An Introduction to the Old Testament

The Canon and
Christian Imagination

Third Edition

*Walter Brueggemann
and Tod Linafelt*

Contents

Preface to the Third Edition

This most recent edition of the book has been updated in ways both subtle and substantial. On the substantial side of things, we have added two new chapters at the end. The first of these, "Getting the Most from the Bible," gives a series of practical tips and guidelines for reading biblical literature closely, with an eye toward developing the necessary skills for textual interpretation. The second new chapter, "The Bible and the Contemporary World," puts biblical texts into conversation with a few of the most pressing ethical issues of the day, grounded in what we take to be a biblical vision of human existence as being, at root, ethically obligated. We have also added several new "textboxes" throughout the book, along the lines of those from the second edition—that is, "close readings" and "midrashic moments" (see the preface to the second edition for an explanation of these categories). On the subtler side of things, we have updated this edition throughout with an eye toward more recent bibliography, again accounting for current publications, and, in a few places, have made alterations or edits to reflect how we have changed our minds about particular texts or issues. Finally, we have added epigraphs to the chapters on the biblical books, that is, brief quotes from the biblical text that focus attention on some particularly salient theme or image from the material under consideration.

TOD LINAFELT

Preface to the Second Edition

Having been first introduced to the serious (and thrilling) academic study of the Bible as a student of Walter Brueggemann over twenty years ago, in his course on the Pentateuch at Columbia Theological Seminary, I was both pleased and hesitant to accept the invitation to collaborate with him on this revised and expanded second edition of *An Introduction to the Old Testament*. What could I add? However, while my own scholarly work remains thoroughly influenced by Professor Brueggemann, it has also moved in a slightly different direction, with more investment in traditional literary categories and in interest in the cultural history of the Bible. And my teaching for the past fifteen years has taken place almost entirely within an undergraduate context, at Georgetown University, in contrast to Brueggemann's long career teaching in seminaries. So in the end we hope that our complementary interests and teaching experiences have made this new edition of the book a worthwhile project.

The present edition has several new features. First, a substantial new chapter (chapter 2) on the literary art of the Old Testament focuses on the differing literary resources of biblical *narrative* and biblical *poetry*, respectively. There has lately been a great surge of interest in the literary workings of the Bible, but too often the very real differences between these two large genres have been flattened or ignored. Biblical prose narrative and biblical poetry (or verse) work with very different literary tool kits and are used in very different ways. It seems clear that the ancient authors were quite aware of the differing conventions and possibilities associated with narrative and with poetry, and that their audiences would have responded differently to these two primary literary forms. The better we understand these forms, the better we are as readers.

Beyond that new chapter, one finds throughout the book a series of text-boxes, which take two forms: close readings and midrashic moments. The *close readings* focus in on particularly interesting or illuminating details in the texts and suggest, briefly, lines of interpretation arising from such close attention.

Anyone who has ever been in a class or a workshop with Professor Brueggemann knows that he is unrelenting in his demand that we read closely and take seriously the details and texture of Scripture, rather than relying on a vague or misleading paraphrase that attempts to reduce the text to some easily digested lesson. Though few and brief, our close-reading textboxes arise from that same spirit of collaborative classroom interpretation. "Midrash" is the traditional Jewish name for "interpretation," most especially the type of interpretation that brings the ancient text into explicit dialogue with later cultural contexts, and our series of *midrashic moments* highlight specific examples of the biblical text being put to good interpretive use. Such examples not only show the continuing generative power of the Bible but also, we hope, encourage readers toward a more active use of the Bible in contrast with a passive reading. In other words, there is a long history of creative reuse of biblical stories, images, and ideas; and reverence for the text ought not to discourage such creativity. Finally, in addition to the newly written additions to the book, each chapter has been revised and updated, some more than others naturally, and the bibliography has been expanded to take account of works published since the first edition.

I was pleased to find that the first edition of the book was dedicated to Charles Cousar, Professor Brueggemann's longtime colleague at Columbia Theological Seminary. Charles Cousar was also my professor at Columbia, and he taught me the same sort of imaginative close reading of the New Testament that Brueggemann required of the Old Testament. It is difficult to imagine two better professors to initiate one into the academic study of the Bible, and so I am happy to second that original dedication: to Professor Charles Cousar.

TOD LINAFELT
Ordinary Time 2011

Preface to the First Edition

Recent developments in interpretive perspective in Old Testament study and the emergence of newer methods in the last two decades have made a huge difference for the way in which churches (and pastors) may have access to the Old Testament as a source and norm for faith. In older scholarship that was dominated by historical-critical approaches, Old Testament studies for the most part was a highly academic enterprise for "experts," with not much obvious or intentional connection to the life and practice of the church. The resultant problem tended to be either that pastors were tempted to stay with historical-critical matters that did not connect very well, or they had to make fanciful leaps that tended to disregard the gains of historical-critical study and so to proceed in a precritical manner.

The newer approaches and methods—especially canonical, rhetorical, and sociological—permit the text to come more readily into contact with the milieu of the contemporary interpretive community of the church. There is of course still an important role for historical criticism; but other approaches now stand alongside and make the interface of ancient text and contemporary community more poignant and palpable. The present book is my effort—albeit a personal effort and at some points idiosyncratic—to mediate and make available fresh learnings of Old Testament studies that will be of peculiar force for pastors and Christian congregations. It will be evident that I have more interest in and more expertise in some parts of the Old Testament than in other parts, but such is permitted in a statement that intends to be personal and colleague-to-colleague. It will also be evident that because this book is intended for congregational and pastoral use, I have not reiterated all of the elementary critical apparatus of history, geography, and chronology that often appears in an introduction to the Old Testament. Such data will in other ways be available to pastors and congregations.

It will be evident that I have been instructed by and learned a great deal from the canonical approach of Brevard Childs, a fact gladly acknowledged in the term "canon" in the title. Childs has taught us all about the legitimacy and force of church interpretation that is formed by but not enthralled to academic, critical categories. It is difficult to overstate the importance of Childs's contribution for the field generally or for my own personal perspective on interpretive matters. It will be equally apparent, however, that I am unwilling to follow Childs all the way, that is, unwilling to conclude that the force of canonical traditioning was able to override all parts of the tradition that do not fit canonical intentions or, eventually, that do not fit the church's "rule of faith." Or alternatively, I am not willing to exclude from consideration all textual testimony that does not readily adapt itself to the categories of normative church teaching. It is my judgment that the canon, taken alone and without attentiveness to the parts that do not fit, eventuates in a process of repression, surely the last thing that a church in a technologically repressive society needs.

Thus the title of my book includes "imagination" because I believe that the text both embodies and insists on ongoing work of imaginative interpretation that does not and will not conform to the strictures, limits, and demands of church faith. To that end, I have freely cited from the book *Congregation*, a collection of essays on the books of the Hebrew Bible by urbane Jewish literary figures (Rosenberg 1987). These suggestive essays notice and celebrate nuances and dimensions of the text that fall well outside the scope of the Christian canon. My own sense is that it is the interplay between *normative* and the *imaginatively playful* that gives the text its obviously transformative energy. To be sure, the playfully imaginative by itself without the normative dissolves the text in a way that makes it of little help to a missional congregation. Thus, on the one hand, the danger of the canonical by itself is in the direction of repression; the danger of the imaginatively playful by itself, on the other hand, is to dissolve the text away from the gravitas of mission. It is my judgment that the interface between the canonical and the imaginative is exactly the way in which the most responsible and faithful interpretation takes place. I expect, moreover, that that is exactly how it is done among pastors and among congregations that take the Bible as the normative and as the live Word of God.

While I have given my own read of matters, I have quoted copiously from other authors. I have done so because I wanted the reader to be engaged in the ongoing interpretive conversation that is rich and thick well beyond my own read. It is my hope that by such engagement the text may be freshly appropriated by pastors and congregations, not simply for the next task of church study but as an alternative world of well-being, freedom, and responsibility,

alternative to the world of dominant secular culture or to the conventional world of church teaching that too often has become thin and arid.

In thinking about the generative work of the text in the process of providing an alternative world that invites faithful imagination, I have had in mind the guidelines of two giants in the field of interpretation. Amos Wilder says of world-making narrative:

> If we ask a prestigious body of modern critics about the relation of story-world to real world, they will reply that it is a false question. For one thing the story goes its own way and takes us with it; the story-teller is inventing, not copying. He weaves his own web of happening and the meaning of every part and detail is determined by the whole sequence. We lose our place in the story if we stop to ask what this feature means or refers to outside it.
>
> More important, these students of language will ask us what we mean by "real world." There is no "world" for us until we have named and languaged and storied whatever is. What we take to be the nature of things has been shaped by calling it so. This therefore is also a story-world. Here again we cannot move behind the story to what may be more "real." Our language-worlds are the only worlds we know! (Wilder 1983, 361)

What Wilder says of story is surely true, mutatis mutandis, of a rich panoply of other genres as well. And Raymond Brown, in his early study of interpretation, comments: "After all, in the Scriptures we are in our Father's house where the children are permitted to play" (R. Brown 1955, 28).

Without denying the gravitas of the canonical, I have wanted to give assent as well to the "otherness" of the text that is other even beyond that canonical gravitas. Karl Barth has famously written of the "strange new world" within the Bible. Indeed! It is to be noted, however, that the strangeness and newness of the world in the text surges even beyond normative canonical categories, as Barth himself has been able to recognize. Thus I hope that this effort on my part will enhance the world-making, imaginative work of church interpretation, precisely because the flat, thin world of our dominant culture is by itself not an adequate venue for the abundant life given by the God of the gospel.

It remains for me to express thanks in many directions. This book was undertaken at the suggestion of Carey Newman, then of Westminster John Knox Press. After his departure from the press, Greg Glover has succeeded him and has done diligent, steadfast work to transpose my writing into a workable book. Tim Simpson has worked through the manuscript in detail, and has measurably corrected and strengthened the book in important ways. David Knauert has labored mightily on the bibliography. Most of all, I express my thanks to Tia Foley, who has overseen the entire process of preparation of

the manuscript with her characteristic gifts of technical competence, exegetical capacity for my penmanship, patience, and attentiveness to detail, all of which have brought the process to a good conclusion. The longer I work at writing, the more I am increasingly aware of how dependent I am on such good cohorts, and so my great appreciation to Greg, Tim, David, and Tia.

I am pleased to dedicate this book to my colleague Charles Cousar with gratitude and affection. Cousar's presence on the Columbia Seminary faculty was the primal attraction for me to come to the seminary, and I have not been disappointed in the years since that decision. In addition to his steadfast friendship and good colleagueship, Charlie is a model of church scholarship, pastoral teaching, and institutional citizenship. On all these counts I am glad for our long season of shared life on the faculty together, and now for the chance to grow old in retirement alongside him.

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN
Ash Wednesday 2003

Introductory Materials

1

Imaginative Remembering

The Theological Witness of the Old Testament

As recently as forty or fifty years ago, there was a general consensus about an introduction to the Old Testament, about the questions to be asked and the answers to be given. That general consensus managed, in an odd way, to keep together a deep *grounding in faith* ("Christian" faith, since the critical scholarship of that era was undertaken primarily by Christian scholars) and in the *critical judgments* then operative. These scholars maintained an uneasy settlement of faith and criticism, one that at the time seemed honest and workable. In more recent times, however, that general consensus has given way to an immense pluralism of perspectives and methods that, not surprisingly, now preclude agreement among scholars. As a consequence, the offer of an introduction has become more complex and problematic. What follows is an attempt to offer a critically informed, intellectually coherent introduction that may function as a guideline for critically informed, theologically responsible Bible reading in the church. For the most part, we shall state the main contours of current scholarly opinion; but there is no point in writing an introduction unless one has the freedom to do so from a particular angle of vision. In what follows, we exercise that freedom in ways that we hope are both responsible and suggestive.

I

At the outset, readers may reflect on four themes that relate to current and recurring problems in reading the Old Testament.

1. The term "Old Testament" itself bears reflection and quickly raises a nest of difficult issues. The term refers to a specific set of "books" that constitute part of Christian Scripture. As Christian readers of this Scripture, we read increasingly in the presence of and with awareness of Jews as the first to

believe in the God of this Scripture and the direct descendants of the people who recorded and passed down these traditions; consequently, the term "Old" Testament is not without problems (Brooks and Collins 1990). It is a confessional term, for it asserts that Christians read this Scripture always with attentiveness to the "New" Testament that we read as deeply and intimately connected to the "Old" Testament. Thus, for Christians, the two parts of Scripture stand together as "old and new," the "old part" coming to fruition and fulfillment in the New that attends to Jesus as the Messiah. That is an elemental claim of Christian faith, one that has been attested from the earliest time in the church. But it is not a simple claim for at least two reasons.

First, the "Old/New" connection seems to preempt completely the Old and to exclude any reading of it except a reading toward the New. While this is a long-established Christian assumption and practice, it is not one that can be sustained in the presence of Jewish reading and certainly not one assumed in this discussion. Thus in speaking of "the Old Testament," we intend to leave room to allow and affirm that as Christians read this text toward the New Testament, so Jews properly and legitimately read the same scrolls toward the Talmud as the definitive document of Judaism. This in no way compromises claims made in Christian faith, but it intends to eschew any monopolistic reading that crowds out a Jewish reading that is likewise faithful to the text and is to be taken with equal seriousness by Christians. Thus in reading the Old Testament, readers of this book must ponder how Christians are "coreaders" with Jews, how far and in what ways we may read with Jews, and in what ways we read in different directions and apart from Jews. This question is not an easy one and is not served by any compromise of Christian faith or by any patronizing of Jews.

Second, the phrase "Old Testament" is unfortunately too often understood as an affirmation of "supersessionism" (the idea that the New "supersedes" the Old and thus renders it obsolete). This assumption is evident in parts of the New Testament (see Heb 8:13 for example) and is unmistakable in much Christian interpretation and practice (Soulen 1996). That, however, is not a correct or helpful understanding of "Old/New," for the phrase "Old Testament" seeks to testify to the close and intimate connection between the faith of Israel and the faith of the early church that attests to Jesus. Christian faith is both continuous with Judaism and discontinuous from it, and the matter admits of no easy articulation. It is clear in Christian understanding that Christian faith and the Christian reading of the New Testament cannot be undertaken without the Old, and cannot tolerate any notion of the superseding of the Old Testament. (This point has been clear in the church since Marcion, an early teacher in the church who sought to contrast the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New. The church has early and always

refused such a teaching.) The "Old/New" linkage, then, does not suggest the disposal of the Old Testament in Christian reading but rather insists that the Old Testament is indispensably important in a Christian reading of the New Testament. It is clear that the Old Testament provides the categories of faith and interpretation through which the New Testament is to be understood and without which the New Testament cannot be faithfully and intelligently read. While these issues are complex and currently under intense discussion, for now it is sufficient for the reader to recognize that the Old Testament, as in "Introduction to the Old Testament," is densely loaded with interpretive possibility and problematic. The term "Old" is not merely a convention or a convenient label, but a thick reference that bespeaks much of the difficulty and the wonder of the church's relation to Judaism, a difficulty and wonder already amply attested by Paul in Romans 9–11.

2. An introduction to the Old Testament, a study of the *literature* of the Old Testament and a consideration of the *theological* claims it makes, is not to be confused with a study of either the *history of ancient Israel* or the *history of Israelite religion*. Nonetheless, it is also clear that one cannot understand the literature of the Old Testament or its theological claims without an interest in and awareness of the history of ancient Israel and of its religion. In simplest form, it is important to know that Israel's history in the Old Testament is characteristically presented in three identifiable periods:

1. The *premonarchial* period, from the beginning of Israel to the rise of King David around 1000 BCE
2. The *monarchial* period, from the rise of David in 1000 BCE to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE
3. The *postmonarchial* period, after 587 BCE, a period that encompasses both the exile and the recovery from exile that led to the formation of Judaism and, eventually, to the emergence of Christianity

This scheme is everywhere assumed in the Old Testament and becomes a convenient way to make sense of the literature as Israel reflects on its life with God in the world under the terms of various sociopolitical-economic conditions. While a close connection between literature and historical context cannot always be demonstrated, the literature, as an act of generative imagination, characteristically purports to be intentionally linked to concrete historical contexts.

It is clear that historical dimensions of Israel's faith and literature in the Old Testament are immensely problematic. Not more than two generations ago it was widely assumed among critical scholars that the biblical story line closely reflected the lived experience of historical Israel (see Bright 2000; Hayes and Miller 1986). Within recent decades, however, the emergence of new critical

methods, together with fresh perspectives and new questions, have led many critical scholars to conclude that the story line given in the Old Testament is itself no reliable guide for "what happened." What we have in the Old Testament, rather than reportage, is a sustained memory that has been filtered through many generations of the interpretive process, with many interpreters imposing certain theological (and other) intentionalities on the memory that continues to be reformulated. Reliance upon extrabiblical evidence such as archaeological remains and inscriptions, moreover, has led many scholars to the conclusion that much of what is claimed as history in the Old Testament has no basis in verifiable fact. Such a judgment (to be sure, not shared by all scholars) makes the story line of the Bible, to say it boldly, fiction.

While this judgment will for a long time remain in dispute, it is enough for now to recognize what is likely to be a very large divergence between "real history" and "claimed history," even as we recognize that what scholars now accept as "real history" is itself not a disinterested reconstruction of the past of Israel. For purposes of literary introduction, we may attend to the proposed history reflected in the text, while being alert for signals of the way in which real historical circumstance caused purported history to be inscribed as it is. The reader may be confident in attending to the literature of the Old Testament not only that ours is not a historical study, but also that the biblical text itself does not purport to be "history" in any modern sense of the term. Thus the literary offer as a vehicle for religious claims does not rise or fall with critical historical reconstruction, for the literature is not a product of *events*, but a product of imaginative *interpretation*.

3. While the study of the Old Testament has been a largely historical enterprise for the last several centuries, only recently has Old Testament study been freshly addressed under the rubric of *canon*, an approach that offers an alternative to study under the rubric of *history*. The term "canon" attests that literature of the Bible functions as normative and regulative for a community. In Old Testament study the term refers to the list of books that came to constitute the scriptural corpus of literature for both Jewish and Christian communities of faith. The Hebrew canon is the organizing principle of this introduction. That canon is organized into three distinct sections:

The Torah consists of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, traditionally termed the Five Books of Moses (or sometimes the Pentateuch). This corpus of literature is received as having the highest scriptural authority in Jewish tradition and, derivatively, in Christian tradition as well. It was likely in its completed form by the fifth century BCE, that is, by the time of Ezra.

The Prophets as a canon consists of eight "books" divided into two groups. The Former Prophets include Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings; the Latter

Prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets (the last constituting one scroll). This corpus reached its final form by the second century BCE, attested in the book of Ben Sirach, and has a lesser authority than does the Torah. This consensus judgment is somewhat called into question by the evidence of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which witness to a more fluid situation.

The Writings includes a somewhat miscellaneous collection of thirteen books:

> The three great poetic books of Psalms, Job, and Proverbs
> The Five Scrolls: Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and the Song of Songs
> A revisionist historical corpus of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah
> A single apocalyptic scroll, Daniel

This material reached its canonical shape and status only very late, likely in the Christian era, and possesses less of a canonical authority than the Torah or the Prophets, that is, "the Law and the Prophets" (see Matt 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Luke 16:16). Readers should note that there is a distinction between the Protestant and Roman Catholic/Orthodox canons in that the latter includes a series of seven works called the deuterocanonical (that is, "second canon") books, also known as the Apocrypha. As the name implies, these texts are widely understood to be of secondary status in terms of their significance to the development of the Christian community's faith. Thus in this present study we will concern ourselves only with the main lines of the textual tradition.

The process of canonization, whereby this varied literature reached authoritative status for these communities of faith, is largely hidden from us. But it is clear that religious leaders and communities engaged in serious debate about which books belonged in Scripture. At the core, the leading literary authorities were obvious; at the margin, however, opinion varied. While the canon eventually received something like an official acknowledgment or promulgation, it is undoubtedly the case that canonization fundamentally reflects the tried and tested usage of the religious community. These books were recognized to be the most recurringly useful, reliable, and "meaningful," that is, judged to be true teaching. This does not mean in every case that they are the "best" books from a religious, moral, or artistic perspective, but that the community of faith was drawn to them. This list of books thus became the normative starting point and literary deposit from which arises the endless process of tradition and imagination whereby the community of Judaism is constituted and, derivatively, whereby the Christian community is given the

resources through which to understand, affirm, and receive Jesus of Nazareth as the defining theological reality.

The matter of canon, however, is complicated for Christian usage beyond this disciplined Jewish list. The complication arises because a different Jewish community in Alexandria by the third century BCE had developed a much more open, much more extensive list of authoritative books rendered in Greek. This version of the canon, the Septuagint, from the outset was more expansive and less disciplined than the "Jewish canon," reflective of a different cultural, intellectual climate. Christian appropriation of Jewish canonical materials, eventually reflected in Roman Catholic usage, opted for the larger Greek canon. The Protestant tradition, since the Reformation in the sixteenth century, has returned to the smaller, more disciplined Jewish canon (thus the subject of this study) but has departed from the ordering of the Hebrew canon to follow the different ordering of the Greek list. Thus the Bible familiar to Protestant Christians is a mix of the list of the Hebrew Bible ordered according to the Greek-speaking tradition. The list of books in the slightly larger, Greek-speaking canon used by Roman Catholics (and not included in the Hebrew canon used by Protestants) constitutes the Apocrypha, books that are accorded deuterocanonical status in Protestant usage.

What may interest us about canon beyond an understanding of lists and order of books, however, is that since the 1970s it has come to be understood not simply as a historical development or a literary decision, but as a *theological* practice. That is, the development of the literary corpus, it is now recognized, took place through a theological impulse, a concern to shape the literature according to defining theological conviction. James Sanders has shown that the "canonical process" was in the service of a monotheistic conviction, even though much of the literature that became the Old Testament would not easily serve such a belief (J. Sanders 1976). Brevard Childs has shown that the shaping and editorial process of bringing the literature to its form was in the service of the core faith of the canonizing community (Childs 1979). Childs has gone even further to propose that beyond canonical process or canonical shape we may find present in the literature itself a normative canonical interpretation that coheres with the primary dogmatic convictions of the church (Childs 1993). In this perspective, the literature itself is, from the ground up, a normative theological statement. It is formed according to passionate theological conviction.

4. The interplay of historical reportage and canonical formation is endlessly complex. The process of that interplay is the work of *tradition*, the defining enterprise of biblical formation, transmission, and interpretation that we may term "imaginative remembering."

The remembering part is done in the intergenerational community, as parents tell and retell to children and grandchildren what is most prized in community lore (see Exod 10:1–2; 12:26; 13:8, 14; Deut 6:20; Josh 4:21; Ps 78:5–8). Perhaps what is remembered is rooted in some historical occurrence. It is, however, an occurrence to which we have no access, and we cannot make certain the claim for its "happening." Remembering, moreover, is itself shot through with imaginative freedom to extrapolate and move beyond whatever there may have been of "happening." Sometimes that imaginative reconstrual is intentional, in order to permit the memory to be pertinent to a new generation. For example, it is possible that the exodus narrative (in Exod 1–15) contains not only memories of a genuine event of liberation but also exilic materials in order that the later generation of the sixth-century exile might understand the exodus memory in terms of its own emancipation from Babylon. Sometimes, surely, the imaginative construal that goes beyond "happening" is unworthy and untenable. Either way, the traditioning process of retelling does not intend to linger over old happenings, but intends to recreate a rooted, lively world of meaning that is marked by both coherence and surprise in which the listening generation, time after time, can situate its *own* life, rather than gaining direct access to a world long past.

This act of imaginative remembering, we believe, is the clue to valuing the Bible as a trustworthy voice of faith while still taking seriously our best critical learning. Critical scholarship for a long time tried to separate "reliable remembering" from imaginative extrapolation, thereby arriving at a historical core of what happened (von Rad 1962, 105–15, 302–5). In the 1990s and 2000s this project took a skeptical turn: many scholars increasingly judged the historical core of the Old Testament to be largely unreliable (Dever 2001; Finkelstein and Silberman 2001), not to mention loaded with ideological freight (Barr 2000). The recognition of these critical judgments is important and warns against making irresponsible claims for historicity of the text. But very recent scholarship in history and historiography has begun to develop what Andrew Tobolowsky calls "a third way," one that neither maximizes nor minimizes the historical data but recognizes that the texts we have are products of "cultural memory," the idea that cultures remember the past as a way of constructing present notions of identity (Tobolowsky 2018; see also Moore and Kelle 2011; Pioske 2015 and 2018; I. Wilson 2018). On this understanding, questions shift from whether or how much past realities are faithfully represented in their retelling to how the retellings *function*. Memory is never objective but is always bound up with imagination in its construal of a shared past.

We might say then that the imposition of modernist tests of reliability on the ancient narratives has been wrongheaded and has asked of them what

they did not intend to deliver. Thus what parents have related to their children as normative tradition (that became canonized by long usage and has long been regarded as normative) is a world of meaning that has as its key character YHWH, the God of Israel, who operates in the stories and songs of Israel that are taken as reliable renderings of reality. Given all kinds of critical restraints and awarenesses, one can only allow that such retellings are a disciplined, emancipated act of imagination.

The notion of the dynamism of the traditioning process is no new awareness in Old Testament studies. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the matrix of Enlightenment rationality, the traditioning process was worked into a defining hypothesis concerning the emergence of Old Testament historical texts according to a series of proposed "documents" or "sources," thus the phrases "documentary hypothesis" and "source criticism." According to the most influential version of the hypothesis, which is still reported in many books, the ongoing tradition of Israel's "historical remembering" is marked by fixed accent points in the tenth, ninth, seventh, and fifth centuries BCE, represented in hypothetical documents respectively designated as the Yahwist (J), the Elohist (E), the Deuteronomist (D), and the Priestly (P) tradition. Some more recent versions of the theory date J and E to the ninth century BCE, P to the eighth, and D to the seventh.

Each stratum of tradition relied on what was remembered, took

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Excursus on "YHWH" and names for God

There are many ways of referring to God in the Bible, including titles such as Adon or the related Adonay ("lord" or "sovereign"), El Elyon ("God most high"), and El Shaddai (probably meaning "God of the mountains" and traditionally translated as "God Almighty"). But the most common by far are, in Hebrew, *'elohim* (occurring nearly three thousand times) and *yahweh* (over six thousand times). The latter word, *yahweh*, is a proper noun; it is God's personal name, which according to some traditions in the Bible was secret until revealed to Moses (see Exod 3:13–15 and 6:1–7). The word *'elohim*, on the other hand, is a plural common noun meaning most basically "gods" and is often used to refer to, say, the gods of Egypt or the gods of Babylon. But *'elohim* also gets used in the Bible with singular verbs, in which case it refers to Israel's god, almost as if it is a proper name. In English translations *yahweh* is consistently rendered as "the LORD" and *'elohim* as "God" or "the gods." Although biblical authors seemed to have no qualm about using God's personal name, there developed a strong tradition in later Jewish practice of avoiding either saying aloud or writing in full the divine name, out of respect for God's holiness. An alternative is just to write the four consonants of the name (aka the "Tetragrammaton" or "four letters"), YHWH, without the vowels. In this book we will follow that practice and will often refer to the god of the text as either "YHWH" or more simply as "God."

what it wanted and could use, neglected what it would not itself use, and reformulated and resituated the material to make a new statement. The final form of the text is a combination of these several major attempts at reformulating the core tradition of that memory.

That hypothesis of documents was governed by a notion of the linear, evolutionary development of Israelite religion that has since been called into question; but the dynamism of the process itself continues to be recognized, albeit in very different form. It was only in the mid-twentieth century that scholarship began to move away from "documents" to "traditions," but the point of the dynamism is the same in either case. The tradition, including its final form, is a practice of imaginative remembering.

II

The traditioning process that came to constitute the church's Scripture is not an innocent act of reportage. It is, in each of its variations over time, an intentional advocacy that means to tilt the world of the next generation according to a conviction of faith. We may identify three facets of that intentionality that can be taken into account in our study.

First, we have already noted that the tradition that became Scripture is a relentless act of imagination (D. Brown 1999; 2000). That is, the literature does not merely describe a commonsense world; it dares, by artistic sensibility and risk-taking rhetoric, to posit, characterize, and vouch for a world beyond the "common sense." The theological aspect of this imagination is that the world is articulated with YHWH as the defining character, even though YHWH in all holiness defies every attempt to make this character available or accessible in any conventional mode. That theological dimension of imagination—to render a world defined by the character of YHWH—is matched by a rich artistic sensibility that renders lived reality in song, story, oracle, and law. The artistic aspect of the text, about which we will say more in the following chapter, is not uniform and one-dimensional; in the narratives of Samuel, for example, or in the poetry of Job or in the metaphors of Jeremiah, we are offered "limit expressions" that render the "limit experiences" of the generation that offers its testimony and that invites "limit experiences" in the listening generation that would not be available without this shared "limit" language (Ricoeur 1975, 107–45).

Second, it is now widely recognized that the traditioning process is deeply permeated by ideology. The traditioning generation in each case is not a cast of automatons. Rather they are, even if unknown to us and unnamed by

us, real people who lived real lives in socioeconomic circumstances where they worried about, yearned for, and protected social advantage and property. Indeed, the traditionists surely constitute, every time, a case study in the Marxian insight that "truth" is inescapably filtered through "interest." And while Marx focused on economic interest, it is not difficult to see in the traditioning process the working of interest expressed through gender, race, class, and ethnic distinctions (Jobling 1998; Schwartz 1997). Because the text is marked by these pressures, it is clear that the text is open, in retrospect, to critique. As David Brown has seen, the later traditioning process may indeed circle back and critique the older, established textual tradition. In doing so, it is important to recognize that each subsequent critique of older tradition (including one's own critique) is itself not likely to be innocent; it in turn reflects social location and interest.

Third, the religious communities of Judaism and Christianity that take this text to be normative will affirm in a variety of ways that this text is inspired. In this affirmation, the religious communities go beyond critical scholarship, which in its characteristic skepticism avoids any such claim. These religious communities make this claim not because they are obscurantist or engaged in special pleading of a defensive kind, but because over time these communities have found these texts to be carriers of and witnesses to the most compelling offer of a meaningful, responsible, coherent life.

The term "inspiration" is not without its own complexity. If we recall the mention of "artistic imagination," we may for starters say that the biblical text is "inspired" in the way that every gifted artistic accomplishment is inspired. It is recognized that the artist is peculiarly gifted and is able to move beyond ordinary capacity in an extraordinary moment of rendering. To say this much is to say a great deal: that the singers and storytellers and poets who constituted the Old Testament did indeed reach beyond themselves in an extraordinary way.

But when Christians speak of the Bible as "inspired," we mean to say much more than that. We mean to say that God's own purpose, will, and presence have been "breathed" through these texts. Such a claim need not result in a literalist notion of "direct dictation" by God's spirit, as though God were whispering in the ear of a human writer; it is clear that the claim of "inspired" is an inchoate way of saying that the entire traditioning process continues and embodies a surplus rendering of reality that discloses all of reality in light of the holiness of YHWH. Through that disclosure, which happens in fits and starts by way of human imagination and human ideology—but is not finally domesticated by either human imagination or human ideology—we receive a "revelation" of the hiddenness of the life of the world and of God's life in the world. And because we in the church find it so, we dare to say in the actual

traditioning process with trembling lips, "The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God."

It will occur to an attentive reader that these three facts of the traditioning process—imagination, ideology, and inspiration—do not easily cohere with one another. Specifically, the force of human ideology and the power of divine inspiration would seem to be definitionally at odds. Precisely! That is what causes the Old Testament to be endlessly complex and problematic, endlessly interesting and compelling. The interplay of human ideology sometimes of a crass kind, of divine inspiration of a hidden kind, and of human imagination that may be God-given (or may not be) is an endlessly recurring feature of the text that appears in many different configurations. That interplay of the three requires that the text must always again be interpreted; the traditioning process, for that reason, cannot ever be concluded, because the text is endlessly needful of new rendering. (A case in point is the way in which the biblical teaching on slavery appeared at a time to be "inspired" and now can be seen to be ideology [see Haynes 2001].) It is this strange mix that is always again sorted out afresh. It is, however, always a sorting out by church interpreters and scholars who themselves are inescapable mixes of imagination, ideology, and inspiration.

The traditioning process is endless and open-ended. We can, however, make this distinction. First, there was a long process of traditioning prior to the fixing of the canon as text in normative form. Much of that process is hidden from us and beyond recovery. But we can see that in the precanonical traditioning process there was already a determined theological intentionality at work (J. Sanders 1976). Second, the actual formation of the canon is a point in the traditioning process that gives us "Scripture" for synagogue and for church. We do not know much about the canonizing process, except to notice that long use, including dispute over the literature, arrived at a moment of recognition: Jewish, and subsequently Christian, communities knew which books were "in" and which were not. But third, it is important to recognize that the fixing of the canon did not terminate the traditioning process. All the force of imaginative articulation and ideological passion and the hiddenness of divine inspiration have continued to operate in the ongoing interpretive task of synagogue and church until the present day. In Judaism that continuing traditioning process (which makes its own claims for normative authority) has taken the form of the great Talmuds, midrashic extrapolation, and ongoing rabbinic teaching. In Christian tradition we may see the New Testament as an immense act of interpretation of the Old Testament that itself became normative for the church (Moberly 1992). Beyond the New Testament, moreover, interpretation has continued both under church authority as well as in scholarly communities that regularly have had a wary relationship with

church authority. This ongoing interpretation has evoked interpreters who, in every generation and in every context of the church, have rearticulated faith in the intellectual categories and cultural environment where the church has lived. Thus, for example, the core claims of faith were articulated in terms of Neoplatonic Greek philosophy in the early centuries by the Apologists, in the categories of Aristotle by Thomas Aquinas, through humanistic "new learning" by the Reformers, and, in our own time, in the categories of Karl Marx in the work of liberation theologians. It is, moreover, the case that every so often the postcanonical traditioning process has come to exercise decisive control over the biblical text itself, as is variously evident in Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, or Calvinist traditions. Postcanonical interpretation characteristically yields a certain casting of Scripture, and thus on occasion—in the crisis of reform—the ongoing developed tradition is radically called into question by a fresh attentiveness to the canonical text.

It is in the very character of the text itself to require and generate ongoing interpretation that is itself imaginative and often laden with ideology. The very presence of "the book" in these religious communities bespeaks a kind of unsettled restlessness that characteristically "makes ancient good uncouth," including ancient interpretation that is rendered "uncouth." When we ask why the text requires and generates an ongoing interpretive tradition, we may first answer with David Tracy that it is in the character of any "classic" to be a durable source for new disclosures (Tracy 1981). While not from our perspective adequate, Tracy's formulation of "classic" is immensely important and helpful, for it recognizes that the Bible participates in the properties of great literature that defies any single explanatory reading that is eventually exhausted.

Beyond the claims of "classic," the faith claim of the church is that the Bible as the church's Scripture is without parallel, for it is God-given—given, to be sure, through the quixotic work of human beings—as originary testimony to the truth of God's presence in and governance of all creation. Because it is God-given, given as God characteristically gives through the hidden workings of ordinary life, the book endlessly summons, requires, demands, and surprises with fresh reading. The only way to turn the book into a fixed idol is to imagine that the final interpretation has been given, an act of imagination that is a deep act of disobedience to the lively God who indwells this text. The only way to avoid such idolatry is to know that the lively God of the text has not given any final interpretation of the book that remains resistant to our explanatory inclinations.

The traditioning process, when it is faithful, must be disciplined, critical, and informed by the best intelligence of the day. But it must be continued—and is continued—each time we meet in synagogue or church for telling and

sharing, for reading and study, each time we present ourselves for new disclosure "fresh from the Word." There are two postures that characteristically want to terminate the daring process of traditioning. On the one hand, there is a mood in the church—sometimes linked to what is called a "canonical" perspective—that judges that the "true" interpretation has already been given, and all we need to do is reiterate. On the other hand, Schleiermacher's "cultured despisers of religion" who live at the edge of the church often fail to recognize the thickness of the traditioning process, and they take the biblical offer at surface meaning, run the matter through the prism of modern rationality, and so dismiss the tradition as inadequate. Either way—by confessional closure or by rationalistic impatience—one misses the world "strange and new" that is generously, with recurring surprise, given in the Scriptures.

2

Narrative and Poetry

The Literary Art of the Old Testament

It is hard to deny that in some respects the Old Testament is among the most unliterary works of literature that we have. Biblical Hebrew narrative exhibits a style that often seems simple, even primitive, in comparison with other great works of world literature. And Hebrew poetry, lacking the strict metrical patterns of classical verse or the rhyme of later English poetry, has more often than not gone unrecognized *as* poetry. Yet once we become aware of the distinctive elements of both biblical narrative style and biblical poetic style, we can begin to appreciate with fresh eyes the rich literary artfulness of the Old Testament. Moreover, having knowledge of and appreciation for the literary style and conventions of the Bible may well facilitate a deeper engagement with the ethical and theological dimensions of the text.

Before considering in more detail the workings of narrative and poetry in the Bible, it is necessary to say a few words about nonliterary genres—that ritual and ethical material that comprises so much of the Torah (or Pentateuch) in particular. On the one hand, we are reluctant to give short shrift to the ritual and ethical texts—dealing with the construction of the tabernacle, sacrificial rituals, dietary laws, and so forth—that one finds in the second half of Exodus and throughout most of Leviticus and Deuteronomy and much of Numbers. This material has already suffered from a less-than-benign neglect both in the history of Christian religious interpretation, which has been inclined to view it as irrelevant in the wake of the gospel, and in Western literary history, which has gravitated to the stories and poems as sources of inspiration. On the other hand, for all its interesting complexity, its real depth of religious sensibility (and in Deuteronomy at least its high rhetorical flair), this material is in the end not quite what we think of as literature. There may indeed be structuring principles both large and small at work that indicate more intentionality in its shaping than is immediately apparent (for one of the most recent and interesting theories along these lines, see Douglas 1999 and

2004), and certainly the legal texts both demand and reward the sort of close reading that we tend to associate with poetic and narrative texts (such a reading would bring out, for example, the complex and competing social codes that lie behind the list of sexual prohibitions in Leviticus 18), but these texts are finally more discursive than literary, and we will treat them more fully as appropriate in the chapters that follow in the book.

THE NATURE AND WORKINGS
OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

Saint Augustine, already in the fourth century CE, confessed that biblical literary style exhibits "the lowest of language" and had seemed to him, before his conversion, "unworthy of comparison with the dignity of Cicero." It is easy to see what he meant. For example, biblical *narrative* especially (things are very different with biblical *poetry*, as we will see below) works with a very limited vocabulary, and it often repeats a word several times rather than resorting to synonyms. Its syntax too seems rudimentary to modern ears, linking clause after clause with a simple "and" (what the linguists call "parataxis") that reveals little about their syntactical relation, instead of using complex sentences with subordinate clauses ("hypotaxis"). Notice, for example, the dogged repetition of "face" and the run-on syntax in the following very literal translation of Genesis 32:20 (where Jacob is sending ahead of him a very large gift to his estranged brother Esau, in hopes that Esau will be placated over Jacob's earlier stealing of his blessing): "For he said, 'Let me cover his face with the gift that goes before my face and after I look upon his face perhaps he will lift up my face." And if modern translations tend to obscure these features, even when one is not reading the Hebrew one is bound to notice the paucity of metaphorical description, the brevity of dialogue, the lack of reference to the interior lives of characters, the limited use of figural perspective (that is, dropping into the perspective of characters within the narrative world), and not least the jarring concreteness with which God is imagined to be involved in human history.

Many of these features are elements of biblical literature's *economy of style*, or essential terseness. We may compare, for example, Homer's use of sometimes startling metaphors in describing a scene with the practice of biblical authors (all of whom are essentially anonymous), who by and large avoid such elaborate figurative language. Contrast this description in the *Iliad* of the death of a single, obscure Trojan charioteer—"Patroclus rising beside him stabbed his right jawbone, / ramming the spearhead square between his teeth so hard / he hooked him by that spearhead over the chariot-rail, / hoisted, dragged the

Trojan out as an angler perched / on a jutting rock ledge drags some fish from the sea, / some noble catch, with line and glittering bronze hook" (16.480–85; Fagles trans.)—with the blunt recounting from Genesis 34 of the massacre of an entire city by two of Jacob's sons: "Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and came against the city unawares, and killed all the males. They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword" (Gen 34:25–26). Indeed, biblical narrative tends to avoid description of any sort, metaphorical or otherwise. The principle applies, with some exceptions, not only to *physical* description—so that we are rarely told what either objects or people look like—but also, and more importantly, to the *inner* lives, thoughts, and motivations of characters in the narratives. It would be a mistake, however, to take this economy of style as an indicator of the Bible's essential simplicity or primitiveness as a work of literature. Indeed, it is primarily this terseness that lends biblical narrative its distinctive complexity as literature.

In beginning to think about the narrative art of the Bible, one could do no better than to read "Odysseus' Scar," the opening chapter of Erich Auerbach's book *Mimesis*, in which Auerbach compares biblical narrative style with Homeric epic style. Auerbach offers the first and best modern articulation of how the drastic terseness of biblical narrative is not just the absence of style but is in fact a distinctive and profound literary mode in its own right. Auerbach famously describes Homeric style as being "of the foreground," whereas biblical narratives are "fraught with background." In other words, in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, both objects and persons tend to be fully described and illuminated, with essential attributes and aspects—from physical descriptions to the thoughts and motivations of characters—there in the foreground for the reader to apprehend. But with biblical narrative such details are, for the most part, kept in the background and are not directly available to the reader. So, as noted above, we are very rarely given physical descriptions of either objects or people in the biblical narrative. (This contrasts with nonnarrative cultic or liturgical texts where, for example, we are given quite detailed descriptions of the tabernacle and its furnishings; see Exod 25–27.) What do Adam and Eve look like? We do not know. Abraham? Sarah? Moses? We do not know. As Auerbach puts it in his comments on Genesis 22, where God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, it is unthinkable that the servants, the landscape, the implements of sacrifice should be described or praised, as one might expect in Homer: "they are serving-men, ass, wood, and knife, and nothing else, without an epithet" (Auerbach 1953, 9). Occasionally a certain quality is ascribed to some person or object: we are told that Eve perceives that the tree of knowledge is "a delight to the eyes" (Gen 3:6), and likewise we are told that Joseph is "handsome and good-looking" (Gen 39:6). But as a rule such minimal notations are given only when necessary to

introduce some element that is important to the development of the plot. In the present cases the attractiveness of the tree of knowledge leads to the eating of its fruit (But what kind of fruit? We are not told, the long tradition of the apple notwithstanding), and Joseph's attractiveness leads, in the next verse, to the sexual aggression of Potiphar's wife and thus indirectly to Joseph's imprisonment. And even here one notices that one is not told what it is that makes the fruit lovely to look at or what exactly makes Joseph so beautiful.

Beyond a lack of physical description in the biblical stories, one notices too that descriptions of personal qualities are largely absent. That is, characterization is rarely explicit, but rather must be teased out of the narrative based on what characters *do* and *say*. The presentation of Esau and Jacob in Genesis 25 illustrates this nicely. We are told that Esau is "a skillful hunter, a man of the field" (v. 27), but the essential characterization of Esau as impulsive and unreflective, indeed almost animal-like, is conveyed by action and dialogue. Thus, coming in from the field to discover that his brother Jacob has prepared a stew, Esau inarticulately blurts out, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished" (v. 30). Alter notes that Esau "cannot even come up with the ordinary Hebrew word for stew (*nazid*) and instead points to the bubbling pot impatiently as (literally) 'this red red.'" Then, after Esau agrees to trade his birthright to Jacob in exchange for some of the stew, his impetuous, action-oriented character is suggested by the "rapid-fire chain of verbs": "and he ate and he drank and he rose and he went off" (Alter 2004, 131–32).

The character of Esau is starkly contrasted in the story with the character of Jacob. If Esau is all instinct and action, Jacob is all calculation and deliberation. The stew is prepared and waiting for the return of Esau from the field, and one cannot fail to notice the mercantile manner in which Jacob first suggests, and then demands formal confirmation of, the trading of the birthright: "And Jacob said, 'Sell now your birthright to me.' And Esau said, 'Look, I am at the point of death, so why do I need a birthright?' And Jacob said, 'Swear to me now'" (vv. 31–33, au. trans.). These initial thumbnail characterizations of Esau and Jacob will be fleshed out further two chapters later, in Genesis 27, where the blind Isaac is deceived into bestowing his blessing on Jacob rather than the intended son, Esau. The elaborate ruse carried out by Jacob—with, to be sure, the invaluable help of his mother Rebekah—in which he impersonates Esau, confirms his calculating ambition even as it adds outright deceit to his résumé of character traits. Jacob will become a consummate trickster as the story proceeds—though he will also, as an elderly man, be tricked by his own sons—but he is never actually *described* by the narrator as tricky or deceptive in the way that Odysseus is described repeatedly in terms of his resourcefulness or Achilles in terms of his rage, for example; instead, he has

his character revealed by what he says and what he does. Esau, for his part, will play a lesser role in the narrative that follows, although his reappearance in chapter 33 is striking and in some ways unexpected. However, both his inarticulateness and his utter lack of calculation are revealed by his response upon hearing that Jacob has stolen his blessing: "He cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry and he said to his father, 'Bless me, me also, Father'" (27:34, au. trans.); and again, a few verses later, "'Do you have but one blessing, my father? Bless me, me also, Father.' And Esau lifted up his voice and wept" (v. 38, au. trans.).

By not directly revealing the qualities of character of the actors in the narrative, the narrator puts the onus of interpretation on the readers, who must work out on their own—albeit with hints given—what they think of these characters. To repeat, this is not the *absence* of characterization, but is a *certain mode* of characterization, and in fact a fairly complex mode at that.

We may best see the complexity of this mode of characterization, and indeed of the Bible's economy of style more generally, when it comes to the inner lives of the characters. Readers are for the most part used to having access in one form or another to the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of the characters about whom they read. Again, Auerbach on Homer: "With the utmost fullness, with an orderliness which even passion does not disturb, Homer's personages vent their inmost hearts in speech; what they do not say to others, they speak in their own minds, so that the reader is informed of it. Much that is terrible takes place in the Homeric poems, but it seldom takes place wordlessly" (Auerbach 1953, 6). For instance, the tragic death of Hector at the hands of Achilles near the end of the *Iliad* (in book 22) has devoted to it (in the Greek) fourteen lines of lament by Hector's father, seven lines by his mother, and fully forty lines by his wife, Andromache. We may compare this with the brief notations of grief in biblical narrative. On the death of Sarah: "And Sarah died at Kiriath-Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan; and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her" (Gen. 23:2). On the death of Moses: "The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended" (Deut 34:8). One might object that since both Sarah and Moses had lived long and fruitful lives their deaths lack the tragedy of noble Hector being cut down in his prime over the affairs of his less noble brother Paris, and thus inspire less intense expressions of mourning.

But even with more obviously tragic deaths, we see in biblical narrative the restraint of the narrator, who acknowledges the grief of the survivors but refrains from allowing them full expression of it. We noted above, for example, Jacob's response to what he takes to be evidence of his young, beloved son Joseph's death: "A vicious beast has devoured him, / Joseph torn to shreds!"

(Gen 37:33, au. trans.). In a scene that seems intended to characterize Jacob as an extravagant mourner, the narrator goes on to describe Jacob as rending his clothes and donning sackcloth and refusing to be comforted by his other children: "'No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.' Thus his father bewailed him" (37:35). Yet even here the few scant lines in Hebrew do not come close to matching the sixty lines of direct lament over the death of Hector, not to mention the extended scene in book 24 of the *Iliad* where Hector's father Priam goes to the tent of Achilles to beg for the return of his son's much-abused corpse.

Consider also the notoriously ambiguous story in Leviticus 10 of the burning of Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron. The reader is told that the two young priests brought "strange fire" or "alien fire" (*'eš zarah*) before the Lord, "and fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord" (10:1–2, au. trans.). Moses very quickly offers a sort of cryptic theodicy, cast as a line of verse, in the face of the shocking event: "This is what the Lord spoke, saying, 'Through those near me I will show myself holy / and before all the people I will be glorified'" (10:3, au. trans.). No more laconic response could be imagined, both to the death of the young men and to Moses' extemporaneous theologizing, than that attributed to Aaron: "And Aaron was silent." Surely we are to imagine Aaron's grief as real and deep—indeed, a few verses later Moses forbids Aaron and his other sons to go through the public rituals of mourning while they are consecrated for service in the temple (10:6–7)—and yet all we are given is his silence. Unless one imagines this silence to indicate a complacent assent to what has just been witnessed, the narrator gives us, to borrow from Auerbach again, "a glimpse of unplumbed depths." It is, in short, a silence that is "fraught with background," a silence that demands interpretation on the part of the reader. Is Aaron feeling pure shock? Overwhelming sadness? Anger at God? Confusion or despair? Is his silence a rejection of Moses' statement of God's intent? And if so, on what basis? We are given no access whatsoever into the inner life of Aaron, and because we do not know what he is thinking we also do not know what motivates his silence.

It is with regard to this latter issue, the question of character *motivation*, that we may see the importance of recognizing the distinctively terse mode of biblical narration. As noted above in considering the story of Jacob and Esau, the narrator reveals very little about the inner lives of characters, instead reporting mainly action and dialogue, or what the characters *do* and what they *say*. If we are given little or no access to the thoughts and feelings of the characters about whom we read, then it follows that the motivation behind what they do and say is also largely obscure. The importance of this obscurity of motivation can scarcely be overstated for any literary reading of the Torah

or for biblical narrative in general, since it more than anything else is what gives the literature its profound complexity as it forces the reader to negotiate the many possible ways of imagining the characters' inner lives. Let us try to justify this claim with reference to the literature itself.

We may take Genesis 22 as a classic example of the ambiguity of character motivation in the Torah. In a story that has never failed to engage the imagination of interpreters ancient or modern, God commands Abraham to take his son Isaac and sacrifice him as a burnt offering. Although a few chapters earlier we have seen Abraham challenge the justness of God's decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, here Abraham says nothing in response. Instead, there is the narrator's terse report: "So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him" (vv. 3–4). Abraham's silent obedience here is often taken to be motivated by an untroubled and unquestioning faith in God, which, depending on one's perspective, may be seen positively as an expression of ultimate piety, or negatively as an expression of unfeeling religious fanaticism. But both interpretations fail to recognize the fundamental literary convention of the refusal of access to the inner lives of characters. That we are not *told* of Abraham's inner, emotional response to the demand that he slaughter his son does not mean that he *has* no inner, emotional response. Surely we are to assume that he does, but rather than describing it for us or allowing Abraham to give voice to it, the narrator leaves us guessing as to what that response might be and thus also as to his motivation for his actions.

It is possible to fill that gap left by the narrator with an inner calm that reflects absolute faith, but it is equally possible to imagine that Abraham is feeling anger, disbelief, and even disgust (with God for demanding the slaughter? with himself for not protesting?). And however one fills the gap of Abraham's inner life initially, surely it is complicated by Isaac's calling out to him in verse 7, "Father!" and by the plaintive question that follows, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" It is precisely because we do not know what Abraham is thinking or feeling that his brief response to Isaac's question ("God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son," v. 8) takes on a deeply ironic double meaning. On the one hand, it may be read as a ruse, if not an outright lie, to deflect any suspicions that may be dawning on the son; on the other hand, it may be read as a straightforward statement of faith that a sheep will indeed be provided. It may even be the case here that the author makes use of the ambiguities of Hebrew's seemingly rudimentary syntax in order to signal the potential irony to the attentive reader. For there is no punctuation in the Hebrew text, and

one may also construe the syntax to read: "God will see to the lamb for the offering: *namely*, my son."

To go back to Abraham's initial response to Isaac, we may see how what at first instance looks like wooden repetition may be a subtly modulated use of a key word or theme. When God first calls out to Abraham to begin the episode, Abraham's response is, "Here I am"; when Isaac calls in the middle of the episode, on the way to the place of sacrifice, Abraham's response is, once again, "Here I am, my son"; and when, at the climactic moment that the knife is raised over the boy, the angel of YHWH calls out, "Abraham, Abraham!" (22:11), his response is again, "Here I am." In each case the single Hebrew word *hinneni*, "here I am" or "behold me," is repeated by Abraham. To substitute a synonym for the sake of variety is to lose a concrete expression of what is certainly a central theme for the story, namely, the anguished tension between the demands of God and the ethical demands of another human being (Abraham's own child no less!). Surely every ethical impulse demands that Abraham not kill his son, and yet this is precisely what God demands that he do. He responds, "Here I am," to both God and Isaac, and yet he cannot be fully "there," fully present, to both equally. It is only with the third, very late, repetition of "Here I am" that the tension is resolved and Abraham is no longer caught between these opposing demands on his loyalty. One might say that Abraham's threefold response provides the underlying armature for the story, marking the beginning, the middle, and the end. Although the single word *hinneni* is literally repeated each time, it acquires a new depth of meaning—and certainly a new tone—with each repetition. And to the end of the story it remains the case that we are never quite sure what Abraham is thinking as he first travels in silence, then responds to his son, then binds and raises the knife, and finally sacrifices the ram instead.

If we do not know what motivates Abraham in Genesis 22, it is also the case that we do not know what motivates Isaac to make his inquiry as to the whereabouts of the sheep or what he is thinking as his father binds him and lays him on the makeshift altar. But by this point we are not surprised by this fact, since we have begun to see that the biblical authors make use of this convention in order to allow for depth of character and depth of meaning. It is perhaps somewhat more surprising to note that this convention applies to God too, who is after all a character in these narratives as well, and so the *literary* art of biblical narrative has distinct *theological* implications. What motivates God to demand the sacrifice of Isaac? The narrator refuses to tell us, though for any reader, religious or not, this must certainly be a compelling question.

We are told that "God tested Abraham" (22:1), but this does not give us an answer to our question. The sense of the word "test" (Hebrew *nissah*)

is something like "trial" or "ordeal," and so God decides to put Abraham through an ordeal, presumably to test his mettle. (A comparison with the opening chapters of Job is apt.) But why, and to what end? Is it to find out how strong Abraham is under pressure? To see whether he values his son more than he values God? Does God genuinely learn something new about Abraham, about humanity, or about God's self through this test ("now I know . . ." [22:12])? Without knowing what motivates God or what God is thinking as the knife is raised, we cannot finally even know whether Abraham has passed or failed the test. Most readers assume that he has passed, but a few have dared to suggest that God wanted not blind obedience from Abraham but resistance—after all, such resistance was honored when Abraham argued on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah—and that in failing to argue with God, Abraham failed to show the strength of character that God hoped to see (Wiesel 1976, 93–94; Fewell and Gunn 1993, 52–54). If such a reading seems strained, especially in light of 22:16, that it is nonetheless possible—if only just—witnesses to the profound but productive ambiguity of Hebrew literary style, which exploits to great effect its distinctive economy of style.

We could say much more about the literary art of Old Testament narrative, especially about the patterns or structures that biblical authors and editors have used to construct both individual stories and larger blocks of material, but we want to close by pointing out one final way in which the literary and the theological are bound up. We mentioned at the beginning of this chapter the jarring concreteness with which God is sometimes imagined in the Bible as active in the world: God walks in the garden of Eden and enjoys the evening breeze; God shows up at the tent of Sarah and Abraham to promise them offspring; God destroys Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea; God inscribes with God's own hand the tablets of the covenant at Sinai; and in the final, poignant scene of the Torah at the end of Deuteronomy, God buries Moses after allowing him a vision of the promised land that he is not finally to enter. But if the Hebrew literary imagination is relentlessly *concrete* in its workings, including its imaginings of God, it does not follow that it is without *craft* or *nuance*. Indeed, divine agency and human agency are almost always imagined in these narratives as being inextricably but ambiguously bound together in such a way that neither is autonomous or effective in and of itself. For example, God announces to Rebekah in Genesis 25 that the elder of her twins (Esau) will serve the younger (Jacob); but two chapters later, when the time has come to deliver the blessing to the proper son, God has apparently left the matter to Rebekah to work out, which she does with great effectiveness. Joseph may declare in Genesis 50 to the brothers who, thirteen chapters and many years earlier, had sold him into slavery, that "even though you intended to do harm

to me, God intended it for good," but the story also suggests that it is largely his own wits and talent, rather than any supernatural intervention, that allows him to survive and prosper in Egypt.

Even in the exodus story, where God's concrete saving action seems more tangible than anywhere in the Bible, the divine plan requires human agents for implementation. Thus, after the flurry of first-person active verbs by which God resolves to liberate Israel from slavery ("I have observed . . . , I have heard . . . , I have come down to deliver them . . . , to bring them up . . ." [Exod 3:7–8]), God shifts unexpectedly to the second person, saying to Moses, "So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" (3:10). Moses quite naturally responds, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" God's answer is telling with regard to the interdependence of divine and human agency: "I will be with you" (v. 12). Who is it that liberates Israel—God or Moses? It is both. But even that answer is too simple, since the liberation of Israel requires not only the cooperation of God and Moses but of *Israel* as well. Thus Moses dutifully announces to the enslaved Israelites God's plan to liberate them, which God has again stated in a flurry of first-person verbs: "I will free you . . . , and deliver you from slavery. . . . I will redeem you. . . . I will take you. . . . I will be your God. . . . I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham" (6:6–8). The response? "They would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery" (6:9). The point would seem to be a sociological one: the people cannot be liberated before they are ready, and after generations of bondage and hard labor it will take more than promises to get them ready; only after seeing the very real power of Pharaoh broken by repeated plagues are the Israelites able to summon the energy to come out of Egypt.

Pharaoh himself is no less a site of this fundamental tension, in this case paradox, of divine sovereignty and human agency. On the one hand, *God* claims responsibility for "hardening" Pharaoh's heart so that he refuses to allow Israel to leave (7:3; 14:4); but on the other hand, Pharaoh is said by the narrator to have hardened *his own* heart (8:15, 32). And still other times the passive voice is used, so that Pharaoh's heart "was hardened" or "became hard" (7:14; 8:19; 9:7), thereby leaving the agency behind the hardening unclear. This shifting of agency allows the narrative to retain a sense of God's sovereign activity in history, while at the same time affirming the moral culpability of Pharaoh, whose repeated promise of freedom is never fulfilled and thus represents rather realistically the psychology of tyranny. Logically, we as readers may want to know, Which was it? Did God harden Pharaoh's heart, or did Pharaoh harden his own heart? But the story refuses to put forth one answer or another, giving us a "both/and" that reflects a pronounced

trend in biblical narrative to render not only the inner lives of both humans and God but creation and history itself as unfathomably complex and finally unresolvable.

THE NATURE AND WORKINGS
OF BIBLICAL POETRY

"If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off," Emily Dickinson once wrote, "I know *that* is poetry." Dickinson was, of course, somewhat more than averagely tuned in to the effects of poetry. In truth, poetry—even great poetry—often fails to take the top of one's head off, and even sometimes goes unrecognized *as* poetry. There is no more striking example of this than the Old Testament, which contains a distinctive body of poetry that has been, for two thousand years, only rarely and inconsistently represented on the page in the form of verse rather than prose. Though some passages are lined out in ancient and medieval manuscript traditions, these include not only ones that we would now recognize as poetry but also lists of names that are clearly not poetry (in the same way that the phone book is not poetry just because it is lined out). And printed Bibles from Gutenberg on, until the twentieth century, represent most of the poetic sections of the Bible as blocks of text indistinguishable from prose.

The question of whether biblical poetry even exists has been around since ancient times, and it has been exacerbated by the fact that our primary models for what counts as poetry are drawn from classical literature, which was highly metrical (that is, marked by the regular alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables known as "meter"). Already in the first century CE, Jewish intellectuals like Philo and Josephus, feeling the need to defend their cultural heritage in terms of Greek and Roman ideals, went looking for iambs and hexameters in the Torah. And they were followed in this task by later Christian writers such as Origen (in the early third century) and Jerome (in the fourth and fifth centuries), who also assumed that if poetry existed in the Bible then it must exist in metrical form. The search for meter in biblical literature has been revived on occasion in the modern period as well, but it has never amounted to much, for the simple fact that ancient Hebrew verse is not metrical.

This lack of conformity to classical standards—as well as to virtually all poetry in the West until the nineteenth century—has no doubt been a major factor in keeping biblical poetry under wraps and underappreciated, but so has the Bible's status as religious literature. This status means that attention to literary *form* has been a low priority for interpreters of the Bible, eager as they have been to move to the *content* or the *meaning* of any given passage.

There has been very little allowance in biblical interpretation for the possibility that, as Wallace Stevens puts it, "poetry is the subject of the poem."

A major breakthrough in understanding biblical poetry came with Robert Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, first delivered in association with Lowth's chair in poetry at Oxford and then published in 1753. Lowth's most lasting contribution, for good and ill, was his identification of *parallelismus membrorum*, or parallelism of lines, as the primary structuring principle of ancient Hebrew verse. "Things for the most part shall answer to things, and words to words," Lowth writes, "as if fitted to each other by a kind of rule or measure" (Lowth 2005, 205). From Psalm 114:4, for example:

> The mountains skipped like rams,
>   the hills like lambs.

Or from Song of Songs 8:6:

> Love is strong as death,
>   passion fierce as the grave.

Notice that "mountains" matches "hills," and that "rams" matches "lambs." And notice the strict parallelism of "love//passion," "strong//fierce," and "death//grave." Lowth admitted that many lines of biblical poetry did not display the same equivalence of terms that we see here, but nonetheless the recognition that lineation was based on the matching of two or three short lines in a couplet (two lines) or triplet (three lines) form, which did not depend on meter, opened the way for more sustained attention to such poetry *as poetry*, rather than just repetitious-sounding prose.

For two hundred years after Lowth nearly all attention to biblical verse was on this phenomenon of parallelism, and most especially semantic parallelism (or parallelism of meaning), which too often was reduced to the idea that the second or third line in a couplet or a triplet simply restates the basic idea from the first line. But recent scholarship has shown that the relationship between lines is more intricate and more interesting than this. Adele Berlin, Michael O'Connor, F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, and others have shown that parallelism involves not only semantic features (a parallelism of *meaning*) but also grammatical, syntactical, and phonological patterns (generally not apparent in translation), and that complex syntactical constraints underlie the ancient Hebrew poetic line, which are not in the end reducible to "parallelism." Moreover, Robert Alter and James Kugel have shown that even when the relationship between lines looks to be semantically parallel at first glance, there is often a subtle dynamism in which the second line moves beyond the language or imagery in the first by making it more concrete, more specific,

more intense, or more emotionally heightened. Thus, in the matched lines quoted above from the Song of Songs, *passion* is a more specific emotion associated with *love*; *fierce* heightens and intensifies the connotation of *strong*; and *the grave* serves as a concrete symbol of *death*.

Beyond the question of line structure, however, the cluster of other features that typify biblical verse has mostly been overlooked by scholarship of recent decades. But one can get a much richer sense of the distinctive workings of biblical poetic style by recognizing these features—features that can be seen more clearly when compared with the workings of biblical prose narrative.

As we saw above, ancient Hebrew authors developed a *prose* style that was especially suited for narrative (or storytelling) and that prefigured in important respects the style and techniques of both modern novelistic fiction and history writing. Virtually all other long narratives in the ancient world—from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* to the Canaanite epics to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—take the form of verse, reflecting the oral origins of the epic genre. By casting their stories in the form of prose, biblical authors pioneered a "writerly" form of narrative that did not depend on the rhythms of oral poetry and that allowed for the development of a genuine third-person narrator, whose voice could be distinguished from the direct discourse attributed to characters within the narrative. It also allowed for a depth-of-consciousness and an opaqueness in its literary characters so that, as we saw above, readers are seldom told what characters are thinking or feeling at any given moment, even though such thoughts and feelings are often vital to characterization and to plot development.

Biblical poetry, however, is very different. First, formal differences mark the poetry as *verse* (instead of prose): not only lineation but also a compressed syntax that tends to drop particles and pronouns in order to achieve the conciseness of the line. And biblical poetry is, to borrow Terry Eagleton's vague but appropriate characterization of poetry in general, much more "verbally inventive" than biblical prose narrative. The terse, straightforward style of biblical narrative means that it tends to avoid elevated diction or figurative language. But the poetry is filled with figurative language, from the mostly conventional imagery found in the Psalms, for example, to the more inventive imagination of the book of Job, to the double entendres of the Song of Songs. So the troubled fate of the psalmist is, often as not, imagined in terms of "the pit" that threatens to swallow or "the flood" that threatens to overwhelm; and God is imagined as a "rock," a "fortress," or a "shield."

As the suffering Job imagines blotting out the day of his birth, he both personifies and eroticizes it, as he imagines the night longing for the day, which, in his counterfactual curse, never arrives:

Let the stars of its dawn be dark;
    let it hope for light, but have none;
    may it not see the eyelids of the morning.
                           (Job 3:9)

Later, Job imagines God's enmity toward him in terms of the ancient grudge between God as Creator and the chaotic force of the personified sea:

Am I the Sea, or the Dragon,
    that you set a guard over me?
                  (7:12)

Answering Job, thirty chapters later, God returns to this image, but redefines and repersonifies the chaotic Sea not as an enemy combatant but as an infant to be nurtured:

Who shut in the sea with doors
    when it burst out from the womb?—
when I made the clouds its garment,
    and thick darkness its swaddling band . . . ?
                    (38:8–9)

The Song of Songs, erotic poetry set in the alternating voices of two young, unmarried lovers, prefers a lush, bodily based array of metaphors. For example, the male voice proclaims:

Your two breasts are like two fawns,
    twins of a gazelle,
    that feed among the lilies.
                (4:5)

Or this, from the female voice:

As an apple tree among the trees of the wood,
    so is my beloved among young men.
With great delight I sat in his shadow,
    and his fruit was sweet to my taste.
                 (2:3)

If line structure and other formal markers are enough to establish the presence of verse in the Bible, they still do not tell us much about its use or function. Again, a comparison with biblical prose is instructive, since one of the most striking features of biblical poetry is that it is relentlessly nonnarrative. Once ancient Hebrew culture had developed the flexible prose form

for recounting stories, both long (e.g., Genesis, 1 and 2 Samuel) and short (e.g., the books of Ruth and Esther), it seems that verse was reserved for more specialized, highly rhetorical uses. For example, the prophets are most often represented as casting their messages in poetic form. Note the parallelism and figurative language in, for example, Amos's well-known cri de coeur,

> Let justice roll down like waters,
>   and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
>   (5:24)

This familiar parallel structure is combined with hyperbole and a striking visual imagination (both very much lacking in biblical narrative, though common in the ancient epic tradition) in the prophet Isaiah's utopian vision of the future:

> The wolf shall live with the lamb,
>   the leopard shall lie down with the kid.
>   (11:6)

As in so many languages, verse also seems to have been the preferred form in ancient Hebrew for the aphorism—the pithy and often didactic observation on the nature of the world—which, like poetry more generally, aims for a maximum of meaning in a minimum of words. The book of Proverbs is filled with such aphorisms in verse form, such as,

> A soft answer turns away wrath,
>   but a harsh word stirs up anger.
>   (15:1)

For more skeptical versions of such aphorisms, one can turn to the book of Ecclesiastes, as in:

> All streams run to the sea,
>   but the sea is not full.
>   . . . .
> The eye is not satisfied with seeing,
>   or the ear filled with hearing.
>   (1:7–8)

or,

> In much wisdom is much vexation,
>   and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow.
>   (1:18)

But one of the most interesting uses of biblical verse is as an early form of what will later go by the name of "lyric poetry," that intensely subjective, non-narrative, and nondramatic form that has dominated modern poetry at least since Wordsworth. This early form of lyric foregrounds two final characteristics of biblical poetry, both of which further distinguish it from biblical prose narrative. First, biblical poetry is invariably presented as direct discourse, the first-person voice of a speaking subject (a precursor of the modern "lyric I"). Again, ancient Hebrew narrative separates the third-person *narrator* from the dialogue spoken by *characters*, which is grammatically marked (by expressive forms and deictics, to use the technical terms) as direct discourse, whereas the narrator's voice is not (see especially Kawashima 2004a). Biblical poetry is also marked in this way; it is, in other words, always presented as if it were dialogue. For example, the biblical narrator will never be represented as speaking in poetry, but characters can be, as in the deathbed blessing of Jacob near the end of the book of Genesis (chap. 49) or the Song of Deborah in the book of Judges (chap. 5).

The second way that biblical lyric poetry distinguishes itself from narrative is in its willingness to give access to the inner lives of its speakers. If biblical narrative trades in opaqueness of characterization, biblical poetry fairly revels in the exposure of subjectivity. When biblical authors wanted to convey feeling or thought, they resorted to verse form. Obvious examples of this formal preference include poetic books such as the Psalms and the Song of Songs, where the expression of passion, whether despairing or joyful, is common. We find also in narrative contexts briefer poetic insets that serve to express or intensify emotion. Take, for example, Jacob's reaction to the bloodied robe of Joseph, which is rendered as a perfect couplet of Hebrew poetry: *ḥayyah ra'ah 'akalatu / taroph toraph yoseph* ("A vicious beast has devoured him, / torn, torn is Joseph!"—au. trans.). The book of Job serves as an example on a much larger scale, beginning in the narrative mode and giving precious little insight into Job's thoughts or feelings. But when the story moves to Job's anguished death wish ("Let the day perish in which I was born, / and the night that said, 'A man-child is conceived'" [3:2]), it gives way to the passionate but finely modulated poetic form of chapter 3, followed by many chapters in verse form of Job's impassioned defense of his integrity.

T. S. Eliot's dictum "When we are considering poetry we must consider it primarily as poetry and not another thing" might seem like a truism, but it is a sentiment that sometimes needs repeating. This is especially true when it comes to considering the poetry of the Bible, which has so often been treated precisely as "another thing"—traditionally as theology or as ethics but more recently, under the guise of literary criticism, as narrative. But biblical poetry is, in at once the most simple and the most complicated ways, *poetry*. To

consider a biblical poem as poetry is to pay attention to its line structure, its status as direct discourse and the sort of speaking voice that it presents, its diction and imagery, and its willingness to give expression to thought and emotion in a way that biblical narrative rarely does. It is, in other words, to attend not only to *what* the poem means but also to *how* it means and to how it gets used. By paying such close attention to literary *form*, in addition to *content*, we honor those authors and communities that worked so hard to produce and preserve literature of a very high quality.