

TEACHING THE DISCOURSE OF THE BIBLE IN THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM

Tibor Fabiny

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(Northrop Frye)

1. METHODOLOGICAL REVOLUTION IN BIBLICAL STUDIES: LITERATURE AS A NEW PARADIGM

The assumption of the present paper is that we are witnessing a convergence of biblical and literary studies, according to many scholars, there is a methodological revolution; the historico-critical methodology of the past two hundred years or so is gradually being complemented and occasionally even replaced by the new literary methods. Scholars have begun to talk about paradigm-change, namely, that we are moving from the historical era to the literary era in biblical studies. Diachronic approaches are being challenged in favour of synchronic studies; canonical criticism, rhetorical criticism, reader-response criticism, narrative criticism and even deconstruction has appeared on the palette of the *new directions for biblical studies*. It has become a commonplace that instead of using exclusively historico-critical methodology we should be aware, in Edgar McKnight's phrase, of the "postmodern use of the Bible".

2. CANONICAL REVOLUTION IN LITERARY STUDIES: THE BIBLE IN THE CURRICULUM

There has been a similarly serious revolution in literary studies, but this revolution is canonical rather than methodological. Some decades ago the concern of literary scholars was literature in its narrow sense and thus the Bible was assigned to the sacred or religious sphere, alien from the domain of profane literature. That was the age of the criticism of Rene Wellek. However, in the past fifteen years or so some new perspectives have been emerged by

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the discovery of the untrodden field of the Bible, for a long time a strange taboo for literary scholars. In the 1980s there was an unparalleled outburst of books on the literary approaches to the Bible. Frank Kermode's *The Genesis of Secrecy* (1979), Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981), Northrop Frye's *The Great Code* (1982), Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (1985), Stephen Prickett's *Words and the Word* (1986), Alter-Kermode's *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (1987) and more recently Leland Ryken's and Temper Longman's *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (1993) all mark this new literary interest in the Bible. For scholars like Alter or Sternberg the Bible means the "Hebrew Bible" while for Kermode, Frye, Prickett or Ryken it is the "Christian Bible".

We may argue that this approach had two forerunners in the previous decades; Eric Auerbach's now classic *Mimesis* (1946) and Amos Wilder's *Early Christian Rhetorics. The Language of the Gospel* (1971). Literary Scholars wanted to complement, not abolish historical criticism, and literary criticism was hailed as helping to identify the nature of biblical texts and explore how they achieve multiple meanings.

3. TEACHING THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE: THE HUNGARIAN CASE

In the former Eastern Europe, including Hungary, resistance to the Bible was not only on critical but primarily on ideological grounds. The major breakthrough took place in the late 1970s when some passages of the Bible were included in the classical section of the literature curriculum of secondary schools. Secondary school teachers so far perhaps unfamiliar with the Bible were obliged to read or reread parts of Genesis (the Joseph story) or of the Gospels in order to be able to teach the literary artifice of these texts to their students. It has become evident, or even imperative, that the Bible should be taught also at the University, for example at an English Department. I think the thesis needs no defence that English and American literature from the mysteries and moralities through Milton and Blake up to T. S. Eliot is strongly bound up with the biblical tradition; it is well documented in David Jeffrey's recent *A Dictionary of the Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (1992). Let me briefly speak only about my own experience, how I began to teach the Bible in the English curriculum. In 1982-83 I had to teach a course on the English Renaissance. It was obvious that the 16th century translations of the Bible should be included in the syllabus. At the beginning of the course I taught Tyndale and Coverdale and we read excerpts from the King James Bible (1611). We illustrated the archaism of this version by comparing the passage of the Sermon on the Mount with some more recent translations. Though we spent much of term with Shakespeare, my favourite, towards the end of the term we arrived at the metaphysical poets and Milton and we

bumped into the Bible again. It was the time when Barbara Kiefer Lewalski's excellent book *Protestant Poetics and 17th Century Religious Lyric* (1979) had been out for one or two years and the author's lucid discussions of "biblical poetics" gave a strong impetus to the discussion of the Bible in literary seminars. We have agreed that the Christian Bible for the Christian faith is the repository of truth but at the same time it is also a comprehensive storehouse of Western literary genres, archetypes and forms and thus it is normative both for spiritual truth and poetic art.

Northrop Frye's *The Great Code* was published in 1982. It provided a methodological framework for the literary study of the Bible and especially for the study of the relationship of the Bible and literature. In 1987 (still in the last years of Communism) I managed to persuade the Head of the Department to allow me to set up a course entitled *Intellectual Backgrounds of English Literature*. This was meant to be a course for first year students. I asked a colleague from the classical department to give six classes on Greek and Roman literature and I designed a six class sequel to it on the English Bible. Three classes were devoted to the Old Testament, and another three classes to the New Testament. I discussed the Old Testament under the following rubrics: narrative discourse (the Torah and the history books), prophetic discourse and poetic discourse (hymnic and wisdom books). This division followed the structure of the Jewish Canon. The New Testament was discussed in a similar threefold division. The material increased and the course developed further. Soon not only a half-semester but a whole term was devoted to the subject. However, some principles had to be elaborated concerning methodology. First, I had to give a rationale, why I had the whole Bible and not only some fragments in mind and then I had to rethink what I thought about the discourses of the Bible. The former task was achieved with the help of Frye, the latter with some recent work of Paul Ricoeur.

4. PRINCIPLES OF UNITY: IMAGERY AND THE NARRATIVE

Northrop Frye criticized the *Bible as literature* courses practiced at many North American colleges because this practice involved, as he said, "chopping pieces out of the Bible like the Book of Job and the parable of Jesus and saying, »Look aren't they literary?«. Frye commented: "That approach violated all my instincts as a critic, because those instincts told me that what a critic does when he is confronted with any verbal document whatsoever is to start on page one at the upper left hand corner and go on reading until he reaches the bottom right hand corner of the last page". Well, in my view Frye's literary critical instincts are justified: if we are selective with the canon on whatever grounds (whether theological or literary) or investigations might end up with a sense of incompleteness. The Bible is undoubtedly a collection

of diverse books written within a span of more than a thousand years in various genres and styles, by authors of different social rank, education and piety. Nevertheless these writings have been moulded into one book throughout the centuries. Nowadays the dominant historical and analytical approach emphasizes the diversity, complexity and idiosyncrasy of each book. However, if one is endowed with some artistic sensitivity then it is impossible not to notice a striking unity within the diversity. It is somewhat ironic that today it is the task of the literary critic to call attention to the intrinsic imaginative unity of the Bible.

Wherein lies the unity of the Bible? We may perceive and demonstrate this unity on two levels: (a) the unity of the narrative, (b) the unity brought about by the recurring imagery.

The unity of the narrative

The Bible is a book containing several books from Genesis up to Revelation: it has a remarkable beginning and an end. It begins with Creation and ends with Apocalypse or the Recreation of the world. It contains a story and a history at the same time God's "love-story" for mankind and salvation history under the symbolic names of Adam and Israel. Frye observes two concentric quest-stories within the Bible: the myth or story of Genesis-apocalypse which includes the myth or story Exodus-millennium: "In the former Adam is cast out of Eden, loses the river and the tree of life, and wanders in the labyrinth of human history until he is restored to his original state. In the latter Israel is cast out of his inheritance and wanders in the labyrinth of Egyptian and Babylonian captivity until he is restored to his original state in the Promised Land. Eden and the Promised Land, therefore, are typologically identical, as are the tyrannies of Egypt and Babylon and the wilderness of the law". Northrop Frye even perceives a narrative shape peculiar to the Bible and he identifies this as the repetition of "U shaped" curve of fall and restoration. This "U shape" pattern of loss and deliverance is present not only throughout the history of Israel but it is epitomized in the Book of Job in the Old Testament or the parable of the Prodigal Son in the New Testament. The top images are ideals of human life while the bottom images are symbols of bondage and slavery. The top images are metaphorically (spiritually) identical with one another and so are the ones on the bottom.

Unity of Recurring Images

In the Bible images and metaphors are not ornaments of language but they are controlling modes of thought. Biblical language is more metaphorical than conceptual, it is bound up with concrete images and symbols rather than with abstract dogmas. There are prominent metaphors, images and symbols

running through the Bible and recurring several times. Our task is to identify these archetypal images in the Bible. Such an archetypal image, for example, is the garden, oasis, Eden or paradise that symbolizes the ideal way of existence. This is a group-image which appears individually in the form of tree and water. The first event in the Bible is the loss of the tree of life in Genesis 3 and the last event is the regaining the tree and water of life in Revelation 22. The garden or pastoral imagery is something that runs through the Bible. Isaiah and Ezekiel both promise that the desert or desolate land will become like the garden of Eden (Isaiah 51:3 or Ezekiel 36:35). The image of the garden as an ideal state or golden age has become an important motif also in secular literature: we may associate Shakespeare's *Richard II*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, or Marwell's *The Garden* among the many examples. However, each ideal or apocalyptic image has a demonic counterpart within the "fearful symmetry" of biblical imagination. The demonic counterpart of paradisaical imagery is the image of wilderness. In the individual form instead of the tree of life there is the cursed tree of death (Deut. 21:22; Gal. 3:13), ultimately identified with the cross. Instead of the living water we get the image of dead water, Dead Sea or deluge – archetypal images of destruction.

Apart from the agricultural imagery another prominent cluster of metaphors have to do with male-female relationships which we may call sexual imagery. The imagery of the wedding, the union of the bridegroom with the bride is a recurring motif in the Bible. The Old Testament uses the language of male-female relationships to describe God's dealing with the people of Israel. God is always faithful in this relationship while the unfaithful Israel often appears in the image of the adulteress. In the New Testament Jesus identifies himself with the bridegroom and the bride is actually a communal symbol: the entire body of the Christian followers. The demonic counterpart of the Bridegroom is the Antichrist of the Apocalypse and the demonic counterpart of the bride is the great whore of Revelation 17 which had a prefiguration in the person of Jezebel of the Old Testament (2 Kings 21). However, for all the tribulations the final vision of the Bible is the consummation of history in the union or marriage of the Lamb with the victorious bride (Rev. 19:7) as one reads in the Hungarian Reformed hymnbook: "a győzedelmes egyház urával egyesül". In this final apocalyptic vision the sexual imagery is bound up with mineral or urban imagery. The bride is the city, the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2) and the Temple is not separate any more because the Lord and the Lamb are the temple of it (Rev. 21:22).

5. DISCOURSES IN THE BIBLE

Having grasped the Bible's literary unity we can now turn to unfolding some further literary perspectives in it. Here our methodological pillar is going to be Paul Ricoeur's seminal study on *Toward a Hermeneutical Idea of the Revelation*. Ricoeur distinguishes various types of discourse in the Bible: narrative discourse, prophetic discourse, perspective discourse, wisdom discourse, hymnic discourse. As a matter of fact Northrop Frye similarly distinguishes what he calls "the seven phases of revelation": creation, revolution, Law, Wisdom, Prophecy, Gospel, Apocalypse. We might have this model of discourses or styles in mind when we want to concentrate on the literary perspectives of the Bible. For the sake of convenience I am going to adopt some of them and focus on some that are not explicitly discussed by Ricoeur or Frye. Thus I shall concentrate on narrative, prophetic, hymnic, parable, epistle and apocalyptic discourses of the Bible. Each type of discourse can be found in both testaments.

a. *narrative discourse*. Most of biblical discourse falls into the category of the narrative so we can consider the application of the categories of plot, characters, setting or point of view when discussing biblical narratives such as, for example, the story of Jonah. Moreover, it is legitimate to investigate such aspects of narrative style as repetition, omission, dialogue or irony. The most remarkable and now classic analysis of biblical narrative is Eric Auerbach's discussion of the story of Abraham and Isaac in comparison with an episode from the *Odyssey* in his essay on *Odysseus' scar* (the first chapter of *Mimesis*), Auerbach noticed that in Homer's narrative everything is scrupulously externalized for the sake of relaxing tension. In the Genesis-narrative, however, an overwhelming suspense is present, the story is "fraught with background", speech is not meant to externalize thought. His conclusion is that "The Scripture stories do not, like Homer's court out of favour, that they may please us and enchant us – they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected, we are rebels."

b. *prophetic discourse*. It is, according to Ricoeur, the nucleus of biblical revelation. There is a kind of "double authorship" here as prophets claim to speak in the name of God. Prophetic discourse is an intensive literary discourse and while reading the narratives of prophetic callings (Isaiah 6:1–13, Jeremiah 1:5–8 or Ezekiel 2:1–8) we might study the relationship between inspiration literary and divine (see Austin Farrer's classic essay on this subject).

c. *hymnic discourse*. Hymnic discourse can be found both in the Old and the New Testament. The most obvious examples are the Psalms. However, it is worth discovering that this type of discourse can be found also in some unexpected places. In the Lukan narrative we can read the Magnificat

(Luke 1:46–55). If we compare the style, structure and imagery with Hanna's song in Samuel 2:11–110 we can find that there is a typological relationship between these two hymns: Mary's song is a rewriting of the song of Hanna.

d. *parable*. The parable is perhaps the most literary of the literary discourses of the Bible. In fact, it was the study of the parables by American biblical scholars (Robert Funk, Dan Via, Crossan) that revolutionized the methodology of biblical studies and paved the way towards a new "literary paradigm" in biblical interpretation. Paul Ricoeur devoted much of his *Biblical Hermeneutics* to this subject and elucidated the relationship between the parables of the synoptic gospels with the proclamatory and proverbial genres of the Old Testament. He stressed the significance of the extravagance in the ordinary story which results in "disorienting the audience in order to reorient them". This is very close to what the Russian formalist called "desautomatization" in connection with the function of poetic language. Ricoeur also demonstrated the dramatic nature of this genre where the denouncement is either tragic as in the case of the parable of the ten virgins (Mt 25:1–13) or comic as in the case of the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). Though in the past two thousand years there have been many attempts at allegorizing the parables, recent research is unanimous in suggesting that the parable has much more to do with *mashal* of Hebraic thinking than with Hellenic allegorization.

e. *epistle*. Though neither Ricoeur or Frye discuss the epistle as a type of literary discourse in the Bible, we have to remember that much of the New Testament is written in this form. Recently, however, rhetorical criticism has much contributed to the exploration of this genre. George Kennedy's excellent book, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (1984) soon proved to be a classic. The terminology of classical rhetoric can be applied to many discourses of the New Testament and it is especially helpful for the study of the epistles. In the epistle to the Galatians, Kennedy argues, St. Paul uses deliberative rhetoric (the audience is urged to take action, the Christian community is exhorted to abandon Jewish legalism and love one another).

f. *apocalypse*. Though there is much apocalyptic discourse in the Old Testament (Daniel, Joel) and in the synoptic gospels (Jesus' "little" apocalypses), the last book of the Bible is usually identified with this discourse. "The Greek word revelation, apocalypsis, has the metaphorical sense of uncovering or taking the lid off, and similarly the word for truth *aletheia*, begins with a negative particle which suggests that truth was originally thought of as a kind of unveiling, a removal of the curtains of the forgetfulness in the mind", writes Northrop Frye. Apocalypse is not only recapitulation of all the previous images, symbols, types and archetypes in the Bible, but it is the recapitulation of the whole Bible itself. One of the central symbols of the Book of Revelation is the "book" that must be swallowed by

the Seer of Patmos in chapter 10. Likewise, we, the readers of the Book must also swallow it in order to possess it. Only by doing so can we appropriate it. As a result we shall be absorbed by its vision, our egos will disappear. A last quotation from Frye: "So the Bible uses the language of symbolism and imagery, which bypasses argument and aggressiveness and at the same time clearly defines the difference between life and death, between freedom and slavery, between happiness and misery, is in short the language of love, and according to St. Paul, that is likely to last longer than most other forms of communication."

It is this Frygian vision of the Bible that I wish to end my short panel with. The Bible is not sectarian or denominational but universal and catholic, it is meant to believers and unbelievers alike. It drives away pride for those who think they possess something and it relieves hunger and quenches thirst for those who are open to it. Therefore, without sectarian bias or enthusiasm it should have its place in the literary curriculum for students of language and literature who are keen on learning something about the creative and recreative power of words.

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BIBLE-BASED SYLLABUS FOR EFL

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The purpose of this paper is to introduce the work I have recently begun: designing a Bible-based syllabus for the teaching of English as a foreign language. It is not intended as a contribution to hermeneutical research, but as the exposition of an idea as to how work in this area can be applied to a totally different field.

Why is this syllabus being designed? There are two reasons for its design – academic and pragmatic.

I. ACADEMIC: LEARNER MOTIVATION

Successful language learning is dependent upon a number of factors: the learner's age, aptitude, cognitive style, personality, favoured methodology and motivation. In 1978 a study entitled "The Good Language Learner" was conducted by Naiman and others in an attempt to discover the context and characteristics which contributed to such a person. In other words, what made a good language learner "good"? Was it innate gifting or good teaching or both? The conclusion they reached was that:

The Study confirmed the conviction that strategies and techniques form only part of language learning. It is therefore important to relate them to personality and motivational factors in the learner, and to other less obvious aspects of the learning process. (Naiman et al 1978)

My interest is in learner motivation. My hypothesis is that as motivation is a key factor in good language learners it must be nurtured and sustained, and that one way to achieve this is to ensure that the content of a language course is interesting, stimulating and relevant to learners' needs and desires. Thus, an English language course with distinctly Christian content should be of interest to learners who are Christians or who are open to Christianity.

Therefore, the projected learners are those who are motivated by conviction or curiosity. They want to advance their knowledge of English through the specialist subject-matter this syllabus provides. For Christian learners it is not only an opportunity to learn English, but also some Bible

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