Special Section: ***Ways to Read the Bible***

The Bible As Visionary Power

by Ottilie Stafford

The Bible . . . is not a story-book or an epic poem; but it is much closer to being a work of literature than it is to being a work of history or doctrine, and the kind of mental response that we bring to poetry has to be in the forefront of our understanding of it.[1]

—Northrop Frye

Northrop Frye's repeated statements relating the Bible to a reality of the imagination that is vast—stretching through time and space to include the whole history of the world and the prophetic soul dreaming on things to come—have influenced teachers of biblical literature, both directly and through other writers.[2] Ever since his early work on Blake, everything that Frye has written has pointed forward to a major work dealing with biblical literature. He has always written of the Bible as the central myth of the Western World, and "the supreme example of the way that myths can, under certain social pressures, stick together to make up a mythology."[3]

Now that the first volume of his work dealing with the Bible, *The Great Code*,[4] has appeared to enthusiastic critical applause, the importance of Frye's application of literary theory to biblical study cannot be ignored. The title of his book echoes William Blake: "The Old and New Testaments are the Great Code of Art." And Frye is very much concerned with the necessity of understanding the Bible in order to understand the arts of the Western World. But he is also insistent that the Bible is itself a unified work, narrative and poetic in its forms, given coherence by its patterns of imagery, structure, and rhetoric. This is an important change from the more common literary approach to the Bible, that sees it as a collection of separate works, an anthology of Near Eastern literature. Frye's approach makes possible not only a coherent reading of Scripture, but also a new approach to the ways in which biblical literature acts as a magnet drawing to itself the secular literature of our culture.

Frye's background qualifies him for such a study. After graduating from the Honours Course in Philosophy and English at the University of Toronto, he took three years of theology at Emmanuel College, and was ordained by the United Church of Canada in 1936. Although he decided that his true vocation lay in literary study and went on to do graduate work at Oxford, his theological training has affected his approach to literature, just as his critical theories have affected his reading of the Bible. *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) led to his recognition as "the most able systematizer of his time." The *Anatomy's* structure of criticism initially was intended to organize ways of looking at literature, but eventually led to educational theory, and finally (in *The Critical Path* in

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1971) to approaches to social and political action.

This broadening of Frye's concerns is logical. He sees the purpose of all humanistic study, and ultimately of life itself, as an attempt to find vaster and more creative structures of the imagination in order to shape life by them. And he sees the Bible, sitting in the middle of all such structures, as the single most important object of humanistic study, particularly of literary study. So the Bible is central to the effort to grasp life through the imagination without abstracting it. Its visionary power is its secret, and its aim is to transform the society. The aim of myth is to make the seemingly impossible probable. The work of literature is to reshape experience.

The Bible's power to organize man's vision of his world rises out of its being an organized world of typology. It is the only form which incorporates all the structures of archetypes that can extend over time and space and over all orders of reality, visible and invisible. Everything in the Bible becomes mythically significant as it is seen within these structures. The universal is seen in every event recorded; "the truth is inside its structure, not outside."[5]

Inside the structure are symbols that unify all existent worlds: the divine world of God, the human world of the Son of Man, the animal world of the sheepfold, the vegetable world of vine and garden, the mineral world of the cornerstone. All are caught up in a movement with a quest as its theme: the search for an ideal world where injustice and suffering have passed away. The quest for such a possible but not present world is a theme found in all literatures. In the Bible it shapes the movement from Garden to Holy City, as well as individual expressions within it.

The *Pilgrim Psalter* (Psalms 120–134), for example, moves from isolation and violence to community and holiness. The Joseph epic ends in reunited brotherhood after danger, violence, and distress. A similar structure is found in the book of Ruth and an ironic form in the book of Jonah.

Particularly in the book of Job—a kind of Bible in miniature—the reader moves from

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despair at the separation of experience from meaning, the agonizing search for God and His answers, to the joyous vision of the whole creation filled with God's presence. These themes not only relate Job to the whole movement of the Bible, and to other works within that larger structure, but also relate it to Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Frost's *The Masque of Reason*, Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, Dillord's *Holy the Firm*, and any number of the widely-ranging footnotes to the book of Job in world literature. They are also related, of course, to personal tragedies in individual lives, and to society's distress recorded in the daily papers.

Frye sees the quest for lost identity, the search for the long-lost home, the desire for reconciliation and harmony as the theme of almost all literature and most of the experiences of life. It is found in Yeat's "Sailing to Byzantium" with its golden birds in golden trees singing of what is past and passing and to come, in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, with its movement from the pastoral world to the pearl gates and the jewels of the glowing streets, in Thoreau's vision of a brighter day to dawn, and in all the Utopias where the life of nature and reason are lived in communities.

Both in reading and understanding the Bible and in living a responsible life, it is the imagination that grasps and holds a vision of a possible world. It is the will that trans-

forms that vision into a goal for action. The relationship to belief and faith is obvious. For the Christian, who believes that revelation gives the key to the meaning of life and the individual must respond, Frye's Bible-centered organizations have a particular value.

What does such an approach do to the study of the Bible? First of all, it sees the Bible as a unity in a way doctrinal and historical approaches cannot. It is an epic with God as the hero. It is a romance, a quest for a lost society that moves from Genesis to Revelation. It is a progress from despair to joy, from chaos to order, from innocence to hard-won illumination, from isolation to community, from violence to holiness.

If one views the movement from creation to apocalypse as a movement from chaos to order, then the stories of Jesus are central to the typology of the Bible and hence of all of the experiences in life and in literature. He is the unifying symbol for all existence. His death and resurrection lead us through the deepest chaos into the most complete reestablishing of order. The quest for the lost identity has its central expression here, and the effort "to regain to know God aright" concentrates on the life of Christ. Here archetypal literary criticism and theology are in complete agreement.

Furthermore, the unity of the Bible is not a static one, according to such an approach. There is a continual shaping of the typological coherence as book after book is written. The Old Testament is found in the New in its images and in the echoing suggestion of repeated narrative. The visionary structure of any part of the Bible enlarges upon the visions of the past. Inspiration works in part through this process.

The second benefit of Frye's approach to the Bible is the typology it gives us to relate to other works of literature and to the arts and social sciences as well. This implies an educational significance also. It would be possible to use Frye's structures, centered in the Bible, as a way of organizing the study of other subjects. He talks of a gigantic cycle from creation to apocalypse as containing three other cyclical movements: individual, from birth to salvation; sexual, from Adam and Eve to the apocalyptic wedding; social, from the giving of the law to the establishment of the renewed society. One could incorporate most areas of theology, psychology, history and political science, behavioral science, as well as the arts that express them, within these structures. This is hardly what Adventist educators think of when they talk of Bible-centered curriculums, but such an organization of study might be less contrived and more capacious than some of our efforts have been.

Frye recognizes the educational implications of his theories. He says the Bible's importance as the central myth means that it "should be taught so early and so thoroughly that it sinks straight to the bottom of the mind, where everything that comes along later can settle on it." Obviously, the manner of reading needed is not the memory-verse method. It is the power of the character and the story and the language that the imagination responds to. It is a *visionary* power.

The third advantage in approaching the Bible as a texture of myth relates it immediately to the concerns, anxieties, and hopes of life. Frye is trying to embrace the entire conceptual world and to use it to create personal vision. Literature is important as verbal power; but even more important, it is a way of getting at an understanding of life itself. Placing the Bible at the center of such an endeavor organizes an understanding of life around it, rather than demanding a withdrawal from life to study it. If the Christian's goal is to see life whole,

as well as the Bible whole, his ability to relate the vast movement of symbols in the Bible to the events of his life might make his vision more coherent. It might help to place order on the chaos of daily haphazardness. But to grasp a vision of holiness and to use it to transform the world demands an educated imagination—not usually one of the concerns of Adventist schools and colleges.

For it is only the imagination that can see in Revelation, for example, not only a unified and carefully constructed literary form, but a final expansive bringing together of the symbolic structures that run through the Bible. The historical critic sees Revelation's strange breasts as a part of an Old Testament mythology known throughout the Middleastern world. The doctrinal reading of Revelation dissects, graphs, defines. The archetypal reading of the grand apocalypse moves from the factual world of geographically located cities to a geography filled with unreal beasts, symbolic women, and polarized cities, where all humanity is wound on to two spools of good and evil.

In the perfect city is gathered the perfect society. As evil deepens in the earthly society portrayed in the Apocalypse, the contrast with goodness is heightened. Gradually the society governed by the beast becomes unnatural, ghastly, filled with groans and the sound of weeping. Everything is lurid. And like the nightmare world it has become, the natural world turns grotesque: insects fill the air, water is blood, the heavens speak of doom, leaders of the society think only of warfare. Horror grows until God's people are called to come out of the dreadful night and the violence of Babylon. Then the contrasting society is pictured. Groaning and weeping are replaced by song; messages of doom followed by shouts of praise; suffering and violence end and the splendid city is filled with order and love.

The symbol of this love is the apocalyptic wedding. The first wedding of Adam and Eve is the background against which this final biblical wedding occurs. This redeemed love, however, unlike that of Adam and Eve, is a result of suffering—that of the Lamb and that of the martyrs. Evil and violence caused the suffering, but holiness and harmony result from it. The worship of the Lamb rises out of the memory of violence. The entire Bible and all of human experience emerge from the chaos they were tossed into after the first wedding in the innocence of Eden.

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And Eden is deliberately recalled. The tree of life and the throne of God remind the redeemed society of where it began. But they now appear in a setting not of the familiar natural world where everything was begotten, born, and died, but in the enduring world of jewels and gold, lifted out of the temporal. Here there is not even a sun to mark the daily movement of time. With everything else that brought suffering and death, time itself has been wiped out.

Since the finishing of the creation, the number seven has symbolized completion. Here in the Apocalypse, with the fulfillment of the promises to the seven churches (all organized in packages of seven), the final completion is achieved. Even the phrases used in the early messages to the churches are repeated to signal the finish of both rewards and condemnations. Division is now also finished, and the wedding of the redeemed and the Lamb symbolizes the return of the world to oneness. Separation, individual isolation, conflict, contention, and the anxiety and hostility they caused,

which have been themes throughout the Bible, end with the destruction of evil.

Color imagery also organizes the movement of the book through the separation of good from evil and the final resolution of history. The first vision seen by John, with its gold candlesticks, God's white hair like wool and sun-like countenance, begins the patterns of white and gold identified with holiness. But the feet that burn and the eyes of flame begin patterns of fiery red that end with the destruction of wickedness. At the end of the book, when the images of darkness and night are entirely outside the Holy City, the flaming anger of God destroys evil for the final time, and what remains are the colors of perfection: white, gold, the rainbow, shining splendor.

As Gros Louis suggests,[6] any attempt to portray unmodified evil or unstained good strains the limits of language and brings the imagination to a point beyond which it does not know how to go. But the vision of a society centered in holiness, unified by brotherhood, caught up in universal praise of the Creator and Redeemer, works powerfully. Here is the homeland of the imagination. It is with the entire memory of biblical imagery and of human history filled with suffering and searching that the homesick wanderer reads John's words: "Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

Beyond the point where history as we know it ends, the archetypal structures of the Bible do not take us. Neither do they take us back to the universe that existed before the opening words of Genesis. But they do give us structures to organize personal and social history. And the unified vision of unspoiled goodness at the beginning of history and of splendid holiness at its end moves us, or should move us, toward a better world.

To be so moved is, for Frye, the purpose of all biblical and literary experience. It is to create a vision in the reader's mind, so that his will can freely choose to transform the world in every way he is able. The Christian's chief responsibility is to become a visionary and a revolutionary. To paraphrase Frye, the road to reformation runs through the language of the imagination.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Northrop Frye. *The Critical Path: An Essay on the Social Context of Literary Criticism* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 116.

2. See, for example, Leland Ryken's *The Literature of the Bible* (Wheaton, Illinois: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), and Leonard Thompson's *Introducing Biblical Literature* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1978).

3. *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance.* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), p. 14.

4. New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982.

5. *The Great Code*, p. 46.

6. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, "Revelation," in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 345.