontations. The formula previously used to indicate an immediate concatenation of events in the entrance of the future bride—"The servant] *had barely finished speaking* [to God] *when*, look, Rebekah was coming out" (Gen. 24:15)—occurs here to interrupt the dialogue

between Jacob and the shepherds: "*He was still speaking with them when Rachel arrived*" (Gen. 29:9).

In this case, not only does the future bridegroom take care of the drawing of water, but he has an obstacle to overcome—the stone on the mouth of the well. This minor variation of the convention contributes to the consistent characterization of Jacob, for we already know him, as his name at birth (*Ya'akov*) has been etymologized, as the "heel-grabber" or wrestler, and we shall continue to see him as the contender, the man who seizes his fate, tackles his adversaries, with his own two hands. If the well of the betrothal scene is in general associated with woman and fertility, it is particularly appropriate that this one should be blocked by an obstacle, for Jacob will obtain the woman he wants only through great labor, against resistance, and even then God will, in the relevant biblical idiom, "shut up her womb" for years until she finally bears Joseph. There is even some point in the fact that the obstacle is a stone, for, as J. P. Fokkelman has noted, stones are a motif that accompanies Jacob in his arduous career: he puts a stone by his head when he sleeps at Beth-El; after the epiphany there he sets up a commemorative marker of stones; and when he returns from Mesopotamia, he concludes a mutual nonaggression pact with his father-in-law by setting up on the border between them a testimonial heap of stones. These are not really symbols, but there is something incipiently metaphorical about them: Jacob is a man who sleeps on stones, speaks in stones, wrestles with stones, contending with the hard unyielding nature of things, whereas, in pointed contrast, his favored son will make his way in the world as a dealer in the truths intimated through the filmy insubstantiality of dreams.

In this particular encounter at the well, no direct speech between the stranger and the girl is reported, only a terse summary of the exchange between them. Rachel had been named by the shepherds and identified as Laban's daughter even before she actually reached the well, and for that reason she is not called *na'arah* but by her name, Rachel, throughout. Jacob weeps and embraces her as his kinswoman, revealing his familial tie to her, and she, following the requirements of the

type-scene, then runs (the verb *"rutz"*) to tell her father. Laban responds by running back to greet the guest and embrace him, but our memory of Laban's glittering eye on the golden bangles may make us wonder how disinterested this surge of hospitality will prove to be. If his first statement to Jacob (verse 14) is an affirmation of kinship, the next recorded statement (verse 15) is an overture to a bargaining session and reveals incidentally that he has already been extracting unpaid labor from his kinsman-guest for a month.

It is only at this point that we get a piece of information about Rachel that in the case of Rebekah was announced as soon as the girl arrived at the well: that the maiden was very beautiful. This small difference in the strategy of exposition between the two versions nicely illustrates how substantially the same materials can be redeployed in order to make different points. Rebekah's beauty is part of her objective identity in a scene that she dominates, an item in her pedigreed nubility along with her virginity, and so it is appropriately announced the moment she enters the scene. Rachel's beauty, on the other hand, is presented as a causal element in Jacob's special attachment to her, and that, in turn, is fearfully entangled in the relationship of the two sisters with each other and in their competition for Jacob. The crucial fact of Rachel's beauty, then, is withheld from us until both Rachel and Leah can be formally introduced (verses 16–17) as a prelude to the agreement on a bride-price, and so it can be ambiguously interwoven with the prerogatives of the elder versus the younger sister and contrastively bracketed with Leah's "tender eyes" (presumably all she had to recommend her looks, or perhaps actually to be construed as a disfigurement, "weak eyes"). One can clearly see that the betrothal type-scene, far from being a mechanical means of narrative prefabrication for conveying the reader from a celibate hero to a married one, is handled with a flexibility that makes it a supple instrument of characterization and foreshadowing.

The next explicit occurrence of this particular type-scene (Exodus 2:150–21) is the most compact version, but the strength of the convention is attested to by the fact that in six and a half swift verses all

the requisite elements appear. Moses, the native of Egypt, has fled to a foreign land, Midian, where he encounters the seven daughters of the Midianite priest Reuel, who have come out to draw water from a well. In this case, the stranger is obliged to drive off a gang of hostile shepherds before drawing water and giving drink to the flocks, as the convention requires. The girls hurry off to tell their father, a fact that in this accelerated version of the type-scene is not independently stated by the narrator but touched on by Reuel in the first words of the vivid dialogue between him and his daughters: "Why have you hurried [*mi-harten*] back today?" (verse 18). With similar economy, the welcoming feast is not directly reported but intimated in Reuel's concluding words in the dialogue: "Why did you leave the man? Call him that we may eat bread" (verse 20). The two immediately following clauses tersely inform us that Moses took up residence with Reuel and was given one of the daughters, Zipporah, as a wife.

These few verses may seem so spare a treatment of the convention as to be almost nondescript, but in fact this is just the kind of betrothal type-scene needed for Moses. To begin with, any presentation that would give more weight to Zipporah than merely one nubile daughter out of seven would throw the episode off balance, for her independent character and her relationship with Moses will play no significant role in the subsequent narrative. (The single enigmatic episode of the Bridegroom of Blood is scarcely an exception.) If this version reads like a succinct summary of the convention, that is fitting, for it holds Moses the man and his personal involvement at a distance, under the perspective of a certain stylization, and throughout his story we shall be excluded from the kind of intimacy of domestic observation we get in the narratives of the patriarchs or in the stories about David. That effect of stylization is surely reinforced by introducing the formulaic number of seven for the young women, a detail that helps give this narrative by a sophisticated writer a deliberate, archaizing quality of folktale. At the same time, the manner of drawing water here is distinctively appropriate for Moses. He is faced not just with an obstacle but with enemies whom

he has to drive off, not surprising for the killer of the Egyptian taskmaster, the future liberator of his people and its military commander in forty years of desert warfare. The narrator uses the verb "*hoshia*," "to save," for Moses's rescue of the seven girls, a lexical clue to his future role of *moshia*, national redeemer. The water drawn from the well in any case has special resonance in Moses's career, and Reuel's daughters seem to stress the physical act of drawing up water. Here is their entire narration of the incident to their father (verse 19): "An Egyptian man rescued us from the shepherds, and what's more, he even drew water for us [*daloh dalah*, the intensifying repetition of the infinitive alongside the perfect verb] and watered the flock." Moses the infant was saved on the water, given a name said to mean "drawn from the water"; Moses the leader will miraculously take his people through an expanse of water that will then close over their enemies; and in the wilderness he will bring forth water from a rock, but in an outburst of impatience for which he will be condemned. Moses's betrothal type-scene may not tell us a great deal, but it tells us just what we need to know for this protagonist at this point in the narrative.

What I am suggesting is that the contemporary audiences of these tales, being perfectly familiar with the convention, took particular pleasure in seeing how in each instance the convention could be, through the narrator's art, both faithfully followed and renewed for the specific needs of the hero under consideration. In some cases, moreover, the biblical authors, counting on their audience's familiarity with the features and function of the type-scene, could merely allude to the type-scene or present a transfigured version of it. Allusion and transfiguration are not necessarily limited to the later books of the Bible, and other type-scenes, as for example that of the annunciation to the barren wife, appear several times in integral form in post-Pentateuchal stories. But in the instance of the betrothal type-scene that we are considering, it happens that the three full-dress occurrences are all in the Pentateuch, while later narratives—I would be inclined to assume, later in regard to date of composition as well as in historical

setting—transform or simply allude to the primary scene. Let me offer two brief examples.

The one biblical narrative that is in a sense entirely devoted to the circumstances leading to a betrothal is the Book of Ruth. Where the whole story is a betrothal narrative, one segment could not very easily be a betrothal type-scene, but the author of Ruth, who is one of the most brilliant masters of formal technique among biblical writers, finds an ingenious way to allude to the type-scene. Ruth's first encounter with her future husband, Boaz, is in the field where she has gone to glean the leavings of the harvest (Ruth 2). Boaz asks one of his retainers, "Whose girl [*na'arah*] is that?" and is told that she is Ruth the Moabite, just returned from Moab with Naomi. Boaz then addresses Ruth directly (verses 8–9): "Listen, my daughter. Do not go to glean in another field, and don't go away, but stick here with my maidens [*na'arotai*]. Keep your eyes on the field they are reaping and go after them, for I have charged the lads [*ne'arim*] not to touch you. When you are thirsty, go to the jars and drink from what the lads draw." In this elliptical version, the author has rotated the betrothal type-scene 180 degrees on the axes of gender and geography. The protagonist is a heroine, not a hero, and her homeland is Moab, so the "foreign soil" on which she meets her future mate near a well is Judea. (Much of the thematic argument of the story as a whole is carried by the complex ambiguities in the repeated use of the verb "to return." Here Ruth is said to have "returned" to Bethlehem, an alien place to her, when it is only her mother-in-law who has really returned. But we get a progressive sense that she is actually coming back to the unknown homeland of her new destiny.) Boaz at first erroneously identifies Ruth as a *na'arah*—she is, in fact, a young-looking widow. He enjoins her to follow his *ne'arot*, who in the traditional type-scene would come out to draw water. Here, since it is a female protagonist who has come to the foreign land to find a spouse, the male counterparts of the maidens, the *ne'arim*, take over the customary function of water-drawing. The presence of the convention may have even led the audience to wonder temporarily whether Ruth would choose a mate from among the *ne'arim*.

In the ensuing dialogue between Ruth and Boaz, the reversal of conventional literary gender is reinforced by a pointed allusion (verse 11) to Abraham, when Boaz says, "You have left your father and mother and the land of your birth and gone to a people you never knew" (cf. Genesis 12:1—"Go forth from your land and your birth-place and your father's house . . ."). Ruth is conceived by the author as a kind of matriarch by adoption. This particular allusion links her with the movement from the east to Canaan at the beginning of the patriarchal enterprise, while the whole invocation of the betrothal type-scene suggests a certain connection with the matriarchs. In the case of Rebekah and Rachel, considerable importance is attached to ascertaining the genealogy of the maiden at the well. Here, in the exchange with Ruth, Boaz essentially establishes that Ruth's courage and her loyalty to her mother-in-law will amply serve in place of a genealogy. At the end of the dialogue, he invites her (verse 14) to a simple rural repast of roasted grain and bread dipped in vinegar—the hospitable feast that, according to the convention, follows the drawing of water and the conversation between the future spouses at the well. In this version, there is no running to bring the news—and, indeed, the lexicon of the Book of Ruth moves from recurrent verbs of going and returning to a cluster of words that suggest clinging or being at rest—because Ruth is not a young girl dependent on the decisions of her paternal household and also because the actual conclusion of the betrothal must be postponed to the last chapter of the story, where it is preceded by the legal ceremony of the refusal of the levirate obligation by a nearer kinsman of Naomi. In any case, the ancient audience must have admired the inventiveness and allusive economy with which the betrothal type-scene was brought into Ruth's story and must have taken a certain pleasure in recognizing the thematic clues it provided.

In all this, of course, we must keep in mind that what we are witnessing is not merely the technical manipulation of a literary convention for the sheer pleasure of play with the convention, though, as I argued at the end of the previous chapter, significant playful activity on the part of the Hebrew writers should by no means be discounted,

even in these sacred texts. The type-scene is not merely a way of formally recognizing a particular kind of narrative moment; it is also a means of attaching that moment to a larger pattern of historical and theological meaning. If Isaac and Rebekah, as the first man and wife born into the covenant God has made with Abraham and his seed, provide certain paradigmatic traits for the future historical destiny of Israel, any association of later figures with the crucial junctures of that first story—the betrothal, the life-threatening trial in the wilderness, the enunciation of the blessing—will imply some connection of meaning, some further working-out of the original covenant. In the foregoing discussion, I have been stressing the elements of divergence in the various invocations of the convention in order to show how supple an instrument of expression it can be. The fact of recurrence, however, is as important as the presence of innovation in the use of the type-scene; and the convention itself, the origins of which may well antecede biblical monotheism, has been made to serve an eminently monotheistic purpose: to reproduce in narrative the recurrent rhythm of a divinely appointed destiny in Israelite history. In this fashion, the alignment of Ruth's story with the Pentateuchal betrothal type-scene becomes an intimation of her portentous future as progenitrix of the divinely chosen house of David.

A much simpler example of allusion to the betrothal type-scene occurs at the beginning of Saul's career (1 Sam. 9:11–12). Having set out with his servant in search of his lost asses, he decides to consult the local seer, who turns out to be Samuel, the man who will anoint him king. "They were just coming up the ascent to the town when they met some young women [*ne'arot*] going out to draw water, and they said to them, 'Is there a seer hereabouts?'" What we have in this verse, I would suggest, is the makings of a betrothal scene: a hero at the outset of his career in a foreign region (Saul has wandered out of his own tribal territory) meeting girls who have come to draw water from a well. As an audience familiar with the convention, we might properly expect that he will draw water for the girls, that they will then run home with the news of the stranger's arrival, and so forth. Instead, this

is what ensues: "They answered and said to them, 'There is. Look, he is straight ahead of you. Hurry [*maher*] now, for today he has come to town, for the people have a sacrifice today on the high place.'"

The type-scene has been aborted. The hero swings away from the girls at the well to hurry after the man of God who will launch him on his destiny of disaster. This is probably a deliberate strategy of foreshadowing. The sense of completion implicit in the betrothal of the hero is withheld from this protagonist; the deflection of the anticipated type-scene somehow isolates Saul, sounds a faintly ominous note that begins to prepare us for the story of the king who loses his kingship, who will not be a conduit for the future rulers of Israel, and who ends skewered on his own sword. If this interpretation seems to exert too much pressure on half a dozen words of the Hebrew text, one must keep in mind the rigorous economy of biblical narrative. For the particular detail of an encounter on unfamiliar territory with maidens by a well would otherwise be gratuitous. Saul could have easily been made to proceed directly to find Samuel, or, as happens in other biblical narratives, he could have simply met an anonymous "man" and asked directions of him. The fact that instead the author chose to have him meet girls by a well on foreign ground and to stress the verb "to hurry" as they begin their response to the stranger is in all likelihood a clue of meaning.

Finally, the total suppression of a type-scene may be a deliberate ploy of characterization and thematic argument. The case of David, who has rather complicated relations with at least three of his wives, may be an ambiguous one, for perhaps the author, working closely with observed historical data about David, did not feel free to impose the stylization of a betrothal type-scene when he knew the circumstances of David's marriages to have been otherwise. Be that as it may, we might note that the three discriminated premarital episodes in the David cycle all involve bloodshed, in an ascending order of moral questionability: the two hundred Philistines he slaughters in battle as the bride-price for Michal; his threat to kill Nabal, Abigail's husband, who then conveniently dies of shock; and his murder of the innocent Uriah

after having committed adultery with Bathsheba. Are these betrothals by violence a deliberate counterpoint to the pastoral motif of betrothal after the drawing of water? Perhaps, though from this distance in time it is hard to be sure.

More confidently, one can see the likely point of the omitted betrothal scene in the Samson story (Judges 14). At the beginning of his adventures, Samson goes down to Philistine Timnah, and so we have a young hero on foreign soil, but there is no well, no ritual of hospitality. Instead he sees a woman he wants, promptly returns home, and brusquely announces to his parents that he expects them to arrange the marriage for him. Grudgingly, they accompany him back to Timnah for the betrothal negotiations, and on the way he encounters a lion that he tears limb from limb. The awesome destruction of the lion, and the subsequent scooping out of honey from the lion's bleached carcass, may even be a pointed substitution for the more decorous and pacific drawing of water from the well. In any event, the impetuous rush of Samson's career is already communicated in his impatient movement from seeing a woman to taking her without the ceremonious mediation of a betrothal type-scene, and we all know what calamities the marriage itself will engender.

The process of literary creation, as criticism has clearly recognized from the Russian Formalists onward, is an unceasing dialectic between the necessity to use established forms in order to be able to communicate coherently and the necessity to break and remake those forms because they are arbitrary restrictions and because what is merely repeated automatically no longer conveys a message. "The greater the probability of a symbol's occurrence in any given situation," E. H. Gombrich observes in *Art and Illusion*, "the smaller will be its information content. Where we can anticipate we need not listen."⁶ Reading any body of literature involves a specialized mode of perception in which every culture trains its members from childhood. As modern readers of the Bible, we need to relearn something of this mode of perception that was second nature to the original audiences. Instead of relegating every perceived recurrence in the text to the limbo of du-

plicated sources or fixed folkloric archetypes, we may begin to see that the resurgence of certain pronounced patterns at certain narrative junctures was conventionally anticipated, even counted on, and that against that ground of anticipation the biblical authors set words, motifs, themes, personages, and actions into an elaborate dance of significant innovation. For much of art lies in the shifting aperture between the shadowy foreimage in the anticipating mind of the observer and the realized revelatory image in the work itself, and that is what we must learn to perceive more finely in the Bible.

Let me cast a last glance across the terrain of related scenes we have covered to the methodological quandary that was our point of departure. Though I would hope to have persuaded most readers that there is artful purpose in the modifications of these shared motifs from one occurrence to the next, there may be some lingering doubt about the general inferences I have drawn concerning a formal code of biblical literature. Five or six instances, as I noted earlier, may seem a slender foundation on which to build a hypothesis of a literary convention. Not only would I concede the difficulty—I have presented type-scene as an important instance of how a literary understanding of the Bible works precisely because it poses the intrinsic difficulties and may show how by careful analysis they might be overcome. Had I taken my examples from some feature of the formal art of biblical narrative tied in to minute stylistic phenomena (as I shall in some of the chapters that follow), it would have been easier to establish a clear-cut case because a different magnitude of evidence could be cited. Thus, the formal technique Buber and Rosenzweig first identified as *Leitwortstil*—the use of reiterated key words or key roots to advance and refine the thematic argument—can be resoundingly demonstrated as a conscious technique because it is so pervasive, and hundreds of elaborate instances could be cited. Or again, the use of contrastive speech patterns to differentiate the two speakers in a dialogue, as we shall see in the next chapter, can be shown analytically in dozens of instances, and so seems safe from the charge of being a product of modern interpretive ingenuity.

The available evidence, however, does not always make literary identifications so easy, and that is why I find the case of type-scene especially instructive. For, even granted the limited number of instances on which to base a generalization, the crucial question we must ask ourselves is: what are the alternative modes of explanation? To account for such a degree of repetition of narrative materials, there are, as far as I can see, only three possible hypotheses: it is a convention; or, it reflects a problem in the transmission of a single source, where an original story, either oral or written, is scrambled in the course of time and attributed to different personages; or, it is the consequence of allusion, one story (say, Sarah's annunciation) being the model that is pointedly cited or referred to by all the others, as Pope's *Dunciad* cites the Aeneid and *Paradise Lost*.

The notion of a recurrent stammer of transmission, which has been favored by many biblical scholars, will not stand up under analysis for the simple reason that the variations in the handling of the repeated narrative motifs are never random, as would be the case of a tale first told about X and later inadvertently attributed to Y and Z. On the contrary, these variations, as we have seen, are finely tuned to the special thematic and structural requirements of each particular narrative and protagonist, and thus they suggest an accepted common framework of narrative situation that the writer could then modify for the fictional purposes at hand. The hypothesis of allusion, on the other hand, is plainly not persuasive in enough cases. When one biblical story alludes to an earlier one, as often happens, clear textual signals are given in the citation of key words or phrases, sometimes even whole statements, from the antecedent story (the line-by-line citation of the Sodom story in the grisly tale of the concubine at Gibeah, Judges 19, is the most extreme instance of this procedure). It is theoretically possible for one type-scene to allude to another specific occurrence of the same scene. But in most instances of the type-scene, there is little evidence of such pointed citation, and so the hypothesis of allusion as a general explanation seems strained. Indeed, I would suggest that no single instance of a type-scene, including the first in chronological

order, is conceived to be the primary one. Instead, all would seem to draw on some shared—probably initially preliterate—Hebrew understanding about how conception and birth, betrothal, trial, and so forth, are to be narrated. Some of these patterns, of course, may have been ultimately adopted from surrounding ancient Near Eastern literatures, but even if that proved to be the case, it hardly matters because what concerns us is not the etiology of the convention but its fulfilled presence in the texts we read. The most plausible hypothesis, then, is that these intriguing instances of recurrent sequences of narrative motif reflect a literary convention that, like other narrative conventions, enabled the teller of the tale to orient his listeners, to give them intricate clues as to where the tale was going, how it differed delightfully or ingeniously or profoundly from other similar tales.

The argument has in a sense brought us 180 degrees around from the objections to the literary perspective with which we began. The apprehension about seeing the Bible in literary terms is that by so doing we unreasonably modernize it, wrench it out of its original context and purposes. This is a slippery slope down which any modern literary analyst could easily slide. But there is an even more coercive modernizing perspective in the largely unself-critical historical and textual approaches that insist that the ancient materials conform to the logical assumptions of sequence and organization of a later age, somehow supposed to be timeless and universal. These complex workings of a seemingly simple convention that we have followed—a literary convention never really identified by scholarship as such—should, in fact, inspire a degree of intellectual humility in us moderns toward these ancient Hebrew texts. Biblical narrative, for all its laconic nature, evinces an extraordinary degree of artistic sophistication, in many cases playing with the permutations of a literary code largely unfamiliar to us, and it is well worth the trouble to try to recover whatever we can of that code. For anyone interested in the dynamics of literary texts, I would suggest that these biblical instances can prove remarkably instructive because the Hebrew writers fashioned the most compact vehicle, marked by a rich complexity that clothed itself in simplicity. In

scrutinizing this vehicle, one is able to see—perhaps more readily than in more texturally elaborated narratives—the workings of narrative convention as such. One can grasp with greater clarity what it is that convention and its modifications can do to define narrative situation, character, theme, and moral vision. As for the reading of the Bible itself, we may come not only to appreciate these ancient narratives better but, more important, to understand what they intend to say.