

Some Personal Reflections on Literary Artistry in the Bible¹

I AM WRITING THIS ESSAY, with some nostalgia, from Jerusalem, from the Judaica Reading Room in the National Library (*hasifriyah hale'umit*) at Hebrew University. It was here over thirty-five years ago, in August 1978, that I discovered the topic of the Bible as literature, and it has confounded me ever since.

While reading through journals that late summer, I found a reference to J. P. Fokkelman's *Narrative Art in Genesis*, which had been published in 1975.² It had not yet arrived at the National Library, so I trekked to East Jerusalem, to the library of the École Biblique—one of the very best biblical studies libraries in the world—to read it there. It was a jaw-dropping experience. If memory serves me properly, the École in those days was open to non-Christian readers only from 9-12 each morning, and I spent several consecutive mornings reading the book, frustrated and sad when noon arrived. I was trained in the standard historical-critical diachronic methods of biblical study, and the book opened my eyes to using synchronic methods to read the Bible, turning it into a different kind of book for me—for a while.

Fokkelman was not the first study of the Bible as literature. Aside from the very outdated and problematic 1896 *The Literary Study of the Bible* by Richard Green Moulton,³ I had read the article of one of my teachers, Michael Fishbane, on the Jacob cycle in *The Journal of Jewish Studies* (1975),⁴ and the essays of Robert Alter in *Commentary*⁵—articles that would later appear, respectively, in *Text and Texture* (1979) and *The Art of Biblical*

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Narrative (1981).⁶ For a course in Psalms with Nahum Sarna, I had read sections of Meir Weiss's magisterial *Ha-Miqra' Kidmuto* (much later translated as *The Bible from Within: The Method of Total Interpretation*),⁷ and eventually I found my way to the 1968 Society of Biblical Literature presidential address of James Muilenberg, published in 1969 as "Form Criticism and Beyond."⁸ This address claims clearly and unapologetically that the Hebrew Bible "offer[s] us literature of a very high quality"⁹—a statement that might seem banal now, but was revolutionary then.

These studies of Muilenberg, Fokkelman, Fishbane, Alter and others began the modern study—especially in the United States and Israel—of the Bible as literature. During my thirty plus year career as a professor of biblical studies, almost every sort of literary device has been catalogued, analyzed and documented. I now find this tendency distressing.

Some of these studies suggest, either explicitly or implicitly, that the Bible is the best book ever written, sometimes citing intricate patterns as proof. These patterns are frequently in the eye of the study's author only. Most biblical writers were not Shakespeare—or comparable to the author of the Gilgamesh epic, a most moving work in English, which is even more remarkable in Akkadian. Finding these esthetically wonderful literary patterns may partake in an outdated polemic that goes back to Jewish scholars in the medieval Muslim orbit, who answered the claim that the Qur'an was the finest piece of literature, and that Arabic was the finest language, with the counterclaim that the Tanakh surpassed the Qur'an, and biblical Hebrew surpassed classical Arabic.¹⁰ This mode of thinking may even go back to Josephus, who in *Antiquities* presents the incipient Bible as being as meritorious as any Greek writing.¹¹

The idea that the Tanakh is the greatest story ever told¹² is related in some people's mind to the notion of a divine Bible—can the perfect God be present in anything other than a perfectly beautiful and esthetic text? (This assumes that the Bible, and later Judaism, presume a perfect God; I will leave this issue to philosophers and historians of religion.) For some, the idea of a highly esthetic Bible is thus a corollary of *Torah min hashamayim*, divine Torah; for others I believe it is a type of surrogate for that notion. But I remain unconvinced by this perspective that downplays the human element in the development and the transmission of biblical books.¹³

To my mind, the most insightful exploration of whether or not the Bible is literature at all remains the largely forgotten debate between two fine scholars, James Kugel and Adele Berlin, that appeared in the initial volumes of the premier English-language journal of Jewish literature, *Prooftexts*, in

1981-1982.¹⁴ Kugel, starting the debate, claims that “in some important ways, the Bible is *not* literature, and that, more precisely, ‘literary analysis’ is not, simply because it exists, an operation to be performed on any text that comes along.”¹⁵ He critiques, for example, one of Fokkelman’s chiasmic structures by observing: “True enough, his diagram is symmetrical—but is the text? And to what end?”¹⁶ He continues by asking “And, still more relevantly, what’s so great about symmetry?”¹⁷ In much of the article, he contrasts Scripture and literature.

In her critique, Berlin notes that “[i]f we cannot read the Bible as literature, we cannot read it at all”;¹⁸ Kugel clarifies in response that he was complaining about the tendency of many literary scholars to read the Bible as “the theological book par excellence minus its theology, the Literary Bible.”¹⁹

Both positions have merit. I agree with Kugel’s critique of the excesses and subjectivity and anachronistic nature of many modern studies of the Bible as literature—a tendency that has increased in the last three decades. Berlin is correct to note that the Bible, like any literature, has certain conventions that we must understand so that it makes sense. Discerning these conventions, however, does not make the Bible an esthetic text. This point was subsequently presented clearly and decisively by John Barton in *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, where he develops the idea of understanding ancient Israelite literary competence.²⁰ As I would put it, the Bible is certainly literature, and uses literary rhetorical devices, but is not comprised entirely of Literature.

The “Bible as literature” movement troubles me for several reasons. Practitioners of this method have claimed that they have found patterns in particular texts that can only be the work of an original author (or Author), and thus various historical-critical conclusions that suggest that different biblical books are composite, the work of several authors, are wrong. I do not see many of these patterns, and believe that they are created by the modern scholar; the patterns that do exist can sometimes be the work of an editor or a redactor, rather than an original author/Author.

Many of these literary studies are new-critical in nature, and treat the text as an artifact, disengaged from its original historical context.²¹ I do not mean to *confine* the meaning of the biblical text to its original context—Judaism has not done this—but I believe that context is important, and as such I find problematic most literary readings that decontextualize biblical passages, and pay only lip-service, if that, to the Bible as an ancient Near Eastern text. (This lip service is seen in the expression “The Bible and [rather than ‘in’] the Ancient Near East” which to my mind is comparable to “The

U.S. and the Modern World”—the Bible is just as much a part of the ancient Near East as the U.S. is part of the modern world.)

Others have criticized historical-critical methods of studying the Hebrew Bible, which favor looking at the Bible's prehistory, as opposed to literary study of the Bible, which studies the Bible only in its final form. The historical-critical methods are critiqued as “hypotheses” only, in contrast to the “fact” of the final text—but this point ignores that hypotheses and competing methods must be chosen and evaluated as well to read the text in its final form—no text, including the Bible, may be read without any method.²² Furthermore, in a post Dead Sea Scrolls world, we have clear evidence for the development of biblical texts before they became stabilized. In discussing the prehistory of the Bible, the observation of the anthropologist Sir Edmund Leach, who claimed many of the methods of modern biblical scholarship are like “unscrambling the omelette,”²³ are sometimes cited approvingly. To my mind, however, the Bible is not an omelet, but more like sunny-side up eggs, with clearly distinguishable layers, comparable to the yolk and the white, and this guides my interpretation. There may be people who can convince themselves that the sunny-side up eggs that the waiter brought them erroneously really are an omelet, just as some to my mind convince themselves that complex and composite texts are really unified by some variety of “literary” devices, ignoring all the markers that suggest otherwise. Finally, as I have written elsewhere, I believe that viewing biblical texts as composite, thereby emphasizing the Bible's polyphony, is constructive for contemporary Jewish belief, and helps bring the Bible closer to rabbinic literature.²⁴

Stated differently, too many people believe that the Bible must be studied either as a composite text, or as literature, typically in its final form. But is this a valid dichotomy? Is it not possible to study how components of the final text use literary-rhetorical devices to shape their messages, and how different layers within a text have different styles? And is it not equally valid to explore whether a particular structure is the result of redaction rather than composition?

A well-known biblical literary device is the *inclusio*, also called the inclusion or an envelope structure, where the limits of a unit are defined by an ending that returns to the beginning. Like other “literary” principles, this was also known in medieval Jewish interpretation, where it was described as *chatimah me'ein petichah*—a conclusion that is similar to a beginning. I would like to use this ancient form to “round out” my essay. I would first note that I no longer find Fokkelman to be jaw-dropping, but instead over-detailed and overly subjective; I find it distressing that so many of the Bible students sur-

rounding me in this library are working in his footsteps on dissertations that highlight the Bible as literature. I find more compelling Muilenberg's 1969 manifesto, where he notes:

In the Scriptures, we have a literary deposit of those who were confronted by the ultimate questions of life and human destiny, of God and man, of the past out of which the historical people has come and of the future into which it is moving, a speech which seeks to be commensurate with man's ultimate concerns, a raid on the ultimate, if you will.²⁵

Muilenberg claims that understanding the Bible as literature helps us better understand these "ultimate concerns," a term taken from the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich. I agree with Muilenberg, but I feel that the Bible as literature movement has sometimes forgotten this. Almost all of the Bible is highly ideological literature²⁶—and much of it is theological, a subcategory of ideological. (Song of Songs may be the only exception.) As such, it is not best analyzed as *belles lettres*, as so many Bible as literature studies seem to do, and inclusions, or chiasms, or word-plays, or phonological plays should not be counted and catalogued to impress readers with the Bible's great artistry. Instead, it is crucial to remember that the Bible is literature with a purpose;²⁷ we should thus not merely highlight literary devices as esthetic patterns, but should see how they function to further the messages of the Bible, how they contribute to making the Bible Torah—"instruction."²⁸

NOTES

1. This essay is meant to be suggestive rather than definitive. Some of the points made below may be found, with supporting documentation, in my *The Book of Judges* (London: Routledge, 2002), 9-21 ("Reading Judges as Literature").
2. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975).
3. Richard G. Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible* (London: Isbister, 1896).
4. Michael Fishbane, "Composition and Structure in the Jacob Cycle (Gen 25:19-35:22)," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 26 (1975): 15-38.
5. These began with Robert Alter, "Joseph and His Brothers," *Commentary* 70 (Nov. 1980): 59-69.
6. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (rev. and upd. ed.; New York: Basic Books, 2011); Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979).
7. Meir Weiss, *Ha-Mikra' Kidmuto* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1962); Meir Weiss, *The Bible from Within: The Method of Total Interpretation* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984).

8. James Muilenberg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969): 1-18.
9. *Ibid.*, 7.
10. See Jonathan Decker, "Literatures of Medieval Sepharad," *Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry: From the Golden Age of Spain to Modern Times*, ed. Zion Zohar (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 80.
11. This is a major theme in the work of Louis H. Feldman on Josephus; see esp. his *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 374-442 (on Moses).
12. This is the title of a 1965 movie about the New Testament.
13. On prophecy, see e.g. Moshe Greenberg, "Jewish Conceptions of the Human Factor in Biblical Prophecy," in his *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 405-419; on the human element in the transmission of the Bible, see Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012).
14. James Kugel, "On the Bible and Literary Criticism," *Prooftexts* 3 (1981), 217-236, with a response by Adele Berlin and a counter-response by James Kugel in "Controversy," in *Prooftexts* 2 (1982), 323-332.
15. *Ibid.*, 219.
16. Kugel, "On the Bible," 225.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Adele Berlin, "Controversy: On the Bible as Literature," *Prooftexts* 2 (1982), 324.
19. James Kugel, "Controversy: James Kugel Responds" *Prooftexts* 2 (1982), 329.
20. John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1996), esp. 8-19.
21. An excellent discussion and critique of new-critical readings and the Bible is in Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, 140-179.
22. In addition to Barton's book in the previous note, see Edward L. Greenstein, *Essays on Biblical Method and Translation* (Brown Judaica Series 92; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).
23. *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth*, ed. Edmund Leach and D. Alan Aycock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 3.
24. Marc Zvi Brettler, Peter Enns, and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Bible and the Believer: How to Read the Bible Critically and Religiously* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Marc Zvi Brettler, "Biblical History and Jewish Biblical Theology," *Journal of Religion* 77 (1997), 563-83.
25. Muilenberg, 18.
26. See my *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (London: Routledge, 1994), esp. 12-14.
27. This was properly appreciated by the (Orthodox) literary critic Harold Fisch in *Poetry With a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1990).
28. For more on Torah as instruction, see Marc Zvi Brettler, "Torah" in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2.