READING THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE

By JAMES BARR, M.A., B.D., F.B.A.
PROFESSOR OF SEMITIC LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

IN this lecture I propose to do two things, and both of these, I fear, only in a rather simple and superficial manner: firstly, I want to consider in general principle what it means to read the Bible as literature and how far it is possible to do so; and secondly I want to consider some of the issues of method in the literary appreciation of the Bible, as they are being discussed at the present day.

In one of the classic works of comparative literary studies, Mimesis, Erich Auerbach wrote a first chapter in which he compared two stories, stories that he chose because they formed two strongly contrasting ways of representing reality. The chapter was called “Odysseus’ Scar”, and it began with the story of the home-coming of Odysseus to Ithaca in book 19 of the Odyssey. The aged housekeeper Eurycleia, who had been the childhood nurse of the great warrior and navigator, recognized him by a scar. I shall not venture farther into Auerbach’s analysis of the style of this story; but, he said, “The genius of the Homeric style becomes even more apparent when it is compared with an equally ancient and equally epic style from a different world of forms.” The contrasting story which he cited was the tale of the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham from the Book of Genesis. Later he goes on to deepen the contrast by discussing other biblical characters—Saul, David, Absalom. It would be impossible for me to restate here all the aspects of contrast which Auerbach draws out; but perhaps the main point is this, that the Greek style is “of the foreground”: “the Homeric style knows only a foreground, only a uniformly illuminated, uniformly objective present” (p. 5). In the Hebrew style, by contrast, we have “the externali-

1 A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester on Wednesday, the 14th of February 1973.

zation of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative”; thus “thoughts and feeling remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches.” One prime example, as the father and son make their way to the place of sacrifice, Isaac carrying the wood and Abraham with the fire and the knife, is the dark and ominous phrase—yet full of compassion and perhaps with a glimmer of hope—that says “and the two of them went together” (Gen. xxii.6); then Isaac asks, hesitatingly, about the animal, and Abraham says, “God will provide for himself the ram for the sacrifice”—and then, again, “and the two of them went together”. So, according to Auerbach, the Hebrew text is distinctively “fraught with background”.

Now it is not my purpose to consider at this time whether this analysis of the Greek and Hebrew styles of the respective ancient writers is a correct one. Sufficient for my purpose is this, that we note how a writer like Auerbach, surveying in depth the representation of reality in western literature, chooses an Old Testament passage to stand alongside a passage from Homer as two basic types. In his presentation of the matter these two types are the starting points for a long progression through many varieties of style. We may thus, then, begin with a recognition of the literary value, and the importance in literary history, of the Hebrew Bible and its style.

On the one side, then, we have as a starting point a deep recognition of the function of the Bible as a literary function, fully comparable with the function of Homer’s Odyssey or with that of the Chanson de Roland. But before we can go farther we have to set against this the weight of those opinions which have spoken with some asperity against the evaluation of the Bible as literature. Such opinions were all the more impressive when they were expressed by distinguished men of letters themselves. In an essay “Religion and Literature”, no less a person than T. S. Eliot—and whose voice could be more authoritative than his in such a matter?—uttered some severe strictures against those who wanted to treat the Bible as literature.¹ Books such as the Bible, he

¹ The essay is published in T. S. Eliot, Essays Ancient and Modern (London, 1936), pp. 93-112; for the passage quoted, see pp. 95 f.
averred—or, indeed, such as the historical works of Gibbon, or such as Bradley's *Logic* (this last, one might feel today, hardly a competitor in the same class)—could certainly be read for the "enjoyment of language well written" but could not properly be enjoyed for this alone; they could be fully appreciated only by those who in addition were concerned "with the objects which the writers had in view". So, Eliot went on, warming to his argument, "The persons who enjoy these writings *solely* because of their literary merit are essentially parasites; and we know that parasites, when they become too numerous, are pests. I could easily fulminate for a whole hour against the men of letters who have gone into ecstasies over 'the Bible as literature'." Or, again, in a memorable phrase, "those who talk of the Bible as a 'monument of English prose' are merely admiring it as a monument over the grave of Christianity". If the Bible has had an influence on English literature, this is not because it has been considered as literature, but because it has been considered "as the report of the Word of God".

And with this remark Eliot has defined for us one basic difficulty in any attempt to understand the Bible as literature. In the main tradition of Jewish and Christian culture, at least until fairly recent times, the Bible has functioned primarily as a religious and theological work. However great its literary excellence, it was valued not for that but because it was the source for the truth about God, about man and about the world. Its character was in this sense understood to be informational rather than literary; the mode of its reading was more akin to the philosophical quest for ultimate truth than to the pursuit of literary insight and enjoyment. This fact put the Bible in a different class from other books, and the effect of this was rather to stifle the idea that it might be enjoyed as literature. During the last decades, indeed, occasional attempts have been made to present the Bible primarily as a literary work—for instance by altering the purely physical appearance of the traditional Bible, a book uniquely bound in black with gold or red edges, set out in numbered verses which seemed designed for citation in doctrinal argument, and to make it *look* like any other book; and editions have been published with titles such as "The Bible designed to
be read as Literature ". But, at least until very recent years, such efforts have not been very successful. Only in post-war years do the Revised Standard Version and the New English Bible, both in widespread use, look like any other book; and it is doubtful if they in any case are particularly "designed to be read as literature". People, no doubt, feared these fulminations of Mr. Eliot, and did not wish to be regarded as both parasites and pests; or they respected the opinion of another man of letters, C. S. Lewis, who put forward more or less the same argument, saying that "You can read it (sc. the Bible) as literature only by a tour de force ".

But a more profound reason, no doubt, and one which probably had its effect on Mr. Eliot and Mr. Lewis, was the trend in the theological thinking of the time.

That same period, the decades from the thirties up to the sixties, was also the time of a marked revival of biblical influence and authority within Christian theology; and in this revival one of the opinions most strongly held was that the Bible had authority not for what it was in itself, least of all for its literary qualities, but because it testified to the great truths of God and his work in history for the salvation of mankind. The essence of the Bible, seen from this point of view, is its quality as a report of events; and if its reports are sometimes pretty poor stuff as literature, then, it was felt, so much the better, since literary quality is entirely a side-issue. During this period, it is said, this same edition of "The Bible designed to be read as Literature" was not infrequently cited as an ideal example of how the Bible ought not to be read.

To sum up this point, then, a traditional religious viewpoint had been that the Bible must be read in a theological mode, and that meant above all as a source of true knowledge about the objects described in the Bible—about God, about the creation of the world, about his redemption of mankind, about sin and salvation, about the possibility of a future life. This traditional point

1 E.g. The Bible, designed to be read as Literature, edited by E. S. Bates with an introduction by Laurence Binyon (London, [1937]).

of view, with its emphasis on the reading of the Bible for the objects to which it refers, the historical events which it narrates, was in part reasserted (with some differences) in what I have elsewhere called the twentieth-century revival of biblical authority. This position tended against the appreciation of the Bible as literature, and this tendency in turn may well be supposed to have affected such literary men as Eliot and Lewis. However, we may go on to ask, are these arguments entirely compelling? Is it not necessary after all to come back to the importance of reading the Bible as literature?

Firstly, it has to be faced that a large part of the population is no longer able or willing to read the Bible as an authoritative source of direct theological and religious wisdom. If it is insisted that the Bible can be read only as such a source, and in no other way, then the only effect will be that the average person will not read the Bible at all; and this indeed is very probably happening. There is probably no body of literature of equal importance, not extraneous to our Western tradition and civilization but intrinsic to it and woven into the texture of all its later literary and artistic achievement, that is so little enjoyed as literature as is the Bible. Just because the tradition has been that this book is there not for our literary enjoyment but for our religious edification and instruction, people feel a mental blockage against reading it at all unless their purpose is to make its religious and moral instruction the basis of their life. The effect of this is on the one hand to damage the appreciation of other literatures, such as English literature, which have absorbed a tremendous amount of imagery and substance from the Bible; and, on the other hand, to isolate the small world in which the Bible is read, the world of synagogue and church, from the surrounding culture. Surely now the time has come when this tendency may wholesomely be reversed: if the past religious tradition has tended to insist that the Bible is primarily an authority for religious belief and practice, and if in our own times the remnants of that tradition make a dividing line between the Bible and our culture, then perhaps the time has now come when the religious tradition can invite the surrounding culture, irrespective of its belief, irrespective of whether it considers the Bible a unique source of theological instruction, to
share the reading of the Bible with the religious tradition as a common literary experience.

And I do not doubt that much of this would have been accepted by men of letters such as Eliot or Lewis. Eliot did not deny that the Bible could be read as literature; he denied that it could be rightly read if it was read solely as literature, without any concern at all for the objects which concerned the writers. Between the two there is important middle ground. It would indeed be a thin and no doubt a useless reading of the Bible that did not recognize its profoundly religious and theological character; indeed, it is almost fantastic to suppose that one might read it without recognizing that it was written not out of joy in the sonorousness of its own language, out of pleasure in its own literary quality, but because it wanted to say something about God and his works, God and his dealings with man. On this recognition we may properly insist; and indeed I doubt if many would really dispute it. But the recognition that the Bible is a religious text, that it is concerned to speak about God, is not the same thing as an acceptance that its religious teaching must be right, a willingness to read it as a source of religious authority for me today. The recognition that the Bible is dominated by a religious concern is no obstacle to the reading of it as literature; but the idea that its religious teaching must be right and must be accepted as authoritative does constitute in the minds of many people a serious block to the enjoyment of it as literature. Thus the reading of the Bible as literature forms a possible way in which the Bible may serve as a common point of contact to both religious man and non-religious man in the present age.

And this is reinforced by another point: even the religious reading of the Bible comes closer to the literary reading of it than has been recognized by any of the authorities that we have quoted so far. The Book of Job, for instance, one of the supremely literary pieces of the Bible, is not evaluated even by the most orthodoxly religious as if it directly conveyed teaching about God and his works; in so far as it conveys something about God at all, it does so obliquely, through the appreciation of its dramatic progression, of its tragic profoundity, and so on. In the New Testament we have parables, the purport of which is other than
the surface story which they narrate. And these are only a few examples, but clear cases; no one knows how far the principle might be extended, so that wide areas of biblical narrative might have to be read in the same way. The Genesis story of creation is no longer read as if it told us how the universe came into existence; it conveys to us something about God and his nature, something about ourselves, something about the world around us, but what it conveys is something different from the surface meaning of the text as it lies before us. And, if this can be said of the story of creation, why not the same of the story of Jesus' birth, or his resurrection? The efficacy of the Homeric epics does not depend on the real existence of the deities Zeus or Poseidon, or on that of Achilles and Odysseus; and indeed they are equally effective as literature whether or not there ever was any war between the Greeks and Troy. Why should it not be so with the Bible also, and what if we were to think of it as a supremely profound work of fiction? I do not say I want to go so far; I only assert that some steps in this direction are already accepted as normal.

Perhaps we can put the same point in another way, as follows: even the theological or religious effect of the Bible never took exclusively the more rational and intellectual form of studying and accepting the explicit teaching of the Bible, taking the Bible as enunciation of the truth about the objects which it describes. Even in the most traditional culture the Bible and its imagery functioned on a much wider front than this: it furnished, through use in liturgy, in art and in legend, the images and the colouring for a sort of mythology which permeated Christendom and which went far beyond the scope of the explicit doctrinal theology. In this respect the effect of the Bible in the religious culture itself may be considered as closer to a literary than to a directly theological phenomenon.

Nevertheless, as I have suggested, a central core of theological thinking held on to a basically informational function for the Bible, a basically referential orientation to its meaning. But this

1 "Referential" is used for explanation in terms of the "referents" or objects referred to in a text, as distinct (let us say) from explanation in terms of the intentions in the mind of the writers. Cf. the diagram on p. 61 of my The Bible in the Modern World (London, 1973).
view, powerful as it has continued to be within theological thinking, has now come to be immensely qualified by another factor. Within theology today, whatever theory may say, the dominant mode of reading and understanding the Bible today has come to be a historical mode; this is not the sole approach, but it is certainly the dominant approach, among the professional experts in biblical studies. It is a characteristic experience of the student of theology that, having embarked on his subject with the aspiration to learn from the Bible more about the God whom he worships, he finds his biblical study directed insistently towards historical quantities: the sources used by the writers, the unity and integrity\(^1\) of the writings ascribed to them, the dating of them, the influences which worked upon their minds. It is true that this dominance of the historical reading of the Bible, though it has been virtually effective for a century or so, has not yet fully percolated through the entire religious public, and possibly it never will; but even so the availability of good and simple popularizations of scholarship, and the existence of excellent courses on biblical subjects in schools, make it likely that the historical understanding of the Bible will continue to spread. And in any case, whatever the situation for the general public, I would hardly doubt that in the world of biblical scholarship the centrality of a historical method of approach to the Bible is still unchallenged.

But the dominance of a historical reading of the Bible has now in effect changed the position of the religious or theological approach to it. The Bible is looked at not as a document which can be directly interpreted so as to give access to the truth about the entities mentioned in it, i.e. God, creation, redemption, the nature of man, the life to come and so on. Rather, it is looked at for the mind of the writers in their historical setting. What did they think, and why did they so write? What was their theology, and what were their intentions in their situation? Thus we no longer move in theology from biblical texts directly to external realities, but from biblical texts to the theological intentions of the

\(^1\) "Integrity" in biblical scholarship means the belonging together of a book or group of books as the genuine work of the writer to whom they have been ascribed.
writers and only from there, and thus indirectly, to external realities. But, and this is important for our purpose, this means that theological use of the Bible has already in effect moved to something more like a literary method.

Thus, to summarize this part of our argument, it is only in part and at certain limited levels that the desire for a religious or theological understanding of the Bible contradicts a literary reading of it. On the contrary, (a) the religious understanding of the Bible has always had in it something of the myth function which belongs to literature generally; it has provided a sort of poetry which has informed the life of church and synagogue and which has gone far beyond the range of the more deliberate and rational thinking of actual theology; (b) even when theology directs itself towards the events and realities which lie behind the biblical text, it leaves so much uncertainty about the exact character of these events and realities that they in turn often become something like the symbols in literary myth; (c) theology itself by its own reliance on a historical approach to the understanding of the Bible has already granted that the study of the Bible lies within the total current of study of the world's literatures. There are indeed certain functions in biblical study which a literary study cannot hope to carry out in itself; there are philosophical questions, theological questions, questions of structure and reality, which may lie beyond the reach of any literary reading of the Bible; and thus we may perfectly well admit that a theological use of the Bible needs to go beyond what the literary reading of it can provide. But I think that I have shown that there is no real contradiction between a literary reading of the Bible and the perspectives which will be perceived and made use of in the religious life.

If this can be agreed, however, it only starts us off on the second part of this lecture, in which I undertook to discuss some of the current issues about method in the literary appreciation of the Bible. Here we may go back to the point made a moment ago, that the dominant mode of reading the Bible in mainstream theology is a historical one. It looks at the text and asks historical questions: who wrote this, and when, and why? What was the process of evolution of this form of the text? What currents of
earlier tradition can be reconstructed, that led up to the present written stage of the material? And, again, starting from the events as reported in the text, one asks: were the events really like this, as they are reported? Can the data of the biblical text be used as evidence in order to reconstruct more accurately the true history, whether the external history of physical and perhaps political events or the internal history of development of tradition? Historical reasoning of this type is familiar to all serious students of the Bible in modern times. It is true that it is felt that this in itself is not enough to provide an answer to the truly and specifically theological questions; and for this purpose attempts are made to add on a structure of “biblical theology” or something with the same function; but the point is that such theological questioning is, within theological Bible study itself, not felt as a contradiction of the historical reading of the Bible, but as something that follows upon, presupposes and accepts the latter. The historical reading of the Bible continues to have a central role.

There are, however, several strains which have been brought upon the understanding of the Bible by this domination of a historical method. I may mention among them the following. First of all, the centrality of a historical method has produced something of a gulf—not perhaps necessarily, but certainly in fact—between the lay reader of the Bible and the trained professional. Partly this is a necessary result of the great expansion of knowledge. There was a time when rather little was known about the history of Israel and the life of the earliest church except for what could be directly read from the pages of the Bible, but the modern scholar has to use sources from a variety of cultures which goes far beyond the acquaintance of the layman. But the essence of the matter is not the expansion of available factual material. Rather, the essence lies in two things: the historical approach is a matter of training and habit, which cannot be easily acquired. Secondly, the historical approach involves an immense amount of hypothetical reconstruction. All the work of textual criticism, source criticism, form criticism, and so on is absolutely necessary, and enables us to penetrate to earlier and perhaps more genuine or accurate forms of the text; but, however probable these results, they always retain a reconstructive and hypothetical
element, and in this sense they differ from the reading of the biblical text as it stands.

But, if the historical method causes something of a gulf between the modern professional and the modern layman, it also causes something of a gulf between modern scholarship and the older religious and theological tradition. All the major doctrines of the religions in question were worked out and enunciated long before the historical method in its modern form was worked out. Though it may be possible at a higher level to reconcile traditional doctrinal ideas, such as those that were worked out in the early centuries of Christianity (I think of the ideas of the Trinity and of the nature and person of Christ) with the Bible as read through modern historical approaches, it is extremely difficult to suppose that these teachings would ever have emerged in this form had the historical mode of reading then been in fashion. But if there is thus a certain gulf between traditional theology and modern historical biblical study, there is also a certain gulf between modern theology and modern historical method. Though I have said that within institutions of theological learning and education the historical method of reading enjoys a dominant position, there is much dissatisfaction about that position from the side of theology itself. It is repeatedly asked whether a historical study of the Bible can prove adequate for religious needs. How does one get from a historical appreciation of the Bible to an understanding of its meaning for the present day? Can one pass from what it meant to what it now means? Can the biblical scholar, along with the results of his historical research, also give some directions to the theologian about the implications of this for religion in the present time?—and often, it seems, he cannot. It is thus not surprising that the present time sees a certain striving to work out something that would not deny, but would supplement, the historical interpretation of the Bible—and the most important such attempt, no doubt, is the existentialist line of interpretation, associated with the name of Bultmann.

But finally, and for our immediate subject most importantly, the dominance of the historical approach in biblical study draws biblical scholarship rather far apart from the general study of
literature. An illustration of the separation can be found in the use of the term literary criticism itself, which has come to mean in biblical scholarship something quite different from its sense as applied to general literature. In general literary study we mean by literary criticism a study of the structures and the imagery of works, their modes, symbols and myths, their poetic, dramatic and aesthetic effect; but in technical biblical scholarship the same term means the separating out of historically different layers in composite works, the history of the tradition during the period of its development in written form, as distinct from its development in a spoken form before it was written down. The historical character of biblical scholarship has meant that it works, to a surprising extent, with reconstructions of previous stages of the tradition, rather than with the present form of the text; that, to state the other side of the same coin, the units with which it works are different from the units of the present text, e.g. the books of the Bible as they stand, because these are analysed and divided into their different sources, like the documents J, E, D and P in the Pentateuch, or the documents Q, Mark, L and M in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. And this matter of source division is only a symptom of a general outlook which lies deeper, and which appears whether differentiation of sources is in question or not: the biblical scholar on the whole interprets the biblical text on the basis of its origins, its background, the process which has led up to it, and, above all, the intention of the person or persons who produced it. In this sense we may say that biblical scholarship is focused upon intentionality. Even when it goes beyond merely historical levels of explanation and tries to provide a theological assessment, it tends to look for the theological intention, the kerygmatic intention and the like, of the author or of the tradition behind him.

From the point of view of general literary study, however, this emphasis on intention may be questioned and has been questioned. The issue is well focused in the title of an essay by an American scholar, W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., "The Intentional Fallacy". A poem, or a work of art, is not to be judged or

assessed on the basis of what the author intended, but on the basis of what he produced. It follows that the task of the interpreter is not primarily to interpret the author’s mind but to interpret the poem, the historical legend, or the gospel which he wrote. Knowledge of the antecedents of the literary work, the sources it used, the background and situation of the author, his mental state and intentions, may be interesting information but can be no more than ancillary to the main task, which is that of interpreting the work which he produced. Wimsatt, indeed, did not apply this at all to the Bible; and of course the question was already formulated before him by others. Another American literary critic, who has worked more fully upon the relations between literature and religion, R. M. Frye, writes as follows:¹

A literary work is its own meaning, and its meaning cannot be univocally abstracted from it. This is the one literary principle upon which all competent literary critics now agree.

In other words, for a work to be literary in character, and not merely informational, means that it does not have a detachable meaning which might have been stated in some other way; the way in which it was stated in the work is in fact the “meaning” or the “message” of this work.

In all these three ways, then, it seems possible to say that a certain gap in the consciousness has been created by the centrality of a historical method in biblical scholarship: it has left as its inheritance a separation from the person who is not a professional scholar, a separation from the older religious exegetical tradition, and lastly a separation from the more aesthetic appreciation, directed primarily to the forms, structures and myths, of literature in general literary culture outside the biblical sphere. It would not be unfair, I think, to say that biblical scholarship, when compared with the general criticism of literature, gives something of a rather “philistine” impression; its basic consciousness is, or recently has been, “non-literary”.

¹ In his Perspective on Man: Literature and the Christian Tradition (Philadelphia, 1961), p. 43.
² Cf. R. M. Frye in his “A literary Perspective for the Criticism of the Gospels”, in Jesus and Man’s Hope (Pittsburgh Festival on the Gospels, Pittsburgh, 1971), ii. 194 f.: “As I read certain kinds of New Testament criticism, 1
It is not surprising, therefore, that voices are now being quite widely heard to propose some new modes of reading the Bible which will at least supplement the concentration of current scholarship on the historical approach. In the post-war years, for instance, there was considerable discussion of a typological method of reading. Typology is a mode of reading in which persons or incidents of one part of the Bible are seen to prefigure or to be shadows of persons or events of another. For instance, Joshua might be thought to be a prefiguration of Jesus: he had the same name, and he led his people into the Promised Land, just as Jesus did in another sense. Such typology already exists within the Bible and was widely used by the New Testament writers in their adoption and utilization of the Old. Not only this, however, but typology was the principle through which for people generally, for example for medieval man, the Bible came to be and to furnish a central, perhaps the central, personal orientation to the world, in other words to be the central source of literary myth. Thus the attempt to revive typological interpretation in the twentieth century can be seen as in a way an attempt to restore a certain poetical and literary reading, alongside the historical one. This particular revival, for reasons that I shall not enter into here, has not in the end had a great deal of effect; but it is a certain indication of the way in which the wind is blowing.

As another example I might mention the position taken by the productive American Old Testament scholar, Brevard S. Childs. In a recent book he puts forward the thesis that the true context sometimes feel that I am observing a radically nonliterary enterprise, so different are the methods from those generally accepted in the field of the humanities." This observation in itself seems to me to be true, but I would be doubtful of many of the other criticisms of current biblical scholarship as stated by Frye, not least because they seem to bear not upon the distinction between historical and literary methods, which is our interest here, but upon certain particular schools of New Testament scholarship, particularly the Bultmannian.

1 Biblical Theology in Crisis (Philadelphia, 1970). Cf. the French structuralist position, expressed by P. Beauchamp (Vetus Testamentum Supplements, xxii. 123), that a distinctive feature of the Bible is the fact that it is "un corpus, dont la clôture est la marque essentielle". The perception of a structure of the biblical whole is made possible by the fermeture, the closedness, of this corpus. Cf. below, pp. 25-29.
for understanding of the Bible is the context of the canon of scripture. By this he means that the biblical writings are different from just any group of books, in that they are a corpus or collection of a closed character. Childs entirely accepts in itself the historical principle, that one can validly and must necessarily consider previous stages of the books, that one must consider their relations with writings outside of the biblical canon, and that the books can be understood in terms of their origins and background. But he adds to this another approach which he considers indispensable and also decisive: the major task of interpretation is interpretation of the Bible as it now is, that is, of the collection of books as a finished and completed collection, and of each element as it stands, not in relation to its reconstructed prehistory, but in relation to the other parts of this same canon. To this he adds another shift of perspective: traditional biblical scholarship has had a bias toward origins, toward explaining things through what they had been beforehand. Childs wants us to look with equal interest at what came afterwards, at the effects of scripture as well as the world from which it emerged. Biblical scholarship, in its claims to be historical, has often been historical in one direction rather than in the other: it has looked for antecedents, but been unable to deal with after-effects. Now, in saying all this, Childs is arguing more on a theological than on a literary basis: that is, he thinks that this suggestion is the right way to pursue a future biblical theology. But it is impossible to avoid noticing the similarity of his suggestions to lines which emerge from the literary consideration of the Bible.

Another name that should be mentioned is that of the Israeli scholar Meir Weiss, who published some years ago a work in Hebrew entitled The Bible and Modern Literary Theory (2nd ed., 1967; the Hebrew title is ha-Miqra ki-d'muto). As the title suggests, Weiss advocates the application to the Bible of methods widely applied in reference to modern literature and elaborated in critical theory. His views are available in a European language in a paper delivered before the Uppsala Old Testament Congress in 1971.¹ He calls his method “Total-Interpretation,” for which “structure analysis” seems to be a synonym. The task is

¹ Vetus Testamentum Supplements, xxii (1972), 88–112.
to interpret the text as it now stands, and to interpret it as a whole. Within that whole each individual element has its own importance, but it has this importance only as it is related to the function of the whole. Weiss does not claim exclusive rights for his Total-Interpretation. It explains only one thing: what the poem (in the case used at Uppsala, a Psalm) means. (This, needless to say, is quite a lot!) Biblical scholarship has also other tasks, for instance to judge the text according to its historical position and to understand it as a historical document; but this is entirely another matter. It would be impossible for me to embark here on a full discussion of Weiss's ideas, and I would venture only the following observations. First of all, his general ideas seem to belong to a strongly Germanic trend of thinking, and are not always clear; also, they show a kinship with ideas of the philosopher and religious thinker Martin Buber, from whom indeed the term "Total-Interpretation" appears to derive. Secondly, it is not clear exactly how Weiss's specimen analyses follow necessarily from the premises of his theoretical position, nor does he seem to make adequate contact with other views about the structure of the Psalm in question, or indeed adequate contact with current opinion within Old Testament scholarship generally. But, finally, in general we may well expect that Israeli scholarship will provide much stimulus in the future towards the appreciation of the Old Testament as literature. On the one hand the particular forms of historical analysis of the Bible which have become normal (and perhaps sometimes almost fossilized) in western scholarship have not been so fully indigenized in Israel; and on the other hand it is obviously more natural to the Israeli people and scholar to regard the Bible as basic and classic national literature.

The most important direction, however, from which current stimuli towards new literary approaches to the Bible are coming lies, as might be expected, in French structuralism. It is a measure of the interest that has been awakened by these new approaches that at the Uppsala Congress already mentioned there were, in addition to Meir Weiss's paper, one by a French scholar on "L'analyse structurale et l'exégèse biblique" and one by a Canadian on "Structural Analysis and Biblical Studies". Thus

1 Ibid. p. 93.
three out of the seventeen papers published in the Congress Volume belong directly to our present question. The French scholar, P. Beauchamp, had already published a full-length work, Création et séparation (Paris, 1969), which offered a detailed study of the Genesis story of creation.¹ And, for a variety of related approaches in theory and in practice, we must mention the composite volume Analyse structurale et exégèse biblique with contributions from François Bovon ("Le structuralisme français et l'exégèse biblique"), from Roland Barthes, from the Swiss Old Testament scholar R. Martin-Achard, and from others.

What then is structuralism? Perhaps we may introduce the subject by comparing the situation in the study of language, and not of literature. This is a good comparison in many ways, for it is very relevant to the linguistic side of biblical study. The basic approach in western scholarship to a language like biblical Hebrew has lain through historical and comparative philology. There has been an emphasis on the historical development of the language, and particularly on the development as seen backwards rather than forwards: thus for instance the knowledge of the reconstructed linguistic situation before the earliest Hebrew documents has been, on the whole, esteemed a lot higher than the knowledge of what happened afterwards, for example the knowledge of how Hebrew developed in the post-biblical period. This, of course, is typical of a historical approach which is not just history but history slanted and biased towards the origins, rather as if (to exaggerate a little) the key to all English history lay in the understanding of what happened before 1066. In semantics and lexicography, in the study of words and their meanings, the emphasis correspondingly lay on etymology, the study of the origins and previous background of words.² As a whole, this method of study—and it is still dominant in our university courses in biblical

¹ But note that Beauchamp himself (Vetus Testamentum Supplements, ibid. p. 117 n.) warns against taking his book as in its entirety typical of the structuralist analysis: though certain sections are related to structuralism, any view which took his book as a whole to be typical of that approach would be in error about the real nature of structuralism.

Hebrew—is atomistic. Elements of language are taken separately and are compared with related elements in other languages, or in the same language at other times, rather than set within the system of the one language at the same time. There is an emphasis on that which is exceptional; knowledge of the unusual, the rare example, the exotic phenomenon, is highly esteemed.¹

This older way of looking at language can now be said to have become out-dated. The newer linguistics looks on a language primarily as a system, not a group of discrete elements, but a system in which elements are related to one another at the same time in relations of similarity and opposition. The emphasis is thus synchronic; it lies on what is present at the same time—whether today, or in the lifetime of the prophet Jeremiah. Individual items cannot usefully be compared with other individual elements in other languages or in other stages of the same language except in so far as a comparison of the entire synchronic systems is made. Within the system of any one time the governing relations constitute the structure.²

This shift of view from the older historical philology to the newer linguistics constitutes the structuralist revolution in language study. Now, when we speak of structuralism in relation to our present subject, namely the study of literature, we are speaking of a transfer of the structuralist mode of thinking to the study not of language but of all sorts of other things—myths, poetry, literature, folktales, religion, and the organization of society in general.³ Here also the attempt is made to outline systems, to identify binary oppositions, to establish paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations. A structuralist work on any subject can often be

¹ Contrast the view expressed by Beauchamp, ibid. p. 127: "pour le structuralisme la catégorie d'exception n'a pas de place."

² A structural approach does not deny in any way the historical approach, but, as it would now be expressed, a diachronic analysis must be one of states properly analysed synchronically. Against much of traditional historical philology it could be alleged that, precisely because of its disinterest in system and synchrony, and because of its bias towards origins, it failed in the very purpose it set most high, that of being historical.

³ The debt of general structuralism to the structural analysis of language in particular, and to F. de Saussure as a pioneer, is generally admitted. See the general introduction to the subject in M. Lane (ed.), Structuralism: a Reader (London, 1970).
identified by a mere look at the rash of diagrams which attempt to express these relations in visual form.

What are the implications of structuralism as it would apply to the study of the Bible? Unquestionably, this approach would put its main weight upon the explication of the text as we now have it. As Bovon phrases it, "Trop longtemps tournée vers la diachronie (cf. les commentaires, les articles du *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* et les monographies sur la christologie du Nouveau Testament), l'exégèse s'orientera vers la synchronie". Thus he envisages, not the abolition of the historical approach, but "une exégèse génétique enrichie par une exégèse structurale". Anomalous details, philological curiosities, parallels with texts from surrounding cultures, explanations drawn by comparative philology from discoveries at Ugarit or other sources, all of these would fall into place as part of the major study of the text as a whole, governed by its own principles of structure.

But, as with all programmes for a fresh advance in scholarship, the theoretical illumination of the ideas is one thing and the convincingness of the individual execution is another. It is, it seems to me, as yet too early for us to say whether the biblical studies which structuralist principles have inspired will prove so convincing as to turn the world of scholarship in general into a new direction.

In respect of intentionality, that is, in respect of the interest in the author and his purposes or thoughts, structuralism falls very much into line with some of the ideas which have been discussed above. According to Bovon, exegesis as it is usually practised looks for an author, his thoughts, that on which he is dependent, and his genius. By contrast, "structural analysis puts the historical author between brackets, in order to direct attention upon the text alone, understood as a constructed whole, the functioning of which it is our task to comprehend". Again, to talk of the

1 Bovon, in *Analyse structurale*, p. 25; cf. p. 12.
2 Beauchamp's *Création et séparation* must still, in spite of the author's disclaimer mentioned above, be regarded as the nearest thing to a full treatment of a major biblical theme by a writer who is both aligned with structuralist thinking and fully competent as a biblical exegete.
3 Bovon, op. cit. p. 20.
author and of the reader as historical personages would be to depart from the framework of structural analysis; in such analysis, by contrast, author and readers are considered "as personages included in the story". The meaning of the story, this would seem to imply, is the meaning of the story as a story written and read; its meaning tells therefore of author and reader; but this is a different level, a different operation, from the historical identification of the viewpoints of some past author or some past group of readers. "Il convient, écrit-il, de 'découvrir le code à travers lequel le narrateur et le lecteur sont signifiés le long du récit lui-même'."1 Mysterious as some of these hints about method may be, they seem undoubtedly also suggestive in relation to the questions which we have been discussing.2

Space forbids me to do more than mention yet another work, this time from a German source, which also belongs to our subject. Again an Old Testament scholar, W. Richter, has recently published (1971) a work entitled Exegese als Literaturwissenschaft: Entwurf einer alttestamentlichen Literaturtheorie und Methodologie.3 German scholarship has been particularly dominated by the leadership of history, both history in the sense of empirical research into the events of the past and history in the sense of a theological category which has been taken as controlling in theological thinking; and this historical emphasis has been relieved by the rather non-historical or ahistorical existentialist interpretation, while French and Anglo-Saxon developments in linguistics, such as the rise of structuralist thinking, have been rather neglected; but now that rather suddenly a structuralist approach has begun to raise its voice in Germany, it has done so in a formalistic, heavily methodological and somewhat rigid fashion.4 But it is to be expected that the climate of opinion in

1 Bovon, ibid. He is here talking about the views of Barthes.
2 Contrariwise, it is interesting that P. Ricoeur, opposing the synchronic emphasis of structuralism, maintains that, whatever the importance of the synchronic in general, "dans le monde sémitique et judéo-chrétien la diachronie l'emporte sur la synchronie"—see Bovon, ibid. p. 16 and references there.
Germany also will undergo some alteration in coming years as a result of these developments.

Another work which can be mentioned only briefly is the essay “Towards a Valid Theory of Biblical Hebrew Literature” by Professor Isaac Rabinowitz—an essay which, I understand and hope, is in the near future to be expanded into book length. Rabinowitz is interested in the distinctiveness of the Bible as literature—a point which we have already mentioned—and seeks to identify it in the Hebrew conception of the word. If we think (as, Rabinowitz seems to imply, mankind generally, other than Israel, has thought) of words as instruments of communication and expression, the Israelites attached other and greater functions to words. These Hebrew assumptions “encouraged the conviction that literature was not only communicatively effective, but extra-communicatively effective, that it could affect the world directly and immediately...”\(^2\) It remains, however, for a fuller analysis to show that this view can be sustained as the basis for a general view of the literary uniqueness of the Hebrew Bible. It would be necessary, on the one hand, to show that the properties here found in the Bible did not exist in any other literature, which I would doubt. On the other hand, my own researches have caused me to doubt the widely-made generalizations about the Semitic concept of the word as more than a mere word, something more like a form of power.\(^3\) As I have argued, the names that have power in Hebrew literature are the names of powerful persons—gods, holy men, kings, great commanders; if a name is thought of as a name with power, it is because it is the name of an entity which has power. For the present, therefore, I doubt whether the Hebrew idea of words forms an adequate foundation for a theory of general literary distinctiveness.

Another scholar who has thought profoundly in recent years about the literary character of the Bible is L. Alonso Schökel,

---

\(^1\) For bibliographical details, see above, p. 13, n. 2. I have only just seen Professor Rabinowitz’s further development of his ideas, in his “‘Word’ and literature in Ancient Israel”, *New Literary History*, iv (1972-73), 119-39.

\(^2\) Rabinowitz, p. 328.

S.J. 1 Though his awareness of modern trends in the criticism of literature is high, he looks at the Bible from a more definitely theological viewpoint than the scholars whom we have just been discussing, and, as the name of one of his major works, *The Inspired Word*, suggests, his discussion brings together more purely literary considerations with the more traditional theological concepts of inspiration and authority. For this reason his work presents problems for discussion which it would distract us to enter into here in greater detail; but it would equally be impossible to pass over his influential and well-informed thinking without mention.

I shall conclude by mentioning one or two of the questions to which this hasty and incomplete survey leads us.

Firstly, one of the preoccupations of many biblical scholars and theologians in the last thirty years or so has been the endeavour to state the distinctiveness of the Bible, the way in which it differed from the thoughts and the language of other people. I began this lecture by mentioning the *Mimesis* of Auerbach, which suggested that such a distinctiveness was basically a literary matter. In my first book, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, I criticized the attempt to demonstrate such a distinctiveness for ancient Israelite thought by working lexically, from the meanings of words, from the relation supposed to exist between individual words and the mental structure of the Israelites. But in that book (p. 272) I also suggested that the question is a stylistic matter, and that it had been basically wrong to try to wring from words and their meanings that which could only be gained, if at all, from the characteristics not of words but of complete complexes of discourse, that is, from literature. The quest which seems now to be gathering momentum, for some fuller understanding of the Bible as literature, may well lead us closer to some understanding of what can be meant by the distinctiveness of the Bible.

A second general question is of a more philosophical nature: it concerns the relation between the sign and the thing signified, the relation between structure and reality. As I have suggested,

---

the older theological tradition, and modern successors of the same point of view, very often thought of language through a simple referential scheme of meaning: a word means a thing, and that thing is the meaning of the word. It was, therefore, not surprising that, when the attempt was made to link biblical theology with features of biblical language, this was done in a word-centred way. But once we think of the Bible as literature, and take as units not the single words but the great literary and stylistic complexes, it becomes more and more difficult to find any use for a referential idea of meaning. The literature is its own meaning; we cannot expect to identify a set of external realities of which it is the linguistic sign, and nobody approaches other literatures in such a way. It is thus interesting that the French structuralist position seeks to avoid the reduction of the text to a thing signified, the expression of its meaning as the designation of something external to itself.1 In the theological tradition of biblical study, on the other hand, one has sought to disengage from the text the theological or "kerygmatic" truth, which is then taken as the essence of its meaning. Our survey of approaches to the Bible as literature suggests that this traditional theological treatment of the message or meaning of the Bible may be no longer possible. To say this is not to deny the existence of any "thing signified"; it is not to maintain that the great theological entities simply are not there. It is rather that the Bible, when seen as the sort of literature that it is, is not the kind of language which can be taken as direct representation of them.

Finally, we come to a question which certainly goes beyond the scope of this lecture, and which may afford the starting-point for some future discussion. It is perhaps possible to maintain that any literary appreciation implies, or induces, or is related to, a general view of the world, a way of understanding life, a "spirituality".2 In this sense, it may be said, all great literature, what-

1 Cf. Barthes, op. cit. p. 39: "Le problème, du moins celui que je me pose, est en effet de parvenir à ne pas réduire le Texte à un signifié, quel qu’il soit (historique, économique, folklorique ou kerygmatique), mais à maintenir sa signification ouverte." According to Bovon, ibid. p. 22 n., "Barthes refuse tout rapport entre le texte et la réalité à laquelle il se réfère ".

ever its subject-matter, possesses a theological dimension. But, if this is a right view of the matter, and if it is possible to read the Bible as literature rather than as religious guidance, then what is the relation between the spirituality implied in such reading of the Bible on the one side, and the religious and theological belief of those who read it as the sacred text of Jewish and Christian faith on the other? Surely it is uncertainty about this question, which has hardly had adequate recognition so far, that lies at the centre of the debate about reading the Bible as literature.

\[1\] I use more or less this phrase in my *The Bible in the Modern World* (London, 1973), p. 60, n. 5, but fail there to remark that it was suggested to me by Professor C. F. Evans; nor do I there discuss the matter further.