

# Fiction and Poetry in the Bible<sup>1</sup>

by Geoffrey Preston, O.P.

This paper assumes that there is a Bible and not just *biblia*, that there is a more or less recognizable corpus of revelation. It assumes the soundness of the Christian instinct which eventually said that 'all these books and no others, all these books with all their parts' constitute *a* book. Precisely which books and which parts of which books are to be included is not so important. None of the deuterocanonical ('apocryphal') books represents a genre of literature that is not represented in the universally accepted Bible. The whole Christian tradition has a book with an agreed beginning and an agreed end, a book that plays itself out between the Pentateuch and the Apocalypse. Exactly where the canon is fixed between those bounds is not a matter of great moment, exactly what weight Christians give to the decisions of the Synod of Jamnia.

But assuming that there is *a* book and not simply a collection of books, all the various literary items which go to make it up have to be read within the context of the whole book whose terms are the Pentateuch and the Apocalypse. That is, they all have their context in the overall Christian myth, of the movement from creation to re-creation (Genesis to Apocalypse) or within the myth that stretches from Exodus to Apocalypse, the myth of redemption, which is situated by and also situates the creation-recreation myth. All the individual books with all their parts are misread if they are not read as held in tension by this myth. Of course they have a right to be studied as though they had not been finally included in the Book, and that is so for each part of each book even down to each saying ascribed to Jesus by a gospel-writer. If they are not studied as though they had not finally been included in the Book, then once again they are misread. But they have their final Christian significance, their revelatory function for us, only within the Book, only as set in the context of the myth that is polarized by Genesis-Exodus and the Apocalypse.

The instinct that has given us this Book is the instinct to tell a story, the impulse to recite, to rehearse, to find (or have pointed out) some orientation and coherence in the flux of living. The story answers man's yearning for a more comprehensible world. Within the story, the narrated myth of the Bible, there can be set any number of those elements which go to make up the totality of man's life in the world: laws, love-songs, anxious questionings, traditional wisdom, brief ad hoc letters, the literary impact of a particular man's life. All these contribute to the richness of the myth, but are in turn

<sup>1</sup>The substance of a paper given at Spode House in January 1972 to the Christian Publishers' Conference.

criticized by it in its totality and (perhaps) answered in their own terms within some other smaller section of the total myth. The story as a whole sets a graph over all its constituent elements, each of which still retains its peculiar function within the myth. Perhaps it is worth remarking that there is something peculiar to the Judeo-Christian tradition which demands that it come to expression in a story, with its sense of before and after and its potentiality for including the whole of lived and imaginable reality. It is in keeping with that Christian sense that transcendence has to be located in the flesh, and in opposition to the first apostasy from the Christian understanding of the world which is loosely called gnosticism. The story as vehicle of revelation necessarily involves the particular, proper names, dates, the contingent and material, these and not those. The narrative form is peculiarly apt for a religious tradition which insists that the particular historical event which occurred in Jesus of Nazareth passes judgment on all history and on all the facets of human life. The myth that runs from Genesis-Exodus to Revelation and is centred by the event of Jesus can include a dense portrayal of human existence in all its empirical reality only in function of its being a story told. Fundamentally, the Christian wants to say that anything which cannot in principle be included within this myth is meaningless. As Amos Wilder puts it, the story 'holds' the world (in both senses of the word).

Between the two poles of the Bible as we have it, we are offered an extraordinary range of human experience. Often enough what matters is that a certain sort of book is there at all, rather than any of the details of the book. It matters, for example, that Proverbs is there, that distillation of the wisdom of many and the wit of one concerned with ordinary decent standards of living, but you cannot expect to find timelessly valid instructions about how to bring up children there. In the breadth of what is included, there is a pledge that everything humanity is capable of can be included in a meaningful history; it is a basis for the hope that *our* experience can be included. In principle there is no kind of experience which cannot be brought to judgment by the myth. But different books have different functions within the corpus. The histories speak of how the myth is not supra-historical; the pattern from creation to recreation, from the Red Sea to the sea of glass and fire, works itself out in the details (often enough impossibly boring) of the kings of Israel and Judah. It involves case law, people living together from day to day trying (or perhaps not even trying) to be faithful to the pattern expressed in the events at the beginning of the nation's history; long sections of the Pentateuch witness to that. It involves worship; and the later sections of Exodus and Leviticus and the psalms and parts of some of the historical books give us some insight into that. The various books have various functions, and even within the same book different literary forms may have different roles. The rest of this

paper will be concerned to offer some suggestions about the role of fiction and poetry, the function of the creative imagination, in the total myth.

### *Fiction*

By fiction, I refer to some of those parts of the Bible which began life in more or less their present form as writings, rather than words which in some kind of accidental way got written down lest their memory perish (e.g. most prophetic poetry) or words that were written because at the time the author unfortunately had no better means of communication with others because of external circumstances (e.g. those New Testament epistles which are genuinely letters and not disguised tracts). Further to this I intend to exclude quasi-history and quasi-biography, for example the gospels and books like Kings and even Joshua; I am also going to exclude such obvious non-fictional works as law books or books of traditional wisdom. This leaves basically Ruth, Jonah, Esther, Tobit, Judith and the deuterocanonical parts of Daniel, and those protological and eschatological myths of the early chapters of Genesis, the rest of Daniel and the Apocalypse. In all of these, what Northrop Frye calls the 'radical of presentation' is the written word rather than oral address; they are meant primarily, therefore, for a person to read rather than to listen to.

Most of them, too, are popular and unsophisticated. Many of them have some particular axe to grind. They are addressed to a particular historical situation, to people with their own brand of strength and weakness which the author wishes to encourage or to counter. Books like Ruth and Jonah, for example, fit pretty neatly into the time after the return from the captivity in Babylon, when the Jews were determined to build a better life for themselves and their children but did it on bases which some of them regarded as inadequate. Ruth is an attack on the exclusiveness of it all, Jonah on the loss of the sense of mission to the *goyim*. Each book has a specific end in view; the means it uses differ. Ruth is a pastoral idyll, a lovely story, the kind of story that you just cannot put down, a love-story about king David's great-grandmother, the pagan Ruth. The sheer delight of it all was designed to make it a much-read story; and by being read it might go on reminding people that even the best of Jews did not have an altogether Jewish family-tree. Jonah is designed to keep people's interest by the speed of events and their joke-quality. You are supposed to sympathize with Ruth and laugh at Jonah and be a better people of God as you are instructed through being either charmed or amused.

Esther is a story which is quite impossible to put into any historical setting. The author goes out of his way to let you know that he is not offering you a true story. But it is addressed to people who have some experience of an anti-semitic pogrom. It was intended to keep up

people's spirits in a difficult time for the Jews by reminding them that God saves his people in some strange ways. This story which was composed at a desk, for the book-trade, has an interesting after-life when it was associated with the feast of Purim and read out in synagogue almost like a Victorian melodrama, with a great deal of cheering and booing and rattling of noise-machines by the congregation. This is the reverse of what sometimes happens when an originally oral composition comes to be identified increasingly with its written form (e.g. the sagas or Homer).

Judith and the proto-canonical parts of Daniel have much the same function in the Bible as Esther, describing something of what it can be like when God saves his people. (In the Hebrew Esther, God is assumed and never mentioned specifically.) But there are also stories which are moralistic without any obvious historical setting: Tobias and Susanna for example. They attempt to inculcate virtue simply by being stories; the better they are as stories, the more successful they are likely to be, though there is no reason to assume that people's lives automatically improve as their reading-matter gets more respectable. But for the most part they are not told for the sake of a good story; they all have a message. The stories with the real human interest in the Bible are to be found in the historical books. Wilde says: 'The only real people are the people who have never existed'; in the Bible precisely the opposite is the case.

But in the Bible there are also stories which do not have any conceivable historical time as their setting, the myths of the beginning and the end-time: Genesis 1-11 and the apocalypses in Daniel and Revelation. How things began has always fascinated people, as a well-written scientific account still does. How a person thinks of the beginning is desperately important. Israel needed a creation myth of its own to counter the whole series of creation myths open to her people; she needed a myth of the fall; she needed some way of coping with the attraction of the stories of a cosmic flood. What we are offered at the beginning of Genesis is a literary re-working of stories from a wide spectrum of cultures in the East-Mediterranean nations. The function of the creative writer here is not to invent out of nothing, but to tell his tale with all the skill he can manage in order to make his myth a plausible rival for the others, and in fact to make it victorious over the others. It is fantasy, but that sort of fantasy which was never meant to deceive anyone.

The myths of the end have a different basis, and it seems likely that originally Israel had no such myths. Her story could have been told as a story of the promise made to Abraham and his seed of the land of Canaan, a promise that was fulfilled in the time of Joshua. Then history came to an end, and Israel had only to be faithful to the covenant in order to continue in undisputed possession of the land for ever, telling stories about the past. But the national crises which led to the destruction of the two kingdoms had the effect of reinstating

history, at first history that was in principle dateable but, following the bitter disappointments of the centuries after the return from Babylon, of an absolute future to which no date could in any sense be attached. There was a shift, that is, from prophecy to apocalyptic. Apocalyptic was a literary form which went out of favour amongst Jews after the Synod of Jamnia, when the wild hopes that it aroused were blamed for the disaster of 70 C.E. Only one Christian apocalypse was admitted to the New Testament, and some Churches have always been uneasy about it and refused to read it in public worship. Nevertheless it is an essential conclusion to the Bible as Bible; it resumes all the great themes of both testaments and holds out the hope for a new world. Apocalyptic writings functioned in something of the way that underground resistance literature does; they are full of strange words, secret words and symbols, designed to stiffen people's will to resist and throw off the yoke of the Beast. Perhaps, too, one can appeal to science-fiction, which functions in something of the same way: it offers a perspective on a world that can hardly be imagined and yet that can be imagined, that can be brought into language. The apocalyptic seer speaks for God and for the people, for the future and for the dispossessed of the present; he aims to create hope, the stuff of all major innovations. Apocalyptic appeals to those who have no stake in the present and so can afford to fantasize about the future; but it is to such people that the kingdom belongs, and so gospel and apocalypse stand together.<sup>1</sup> Apocalyptic creates a possible rather than an actual world, and by the skill with which it does so it can give a sense of the possibilities that open up before us, so that we become aware of the constrictions that now hem us in and more than ever conscious of the burdens that oppress us. Apocalyptic presents us with a vision of a decisive act of man's recreation. The Apocalypse of the New Testament takes up the great themes of science-fiction and of all world myths: disaster on a cosmic scale which yet leaves a remnant remaining. But it stands as a conclusion to the Bible as Bible, as the conclusion of a narration. Only an apocalypse, which speaks of an absolute future, could do that, could make it possible to include the totality of post-biblical Christian experience within the narration which is the story of God's dealings with men. The prophecy of the Old Testament issued into institutional Judaism; the prophecy which emerged again in Jesus could have ended in the institutional Church (as Eusebius clearly thought it did). In that the book of Revelation keeps open the future, it is altogether essential for Christian orthodoxy.

<sup>1</sup>There is no reason to suppose that in the early years the details of eschatological imagery were taken in a crassly literal way, any more than people take the details of science-fiction in that way. But it is worth remembering what C. S. Lewis said about science-fiction: 'Nearly all the most pungent American criticism of the American way of life takes this form, and would at once be denounced as un-American if it ventured into any other.'

*Poetry*

It is as difficult to delimit what one means by poetry in some parts of the Bible as it is in modern writing. But, almost without exception, the poetry of the Bible was not originally written. It was sung or recited; it was meant to be listened to or sung in chorus. Its 'radical of presentation' is the spoken word rather than the scroll or codex, which has about the same relationship to the poetry of the Bible as a musical score has to the performance of a piece of music. The music exists only in its performance; the poetry of the Bible exists only in its being declaimed.

Often enough, the poetry of the Bible is not 'inspired' in the ordinary and non-theological sense of the word. Often enough poetry is not inevitable but a means to an end, a particular didactic technique. A song is taught to people so that they can sing it, and by singing remember it, and by remembering it be faithful. It is the handmaid of a particular ideology, just as much as the songs we see children singing in China. It is used rather than received. But the Bible has plenty of examples of poetry in its own right, poetry as celebration of grief or joy. Very much of this remains close to that basic form of Jewish and Christian thinking which is the story. The typical form of our poem-hymn-song is the ballad, the song that celebrates a story. 'Poetry is a song of deeds' (David Jones). So much of biblical poetry is a struggle to talk about the history of the world. It is there not for ideological reasons but because, with some degree of inevitability, the deeds of God have to be celebrated, to be brought into poetry, to become the subject of that heightened awareness of them which is proper to poetry. There is a third kind of poetry in the Bible, the poetry of the prophets. In some ways this is poetry used, a means to an end, but the end in question is often enough one which demands the use of poetry. It is a matter of poetry being the only possible way in which such matters can be spoken of. The poem is recited or sung as word of God. Not unlike Jesus after them, the prophet-poets experience daily life at a level of intensity which opens up the vista of God's dealings with his people, and this insight is communicated in poetry. The words of the prophet, by their literary quality, unlock the future to other people and allow them to experience it proleptically as God's future.

*Jesus as maker: fictor and poet*

Strictly speaking, the parables of Jesus are neither fiction (in the sense of being originally written) nor poetry, but they have enough in common with both to warrant their inclusion here. Jesus, though certainly literate, wrote nothing; this was not particularly unusual for rabbis of the time. The radical of his presentation was the spoken and not the written word, oral address. He spoke 'with authority', with the authority of a creative artist with words who knew how to take hold of the deepest aspirations of his people, how to play on the

resonances of their national past and bring them out into the new situation of the present. To listen to the rabbis, you might imagine they were writing down what they said. To listen to this rabbi, you were immediately called into question. The parable form was not new to him, but the fact that he spoke so much in parables was new. 'I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things kept secret since the world was made.' And that is the function of poetry. Christ, says Clement of Alexandria, is the real Orpheus, the new Song which by its singing turns beasts into men and recreates the universe. Jesus is the poet who reveals the iconic power of the first creation, and he does this by using the language of the people to great effect. What is new in Jesus of Nazareth comes to expression as a new literary force as well. He speaks in parables in order that his message may not be exploited intellectually. For the most part he leaves them uninterpreted to those who have ears and do not hear. The road to a moral judgment here is by way of the imagination. The kingdom of heaven is not like a person or thing but like a story. Ultimate reality is dramatic and comes to expression most appropriately as a story into which people are invited to enter; the story is its own guarantee. Like a poem it has an in-meaning rather than a through-meaning. It is a focus of attention rather than a pointer.

#### *Scripture in Church*

Most of the Bible is not great literature. It is popular literature, written for what publishers call non-readers. There has been a tendency in synagogue and church to make even those books which were originally meant to be read quietly by individuals into dramas. Books which were meant to be read aloud though undramatically (like the gospels) have often been dramatized in the liturgy. Often enough the great poems have been set to music to bring out their poetic quality on public worship. The serious reader has Job and Ecclesiastes to keep him happy, and there are some books (Leviticus for example) which are no more meant to be read by all and sundry than were the rubrics at the beginning of the old missal. But in the tradition of the Church there has been a thrust towards keeping the spoken word as the radical of presentation, or even towards making it such. And this is not accidental, any more than the fact that Jesus wrote nothing. As Luther puts it:

'In the New Testament the proclamation should take place by word of mouth, in an animated tone, publicly, and should bring that forward into speech and hearing which before was hidden in the letters and in apparent concealment. Since the New Testament is none other than an opening up and disclosure of the Old Testament, therefore it is that Christ did not write his own teachings as Moses did his, but gave it forth by word of mouth and commanded that it should be done orally and gave no command to write it. Before the apostles wrote, they preached and converted

men by their living presence and voice. That books had to be written was already a great departure and breach with the Spirit, occasioned by necessity and not in keeping with the New Testament.

It is all the more unfortunate that at the end of the Gutenberg era the Catholic Church in England should in practice have gone into reverse by the device of the missalette which has turned liturgy into a literary exercise. Christian liturgy in essence is for non-readers, requiring only a few songs, canticles, acclamations that can be picked up by dint of repetition. The Bible most often demands that people read and other people listen. If I read the Bible at home, I read it in order to be able to hear it and answer it better when I next hear it read in its proper context of the worshipping community, when it actually becomes the word of God. The fiction and poetry in the Bible are there to keep open the immediacy of God's word as address.

But this is not a plea for the burning of Bibles or an attack on the book trade. The Bible includes literature of enough sorts to stand pledge for all kinds of literature. The myth that is polarized by Genesis-Exodus and the Apocalypse and centred by Jesus of Nazareth is a myth that allows for the inclusion of all that is human. Whatever deals with man and with God and with the world in whatever kind of combination has a claim to fit somewhere within the Christian scheme; to fit not simply in its own terms but to be judged and found true or wanting by the story of God's working with man in the world from creation to recreation, from the Red Sea to the sea of glass and fire.

## Faith and Theology in the University

by Roderick Strange

In a recent lecture, Fr Edward Yarnold discussed the place of the theologian in the university.<sup>1</sup> He mentioned the salutary effect of contact with other disciplines on the university theologian, the value of the ecumenical setting which a university provides for theology, and, in particular, the view, proposed by the 1952 Faith and Order Conference at Lund, that theologians should make for the centre of the Christian faith where they are united, and, working from that centre, justify their divisions. On this last point, however, Fr Yarnold registered misgivings, for, he asserted, 'Theology is not a study

<sup>1</sup>See E. J. Yarnold, s.j., 'The Theologian in the University', in *The Month*, March, 1972, pp. 79-82. The lecture was the first annual New Foundation Lecture given at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California, on 13th May, 1971.