THE BAROQUE PROPHETS: AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN THE HEBREW PROPHETS AND JOHN DONNE

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Literary Study of the Bible as Deflected Worship: The Misfit Prophets

The history of the engagement between The Bible and Literature has been shaped by a certain conservatism and telling omissions. From the side of Literature, the tendency has been to focus on writers who explicitly reference the Bible or who have an explicit Christian or Jewish affiliation. There have been relatively few studies that attempt to explore the texture of biblical writing and the aesthetics of the biblical by analogy with other writers. Where such work exists, the tendency has been to seek out the most auspicious, ancient and High Cultural conversation partners. As in the British Radio Four programme Desert Island Discs, the Bible finds a natural companion in lofty cultural icons such as Shakespeare—or modes of classical rhetoric. These studies are often illuminating, but taken en masse they reinforce a restricted definition of the 'literary' in Biblical Studies that reinforces the antiquity and high cultural status of the text. The 'literary' as it is known in Literature Departments is a vast and variegated terrain. Once it comes into contact with the biblical, the literary seems to shrink down into more restricted canon and a generally moderate, smooth aesthetic. There are few literary studies of the Bible that seek out conversations with, say, the visceral and bloodied lines of Ted Hughes, the disjunctive rhythms of Gerard Hopkins, the mutating puns of James Joyce, the Gothic vision of Mary Shelley or the cryptic modernism of Ezra Pound.


This is surprising as one might expect encounters with the sacred to push and expand definitions of the literary. One could envisage a turn to religion in literature analogous to the current turn to religion in continental philosophy—a seeking out of religion in order to trouble and dislocate existing philosophical categories. It seems symptomatic of secularisation that encounters between the Bible and literature have not, on the whole, opted for an exploration of exceptional divine effects, instead tending to normalise the biblical by translating it into the literary as the human and humane. In a tantalisingly brief aside in his *Formations of the Secular*, Talal Asad comments on a specifically modern phenomenon whereby a ‘newly emerging concept of literature’ is brought ‘to the aid of religious sensibilities’, adding that ‘If the Bible is read as art (whether as poetry or myth or philosophy) this is because a complicated historical development of disciplines and sensibilities has made it possible to do so’. Looking at the opening pages of a book titled *The Bible Designed to Be Read as Literature* published in Britain before the Second World War, Asad is intrigued by the protest the Introduction makes to the effect that ‘a concern for literary reading is no derogation of its sacred status’ and the author’s emphatic statement that ‘to make a rigid division between the sacred and the secular is surely to impoverish both’. As Asad comments, this statement is itself a secular expression of the text’s malleability. More could be said about the use of the literary to translate the Judeo-Christian into universally accepted categories of value and the perception of the literary as coming to the aid of beleaguered religion. Turning the Bible into a literary (or indeed historical) document consolidates one of the primary definitions of secularisation: the privatisation or marginalisation of religion, religion translating itself into ‘universal’ categories. The translation of the biblical into a superlative object of worship—the Best Book in human terms—is thus, paradoxically, at the same time an expression of religion undergoing something of a cultural cringe.

The curious contraction of the literary when it came into contact with the Bible was a symptom of two key pressures: the need to use literary criticism as deflected worship, and a rudimentary understanding of the literary as an alternative to, and even the opposite of, Historical Criticism. Arriving in the midst of a too-devout historicism, definitions

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