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THE BIBLE AS A CLASSIC AND THE BIBLE AS HOLY SCRIPTURE*

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Thirty years ago there was hardly any attention to an alternative like the Bible as a classic and the Bible as Holy Scripture. Then the proper discussion was about the Bible as history and the Bible as Holy Scripture. And the battle was about *geschichtlich und historisch*, historic and historical, about historicity and myth, the historical Jesus and the kerygmatic Christ, history of salvation and just plain history.

Now there has been a shift from history to story: the Bible as story, theology as story.¹ For both philosophical and literary reasons the focus on language and on forms of literary criticism demand the center stage. The odd idea of a "language event" strikes me as a hybrid in the transition from the one perspective to the other.

It is tempting to speculate about deeper cultural forces at work in this shift. Could it be that preoccupation with history comes natural when one is part of a culture which feels happy and hopeful about the historical process? Hegel's pan-historic philosophy belongs, after all, to the ascendancy of western imperialism—it was even said that other parts of the world were lifted "into history" when conquered, colonized, or converted by the West. Now the western world is not so sure or so optimistic about where history—that is, "our" history—is going. So the glamour, the glory, the Shekinah has moved away from history.

*The Presidential Address delivered 18 December 1983 at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature held at the Loews Anatole Hotel, Dallas, TX.

¹ This shift has many facets. There is the literary dimension as found in Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York/London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982). There is the movement represented by the Society of Biblical Literature journal *Semeia* (1974–), edited by J. Dominic Crossan and foreshadowed by the pioneering work of Amos N. Wilder (see *Semeia* 12–13, 1978). The depth of the philosophical and theological shifts are perhaps best expressed in David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981). Tracy significantly uses as one of his main categories "The Classic." For a theological critique see the review by Peter Manchester, *Cross Currents* 31 (1981/82) 480–84. See also Patrick A. Kiefert, "Mind Reader and Maestro: Models for Understanding Biblical Interpreters," *Word and World* 1 (1980/81) 153–68; and in the same issue (entitled "The Bible as Scripture") Karlfried Froehlich, "Biblical Hermeneutics on the Move," 140–52.

There is a striking analogy to such a move from history to story and wisdom. I think of the major move of rabbinic Judaism after the fall of Jerusalem and the Bar Kokhba catastrophe. Rabbinic Judaism—a child of the very tradition which is often credited with having given “the idea of history” to the world—cut loose from the frantic attempts at finding meaning in and through history. At Jamnia and through the Mishnah the center of religious existence was placed in Halakah, i.e., in the lifestyle and wisdom of Torah. To be sure, the historical consciousness remained strong in Judaism, but not any more as the center of attention. It becomes exactly “story,” Haggadah, with far less binding authority. To be sure, the Mishnah and the Talmud are not the sum total of Judaism. There are the prayers and the memories, but the center, the equivalent to what Christians came to call theology, is in Torah as Halakah. Those Jewish writings that struggled with meaning in and through history, writings like 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch, have survived through Christian transmission.² They were not part of the living tradition of Judaism. It was the Christians, new on the block, who inherited and renewed the historical mode. To them history was not mute, for now “in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb 1:2). With continuity and with fulfillment, history worked well—or what turned out to be a very long time—a time which now may come to an end in western theology.

Whatever the value and truth of such rather wild speculations, the shift in contemporary biblical and theological work from history to story is obvious and well substantiated by a perusal of the program for the annual meeting of our Society of Biblical Literature and of our sister, the American Academy of Religion.

Thus it has become natural to think in the pattern of the Bible as a classic and the Bible as Holy Scripture. The shift is appealing for a very simple additional reason. It expresses so much better the way in which the Bible actually exists within our western culture, and sometimes even beyond its confines: as a classic with often undefined distinctions on a sliding scale of holiness and respect.

By “classic” I mean any work that is considered worth attention beyond its time, and sometimes also beyond its space—although I doubt there is any truly global classic—across all cultures. It would be western myopia to claim such recognition for Homer or for Shakespeare, or even for the Bible. For it is its recognition that makes a classic a classic, not its inner qualities. Hence I try to avoid the more romantic terminology in which modern studies abound, such as “excess of meaning” or “the

² See now Jacob Neusner, *Ancient Israel After Catastrophe: The Religious World View of the Mishnah* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1983). Note also Neusner’s observation about the revelatory style of 4 Ezra and Baruch in contrast to the Mishnah (p. 26).

power of disclosure.” Such terminology tends to obscure the societal dimension of a classic. It is common recognition by a wide constituency of a society that makes a certain work into a classic. No inner quality suffices unless widely so recognized.

Thus I limit myself to western culture and its classics. There is the Bible, Dante, Milton, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, and Shaw’s *Pygmalion*—becoming even more of a classic by dropping the Greek name for the English title, “*My Fair Lady*.” And there are the classics of philosophy and science: Plato, Aristotle, Kant’s *Critiques*, and Darwin’s *Species*. There are classics of law and classics of medicine. There is even Kierkegaard, who wrote a novel with the title *Fear and Trembling*—he did call it a novel.

Furthermore, as the West broadens its perspective there are ways in which the Quran and the Gita become classics in our eyes. We read the holy texts of other communities as classics, mostly without consciousness of their being “only” classics. Readers find that such classics speak to them, often in undefined ways.

So there are many types of classics, and they come in many shapes and forms, in various styles and genres. And awareness of the genre is part of their being a classic for the reader. To speak of the Bible as a classic is therefore not the same as speaking of it as a literary classic. The issue is rather how to assess what kind of a classic we are dealing with. Scholars are of course free to pronounce it—or its various parts—a literary classic, or a classic of language, or a classic of history, or a classic of philosophy, or whatever. But as a living classic in western culture the perceptions of common discourse on a more democratic basis are decisive. And it is my contention that such perceptions include an irreducible awareness of the Bible as Holy Writ in church and/or synagogue.

What then about Holy Scripture? That designation is not innocent of culture and theology. It is our language. After all, Quran means “recitation,” not “scripture,” and the Hebrew Bible knows not only the *kētîb* but also the *qērê*—Jesus presumably never used the *kētîb* Yahweh.

It is as Holy Scripture, Holy Writ, that the Bible has become a classic in the West. Personally, I prefer the plural form, Holy Scriptures. I do so not primarily in recognition of the fascinating and often elusive ways in which the Hebrew Bible is common to Jews and Christians—the same text word for word, and yet so different when it becomes the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. I speak rather of “Holy Scriptures,” plural, in order to highlight the diversity of style and genre within the scriptures. In various ways such diversity becomes important for those to whom the scriptures function as the bearer of revelation.³ When the

³ See Paul Ricoeur’s Dupleian Lecture at Harvard Divinity School, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” *HTR* 70 (1977) 1–37. Here Ricoeur differentiates

Bible functions as a classic in culture, such distinctions play no significant role, but for theological and philosophical reflection it is crucial. In the scriptures we have the oracles, the laws, the prophets, the dreams, the interpreters of dreams, the wisdom, the history, the stories, the psalms, the letters, and so on. To be sure, it is a whole library. Bible means, after all, "the little books."

Nevertheless, what makes the Bible the Bible is the canon. Here is where the Bible as a classic and as Holy Scripture meet: the canonical books, bound together by those complex historical acts of recognition in the communities of faith which we can trace as the history of canonization. For it is as Bible that the biblical material has become a classic of the western world, and whatever part of the Bible is in focus—be it Job or Leviticus, the Christmas story or the Sermon on the Mount—it functions as a classic by being part of the Bible. It is perceived and received as a classic by being part of the Bible.

The Bible as a classic exists in western culture with an often undefined but never absent recognition of its being the Holy Scriptures of the church and/or the synagogue. I have my doubts that it—or substantial parts of it, at least—would have ever become a classic were it not for its status as Holy Scripture. Perhaps not even Job, the literary favorite; certainly not Leviticus, except as a legal classic. And Arthur Darby Nock used to say that the Gospel of John did not become beautiful as literature until 1611, when the King James Version gave it a beauty far beyond what the Greeks perceived.⁴

It is as Holy Scripture that the Bible is a classic in our culture. Therefore there is something artificial in the idea of "the Bible as literature." Or rather, it can be artificial and contrary to the perception of both most believers and most unbelievers, as artificial as "the Bible as history" or "the Bible as a textbook in geology or biology" or—the Bible as anything but Bible.

Most readers know, in often undefined ways, that the Bible is Holy Scripture, and it is a classic exactly as that special kind of classic. I wonder if some of our attempts at literary analysis—be it structuralism or not so new "new criticism"—are not, when all is said and done, a form of apologetics, sophisticated to a degree which obfuscates the apologetic intention even to its practitioners.

I do not consider apologetics to be a sin, provided that the apologetic intention is conscious and not obscured by having it masquerade as

Prophetic Discourse, Narrative Discourse, Prescriptive Discourse, Wisdom Discourse. The first constitutes to him the "basic axis of inquiry" concerning revelation. Indeed, this is the discourse which declares itself to be "pronounced in the name of [God]," p. 3. Cf. the Book of Revelation—the only NT book which claims such authority.

⁴ For a penetrating understanding of the glories of the King James Version see J. L. Lowes, "The Noblest Monument of English Prose," *Essays in Appreciation* (1936), 3–31.

something else or offered as an alternative to a traditional apologetic of theological and doctrinal special pleadings. About such apologetics Northrop Frye says: "Such systems of faith, however impressive and useful still, can hardly be definitive for us now, because they are so heavily conditioned by the phases of language ascendant in their time, whether metonymic or descriptive." Then he continues:

A reconsideration of the Bible can take place only along with, and as part of, a reconsideration of language, and of all structures, including the literary ones, that language produces. One would hope that in this context the aim of such a reconsideration would be a more tentative one, directed not to a terminus of belief but to the open community of vision, and to the charity that is the informing principle of a still greater community than faith (*The Great Code*, p. 227).

It seems rather obvious to me that Frye's program of reconsideration in all its humble tentativeness is an apologetic attempt with its own theology, appealing to charity over against the outdated "systems of faith," and addressing "a still greater community than faith." In short, here is an attempt at cutting loose from the moorings of Holy Writ. It is an attempt at allowing the text to speak as literature freed from the very claims which made the Bible a classic in the first place.

That can be done, and with great effect, not least in the hands of masters of exposition like the Auerbachs and the Fries of literary criticism. In Frye's case the very fact that the Bible is already in itself a continuum of interpretation and reinterpretation, then becomes a glorified manifestation of a "capacity of self-re-creation," and that "to an extent to which I can think of no parallel elsewhere" (p. 225).

Such an approach yields significant insights and opens the senses that have been numbed by overly familiar ways of reading, greedily hunting proof texts for cherished doctrines. Titles like *Mimesis* and *The Great Code* help our mental liberation.

Or to shift to Ricoeur's proposal of a "non-heteronomous dependence of conscious reflection on external testimonies," a literary approach allows new space for the imagination. He suggests that we "too often and too quickly think of a will that submits and not enough of an imagination that opens itself . . . For what are the poem of the Exodus and the poem of the resurrection addressed to if not our imagination rather than our obedience?" Thus there is the non-heteronomous possibility of encountering revelation "no longer as an unacceptable pretension, but a nonviolent appeal."⁵

Frye and Ricoeur both address the imagination, but while Frye looks away apologetically from the revelatory dimension of Scripture, Ricoeur

⁵ *HTR* 70 (1977) 37.

defines a way in which revelation can be revelation in a “nonviolent” manner. But Ricoeur is driven toward a dichotomy between imagination and will or obedience. Yet in speaking of an appeal, be it nonviolent, it seems that the issue for him is not will versus imagination, but rather *how* the scriptures affect the readers, in their full persons, imagination as well as will and action.

This attention to revelation, will, obedience, and action is important for our discussion, and it would seem that any culture-apologetics that circumvents those dimensions of scripture misjudge the ways in which the Bible is actually perceived as a classic by the common reader in western culture. For such readers do recognize the Bible as a classic just in its belonging to the genre of Holy Scripture. Thereby there is a recognition of the normative nature of the Bible. That is an irreducible component in the kind of classic that the Bible is. In this it is different from Shakespeare or from the way one now reads Homer.⁶

How one relates to that normativeness is a very different question. The spectrum here is wide indeed, both within and outside the communities of faith, all the way from rejection of that claim to the most minute literal obedience. But that does not change the fact that the normative claim is recognized as intrinsic to the Bible.

It may be worth noting that the more recent preoccupation with “story” tends to obscure exactly the normative dimension. Following upon the history-kerygma preoccupation—via the “language event”—we come to story. It should be remembered, however, that even much of biblical story was preserved and shaped by the halakic needs of the communities of faith, rather than by the kerygmatic urge of communication. What was told or remembered was shaped by the need for guidance in the life of the communities; hence the normative nature of the texts as they are given to us.

It is this element of the normative which makes the Bible into a peculiar kind of classic. This is of course true in an intensive sense within the Christian community (and what a sliding scale of intensity there is). But I find it important to remember that the normative character is present also in the minds of most people who read the Bible “only as a classic.”

When biblical scholarship has become greatly enriched by learning methods of literary criticism, it seems that this sense of the “normative expectation” has been lost or overlooked, for the literary models have

⁶ There was, of course, a time when Homer served as a “sacred” text which became the object for religious and philosophical interpretation. The Stoics are famous for this approach, and such commentaries on Homer came to serve as prototypes for both Jewish and Christian commentators on the Bible in the Hellenistic and Graeco-Roman world. See Rudolf Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship: From the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968) 237ff.

been non-normative genres. To ask poets (or artists) what they actually meant or intended with a piece of art is often an insult, and they are apt to answer: "It is for you to answer what it means to you." That is fair enough. The more meanings the merrier.

The normative nature of the Bible requires, however, a serious attention to original intentions of texts. The intention of the original sayings, or stories, or commandments can hardly be irrelevant, as they might well be in other genres of literature. Let me give only one example, the "lex talionis" (Exod 21:22-25; Lev 24:20): "... eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand . . .," words that must strike most contemporary readers as ferocious. Self-serving Christians even quote it as an example of that spirit of vengeance which is supposed to characterize Judaism as compared with Christianity, the religion of love and forgiveness.⁷ But attention to "what it meant," to the intention of the legislation, to descriptive historical exegesis, all make it abundantly clear that the point made was the quantum jump from "a *life* for a tooth." Thus it was a critique of vengeance, not a sanction for vengeance. Such examples could be multiplied seventy times seven—and more.

All of this leads me to the conclusion that it is exactly the Bible as a classic *and* as Holy Scripture which requires the services of the descriptive biblical scholars and their simple reminder "that from the beginning it was not so," as Jesus said. That is as true about the commandments as it is about the theological constructs or the human self-understandings of the Bible.

Actually, the more intensive the expectation of normative guidance and the more exacting the claims for the holiness of the Scriptures, the more obvious should be the need for full attention to what it meant in the time of its conception and what the intention of the authors might have been.⁸ But also where the Bible is enjoyed in a far more relaxed mood as a classic, people do like to find its support or sanction for their thoughts and actions. The low intensity of the normativeness often makes such use of Scripture less careful. Many even think they give honor to God and Christianity by such use of the Bible. Not least in such

⁷ On the Jewish interpretation of the *lex talionis*, see W. Gunther Plaut, et al., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981) 568, 571-75; and Jakob J. Petuchowski, *Wie unsere Meister die Schrift erklären* (Freiburg: Herder, 1982) 58-64.

⁸ Since I have placed so much emphasis on the Bible as canon, it is important to stress this point. Contemporary stress on the Bible in its canonical wholeness is often coupled with disregard for the intention of the various strata and theologies within the Bible. I would argue rather that exactly the normative quality of scripture necessitates the attention to original intentions; see my discussion with Brevard Childs in the introductory essay in my forthcoming book *Meanings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) and also the essay on "One Canon is Enough" in that volume.

situations, the call to historical honesty by access to what it meant is necessary and salutary, lest vague biblical authority become self-serving, trivializing or even harmful.

In conclusion: we are a Society of Biblical Literature. The word "biblical" includes both the Bible as a classic and the Bible as Holy Scripture, and I have tried to argue that in both respects the normative dimension is an irreducible part of biblical literature. Hence our responsibilities include the task of giving the readers of our time free and clear access to the original intentions which constitute the baseline of any interpretation. This task is both one of critique and of making available those options which got lost in the process. For true criticism is also the starting point for new possibilities, hidden by the glories and by the shame of a long history under the sway of the Bible.



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