

THE BIBLE

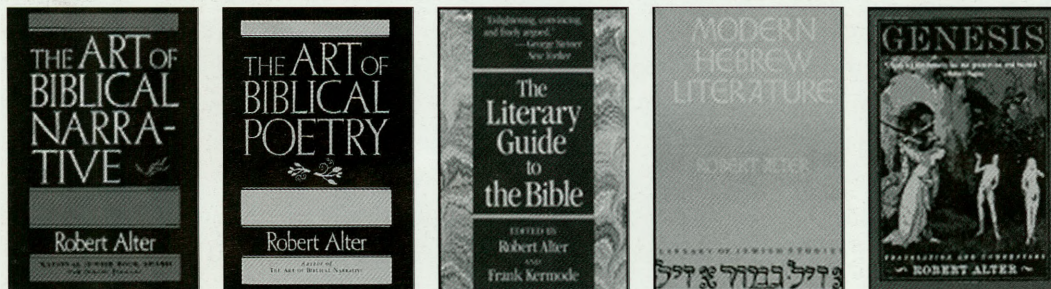
From Cliff Rusch's book *Redesigning Genesis*: Chapter One, right panel. Text elements are beginning to stray. Rusch says, "it is as if God is pecking out the script as he goes, adjusting the story, making changes, and also making mistakes."

Discussed: T. S. Eliot, literary play, puns, God's end of the telescope, Hagar, Flaubert, Gideon,
literary archaeology, historical amnesia, sensual deliquescence, imaginative force

An Agenda for a New Kind of Literary Study of the Bible

By Robert Alter

The literary study of the Bible may for some seem to be what philosophers would call a category error. The Bible, according to this common though imprecise understanding, is a set of religious texts. Its purpose is to convey a vision of how God created the world, of his designs for the historical destiny of humankind, including a special account of his covenanted people, and to set forth in forceful terms the moral and ritual obligations that the readers of these texts through the generations are expected to fulfill. What, then, could all this have to do with literature? One does not have to be a Philistine to pose such a question. A reader as subtle as T. S. Eliot saw fit, after his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism, to rebuke those who read the Bible for its poetry.



In 1971, Robert Alter, a literature professor at Berkeley, gave an informal colloquium at Stanford on the literary study of the Bible. The lecture grew into an article, then a book. More books followed. The *Los Angeles Times Book Review* says he makes reading the Bible fun again. In March 2006, he gave the Longo Lecture at Pacific Union College, which is published here with the permission of the author and the college.



But religion and literature are by no means mutually exclusive categories, as the evidence of literature outside the Bible in many languages should abundantly remind us. The great seventeenth-century Anglican poet George Herbert was one of the most intense and profound religious poets in the English language, and it is also hard to think of a poet more acutely aware than he of the elaboration of poetic form—rhyme, meter, imagery, even typography. Herbert and his

phonetic aspects of language, to the expressive possibilities of syntactic ordering, and to subtleties of word choice, while they deploy as well a variety of strategies for the presentation of character and dialogue, shifts in narrative point of view, the effective selection of narrative detail, significant analogues among different episodes, and much more. It is my conviction, as I will try to show through some brief examples, that careful attention to the elaboration of these aspects of literary

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near-contemporaries, John Donne and Milton, illustrate, as do countless other writers, that what is literary is not merely aesthetic, though, whatever else it may be, it is almost always aesthetic, as well.

Because of the way that the aesthetic and the religious are interfused, I will avoid that common phrase, “the Bible as literature,” often used as a rubric for college courses, because there is something condescending or at least concessive about it: the Bible, it suggests, isn’t really literature, or at least not chiefly literature, but one might, as a kind of intellectual diversion, choose to view it as such. It is a more just description to speak of the literary dimension of the Bible, and that is what I will try to illuminate here.

What role, then, does literature play in Scripture? The bulk of the Bible is either narrative prose or poetry. (I will not attempt to draw the catalogues of laws—cultic, civil, and moral—under the literary tent, though some recent scholars have attempted to do that.) Literature is a particular use of language that seeks to exploit the strong expressive potential of the artful ordering of words and in so doing makes available to its audience a kind of utterance that is more memorable, more forceful, and often more complex or more richly paradoxical than would be possible through extraliterary uses of language.

In poetry, the linguistic resources tapped include sound (especially its rhythmically regular character), imagery, syntax, and, in the special case of biblical verse, the complications of the semantic dynamics of parallelism between the first half of the line and the second, or in triadic lines, among the three members of the line. (I will have more to say later about the dynamics of parallelism.)

The prose narratives also reflect attention to the

form in the biblical poems and narratives brings us closer to what the biblical writers actually meant to say.

Now, the manipulation of literary form is from a certain point of view a kind of play, anthropologically related, let us say, to a child’s kneading clay or putting together any other raw material in order to make a pleasing shape. The presence of such play is evident throughout the Bible, a good deal of it detectable even in translation, though some of it, as always the case in literature, is visible only in the original language. But, as we would expect, the literary play of the Bible is almost always play with a purpose.

Let me begin by citing the humble instance of the pun, commonly and wrongly dismissed as the lowest form of humor. The Hebrew Bible abounds in puns. Perhaps it is a form of expression that tends to flourish in languages like biblical Hebrew that work with a relatively small vocabulary. These plays on words are often quite telling. For example, toward the end of Psalm 69 (verses 31–32), the speaker affirms, in a gesture reminiscent of some of the later Prophets, that a heartfelt song of gratitude is more pleasing to God than a sacrificial beast slaughtered on the altar. (This and all subsequent biblical quotations are my own translations.)

Let me praise God’s name *in song*
And exalt Him in thanksgiving,
and it will be better to the LORD than *an ox*,
than a cleft-hooved bull with horns.

The statement seems straightforward and, certainly from a modern point of view, admirable, but in the Hebrew, the theological argument turns on a pun. “In

song" is *beshir* and "than an ox" is *mishor*. What the poet has done is to effect a religious or cultic substitution by shifting the vowel in a monosyllabic noun: *shir*, "song," is made to take the place of *shor*, "ox," on the linguistic surface of the poem, as in the spiritual depths of the psalmist's life. Such purposeful punning occurs many hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of times in Hebrew Scripture.

Let me cite another example from biblical poetry that is less microscopic and also visible in translation. The relationships between the two or three parts of a line of biblical poetry (a subject to which we will return), though seemingly a matter of semantic equivalence, generally involves some sort of development from the first part of the line to the part, or parts, of the line that follow—an intensification, a focusing, a concretization, or a miniature narrative momentum. In Psalm 90, one of the great meditations in all literature on the unbridgeable difference between God's eternal temporal scale and the transience of human life, we encounter this haunting line:

For a thousand years in Your eyes
are like yesterday gone
and like a watch in the night. (Ps. 90:4)

Here is time, through the magic of poetry, imagined through God's end of the telescope; in a rushed sequence of diminishing temporal terms, we move from "a thousand years" in the first verset to a "yesterday," which has already vanished in the second verset, to "a watch in the night," not even the twenty-four hours of the yesterday that has gone, but a mere four hours or less (one-third of the night in biblical reckoning), a brief period devoid of daylight, when everybody but the night watchman are plunged in sleep, as the psalm will proceed to remind us.

I offer this single memorable line as a token of thousands of others in the Bible, where the peculiar semantic dynamics on which the poetic line is constructed enable a vision of God and human existence that would scarcely be possible—surely not with this evocative power—in a nonliterary form of expression.

As a final preliminary instance of the force of literary shaping in the Bible, I would like to call attention to the boldness and precision of word choice, a feature shared by poetry and narrative, though deployed differently in each. In the story of the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis, there comes a moment

when Hagar concludes that there is no hope for the child's survival: "And when the water in the skin was gone, she *flung* him under one of the bushes and went off and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away, for she thought, 'Let me not see when the child dies'" (Gen. 20:15–16).

Now, to the best of my knowledge, I was the first translator to render the crucial Hebrew verb here as "flung," although that is clearly what it means. (The very same verb is used in Exodus when Pharaoh decrees that every male Hebrew infant should be flung into the Nile.) Others represent it as "place," "put," "lay," or some other evasive term. The King James Version uses "thrust," which is a little better but does not go far enough. It is probably a general rule that great writers are more daring and more surprising than their translators are willing to be.

I think due respect for the precision of word choice of biblical prose throws the following light on this heart-stopping moment in the story: Hagar is convinced that her only child is about to perish from thirst in the blazing heat of the desert sun. She cannot bear to watch him die and so withdraws a bowshot away (a beautifully apt measure of distance here because Ishmael, as we learn at the end of the episode, is destined to become an expert bowman).

In a paroxysm of maternal despair, she does not place her child under the bush but flings him down there. The terrible emotional cost of the ordeal Sarah has inflicted on Hagar through Abraham is thrown into sharp focus by this single violent verb. Perhaps one may glimpse here how the "message" of the biblical story about human nature and the moral consequences of particular actions is more complex than might initially appear.

Literary analysis, of course, is not necessarily a magic key, and there are a good many things one should *not* do in the literary study of the Bible. Let me rapidly list a few cardinal sins of literary analysis of Scripture. One should not read the Bible as though it were modern literature, as though biblical narrative had been written by someone like Balzac or Conrad, biblical poetry by Baudelaire or Wallace Stevens. The conditions of production of liter-



ature, the governing conventions, and the strategies for organizing both narrative and poetry were in many respects quite different from those obtaining in modern Western literatures, so one cannot simply impose a modern literary framework on the ancient texts.

The fundamental difference between a literary practice based on individual authorship, with the name of the author and indication of copyright on the title page, and a literary practice where authors are anonymous (except for the Prophets) and the texts them-

grid. Methodology, it should be said, is often seductive to scholars in the humanities because it gives them a reassuring sense that their work is not subjective but rigorous and perhaps even scientific; and also, since methodological fashion changes by the decade, it encourages a feeling that what the scholars are doing is at the much-invoked cutting edge of intellectual endeavor.

Thus, when some younger biblical scholars began to take an interest in literary analysis in the late 1970s,

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selves often constructed as collages of different sources, has far-reaching consequences. These sweeping contrasts do not mean that there are never points of illuminating contact between ancient and modern.

The repertoire of literary devices, after all, is not infinite, and thus sometimes more or less the same device or technique will be observable in both a modern and a biblical text, and one may learn from the modern about the ancient, or, indeed, the other way around. From time to time, the reading of a modern writer otherwise quite unlike the Bible may throw light on a biblical literary practice.

Flaubert, for example, is utterly different as a stylist from any of the biblical writers in the lexical wealth of his language, the sheer profusion of his stylistic palette, yet his almost fanatic devotion to finding *le mot juste*, the exactly right word for the particular context, may teach us to appreciate better the extraordinary lexical precision and elegant rigor of the makers of prose narrative in the Bible.

Joyce, who in *Ulysses* actually uses an abundance of biblical materials, though in rather unbiblical ways, produced in that novel one of the most elaborate systems of recurring narrative motifs in modern literature. Having read *Ulysses* with attention to its structure of motifs, we may be in a better position to appreciate the centrality of recurring motifs in many biblical narratives—stones in the Jacob story, dreams in the Joseph story, water in Moses's story, fire in the story of Samson, and so forth.

The more prevalent error, at least in academic circles, in trying to understand the literary operations of the Bible, is to try to analyze it according to lines laid out in some pre-existing methodological

there was a wave of structuralist studies of various biblical texts. This was followed by a spate of semiotic readings, reader-response interpretation, deconstruction, and, a little later, by the more ideological trends of academic literary studies such as New Historicism, postcolonialism, and feminism. By and large, the results of all this activity driven by academic fashion have been less than illuminating.

I do not mean to dismiss such work wholesale. Good readers will be good readers in spite of methodology, as is demonstrated by one resolutely structuralist biblical scholar who, in the midst of elaborate and often wearying schemata of purported formal structures in the biblical texts, manages to offer some wonderful local insights into what is going on in the stories and poems.

I would like to propose an alternate model for how literary scholarship should deal with the Bible. What is called for, I would argue, is an enterprise of literary archeology. Just as archeology proper has given us a much better understanding of the material culture of ancient Israel—the layout of its homes, the structure of its sanctuaries, the mechanisms of its economic and agricultural life, and much more—through patient digging and the painstaking piecing together of fragments, we need to sift through the biblical canon and reconstruct the organizing conventions and distinctive techniques of biblical literature.

Instead of reading the Bible according to the guideposts of some ready-made system of analysis, we need to try to recover the Bible's own literary system as best we can. I am convinced that this is an empirical undertaking: by observing recurring patterns in the

biblical corpus and asking questions about how and why they occur, by accumulating the evidence of different but related examples, we can begin to get a handle on at least some of the governing literary conventions of the Bible.

Conventions, as I tried to show in my book on biblical narrative and in a good deal of subsequent work, are the enabling frameworks of the act of literary communication. When in the opening sentence of a story we see words such as these, "Once upon a time in a land far away," the knowledge of narrative convention we have had since early childhood allows us to pick up this beginning immediately as a signal that the narrative we are reading is not a realist novel or an epic poem but a fairytale, and we accordingly are prepared to encounter certain kinds of details we would not expect or accept elsewhere—wicked witches, princesses in towers, magic wands, symmetrical series of three sons or three daughters, and so forth.

In the case of the Bible, the familiarity with literary convention that was second nature to the original audiences was largely lost over the centuries because both Christians and Jews, focusing on the biblical texts as divine revelation, read them in entirely different terms, whether theological, typological, allegorical, mystic, or moral.

It is because of this historical amnesia that a literary archeology of the Bible is needed. Such features of the stories and poems as the use of repetition, the presentation of dialogue, the deployment of poetic insets in the prose narratives, the function of puns in linking adjacent segments of the text, the complex interplay of the two halves of the poetic line, need to be carefully scanned so that the organizing principles that undergird these narrative and poetic materials may be inferred.

In some cases, the recovery of a convention may involve a certain margin of conjecture because we can find only a handful of occurrences in the corpus where we might prefer to have at least several dozen; yet in many instances, a wealth of instances can be found and persuasive general conclusions can be drawn.

In the brief compass of these remarks, I will offer three exemplary instances in which the understanding of a recovered convention of biblical literature throws into fine focus what is going on in the story or in the poem. In each case, many dozens or even hundreds of examples of the operation of the same convention could be cited.

My first illustration involves the formal presentation of dialogue in biblical narrative. Most readers of the Bible will be aware that there is a fixed formula for introducing direct speech in these stories: And X said to Y, followed by X's words, and then, And Y answered and said (or, simply, And Y said to X), followed by his or her response to X. But what I began to notice some years ago, and what I believe has not been observed in the scholarly literature, is that there is a divergence from this general pattern that looks like this: And X said to Y, followed by X's words, and then again, with no intervening response from Y, And X said to Y, with more of the first speaker's dialogue. In the end, Y may finally answer, or no response may be given.

Why this odd repetition of the formula for introducing speech as the same interlocutor continues to speak? After examining dozens of instances of this pattern, in keeping with my notion of empirical investigation, I arrived at the following conclusion: whenever the formula for introducing direct speech is repeated without an intervening response from the other speaker, that repetition indicates some sort of difficulty in response on the part of the second speaker—bafflement, embarrassment, surprise, or whatever the case may be.

When Gideon has successfully completed his expedition against the marauding Midianites (in this passage they are also referred to as Ishmaelites), he is approached by his men with the following proposal:

And the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, you, your son, and your son's son, for you have rescued us from the hand of Midian." And Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you. The LORD will rule over you." *And Gideon said to them,* "Let me ask something of you, that each of you give me the nose-ring he took as booty"—for they had nose-rings, as they were Ishmaelites. (Judg. 8:22–25)

The dialogue begins according to the set form: the speech of the men is introduced, they speak, Gideon's speech is introduced, and he answers. After Gideon's bit of emphatic dialogue, however, in which

he renounces the proffered kingship, there is no recorded response from the men of Israel. Instead, the narrator repeats the formula for introducing speech, "And Gideon said to them," and Gideon proceeds to request the donation of gold nose-rings.

What is going on here? On the basis of many analogous instances that exhibit the same formal pattern, I would propose that the repetition of "And Gideon said" indicates an awkward, perhaps painful or even ominous silence on the part of the men of Israel: Here they have offered a crown to their triumphant commander, and he flatly refuses them! At this point, Gideon recognizes that this is a moment of danger: the men might well rebel against him, fall away from him, or choose another candidate for the throne.

Thinking quickly, Gideon realizes that his troops need a security blanket, and if it isn't a king, he must offer them something else—hence the request for the gold nose-rings, from which he will fashion a golden ephod (the story of course pointedly alludes to Aaron and the golden calf), which will prove to be a snare and delusion to Israel.

As readers, if we pick up the signal conveyed to us by this convention for the presentation of dialogue, we are able to tune into more of what is going on between Gideon and his men, and grasp more of the interplay of political, psychological, and theological concerns in the story.

A far more widely deployed convention of biblical prose is the use of minute divergences from verbatim repetition in strings of phrases, clauses, and whole sentences that, at first glance, appear to be repeated word-for-word. These little swerves from the verbatim—a change of one or more terms, the addition or deletion of an item, a switch in the order of items or events as they were initially reported—are almost always (the exceptions are quite rare) apertures of meaning, points at which nuances of difference are introduced in regard to the characters, their motives, what happens to them as they interact with different characters.

Others besides me have observed this phenomenon—I would make special mention of Meir Sternberg and George Savran—and there are so many hundreds of occurrences of the convention in biblical narrative that its existence as a general principle used by the writers and recognized by their audiences is

scarcely in doubt. Let me offer one succinct example.

In Genesis 27, the episode in which Jacob steals the paternal blessing from Esau, when the blind Isaac calls Esau to his bedside, he asks his firstborn to bring him game to eat, "so that *I may solemnly bless you* [literally, "so that my essential self may bless you"] before I die" (verse 4). Rebekah, having eavesdropped on this conversation, reports Isaac's words to her favored son Jacob in what looks like a verbatim repetition, with her report ending in the following quotation of her husband's speech: "*I shall bless you in the LORD's presence before I die*" (verse 6).

The change she makes is small but significant: she substitutes for *nafshi*, "my essential self," which amounts to an intensive form of the first-person pronoun (misleadingly rendered in the King James Version as "my soul") the verb "to bless" simply conjugated in the first-person singular but followed by "in the LORD's presence" (or, "before the LORD").

Isaac's intention to execute a performative speech act in blessing his firstborn son is converted by Rebekah into a solemn declaration before the Lord. The message she is conveying to Jacob is that this blessing, uttered as it will be in God's presence, will be irrevocable. Thus, if Jacob wants to get the blessing for himself, he must listen to his mother's plan of deception and make the utmost haste to carry it out, or the blessing will be lost forever.

When Jacob then comes before his father, pretending to be Esau, he repeats, as we would expect in biblical narrative, the very words his father spoke to Esau and that were repeated, with the strategic revision just noted, by his mother to him, inviting Isaac to "eat of my game so that *you may solemnly bless me*" (verse 19). Why does Jacob revert to the actual words Isaac spoke, which he himself did not hear, instead of using the version reported to him by his mother?

I would suggest that in the midst of the lie he is perpetrating, the mention of "in the LORD's presence" sticks in his throat and so he substitutes language that implies a relatively secular if solemn act; in this fashion he employs unwittingly, and perhaps with unconscious irony, the formulation his father himself had used. One should also note that a phrase present in both previous versions of this clause is quietly deleted here: Jacob does not go on to say "before you die," no doubt sensing that it would be tactless to mention the imminence of death to his old and failing father, even if Isaac himself had done so.

Recognition of this convention, then, of purposeful divergence from verbatim repetition provides us a means of reading the story more fully. Whenever utterances are repeated ostensibly word-for-word, we need to look for the places where one term is substituted for another or some other kind of change is introduced. If we then ask ourselves why the small swerve from verbatim restatement has been made, we will begin to see in most instances that more is going on in the story than meets the casual eye.

My last example is from poetry. Now, it has been understood at least since the eighteenth century that lines of biblical poetry are generally organized as two (or sometimes three) units—I have been calling them “versets”—that are parallel in meaning. If you have “hearken” in the first verset, it is likely to be followed by “listen” or “incline your ear” in the second verset; if you have “speech” in the first verset, you can usually count on the appearance of something like “utterance” or “saying” in the second.

But poets, including biblical poets, are not fond of

simply repeating themselves, and it has become more widely recognized in the past couple of decades that there is very often some sort of development between the first verset and the second in what at first may seem sheer synonymity. As I noted above, ideas and images tend to be intensified, focused, concretized, made more specific, and sometimes a miniature narrative momentum is built up as the poet moves from the first half of the line to the second. A reader who assumes, as many have, that there is nothing but synonymity operating in these lines of verse will be lulled into inattention and miss much of what is truly interesting in biblical poetry.

I offer as a single vivid instance that can stand for countless others two lines from Proverbs 5, the poem in which the Mentor warns his disciple (“my son”) to resist the wiles of the “stranger-woman” and content himself with the virtuous sensual joys of married life:

For the stranger-woman’s lips drip honey,
and smoother than oil her palate.
But in the end she is bitter as wormwood,
sharp as a double-edged sword. (Prov. 5:3–4)



Pastor Roy &
Bennie Gee

AU '66

Auburn Gospel
Fellowship

“A SAFE PLACE
FOR GOD’S GRACE”
10:45 A.M. Sabbath

TWO CONGREGATIONS ONE HOLY CHURCH



Pastor Rick &
Nancy Kuykendall

AU '80

First Congregational
Church of Auburn

“STRIVING TO BE
AN ENLIGHTENED
CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY”
10:00 A.M. Sunday

710 AUBURN RAVINE ROAD, AUBURN, CA 95603 • 530.885.9087

“How good and how pleasant it is to live together in unity!”

This brief specimen illustrates how even didactic poetry can exhibit remarkable virtuosity. Since poetry obviously depends to a greater degree than does prose on the meaningful play of the original words, in this instance my comments will involve a little more detailed reference to the Hebrew.

In the first two lines, at first there would seem to be a pat matching of conventional word pairs. "Honey" and "oil" are often paired in parallel versets as two different tokens of the pleasurable good life. "Lips" and "palate" may look like another virtually formulaic pair, but they actually deserve a second look. The lips are, after all, on the outside, the palate deep within the mouth. The sequencing of the two offers an instance of narrative progression between the two versets: first the kiss on the honeyed lips, then, in a more intense erotic gesture, the penetration of tongue into mouth.

In the Hebrew, a pun lurks in "her palate," *hikah*, which is only a half-vowel away from *heiqah*, "her lap," a term often used as a metonymic euphemism for the woman's sexual part. Kissing leads to deep kissing, which leads to the dangers of actual sexual intimacy with the seductress, to be spelled out in the next line.

The phonetic richness of this line in the Hebrew invites a brief note. The concentration of alliterations is striking ("lips drip" in my translation is a pale intimation of it). The initial verset in the Hebrew sounds like this: *nofet titofna siftey zarah*, with a dense cluster of t- and f- and n- sounds occurring in shifting combinations. It is as though the sensual deliquescence of the seductress's lips had suffused the language itself. Then "smooth" in the second verset of this line, *halaq*, figures in a second alliterative pattern with "her palate," *hikah*.

The second line constitutes an obvious antithetical reversal of the first, with sweet honey turned into bitter wormwood and the smooth inside of the mouth into the sharpness of a sword. Here, too, however, the reader conditioned to watch for development from one half of the line to the next will see how an initial idea is forcefully intensified. Wormwood is nasty-tasting stuff, but, at least in reasonable doses, it won't kill you, and it was even taken as a tonic.

The double-edged sword is quite another matter: by this point, we have moved from smooth kisses to a lethally sharp weapon. The Hebrew, moreover, for "double-edged sword" means literally "sword of [two] mouths," so the mouth image with which this whole small sequence began culminates here in the devouring "mouths" of a well-honed sword with two edges.

Finally, in another strong wedding of sound and meaning, every one of the first three versets ends with the feminine *ah* suffix: *zarah* (stranger-woman), *hikah* (her palate), and *la 'anah* (wormwood). The last word of the fourth verset breaks this pattern with *pifyot* (mouths), a phonetically dissonant note at the end that aptly accords with the ominous appearance there of a double-edged sword in a sequence that began with honeyed lips.

Although I am a little uneasy about the application to the Bible of the term *message* because it sounds too reductively simple for the way the biblical writers convey complex meanings (messages, before the era of e-mail, were the province of Western Union, at so many cents a word), I hope that this last example may suggest that even when a biblical writer wants to get across an explicitly didactic message, the deployment of literary resources gives vividness, depth, and imaginative force to what is said.

The kind of literary archeology I have tried to illustrate through these examples holds, I am convinced, ample rewards for the reader.

Literature involves an elaborate system of rules, methods of ordering language and ideas, and expectations on the part of the audience conditioned by literary conventions. A certain cultural amnesia, as I have argued, has taken over in regard to the particular system within which the literature of the Bible was shaped.

To the extent that we can recover the principal elements of that system, all of us who read the Bible for whatever motives will have the possibility of seeing it more fully—which is to say, not only enjoying more fully the pleasures of the imagination it offers but grasping more firmly the truths about human nature, society, history, and humankind's relationship with God that these endlessly rich writings sought to convey.

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