

PROLEGOMENA TO MEANING, OR, WHAT IS “LITERARY” ABOUT THE TORAH?

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The drastic economy of biblical narrative style is not simply to be equated with an absence of style but rather represents a distinctive narrative poetics, which turns in particular on the opaqueness of characters' inner lives and thus on the essential ambiguity of character motivation. Such practical criticism, by rigorously lingering over the details and structures of the literature, serves as an indispensable prolegomena to the meaning-making project of interpretation, theological or otherwise.

IS THERE ANYTHING WE MIGHT IDENTIFY as distinctively literary about the Bible? I realize that the very phrase “distinctively literary” will sound more than a little old-fashioned to many readers. Yet, I want to claim that there is not only something distinctively *literary* about the Bible but also something *distinctively* literary about it, and that if one is unaware of the particular literary art of the Bible, one not only misses out on the richness of the literature but also on certain of its theological implications.

The idea of a distinctively literary aspect of the Bible may sound old-fashioned from a literary-theoretical perspective because the very concept of “literature” has come under question in recent decades from, on the one hand, a cultural studies perspective that blurs the once rigorously-maintained line between high and low culture and, on the other hand, a newly resuscitated emphasis on rhetoric that understands “literary” language as no less engaged in the task of persuasion than supposedly non-

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literary forms of discourse.¹ And any claim regarding the distinctiveness of biblical literature in general will also sound old-fashioned within the context of biblical and religious studies because of the current emphasis on the continuity of ancient Israelite culture and literature with its ancient Near Eastern context.² These trends in literary and biblical scholarship are good ones, certainly: the idea of literature as a rarefied object of study that is thought to exist beyond, or outside of, ideological commitments and concrete historical practices is untenable and needs to be challenged; and the once-popular notion of the Bible's "uniqueness" is also untenable and was driven, for several generations of scholarship, by the theological commitments of scholars. Still, to emphasize the participation of literature in the same cultural and linguistic structures as other forms of discourse is not to deny the existence of literary conventions and strategies, even if they can be used just as readily in what we might think of as primarily nonliterary contexts. (Thus, metaphor, elevated diction, narration, etc., appear regularly not only in prose nonfiction, political speeches, and other polished forms of high rhetoric, but also in daily conversation. In such contexts, the speaker or author could be said to strive for a "literary" effect, without intending to produce "literature.") And to argue that certain ancient Israelite writers developed a distinctive prose—and to a lesser extent, poetic—style, as I mean to do in what follows, is not to argue for the absolute uniqueness, either literary or theological, of the biblical writers. (By analogy, one might claim that French-Canadian writers, although sharing much with both other French writers and other Canadian writers, have carved out a distinctively French-Canadian style.)

In light of this methodological critique, even at the risk of sounding old-fashioned, I will make the case for the distinctive literary qualities of the Bible, focusing especially on the Torah, or Pentateuch, for several reasons. The first is the centrality of the Torah in Jewish tradition and formative Christianity, which makes it of primary importance in Western

¹ For information on both of these challenges to the idea of literature one might begin with Jane Tompkins, "The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response," in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1980) 201–22; and the first and last chapters of Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996) 1–14 and 169–89; along with the bibliographies in each.

² It is instructive to compare just the titles of older books such as Norman Snaith's *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (New York: Schocken, 1964) or G. Ernest Wright's *The Old Testament against Its Environment* (London: SCM, 1950) with more recent books such as Mark S. Smith's *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford University, 2001).

religious tradition. Second, the Torah is a repository of much of what we might term classical Hebrew narrative and, as such, has had a looming presence in Western literary tradition as well. Third, it happens that we now have available, in Robert Alter's recent translation, a very fine literary rendering of the Torah into English that makes accessible even to those without Hebrew many of the distinctive literary effects that previous translations have tended to obscure.³ Although focused on the Torah, much of the analysis offered below can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to other parts of the Hebrew Bible. What follows, then, is emphatically an example of practical criticism, that is, an analysis of "the words on the page," to use the old New Critical phrase, with a minimum of theoretical reflection. Theoretical reflection is reduced here not, I hasten to say, because I judge literary theory to be useless or irrelevant—I have in fact done theoretical work myself and think that it has a very important place in literary and biblical studies. Moreover, it is true that the type of practical criticism I offer here has its own theoretical presuppositions, and I am happy for readers to reflect on what those might be. But my experience in teaching and in research tells me that there is a general lack of awareness of biblical literary style, and I intend my article to serve as a sort of primer on the workings of biblical literature.

As a practical exploration of biblical style, what follows might also be thought of as a "prolegomenon to meaning." Biblical scholarship has tended to be in the "meaning business," to move quickly from the words on the page to the meaning of those words; or, in the parlance of structural linguistics, we biblical scholars have tended to see significance as dwelling less in the signifier than in the signified. The New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl has famously articulated the distinction between what the biblical text "meant" in its ancient context (the task of historical-critical scholarship) and what it "means" today (the task of hermeneutics). Whatever the limits or weaknesses of this distinction—and it has not gone without challenge from several quarters—it is significant that both the historical-critical task and the hermeneutical task are understood as having to do with meaning.⁴ Biblical scholars, of course, are hardly unique in this respect. Theologians and ethicists also, when working with religious texts,

³ Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2004).

⁴ Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 5 vols., ed. George Arthur Buttrick et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962) 1:418–32. For important responses to Stendahl's formulation, see, e.g., Ben Ollenburger, "What Krister Stendahl 'Meant': A Normative Critique of 'Descriptive Biblical Theology,'" *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 8 (1986) 61–98; and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Interpretation: De-Centering Biblical Scholarship," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107 (1988) 3–17.

tend to move quickly from the texts themselves to whatever doctrinal or ethical content can be extracted and summarized. Even those religion scholars with a more social-scientific orientation, when analyzing, for example, a ritual practice or kinship code, will try to tease out of concrete codes and practices their larger symbolic meanings. I do not intend to challenge the project of meaning-making, of interpretation based on real analysis, since it seems to me both inevitable and desirable. I would like to make a case, though, with regard to biblical interpretation specifically but with implications for other subdisciplines in the study of religion, for fully attending to style before moving to what is often considered substance, for tarrying with surfaces before attempting to plumb the depths.

THE BIBLE'S ECONOMY OF STYLE

It is hard to deny that in many respects the Torah is among the most "unliterary" works of literature that we have. This judgment is not entirely attributable to its mass of legal material. For even those portions of the Torah made up of classical Hebrew narrative (most of Genesis, the first half of Exodus, parts of Numbers) exhibit a style that often seems simple, even primitive, in comparison with great works of world literature from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, to the *Tale of Genji*, to *Lolita*. For example, biblical narrative 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" that reveals little about their syntactical relation (what the linguists call "parataxis"), 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 32:21 (where Jacob sends ahead of him a large gift to his estranged brother Esau in hopes that Esau will be placated over Jacob's earlier theft 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'" (my trans.). 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, and, not least, the sometimes jarring concreteness with which God is imagined to be involved in human history.

Many of these features are elements of biblical literature's "drastic economy of style" (thus Robert Alter). 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”⁵—with the blunt recounting in Genesis of the massacre of an entire city by two of Jacob’s sons: “Simeon and Levi, Dinah’s brothers, took each his sword, and came upon the city unopposed, and they killed every male. And Hamor and Shechem his son they killed by the edge of the sword” (34:25–26).⁶ 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. In fact, as I endeavor to show, it is primarily this terseness that lends biblical narrative, and thus the Torah, its distinctive complexity as literature.

I have chosen, here and below, to compare the Bible with Homer for a couple reasons. One is that the epics bearing Homer’s name represent a substantial body of literature from an historical period roughly contemporaneous with much biblical literature, that is, the early first millennium BCE. But, since the two bodies of literature differ in language and in cultural and geographical background, they make for interesting comparison. Second, the Bible and Homer—and, more broadly, Greek and Hebrew literature—represent two primary pillars of Western literary and intellectual tradition and so are worthy of special attention. It is also fruitful, of course, to compare the Bible with other ancient Near Eastern works such as Ugaritic narrative poetry, on the one hand, and the epic of Gilgamesh and other ancient Mesopotamian literature, on the other hand. But since this literature lay buried for millennia and was only rediscovered within the last hundred years, it has not had the same sort of cultural influence as the Bible and Homer. Still, there is much continuity between biblical literature and the Ugaritic texts, written in a West Semitic language directly related to biblical Hebrew and dating from about 1400 BCE, and

⁵ *Iliad* 16.480–85 (translation is from *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles, intro. and notes Bernard Knox [New York: Viking, 1990] 426).

⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, biblical passages are from Alter’s translation, cited in the text by chapter and verse.

it is true that the Ugaritic narratives display the sort of terseness found in the Hebrew Bible.⁷ It also seems, however, that the scribes responsible for writing the Ugaritic texts did not exploit this terseness for deliberate literary effect in the way that biblical authors did. Moreover, as Robert Kawashima has demonstrated, these scribes did not have the linguistic ability to represent consciousness and thus could not imply an unplumbed depth-of-consciousness in the way that the most accomplished biblical authors were able to do.⁸ Finally, while there are clear thematic parallels between biblical narrative and Mesopotamian narratives like the Epic of Gilgamesh or the Epic of Atrahasis—the most famous being strikingly similar flood stories, these latter do not exhibit the same economy of style found in the biblical and Ugaritic narratives.⁹

NON-NARRATIVE MATERIAL IN THE TORAH

Before considering in more detail the workings of narrative in the Torah, it is necessary to say a few words about, first, the cultic and legal material that comprises such a significant portion of these five books and, second, the poems and poetic fragments that comprise a much smaller group of passages.

Cultic and Legal Texts

On the one hand, I am reluctant to give short shrift to the cultic and legal texts—dealing with the construction of the tabernacle, sacrificial rituals,

⁷ The Ugaritic texts take their name from the ancient Canaanite city Ugarit (modern Ras-Shamra) and were discovered after excavations of the city began in 1929. For an introduction to and translation of the texts into English see Simon B. Parker, ed., *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1997).

⁸ See especially Robert Kawashima, *Biblical Narrative and the Death of the Rhapsode* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2004) chap. 4. Kawashima's argument is fairly technical but well worth working through in order to get at the differences between the narrative style of biblical literature and other ancient Near Eastern texts. Another very important difference between the Ugaritic narratives and biblical narrative is that the Ugaritic texts are all in poetic or verse form, while biblical authors have begun to work in the new and more flexible form of prose narration. Again, recognizing these differences does not imply a claim for absolute uniqueness.

⁹ For very literal English translations of Gilgamesh, Atrahasis, and other Mesopotamian texts see Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (New York: Oxford University, 1989). A compelling verse translation of Gilgamesh can be found in David Ferry's *Gilgamesh: A New Rendering in English Verse* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1992). On the history of the discovery of Gilgamesh and its cultural history since, there is now David Damrosch's *The Buried Book: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007).

dietary laws, etc.—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 highly rhetorical flair, the cultic and legal material in the Torah is not quite what one might think of as literature. There may indeed be structuring principles both large and small at work in this material that indicate more intentionality in its shaping than is immediately apparent,¹⁰ and certainly the legal texts both demand and reward the close reading that one might associate with poetry and narrative (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.

Poetic Texts in the Torah

The poetry one finds in the Torah may take the form of relatively long, formal set-pieces (Gen 49:1–27; Exod 15:1–18; Deut 32:1–43) that would seem to have existed independently before being inserted by an author or an editor into their present narrative contexts (often as markers of transition in the larger structure of a book or in the Torah as a whole), or it may take the form of shorter poems (sometimes just a line or two) that were in all likelihood composed by the author of the surrounding narrative. In either case the most salient characteristic of ancient Hebrew poetry—what in fact allows it to be called poetry—is present, namely, parallelism. That is, a line of Hebrew biblical poetry is composed of usually two, but sometimes three, short segments or cola placed in parallel relationship to each other. In the most obvious form of this parallelism, the second colon will correspond both semantically and syntactically to the previous. Thus, in the line from Moses' victory song in Exodus 15, "Your right hand, O LORD, is mighty in power. / Your right hand, O LORD, smashes the enemy," every element from the first half of the line is matched in the second half of the line. But clearly the ancient poets felt a good deal of freedom in articulating the parallelism of the line, and it is only rarely that one encounters the sort of strict phrase-by-phrase parallelism that we see above.¹¹

¹⁰ For one of the most recent and interesting theories along these lines, see Mary Douglas, *Leviticus as Literature* (New York: Oxford University, 1999).

¹¹ A good sense of the workings of the ancient Hebrew poetic line, as well as the unfinished debates on various issues in the study of biblical poetry, can be had by comparing these important works on the topic: Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical*

Puns, wordplay, alliteration, and the like, as well as the Hebrew syntax, are often lost in translations, but there is still a great deal to be seen in the semantic parallelism, or parallelism of meaning, between one colon and the next, even in English translation. Frequently the relationship between the cola is one in which the second will heighten or intensify the emotional register of the first, as we see in Jacob's response to being shown Joseph's tunic, recently dipped in the blood of a slaughtered kid by his scheming brothers: "A vicious beast has devoured him, / Joseph torn to shreds!" (Gen 37:33). The image of Joseph being devoured by a wild animal is bad enough, but the grief-stricken father goes on to imagine his son torn to shreds. Or the second cola might take an image from the first and make it more concrete or specific, as in Exodus 15:14 where in the line, "Peoples heard and they quaked, / trembling seized Philistia's dwellers," the generic reference to peoples is made specific by reference to the Philistines. Or the second colon might offer a temporal or narrative-like progression from the first, as in Exodus 15:10: "You blew with your breath—the sea covered them over. / They sank like lead in the mighty waters." Often there will be more than one way of articulating the parallelism of the line, and much of the pleasure of reading biblical poetry is found in trying to work out just how the second or third colon relates to the first.

The longer, more imposing poems often serve as markers of an overarching design, usually of endings or transitions, in one of the individual books or in the Torah as a whole. So the ending of Genesis is marked by the long poetic blessing that the elderly Jacob extends to his twelve sons (representing the twelve tribes of Israel) in chapter 49. The poem draws together themes from the previous family-oriented stories in Genesis—especially the promise of fertility and the rivalry among brothers—and it points forward to the coming tribal and national history of Israel (e.g., "The scepter shall not pass from Judah" [49:10]), while also lending a formal closure to the long and storied life of the ancestor Jacob: "And Jacob finished charging his sons, and he gathered his feet up into the bed, and he breathed his last, and was gathered to his kinfolk" (49:30). Likewise, the justly famous poem in Exodus 15, traditionally known as the "Song at the Sea," marks a particularly significant moment in the larger narrative of Exodus: the story moves geographically from Egypt to the wilderness and thematically from liberation to covenant, even as the people of Israel move from slavery to freedom. The end of the Torah as a whole is doubly marked, first by the "Song of Moses" in Deuteronomy 32, which praises

Poetry (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1985); James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University, 1981); and M. P. O'Connor, *Hebrew Verse Structure* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1980).

God's saving actions on behalf of Israel, and second by the blessing that Moses extends, as Jacob did earlier, to the twelve tribes in Deuteronomy 33. There is a good deal of linguistic evidence to indicate that these poems or songs (Hebrew *shirah*; plural, *shirim*), along with the "Song of Deborah" in Judges 5, are among the oldest portions of the Bible. Thus they are sometimes read as a source of clues in reconstructing tribal history or social structure, but they are also compelling as acts of literature in their own right, exhibiting not only the various types of parallelism but also heightened diction, the sort of vivid and arresting metaphors that are lacking in Hebrew narrative, and, especially in the case of Exodus 15, a strophic structure.

The shorter poetic utterances serve either to impart a formal tone or ceremonial *gravitas* to a situation or to heighten the intensity or the emotional register of a character's speech. For the latter, we saw above the verse form of Jacob's brief lament over Joseph, and among other examples we might add the following: God's outburst over the violence of Sodom and Gomorrah, "The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah, how great! / Their offense is very grave" (Gen 18:20); Sarah's exclamation at the birth of Isaac, "Laughter has God made me, / whoever hears will laugh at me" (Gen 21:6); and the reaction of Moses, who has just received the tablets of the commandments from God, to the sound of the people celebrating around the golden calf, "Not the sound of crying out in triumph, / and not the sound of crying out in defeat. / A sound of crying out I hear" (Exod 32:18). The effect of lending a formality of tone to an utterance may be seen particularly in short speeches of God, for example, God's articulation of the consequences of the eating of the fruit in Genesis 3:14–19, the exhortation to Cain in Genesis 4:6–7, and the endorsement of Moses over against Aaron and Miriam in Numbers 12:6–8. At the same time, the use of verse also serves a ceremonial function on lips of human characters, as in Isaac's blessings of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 27, Jacob's response to God's promised blessing in Genesis 28:17 ("How fearsome is this place! / This can be but the house of God, / and this is the gate of the heavens"), his grievance against Laban in Genesis 31:36–40, and Balaam's several blessings of Israel in Numbers 23–24. Many of these shorter examples of verse are not set off as poems in the major translations, but the reader attentive to parallelism and a more formalized diction will be able to catch them and may then ask why the author has set off this particular speech or piece of dialogue in verse form.

NARRATIVE STYLE AND MEANING IN THE TORAH

The legal, cultic, and poetic sections notwithstanding, to speak of the literary art of the Torah is to speak primarily of its narrative art. It is still

the case that in beginning to think about the narrative art of the Bible one could do no better than to read Erich Auerbach's "Odysseus' Scar," the opening chapter of his book *Mimesis*, in which he compares biblical narrative style with Homeric epic style.¹² Auerbach offers the first and best modern articulation of how the drastic terseness of biblical narrative is not the absence of style but is rather a distinctive and profound literary mode in its own right. Auerbach describes Homeric style as being "of the foreground," whereas biblical narratives are by contrast "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, right in the foreground for the reader to apprehend. With biblical narrative, such details are, for the most part, kept in the background and are not directly available to the reader. So, as I noted at the outset of my article, biblical narrative rarely provides physical descriptions of either objects or people. (This contrasts with cultic texts where, for example, we find 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."¹³ Occasionally a certain quality is ascribed to some person or object: we are told that Eve perceives that the tree of knowledge is "lovely to look at" (Gen 3:6), and likewise we are told that Joseph is "comely in features and comely to look at" (Gen 29:6). But as a rule such minimal notations are given only when necessary to introduce some element 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 we are 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, we notice too that descriptions of personal qualities are largely absent. That is, characterization is rarely explicit, but must be teased out of the narrative from the characters' words and deeds. The presentation of Esau and Jacob in Gen-

¹² Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1953) 3–23.

¹³ *Ibid.* 9.

esis 25 illustrates this quality. We are told that Esau is “a man skilled in hunting, 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 gulp down some of this red 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.’” And then, after agreeing to trade his birthright to Jacob in exchange for some of the stew, Esau’s 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” (v. 34).¹⁴ 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). These initial thumbnail characterizations of Esau and Jacob will be fleshed out two chapters later, in Genesis 27, where the blind Isaac is deceived into bestowing his blessing on Jacob rather than on 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 resumé 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, his words and deeds reveal his character. 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, but both his inarticulateness and his utter lack of calculation are revealed by his response on hearing that Jacob has stolen his blessing: “he cried out with a great and very bitter outcry and he said to his father, ‘Bless me, too, Father’” (v. 34); and again, a few verses later, “‘Do you have but one blessing, my father? Bless me, too, Father.’ And Esau raised his voice and wept” (v. 38). 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 characterize

¹⁴ Alter, *Five Books of Moses* 131–32.

the actors on their own, using hints gleaned from the text. To repeat, characterization is not absent, but a certain mode of characterization, and a fairly complex mode at that, is used.

We may best see this complexity, and indeed the Bible's economy of style more generally, where texts deal with the inner lives of characters. Readers of Western literature, and especially modern literature, are used to having access in one form or another to the thoughts, feeling, and motivations of the characters portrayed. 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."¹⁵ And so 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) 14 lines of lament by Hector's father, 7 lines by his mother, and fully 40 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 in Kiriath-Arba, which is Hebron, in the land of Canaan, and Abraham came to mourn Sarah and to keened for her" (Gen 23:2). On the death of Moses: "And the Israelites keened for Moses in the steppes of Moab thirty days, and the days of keening in mourning for Moses came to an end" (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 who is 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 survivors but refrains from allowing them full expression of it. I 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). In a scene that seems intended to characterize Jacob as an extravagant mourner, the narrator describes Jacob as rending his clothes and donning sackcloth and refusing to be comforted by his other children: "'Rather I will go down to my son in Sheol in mourning,' and his father keened for him" (37:35). Yet even here the few scant lines in Hebrew do not come close to matching the 60 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

¹⁵ Auerbach, *Mimesis* 6.

burning of Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron. The reader is told that the two young priests brought “strange fire” or “alien fire” (*‘esh zara*) before the Lord, “and fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord” (10:2). Moses very quickly offers a cryptic theodicy, cast as a line of verse, in the face of the shocking event: “This is what the Lord spoke, saying, ‘Through those close to Me shall I be hallowed / and in all the people’s presence shall I be honored’” (10:3). 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 “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? The fact is that we are given no access whatsoever into Aaron’s inner life, 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 I noted above in considering the story of Jacob and Esau, the narrator reveals very little about the inner lives of characters. If we are given little or no access to their thoughts and feelings, it follows that their motivation is also 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, more than anything else, it 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 me try to justify this claim with reference to the literature itself.

We may take Genesis 22 as the *locus classicus* 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 Abraham challenges the justice of God’s decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, here Abraham says nothing in response. Instead, there is the narrator’s taut report: “And Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey and took his two lads with him, and Isaac his son, and split wood for the offering, and rose and went to the place that God had said to him. On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the

place from afar” (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. The fact 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. I think that 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 at that response and at the motivation for his actions. Now, 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 feels anger, disbelief, and even disgust (perhaps with God for demanding the slaughter or with himself for not protesting). However one fills the gap of Abraham’s inner life initially, surely it is complicated by Isaac’s calling out to him, “Father!” and by the plaintive question that follows, “Here is the fire and the wood but where is the sheep for the offering?” (v. 7). Precisely because we do not know what Abraham is thinking or feeling, his brief response to Isaac’s question takes on a deeply ironic double meaning. On the one hand, Abraham’s response may be read as a ruse, if not an outright lie, to deflect any suspicions that may be dawning on his 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 uses the ambiguities of Hebrew’s seemingly rudimentary syntax 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 sheep for the offering: *namely*, my son.”

To go back to Abraham’s initial response to Isaac, we may see how what at first looks like wooden repetition may in fact 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 when the knife is raised over the boy, the angel of Lord 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, as, for example, the JPS Tanakh does in translating the second occurrence as “Yes, my son,” 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 precisely this is 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. 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 structure 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.

SOME THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF LITERARY STYLE

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 enquiry as to the whereabouts of the sheep or what he is thinking as his father binds him and lays him on the makeshift altar. By this point, however, we are not surprised, since we have begun to see that the biblical authors use this convention to allow for depth of character and depth of meaning. It is perhaps somewhat more surprising to note that this convention applies also to God, 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 does not tell us, though for any reader, religious or not, this question must be compelling. We are told that “God tested Abraham” (22:1); but this does not answer our question. The sense of the word “test” (*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 determine Abraham’s strength under pressure, or 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.¹⁶ If such a reading seems strained, especially in light of 22:16, that it is nonetheless possible—if only barely—witnesses to the profound but productive ambiguity of Hebrew literary style, which exploits to great effect its distinctive economy of style.

Much more can be said about the literary art of the Torah, especially about the patterns or structures that biblical authors and editors have used to construct both individual stories and larger blocks of material, but I want to close by pointing out one final way in which the literary and the theological are bound up. I mentioned at the beginning of this article the jarring concreteness with which God is imagined in the Torah 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 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. In fact, 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. Thus 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 quite effectively. Joseph may declare in Genesis 50 to his brothers who, 13 chapters and many years earlier had sold him into slavery, that, "while you meant evil toward me, God meant it for good," but the story also makes clear that Joseph's own wits and talent have no small role in allowing him to survive and prosper in Egypt.

Even in the Exodus story, where God's saving action seems more tangible than anywhere in the Bible, the divine plan requires human agents for implementation. After the flurry of first-person active verbs by which God resolves to liberate Israel from slavery ("I have seen. . . . I have heard. . . . I have come down to rescue. . . . I will bring them up. . . . [3:7–8]), God shifts unexpectedly to the second person, saying to Moses, "And now, go that I may send you to Pharaoh, and bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt" (3:10). Moses quite naturally responds, "Who am I that I should go to

¹⁶ See Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Summit, 1976) 93–94; Danna Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) 52–54.

Pharaoh and that I should bring out the Israelites from Egypt?" God's answer is telling with regard to the interdependence of divine and human agency: "For I will be with you" (v. 12). Who liberates Israel—God or Moses? 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 series of first-person verbs: "I will take you out. . . I will rescue you from bondage. . . I will take you. . . I will be your God. . . I will bring you to the land I promised" (Exod 6:6–8). The response? "They did not heed Moses because their spirits had been crushed by cruel slavery" (my trans.). The point would seem to be a sociological one: that 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 can the Israelites summon the energy to leave Egypt.

Pharaoh himself is no less an example of this fundamental tension between (or 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 (Exod 7:3; 14:4); but on the other hand, Pharaoh is said by the narrator to have hardened his own heart (8:11, 28). And still other times a passive voice is used, so that Pharaoh's heart "was hardened" or "became hard" (7:14; 8:15; 9:4), 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 favor one answer over another, giving us a "both/and" that reflects a pronounced trend in biblical narrative—on display nowhere more than in the Torah—to render not only the inner lives of both humans and God, but creation and history itself, as unfathomably complex and finally unresolvable.

I realize that I have, at most, begun only to scratch the surface of the theological implications of biblical literary style. But I hope the point is clear, that any appropriation of these ancient poems and stories— theological or otherwise—should take account of their complex and subtle workings as literature. There is a negative benefit to taking such account: one might be saved from serious misinterpretation. One notorious example of misinterpretation is the literalizing appropriation of the poetry of Zechariah 9:9 by the author of the Gospel of Matthew. Exhibiting the sort of specifying parallelism discussed above, the prophet imagines the proces-

sion of a triumphant ruler, who arrives “humble and riding on a donkey, / on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” The author quotes Zechariah but, apparently not understanding the conventions of ancient Hebrew poetry, imagines there to be two animals here rather than one, and so has Jesus improbably riding both a donkey and a colt. But there are also positive benefits to recognizing literary conventions and practices: we may come to understand more fully the literary basis for some of our primary theological concepts. I think, for example, of Alter’s argument that the apocalyptic worldview is in no small part a result of the poetic form adopted by Hebrew biblical prophets, where the interlinear intensification of the poetic idiom pushes the rhetoric higher and higher until there is nowhere to go but visions of cosmic destruction and utopian restoration.¹⁷ For example, in Isaiah 24:17–20, part of what some call the Isaianic apocalypse, the passage moves from a fairly realistic portrayal of the threat of war (“Who flees the sound of terror / will fall into the trench. // Who climbs up from the trench / will be caught in the trap.”) to an apocalyptic vision of cosmic upheaval, with the earth itself breaking and crumbling and swaying like a drunkard. It also seems likely to me that the prevalent notion in Jewish and Christian theological thought of God as—to use Rudolph Otto’s phrase—the *mysterium tremendum*, a fundamentally unknowable yet endlessly enthralling reality, has roots in Hebrew biblical narrative style, where God is a character whose inner life so often drives the plot but is rarely on display. This aspect of God was evident in my brief treatments of Genesis 22 and Leviticus 10. To cite one more example from the Torah: what could God possibly be thinking or intending in Exodus 4:24–26, where God meets Moses in the night and tries to kill him, just after commissioning him to go to Pharaoh and demand the Israelite’s freedom? Every interpreter who takes this text seriously longs to know the answer to this question; yet, if we did know, the text would lose much of its awful power.

There are no doubt innumerable ways in which a thorough knowledge of literary style could enrich theological interpretation, and readers of this journal will be better at thinking of and articulating theological implications than I am. That being the case, I leave this task to readers and end with a final plea for close, informed attention to the words on the page—for making sure we have thought in a rigorous and discriminating manner about *how* a text means before we jump to *what* it might mean.

¹⁷ Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry* 145–61.