David Gelernter

Psychological Criticism of Biblical Narrative

Abstract: No literary approach to the Hebrew Bible can succeed unless it considers the psychology of biblical characters. The text tends to be so compressed and elliptical and so apt to use concrete images to hint at abstractions, yet so deeply aware of the psychology of its characters and narrative, that we miss much if we confine our attention to its surface. I give some examples by considering “theophany as epiphany”—where divine revelation is simultaneously a revelation to the seeker of his own character. I discuss briefly Moses at the bush, Jacob’s long night before rejoining Esau, the puzzling story of Moses (evidently) attacked by the Lord, and Elijah’s encountering the “still, small voice.” Naturally, biblical criticism reflects the mood of the times. Our own age tends to be suddenly hostile to the study of individual psychology, and virtually all scholarship—biblical scholarship especially—pays the price.

1. Introduction

If the Bible is a problem for today’s intellectual world, the modern intellectual climate also poses problems for the Bible, certainly insofar as it demands that the Bible be read through the lens of literary criticism as it is conceived today. The Hebrew Bible focuses consistently and acutely on the psychology of the individual—especially (in light of its fondness for good stories well told) on the individual of rare ability at a crisis or breaking point. But biblical literary criticism rarely confronts the Bible’s psychological depths and provides no tools for penetrating them. The age of psychology has come and gone, from the emergence of Nietzsche and Freud to the collapse of classical Freudianism in mainstream culture under the weight of postmodernism and its focus on class instead of man. No sustained “psychological criticism” of the Bible has ever emerged, and none seems likely to emerge in today’s intellectual climate.

The recurrent focus of biblical narrative on psychological questions raises the subtle, difficult question of how abstract ideas are dealt with
in the concrete, linguistic universe of the Hebrew Bible. One answer is that biblical narrators address readers indirectly, through the medium of evocative images and scenes. These images and scenes are too often taken at face value, read at the level of *peshat* and not *derash*. When words are intended to create an image in the listener’s or reader’s mind, however, it might be the image itself and not merely the language that needs expounding. What is required in such cases may be closer to art criticism—What does this painting show? How does it read? What does it mean?—than to literary criticism. Reading images is, I believe, essential to reading the Bible. Much current literary criticism suffers, furthermore, from the lack of a specifically midrashic willingness to imagine biblical characters outside the regulated habitat of the text, as fully formed personalities.

This article focuses on a topic that is overlooked by literary critics who neglect the psychology of biblical characters: the self-discovery that is part of a personal encounter with God. At several key points in the text, some of which will be discussed here, the biblical narrative presents what we might call “theophany as epiphany”—moments when a person comprehends, or encounters, his own character at the same time he encounters the Lord.

2. The Burning Bush

The revelation at the burning bush in Exodus 3:1–4:17 begins the biblical history of Israel’s liberation from Egypt. But this story is told in such a way that the revelation of God’s plans to Moses is, at the same time, a revelation of Moses’ own character. The encounter at the bush is both a theological and a psychological event, but psychological ideas are conveyed in images, not words.

We needn’t accept Freud’s view of “dreamwork” to know that we often think in images and that, in dream-thought especially, the mind tends to use images to express ideas. Cognitive psychologists have discussed this phenomenon.¹ Maimonides, in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, associates divine revelation in general with “visions or dreams.” Radak and others generally agree.²

First, a brief glance at the rabbinic literature, which supplies hints (but no developed understanding) that biblical images—notably that

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of a burning bush—embody or convey psychological states. A midrash notes that a thornbush (sneh) is the humblest of trees and therefore represents Israel humbled and enslaved in Egypt; “just as the bush burns but is not consumed, so the Egyptians will be unable to destroy Israel.” The midrashic literature often speaks as well of Moses’ humility, citing Numbers 12:3—“The man Moses was very humble, more so than any man on the face of the earth”—and other verses, including some from the bush encounter itself. Here the midrash is concerned with the psychological state of Moses the individual, suggesting that the humblest of trees is an apt symbol not only for Israel in Egypt but for Moses himself.

The biblical narrative invites us here (and elsewhere) to ask the sort of question about Moses—the man beyond or behind the text—that some readers dislike asking even about characters in modern novels, where the author’s identity and the narrative structure are plain. But the invitation to ask these “midrashic” questions is compelling—because when we do, clear and vivid answers emerge.

Given Moses’ life story, including his escape from Egypt as a wanted criminal after killing an Egyptian who had been beating a Hebrew, what might have been in his mind during his long, solitary ramble to “the other side of the wilderness”? “I have seen, yes seen, the affliction of my people in Egypt, and I have heard their screams in the face of their taskmasters; I do know their sufferings.” These words seem to fit Moses’ emotional and cognitive state perfectly; but they are spoken by the Lord. At the bush, then, Moses hears what is on his own mind; in listening to the Lord he listens, as it were, to his own mind speaking. He is forced to confront not only the Lord but his own dangerous, difficult, heroic desire to return to Egypt and lead his people out of slavery. This is just the sort of desire that a man like Moses would be least likely to acknowledge; the sort he might push away when it impinged on his awareness.

The midrashic comment that the bush conveys humility might be taken further: the burning bush perfectly symbolizes Moses’ character and the deepest parts of his personality as we come to know them through the biblical narrative. The bush is on fire but not consumed, and so is Moses, who is capable of great, passionate, fiery deeds; who burns with a sense of duty; who is capable—although he strenuously resists admitting it—of confronting Pharaoh and leading the fractious and

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3 E.g., Exodus Rabba on Exodus 2:5.
4 Ibid.
5 Exodus 3:7. The Hebrew reads: “ra’ah ra’iti et oni ami asher b’mitzrayim, v’et tza’akatam shamati mipnei nogsav; ki yadati et machovav.” Translations of biblical passages throughout this paper are my own.
difficult Israelites through the wilderness to the land of Israel. Moses is about to embark on a mission that would have consumed a lesser man, as flames would have consumed an ordinary bush. The burning bush is a character sketch of Moses in the form of an image instead of words; at the bush, he hears his own mind speaking and looks upon (or into) his inner self. But instead of telling us about Moses’ confrontation with his own psyche, the story shows us the confrontation: it shows us Moses’ facing a physical embodiment of his character and psychological state. Of course, it is significant that the physical embodiment of Moses’ psyche is also a divine revelation, that this epiphany is also a theophany. The moment of reaching or encountering God is also a moment of reaching or encountering the self, as if the presence of God creates a brilliant flash that lights up the human psyche all the way to the bottom.

The truths revealed to Moses about himself at the burning bush are not easy or trivial for a man to confront. Egypt draws him back, but Egypt is dangerous ground; Pharaoh himself wants Moses dead. That the bush is on fire but not consumed reminds us that Moses will die in old age with “his eyes undimmed and his powers unabated.” But the image also seems to tell him that he will burn with passion his whole life and never be done burning; he will never cool down, cool off, come to rest. And eventually Moses dies, of course, without setting foot in the land of Israel; with his passion, in this sense, unconsummated. Moses would have been aware of these truths subliminally, in some form. At the bush he faces them directly.

The dual aspect of this story, as a theological and psychological event, is important to our understanding of the text and hinted at in midrashic passages. Few commentators, however, take the hint and explore the remarkably vivid psychological aspects of the text.

3. Jacob’s Struggle

Robert Alter gives us a psychologically acute reading of another important passage but again doesn’t go as far as he might.

In Genesis 32, Jacob is returning home, guilt-ridden and afraid, to his brother Esau; he has wronged Esau and (even more shamefully) his dead father by filching the paternal blessing intended for Esau as firstborn. “Jacob was very frightened and in anguish.” He prays desperately, “Please

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7 Deuteronomy 34:7.
save me from my brother's hand, from Esau's hand." After bedding down, he gets up again restlessly and moves his household across the Jabbok ford. And then, "Jacob was left alone." 9

What ought Jacob to have expected that night? A good night's sleep? More likely a struggle in his own mind, with himself: with his guilt and fear, with a shameful truth about himself and his past that, being only human, he would rather not confront. And Jacob does indeed spend the whole night, "until daybreak," 10 struggling—with a mysterious attacker. Jacob, like Moses, is an actor in his own vision.

Who is his opponent? The story cannot quite bring him into focus. "A man struggled with him until daybreak"; but later Jacob says, "I have seen God face-to-face." So who is this mysterious opponent, and why does he fight with Jacob? Commentators have proposed angels, aroused spirits, and local demons; 11 several midrashic passages identify the opponent, significantly, as Esau's guardian angel. 12 But the text mentions no angel, no spirit, no demon—just "a man" and "God." Alter is surely right that "Jacob's mysterious opponent is an externalization of all that Jacob has to wrestle with within himself." 13 Once again the story shows us a psychological confrontation instead of merely telling us about it. It describes Jacob struggling with a physical embodiment of his own psyche—of his own emotional and psychological state. Once again, this theophany is also an epiphany.

But for all his acuity, Alter doesn't follow up on his own lead. He connects Jacob's nighttime struggle on his way home with the mental anguish caused by the act that forced him to leave home in the first place. But Alter neglects a compelling piece of evidence for this connection he has drawn—a connection that the text, of course, never mentions.

Before he had fled home many years earlier, Jacob's last (guilty) act had been to extract a blessing. Most blessings in the Bible are freely given. But this blessing had been meant for his elder brother, and Jacob got it by deceiving his blind and failing father. Two decades later, on the night before he meets his wronged brother once again, a mysterious assailant

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9 Genesis 32:25.

10 Ibid.

11 See, for example, Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989).

12 See, for example, Genesis Rabba on Genesis 77:3; see also Nahmanides, commentary on Genesis 32:26.

13 Alter, Genesis, p. 112ff. I argued along similar lines that Jacob's struggle shows how "tense days explode into brightly colored nightmares." See David Gelernter, "Tsipporah's Bloodgroom," Orim 3:2 (Spring 1988).
asks Jacob to let him go: “Release me, for the dawn rises.” And Jacob says, “I will not release you unless you bless me.” He extracts yet another blessing.  

Sleepwalking Lady Macbeth, as if washing her hands, reenacts the night of her sin and crime. Jacob, too, reenacts his sin. He extracts yet another blessing. The repetition of this act, this time done rightfully instead of sinfully, makes a strong connection between Jacob’s night of struggle and the source of the mental anguish embodied by the struggle. Once again we miss something important if we neglect the psychological depths of the text.

4. Moses’ Hidden Identity and Elijah’s Still, Small Voice

Two more instances of a theological and psychological event combined, of theophany as epiphany in the Bible, are of interest here.

The story of Moses, Zipporah, and the “hatan damim” in Exodus 4:24–26 is famously puzzling. At an inn or overnight stopping place on the way from Midian to Egypt, the Lord apparently attacks Moses, who is evidently saved by his wife’s circumcising his son, marking Moses with the blood, and calling him a “hatan damim,” a “bridegroom of blood” or “bloody bridegroom.” Here again the text invites us to ask the sort of question that doesn’t come up in modern reading, about the lives of the actors behind or beyond the text.

We can’t help asking: Has Moses revealed to his wife and family the fact that he is an Israelite? When he appeared in Midian, after all, he was taken for an Egyptian—which is hardly surprising given his upbringing. Did Moses ever correct this wrong impression?

We might dismiss the question, but Ibn Ezra makes a connection that directs us right back to it. He associates the blood mark on Moses with the blood mark on the night of the first Passover, which preserved the marked homes of Israelites from the death plague decreed against Egypt’s firstborn. The blood mark on Passover says, “These are Israelites”; might the blood mark on Moses say the same thing? Is Zipporah declaring, publically, that Moses is not an Egyptian but an Israelite?

The verses just before the hatan damim story interrupt the narrative flow and accordingly seem intended to serve some purpose. In these few verses, the Lord announces his intention to kill Egypt’s firstborn unless

14 Genesis 32:27.
15 Rashi, followed by Nahmanides, suggests that when Jacob demands a blessing, he is asking, in effect, that his opponent legitimize the long-ago blessing meant for Esau.
Pharaoh liberates Israel, the nation that constitutes the Lord’s own first-born. Just as we arrive at the hatan damim story, in other words, the Lord has declared the distinction between Egyptian and Israelite to be a matter of life and death. (Historical and archaeological information suggests, too, that infant circumcision versus circumcision at puberty or later distinguished an Israelite from an Egyptian.)

Of course, the biblical narrative itself tells us plainly that Moses is an Israelite; we are dealing with a case not of unknown but (perhaps) of hidden identity. A man who has hidden his identity just at the time when his identity (as matters develop) must be clear to all the world, is likely to have a mind in turmoil. And so we find that our hatan damim story has the structure of a perfect nightmare: the action is confused, but the underlying emotions are clear. The story seems precisely like the sort of bad dream Moses might have experienced on that fateful night following the Lord’s warning to the firstborn of Egypt. Such a nightmare would have reflected the unclarity of Moses’ declared identity and allegiance: has he made his Israelite identity known to his own wife and family? Or has he hidden it, or allowed himself to be misunderstood? If he has hidden it, the death sentence pronounced on Egypt might apply to him—and his wife might be required to take desperate measures to mark him as an Israelite and save him from the Lord’s decree.

There’s much more to be said about this story and the structure of nightmares. We have here, once again, a passage that might be understood as a theological and psychological event, an encounter with the Lord yielding an encounter between Moses and his own psyche—theophany and epiphany.

When Elijah journeys to Horeb, he is made to witness a series of dramatic natural events—a great windstorm, an earthquake, a firestorm—but the Lord isn’t present in any of them. Finally he hears a “still, small voice”—there are other possible translations, but at any rate this must be an exquisitely quiet voice. It seems likely that this “still, small voice” is an inner voice. The biblical narrative must, after all, express the idea of an inner voice in concrete language; and “an exquisitely soft voice,” so quiet that only one man can hear it, is a natural way to do so. On this reading, we learn that Elijah encounters the Lord not in noisy natural phenomena but in the promptings of the prophet’s own mind—as if this theophany

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19 I Kings 19:11ff.
were once again a psychological event, and Elijah’s encounter with God were simultaneously an encounter with the prophet’s own psyche.

5. Conclusion

Psychology belongs at the center of all literary criticism, especially literary criticism of the Bible. These are hard times for depth psychology and the psychology of individual behavior in general.\(^{20}\) When psychology was fashionable, literary criticism of the Bible was not; now that literary biblical criticism is in, psychology is out. But all effective literary criticism must be informed by psychology. Nowhere is this more important than in reading the Hebrew Bible.

Yale University

\(^{20}\) Jonathan Lear calls the first section of his recent book, *Freud* (New York: Routledge, 2005), "Bringing Freud Back from the Dead."