Language, conflict and coherence in the Bible

The Bible[1] is perhaps our single most influential collection of texts, and certainly one of very few that have achieved canonical status. That it has also lost some of its prominence in more recent years, in terms of religious and cultural significance, is also evident. This loss of prominence reflects the secularisation of society and, in the postmodernist age, a notably less reverential concern with the past and with fixity of meaning. Whatever our views on the merit of the Bible's impact on the development of thought, whether we believe it deals in truth or falsehood, Divine revelation or Feuerbachian projection[2], or whether we wish to focus on its former prominence or current ambiguity (in which the boundaries between religious text and literary work are becoming blurred) there remains much to be gained from a close examination of the text itself.

Given the sheer breadth, richness and diversity of the Bible any consideration of it must necessarily be selective, particularly when, as in this instance, that consideration is of the work as a whole. Accordingly, the purpose of this essay will be:

- to examine how the Bible develops language as an element within its own narrative;

- to develop the idea that the Hebrew Bible is an open-frame which invites a continuing process of engagement;

- and to suggest that there is an ideological coherence across the entire corpus which embraces a theme of creative process and realisation.

One of the immediate difficulties for the reader addressing the Bible is that much of the text claims God for its author (or co-author, through the medium of inspiration), a claim

---

[1] Generally I will use the simplified term 'the Bible', but where appropriate will distinguish between the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible. All references to 'Old Testament' and 'New Testament' should be understood as relating to the Christian form of the Bible.

which serves to place the actuality of the text outside the norms of standard presentational expedient. What we are reading doesn't simply come in written form because that is how it is most easily transmitted; rather, the existence of the text as artefact is granted a heightened status so that the message becomes thoroughly conterminous with the medium. The Bible claims an authority for itself that is independent of authorship, interpretation and meaning; and for a reader used to approaching a text as either 'factual' or 'fictional' this inflicts a sense of uncertainty about the status we are required to accord to the language it uses.

This self-referential authority begins with the opening of *Genesis*, in which the creation is described as being effected through God's speech. Immediately, for the reader, language is presented as being more than the simple conveyance of meaning. It is shown as an active, participatory agent of effect:

'And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.' (Gen 1:3)

The formula of speech leading to actuality is repeated throughout the opening chapter which offers a description of an unfolding of creation, as each stage in the process builds on, and reflects, the preceding stage. Thus, having created 'light', God divides the light from darkness. The process culminates on the sixth day:

'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.' (Gen 1:27)

There are a number of interesting things happening here. Firstly, we are informed that it is literally all inclusive. If this is God's story, then it is equally the story of everything that exists, including the reader. We may not believe this, but it has the effect of disallowing

---

[2]   See Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*.

an argument of irrelevance about what will follow and of requiring a direct engagement with the text. Moreover, there is a highly structured form given to the process of creation. It is not simply thrown together, or brought under a general statement of God's creative potency: each stage is introduced with the words 'And God said...' As Robert Alter shows in his discussion of parallelism in poetic verses of the Bible, this form of structuring signifies both progression and intensification:

> 'The pattern of a large spatial image followed by a smaller entity contained within it may be coordinated with the tendency to concretization... "They *will lay waste* his **land,** / his **cities** *will be razed without inhabitants"* (Jer 2:15).' (ABP, 21)

Alter's comment is related to the underlying structure of individual verses, but the thrust of it can be seen to be operating within the whole of the opening creation sequence as the narrative moves from the general and cosmological (the creation of 'light'), to the particular (the creation of humankind). Indeed, there is much to suggest that the structure of the Bible as a whole is one of presenting an overview which is rapidly followed by a movement in to, and a close focusing on, the particular. In the broadest terms, the narrative sweeps forward from the origins of existence, through the story of a nation and its patriarchs, and into the particulars of history. It culminates (in the Christian Bible) with the New Testament and a shift in focus from national religious identity, to individual religious faith. It is also possible, as I will show later on, to regard the New Testament itself as a 'concretization' of the ideological process of the Hebrew Bible.

The move from the general to the particular in Gen 1 is extended in Gen 2 as the narrative begins to explore the relationship between God and creation. But the transition isn't smooth. Between Gen 2:7 and Gen 2:25 we find a variant creation myth as God forms and breathes life into Adam; and from Adam, forms Eve. The narrative is more explicit than in Gen 1, and we are given details of an almost physical mode of creation:

> 'And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life...' (Gen 2:7)

This narrative refocusing is reinforced in Gen 2:19, as Adam is granted the task of naming all the living creatures that God has brought forth and (in Gen 2:22) of being the material from which Woman is fashioned. Traditional scholarship has argued that this is indicative of two divergent traditions, but this does little to explain why the redactor has chosen to include both within the final work. In terms of developing the story, I would concur with Alter when he writes:

> 'Whatever the disparate historical origins of the two accounts, the redaction gives us first a harmonious cosmic overview and then a plunge into the technological nitty-gritty and moral ambiguities of human origins.' (GEN, 7)

By circling back on a thematic presentation and re-constructing it in a second form, our sense of relationship with God-as-character is deepened. In the first instance we are shown a being of awesome power who functions by diktat; and in the second, a being who is gentle and caring and one whom we can believe will take a special interest in the life so lovingly created. This establishes both power *and* relationship in God, as was noted by Austin Farrer whose personalist metaphysics led him to prefer the second account:

> 'I could not accept the great executive deity, who does everything by giving orders, in place of the dear God whose fingers are on our clay and whose breath is in our nostrils; and who, when God has made us, comes to walk with us in the orchard-paths of God's paradise.' (cited in MP, 82)

By humanising the story of creation, the redactor draws the reader into the action and emphasises that the text should be regarded not as a closed, external tract through which meaning is imposed, but rather as an integral part of progressive human existence.

This functional aspect, that of the Bible being an integral part of living, is particularly relevant in understanding how the text makes use of the concept of language, and in particular its 'self'-realisation as a written record. The move from spoken word to written occurs in *Exodus*, as the narrative progresses from extended prologue (the 'pre-histories' and establishment of the 12 tribes in *Genesis*) into a more particular engagement with the Israelites as an identifiable national group. In *Genesis* the emphasis is on speech, most clearly in the telling of the story of Babel (Gen 11:1-9) which establishes the concept of complexity of language, ambiguity and misunderstanding; and in the view of some commentators a more positive and creative process of cultural dissemination[3].

> 'Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.' (Gen 11:9)

Babel serves to explain human diversity in terms of divine agency. It is also morally ambiguous. No overt reason for God's intervention is given, and although we can infer that the unity of the people is wrongly aspected (they are striving 'to make us a name' (Gen 11:4) rather than honouring God), the story operates on a number of other important levels. God's efficacy after the flood is re-established, but now restrained (wrong-doers are 'confounded', not destroyed). There are also reinforcements of Gen 1 and Gen 3 at play: firstly, in the affective power of language to turn thought into actuality ('and they have all one language... and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.' (Gen 11:6)); and secondly, in the repetition of the motif of

---

[3]   See Abraham ibn Ezra (cited in SC, 53n).

thwarted human endeavour to achieve (or perhaps, confront) divine knowledge (this latter can be seen as another move from the general to the particular, contrasting the archetypal figures in Gen 3 with the worldly populace of Gen 11). No less important is that, by establishing linguistic uncertainty within its own frame, the text implicitly invites an interpretative approach.

The Exodus develops the idea of the Israelites as a nation, extending the individual archetypes of the 12 sons of Jacob into identifiable tribal groups. This movement from simplicity to complexity, whilst seemingly reversing the idea of a move from the general to the particular, helps establish God's operation on a broader front as the focus shifts from selected figures to a nation. The distance between God and the people is thus mitigated as the narrative develops God's continuing involvement with an increasingly diversified creation. The 'distance' is nonetheless real and the need to remember becomes central:

> 'And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying,
>
> Speak thou also unto the children of Israel, saying, Verily my sabbaths ye shall keep: for it is a sign between me and you throughout your generations...

> '...And he gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon Mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God.' (Exod 31:13/18)

The above extract from *Exodus* closes the first of the two accounts of the giving of 'tablets of stone'; and of course, as is well known, this scene is immediately followed by their destruction:

> 'And Moses turned, and went down from the mount, and the two tables of the testimony were in his hand: and the tables were written on both their sides...

'And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables....

'...And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf, and the dancing: and Moses' anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount.' (Exod 32:15-16/19)

In keeping with the open-framed nature of the Hebrew Bible, the complex narrative explores the ambivalent relationship between the human characters and God. Firstly, the people had already been given the Ten Commandments orally (Exod 20) and therefore were wilfully engaging in transgression (unlike the tower-builders of Babel). Secondly, God, having observed the idolatry of the Israelites, attempts to dismiss Moses in order 'that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them' (Exod 32:10). Moses successfully dissuades God from this course, but then (in keeping with his microcosmic role as God's agent) 'waxes hot' himself, breaks the newly inscribed law, and orders the sons of Levi to 'slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbour' (Exod 32:27). Whilst the punishment meted out may not be of the order envisaged by God, it is nonetheless an extravagant display of authority, and one which brings no censure from God despite the clear transgression of the sixth commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill' (Exod 20:13).

The narrative thread is further developed in chapter 34 when a second set of tablets is produced, with Moses acting as scribe. This altogether more human artefact survives and, as Gabriel Josipovici points out, is placed in the ark for safe-keeping (BG, 135). The repetition of the process of recording God's words reinforces the role of writing first addressed in Exod 24:4-7 when Moses 'wrote all the words of the Lord' and 'took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people.' Preparing a written text, recording and recalling words, is thus fully established and, with the placement of the tablets in the ark, is granted divine status. At the same time, the absolute primacy of

God's spoken word seems to have been reduced. It is not that God is no longer all-powerful, but rather (as perhaps symbolised by the retention of the human-crafted tablets in place of the divinely crafted version) that God is being shown as relational and therefore, to a degree, dependent on human response. The use of a human mediator in the production (and acceptance) of the divine text emphasises the co-dependence of God and creation, and opens the way for the legislative frame set out in *Leviticus*. It is in *Leviticus* that the Hebrew Bible establishes itself as a practical and ethical code of life, but en route the narrative has opened up the way for the extensive intertextuality of the later books of the Bible.

Meir Sternberg has commented that the Bible 'internalizes its own rules of communication, whereby the remembrance of the past devolves on the present and determines the future' (PBN, 31), an observation which is suggestive of the process philosophy of A N Whitehead (although Whitehead would no doubt have replaced 'determines' with the more thoughtful 'co-determines' so as to stress the mutuality of creative processes)[4]. I have already shown that the narrative establishes its own (formative) existence as an essential 'character' within itself (eg, the importance of written records) and that it engages in thematic circling and repetition in order to develop a sense of relevant progression. This utilisation of its own text as a source becomes more explicit as we read forward.

Among the many ways in which the Bible draws on itself are the use of the close repetition of extended passages and genealogy. Of the first type are *Deuteronomy* and *1 and 2 Chronicles*, both of which close their respective book (the *Torah* and the Hebrew Bible) and (among other functions) serve as a reminder of how the narrative has reached its present point. It is notable that both leave the future open: *Deuteronomy* ends with the

---

[4]   See Whitehead's *Process and Reality* for a detailed discussion of how past event is contained within the present moment and is thereby informative of the future.

Israelites on the point of crossing into the Promised Land, and *2 Chronicles* closes with these words:

> 'Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the Lord God of heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him an house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? The Lord his God be with him, and let him go up.' (2Chr 36:23)

Alter and Sternberg have both explored the shifts in emphasis that occur in the process of repetition, but the point I am making here is simply that the reintroduction of past text into the present frame of reference is a concrete and immediate exemplar of the very process that is being enjoined upon the Israelites. The past is always to be brought into the present, is to be consistently a factor to be taken into account in today's actions, and is to be always a basis for moving forward. That there is to be a forward movement is indicated by the text itself, which ends at the point of a new beginning. The 'open-ended' closures emphasise that the Israelite history is to continue. The contrast with the Christian Bible, which closes with a promise of the end of history and with an injunction to neither add nor delete a word from the book (see Rev 22:10/18-19), is striking.

A similar function is discernible in the use of genealogy. As with much of the inconsistent or difficult material in the Bible, there has been a tendency to attribute genealogies to a second source ('P' in the standard 'Theory of Documents' which identified three primary sources in the Torah: Jahwist, Elohist, and Priestly Code[5]) and in so doing reduce their impact in terms of narrative extension. Adele Berlin, in her analysis of *The Book of Ruth*, argues for a more considered, and considerate, understanding of their role:

---

[5]   See Cassuto, *Documentary Hypothesis* for a systematic dismantling of   source criticism.

'The genealogy, then, is the narrator, as spokesman for the Israelite narrative tradition, viewing the story... and putting it in the proper context... It is a kind of prologue and epilogue rolled into one...' (PIBN, 110)

Sternberg poses the question: 'Does the genealogy come as a lump of pastness or as an oblique intimation of the future?' (PBN, 45), and later suggests that these 'lumps of history' are more than enforced interpolations in that they serve to contextualise *and* to disguise the development of plot, for example in Gen 22:20-24 which subtly introduces Rebekah into the story but refrains from overtly signalling the significance she plays only two chapters further on (see PBN, 132-3).

Genealogy indeed functions as Sternberg suggests (Adele Berlin illustrates the same point in her analysis of *Ruth*), but contextualisation and intimation of plot is not the whole story. There is also Sternberg's concept of 'ideological singularity' to be taken into account (see PBN, 37) and this can be illustrated by contrasting the use of genealogy in the Hebrew Bible with its use in the synoptic gospels. In Matthew (1:1-17) we are offered a 'standard' representation (chronologically moving from past to present) in which the aim of establishing Jesus' ancestry is paramount (that is, it narrows the focus to an individual point, rather than broadening its arc to encompass a nation). In Mark (3:16-19), a variant is offered and the genealogical form is utilised to introduce the names of the 12 apostles. In this example the aim is not to establish authority through historical connection (as might be expected by the use of the technique), but instead to play on the formula so as to devolve a new authority on the 12 chosen of Christ. The third example occurs in Luke (3:23-38) and presentationally reverses the form and language of Matthew:

'And Jesus... being the son of Joseph, which was the son of Heli,

Which was the son of Matthat, which was the son of...'

The sequence ends in verse 38 with:

> '...which was the son of Adam, which was the son of God.'

The emphasis in *Luke* is not on bringing the past into the present but on establishing an 'end' to that developmental process. In *Ruth* the genealogy closes the book but invites the reader to look forward by establishing Ruth as a forebear of David; and elsewhere the process develops, as Josipovici suggests, the sense of continuity in familial identity (BG, 141). For Luke, however, the genealogy is a way of saying, 'Look no further! The anointed One is here.' The sequence is prefaced by 'a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased' (Luke 3:22), and the cessation of a forward development is established as we move from the 'Son of God' (Jesus) back through time to the Son of God (Adam). The genealogy serves only to connect Christ with God. This reversal of the flow of time precludes the reader from projecting the narrative frame into an, as yet, unknown future. The impact, to use Sternberg's terminology, is didactic, not ideological.

Contrast this with *1Chronicles* which opens with an extensive genealogy of 'all Israel' and, in so doing, creates a sweeping movement that encompasses all of the past and offers it to the present both as a remembrance and as a confirmation of continuity. The difference in function is instructive. *1Chronicles* places an emphasis on a shared history which informs the present and future, and affirms that the historical precursors are functionally connected with the reader. Genealogy is used to convey authority, to engage the reader and – by means of its forward looking structure – to leave the future open. This triple aspect accords well with the role of the Hebrew Bible as a sacred law book, a guide to ethics and daily life and, equally importantly, as a living memorial through which the past is conjoined with the present. In essence, the (Hebrew) Biblical concern is with 'process';

and the genealogies, which embed the past into the present and thereby inform the future, are a principal method through which this ideological implication is conveyed.

Significantly, the Christian Bible places the prophets at the close of the Old Testament, thereby indicating that the New Testament is to be regarded in the light of prophetic fulfilment. Reading back across the text, the structuring of the New Testament promotes a tendency to read the precursive text in its own light. By this I mean that an awareness of the teleological frame of the New Testament invites the reader to invest the Old Testament with a shared goal. This adoption and structural adaptation of the Hebrew Bible is used to establish the fulfilment of the prophecies, but perhaps the most noticeable distinction is the predilection for the New Testament writers to engage in explicit interpretation (eg, John 1:41-42) and to thereby invite a typological exegesis of drawing a single meaning across the text. This contrasts with the Hebrew Bible in which the ambiguity of conflicting versions of stories is allowed space to exist, and meaning is drawn out only slowly (for example, in the Jacob cycle; or in the ambivalent treatments that permeate the Saul/David cycle[6]).

The difference in focus and intention is real, but even at this point there remains an ambiguity which places considerable tension on our grasp of the overall text and is suggestive of a continuation of the move from the general to the particular that is exemplified in Gen 1 and 2. The Hebrew Bible thrives on openness, yet directs itself to an exclusive (Israelite) audience. The Christian, in contrast, whilst drawing the whole of the Hebrew corpus within its frame, closes the text and yet addresses a universal audience.

---

[6]   See Alter (ABN, *passim*) and Sternberg (PBN, *passim*) for discussions of these. Co-existence of conflicting treatments is also observable within the   Gospels,   which suggests a willingness to retain the structural dynamics of   the Hebrew Bible. The   difference, however, is that the Gospels all strive to   impart   the   a   single message.

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' (John 1:1)

'And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us...' (John 1:34)

The Gospel of St John returns the Bible to its very beginnings with its choice of language, emphasis on 'the Word', and recalling of the form of the creation myth in Gen 1 (the use of a day-by-day account in its opening pages: John 1:29 'The next day...'; 1:43 'The day following...'; 2:1 'And the third day...'). Intertextuality abounds, from the story of the Samarian woman at the well (John 4) which recalls the betrothal scenes of the Old Testament (the woman has no husband; but it is also true that she 'hast had five husbands', a contradiction which obliges a re-consideration of the motif), to the many references to Christ as 'the bread of life' ('I am that bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die.' (6:48-50)). The Hebrew Bible is a primary source of inspiration, but at every step its meaning is brought into question.

The challenge is explicit, but the weaving of thematic material is subtle; and the emphasis on Christ's 'becoming' (moving 'into' his own story) suggests that what is at issue is a concern for an altogether deeper level of understanding, rather than an attempt to disengage the Hebrew Bible of meaning. Christ is presented as 'the Word made flesh'; that is, as the embodiment of the meaning of the 'whole'. In *John* he functions with an exquisite sense of the moment: he evades enemies (9:59), but engages totally (11:35). The entirety of experience is drawn together within his being, and self-knowledge is affirmed as primary (see the detailed disputation in John 8, in which Christ argues from a position of 'self' against the more formalistic, doctrinal position of the Pharisees).

If, as I suggested above (p10), we can regard the Hebrew Bible as descriptive of the creative process, then the New Testament (especially in *John*, and more generally

through the element of the Incarnation[7]) seems to be a dramatisation of the instance of concrescence to which that process leads (and hence the emphasis on closure and completion). I said earlier that in *Luke* we are presented with a didactic message, and that Mark drew the past forward to a single point. In *John*, however, there is a return to the ideological. Christ moves through his own story in self-knowledge, seeking out his destiny and creatively controlling it (eg John 14:29-31). The writing here is far bolder than that of the synoptic gospels (which convey event, but refrain from entering it so fully). As a result Christ is a hugely active figure, paradigmatic of personal self-fulfilment. His dying words are the simple but precise, 'It is finished' (19:30), but in reading them we are already aware from the synoptics that Christ is here separated from God (Matt 27:46).

It is Christ's creative living and active dying that provides focus. As the living principle through which the 'many' become 'one' (see John 18:11/23), he embodies the ambiguity of the human condition, personifies the dichotomy between the divine and the human; and in death he symbolises that it is through humanity, not divinity, that wholeness is achieved. The resurrection serves, in this framework, as a reminder that the past and present are always constitutive of the future. And as the Bible begins with the creative use of language (as expressed consciousness), so in *Revelation* we read: 'I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty' (Rev 1:8). The formula is repeated three more times (Rev 1:11, 21:6 and 22:13), ensuring the primacy of language as motif, and the establishment of an inclusive model of self-realisation in which all that has been informs all that is, and all that will be. ('Self-realisation' here also reflects the Bible's 'self-realisation' as a sacred text – see p6, above.)

---

[7] See my essay 'Farrer, Feuerbach and Process: the Divine Human as paradigm' (Term Paper, Autumn 1997 Sussex) for a full treatment of the Incarnation as concrescence.

Whitehead wrote that '"Creativity" is the universal of universals' and that it is the 'principle by which the many, which are the universe disjunctively, become the one actual occasion, which is the universe conjunctively' (PR, 21). There is little doubt that the Bible deals with both creativity and the integration of the many into one. I would suggest that it is possible, by using the Bible's own method (that is, by moving within its textual and structural ambiguities), to regard the two apparently disjunctive parts (for which a unity is nonetheless claimed) as ideologically coherent. In saying this I am referring to the way in which the historical sweep of the Hebrew Bible, its linguistic subtlety, shifting focus and revisiting of event all combine to articulate a principle of creative and open engagement; and to how the New Testament absorbs this principle, and presents not proof or disproof of a particular doctrine, but an instantiation of the very process from which it has emerged.

The Bible, when seen in this light, is a complex and deeply provocative work. It establishes a pattern of human self-becoming which, when the doctrinal and religious imperatives are understood as the medium and not the message, is of continuing relevance for a world in which meaning – as in the Bible – is flexible, and the future remains that which we, in the present moment, are ever in the process of creating.

Bibliography

Alter, R	*The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Basic Books, USA 1981	(ABN)
–	*The Art of Biblical Poetry*, Basic Books, USA 1985	(ABP)
–	*Genesis - Translation and commentary*, W W Norton & Co, NY 1996	(GEN)
Berlin, A	*Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, The Almond Press, Sheffield 1983	(PIBN)
Cassuto, U	*The Documentary Hypothesis*, The Magnes Press, Jerusalem 1961	
Cohen, A (ed)	*The Soncino Chumash* The Soncino Press, Surrey 1947	(SC)
Conti, C	*Metaphysical Personalism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1995	(MP)
Feuerbach, L	*The Essence of Christianity*, Prometheus Books, NY 1989	
Josipovici, G	*The Book of God*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1988	(BG)
Sternberg, M	*The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, Indiana UP, Bloomington 1985	(PBN)
Whitehead, A N	*Process and Reality (Corrected edition)*, The Free Press, NY 1979	(PR)

All Biblical references are to the *Authorized King James Version*, OUP 1997