Story and Poem: The Old Testament as Literature and as Scripture*

> I am persuaded that without knowledge of literature pure theology cannot at all endure, just as heretofore, when letters have declined and lain prostrate, theology too has wretchedly fallen and lain prostrate; nay, I see that there has never been a great revelation of the Word of God unless He has first prepared the way by the rise and prosperity of languages and letters, as though they were John the Baptists... Certainly it is my desire that there shall be as many poets and rhetoricians as possible, because I see that by these studies, as by no other means, people are wonderfully fitted for the grasping of sacred truth and for handling it skillfully and happily... Therefore I beg of you that at my request (if that has any weight) you will urge your young people to be diligent in the study of poetry and rhetoric.[1]

Luther's encouragement seems to have had little effect on biblical studies since his time. With some important exceptions,[2] Old Testament studies in particular have been obsessed with

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1. Preserved Smith and C.M. Jacobs (eds.), *Luther's Correspondence* (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publication House, 1918), II, pp. 176-77.

2. E.g. Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Vom Geist der ebräische Poesie: Eine Anleitung für die Liebhaben derselben und der ältesten Geschichte des menschlichen Geistes* (Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta, 1827 [trans. J. Marsh as *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry,* 2 vols.; Burlington: Edward Smith, 1833]). From the nineteenth and early twentieth century we could mention George Gilfillan, *The Bards of the Bible* (London: Hamilton, Adams, & Co., 1850), Richard Green Moulton, *The Literary Study of the Bible: An Acount of the Leading Forms by Literature Represented in the Sacred Writings; Intended for English Readers* (Boston: D.C. Heath, 2nd edn, 1899), and John Hayes Gardiner, *The Bible as English Literature* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1906).

philological and historical questions. And where biblical 'poetry and rhetoric' have been attended to, the focus has very often been upon the devices or mechanics of biblical literature[3] rather than upon broader issues of the literary character of the Bible or, most importantly, what it signifies that the Bible (scripture) exists as literature.

The decade of the seventies has seen changes, though not always great advances. Two years ago in *Interpretation* John Dominic Crossan gave a useful sketch of the trends of that decade in literary approaches to biblical texts: structuralism, the genre parable, narrative syntax, the genres tragedy and comedy.[4] He omitted mention of the work of James Muilenburg, of which his well-known Society of Biblical Literature Presidential address of 1968 was only a sample; his call for a movement 'beyond form criticism'[5] generated a proliferation of studies, some sensitive and some mechanistic, under the banner of 'rhetorical criticism'.[6] More influential, however, in the English-speaking world at least, has been the heady development of schools of religious studies in secular universities; the Bible has been taught in these schools not for the reasons that have accorded it prominence in the seminaries and divinity schools. It has not even always been taught by professional biblical scholars, but by professors of English for the sake of acquainting their students with what is arguably the

3. So, e.g., Eduard König, *Stilistik, Rhetorik, Poetik in Bezug auf die biblische Litteratur* (Leipzig: Weicher, 1900).

4. John Dominic Crossan, 'Waking the Bible: Biblical Hermeneutic and Literary Imagination', *Int* 32 (1978), pp. 269-85.

5. James Muilenburg, 'Form Criticism and Beyond', *JBL* 88 (1969), pp. 1-18.

6. See Jared J. Jackson and Martin Kessler (eds.), *Rhetorical Criticism: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg* (PTMS, 1; Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1974). For two excellent surveys of the field, see M. Kessler, 'A Methodological Setting for Rhetorical Criticism', *Semitics* 4 (1974), pp. 22-36; and Isaac M. Kikawada, 'Some Proposals for the Definition of Rhetorical Criticism', *Semitics* 5 (1977), pp. 67-91. Cf. also D. Greenwood, 'Rhetorical Criticism and Formgeschichte: Some Methodological Considerations', *JBL* 89 (1970), pp. 418-26; R.F. Melugin, 'Muilenburg, Form Criticism, and Theological Exegesis', in Martin J. Buss (ed.), *Encounter with the Text: Form and History in the Hebrew Bible* (Semeia Supplements, 8; Philadelphia: Fortress Press; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), pp. 91-100.

greatest and certainly the most influential literary work of world civilization.[7]

Those who have been quick to applaud this movement as a restoration of the Bible to its rightful place in education had perhaps better restrain themselves for the time being; for it is by no means determined in advance that when the Bible is studied in the context of comparative literature it must emerge at the apogée of humanistic or even religious texts.[8] But much more serious than the possibility that the Bible will not retain or regain a position of lordship over its rivals, peers, or congeners when considered as literature is the sociological problem now becoming apparent. That is, that there is a danger that particular contexts of reading and studying the Bible will tend to dictate particular ways in which the Bible is approached. In the church and the seminary the Bible will be heard as scripture; in the university and the world it will be heard, when it is heard, as literature. It would be painful if at this moment, when theologians and literary critics have so much to learn from one another, such a distinction should become institutionalized.

It would be doubly distressing if such should come about since the distinction between the Bible as literature and the Bible as scripture is largely artificial. Indeed, it is my contention here that the church can properly hear its Bible as Scripture only when it reads it as literature. Even the 'authority' of the Bible as Scripture is experienced in no different ways from that in which the 'authority' of any great literary work is felt. Ontologically there may be a world of difference between the Bible and the Shakespearean or Dostoyevskian canons, but the way in which they impose themselves upon their readers, impel them to re-examine their values, and win for themselves lodgement in those recesses of the

7. Perhaps the finest in the collection of *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (ed. Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis, with James S. Ackerman and Thayer S. Warshaw; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), was the essay by one such literary critic, D.F. Rauber, originally published as 'Literary Values in the Book of Ruth', *JBL* 89 (1970), pp. 27-37.

8. See e.g. David A. Robertson, *The Old Testament and the Literary Critic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

mind where behaviour is determined, is one and the same.[9] If one cannot, or should not, read the Bible as Scripture except as literature—and the proposition has yet to be defended—may one read the Bible as literature and not as Scripture at all? Yes, and this is why the distinction between 'as literature' and 'as scripture' is not wholly artificial. But whenever the values of the Bible are assented to, whenever indeed they are seriously engaged with and not dismissed as, for example, primitive or anti-humanistic, the line of demarcation between 'literature' and 'scripture' becomes somewhat blurred. Nevertheless, my primary concern here is to explore, not the way biblical literature may function as Scripture, but the way Scripture must be allowed to function as literature.[10]

The literature of the Old Testament is essentially story or poem. Whether we take the historical books, wisdom, prophecy, or psalmody, it is only some genealogical lists, land allocations, prose sermons, and laws (all of them set within a narrative framework) that escape the net of these two literary forms.[11] The two genres are not, of course, mutually exclusive. It so happens, however, that examples of blends of story and poem (narrative poetry, ballads, epics) are rare, if not nonexistent, in Old Testament literature. Even the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5), the nearest approach the Old Testament makes to ballad, is set in the framework of a hymn and so functions as a song of praise to Yahweh rather than as a narrative poem.[12] Further, it must be acknowledged that each of these principal genres, story and poem, is by no means homo-

9. In rooting the authority of the Bible in its 'function', I am more sanguine about the value of that concept than is James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: SCM Press, 1973).

10. See Barr, *Bible in the Modern World*, pp. 53-74; 'Reading the Bible as Literature', *BJRL* 56 (1973–74), pp. 10-33. As far as Brevard S. Childs's *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979) is concerned, I should comment that while for him the Old Testament *is* Scripture, whether it is recognized as such or not, I am not engaging with that position; I am arguing that whether or not the Old Testament is Scripture, it is literature.

11. Cf. J. Barr, 'Story and History in Biblical Theology', *JR* 56 (1977), pp. 1-17 (5): 'The long narrative corpus of the Old Testament seems to me, as a body of literature, to merit the title of story rather than of history'.

12. J. Blenkinsopp, 'Ballad Style and Psalm Style in the Song of Deborah', *Bib* 42 (1961), pp. 61-76.

geneous. But the fact that the Old Testament consists very largely of two types of imaginative literature and only to a minor degree of straightforward 'referential' or 'non-literary' literature, makes one think. It means that so long as we regard the Old Testament as essentially conveying information about theological truth or historical truth we make a serious category mistake. No matter how reliable its information on such matters is, to imagine that we can move with any kind of speed or assurance from the face value of the Old Testament text to such information is to deceive ourselves.[13] The *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* of Vatican II accords on this point with Luther's concern for the activity of 'poets and rhetoricians' in handling the biblical texts:

> Those who search out the intention of the sacred writers must...have regard for 'literary forms'. For truth is proposed and expressed in a variety of ways, depending on whether a text is history of one kind or another, or whether its form is that of prophecy, poetry, or some other type of speech... For the correct understanding of what the sacred writer wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of perceiving, speaking, and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer.[14]

Overarching the multiplicity of literary forms (*Gattungen*) discovered within the Old Testament literature are these two catch-all forms of story and poem. To manifestations of each of these and to some comments on their significance I now turn.

1. *Story*

To observe the effect of taking the Old Testament narrative primarily as *story*, we shall have to consider a few selected examples.

In the case of the book of *Jonah*, we note first that we are relieved of the need to decide whether, or to what extent, the narrative

[13]. Cf. Barr, *Bible in the Modern World*, p. 142; David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1975).

[14]. *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, III.12 (= Walter M. Abbott [ed.], Joseph Gallagher [trans. and ed.], *The Documents of Vatican II* [New York: The American Press, 1966], p. 120).

recounts events that actually happened. Most readers of this article will find no need to be relieved of that decision, since they have already decided that Jonah was not swallowed by a 'great fish' (though they may not be certain whether the Jonah of the story was an historical personage or whether Nineveh ever repented). But very many readers of the book of Jonah itself, I suppose, do not doubt that it tells of what in fact happened, and have not seen any need to make a decision about its historicity. If we come to the story as *story*, both kinds of readers can enjoy the story, value the story, and engage in potentially fruitful discussion with each other about the meaning(s) of the story. It is not necessary to disbelieve, or to believe, in the story's historicity in order to understand it. The question of historicity does not have to be swept under the carpet, but neither does it have to be the *pièce de résistance*.

Next, if the book is viewed as story, we can sit looser to the idea that we should search for *the* message or point or kerygma of the book. When it is regarded primarily as Scripture, we are perhaps more likely to ask what it has to say, teach, affirm, assert, deny. When it is regarded primarily as literature, we are more inclined to say, I think: The simplicity of this book is only superficial; what it has to say is not likely to be simple. The history of recent scholarship confirms this presumption.[15] For the conventional view has been that the book is 'a tract against particularistic intolerance and arrogance'.[16] By some the implication of such polemic has been thought to be a call to mission to the heathen. Some have seen its purpose as a demonstration of the possibility of repentance. Others have found in it a statement about true and false prophecy, about the relation between conditional and unconditional prophecy, or about the problem of the non-fulfilment of prophecy against the nations. Yet again, the message of the book may be regarded as essentially a statement about God, whether in a positive vein, that he is willing to override his prophetic word for the sake of the

[15]. See Childs, *Introduction*, pp. 419-21, 425; R.E. Clements, 'The Purpose of the Book of Jonah', *Congress Volume, Edinburgh* (VTSup, 28; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975), pp. 16-28.

[16]. Georg Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (trans. David Green; London: SPCK, 1970), p. 433, referring to Artur Weiser, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (trans. Dorothea M. Barton; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1961), p. 250.

nations' salvation; or in a more negative vein, that God's capacity for change of mind can destroy the credibility of his prophets and be in any case ultimately ineffectual in converting the heathen. Even the old allegorical interpretation in which Jonah represents the people of Israel swallowed up in exile by the world powers is still advocated.

Most of these interpretations of the thrust of the book of Jonah have so much for them and against them in the book, that we can seriously question whether the search for *a* message is not, in this case at least, incompatible with a 'literary' view of the book. May not Jonah have nothing in particular to 'teach' but be an imaginative story (traditional or not) in which various serious concerns of the author are lightly and teasingly sketched? The delicate echoing ironies of the book and the tantalizing note on which it ends would tempt us to believe so. This story, a literary critic might say, is a field not so much for conflicting arguments but for interpenetrating visions.[17]

If we turn now to the *David* story, we can see, not how the quest for a single theological message or 'kerygma' can disintegrate when the dimensions of the text as literature are explored, but how a ruling historical-critical consensus about the purpose of the work, which lacks any significant theological spin-off, can be overcome by a literary approach that liberates the work to function theologically and humanistically. The story of David as king (2 Sam. 9–20; 1 Kgs 1–2) has long been recognized as a unity in virtue of the 'succession' motif: The thread that binds the story together is the suspenseful question, Who is to succeed David? In other words, the work has been seen as political propaganda for Solomon's place on the Davidic throne.[18]

Against this view is the rather obvious fact that the succession motif is not strongly enough marked to function as the integrating theme. It will not account for the focus of the story of *David*, the

[17]. The formulation is Northrop Frye's (cited by M. Kessler, *SBL Proceedings*, *1972,* II, p. 525).

[18]. Leonhard Rost, *Die Überlieferung von der Thronnachfolge Davids* (BWANT, 3.6; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1926) (= *Das kleine Credo und andere Studien zum Alten Testament* [Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1965], pp. 119-253); R.N. Whybray, *The Succession Narrative: A Study of II Samuel 9–20, I Kings 1 and 2* (SBT, 2.9; London: SCM Press, 1968).

man, the king, and the father. One relatively straightforward reconceptualization of the material is to envisage a distinction between 2 Samuel 2–5 where David is 'under the blessing' and 2 Samuel 9–24 where he is 'under the curse', the pivotal point being the knot of David's misdeeds in the Bathsheba episode (2 Sam. 11).[19] Since David is evidently not always under the curse through chs. 9–24, a more subtle and more persuasive approach to the story is one that explores various levels in the characterization of David and in his relationships with other persons in the story.[20] There is a tension between David as king and David as man (husband, father), a tension that defeats David at times; for example, when his son Absalom, who ought to belong to the private family sphere, moves over into the political sphere and becomes David's enemy militarily. At another level the story of David can be read in terms of the paradigm of 'giving' and 'grasping', both in his private and public life. When David is content to be given to (2 Sam. 2–5) or to give (2 Sam. 15–18) he is at his finest. Grasping, as portrayed quintessentially in the seizure of Bathsheba, is always destructive; it boils over into the sorry story of the family and the state with the rape of Tamar, the killing of Amnon, and the rebellion of Absalom following in rapid succession.

In this narrative there is

> no simple *Tendenz* or moralizing but rather a picture of the rich variety of life that is comic or ironic in its contrasting perspectives and conflicting norms. Not that the author is amoral or immoral; but his judgement is tempered by his sense of the intricacy and ambivalence of the situations that confront his characters—a sense, also, that is not without significance for his treatment of Providence in the story.[21]

Those who would read the David story as Scripture will not neglect, indeed, the narrative's indications of the rather mysterious but also rather infrequent incursions of Yahweh into the tale; but they will sap the life out of the story if they search primarily for religious or

19. R.A. Carlson, *David, the Chosen King: A Traditio-Historical Approach to the Second Book of Samuel* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1964).

20. David M. Gunn, 'David and the Gift of the Kingdom', *Semeia* 3 (1975), pp. 14-45; *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation* (JSOTSup, 6; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978).

21. Gunn, *The Story of King David*, p. 111.

moral truths or lessons. They will hear it best as the 'things...written aforetime...for our learning' (Rom. 15.4) if they engage with the story in its irony and ambiguity and find themselves witnesses of a story about a man's strengths and weaknesses.

Yet even where Yahweh is wholly absent from an Old Testament story, as in the case of *Esther*, the story is not precluded from having any theological 'pay-off'. For it has been precisely through a literary study of this tale that a most satisfying account of the book's religious significance has been given.[22] Mordecai's words in 4.13-14, 'If you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another quarter', are to be recognized as the structural centre of the book, artistically considered. From this perspective, rather than by decoding the term 'another quarter' as a cipher for 'God', we can discern the storyteller's belief in a 'hidden causality' that lies beneath the events of history. Like the Joseph story, the Esther tale evinces no visible activity of God; unlike the Joseph story, the Esther tale does not even allow at the end that all that has happened has in reality been God's doing (as Gen. 45.5, 7-8; 50.20). In Esther, no theologoumenon breaks the spell of the story; but the fact that Esther is in a position of power 'at such a time as this' and that, even if she will not speak out on behalf of her people, 'help' from some quarter or other can be confidently expected bespeaks an assurance that history is neither random nor directed exclusively by human forces. The whole story speaks, though always obliquely, of a hidden presence of Yahweh in the world. The storyteller 'mirrors the nature of history in his method of narration',[23] and as an artist makes Yahweh conspicuous by his absence.

There is another unexpressed theologoumenon that is mouthed rather than spoken by the tale: 'the preservation of the Jewish people is in itself a religious obligation of the first magnitude'.[24] Nothing in the book says so, but the institution of Purim as the

[22]. See Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure* (SBLDS, 44; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979).

[23]. Berg, *Esther*, p. 178.

[24]. R. Gordis, *Megillat Esther* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 1972), p. 13; cf. Childs, *Introduction*, p. 606: 'The strongest canonical warrant...for the religious significance of the Jewish people in an ethnic sense'.

perpetual sequel to the story and the presence of the story within both Jewish and Christian Scripture testify to a consummate art in storytelling that broadcasts its fundamental worldviews by saying nothing, apparently, about them.

A further benefit to be gained from approaching the Old Testament as literature appears when we consider the *Pentateuch*. A truly literary approach will hardly hesitate to regard the Pentateuch as a unitary work, largely because it has been Torah to Jews and the 'fivefold volume' to Christians for many centuries. Moreover, it is chronologically sequential and, with the exception of Genesis, which could no more be separated from what follows than could Exodus be separated from what precedes, its beginning, middle, and end correspond with the life story of a single dominant individual. A wise literary critic cannot afford to ignore the vast investment of scholarly effort in analysis of the pre-history of the Pentateuchal text, but in the end we have to take our stand with the text that won out, and not with the sources JEDP or whatever.

Two important consequences result.[25] First, a single unifying theme in the Pentateuch may be sought (though perhaps not necessarily found). I would locate it in the triple promise (formulated variously in Genesis) of descendants, land and relationship with God—and in the (partial) fulfilment of those promises. Secondly, the point at which the Pentateuch concludes is a powerful determinant of the meaning of the Pentateuch as a whole: Israel's canon within its canon speaks not of the realization of the divine promises, except in part and proleptically, but of the simple existence and continuing reaffirmation of the promises. Israel is left by this literary work with the future, which can be an occasion for hope or despair, for trust in the God of the promise or doubt in his capability.

When this Scripture is read as story, no unambiguous kerygma asserts itself; but the hearers expand their experience of what life under a promise can be like and ask themselves serious questions about how long they can go on living in expectation, with hope deferred, and with their heart sick.

These stories are, according to one influential analysis, 'world-

[25]. See David J.A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (JSOTSup, 10; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978; 2nd edn, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

establishing' myths.[26] But they need not be comforting assurances just for that reason; they can be every bit as much 'world-subverting' as the highly acclaimed 'parable' form. If Georg Büchner rightly depicted literature as a *Möglichkeit des Daseins*, 'a rehearsal of the possibilities of being in the world...not a confirmation of what one is but a proposal to be something different',[27] all these stories are potentially subversive and have the capacity to function as a literature critical of any worldview brought to it by the preunderstanding of its readers.

2. *Poem*

A first example may be taken from *Psalm 42–43*, where a single *dominating image* seems to offer the best insight into the poem.[28] In the first strophe the image is that of water as life; in the second, of water as death. In the first strophe, water is life for the thirsty hart in the desert; the psalmist's anxious desire for God is the instinctual drive of the desperate animal for self-preservation; it is a search for the one who is his water, his life. In the second strophe, however, the psalmist knows himself to be overwhelmed by hostile water which, like the water he craves, also comes from God: 'Your torrents and your breakers have engulfed me' (42.7). In seeking water, he finds it; but it is not the life-giving water that he finds. Does this not mean that 'God, who was to have been the life of the psalmist, has become his death; he has become an elemental force, oceanic, irresistible'?[29] The poem is projecting the tension in the mind of the psalmist between his contrary experiences of God: God is at once his joy and fate.[30] This tension expresses itself also in the dialogue within the psalmist himself: 'Why are you cast down, O my

26. Cf. John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval* (Niles: Argus, 1975), pp. 57-62.

27. Cited by J.P. Stern, *The Times Higher Education Supplement* (June 4, 1976), p. 11.

28. See L. Alonso Schökel, 'The Poetic Structure of Psalm 42–43', *JSOT* 1 (1976), pp. 4-11 (first published as 'Estructura Poetica del Salmo 42–43', in *Wort, Lied und Gottesspruch: Festschrift für Joseph Ziegler* [Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1972]).

29. Alonso Schökel, 'Poetic Structure', p. 7.

30. The phrase is from the eleventh-century mystic Jewish poet, Solomon ben Judah ibn Gabirol.

soul… Hope in God; for I shall again praise him' (42.5, 11; 43.5). Here is the polarity of the psalmist's experience: 'At one level of consciousness nostalgia and dismay predominate; at a deeper level confidence and hope emerge and grow'.[31]

What does this poem teach us about God? That God may be experienced negatively as well as positively? Certainly. That God *is* both comforting and hostile? Possibly. But does this poem exist in order to teach? Does it not exist in order to be sung—or chanted or read? Will not the polarity in the psalmist's experience of God—to speak only of this aspect of the poem—be felt and heard differently by its hearers in their differing circumstances? Of course, as we all know; a psalm that makes one person weep can rejoice another. When the psalm works in this variegated manner, it is functioning as literature. To acknowledge it as Scripture in addition is to say no more than the community of faith welcomes, and is sustained by, the possibilities that it opens up.

Next, the *Song of Songs* may be chosen as an illustration of the role of a sustained *cluster of metaphor* in Old Testament poetry. Country (with its flocks, vineyards, sun, flowers, hills, fields and villages) and court (with its king, chambers, curtains, maidens, jewels, couches, perfumes, banquets, streets and squares) function as a brilliant but transparent metaphoric system for the disjunction of the lovers that is always striving towards union. The imagery is everywhere sensuous, with fragrances, breezes, natural beauty, delights of food and wine; and the emotional language is highly pitched, with ravishment of heart, lovesickness, desperate longing, exultation, and its images of animal energy and grace (gazelle, stag, goats, raven, doves, fawns). Again, the imagery of enclosed gardens, walls, doors, of absence and presence, of losing and finding, pervades the poem with the tension of sexual desire, frustration, and fulfilment. It is not the explicit reference to breasts and kissing that creates the erotic quality of this poem, but the consistent play of metaphor. The language is rarely direct and explicit (hence the difficulties in reconstructing a drama from the poem, or even in some places of assigning speeches); rather it is 'subtle and seductive, leaving many things unspoken but nonetheless

31. Alonso Schökel, 'Poetic Structure', p. 8.

present'.[32] The poem does not allow love to evaporate into a philosophical abstraction, for it persistently makes physical attraction and excitement of feeling the chief ingredient in romantic love; but on the other hand, its emphatic sexuality is not expressed in physical terms and it makes no appeal to the voyeuristic instinct.[33]

The metaphoric systems pervading the poem exist, in the first place, to be savoured and appreciated. 'The beginning of literary criticism lies in the recognition [that]...the work of art...exists not to be used but to be understood and enjoyed.'[34] It does not exist in order to 'teach' or 'affirm' the value of sexual love. It does not even 'celebrate' it in any self-conscious way. It is true that the Song has been appropriated for Scripture, but that only means that its horizon of reference has been broadened so that it can function as teaching (wisdom) if need be. Certainly it may be *used* in protest against distorting and limiting views of human sexuality. But when it is no longer time for protest or battle or the restoring of balances, the Song comes into its own again not as some 'useful' artifact but as an invitation to delight in the mysterious reality of joyful physical love.

For a third example of Old Testament poetry, we may consider *Hosea 2* and the function of *structure* in poetry.[35] Though not a narrative poem in any usual sense of that term, this poem of Yahweh and his wife is structured in two shapes (at least). It first appears in linear or sequential shape, that is, as a plotted poem. We can make out seven acts in its plot, one earlier act being presupposed by the poem. What is going on in the poem, we may say, is this:

0. Yahweh and Israel have related harmoniously to each

32. R.E. Murphy, 'Interpreting the Song of Songs', *BTB* 9 (1979), pp. 99-105 (104).

33. Cf. Leland Ryken, *The Literature of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), pp. 217-30.

34. Helen Gardner, *The Business of Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 15.

35. Cf. D.J.A. Clines, 'Hosea 2: Structure and Interpretation', in *Studia Biblica 1978*. I. *Papers on Old Testament and Related Themes. Sixth International Congress on Biblical Studies* (ed. E.A. Livingstone; JSOTSup, 11; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1979), pp. 83-103 (reprinted below).

other as husband and wife [this is presupposed as the past state of affairs].

1. Israel has begun to love the Baalim, but that cannot be combined with love for Yahweh. So although Yahweh still wishes to be husband to Israel, Israel has blocked that relationship ('she is no wife to me' [v. 2a]).
2. The result is that Yahweh abandons his normal marital relationship with Israel, so that there is a blockage on his side as well as hers ('I am not her husband', viz. 'I can be no husband to her' [v. 2a]).
3. The next move in the plot is not a response, but an initiative, by Yahweh: he sets up a blockage (thorn hedge, wall) between Israel and the Baalim (v. 6), which denies her access to them but does not remove her longing for them (5b, 7a).
4. In the next step, Israel contemplates a return to Yahweh (v. 7b), but she finds that that route also is blocked because she does not 'know' Yahweh and his gifts (v. 8).
5. The result is stalemate. The three *personae* at the corners of the triangle remain, but Israel's lines of communication both to Yahweh and to the Baalim stay blocked; she is trapped.
6. The only way out of stalemate is for Yahweh to remove the blockage between himself and Israel; this he does in removing Israel from the sphere of the Baalim's influence by taking her into the desert (v. 14).
7. Finally, the reciprocal relationship between Yahweh and Israel that existed before the poem began is restored: Yahweh speaks and Israel answers (vv. 14-15). The Baalim are remembered only to be forgotten (v. 17)!

The poem plainly lends itself to being read in this linear fashion. But it also contains another structure which permits a different reading. This second structure emerges from the function of the triple *lākēn* ('therefore') in the poem:

Appeal to Israel to abandon her harlotry (vv. 2-5).

[Because she has played the harlot]

1. *Therefore* (*lākēn*) I will bar her way (v. 6a)
   (viz. I will end her harlotry) (vv. 6-7)

But she does not acknowledge me as giver (v. 8a).

[Because she does not acknowledge me as giver]
2. *Therefore* (*lākēn*) I will take back my gifts (v. 9a)
(viz. I will end her enjoyment of them) (vv. 9-13)
But me she has forgotten (v. 13b).

[Because she has forgotten me]
3. *Therefore* (*lākēn*) I will persuade her...woo her (v. 16)
(viz. I will cause her to remember me and [by implication]
to abandon her harlotry) (vv. 16-17).

Each 'therefore' (*lākēn*) strophe is grounded upon a misdeed of Israel's mentioned at the end of the previous strophe. So there is a sequential air to the poem. Yet each of Israel's misdeeds have taken place at the same time: to have played the harlot with the Baalim, to have failed to acknowledge Yahweh as her benefactor, to have forgotten Yahweh—they are all the same sin. So the poem can be read not as a *sequence* of actions that Yahweh proposes to take in response to a sequence of misdeeds, but as a *set of options* he opens himself up to, a range of possibilities that he passes in review. The mood of the poem is, on this reading, one of divine bafflement, of God's struggling with himself (cf. 6.14; 11.8).[36] Does he dismiss the first two options in favour of the third, or does he take a yet further alternative of forging a wholeness out of all three available options? His options arise from deep feeling (both resentment of Israel and a craving for her companionship), and any decision that attempts to ignore something that is real to him will reduce (will it not?) the wholeness of his being.[37]

The poem does not allow us to choose definitively between these various readings. It permits itself to be read horizontally as well as vertically, that is, as presenting impulses that exist simultaneously within Yahweh as well as a sequence of actions he plans to carry out. It permits itself to be read as the coming to a decision out of a conflict of competing feelings, or as one total response to the reality of Israel's infidelity. We may lean to one reading or another, but we will be good readers of this intense and finely wrought piece of

36. Cf. Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), p. 119.

37. See J.G. Janzen, 'Metaphor and Reality in Hosea 11', *SBL 1976 Seminar Papers* (ed. G. MacRae; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976), pp. 413-45.

scriptural literature if we can be alert to all reasonable readings of it.

Story and poem are alike enough to allow a common set of reflections on their significance in Old Testament literature.

1. Story and poem are oblique modes of communication. Neither Genesis nor the Song of Songs sets out to tell us what to do or to convey a 'message' to us. Indeed, it would be excessively doctrinaire to assert that a literary work has no meaning beyond itself ('A poem should not mean, but be'[38]), but almost equally doctrinaire to claim to nail down *the* 'kerygma' of a literary work. A literary approach to the Old Testament lowers our expectations for clear messages and general truths or for proof texts to equip arsenals for theological warfare. But it heightens our sensitivities to being moved, amused, elated, angered, persuaded. And when the literature provokes in us the kinds of reaction it has the capacity to create—what more could one ask of a *scripture*?

2. Old Testament story and poem reach us as texts. Texts are monuments; they signal the presence of what is dead but 'survives' and can be awakened.[39] We cannot hear these stories and poems as their first hearers heard them, recreating the world of the teller of tales or willing ourselves back into the audience of an Amos. But the texts themselves still exist, endlessly replicated. They are given to springing to life and taking even casual readers by surprise. *We* do not make the leap into the past, *we* do not have to devise some scheme for bridging the gap between the 'then' of the text and the 'now' of the hearer. Any literature worth the name jumps the time-gap of its own accord. For this reason, the church is entitled to regard its scripture as 'lively oracles'.

3. What is happening in imaginative literature such as story and poem is the creation of worlds alternative to our own present reality. Though they bear a resemblance to our everyday world, we are aware that things are done differently there, values we recognize are differently esteemed, and our own personal security

38. A. MacLeish, 'Ars Poetica', in *Streets in the Moon* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1926).

39. Cf. W.J. Ong, '*Maranatha*: Death and Life in the Text of the Book', *JAAR* 45 (1977), pp. 419-49.

may be troubled as we realize that our way is not the only way for humans to be. If we are fascinated into acknowledging the alternative world as part, at least, of what we want to have as our own real world, two horizons merge: that of our prior world and that of the alternative world. In religious language, this is called 'hearing' Scripture. If the Old Testament as literature wins this kind of assent from us, has it not become our Scripture?