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# **Novel Interpretations: An Examination in Interpretive Approaches to the Bible in the Light of Two Modern Novels**

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at the

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He is that great void  
we must enter, calling  
to one another on our way  
in the direction from which  
he blows. What matter  
if we should never arrive  
to breed in the climate of our conception?

Enough that we have been given wings  
and a needle in the mind  
to respond to his bleak north.

There are times even at the Pole  
when he, too, pauses in his withdrawal  
so that it is light there all night long.

R.S.Thomas, *Counterpoint*, pub. Bloodaxe Books 1990

***Novel interpretations: An Examination in Interpretive  
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**Abstract**

This work centres on the reading of two contemporary novels which rewrite the biblical story of David from 2 Samuel and the opening two chapters of 1 Kings: *God Knows* by Joseph Heller, and *Bathsheba* by Torgny Lindgren. The purpose of the thesis is to examine the relationship between each of them and the biblical narrative on which they are based. Neither of the novels claims to come from the context of a practising faith community, and both of them undermine the image of David as a holy king. The argument of this thesis is that they should not however be dismissed as blasphemous, but that they have a valid place in the broad field of biblical interpretation.

The Introduction sets the context for the study by considering comments made by T.S. Eliot about contemporary literature and the relationship between religion and literature. These issues are considered in the light of more recent work in the area of literary approaches to the Bible by such scholars as Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg. Chapter One then offers a survey of the different ways in which the western Christian tradition has approached the biblical text at different stages, the emphasis being on the underlying philosophy or concern reflected at any given time. This is contrasted in Chapter Two with a Jewish approach to the text, focusing particularly on *aggadic* midrash as a possible model for understanding the relationship between the biblical text and the two novels which are the subject of this study.

In Chapters Three and Four, each of the novels is considered in some detail, with some preliminary reflections on the different ways in which they approach the biblical narrative. In Chapter Five the results of this examination are assessed. Similarities and differences between midrash and the novels are considered, in the light of which proposals are made for understanding the relationship between these two novels and the biblical text.

# **Novel interpretations: An Examination in Interpretive Approaches to the Bible in the Light of Two Modern Novels.**

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## Introduction.

In his essay "Religion and Literature", written in 1935 <sup>1</sup>, T.S. Eliot discusses various aspects of the relationship between literature and religion. In this essay, Eliot's main concern is to describe what he sees as the proper attitude of Christian readers to the literature of his contemporaries. He begins with the proposition that literary criticism "should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint." His starting point for the discussion is made explicit towards the end of his essay: "What I do wish to affirm is that the whole of modern literature is corrupted by what I call Secularism, that it is simply unaware of, simply cannot understand the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life: of something which I assume to be our primary concern." In considering contemporary literature, he suggests that most of it is written by those with no notion of or belief in the supernatural order. The proper response of the Christian reader is to subject this literature to moral and theological scrutiny - that is, to maintain certain criteria and standards of criticism. He writes: "So long as we are conscious of the gulf fixed between ourselves and the greater part of contemporary literature, we are more or less protected from being harmed by it, and are in a position to extract from it what good it has to offer."

Eliot's language is revealing on two counts. Firstly, although he is concerned at this point with the reading of contemporary and not biblical literature, the way in which he speaks of 'extracting' from a text reflects the kind of existentialist approach to a text which has characterized centuries of western Christian biblical interpretation. Underlying such an approach is the understanding that the interpretation of a text is

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<sup>1</sup> Eliot, T. S. "Religion and Literature", in Kermode, F. (Ed.) *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* London: Faber & Faber, 1975



concerned with a concept of reference beyond the text, and of relevance for the reader. It is this basic notion of textual interpretation that underlies a concept of scriptural authority for the Christian reader, such that the Bible is called 'the Word of God'. This theological conviction underpins a wide spectrum of hermeneutical stances in relation to the text. For example, in the mediaeval period the recognition that some biblical texts were problematic led to the development of a sophisticated scheme of interpretation, in which four or more 'layers' of meaning were advocated. The Reformers rejected this complexity, yet Luther's appeal for a 'plain' or 'natural' reading of scripture was not in any way a denial of the serious and sometimes difficult issues involved in biblical hermeneutics. Both Luther and Calvin wished to emphasize the principle of the clarity of scripture in the particular polemical context of their relation to the mediaeval Catholic church.<sup>2</sup> The recognition of context is of central importance in hermeneutics, and is a major theme of this study. Yet the broad spectrum of hermeneutical stances does include those who pay little attention to context, and in whose approach the appeal to 'claritas scripturae' suggests a naive and anti-hermeneutical reading of the Bible. Such an approach implies the failure to recognise the basic point that the Bible is a library of books which have been understood as in some sense belonging together, and which therefore interact with one another. Recognition of this interaction is vital as a starting point in any interpretive approach. Within the biblical corpus an obvious example of such interaction is between the texts of the New Testament and those of the Hebrew Bible. Some scholars - the rabbis, to take an obvious example - would claim that the New Testament texts represent interaction that violates the texts of the Hebrew Bible concerned. The interaction is for them an inappropriate, and mistaken, interpretation of these texts.

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<sup>2</sup> For a full discussion of Luther and Calvin's understanding of 'claritas scripturae' see Thistleton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, (London: Harper Collins, 1992) ch. 5: "The Hermeneutics of Enquiry: From the Reformation to Modern Theory".

The activity of interpretation is driven by a desire to understand; in the Christian tradition this has often tended towards a desire to pin down meaning, to explain and draw out - as is indicated by the use of the term 'exegesis', and as is reflected in Eliot's use of the verb 'extract'. The traditional approach to biblical texts within Christianity is precisely this: exegesis, explanation, commentary. It is not an approach that can guarantee agreement however, any more than any other. Within the Christian tradition there is evidently a conflict of interpretations, making conflicting claims concerning the meaning of a text. Nowhere within the biblical corpus is this more sharply focused than in the *Song of Songs* for example, where theological presuppositions have clearly determined the exegetical approach taken: when erotic love poetry is perceived as being incompatible with a concept of God coloured by Platonism, an allegorical approach 'spiritualizing' the text has been adopted.

The second point about Eliot's choice of language revolves around his use of such words and phrases as "corrupted", "Secularism", "the gulf", and "protected from being harmed", all of which suggest great discomfort with his contemporary context. He appears to be greatly concerned that the faith of the individual Christian reader needs to be protected against anything that might threaten to leave it less than perfectly intact. Whilst Eliot claims that the last thing he would want would be two separate sorts of literature, one appropriate for the Christian and one for the 'pagan', he certainly does advocate two sorts of reading - he being particularly concerned with how the Christian reader approaches the texts at issue.

The concern expressed by Eliot is more sharply focused when the contemporary literature of which he speaks is a text which presents an alternative version of a biblical text. The fear that the faith of the reader might be damaged is surely heightened when the text read appears to offer a view of an event or character which contrasts with the biblical

view. Focusing on the literature of the Hebrew Bible alone, there is plenty of choice when it comes to looking at modern 'secular' rewritings of biblical narratives. What sort of response might be appropriate to Julian Barnes' assertion in *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*<sup>3</sup> that Noah was a "puffed up patriarch", "a hysterical old rogue with a drink problem"; or to D.J. Enright's presentation in his poetic sequence *Paradise Illustrated*<sup>4</sup> of an Adam who was hopelessly incompetent when it came to naming the animals? In *The Very Model Of A Man*<sup>5</sup> Howard Jacobson portrays an Adam whose main language of expression was not verbal but in his hands, whose main occupation was in seeking to perfect the art of the conjuror, and whose nights were tormented by dreams of his only memory - his origins in mud. *The King David Report*<sup>6</sup> presents Solomon as a tyrant who is ruthless in his determination to have written a 'history' of his father which puts his own (Solomon's) political purpose as a higher priority than truth. In *God Knows*<sup>7</sup>, Joseph Heller's Solomon, far from being wise, simply writes down everything David says, such that David says of him, "if we had a word for prick then, we would have called him one"; whilst Bathsheba appears as the inventor of ladies' underwear. Discomfort is increased when it is the character of God that is brought into question, as in Torgny Lindgren's *Bathsheba*<sup>8</sup> for example, where ambiguity, instability, and uncertainty appear to be what characterize the Lord. He is elusive to the extent that for the young Bathsheba, there is confusion between God and David on his throne as King; and later for David, Bathsheba becomes the advisor, the lover, and the security that he sought initially in his relationship with God. In these novels, God necessarily becomes a character, albeit one who is off-stage. Whilst this is true of biblical narrative too - for

<sup>3</sup> Barnes, Julian *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters*, [1989] London: Picador, 1990

<sup>4</sup> Enright, D.J. *Collected Poems 1987*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

<sup>5</sup> Jacobson, Howard *The Very Model of a Man*, London: Viking, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Heym, Stefan *The King David Report*, London: Abacus, 1973

<sup>7</sup> Heller, Joseph *God Knows*, [1984] London: Black Swan, 1985

<sup>8</sup> Lindgren, Torgny *Bathsheba*, (trans. Tom Gaddes), London: Collins Harvill, 1989

example in chapters two and three of *Genesis* God is one of the characters present in the garden - there the character of God is never brought into question. To examine all of these texts in detail is not possible within the limitations of this thesis, and so in order to look carefully at the issues they raise, the focus will be on two recent novels based on the David narrative: *God Knows* and *Bathsheba*.

Bathsheba is a tantalizing figure in the biblical narrative, not least because of her silence and the fact that she is so infrequently referred to by her own name. She provides ample fodder for both Christian and Jewish commentators, and for feminist re-readings of biblical narrative. She can be seen as the victim of David's lust, or equally as a temptress responsible for his seduction. Both of these interpretive positions are derived from a basically male ideology, and sometimes embrace a specifically Davidic theology - more often than not, the view of her presented by any given commentator will stem from priority given in interpretation to the figure of David.<sup>9</sup> One striking example of this is the practise of early mediaeval commentators, who because of their prior theological commitment to David as a type of Christ tended to interpret 'the Bathsheba incident' allegorically, or else to evade it altogether.<sup>10</sup> However, it is a mistake to try and generalize: one might have expected readings of the narrative in which Bathsheba represents the pitfalls of carnal pleasures, yet whilst this is evident in mediaeval art it has little place in mediaeval literature. Allegorical readings attempt to redeem the incident by representing Bathsheba as a type of the Law which needs to be liberated from the Synagogue (Uriah) through marriage to Christ (David). Interestingly, in one fourteenth century work, *Cursor Mundi*, Bathsheba is portrayed more boldly as a

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<sup>9</sup> A thorough exploration of the issues surrounding different interpretive strategies in relation to this story, discussed from a feminist point of view, can be found in Mieke Bal's *Lethal Loves* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) Ch. 1: "The Emergence of the Lethal Woman, or the Use of Hermeneutic Models"

<sup>10</sup> See article 'Bathsheba' in Jeffrey, D. L. (Ed.), *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992.

persuasive advocate of Solomon, ensuring his place on the throne. This clearly takes its cue from the suggestive narrative of 1 Kings 1&2 where Bathsheba, from being silent and defined mainly in terms of someone else's possession - "the wife of Uriah" - appears to be drawn into the power politics of the succession, albeit as someone else's mother. Both Lindgren and Heller exploit this. In *Bathsheba* Lindgren presents a Bathsheba who rather than remaining victim decides to conquer the king. Yet her achievement lies in exploiting her position as a supposedly powerless woman in that social context, and then in assuming 'male' characteristics: by the end of the novel her behaviour towards others clearly reflects the cruel demonstration of power seen initially in David. In *God Knows* Bathsheba is an almost grotesque figure, a combination of 'dumb-blonde-babe' and 'Jewish mother'.

As is evident above, any act of interpretation produces a new text: a commentary, a sermon, even a musical, film or a novel. There is a constant flow of such new texts being produced. In the field of Christian biblical interpretation exegetes wish (to varying degrees) to emphasise the sanctity, authority, and primary nature of the biblical corpus. Yet how is the new text to be understood in terms of its relationship to the biblical text - especially if the new text takes the form of poetry or a novel, a musical or film? Are such texts even recognised by exegetes within the tradition as valid interpretations of the biblical text concerned? In the seventeenth century Andrew Marvell expressed his doubts over one such new text, in his poem "On Mr. Milton's Paradise Lost":

"the argument

Held me awhile, misdoubting his intent

That he would ruin (for I saw him strong)

The sacred truths to fable and old song,"

These doubts are put to rest however, and further on in the poem he claims that Milton has

preserved the "things divine", remaining himself "inviolable". This choice of words echoes the language quoted above which Eliot uses, conveying the sense of a reader needing protection from the potential harm inflicted by a corrupting text. Marvell was concerned that Milton's *Paradise Lost* would in some way violate the sacred text. This fear that the biblical text might somehow be abused through a particular hermeneutical approach can still be discerned in contemporary biblical interpretation. The narratives concerning David are a particular case in point. Duplicity, murder and adultery are not characteristics which sit comfortably with most understandings of what it means to say someone is God's anointed king, nor does this reflect well on God. Commentators of both the Jewish and Christian traditions have displayed in their interpretive approach a desire to excuse or explain away such undesirable characteristics, and in doing so to present a 'correct' interpretation. Yet paradoxically, this desire to draw out the correct interpretation may in itself represent an abuse of the sacred text.

Milton was a devout Puritan, and Marvell praises his work. It is unlikely that he would have given the same response to the texts studied in this thesis, for the question of the nature of biblical interpretation is more acutely focused by new texts which interact with the biblical texts from outside the context of the community of belief. Often those within the Christian tradition are quick to cry blasphemy, at the same time displaying an unwillingness to interact themselves with the new text, be it a film, a musical or a novel. Such texts are frequently not recognised by those within the community of faith as appropriate interpretive approaches to the biblical text. The purpose of this thesis is to explore the question of in what sense, if at all, the two novels *God Knows* and *Bathsheba* can be understood as valid commentaries on, and interpretations of, the story of David found in the Hebrew Bible.

This question can only be assessed in the light of interpretive approaches which are

long-established and accepted. For this reason, before looking at the novels themselves, the first two chapters offer a survey of the ways in which the Bible has been approached in the Christian tradition of interpretation, and in the Jewish tradition. The focus for the latter is the specific area of *aggadic* midrash. Bearing in mind the above comments on the essay by T.S. Eliot however, the final part of this introduction must acknowledge the contribution made to biblical interpretation in recent years by those working primarily in the field of literature and literary criticism rather than theology or biblical studies. Here one finds a very different attitude from that of Eliot to the relationship between biblical and contemporary literature.

Eliot spoke of approaching the text "from a definite ethical and theological standpoint" - that is, of consciously interpreting a text in the light of a preconceived theological position. He spoke of this offering 'protection' from the harm inflicted by contemporary 'secular' literature. More recent developments in both general and biblical hermeneutics directly oppose such an aggressive interpretive approach. Gadamer, in *Truth and Method*<sup>11</sup>, recognises that a reader will have certain prejudices which constitute a pre-understanding of the text, and that a purely objective reading of a text is therefore impossible. Eliot appears to want to maintain an objective stance whilst at the same time consciously reading from the specific perspective of a Christian theological critique. Gadamer's work challenges Eliot's apparent desire for maintaining an impossible separation between what is sacred and what he sees as modern literature which is corrupted by 'secularism'. Such a separation is impossible because all literature involves language, and language, as Gadamer recognises, is central as "the arena where history and existence join."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method*, (Eng.) London: Sheed & Ward, 1975

<sup>12</sup> See the discussion by Robert Detweiler and Vernon K. Robbins in Prickett, Stephen (Ed.) *Reading the Text: Biblical Criticism and Literary Theory* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991. Ch. 5: 'From New Criticism to Poststructuralism: Twentieth-Century Hermeneutics'.

This recognition by Gadamer and others of the centrality of language is one area in which irrevocable change has taken place. For centuries the Christian tradition assumed a referential theory of language, with each word being understood as a sign which referred to a 'real' thing. This essential relationship between word and object was what gave rise to meaning. However, such a view has been challenged with the development of modern linguistics, within which structuralism has made a particularly significant impact. Structuralism has its roots in the linguistic theory of Saussure, which is then applied to literature. Saussure understood language as a system of signs, each sign being made up of a 'signifier' and a 'signified', (the concept or meaning). He argued that the relationship between these two is arbitrary. Meaning is based on difference - there is no essential relationship, no 'mystical' immanent meaning in a sign; on the contrary meaning is a function of the difference between one sign and the next, a function of the fact that a thing is not something else. Meaning therefore depends on context and on contrast within that context. In applying this linguistic theory to literature, structuralists looked for an underlying set of laws by which the signs combine to produce meanings. The effect of this theory of language on the analysis and interpretation of texts has been wide ranging. At a very basic level is the recognition that there is no difference between the language used in 'sacred' literature and that used in 'secular' literature. It was not until the 1960's however, that this was widely acknowledged - that is, that religious and theological language is as metaphorical as 'literary' language.<sup>13</sup> These developments challenged the view held by Eliot and others that it was not the literary status of the Bible that was significant in its influence, but its status as divine revelation.

The impact of structuralism on biblical interpretation has been felt particularly in the study of narrative. A full discussion of structuralism in relation to biblical interpretation can be found in Paul Ricoeur's essay, *Biblical Hermeneutics*.<sup>14</sup> Here he

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<sup>13</sup> Detweiler & Robbins, *op.cit.*, *loc. cit.*



precedes his discussion of structural analysis with the mention of the work of some of the formalists, beginning with V. Propp's *The Morphology of the Folktale*. Formalism is a kind of structural approach: it is concerned with structure, but not with meaning produced by difference so much as with the "deep structures" underlying the literary text. Propp's study of the Russian folktale leads him to conclude that there is only one form of the folktale, with variables. The constants within this form are the characters, of which there are only ever seven. The identity of the characters is not so important as their function. This provides the text of the folktale with its structure - deep structure - whilst the actual narrative may vary from one tale to the next. Following on from Propp, A.J. Greimas has analysed the relations between the functions, and in doing so has considered the relationship between the surface structure and the deep structure. His conclusion is that the system of relations between the functions is achronical, and that this actually overcomes the chronological appearance of the narrative. In effect, this approach rules out an existential interpretation of a text, as the referential aspect of the text is abolished. The deep structure was not to do with foundational meaning, but with the opposite: the accidents of culture.

Prior to the advent of structuralism, any attention to the literary nature of biblical texts tended to remain with the 'external' features - genre, form, the techniques of style employed by the author and so on. In contrast, the approach found in formalism and in a structural analysis highlights the internal workings of a narrative. It provides a radical challenge to traditional hermeneutics if applied thoroughly. Ricoeur argues however that if divorced from a structuralist ideology, structural analysis of texts can prove to be a fruitful method of biblical interpretation, and need not rule out an existential interpretation as some may fear.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Ricoeur, 'Biblical Hermeneutics', *Semeia* 1975, (vol. 4).

The effect of these developments has been a profound questioning of long-held assumptions concerning language and meaning. The world of post-structuralism and deconstruction is one in which nothing is certain except uncertainty. Commenting on Frye's *The Great Code*<sup>16</sup>, Detweiler and Robbins write:

"...it is not difficult to translate the rewriting of Scripture in the dynamic of upward metamorphosis into an illustration of Derrida's concepts of supplementarity and dissemination: the constant rewriting goes on because the sign never finds its adequate referent, and dissemination comes to characterize this 'state of perpetually unfulfilled meaning that exists in the absence of all signifieds'."<sup>17</sup>

These themes of rewriting and lack of adequate referent are ones which are apparent in the two novels to be discussed.

In contrast to the separation between the Bible and contemporary literature which Eliot seems to want to maintain, the developments in theories of language and literature outlined above depict a situation in which all literature is treated to the same scrutiny. Another area of development which has contributed to the discrediting of this rather 'colonial' approach to literature found in Eliot is the recognition that the interpretation of biblical texts is an interdisciplinary affair. Traditionally biblical interpretation has been left by and large to the 'experts' - Christian theologians and biblical scholars. Yet some of the most significant developments over the last twenty years or more have come from those whose academic expertise is in literary criticism and not biblical studies, and whose background is Jewish not Christian. For scholars such as Robert Alter, Meir Sternberg and Harold Bloom, the Bible is the Hebrew Bible. Whereas some texts of the Hebrew Bible

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<sup>15</sup> See also Barton, John *Reading the Old Testament* London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1984, especially ch. 8 & 9.

<sup>16</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Great Code* Toronto: Academic, 1982

<sup>17</sup> Detweiler & Robbins, *op. cit.*

may be particularly problematic from a Christian perspective, with its very specific understanding of God's self-revelation in Jesus, the Jewish approach to the same texts is free of these concerns, and its interpretive tradition radically different. To approach a text without the theological and ethical agenda advocated by Eliot, and with the recognition of one's own prejudices as a reader, can be a disturbing and challenging experience. This no doubt contributes to the discomfort experienced by some readers of the two novels considered in this study.

The insights of scholars whose background is not Christian, and of new methods of interpretation can be liberating for us. Yet freedom can feel insecure. Eliot seems to some extent to display that insecurity and a nostalgic desire to turn the clock back. He describes his contemporary reading context by contrast with that of "some centuries past". Recognising that moral judgments on literary works are made according to the accepted moral code of the day, he points out that in these past centuries that he refers to, the common moral code was derived directly from the Christian theology that provided the conceptual framework for all thinking concerning morality. He clearly is going quite a long way back to the period before the Enlightenment, offering the dramatic ethics of the Elizabethan period as an interesting study to pursue. In contrast to this is what he perceives to be his contemporary situation, where the common code of morality has become detached from its theological foundations. Common morality is increasingly to do with habit, which is open to prejudice and change. In such a fluid moral situation Eliot recognises the power of literature to transform morals. Things that people object to in literature are often only objectionable because they do not coincide with the accepted moral code of that particular period, although a generation later the situation may have changed completely with the same things having gained acceptance. Eliot has little time for those who perceive this moral flexibility to be a positive sign. He states scathingly that it

is merely evidence of the unsubstantial foundations of people's moral judgments.

Throughout the essay there is a sense that Eliot's stance towards his context is ambiguous. The implication of the initial contrast drawn between his contemporary situation and that of centuries past when morality was directly derived from the prevailing Christian theology may be understood as the desire for a return to the pre-Enlightenment situation, thus avoiding the mass of insidious contemporary literature. This judgment is not entirely fair however, as the purpose of the essay is derived from recognition of his context and the need not to avoid the literature but to respond in what he considers to be an appropriate way. There is a sense of 'colonialism' nevertheless: Eliot with his lament that few people are reading dead authors accepts the situation to a certain extent, but warns Christians to read the emerging modern literature with caution. His main concern is that what is being written lacks not morality, but any acknowledgment of the supernatural. Specifically he states that this literature "repudiates, or is wholly ignorant of, our most fundamental and important beliefs". Consequently this literature is worldly, representing a view of life limited to the tangible world. He will go on reading the best of it he says, but will criticise it according to his own principles - those of the Christian faith.

As David Tracy<sup>18</sup> and Werner Jeanrond<sup>19</sup> (among others) have quite clearly shown, the attitude advocated by Eliot is untenable at the present time. As Tracy has put it: "The passionate Christian and Yahwist suspicion of the world and its pretensions and delusions - its refusal to face its own contingency and ambiguity - should never become the kind of negation that eventuates in the resentful bitterness of "withdrawal." Rather the Christian should be released for the world *as it really is*: arbitrary, contingent,

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<sup>18</sup> Tracy, David *The Analogical Imagination* London: SCM Press, 1981

<sup>19</sup> Jeanrond, Werner *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* [1991] London: SCM Press, 1994

ambiguous, loved by God and by the Christian. Some sectarian Christians will not abide this ambiguity."<sup>20</sup> At the heart of Christianity lies an image of acute vulnerability - not only the vulnerability of human life, but also that of a God who has identified with humanity on behalf of humanity. Rather than being armed with some kind of notion of 'timeless dogma' which is in danger of leading to the withdrawal that Tracy speaks of, it is necessary for the survival of Christianity that its adherents can make themselves vulnerable to the world they inhabit. The alternative is to advocate an impossible division within every individual between that which is considered 'sacred' and that which is considered 'secular'. This study is concerned with that which concerned Eliot in his context, the question of appropriate Christian response to the literature of the present time - specifically to literature which claims to present some kind of 'alternative version' of biblical texts. It will be helpful first to look back at the traditions of biblical interpretation, both Christian and Jewish, and at the principles that have formed them.

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<sup>20</sup> *The Analogical Imagination*, ch.2, 'A theological Portrait of the Theologian'.

## **Chapter One:**

### **Moments in the Development of Christian Interpretation of the Bible**

It is frequently the case that in the course of development after the death of its founder, any given movement might be perceived to distort the teaching or ideals of the founder. Calvinism in the seventeenth century is no more a true representation of the teachings of John Calvin than Lutheranism is of Luther, or Marxism is of Marx. That this 'distortion' occurs is almost inevitable as the process of interpreting the founding ideas or teaching goes on in the never static context of developing human history. It should not be expected therefore, that a 'pure' form of Christianity can be discovered through the study of the New Testament texts, because all of these texts represent the interpretation of Jesus' teaching and the implications of belief in his resurrection for groups of Christians each in a particular context. To recognise this is not to compromise the 'truth' of the documents, and likewise the recognition of contradictions between the gospel accounts, for example, does not mean that they are not in some sense 'true'. What is necessary though, is to acknowledge that the written texts of the New Testament - including the interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures found in these texts - are as culturally conditioned as our interpretation of them will be.

#### **Early Christian Exegesis**

Jesus was a Jew. Not until some time after his death were his followers first called Christians.<sup>21</sup> He related to scripture in the way that many of the rabbis would

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<sup>21</sup> see Acts ch.11v.26

have done, citing texts and discussing meanings. In the gospels he appears to be particularly critical of some of the demands made by a legalistic interpretation of parts of the Torah, but remained within the diverse tradition of Jewish interpretation. Only after his death was he identified with a break-away sect that became a distinct religious movement, and the phenomenon of Christian interpretation appeared. As Jeanrond puts it, "The proclaimer of God's kingdom was at times reduced to a topic of a body of new Scriptures which now themselves were in need of adequate interpretation".<sup>22</sup> It was impossible to try to interpret these new scriptures without reconsidering interpretation of the existing Hebrew Scriptures, as the former made claims about the fulfilment of the latter. The Christian interpreters approached the Hebrew Scriptures from the point of view of their faith in and experience of Jesus. This meant that these scriptures were often interpreted typologically, a form of allegorical interpretation. This in turn was prone to lead to exclusive and often arbitrary interpretations, guided first by theological presuppositions, and only secondarily by principles of textual interpretation.

In pursuing a view of Christian interpretation of the Bible over centuries it is important to beware of oversimplification. Having said that, it is almost inevitable that given the somewhat sketchy nature of the enterprise within the limitations of a single chapter, such oversimplifications will be made. One debated point which is of significance is the question of the extent to which the scholarship of ancient Greece has shaped the way in which texts tend to be approached and interpreted in the west. The complexity of the background to early Christian interpretation of the experience of Jesus and the earliest texts relating to him should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, although there may be arguments about degree, it seems clear that by far the largest influence on our approach to textual interpretation remains that of ancient Greek philosophy.

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<sup>22</sup> Jeanrond, *op. cit.*

One of the most significant concepts which influenced textual interpretation in the early centuries of the Christian era was the distinction drawn by Plato between the world of rationality and that of visible, tangible objects. The way in which these ideas are set out as a cosmological theory in the *Timaeus* was particularly attractive to Christian thinkers, as reference is made there to a divine creator. *Timaeus* begins by drawing the distinction as follows:

"We must in my opinion begin by distinguishing between that which always is and never becomes from that which is always becoming but never is. The one is apprehensible by intelligence with the aid of reasoning, being eternally the same, the other is the object of opinion and irrational sensation, coming to be and ceasing to be, but never fully real."<sup>23</sup>

He goes on to argue that what becomes and changes does so at the instigation of a maker, who takes as his pattern that which is eternally unchanging. In the early Christian centuries this theory could be found in two basic forms. The Stoic version was of an idea of God as a cosmic soul informing a cosmic body, whilst the Neoplatonist idea preserved the sharp distinction between the visible changing world and the invisible unchanging world. Plato's concept of *λογος* (*logos*) related to his understanding of human beings standing between the two worlds. It refers both to a person's inner dialogue, thought, and to the outward expression of it, speech. Thought refers to the world of intelligence, the unchanging form of things, whilst speech is an image of thought uttered in the changing world.<sup>24</sup>

The influence of this distinction between the realm of sense and that of pure thought has been far reaching in the history of hermeneutics. Given that what is ultimately real is

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<sup>23</sup> *Timaeus*, 27D-28, trans. Desmond Lee, Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics 1971

<sup>24</sup> For a fuller exploration of these ideas see Thomas Torrance, *Divine Meaning* (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1995) ch. 1: "The Complex Background of Biblical Interpretation"



to be located in the realm of pure thought, the activity of interpretation is driven beyond the text in an attempt to identify this ultimate meaning. Hence the distinction which is frequently encountered in early Christian exegesis between the literal sense of the text and its underlying spiritual meaning.

Although of particular significance in mediaeval theology and hermeneutics, reference must nevertheless be made to the influence of Aristotle on early Christian interpretation. Through his work *On Interpretation* more attention was paid to the rules of grammar and logic in approaching a text. This stemmed from his insistence on the fact that form and matter cannot be separated from one another, hence the initial emphasis on formal analysis of a text.<sup>25</sup>

Another major factor in this early stage of development in Christian interpretation was the growing awareness of heretical teaching about Christ and the nature of the created world. Gnosticism posed one of the first threats of this kind. Torrance describes it as "a syncretistic movement intensely interested in the cosmic drama of creation and redemption"<sup>26</sup> which was influenced by pagan mythologies and astrological speculation. Although there are a range of differing ideas found under the general description 'gnosticism', the gulf between the material world and that of pure thought or spirit was central to all the main strands of gnostic thought, such that God is said to be utterly unknowable. Gnosticism's main proponents - Basilides and Valentinus - claimed therefore that this utterly transcendent God was not the creator God of the Hebrew Scriptures, the latter being some kind of demiurge. They also tended to claim that since Christ was a pre-existent divine being there could have been no Incarnation or Passion, as such notions totally contradicted their concept of God. As far as interpretation of the existing recognised scriptures went - the Hebrew Scriptures and growing body of texts accepted as

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<sup>25</sup> Torrance, *op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* (p.25)

Christian - gnostics used these texts in an apparently random fashion in order to find support for their theories about the mythical realms which they claimed filled the gulf between the material world and the totally unreachable and incomprehensible God.

Statements of accepted doctrine became a necessary part of refuting heresy within the growing church. One of the problems was that initially there were no means of ensuring appropriate interpretation of the scriptures. Whereas the grammatical approach ensured that factors within the text itself were taken into account, thus providing some boundaries, the emphasis on allegorical interpretation leading to the ultimately important spiritual meaning was open to abuse in the form of entirely arbitrary interpretations. In order to rectify this situation and refute heresy, a further external factor was established to guide interpretation, and that was the authority of the Church's teaching. When Irenaeus wrote his *Adversus Haereses*, some time before his death in 200 AD, he was able to list all the successors of the apostles in Rome down to Polycarp, whom he had seen before he died at a great age. Although appropriate at this stage, the appeal to tradition has been an excuse in later times for the refusal to allow questions to be asked about the method of orthodox Christianity's interpretation of its texts.

These first major developments in Christian hermeneutics - the beginnings of a consciously systematic approach to scripture - are sometimes spoken of in terms of there being two main schools of thought focused on two particular centres of learning over a period of time, Alexandria and Antioch. They flourished as centres of learning at different times, and a wide variety of views can be found amongst those associated with either one of them, so again, oversimplification must be avoided. Alexandria's prominence as a centre of learning pre-dates Christianity. Apart from the Hellenistic philosophical schools there, it was the centre of learning for the Jews of the Diaspora, the place where among

other things the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures was produced. It was home to the Jewish scholar Philo, who is significant in being the first major exponent of the allegorical interpretation of scripture, and the first to use biblical texts as material for philosophical inquiry. In this tradition lie the Christian scholars Clement and Origen, both of whom made use of the prevailing philosophy of the day in their exposition of Christian doctrine. Antioch also housed a large number of Jews, and their learning influenced the Christian scholarship which built up there from the first century onwards, although it did not really flourish as a prominent place of learning until the late fourth and early fifth centuries. The common approach to scripture here was first to look at the grammar of the text itself, then to think about theological implications. Theodore of Mopsuestia and others specifically rejected the allegorical approach, emphasising the literal meaning of a text, and conceding only that the plain meaning of a text may at times be conveyed by a figure of speech.

### **Origen (c.185-255)**

It is clear that in his expression of the doctrine of the Trinity Origen is working with a Platonic framework, and the same can be said of his approach to scriptural exegesis, although this is not to say that he is simply looking for confirmation of Platonic philosophical ideas within scripture. His approach to scripture needs to be seen in the context of his teaching on the human soul. Having existed in perfect union with God, all human souls, except the soul of Christ, have fallen through disobedience, and become embodied in matter. The aim of the soul is therefore that it be restored to its original perfect union with God. Platonism was on the whole very optimistic about the ability of the individual human to achieve knowledge of God and thus to be restored to its original union and state of perfection. This optimism was based on an understanding of a likeness

between the soul and God: both being intellect. Whilst Origen is happy to acknowledge this affinity between the soul (or mind) and God, he differs from Platonism in stressing that it is only through God's grace that the human mind can be restored to its original state of perfection. Part of his understanding of this grace consists in his acknowledgment that, although supremely transcendent, God has chosen to reveal himself to humanity. This revelation is mediated by, and is itself, the Logos, who has worked in different ways at different times enabling those who have experienced him to record in words what he has revealed of God. These words make up scripture, which being divinely inspired plays a central part in the soul's journey back to perfection.

In Book IV of *On First Principles*, Origen advocates a twofold understanding of scripture. The fact that at a literal level a text may appear to be irrelevant or not to make much sense is enough to indicate that the true meaning of the text lies at the figurative level. Commenting particularly on the narrative of Genesis 3, where God is said to be walking in the garden in the cool of the day, he says, "I do not think anyone will doubt that these are figurative expressions which indicate certain mysteries through a semblance of history and not through actual events."<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere in his writings, a threefold pattern of scriptural interpretation is advocated, corresponding to the activity of the Trinity. There are said to be three stages in the journey of the soul: that of purification, that of knowledge, and finally that of perfection. This 'upward' movement of the soul corresponds to the 'downward' movement of the Logos. Initially, the Christian may not be able to perceive the deeper truths of scripture but will be able to respond to moral teaching. After moral teaching, the Christian will be able to move on to an apprehension of the Logos himself. (In his commentary on John, Origen interprets the 'I am' sayings of Jesus as referring to different levels at which the Logos makes himself known.)

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<sup>27</sup> *On First Principles*, Book IV, ch.3.1.

Origen has a very high view of scripture in that in every respect it reveals the Logos. His exegetical approach does involve typological and allegorical readings of texts, and clearly rests upon the Platonic distinction between the real, intelligible, unchanging world, and the visible, tangible, world of change. In a climate where these approaches have been discredited, it is necessary to understand that for Origen this was not to do with an uncritical adoption of Neoplatonist philosophy, or with an uncritical desire to make 'Christian sense' of the Old Testament texts, but that it arose out of his deep conviction that in scripture the Logos is both content and mediator of divine revelation.

### **Augustine (354-430)**

Like Origen, his predecessor in the East, and like many Christian thinkers after him, Augustine too was concerned with the relationship between reason and faith. It was partly his discovery of Neoplatonism, and through that the realisation that the scriptures could be interpreted allegorically, that brought him back to Catholic Christianity after ten years as an adherent of the Manichee sect. However he was well aware of the potential dangers of free use of allegory, and recognised the need to anchor such interpretation in thorough linguistic analysis of the Biblical text. This represents a new stage in hermeneutical thinking: the bringing together of the two basic approaches to biblical interpretation outlined above, associated with the two cities of Alexandria and Antioch.

In his work *On Christian Doctrine* Augustine discusses at length the function of a sign. Following the Platonic school of philosophy he recognised a sign as something that points beyond itself to another reality; it is not itself that reality. In terms of textual interpretation this supports an allegorical approach, but attention to the way in which the sign itself functions avoids both arbitrary allegorising and crude literal readings. According to Augustine the scriptures are not themselves what they talk about - God - but

they do refer to God. They belong to the world of change, and as such are to be used to enjoy the unchangeable: God. Apart from providing this semiotic framework to 'stabilize' scriptural interpretation, Augustine also suggests that a proper reading perspective is necessary for an appropriate interpretation to be achieved. The reading of scripture is to be approached with an attitude of love - both of God and of fellow human beings. This is no external doctrinal presupposition but is a basic conviction about the Christian life expressed by the texts themselves. Reading of scripture then is not only a matter of proper 'intellectual' interpretation, but is to do with the whole dimension of living out one's faith.

In his discussion of signs Augustine highlights two possible areas of difficulty for the reader. Firstly, signs do not always function figuratively but may of course have a direct reference. Secondly, the sign may seem to be ambiguous or simply be unknown to the interpreter. If this is the case the reader must be careful to interpret a sign in its context, applying other relevant knowledge to assist clarity of interpretation. This may include application of the Church's teaching on a subject to illuminate the biblical text. With the correct attitude and motivation of the love of God and humanity, Augustine thinks it highly unlikely that the reader will fail to find the spiritual sense of the text.

The disappointment with this approach is that it is particularly applicable to the New Testament only. As far as the Hebrew Scriptures are concerned Augustine remains within the tradition of typological interpretation. He does nevertheless recognise the importance of the context of reading, pointing to the dialectical relationship between the living tradition and its texts.

### **The Mediaeval Period**

Of all the scholars of the early Church, Augustine remained the greatest influence

during the mediaeval period, when in the West little was known of the Greek fathers at all. The basic two-fold approach to scripture was maintained, with some elaboration. Jeanrond quotes a verse by Nicholas of Lyra (d.1349), which shows how the spiritual sense of scripture has been sub-divided into three further categories:

"The letter shows us what God and our fathers did;

The allegory shows us where our faith is hid;

The moral meaning gives us rules of daily life;

The anagogy shows us where we end our strife."<sup>28</sup>

The Bible begins to appear to be understood as a document not only to do with history and faith, but also as a 'handbook' for daily life and as a document to do with eschatology. This theory of a fourfold sense of Scripture itself precipitated the separation of theological disciplines, because it stressed the separation of the literal sense of the text in terms of its need for consideration independently of its possible theological significance. The various theological disciplines emerging correspond to the various spiritual levels of interpretation: the allegorical approach was the stimulation for speculative theological thinking; the moral sense naturally gave rise to moral theology; and from the anagogical sense was derived particular understandings of eschatology. One of the implications of this development was the separation of theological speculation from practical Christian living. This has to be understood in the wider context of the Church. Its increasing institutionalization led to a strengthening of the hierarchical structures and the legalization of its teaching. The clergy-laity distinction was far more marked than at the time of Augustine, and this took its toll on the way in which theological reflection was undertaken.

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<sup>28</sup> Jeanrond, *op. cit.* p27; English translation from R.M. Grant with David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2nd edn., Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984

## **Aquinas (1225-1274)**

The concern of Augustine about the relationship between faith and reason remained a concern for theologians of the Middle Ages, and Thomas Aquinas was the most prominent scholar of this period who maintained that the two were not incompatible. By this stage though philosophy was dominated by the writings of Aristotle, whose works had been rediscovered in the West, mainly through the influence of Arab scholars. Aristotle had differed from his tutor Plato in denying the existence of the changeless world of the Forms (or Ideas), and asserting that an idea exists only in so far as it is expressed in any individual object. Every individual object was understood as a union of form and matter. He rejected the Platonic notion of the immortal soul being 'trapped' in the human body, instead understanding the soul to be the active principle of the body. Aquinas adopted these ideas, modifying the Neoplatonism he had inherited. His approach was that of an empiricist, perceiving individual material objects to be the first source of knowledge from which the existence of spiritual reality can be inferred. The influence of this view on his approach to scriptural interpretation is clear: he rejected the use of allegory (although he retained the principle of a four-fold reading of scripture), and focused on the literal sense of the text. Following Abelard, Aquinas was concerned that theology should be a scientific, academic discipline, and so drew on the tools of philosophical speculation - logic and dialectic. Increasingly theological speculation used biblical texts as proof texts to back up speculation, despite the promise of a new focus on the literal sense of the text. The dialectic of living tradition and scriptural interpretation was in danger of being entirely lost.



## The Reformation Period.

"Besides, no one has been able to understand his meaning, and much time has been wasted and many noble souls vexed with much useless labour, study, and expense...My heart is grieved to see how many of the best Christians this accursed, proud, knavish heathen has fooled and led astray with his false words. God sent him as a plague for our sins..."<sup>29</sup>

No one reading Luther's treatise *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* could be mistaken about his view of Aristotle, "the heathen teacher" who in the universities "rules further than Christ". Luther writes as one brought up in the Thomist tradition, and well-qualified to make such a critique. His recommendation to the nobility is that among other things the universities should be reformed as places of Christian learning, which would for Luther have to involve the the expulsion of Aristotle's writings, with the possible exception of the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric* which could be used to advantage in Christian preaching.

Luther's strident critique was one of many voices crying for reform. His background was one of mediaeval scholastic theology, and despite his role in the reforms of the time, he does not move as far from this hermeneutical stance as this role might suggest. It is his own theological struggle with such issues as judgment, justification and grace, that brings him to new views of biblical interpretation - a struggle that took place through his study and lecturing on biblical books. New hermeneutical insights of the time stem more from the fruits of Renaissance humanism than anything else. The availability of biblical texts in their original languages and a renewed interest in philology, coupled with the appearance of the Bible in the vernacular (a movement which had begun over a century before) all combined to question the Vulgate translation. The educated readership

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<sup>29</sup> quoted from Rupp, E.G., & Drewery, Benjamin (eds.) *Martin Luther* London: Arnold, 1970, in the series Documents of Modern History, gen. ed. A.G.Dickens.

broadened, and there was inevitably an increase in those whose perception was that the teaching of the Church did not match up to the broad scriptural witness to early Christianity. The sole authority of the Church to interpret biblical texts was questioned, hence Luther in the same document writes:

“...Therefore it is a wickedly devised fable - and they cannot quote a single letter to confirm it - that it is for the Pope alone to interpret the Scriptures or to confirm interpretation of them. They have assumed the authority of their own selves.”

It is this critique of the ecclesiastical *status quo* rather than any new hermeneutical theory that marks the break the Reformers made with the situation of the Catholic Church up to the sixteenth century. As Thistleton points out, the claims made by both Luther and Calvin concerning the perspicuity of scripture arose in this specific polemical context.<sup>30</sup>

One new element which is clear in Luther's hermeneutics is the redefinition of 'letter' and 'spirit', which illuminates the way in which his approach to all biblical texts is christocentric. As an inheritor of the fourfold understanding of scripture, the terms 'letter' and 'spirit' would have meant to Luther the literal and the spiritual senses of scripture respectively. However, in accordance with his new teaching on justification by grace through faith, he redefines these as theological terms: 'letter' refers to everything understood from a human view of existence; 'spirit' to everything understood according to God. As is to be expected from his particular theology of the Cross, Luther argues that the meaning of existence according to God is revealed only in the Cross of Christ, and is only accepted in faith. He arrives at a hermeneutical circle: to interpret scripture adequately a person must have made a decision in favour of the 'spirit', a decision to live according to God, because the Bible can only be understood by such a person. However, it is the reading

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<sup>30</sup> see discussion by Thistleton, *op. cit.*, ch. 5.1 "Three Polemical Contexts which Give 'Claritas Scripturae' its Currency: Epistemology, 'Higher' Meanings, and Efficacy."

of scripture that initially provokes the individual to make this decision. From this perspective all the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures are likewise interpreted christologically; not first through allegory and typological readings, but through a 'literal' and 'prophetic-literal' understanding of the sense of the text.

Erasmus was one of the most influential scholars of the period. Rejecting the mediaeval four-fold interpretation of scripture, and influenced by the Florentine rediscovery of Neoplatonism, his approach to biblical interpretation favoured the work of Origen and of Jerome. His interpretation was two-fold, the literal and the spiritual, reflecting the Neoplatonic contrast of body and soul. He emphasized the importance of linguistic competence, of grammar, and of rhetoric, as the tools of the interpreter. In this he was followed by Zwingli. Zwingli initially placed great emphasis on the spiritual meaning of the text - which in the case of Old Testament interpretation was often a typological reading - to the detriment of the literal meaning. However, his thinking appears to have developed, such that he gave priority to the natural sense of the text, which might be discerned through use of the tools of scholarship mentioned above.

Both Erasmus and Zwingli interpret 'letter' and 'spirit' in a platonic framework: 'letter' being the outer shell or form of a passage, and 'spirit' referring to its inner meaning. Another significant figure, Bucer, rejects this all together. He looked only to the natural sense of the text, emphasising the importance of its historical context. 'Letter' for Bucer was a term referring to the reading of scripture divorced from the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit. Calvin likewise focused on the literal or natural sense of the text. Of all the reformers, he had the most positive view of the clarity of the text, and of the possibility of understanding its meaning without recourse to allegorical or typological interpretations. He claimed that it was important to discern the mind of the

author, and that this could be done through study of the literal sense of the text, paying attention to forms of expression, context and historical circumstances.

The major development during the Reformation period was then to do with the influence of the Reformers' fresh theological insights on their biblical interpretation. Certain aspects of the mediaeval Church's teaching were criticized either as being speculative with no grounding in scripture, or as being based on a mis-translation of the text. Amongst these were teaching concerning the sacraments and the Virgin Mary. From the Swiss reformers particularly comes a more positive attitude to the clarity of the text. Although it is another century or more before further significant developments in biblical interpretation take place, this positive attitude with its emphasis on the literal sense of the text provides the foundations for the challenges of the Enlightenment, and paves the way for the development of nineteenth and twentieth century hermeneutics.

## The Enlightenment

The phrase 'the Enlightenment' is used to refer to developments in thinking during the eighteenth century. Although varied in its manifestations, Enlightenment thought does have a common thread: the sense that basic Christian beliefs are problematic and need to be thoroughly examined by the use of reason to explore whether and in what sense they can be said to be true. This does not by any means represent the sudden rise in agnosticism it may seem to suggest, but rather reflects a mistrust of the way in which the Bible was interpreted both by the Roman Catholic church and by the more extreme Reformed churches. One early work, *Christianity not Mysterious* by John Toland (published in 1696), criticized the lack of trust of reason by religious thinkers of both persuasions. In contrast to developments in arts and sciences Toland saw in both wings of the Church the misuse of scripture for the purpose of defending particular ecclesiastical systems. For

Toland and others after him, reason was to be what governed the hermeneutical approach to the Bible.

It is during this period that historical criticism begins to come to the fore. One of the features of another work at the start of the period, Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), is the identification of an implied antithesis between what was seen as the simple biblical belief in Jesus as Messiah and the later christological and trinitarian dogma imposed upon it. In this Locke anticipates the work of Reimarus, whose work was published posthumously by Lessing in the 1770's.<sup>31</sup> Both drew a distinction between the gospel preached by Jesus and that preached by the apostles. The former was understood in terms of teaching about morality and natural religion, and the latter - begun by the apostles and continued by the second and third century Christian theologians - as the corruption of the 'pure' Christian teaching of Jesus. Locke paid particular attention to historical investigation as a part of rational interpretation, as is evident from his *Paraphrases and Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* (1705-7 but published posthumously) where he looks at the historical circumstances of Paul's letters.

In terms of his contribution to biblical hermeneutics, perhaps the most significant figure of the period is the German Protestant theologian Salomo Semler (1725-91). In the Lutheran tradition he opposed all theologies which he perceived to be silencing the biblical texts by the imposition of doctrines upon them, rather than allowing the texts to speak through proper study of them. Proper study was to be thorough: interpreters must be aware of the historical distance between themselves and the text, and their exploration of the text should include study of grammar, rhetoric, logic, historical setting, the

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<sup>31</sup> H.S.Reimarus (1694-1768) wrote his *Apologie* over a period of about thirty years, but chose not to publish it - Lessing published fragments after his death. In the *Apologie* Reimarus attempts to provide a rational interpretation of Jesus' life which accounts for conflicting views found within the Gospels, especially related to Jesus' understanding of his messiahship. The basic idea he conveys is that the apostles were responsible for creating the image of Jesus as predicting his own death and resurrection, the latter not actually having happened. The apostles stole the body and spread the resurrection story to maintain their own positions amongst the followers of Jesus.

tradition of the text, translations, and a critique of editions of the text. The main aim was to understand the texts as the authors had understood them. In addition to highlighting the misuse of the text in dogmatic terms, Semler also dismissed any kind of typological reading of the Hebrew Scriptures. He drew a distinction between scripture and the Word of God: the former might include things that could not be accepted by anyone believing in divine love. (Parts of the Hebrew Bible were particularly problematic in this respect.) Hence it was necessary to allow for an interpretive approach in which historical understanding was prior to edification - not all biblical texts offered the latter, yet those that did not were still perceived as being of historical significance. In effect, this meant the dissolution of the canon. As far as hermeneutics was concerned he was not willing to advocate any special status for theology.

This emphasis on historical context seen in the approach of Semler and others, plus the increasing emphasis on interpretation as a scientific process, signalled the separation of biblical interpretation and Christian theology - not for the first time in Christian history. This basic approach was to characterize interpretation for most of the nineteenth century. Its inadequacy has only been widely recognised and addressed in the latter part of the twentieth century.

#### **From Schleiermacher to the present day.**

Whilst the historical approach dominated biblical interpretation, wider questions were being raised which decisively coloured hermeneutical debate in the nineteenth century and beyond. It is Schleiermacher (1768-1834) who is seen to be largely responsible for broadening hermeneutical issues beyond that of text interpretation and asking more philosophical questions about the nature of human understanding. He saw that biblical interpretation was secondary to these issues which were fundamental to all

disciplines, not just that of Christian theology. Schleiermacher therefore rejected any suggestion that the biblical text should be approached any differently from any other text, simply on the basis of it being inspired by the Holy Spirit. Any special treatment due on the basis of recognising that must nevertheless rest on top of the fundamental general hermeneutical principles applicable to all acts of human understanding. This emphasis on general hermeneutics was reinforced by Schleiermacher's biographer, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), himself a philosopher concerned to defend the humanities against the charge that they lacked a properly critical foundation. This charge was made in comparison with the natural sciences, which at this time were seen to be making great strides in explaining natural phenomena.

From Schleiermacher and Dilthey onwards, there are several different threads which make up the pattern of hermeneutical developments in the twentieth century. This chapter concludes with the presentation of these only in barest outline. Some of them touch on issues already mentioned in the Introduction concerning recent developments in a literary approach to the Bible.

The broadening of the hermeneutical issue such that it addressed general questions of human understanding encouraged the development of a particular philosophical strand of inquiry. The work of such people as Heidegger and Gadamer focused on this issue of human understanding and the nature of language. Another major figure in the field of philosophical hermeneutics this century is Paul Ricoeur (b. 1913). His wide ranging work includes a particular interest in issues of language and 'language events': questions about the act of reading and understanding. This has an obvious bearing on the more specific issues of text interpretation.

In the arena of biblical studies, two of the most significant figures this century are Karl Barth (1886-1968) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976). The rise in scientific

inquiry outlined above had challenged a simple acceptance of the biblical world view, and similarly the later emphasis in biblical studies on historical inquiry raised questions about the historical reliability of the Bible (for example, approaching the gospels in this way highlighted the problematic chronology of the life of Jesus), and failed to relate biblical study to Christian faith in the present. The post-Enlightenment insistence on Christianity as a reasonable and moral faith was also shattered by the events of the First World War. In the face of such appalling suffering inflicted by human beings on one another, Christian faith and human morality could no longer be simply equated. Barth and Bultmann responded to this situation in contrasting ways. Both were concerned with the place of biblical interpretation in the question of the human relationship with God, but whereas Barth stressed God's revelation as testified to by the biblical text, Bultmann took a more existential stance, starting with human experience as the context in which knowledge of God is interpreted.

The respective starting points of Barth and Bultmann can be seen to represent the division which is often still evident between biblical study and the study of Christian theology, and in both areas of study there can be found a reluctance on the part of some to engage with the concerns of postmodern culture. In the opening paragraphs of this brief review of Christian hermeneutics it was noted that from the earliest moments, Christians interpreted the scriptures from the point of view of their faith in and experience of Jesus, the Word made flesh. Valentine Cunningham highlights the sacramental images of reading which flow from this logocentric approach, speaking of "the incarnational ground of the Christian faith in linguistic presence".<sup>32</sup> He goes on to point out that this approach has been challenged by post-Saussurean arguments about texts being non-referential, about reading as an experience of emptiness and aporia - the negative tradition of doubt and

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<sup>32</sup> Cunningham, *In the Reading Gaol: postmodernity, texts, and history*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994. p.204



darkness. Such a tradition has its place in Christianity, but as Cunningham indicates, what is new in the current time is the generalization and reductiveness of it: the claim that all texts are aporetic, a claim that is at the heart of the deconstructive or postmodern argument.<sup>33</sup> The postmodern world is one of uncertainty and incoherence, characterized by a hermeneutics of suspicion rather than faith, in the face of which the positions which caused concern for Enlightenment thinkers can still be discerned in the life of the Church: on the one hand the dogmatic reiteration of church teaching, and on the other a dogmatic biblicism. Werner Jeanrond warns against this stance as one of living an illusion as far as Christian faith is concerned:

"The illusions of being able to offer a timeless body of truths which are beyond interpretative needs or of having access to the heart of the Bible without engaging in the messy job of actually and consciously interpreting its many texts are a modern phenomenon. They cannot claim much support from the earlier Christian tradition. They point to a fear and anxiety of the world in some theologians and to their deeper theological lack of courage in coming to terms with the developments of human knowledge. Rather than approaching the emerging world-views with critical reason, the various representatives of a theological 'orthodoxy' have circumvented, bedevilled, or replaced reason by authoritarian behaviour of one kind or another."<sup>34</sup>

Whilst the metaphysical framework derived from Plato is no longer relevant, the desire to keep separate the 'spiritual/pure' and 'material/messy' is still evident. The two novels which are the focus of this study represent a challenge to such a position, the challenge of engaging in the messy and sometimes painful job of interpretation. Before looking in

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<sup>33</sup> Cunningham, *op. cit.* p.208

<sup>34</sup> Jeanrond, *op. cit.* p164

detail at them however, we consider midrash, a contrasting approach to biblical interpretation.

## Chapter Two:

### Midrash

In the previous chapter it was noted that the Christian tradition of biblical interpretation has been shaped significantly by a Greek metaphysical framework. Jewish interpretation stands in contrast to this - though it would be incorrect to suggest that Jewish thought remained totally free from the influence of Hellenism. The writings of Philo clearly demonstrate that this is not the case, and some of the apocryphal texts of the Bible must be read in the context of the dispersed Jewish community living in a Hellenized world. Bearing this in mind however, the difference between the two traditions can be characterised by the difference between their respective concepts of 'word': that is, between  $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$  (*logos*) and דְּבָר (dabhar).<sup>35</sup> As we noted in the previous chapter, in the Greek thought that influenced later Judaism (Philo for example) and Christianity, where there was understood to be a gulf between the material world and the entirely transcendent God,  $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$  was often used to speak of the mediating principal between the two. In Stoic thought it was associated with rationality, and so with the intelligence of human beings and their ability to perceive the divine. It was through the mediation of the Logos that human beings were able to have access to an otherwise inaccessible God. This understanding of  $\lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma$  was an obvious framework for Christian writers to use in expressing the concept of God incarnate - as is clear from Origen's theology.

By contrast, דְּבָר carries connotations of something more than the spoken word. It is the creative force, that which brings things into being, (as in Genesis 1). דְּבָר is more than is suggested by a Greek-based semiotics where the word is understood as a sign

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<sup>35</sup> This point is explored extensively in Part One of Susan Handelmann's *The Slayers of Moses* Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982

which points beyond itself to some greater reality. That notion has led to the tendency in Christian exegesis to go from the text to 'somewhere' beyond, in search of an ultimate point of reference. In exegesis of the Hebrew Scriptures this seems particularly forced - for example, in the extremes of typology, the kind of christological perspective that seeks a reference to Christ in every text of the Bible. In contrast the Jewish approach can broadly be characterised as the text being the point of encounter with the divine revelation because God has spoken. On this understanding the verbal pattern of the text can be said to constitute reality in a way that cannot be said of the approach that sees the text in terms of representing types and shadows of a reality 'beyond'. The way in which this affects textual interpretation can be seen from a study of midrash.

The word 'midrash' comes from the Hebrew root דָּרַשׁ (*darash*), meaning 'to seek, search, examine, investigate'. This meaning is found both in the Bible and in rabbinic literature. The noun מִדְרָשׁ (*midrash*) occurs twice in the Bible - in 2 Chronicles 13.22 and 24.27. In both cases it means 'account' or 'result of an inquiry of the events of the times' - ie. what today is called history. In the Septuagint the word is translated as βιβλος or γραφη - 'book' or 'writing'. In the Jewish literature of the Second Temple period 'midrash' is used to speak of learning or education generally, the 'beit midrash' being literally the 'house of instruction' or study (eg. Ecclesiasticus 51.23: "Draw near to me, you who are uneducated, and lodge in the house of instruction"). It can also mean 'to tread', suggesting that study of the Torah has as much to do with 'walking' as with reading. Midrash is to do with the way a person 'walks' or lives out their human life.

In defining midrashic literature there is great difference of opinion as to how far its boundaries extend. What Jacob Neusner outlines in *What is Midrash?*<sup>36</sup> is a much

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<sup>36</sup> Neusner, J. *What is Midrash?* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987

broader definition than that given in the lengthy article in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. The latter focuses more on midrash as a particular genre of rabbinic literature, which constitutes "an anthology and compilation of homilies, consisting of both biblical exegesis and sermons delivered in public as well as *aggadot* or *halakhoth* and forming a running aggadic commentary on specific books of the Bible."<sup>37</sup> In contrast, Neusner describes three ways in which 'midrash' is commonly understood, approaching it not purely as a genre of literature, but more widely as a type of interpretive activity. These three ways in which it is understood are of midrash as paraphrase, as prophecy, and as parable. He goes on to outline within this five types of literature which are produced by this midrashic activity: literature within the Hebrew Bible itself, rabbinic literature, translations, rewriting of Biblical narrative, and pesher-midrash. In the first type he includes the book of Deuteronomy which rewrites parts of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers; and also Chronicles, rewriting the books of Samuel and Kings. His second type is the rabbinic literature which the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* considers as 'true' midrashic literature. Translations, the third type, include for Neusner not only the *targumim* but also the Septuagint. He quotes Ralph Marcus, "every translation is a compromise between two civilizations", and argues that the exercise of translation inevitably involves interpretation, for example, taking theological considerations into account. No translation can therefore be 'pure', and so the Septuagint must be understood as paraphrase - one of Neusner's three ways of understanding midrash. This would not be accepted by some scholars. Within the fourth type of literature, the rewriting of biblical narratives, Neusner includes such texts as Jubilees, and the *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* (Pseudo-Philo). The *Encyclopaedia Judaica* specifically rejects the latter as midrash, saying that there is no foundation for its inclusion as such. The fifth type, pesher-

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<sup>37</sup> *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972.

midrash, is to do with apocalyptic literature. It is particularly associated with the community at Qumran and the literature of the Dead Sea Scrolls. As in rabbinic midrash, *peshet* is to do with the citation of a verse which is then given an interpretation, the word *peshet* usually appearing in an introductory formula. The verses concerned, however, are usually those thought to be prophetic or visionary in some sense, whilst the interpretation is usually perceived to refer in some way to the present situation of those for whom it was intended.<sup>38</sup>

These attempts to define midrash reflect a culture which likes to define intellectual tasks methodologically, as Gerald Bruns points out in his essay *The Hermeneutics of Midrash*.<sup>39</sup> The case of midrash emphasises the fact that interpretation cannot be reduced to a theory. It is not made up of rules or techniques, or of particular strategies. All of the above descriptions of midrash point to the fact that midrash is broadly "the relationship of Judaism to its sacred texts"<sup>40</sup>. As has already been suggested above, it is as much to do with a way of life as to do with the specific study of a text; it is to do with action in the concerns of everyday life. This is true of both of the main kinds of midrash: the *halakhah*, which deals with the law, and the *aggadah*, which is more homiletic in style, covering a wide range of material. Engaged in midrashic activity, the rabbis looked not only at the text of scripture, but also at their contemporary situation and the issues facing them. Whereas interpretation in the western European tradition had often been weighted toward a sense of needing to understand the intention of the author in order to understand the text adequately, midrash stresses that interpretation cannot be isolated from the context of the reader, and therefore from the diversity of human situations. Another major difference between midrashic activity and the western tradition of

<sup>38</sup> See article 'Peshet' by George J. Brooke in Coggins, R. J., & Houlden, J. L. (eds.) *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* London: SCM Press, 1990.

<sup>39</sup> Bruns, G. 'The Hermeneutics of Midrash', in Schwartz, Regina (Ed.) *The Book and the Text*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

interpretation is do to with the emphasis in midrash on the community. Bruns quotes several examples from the Talmud which illustrate that midrash is not envisaged as an encounter between the text and a solitary, private reader. The *beit midrash* was a place of meeting where rabbis and students would expound and dispute the Torah. It was a corporate activity, which gave rise to the plurality and even conflict of interpretations which is inherent in midrash.

Discussion of how midrash might be defined is taken further by Daniel Boyarin, who begins his book, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*<sup>41</sup>, with a discussion of two further contrasting descriptions of midrash. The theory of Isaac Heinemann ignores the social and historical factors; he argues that there is a similarity with the way that he sees the German Romantics having treated poetry: whilst the writer of prose is subject to the social determinations of language, the poet seems to operate "in a privileged ontological and epistemological space all alone and free of any contamination from his time and society"<sup>42</sup>. Midrash therefore is understood as functioning in a transcendental mode, being somehow in communion with the geniuses and heroes of the Bible. Joseph Heinemann goes to the other end of the scale however, describing midrash as historiography. Boyarin considers each of these to be inadequate, and outlines a new theory of midrash, based on the notion of intertextuality.

He outlines three points central to the concept of intertextuality: a) a text is always a mosaic of conscious and unconscious elements of earlier discourse; b) a text may be dialogical in nature, contesting its own assertions as an essential part of the structure of its discourse; and c) there are cultural codes, again conscious or unconscious, which both constrain and allow the production - but not creation - of new texts within the

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<sup>41</sup> Boyarin, D. *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*

culture. These codes are to do with the assumptions people within that culture make about what is true, possible, natural and so on - what Boyarin calls the ideology of a culture. No text can therefore be totally organic or self-contained. Every text is constrained by the literary system of which it is a part, and is inherently dialogical. Intertextuality cannot be a quality of some texts and not others.

Boyarin's theory of midrash presents midrashic literature as interpretation that "continues compositional and interpretive practices found in the Bible itself". A midrashic reading means an intertextual reading, and Boyarin argues that this is only a development of what is already there in the interpretive strategies that are manifested in the Bible itself. This assertion is very much in agreement with Bruns' reflection on the way in which the rabbis understood midrash as a 'linking up words of Torah with one another'.<sup>43</sup> This 'linking' involved many of the practices common to a whole variety of hermeneutical approaches to a text. It might involve tracking any given word, seeing how many times it occurred in scripture, noting the contexts in which it was used and how that varied. This was done however with the perspective that scripture is 'a non-linear text whose letters and words can be discovered in heterogeneous combinations.' Similarly, the rabbis would take a word, verse, phrase, or possibly even a whole book, to elucidate another portion of scripture. In this way, scripture was understood as a self-interpreting text. As Bruns points out, Augustine and Luther would not argue with this, asserting too that one only needs scripture to interpret scripture - although clearly they would argue on the basis of the New Testament interpreting the Old. Distinctive in the rabbinic approach is the way in which books understood as scripture are also seen specifically as themselves being works of interpretation - hence the view that the prophetic books (including what are often categorized as the Deuteronomistic history) were written for the purpose of elucidating the books of the Pentateuch, and later works are seen as

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<sup>43</sup> quoted by Bruns from *Midrash Rabbah*, *Hazita* (Song of Songs), I,1.8; in Schwartz *op. cit.*



interpreting both of these categories. Although this does suggest some degree of linear progression, it has to be understood that this idea was not dominant. The view that the whole of scripture was divinely spoken made chronology of secondary importance. Within the 'body' of scripture, there is an inherent movement back and forward, a relating of one text to another in the play of elucidation. One further point made by Bruns is of particular significance. He points out that what constitutes the whole of scripture is evident when it is presented as a book held in the hand. What it is can easily be described in terms of parts and of the whole, and of the relationship between the two. However, in a culture when scripture existed on scrolls and very much in the memory, the analytical distance between text and interpreter would have been narrower than in the case of a book culture. Any notion of 'the whole' appears to be ill-defined, or at least, highly flexible. In contrast to an approach which displays a very definite awareness of 'the whole' of scripture, one of the things that characterizes midrashic interpretation is the attention to intricate details, minute parts. This combination of detail and the fluidity in the notion of 'the whole' contributes to the characteristic openness and multiplicity of interpretations. The rabbis do not appear to have approached interpretation as a problem-solving activity, with consensus being the goal of any argument. On the contrary, midrash reflects a sense of the text being 'always a step ahead of the interpreter', opening up new ground and new possibilities for exploration, with the midrash itself testifying to an endless play of give and take both between text and interpreter, and between the rabbis gathered together to teach and to debate. As Bruns makes clear, "midrashic interpretations stop but do not end".

Although the Christian tradition is characterized by a variety of hermeneutical approaches, their common thread is an 'excavative' approach, a desire to discover what the text *means*. A Christian biblical commentary, whether or not it is explicitly stated,

will usually convey a sense of there being a point where interpretation does stop, and 'meaning' has been reached. Again, this reflects a mode of thinking where a notion of the transcendent is significant. Bruns suggests that such a way of thinking actually reflects an outlook which has been unable to accept the finitude of human understanding, its rootedness in particularity, and its inherently dialogical nature. This approach suggests an idealist view of both a text and its interpretation - that if only they can be grasped, they exist in some kind of pure state, 'somewhere beyond'. Bruns goes on to make the point that midrash was not exempt from conflict between two opposing attitudes to interpretation, the transcendental and the dialogical. He quotes extensively from *Midrash Rabbah*, Naso [Numbers], XIV.4, which illustrates something of this conflict. Two rabbis welcome Rabbi Joshua at the *beit midrash*. When he asks them what new thing has been said they reply, "We are your disciples and it is your water that we drink." - that is, 'we follow your interpretation'. This suggests some acceptance of the dogmatic approach to interpretation, where what is not formally accepted will be ruled out. However, Rabbi Joshua is not satisfied by this and pursues his question, suggesting by his response that the essence of interpretation lies in the fact that it is never fixed, new things are always being said, and that argument and dispute are essential to the interpretive activity.<sup>44</sup>

From a Christian perspective this emphasis on the dialogical and open-ended nature of interpretation gives rise to the question of authority: an understanding of the Bible as 'the word of God' suggests that it has particular force, and this is frequently assumed to point to particular meaning. What force can the text have as God's word if there is no consensus on what 'the message' actually is? A midrashic approach however, makes clear the fact that a conflict of interpretation is not to be confused with a conflict of authority. Another rabbinic text suggests that there can be no conflict of authority in

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<sup>44</sup> *Midrash Rabbah*, Numbers XIV.4. Bruns, *op. cit.* p193.

midrash, because of the way in which Torah is understood. Against the dogmatic view is the conviction that "the words of these and of the other Sages, all of them were given by Moses the shepherd from what he received from the Unique One of the Universe."<sup>45</sup> The rabbis understood that a dialogue was begun on Sinai when God spoke the Torah to Moses. Interpretation of the Torah is for them a participation in the dialogue that was begun, not an analytical process which happens from a distance. It has already been noted that the prophetic books were understood to be works of interpretation as well as being sacred writings themselves; likewise Solomon is understood to have been both an interpreter and author of scripture. Daniel Boyarin quotes the following passage from the Song of Songs Rabbah:

" 'And not only that Kohelet [Solomon] was wise, he moreover taught knowledge to the people, and proved and researched, and formulated many *meshalim*.' - 'and proved' words of Torah; 'and researched' words of Torah; he made handles for the Torah. You will find that until Solomon existed there was no figure."<sup>46</sup>

*Meshalim* were parables, proverbs or figures by which Torah could be understood. The tradition asserts that Solomon wrote the Song of Songs in his youth, Proverbs in his maturity, and Ecclesiastes in his old age, all of which are for the purpose of 'teaching the people' and interpreting Torah. Words of Torah are linked up with one another and mutually illuminate one another; these texts of Solomon for example, provide "handles" for the more obscure passages of scripture.

What then is Torah? The rabbinic answer is that it is that which is to do with engaging in the dialogue initiated by God. The word 'Torah' often refers specifically to the five books of Moses, or more widely to the whole collection of writings in the Hebrew

<sup>45</sup> *Pesikta Rabbati, Piska*, 3.2. Bruns, *op. cit.* p197.

<sup>46</sup> Boyarin, D. 'The Song of Songs: Lock or Key? Intertextuality, Allegory and Midrash', in Schwartz, *The Book And the Text*

Bible. In addition to this though there is also the Oral Torah - many other writings in the rabbinic tradition which are all to do with participation in this dialogue. The principle of participation undergirds the rabbinic claim of unity between written and oral Torah: all are part of the same thing, the ongoing, never-ending give and take of interpretation, a process begun even in the written scriptures themselves. To return to the issue of authority, there is no concept of conformity to an external norm in so far as the content of interpretation is concerned. What is important is conformity to the practice of interpretation, to midrashic activity itself; that is what is important is participation in the dialogue. No interpretation can be isolated from another; to try and claim such a thing would in effect be to try and set up a new torah on its own ground. Bruns uses the analogy of conversation, where no statement is likely to make much sense if taken in isolation from the whole: "Hence the principle that the conversation itself is the true author of all that is said in it; no one participant in the conversation can claim original authorship or final authority, because what one says derives from the give and take of the conversation itself, not from one's own subjective intention."<sup>47</sup> Therefore each individual rabbi's interpretation cannot claim meaning and authority from its own separate relationship to a particular bit of text; rather, meaning and authority are derived from its participation in the original, its place in the dialogue initiated by God on Sinai. The boundaries of this text, this dialogue, are constantly shifting, raising the question of where they can be drawn. Bruns makes the point that as far as issues of interpretation and of the power claim that frequently accompanies a claim of authoritative interpretation are concerned, the interpretive community is nothing less than Israel herself. This community of people marks the boundaries of interpretation, within which the 'ordinary Israelite' has just as much to contribute or claim in the activity of interpretation. Midrash can thus be seen as

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<sup>47</sup> Bruns, *op. cit.* p199.

the form of God's covenant with his people.

In contrast to the traditional western Christian approach to interpreting the sacred text of the Bible, midrash seeks participation in common ground rather than an ultimate goal, or ultimate ground of meaning. Having explored the distinctive character of midrash in general terms, it is necessary to focus briefly on one particular kind of midrash which is of relevance to this study.

### *Aggadah*

Whatever the type of midrashic activity, the context of that activity is always of significance. The basic context for a midrash of any period is that of the relationship between text and community. Neusner quotes from an essay by Gary G. Porton, "Defining Midrash". Porton writes that "For something to be considered Midrash it must have a clear relationship to the accepted canonical text of Revelation. Midrash is a term given to a Jewish activity which finds its locus in the religious life of the Jewish community."<sup>48</sup> The significance of the particular context of the community from which the midrash was generated is evident from a study of aggadic midrash. The term *aggadah* encompasses a wide range of midrashim, and because of this wide variety is often defined in terms of what it is not. It is that which is not *halakhah*, ie. it is not to do with religious laws and regulations, although there is a good deal of reciprocity between the two. Both are part of the Oral Torah, but *aggadah* is not regarded as authoritative in the same way as *halakhah*. *Aggadah* can be found from the period of the Second Temple, through the talmudic period (approximately fifth century B.C. to sixth century A.D.). It relates to the Jewish community in Palestine at a time when the country was very mixed in terms of both culture and religion, and was the locus of violent political conflict. The Jews faced

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<sup>48</sup> Quoted by Neusner in *What is Midrash?*, from an essay, "Defining Midrash", by Porton in Neusner (Ed.) *The Study Of Ancient Judaism*, New York: Ktav, 1981

struggles not only with those outside their own people, but also within. *Aggadah* evolved as a way of deriving guidance from the Torah, a source of strength for faith, and as a means of education. The word itself means 'relating', in the sense of 'telling'. It contains legends, narrative, ethical admonition and exhortation, expressions of comfort, of hope for future redemption, even doctrine. Although doctrine was not dealt with in a systematic fashion in aggadic literature, there were many attempts to answer questions about God and his relationship to humanity, including questions of his attributes and the experience of his people at any given time. Every generation brought its own concerns to the text, and in every generation contradictory answers were given. The result of this was a great store of rich expression which was highly valued by subsequent generations. The overall purpose of *aggadah* was to touch the human heart and teach the ways of God to his people. This was accomplished by means of considerable variety of literary expression, from parables and allegory, poems and prayers, through to deliberate word play and gematria. There is a great sense of play about *aggadah*, which was acknowledged by the Jewish sages. No single objective truth was to be sought in *aggadah*; unlike the *halakhah* it was to be read with the creativity of the story-teller in mind. Contradictions with the biblical text or other *aggadah* were not an issue, as the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* remarks, "For the sages say, 'Is aggadic interpretation a matter of belief? No, but make the interpretation and receive the reward therefore'...In the *aggadah* 'everyone may interpret as he thinks fit, ie., 'possibly', 'maybe one can say', and not a fixed thing.' " Even so, whilst recognition of the element of play and creativity is important in approaching *aggadah*, it is important not to lose sight of its serious purpose: dealing with the problems of faith and of everyday life.

There is no question that aggadic literature is a commentary on the texts of scripture, in the sense that it relates very closely to the sacred text, participating in the dialogue of Torah. Yet it is of particular significance for this study that there is a strong

understanding of freedom of interpretation, of play and exploration, and that this is not perceived as mockery of the sacred text but as part of the ongoing interpretive process. Two aspects of *aggadah* in particular are significant in exploring how the modern texts of fiction relate to the biblical text: discourse, and historical *aggadah*.

The discourse had its place in the synagogue worship. The public reading from the Torah and the Prophets played a prominent part in the worship, and was followed by an exposition appropriately adapted for the listeners in any given situation. This exposition or discourse was perceived as a continuation of the activity of the Prophets. The preacher took the opportunity on this occasion to speak directly to his audience about their own circumstances. He would be the voice for their hopes and their griefs; he would critique and make judgments about the events of the time, about the people and their enemies. All of this would be linked to whatever part of scripture it was that had just been read. The discourse is an illustration of total involvement with scripture, such that it is hard to determine whether the idea of the *aggadah* came first and was then linked to scripture, or the *aggadah* was an immediate response to the scripture. Whichever way round it was is immaterial. The individual giving the discourse was so permeated with the spirit of the text that the words of the text were alive for that particular audience at that particular time. Both this spirit and the various elements found in the discourses are also to be found in the two modern texts examined in this study.

The literature known as historical *aggadah* contains supplements to the biblical narratives, including some very ancient stories preserved among the people, dating back to the biblical period. Some of these stories are striking in their extravagant transgression of the biblical text. As the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* puts it, "Incidents and deeds only hinted at in scripture serve as kernels of dramatic accounts. Minor biblical figures become leading heroes... In aggadic history, the limitations of space and time are

transcended and anachronisms abound." Hence Eve is to be found quoting from Ecclesiastes and Isaiah, Jacob studies the Torah, and Isaac obeys the Ten Commandments. In freeing these figures from the restraining bonds of time, the aggadist can discover in and through them the meaning for his own generation and those to come. In this kind of literature both the 'whitewashing' of past biblical heroes can be found, and the harshest criticism of them.

## Conclusion

Midrashic interpretation is not to do with the kind of exposition most familiar in the western Christian tradition, which works on a notion of progress towards a 'correct' interpretive goal. Both text and interpretation are perceived as being fluid, and the whole dialogue between the two is what constitutes 'authoritative interpretation', because it is a dialogue initiated by God on Sinai. No one interpretation can be separated from any other, nor is interpretation possible if the reader tries to remain outside, or uninvolved with, the text. The latter point may seem to be stating the obvious, but the desire in the western tradition for what Bruns describes as "an uncontested grasp of the text" reflects a concept of interpretation which tries to limit the dialogue, to 'conquer' the text and move beyond it to something that transcends textuality. Adherents of this latter approach might be surprised to find in rabbinic texts that God is often pictured studying his own texts. Even more of a surprise is the following startling passage quoted by Susan Handelman, who shall have the final word on the subject of the way in which midrash reflects the understanding that revelation is ongoing in the process of interpretation. In the rabbinic debate in question, although Rabbi Eliezer has his argument backed up by manifestations of the reversal of the laws of nature, his opponents still do not agree with him. Finally he calls on Heaven, and a heavenly voice affirms that he is in agreement with Torah. Yet even this



is not enough:

But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: "It is not in heaven." What did he mean by this? Said R. Jeremiah: That the Torah had already been given at Mt. Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because Thou hast long since written in the Torah at Mt. Sinai, *After the majority must one incline.*

R. Nathan met Elijah and asked him: What did the Holy One, Blessed be He, do in that hour? - He laughed, he replied, saying, "My sons have defeated Me, My sons have defeated Me."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *Bava Metzia* 59a, 59b; in Handelsmann, *op. cit*

## Chapter Three:

### *GOD KNOWS*

by Joseph Heller

The scene opens with a king who is old, cold, and forlorn; and yet, whatever anyone might be tempted to think, this aged king is in many ways as powerful and intense a character as he ever has been. The scene is viewed through David's eyes: first the young woman lying beside him; next the wife who enters the room to try and secure her future, and then departs, David's reflections upon whom offers glimpses of the world beyond his deathbed, of scenes played out over a long and vibrant life. The present environment however, is one of a hushed palace; of servants tip-toeing through their duties; of a city stilled, waiting for death; of family members and retainers waiting for a decision.

This is the opening of *God Knows*. David lies on his deathbed looking back over his life, reconsidering, reliving, still seeking sense in things that went wrong, still seeking to justify - to himself as much as to anyone else - his actions. David's is the voice of supreme self-confidence, unbound by constraints of time or history, and of crushing honesty. Yet absolute confidence in God's presence and favour has been replaced by a struggle which involves both the rejection of and the seeking for that presence.

David offers a commentary on his story as told in the Bible - concerned to point out that his is the best story, and to shatter any misleading images one might have of him. No one must think that David was a pious bore, as he is depicted in the book of Chronicles. David's story is much more than that. David has "poetry and passion... wars, ecstatic religious experiences, obscene dances, ghosts, murders, hair-raising escapes and exciting

chase scenes.”<sup>50</sup> Such a story might be the stuff of airport blockbusters, though most of them don’t wrestle with God: “I’ve got a love story and a sex story, with the same woman no less, and both are great, and I’ve got this ongoing, open-ended Mexican standoff with God, even though he might now be dead.”<sup>51</sup>

Yet David’s narrative is much more than his own story. It is a commentary on the whole Jewish religious tradition, with a particular emphasis on the question of what it means to be Jewish in the twentieth century - Heller’s own context. He was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1923. His experience as a bombardier during the Second World War contributed to his pacifism and lack of respect for those involved in wielding political power so famously reflected in *Catch-22*<sup>52</sup>. In *God Knows* we find that familiarity with the subsequent history of his kingdom, indeed with events in the history of the Jewish people right up to the late twentieth century, appears to be for David something entirely natural. He is particularly concerned about the way in which both he and the Jewish tradition more generally have been portrayed in music, literature and art. His concern about misrepresentation is evident on his comment on the statue of him by Michelangelo:

“... and that’s another thing that pisses me off about that stupid statue of Michelangelo’s in Florence that’s supposed to be me: he’s got me beardless, clean-shaven, without a hair on my face - and not only that, he’s got me standing there in public stark naked, with that uncircumcised prick!...

No, what we have from Michelangelo, I’m afraid, is not David from Bethlehem in Judah but a Florentine fag’s idea of what a handsome Israelite youth might look like if he were a naked Greek catamite...”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Heller, Joseph *God Knows* (London: Black Swan, 1985) ch. 1, p. 11. Unless the context indicates otherwise, all ‘*op. cit.*’ references in this chapter relate to this novel.

<sup>51</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 1, p. 14

<sup>52</sup> Heller, Joseph *Catch-22* [1961] London: Vintage, 1994

<sup>53</sup> *God Knows*. ch. 7, p. 227

As he looks back, his unashamed relishing of his early success and the adulation he received is now and again dealt a blow by references to a broken relationship with God. In observing that Saul too had been subjected by God to a 'vast and terrible metaphysical silence' that only someone as truly almighty and indispensable as the Lord has power to inflict, he speaks from personal experience; "I no longer talk to Him, and He no longer talks to me."<sup>54</sup> In fact, despite the vigour which is evident in many of David's reminiscences, he speaks from a moment of emptiness. Hating God and hating life he waits for death, fully aware of the court around him also waiting: for his word on the future.

The moment of emptiness then, is also a moment of power for David - he still claims to have power to shape the future of what is still, technically, his kingdom. He claims to have the power to bring his story to an end, as he acknowledges at the end of the first chapter. This time before death being one of both emptiness and power exemplifies an ambiguity, or apparent contradiction, that is characteristic of the novel as a whole, although it is particularly true of David's relationship with God. He claims to have turned his back on God, he suggests that God might even be dead; yet at the same time cannot shake him off, and ultimately wants him back. This ambiguity is a characteristic which illustrates a disregard for the consistency that is so often sought for in biblical interpretation - to the extent that interpretation of a text is forced to fit a preconceived theological framework. It is this that makes the novel so relevant a commentary in a post-modern culture, bringing the concerns of such a culture to bear on the biblical text. David's is the voice of a late twentieth century Jew, speaking in a world where there is no universal recognition of a meta-narrative that makes sense of human existence. There is no consensus on whether or not God exists - for many people it is not even a relevant question. The Bible is a book which belongs within a community of faith, and for those who

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<sup>54</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 1, p. 13

do not belong has no bearing on what lies outside that community. The prevailing mood is one of the privatization of religion and of individualism, with no sense that if God is real then he is real for everyone, whether or not he is acknowledged. In *God Knows*, David's story is not just that of his own life, or of the Jewish tradition, but also of the ongoing place of that tradition in human life now. One of the key issues for this study is the question of how the novel relates to the biblical text. This will be explored by looking first at the way in which David tells his own story, then at the way in which the Jewish religious tradition is portrayed in the novel.

### David's story

*God Knows* is not an easy novel to write about. In the manner of both memory and midrash, David's narrative appears to jump from one event to another, one biblical passage to another, from his present to past and back again, taking in something of the future along the way. Familiarity with the biblical account of David's story frequently begins and ends in childhood with the story of his encounter with the Philistine 'giant' Goliath. If anything more is known of David, it is probably his adultery with and subsequent marriage to Bathsheba. These events, he admits in chapter two of *God Knows*, were just about the biggest mistakes he made. Such a claim immediately undermines the biblical perception of who David was. There, the impression is of a young man chosen and anointed by God, who struggles - with God on his side - to survive the onslaught from the jealous and failing King Saul, in order to become king himself as God's faithful servant. His subsequent sins, such as his adultery with Bathsheba and 'disposal' of her husband Uriah, and the numbering of the people, are recognised and grieved over. David appears to remain devout. His last words as they appear in 2 Samuel 23 are full of the conviction of intimacy with God, and convey the impression of one approaching death in the confidence of

a life well-lived and ordered by God. This however sits uneasily with the first two chapters of 1 Kings, upon which the narrative of *God Knows* hinges. There David lies on his deathbed, and Abishag the Shunammite is brought to try and keep him warm. David is silent, whilst the picture emerges of rival bids for the throne being enacted beyond the walls of the King's immediate surroundings. He speaks only when necessary, to announce that Solomon shall succeed him as king, and to give him a few words of instruction. He is a mainly silent figure, devoid of character; the action is moving on, and he is about to be left behind. *God Knows* fills the silence: rather than looking from a distance at a dying king and waiting for his final word regarding the succession, the reader of *God Knows* looks upon the scene with David's eyes, exposed to a full-blooded and iconoclastic retelling of his story.

The first mention of David in the biblical narrative is the occasion of his anointing by Samuel, and subsequent entry into the service of Saul as his armour bearer and musician. Although uneasy about the people's demand for a king, Samuel is instrumental in the establishment of Saul, and grieves over his rejection by God. Heller exploits this situation in *God Knows*, such that there is no love lost between David and Samuel, with David aware that Saul was always Samuel's favourite. A further twist to this situation is that in *God Knows* David acknowledges his love of Saul, counting him as one of his three father figures (the other two being Jesse and God). He plays down his friendship with Saul's son Jonathan, suggesting that in his view Jonathan was a bit over the top, and clearly indicating that his love was more for the father than the son. His sympathies rest with Saul against Samuel, whom he describes as a "raging holy man"<sup>55</sup> and "the saturnine figure who was benefactor to both of us sequentially."<sup>56</sup> David's first impressions of Samuel prevail in their relationship. He arrives at Jesse's house in

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<sup>55</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 2, p. 22

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*

Bethlehem with a heifer, thus cloaking his mission to anoint a successor to Saul with an apparent intention simply to offer a sacrifice. He is disgruntled by the fact that God instructs him to pass over each of David's brothers in turn. When David appears, the prophet he finds is a tall, thin, gloomy man with sunken dark eyes, fervid and sad. His manner is arbitrary and short-tempered, his mission spoken tonelessly. When he speaks, it is initially in language reminiscent of the Authorized Version of the Bible:

"The Lord hath repented Himself of having chosen Saul King... for he hath not always followed all His words and performed His commandments. This day He hath rent the kingdom from Saul and given it to a neighbour who is better than he and who is more after His own heart. That neighbour is you."<sup>57</sup>

When questioned by David about what this means, the language slips between this and more natural colloquial speech:

"'It means,' came the tart retort, 'that you and everyone else always have to do whatever I and the Lord command. For the Lord and I are more powerful than anything on earth... Saul has not always obeyed every command. Therefore we have rejected Saul and chosen thee.'<sup>58</sup>

The issues of power, truth and intimacy with God are themes throughout the novel as a whole, but are particularly focused on the person of Samuel. In chapter seven, when David recalls his flight from Saul, these issues dominate his conversation with Samuel. Having been reminded by David that he is both a prophet and a Judge, Samuel laments the fact that he used to be the most powerful man in Israel until he listened to God and made Saul king. In the books of Samuel it is always understood that this power was derived directly from God, and rested upon intimacy with God - Samuel after all is the chosen servant of God,

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<sup>57</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 2, p. 47-8

<sup>58</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 2, p. 48

dedicated to him from birth and first addressed by him whilst he was still a child serving in the temple at Shiloh under Eli. Even so, there is an ambivalence about his relationship with God that Heller exploits: he exists at the turning point between the rule of the Judges and that of the king. In *God Knows* he clearly feels that he would have been better off doing his own thing and not listening to God - the one who makes mistakes. For Samuel, God is a being to be wrestled with or even rejected, but there is no question over whether or not God exists. When Samuel lets slip that God no longer talks to him, David tentatively suggests that God might be dead. Samuel's response is unequivocal: "If He's God, he can't be dead, stupid," Samuel instructed me. 'If He's dead, He can't be God. It's someone else. Enough of your foolishness.'"<sup>59</sup> Finally, when David points out that Samuel could give Saul a second chance and make him feel good for a while, Samuel's response indicates a strong sense of identity with God:

"Samuel spoke with wicked relish. 'Let him twist slowly,' he said, his eyes smouldering, 'slowly in the wind.'

For the moment I was speechless. 'I thought you loved Saul,' I finally exclaimed. 'You said that you and God had pity and compassion for him and that you wanted to be merciful toward him.'

'That's the way we show it.'"<sup>60</sup>

This sense of identity between Samuel and God is reflected in David's comment on what was the beginning of the end for Saul: Samuel departed from Saul, "taking God with him."<sup>61</sup>

The other major prophetic figure who features in *God Knows* is Nathan. He is depicted in no more favourable a light than Samuel. In fact, whereas there remains something slightly awe-inspiring about Samuel, despite the fact that God apparently no

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<sup>59</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 7, p. 211

<sup>60</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 7, p. 212

<sup>61</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 6, p. 194



longer talks to him either, Nathan is portrayed as a whining, crawling, weedy specimen of humanity - to say nothing of him being long-winded: "Compared to Nathan, Polonius was as silent as the Sphinx."<sup>62</sup> David loathes Nathan:

"The good Lord hasn't got a Chinaman's chance of surviving with His reputation intact if He leaves it to toadies like Nathan... God talks to Nathan, Nathan says, but He doesn't always talk sense, if you're going to believe what Nathan tells you He talks about."<sup>63</sup>

David's loathing of Nathan has much to do with the death of the baby, the child of his adultery with Bathsheba. The declaration of God's condemnation on that occasion and the consequences of David's sin is perceived by David as being delivered with malicious enjoyment on Nathan's part - perhaps reflecting his perception of the God whom Nathan represents. It is a turning point in David's relationship with God. Unable to see how God can possibly kill an innocent baby in order to punish the sin which David does recognise, he rejects God in the moment when the baby dies.

This moment is something of a watershed for David. Up to that time, he was fighting hard for his life and for a kingdom. Moments of success satisfy his ego - in *God Knows* he relishes his successes and the adulation he received - and the moments of failure are filled with the struggle to survive. Even after becoming established in Hebron, it is another seven years before he captures Jerusalem and is established as king over the whole nation. The beginning of 2 Samuel 11 conveys the sense that the stillness following his success is the point at which things begin to take a downward turn for David: "In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem." This being the time when kings go to battle, why was David not

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<sup>62</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 2, p. 25

<sup>63</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 8, p. 259

with Joab? This hint of things not being as they ought to be is enhanced in *God Knows*. Up to that point David's relationship with God was amicable.

"Until He lifted my sin from me and placed it on my baby, God and I were as friendly as anyone could imagine. I inquired for guidance whenever I wished to. He could always be counted on to respond. Our talks were sociable and precise. No words were wasted.... Without fail, the answers I received from Him were those I wanted most to hear..."<sup>64</sup>

Although it seemed to David that Saul was treated unfairly by God and Samuel, most of his more bitter reflections about God stem from the time after the baby died. Up to that point, David recalls that he was at ease with himself and with God. After that, recollections of Samuel and the presence of Nathan provide a focus for David's questioning of God's character. They are the figures who most closely represent an idea of the religious establishment. In contrast is Bathsheba, whom Heller brings to life in an extravagant manner. There are two points in the biblical narrative that are significant in this respect. Firstly there is the question which biblical commentators have struggled with in the past: can the blame for the adultery and the murder of Uriah be placed on Bathsheba, rather than on God's chosen and anointed king? What was she doing bathing on the roof in full view of the palace of the king? Secondly, in the first two chapters of 1 Kings, Bathsheba appears as a more prominent figure in terms of being the mother of Solomon. This has implications for Heller's portrayal of him too. After David's death it is to Bathsheba that Adonijah first appeals for mercy.

In *God Knows*, Bathsheba has an air of self-sufficiency that is lost only temporarily in the moments before David finally declares Solomon to be his successor. Most of the time, as David points out in the opening paragraphs of the novel, she knows what she wants and gets it. She has a lot to teach David about sex, having learned much of

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<sup>64</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 2, p. 27

what she knows from her Canaanite girlfriends, most of whom appear to have been harlots. She had admired David from the moment when she saw him dancing before the Lord when the Ark of the Covenant was brought into Jerusalem - the occasion when Michal so despised him for exposing himself in the sight of everyone present. Typically, what Michal despises, Bathsheba desires. From that moment she took her baths on the roof of her house at a time when she knew David would be likely to see her. She moves into the palace as David's wife after Uriah's death, refusing to remain as a mistress or to be a concubine. She insists on having an alabaster bathtub, and her own apartment with a studio. Apart from sex, she engaged in various creative ventures including dyeing her hair and inventing underwear. She has a go at making up psalms and proverbs, though with little encouragement from David.

"'The Lord is my shepherd,' I had scoffed when she showed me her first effort. 'Are you crazy? How fantastic can you get? That's crap, Bathsheba, pure crap. Where's your sense of metaphor? You're turning God into a labourer and your audience into animals. That's practically blasphemy....'"<sup>65</sup>

It is only later, following a conversation with Abigail in which she declines the offer of an alabaster bathtub declaring that her cup runneth over, that he finds phrases beginning to fall into place in his own mind, and he has to acknowledge "that perhaps the bud of a good idea might be found in the presumptuous ramblings of my spouse Bathsheba."<sup>66</sup> Since then, he has been thankful that Bathsheba is too scatterbrained to remember their conversation about the Lord and shepherds.

Although one of Bathsheba's main interests is sex, David observes ruefully from

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<sup>65</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 10, p. 348

<sup>66</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 10, p. 349

his deathbed that "She lost her lust when she found her vocations."<sup>67</sup> The first of these was to be queen; the second, to be queen mother. He insists throughout that she can't be queen because they don't have them. Bathsheba however carries on regardless in her belief that she is a queen. Earlier, David had commented that for her, "all show of interest on behalf of other people is an effort of the will that she is able to exert for about a minute and a half."<sup>68</sup> She informs Abishag that she will soon be the mother of a king, a claim that to David is both audacious and ridiculous in equal measure. It provides one of the points of dramatic tension in the novel: David's narrative is confident, his conviction that Solomon is stupid and will never be king is assured. He portrays Bathsheba as self-satisfied, self-interested, and living in a world dominated by her own rather foolish ideas - one of which is that Solomon shall be king. This, to David, is an example of Bathsheba's naivety; yet whilst listening to David's voice, the reader is at the same time all too aware that Bathsheba speaks of what will come to pass, in the same way that her initial efforts at writing psalms, although ridiculed by David, resulted in one of the best-known psalms of the Hebrew Bible.

In the same way that Heller undermines certain key features of the biblical portrayal of David, so the first mention of Solomon in *God Knows* is related to his renowned wisdom. Referring to the dispute over the baby (1 Kings 3.16-28) David comments:

"...he was dead serious when he proposed cutting the baby in half, that putz. I swear to God. The dumb son of a bitch was trying to be fair, not shrewd."<sup>69</sup>

Solomon's reputation for wisdom is in fact all derived from David himself. Commenting on 1 Kings, he points out that

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<sup>67</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 1, p. 20

<sup>68</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 2, p. 29

<sup>69</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 1, p. 19

"Solomon may have more space, but is there anything in his whole life to compare with any portion of mine? The only smart line he ever spoke - the one directing Benaiah to kill Joab in the tabernacle - he got from me. All the good ones in Proverbs are mine, and so are the best in the Song of Solomon. Study my last charges. They're marvellous, witty, dramatic, climactic."<sup>70</sup>

David has no love for his son, seeing him as a "penny-pinching imbecile"<sup>71</sup> who writes down on a clay tablet everything his father says: "He rarely smiles and never laughs. He has the pinched, drab soul of a landlord with diversified stingy investments who interprets every piddling reverse as a catastrophe uniquely his own."<sup>72</sup> Solomon is notorious for his love of foreign women; he goes off on mysterious forays into foreign countries, returning laden with gold and precious stones. The chapters of 1 Kings given over to Solomon are full of accounts of his acquisition of riches, and the building of the Temple and his palace. The darker side of this is the account of forced labour and a heavy tax on his people in order to sustain the riches of his lifestyle, culminating in chapter 11 in the fact that under the influence of his seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines his heart was turned after other gods. There too is the mention of his building a navy - an idea ridiculed by David throughout *God Knows* - and in addition to precious stones, his acquisition of peacocks and apes, which needless to say, in the novel also meets with David's ridicule. Although he finds it hard to believe that Solomon could be so stupid as to offer worship to foreign gods, he is well aware of the consequences - the ruin of the kingdom that he, David, has worked so hard to build up. Reading of Solomon's aspirations as he recounts them to his father in *God Knows* is an experience of being slowly suffocated

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<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 4, p. 115

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*

with decadence. After itemizing what he thinks his household will consume each day, David's comment is that this seems rather a lot. Reversing the well-known proverb, Solomon's response is that he would rather waste than want, but David persists in asking how his son will deal with the people supplying all these provisions who do not actually have enough bread for themselves:

"'Let them eat cake,' he said calmly. 'Man does not live by bread alone.'

'That is spoken,' I comment acidly, 'with the wisdom of Solomon.'<sup>73</sup>

The juxtaposition of those two phrases spoken by Solomon brings into sharp focus the tension between what is found in parts of the biblical text and what is sometimes sought for in terms of a theologically comfortable or consistent reading of the text. What Solomon describes here - and indeed, what is described in 1 Kings - can quite legitimately be compared with the French court at the time of Marie-Antoinette: a heavily taxed people being forced to maintain the decadent life-style of the few who are in power, when the people themselves do not even have the most basic things to eat; on top of which is expressed an apparent total lack of comprehension of the situation by those imposing the taxes. Yet as far as Solomon is concerned, in both the Jewish and Christian traditions he is renowned for his wisdom and - perhaps by extension - his godliness. This is highlighted by the words of Jesus in the gospels: "Man does not live by bread alone" (Matthew 4.4). There however, Jesus continues, "but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." The context is Jesus' resistance of the challenge by Satan to prove that he is the Son of God by turning stones into bread. The saying is perverted in Solomon's use of it in the novel, as Solomon appears to be planning precisely the sort of thing that Jesus was resisting throughout the three temptations; that is, a demonstration of his power and authority by amassing earthly wealth. Heavy taxation and forced labour do not sit comfortably with the idea of Solomon being particularly loved and blessed by God. The question is inevitably

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<sup>73</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 9, p. 315

raised of what kind of God is it who appears to condone such a course of action in government. Heller does not answer this question, but the way in which he portrays both David and Solomon enhances the sense of the kingdom beginning to rot once David is dead - a rot that set in perhaps when David first set eyes on Bathsheba, or that was implicit in his one admitted weakness: his indulgence towards his sons. Solomon is an exception to that. Portrayed as bland, stupid and acquisitive, David loathes him. In contrast, David is a far more likeable figure: passionate not only in his sexual relationships, but also in his zeal for life and in his struggle with God. In addition, it is David and not Solomon who displays wisdom. Reflecting on the early days of his love for Bathsheba when he was not with Joab at the siege of Rabbah, he comments that "Something in man requires an enemy, something in mankind demands a hostile balance of power. Without one, things fall apart."<sup>74</sup> - as indeed they did.

One of the ways in which Heller enhances certain aspects of David's character is by David's reflections on his nephew Joab. In some ways David and Joab have been very close, yet Joab is in effect a foil to David, almost a kind of 'alter ego'. For forty years they have worked closely together in something of a love-hate relationship - a feeling heightened for David on his deathbed by recollections of Joab's role in maintaining David's position as king, and within that his role in the deaths of Abner, Amasa, and particularly of Absalom, David's beloved son. Joab's pragmatism, particularly in the latter case, highlights David's weakness: his indulgence towards his sons. Once the kingdom is secure, the seeds are sown for things to fall apart within David's own family. It is at that point that Joab is seen where David ought to be - as it has been pointed out above, the opening of 2 Samuel 11 clearly conveys a strong suggestion that David as king should have been preparing for battle, but it is Joab who goes to Rabbah whilst David remains in Jerusalem.

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<sup>74</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 9, p. 320

In *God Knows* David recalls that "Joab arrived on my doorstep on hearing the first cuckoo of spring and enthusiastically unveiled his plans for invading both Europe and Asia. I thought them far-fetched."<sup>75</sup> Instead, Joab has to settle for another siege of Rabbah, and David finds himself falling violently in love. Joab's characteristics are loyalty, pragmatism, independence, and an almost complete immunity from any kind of feeling - characteristics which have been both positive and negative in their effect on David. He has been consistently loyal to David throughout his reign, although David cannot understand why and suspects him of having been tempted briefly to side with Absalom. This loyalty is far from being blind adulation however, to the extent that Joab has more than once taken it upon himself to do something which he saw was necessary for the survival of king and kingdom, and yet which David would have forbidden had he been consulted. The prime example of this is Joab's role in the death of Absalom. With hindsight, David acknowledges how his indulgence towards Absalom blinded him from what his son was really up to. The ensuing battle was a battle David could not win - he wanted to lose neither his son nor his kingdom. He wanted to take part and yet was urged by his leaders to stay behind, and so he recalls sitting above the gates of the city waiting for news of the outcome. Joab's response to David's reaction at the news of Absalom's death illustrates his understanding of kingship. He knows objectively how to be king - that is, devoid of the humanity which is so clearly brought out in Heller's portrayal of David. Joab barges into David's chamber telling him to cut out the weeping and wailing, brutally pointing out that he was making his army ashamed of him:

"When will you learn to be a king? Have you forgotten you won a battle today, that you have a country to rule?"<sup>76</sup>

Asked by David why he didn't join Absalom's side, Joab replies that he knew Absalom

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<sup>75</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 9, p. 303

<sup>76</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 12, p. 420



would lose; but David pushes him further about his loyalties. Joab's objection to Absalom was that he had no respect for anyone but himself; that there was only room for one ruler. His reply to the question of who would be ruler in Jerusalem now clearly indicates that he sees in David a weakness which makes room for him to have power too:

"'You can be ruler,' said Joab. 'But I am the straw that stirs the drink. You can make the laws, as long as I am the one with the authority and strength to enforce them. Absalom would have wanted both - he had too much youthful energy - and then there would have been no need for laws.'"<sup>77</sup>

Joab is close to the king, close enough to be indispensable to David, and close enough not to want the crown for himself:

"'Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown,' Joab relied phlegmatically.

'Saul used to say that a lot.'

'That's one of the reasons I'm content to let you wear it,' said Joab, and smiled."<sup>78</sup>

Echoing the words of Henry IV<sup>79</sup>, Joab sees himself better off as he is, rather than potentially dodging javelins hurled in his direction by a troubled king.

David is passionate about women and sex, and knows what it is to love and be loved; Joab appears to have no experience or interest in any such thing. David is troubled by ageing, yet Joab appears not to have aged at all. David wrestles with God, for whom Joab seems to have no regard. For Joab, it seems as if God is an irrelevance. In discussing Absalom's banishment, David refers to God's laws, and Joab points out how they are broken all the time. Joab is free from any concern about God. In contrast, David feels that

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<sup>77</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 12, p. 421

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Shakespeare, *Henry IV - Part II*, Act 3, scene 1.

God is like a monkey on his back he can't shake off.

David's narrative through much of *God Knows* is energetic, racy, humorous and entertaining; yet it is not without its pathos. Some of the most poignant moments emerge in his description of what it is like to be old, closely tied to which are his feelings in old age about God. He looks back on the day of his victory over Goliath as the best day of his life, a day in which he was conscious of his Creator and exultant in the David God had created. Yet on his deathbed all of that feels so remote:

"Who could have thought back then that a king like me might someday find himself embarrassed by hemorrhoids and an enlarged prostate, or that one favoured with so hale and auspicious a beginning would eventually lapse almost daily into moldering spells of solitary depression and anxiety? Who needs it? Who can stand it?... How a person feels at the end of his life will tell you what he feels to have been the quality of it all. Who would have believed that a time might come when a man like me would regard the day of his death as better than the day of his birth?

Nothing fails like success."<sup>80</sup>

In those early years of success, David and God got on well, although there is a strong suggestion in the novel - not quite acknowledged by David - that when he talked to God he was simply talking to himself, always receiving the answers he most wanted to hear. It is only after the death of the baby born of his adultery with Bathsheba that a slightly fuller picture of God as a character in David's narrative emerges. God is a sneak, a murderer, an enemy. Even so, David's rejection of God is not total. He is still bothered by a sense of God's presence; he desires not to have to acknowledge him, and yet cannot 'shake him off'. Recalling that he had always been much closer to God than anyone else in his time, he adds:

"And I feel I still am, even though I think He may not be here anymore,

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<sup>80</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 4, p. 104-5

and will not lower myself to speak to Him again until He eats crow like a man and apologises like a decent human being for what He did to my dead baby.”<sup>81</sup>

In contrast to the easy relationship of his youth, when it almost seemed as if talking to God was talking to himself, it is now in his moments of deepest anguish that David feels closest to God:

“That’s when I know He is closing in again, and I yearn to call out to Him what I have longed to say before, to address my Almighty God with those words of Ahab to Elijah in the vineyard of Naboth, ‘Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?’”<sup>82</sup>

The ambivalence of David’s attitude to God is consistent throughout the book, exemplified in the above remark. The use of ‘closing in’ suggests a feeling of being hunted, yet the word ‘yearn’ is more often associated with the feelings of a lover for the beloved. Perhaps his earlier observation on the political sphere about something in man requiring an enemy is also applicable to his own inner world. Approaching death, David recalls with envy the serenity of Barzillai the Gileadite in his old age. Within David, there is still a battle going on, or even, at the last, a sense of things falling apart. David makes his decision in favour of Solomon, and when all is resolved there, everyone except Abishag withdraws, taking the kingdom with them. David, unhappy and not at peace, thinks of God, and of Saul. He recalls that Saul’s was the saddest face he’d ever seen - until Abishag held up a mirror to his own just a few moments earlier. He sees a vision of himself as a young man, singing to soothe the troubled spirit of the king. The moment of happiness which that evokes shatters as he finds himself reaching for a javelin to hurl at the young man’s head. Whether in anguish or companionship, his isolation highlights that there is only one for whom David longs: “I

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<sup>81</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 8, p. 258-9

<sup>82</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 12, p. 432

want my God back; and they send me a girl."<sup>83</sup>

## God and religion

David's attitude to God is conveyed in his comments on other characters in the tradition as well as on his own experience. He delights in Sarah, whom he describes as "our first Jewish mother, of whom I am so fond and proud."<sup>84</sup> - a delight based mainly on the fact that Sarah laughed and then lied to God. Recalling the news that the aged Sarah would bear a son, David reflects that Abraham and Sarah were the only people he knew of to get a laugh out of a conversation with God. God is most frequently portrayed as humourless and inscrutable; an authoritarian manager who does not expect to be questioned about his actions, and who acts as if he is incapable of being wrong.

"God does have this self-serving habit of putting all blame for his own mistakes upon other people, doesn't he? He picks someone arbitrarily, unbidden, right out of the blue, so to speak, and levies upon him tasks of monumental difficulty for which we don't always measure up in every particular, and then charges us for His error in selecting imperfectly.

He tends to forget we are no more infallible than He is."<sup>85</sup>

Any notion of election is totally dismissed in this comment on the arbitrary nature of God's 'choices'. Similarly, far from being infallible David depicts God as a slightly larger-than-life human being who tends to throw his weight about in picking other people to do his work for him. The choice of Abraham is acknowledged to have been a good one, though David sees it as guess-work on God's part. Saul he describes as "a grave disappointment" to God; but it is Moses who has David's sympathy as one who felt the force of God's furious

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<sup>83</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 14, p. 447

<sup>84</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 2, p. 70

<sup>85</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 2, p. 59

ill-humour. There at the burning bush Moses reasonably asks 'Why me?', explaining that he has a stammer.

"The anger of God was kindled against Moses right then and there by the implication that He perhaps had erred and gotten the wrong party and that the force that could lay the foundations of the earth and draw out leviathan with a hook might be deterred by something so trivial as a minor speech impediment."<sup>86</sup>

In his subsequent dealing with Moses God refutes any suggestion that he is supposed to be kind or good or make sense - or at least, any suggestion that those qualities should be manifested in particular ways. In his recollection of his ancestors, David returns again and again to his own situation, frequently referring to his relationship with God in the context of his baby's death. On that occasion he prayed and fasted in the hope that God might change his mind.

"I lacked the genius to sway Him that was congenital in Moses and Abraham. But Moses and Abraham were pious men who were devoted to him fully. And I was never pious or devoted. I'm not devoted to him now. God will have to make the first move if He wants to end this tension between us. I have my principles; and I too have a long memory."<sup>87</sup>

There is one further observation to be made concerning David's reflections on God, the adultery with Bathsheba, and the death of the baby, and that is to do with the rare occasions when David mentions the Devil. It stands out almost as an intrusion into the narrative, an anachronism in that the idea of the Devil in biblical literature developed after the time of David, and when he is mentioned in biblical texts the name Satan is used. In the book of Job for example he is the adversary, given permission to provoke but very much a lesser

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<sup>86</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 2, p. 30

<sup>87</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 2., p. 71

figure than God. Heller chooses to use 'Devil' and 'Mephistopheles', specifically suggesting a Faustian character. About half way through the novel David reflects on his first sight of Bathsheba, and the act which initiated "the imperceptible drift into the turbulent and depressing second half of my life", commenting as if as an afterthought, "I could always say that the Devil made me do it. The Devil always comes in handy that way, doesn't he?"<sup>88</sup> However, two chapters later this afterthought has become in David's memory the Devil's voice, urging his wavering conscience into throwing caution to the wind. Yet when in the last pages of the novel David has an imaginary conversation with God in which he blames the Devil, God replies that there is no such thing.

"The Garden of Eden?"

And He'd say unto me, 'That was a snake. You can look it up.'

The fault, I know, was not in my stars but in myself."<sup>89</sup>

In David's understanding of God there is no room for the devil. To David's mind God himself has some of the negative characteristics one might more readily associate with a portrayal of the devil. More than this however, David is too honest to use the idea of the devil as a convenient excuse for what has gone wrong. Admitting human fault, he can only go on wrestling with the inadequacies of both himself and of the presence that feels like a monkey on his back.

Throughout the novel it is evident that David is conscious of - though not restricted by - his Jewishness. Like Heller, David offers the observations of a late twentieth century secularized American Jew. His assessment of Moses' place in their history is naturally associated with the giving of the law, but always for David with a sense of both boredom and amazement that there can be so many laws. Piety and devotion he can see in such characters as Moses and Abraham, but not in himself, and there is no sense of the

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<sup>88</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 8, p. 244-5

<sup>89</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 12, p. 432

holy in his comments about God. Similarly, there is no suggestion concerning the laws that they may have anything to do with a holy way of living - they are simply the result of God laying down the law for reasons known only to himself. This attitude is reflected in one of David's comments on the promises God gave to Moses concerning the goodness of the land they would inherit:

"That's what He promised and that's all He gave us, along with a complicated set of restrictive dietary laws that have not made life easier.

To the goyim He gives bacon, sweet pork, juicy sirloin, and rare prime ribs of beef. To us He gives pastrami."<sup>90</sup>

David relishes the religious freedom he enjoyed before the development of the religious system of rabbis and synagogues, daily and weekly prayers to recite, and claims that at that time they could even forget to observe Passover if there was something more entertaining to do. For him the requirements were minimal:

"All I had to do was to bring a lamb to the altar of the priests every once in a while; they slaughtered it and I was finished."<sup>91</sup>

For David in *God Knows*, being Jewish is important in the way that it is for some contemporary Jews who do not see themselves as believers, yet observe certain rituals which are seen as important in maintaining a sense of Jewish identity. David's attitude to God fluctuates throughout the novel - whilst asserting that he no longer talks to him and that God might even be dead, he cannot let go of the possibility that God might in fact be as real as he seemed in David's youth. David nevertheless has some clear ideas about how God is expected to behave - ideas which are in keeping with the rest of the novel in their inconsistency. Reflecting on the relationship between Saul and Jonathan, and generally on fathers who want to destroy their sons, David is sure that if he were God he would sooner

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<sup>90</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 2, p. 33

<sup>91</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 5, p. 152

obliterate the world than allow one of his children to be killed in it:

"I would have given my own life to save my baby's, and even to spare Absalom's. But that may be because I am Jewish, and God is not."<sup>92</sup>

God does not behave in the way David would expect a Jewish father to behave. He later describes the death of the baby as "an act of God that was warped and inhuman."<sup>93</sup> However, having said that God is not Jewish, when he wants to be sure that it really is God's voice that Nathan hears, David asks Nathan what language God uses to address him in:

"'In Yiddish of course,' said Nathan. 'In what other language would a Jewish God speak?'

Had Nathan said Latin, I would have known he was fabricating."<sup>94</sup>

David's contentment with this response suggests acceptance of the idea that God is Jewish and specifically that he is not Christian. It also highlights yet again the fact that the novel is very much concerned with the issue of what it is to be Jewish in Heller's contemporary context. Another way in which awareness of this issue is maintained is by means of the endowment on several of the characters in the novel with an unselfconscious awareness of what lies in the future, trivial or otherwise. One of these characters is Joab, who in stressing the urgency of embarking on his plan to conquer the known earth informs David of what might happen if they delay:

"'The English are coming down from the trees,' he informed me as though menaced. 'The Germans are coming out of their caves. We have to act now... They'll invent democracy and degenerate into capitalism, fascism and communism... There could be concentration camps. There might even be Nazis. There'll be lots of goys. They might not like us. They'll take

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<sup>92</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 5, p. 125

<sup>93</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 10, p. 366

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*



our religion and forget where it came from.”<sup>95</sup>

This pointer to the events of the Holocaust simply rests as an observation, without further development - David's first concern on hearing the plans being to do with how Joab and his army will manage for kosher food. However, although this is one of very few references to the events surrounding the Holocaust, David's frequent references to the unjust death of his first baby by Bathsheba continually raises theological questions about the death of the innocent which are likewise raised by reflection on the events of the Holocaust. In a similar vein, the far less frequent mention of the Promised Land alerts the reader to the changing status of that particular geographical area right up to the present day. Political conflict centring on the country of Israel is hinted at but not developed upon. After recounting the events of the forty years in the wilderness, David recalls how Moses died on the brink of the land:

“Some Promised Land. The honey was there, but the milk we bought in with our goats. To the people of California, God gives a magnificent coastline, a movie industry, and Beverly Hills. To us He gives sand. To Cannes He gives a plush film festival. We get the PLO. Our winters are rainy, our summers hot. To people who didn't know how to wind a wristwatch He gives underground oceans of oil. To us He gives hernia, piles, and anti-Semitism.”<sup>96</sup>

Elsewhere David reflects that “Palestine is still a vigorous place of diverse and mutually enriching cultures.”<sup>97</sup> There is perhaps a suggestion that the diversity of Palestine is something to enjoy, and the drive for separation with its emphasis on the sacredness of the land set apart not something that can or should be maintained. That is as close as the novel comes to any comment on the modern state of Israel. Of Jerusalem itself David observes

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<sup>95</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 10, p. 330

<sup>96</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 2, p. 56

<sup>97</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 2, p. 58

that it was not sacred until he made it so by his presence. There is no mention of God's presence in this context, except in David's account of when he brought the Ark of the Covenant into the city. Yet what 'proved' the holiness of the ark was the death of Uzzah three months earlier upon touching the ark itself, even though with the best of intentions. David's second attempt to bring the ark into Jerusalem was successful, transforming the city of David into the city of God. He comments that "where the ark was, there was God. Where the ark is today, God knows."<sup>98</sup> Here again is a reminder of the uncertainty which constantly nags David: where is God today?

#### **'Of the making of books...'**

"Of the making of books there is no end..."<sup>99</sup> observes David, quoting the book of Ecclesiastes, the authorship of which tradition has assigned to Solomon. Yet as is quickly established in the early stages of the narrative, Solomon is capable of no more than laborious repetition and copying down of his father's words, often without understanding. It emerges that the tradition has done David an injustice, his literary endeavours being far more extensive than his audience might previously have thought. The narrative of *God Knows* is a seamless interplay of biblical and non-biblical literary texts, dissolving the distinction between them, with David as both originator and literary critic. Not only the Psalms, but also the wisdom of Proverbs and of Ecclesiastes stream from his lips. Throughout the novel, his descriptions of the ministrations of Abishag the Shunammite ensure that the text of the Song of Songs is never far away - referred to by David as "that well-known hymeneal song-cycle of mine mistakenly ascribed to my drab sluggard of a son Solomon."<sup>100</sup> The 'plot' of the Song is evident in Abishag's descriptions of her home

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<sup>98</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 10, p. 334

<sup>99</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 2, p. 21

<sup>100</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 3, p. 82

and background, but many of the more erotic phrases can be heard in David's recollection of his early days with Bathsheba. It is not only biblical texts that are in evidence however; from David come also lines recognised as being those of much later poets - amongst them Shelley and Byron, and Shakespeare. As a critic he dismisses Shelley's elegy on the death of Keats as "revolting, sentimental *dreck*."<sup>101</sup> Yet in warning Solomon against the amassing of material wealth David speaks much of Shelley's 'Ozymandias'. On another occasion when exasperated with Solomon and calling for Abishag, David observes that "She walks in beauty like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies"<sup>102</sup>, lines written by Byron. He is critical of Milton and Browning, although with the former he has some sympathy. Describing Samson as "that goon, that troglodyte, that hairy ape"<sup>103</sup>, David remarks that Milton was "a mile off the mark" with his portrayal in 'Samson Agonistes'. Yet whilst acknowledging that Milton was "frequently imperfect", David nevertheless rather magnanimously begs

"the same indulgence that I occasionally require for myself. He and I are poets, not historians or journalists, and his Samson Agonistes should be looked at in the same fair light as my famous elegy on the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, along with my psalms and proverbs and other outstanding works... Look to us for our beauty rather than factual accuracy."<sup>104</sup>

When describing the state of Saul before he received the benefit of David's soothing music however, David's concern is more for factual accuracy. He urges his audience not to listen to Browning's description of how it was, because Browning wasn't there - "he was in Italy sending home thoughts from abroad"<sup>105</sup> - whereas David was there, and can say with

<sup>101</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 5, p. 123

<sup>102</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 8, p. 237

<sup>103</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 2, p. 41

<sup>104</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 2, p. 42

<sup>105</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 5, p. 155

feeling exactly what it was like.

Whilst critical of some of his fellow poets, it is for William Shakespeare that David reserves his strongest expressions of antipathy. He is an

“overrated hack...whose chief genius lay in looting the best thoughts and lines from the works of Kit Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, Plutarch, Raphael Holinshed, and me. The idea for *King Lear*, of course, he got from me and Absalom. Are you going to tell me no? Who else but me was every inch a king? Do you think the unscrupulous plagiarist could have written *Macbeth* had he never heard of Saul?”<sup>106</sup>

It is often when David is most critical of Shakespeare that he is found speaking lines previously recognised as penned by ‘the bard of Avon’ - a title which gives rise to nothing but contempt in David: “Some bard... In my day, a bard like him would be rolling out pancake dough in the street of bakers in Jerusalem...”<sup>107</sup> Of Shakespeare’s plays David says that they consist of “stupid plots cluttered with warm bodies and filled with sound and fury and signifying nothing.”<sup>108</sup> - the latter phrase being Macbeth’s reflection on life as “a tale told by an idiot.”<sup>109</sup> He refers to *Hamlet* directly more than once, and indirectly by use of lines from the play several times. In describing his own feigned madness as a means of escape from the Philistines he claims:

“I did better than Hamlet with my madness. I saved my life. All he did was carry on precociously and divert attention from the fact that nothing much believable goes on in the play between the second act and the last.”<sup>110</sup>

Over the page however, after a night spent out of doors once more a fugitive, he observes

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<sup>106</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 2, p. 89

<sup>107</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 6, p. 188

<sup>108</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 6, p. 189

<sup>109</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 5, scene 5.

<sup>110</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 7, p. 226

"the morn in russet mantle clad creep o'er the hills"<sup>111</sup> - echoes of Horatio's words to the anxious watchmen after seeing the Ghost of Hamlet's father.<sup>112</sup> Regarding the succession and Bathsheba's insistence that Solomon will be king, David again uses language recognised as Hamlet's:

"But try telling anything complex to Bathsheba. 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends,' I explain altruistically, to cushion her for the disappointment I know is inevitable, 'rough-hew them how we will, and all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death.'"<sup>113</sup>

The use of Shakespeare in this apparently unconscious and entirely natural way serves in effect as 'proof' that it was indeed Shakespeare who copied from David, and not the other way around.

David's creativity does not stop with the language of poetry. It also emerges that he was a prolific composer. He comes to soothe Saul armed with his 'Ave Maria', his Moonlight Sonata, and his Goldberg Variations. In a burst of creativity which he describes as "one of those stimulated outpourings of constructive energy that are often the intoxicating concomitants of love"<sup>114</sup>, he organises the temple musicians and provides music for them to play and sing:

"...in hardly more than a fortnight, I composed my B-Minor Mass, Mozart's Requiem, and Handel's *Messiah*."<sup>115</sup>

It is clearly nonsensical for David, with his strong sense of Jewishness, to claim credit for some of the greatest musical works of the western Christian tradition. Yet this is part of the broader strategy underlying the whole narrative of *God Knows*. Just as David's

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<sup>111</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 7, p. 228

<sup>112</sup> Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Act 1, scene 1.

<sup>113</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 13, p. 433; see Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Act 5, scene 2.

<sup>114</sup> *op. cit.* ch. 10, p.349

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*

version of his story undermines the biblical text and the traditional interpretation of it, and as his use of major poets in the western tradition undermines their status, so the claim to have produced in a fortnight - and on a tide of creativity stimulated by his sexual involvement with Bathsheba - major works of Bach, Mozart and Handel, diminishes the status of those works and dismisses their religious significance.

This audacious creativity of David, and his open hostility to Shakespeare, can perhaps be understood in terms of the desire to master death, to ensure that he is remembered in some way, that something will bear his name. The 'city of David' has become the 'city of God'; the 'kingdom of David' he sees as not surviving the rule of the son he loathes; and what is more, there is not a single book in the Bible which is named after him - something he feels acutely especially when recalling that Samuel has two books bearing his name, yet doesn't even feature in the second which in fact is all about David himself. His antipathy towards Shakespeare might be attributed to the fact that despite his prolific output, David is never chosen as a subject for his plays. What is more, given David's sense of Jewishness, he cannot be expected to applaud his adversary's far from complimentary portrayal of the Jew Shylock.

## Conclusion

Andrew Marvell remarks that Milton, in 'Paradise Lost',

"Draws the devout, deterring the profane.

And things divine thou treat'st of in such state

As them preserves, and thee, inviolate."<sup>116</sup>

He is unlikely to have said the same of Heller with regard to *God Knows*. A superficial reading of the novel may well evoke in the devout shock or horror at what appears to be a lack of proper respect shown to the sacred text. Marvell, no doubt, would have considered

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<sup>116</sup> Marvell, "On Mr. Milton's Paradise Lost"

both Heller and the biblical text to be violated by the enterprise of producing *God Knows*. Such a response in part reflects a concern which David evidently shares in the novel: that is, the fear of misrepresentation, a fear of the truth being perverted. Yet although the humour of the novel may seem frequently to be irreverent, it is far more profound than the possible superficial response outlined above would acknowledge.

The question of whether or not it is appropriate to look at such texts as *God Knows* as a modern midrash on the biblical text will be considered in the light of discussion of both the texts in this study. By way of conclusion to this chapter some preliminary reflections are offered on the way in which *God Knows* relates to the biblical narrative of David.

The narrative of *God Knows* hinges on the first two chapters of 1 Kings. Heller opens his novel with the scene as set at the beginning of 1 Kings chapter 1. Outside the palace walls Adonijah makes lavish preparations for his own claim to the throne to be realised; within the palace Nathan encourages Bathsheba to claim the crown for Solomon, who himself apparently has no part in the action, remaining unseen and silent until he is actually anointed as king. At the still centre of all this activity lies the aged king, old and cold, unable to feel any warmth even in response to the ministrations of Abishag the Shunammite. In the biblical narrative David has receded. He still has power to make a declaration concerning his successor, but is pushed into doing so by the schemes of Nathan. He summons Bathsheba, Nathan, Zadok and Benaiah, giving them instructions concerning Solomon. The action however has shifted beyond the walls of his bedchamber; the focus has gone from him. His final speech to Solomon is formal and wooden in delivery, displaying little of the vigour or passion seen in narratives of his youth. Having said that however, there are moments in this narrative which invite recollection of David's earlier years.

The fact the the biblical writer remarks on his lack of sexual potency even with the enticing Abishag, suggests a contrast with his previous sexual exploits. This also leads to reflection on his relationship with Bathsheba - had he really promised her that Solomon would succeed him? The writer of 1 Kings assumes that readers will be familiar with the books of Samuel, and the final speech of David turns the reader back to the narrative of his earlier life. He refers Solomon to the law of Moses, the formality of which begs questions concerning David's own religious practices. The references to Joab, Barzillai the Gileadite and Shimei suggest the past events are vividly present in David's current concerns. He has to leave it to Solomon to avenge or reward accordingly, to perform what is now beyond David's power.

In terms of the way in which the story is told, there are two particular points to be noted regarding *God Knows*. The first has already been mentioned: the inconsistency in the way the story is told, with David moving from one event to another without any apparent concern for chronology. That remains true throughout the book, although the broad movement of the narrative chapter by chapter does proceed in chronological order. The second point is that David himself is the narrator. The events described are seen only through his eyes. He is depicted in this way as a sympathetic character, which encourages the reader to accept the viewpoint he gives, re-reading the biblical narrative in the light of that. The novel relies on the biblical narrative as an existing classic text which it either supports or subverts, playing off one part against another. David claims in the novel to have been ruddy and good-looking in his youth , as in the biblical narrative. His sympathy for and understanding of Saul for example, and his honesty about his feelings concerning other characters, incline the reader to trust what he says about himself - and therefore what he says about other characters too, such as Samuel, Bathsheba and Solomon, where there is a radical departure from the impression gained from reading the



biblical text.

To read *God Knows* without knowledge of the Old Testament text would be impossible. The humour and power of the narrative in the novel relies both on its closeness to the biblical text and on the marked contrasts with the way the story is told. The sense that David is putting the record straight has no impetus if there is no awareness of what has already been written about him. Is *God Knows* then simply an outrageous parody of the biblical narrative, or is it more subtle than that? Many of the themes that emerge in the novel have been considered above: the issue of Jewishness, of representation, of loss, and the presence/absence of God. Punctuating the book at regular intervals is the reminder that David has lost his baby and cannot forgive God. There are echoes in these themes of the words of Elie Wiesel in *Night*. On the occasion of *Rosh Hashanah* (the Jewish new year) following the hanging of the child which everyone in the camp had been forced to witness, Wiesel finds himself no longer able to plead with God over his sins. Incapable of lamentation he writes:

"I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes were open and I was alone - terribly alone in a world without God and without man. Without love or mercy. I had ceased to be anything but ashes, yet I felt myself to be stronger than the Almighty, to whom my life had been tied for so long. I stood amid that praying congregation, observing it like a stranger."<sup>117</sup>

*God Knows* cannot be summarized in terms of a single theme, but the loss of the baby and subsequent undermining of faith in God underlies the whole of David's narrative, shedding light on what preceded and what followed it.

It was stated early in this chapter that in *God Knows* David offers a commentary on his story as told in the Bible. Clearly *God Knows* is not a conventional commentary on a biblical text; it does not offer a verse by verse analysis, nor does it provide additional

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<sup>117</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Night*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981, p. 79

information which may be perceived as illuminating the text for contemporary readers. The aim of a commentary is to interpret, to shed light on a text in order to enrich the understanding of the reader, yet what is often lacking is an awareness of the fact that readers brings to the text the concerns of their contemporary context. In her Introduction to *The Book and the Text*<sup>118</sup>, Regina Schwartz points out that the distinction formerly made in interpretation between the biblical and non-biblical worlds - whereby one was given priority - has now broken down, such that both categories have become obsolete. What has come to the fore is a renewed interest in ideology and interpretation, and a return to discussions about the ground of meaning, which as Schwartz notes, was of great concern in early theological debate<sup>119</sup>. The foundations of the metaphysical framework which sustained Christian theology for centuries are now, at best, shaky; some would say they collapsed long ago. This collapse heralded the rejection by many of the meta-narratives which have hitherto made sense of human life. It is this post-modern world, in which there is nothing to replace the certainties of past conviction, which is reflected in the pages of *God Knows*. Heller, unlike those in the hermeneutical traditions discussed in the previous chapters, does not write with an explicitly theological purpose. Nonetheless he can be seen in some respects as standing in continuity with both the midrashic tradition and the classical 'western' tradition of interpretation.

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<sup>118</sup> Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990

<sup>119</sup> *op. cit.* cf p. 4f, p. 11f

**Chapter Four:**  
**BATHSHEBA**  
**by Torgny Lindgren**

There could not be much greater a contrast between two novels based on the same biblical narrative than there is between *God Knows* and *Bathsheba*. Lindgren's context is very different from Heller's: born in 1934, his work is not so widely known outside his native Sweden, although with this novel he won the French *Prix Femina* in 1986. The two books explore similar themes, not least a questioning of the nature of God. The Christian tradition recognises that the nature of God may at times be problematic, and the midrashic tradition pushes this a little further, being willing at times to say that we are capable of misunderstanding and therefore misrepresenting God; but within the biblical text itself the nature of God is never questioned. Where *God Knows* is outrageous, comic and excessive, Lindgren's novel is dark and sombre, the writing precise and often stark. Within the first two pages the tone is set for all that follows. Shaphan and King David stand together on the roof of the royal palace in the moment of David's first catching sight of Bathsheba. Whereas Heller's David is open and expressive, Lindgren suggests someone of a more introverted nature: he has "tiny squinting eyes" which move in a "capricious yet calculating" manner.<sup>120</sup> His mind appears to be occupied with more than what simply lies before his eyes, as he asks Shaphan if Bathsheba has wings, or if her head is encircled with light: heavenly images in the mind of one who is constantly concerned with holiness and the divine - whatever those things might be. That seeing in this way is not unusual for the King is reflected in the comment that Shaphan "was used to the King asking questions

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<sup>120</sup> Lindgren, Torgny (trans. Geddes, T) *Bathsheba* London: Collins Harvill, 1988. p.1 Unless the context indicates otherwise, all 'op. cit.' references in this chapter relate to this novel.

that were not at all obvious or natural to an ordinary person.”<sup>121</sup> He reflects on the King’s “headlong pursuit of holiness,” suggesting in doing so that it is part of everyday life.

Already in these opening paragraphs there is evident a sense of uneasy juxtaposition, or even of contradiction. Whilst lusting after Bathsheba at the sight of her beauty, the King’s mind also appears to be preoccupied with the realm of the divine. Whilst desiring the most intimate contact with the young woman before his eyes, there is also the suggestion of the cruelty of which the King is capable. This having been suggested in the reflection of Shaphan that Bathsheba was just a bowshot away, he then asks what he should say to her when he goes to bring her to David:

“But the King did not reply; he merely shook his head impatiently, which meant: say whatever you like, say that the King was overcome and faint with the sickness of love when he saw her, say that the King will have her whipped and stoned and burned if she does not come, tell her the truth!”<sup>122</sup>

From the start, the narrative is taut with unanswered questions and the tension of apparently irreconcilable qualities existing side by side. Is it love or lust that motivates the King, and what is the relationship between the two? What form does his pursuit of holiness take, and where is the holy to be found? Enhancing this tension is the writing itself. In a tiny detail Lindgren encapsulates a whole scene, conveying both intimacy and distance. The King is on his palace roof, Bathsheba in a garden some distance away:

“The King’s head stretched forward, heavy with desire, as if he were trying to reach her fragrance and catch the soft sounds of her limbs as

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<sup>121</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> *op. cit.* p. 2

they brushed against each other. His breathing was deep and laboured."<sup>123</sup>

Bathsheba herself has an air of quiet self-sufficiency. She appears unflustered by her summons to King David, and is prepared to let him and his messengers wait as she makes herself ready. The moment of her entry into the King's chamber is caught in two short sentences:

"The King was sitting on the little ivory stool when they came into him with Bathsheba. The leather thongs of the seat creaked as he moved."<sup>124</sup>

With Shaphan and the guards, the reader waits to see how the silence will be broken by more than the minute creak of the leather as the King shifts his weight on the stool.

As we have already noted, in the biblical narrative, Bathsheba is almost a woman without a name. She is identified initially as Uriah's wife, and this idea of a woman as a commodity to be purchased, possessed or stolen is very much to the fore in Lindgren's novel. When asked by David about herself, she explains that she was bought from her father by Uriah when she was thirteen years old. As was pointed out with reference to *God Knows*, it is in the opening two chapters of 1 Kings that Bathsheba is mentioned most by name, and where she appears to have a more prominent role in the question of the succession and in the early days of Solomon's reign. Like Heller, Lindgren explores the implications of this in terms of Bathsheba's character and her relationship with David. The hints of a larger role which are there in the biblical narrative invite an exploration of the question of who has power over whom, and this question is introduced in the opening pages of *Bathsheba*. When Bathsheba is brought into the King's presence, he gazes at her for a long time "just as he had observed the Philistines before the battle of Keilah."<sup>125</sup> When she raises her eyes to look at him she sees him leaning forward on the stool, holding

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<sup>123</sup> *op. cit.* p. 1

<sup>124</sup> *op. cit.* p. 2

<sup>125</sup> *ibid.*

his head out in such a way that he looks like a bird of prey. When he finally comes to her, thinking that they are alone, it is "fast and merciless as if she were yet another enemy to be conquered."<sup>126</sup> Indeed, it would seem that this is precisely what she is. Power, love and lust are inextricably intertwined in these opening pages of the novel. What is described is the working out of David's lust; the way in which it is described is in terms of one person preying on or conquering another. Yet whilst almost crushed by his weight, Bathsheba's thoughts are on love:

"...she was merely the object of his unbridled love. That was the nature of love: to be the object of another's love.

...King David loves me, she thought, that is why he is doing this. Because he is doing this with me, he loves me."<sup>127</sup>

Finally, at the height of his passion, "He screamed as he would scream over a fallen enemy, over a giant or a people with a strange god or a city full of gold and pearls."<sup>128</sup>

This unresolved confusion of love and lust is closely tied up with notions of holiness and sacrifice, and the question of the relationship between the material and the spiritual. It is a collection of themes which are characterized in the novel by contradiction. They come to the fore again in relation to Amnon's rape of Tamar; but here, as David is about to defile Bathsheba by effectively raping her, given that she has no choice in the matter, he is concerned about her ritual cleanness. Images of lust are entwined with those of prayer: as David strips off his clothes Bathsheba hears him "muttering over and over again in his ardour the name of the Lord."<sup>129</sup> When his passion is spent, he immediately begins to speak with the Lord, in a "melancholy monotone lament."<sup>130</sup> In this context God is

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<sup>126</sup> *op. cit.* p. 6

<sup>127</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> *op. cit.* p. 5

<sup>130</sup> *op. cit.* p. 6

introduced - in such a way as to suggest a deity who is primitive, almost 'man-made', and who yet is remote and inaccessible. He is described as living "in a tent in the palace garden."<sup>131</sup> Whilst "tent" is a perfectly accurate word for the tabernacle, it feels like a reductive description. It suggests a homely and visible dwelling, yet the Lord himself remains unseen and unknown - except perhaps by David. He claims that he is always speaking with the Lord, who is the only one who understands him. David's response to Bathsheba's question, "What is the nature of the Lord?" is also characterized by contradiction. His first response is to say that the Lord is like him: "And Bathsheba thought of how he had almost crushed her and of his uncontrollable lust."<sup>132</sup> He speaks with no apparent feeling of how the Lord is good and his love boundless, phrases suggestive of repetition of what one has learned as a child. Bathsheba remains preoccupied with the first response, wondering, if the Lord is indeed like David, what will become of her and of Uriah. Remarking that love is incomprehensible, she says she still does not understand the Lord. David agrees:

"'Yes,' said King David. 'Even love is incomprehensible. Love is insecurity and uncertainty. The most appalling uncertainty.'

'And that is the nature of the Lord?' said Bathsheba.

'Yes,' said the King. 'That is the nature of the Lord,'"<sup>133</sup>

Rather than a primitive being dwelling in a tent in the palace garden, this conversation suggests a being who is remote and to be feared. Yet David goes on to whisper to Bathsheba the words of the opening verses of Psalm 139, a psalm which expresses confidence in God's intimate knowledge of the psalmist, and which is usually interpreted in terms of his love and care and delight in the human beings he has created. This suggestion of intimacy with the Lord provides yet another possible answer to Bathsheba's question. No conclusive

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<sup>131</sup> *op. cit.* p. 5

<sup>132</sup> *op. cit.* p. 6

<sup>133</sup> *op. cit.* p. 7

answer is offered though, and the question reverberates throughout the novel, emerging from the lips of various characters at significant moments. The close of the first chapter brings Shaphan's demise, an appalling footnote to the question 'what is the nature of the Lord?' - and by implication, what is the nature of the King. Intimacy with the King is suddenly withdrawn, yet as the King screams to the guards the punishment for seeing what should not have been seen, Shaphan's only thought concerns love:

"This too is possible, love is as uncertain as the wind, uncertainty is the only thing there is. It besets me behind and before, it opens the eyes of the blind."<sup>134</sup>

The only thing one can be certain of is uncertainty; it is that which hems one in behind and before (echoes of Psalm 139 again), not the encompassing presence or love of God - unless indeed these things are somehow one and the same. Shaphan's love for the King led to him seeing and therefore being involved in what was for him out of bounds, and for this involvement his eyes are to be gouged out and his life extinguished. As for Bathsheba, from being the distance of a bowshot from the King, she now feels physically sick at the thought that he might in fact have taken possession of her to the extent that he moves around within her body, that she lets him use it as an empty vessel, and that her life too is all but extinguished.

The respective roles of David and Bathsheba are clear cut in the opening chapter of the novel, but as Bathsheba returns to her house feeling like one of the many prisoners she has watched in the past being led up the steps to the King's house, she makes a decision: if she is not to remain vanquished, then she must conquer the King. By the novel's end, it seems that she has achieved her desire. In the intervening pages as the reversal of roles is subtly played out, the issues of power and authority, the concept of being chosen, the place

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<sup>134</sup> *ibid.*



of sacrifice and indeed the purpose of life itself, are all called into question, punctuated again and again by the overriding question: "What is the nature of the Lord?"

### **Bathsheba**

The development of Bathsheba's role is not recounted simply by continuous narrative. Lindgren is highly selective in the episodes of the story he uses, almost as if he is presenting his audience with a series of still photographs and highlighting every detail and nuance as he does so. In addition, there are significant shifts in the narrative style. The narrative voice for much of the novel is in the third person, but from time to time the reader is privy to comments in the first person made to the scribe by both David and Bathsheba. Even within the third person narration, the reader is at times brought up short by a change from the past tense to the present. It is as if Lindgren guides the reader round a series of related paintings in a spacious art gallery: at each new scene the guide stops the movement and draws attention not only to the occasion depicted in the picture, but also to the way in which different aspects are emphasized, to the subtle changes of colour and texture. Lindgren does not number or name his chapters, but at each new section it is evident that time has passed and that the relationship between Bathsheba and all whom she encounters at the palace has been continuously developing in the meantime.

With Bathsheba's move into David's house, the predatory language and images initially used are replaced by more of a sense of friendship between David and Bathsheba. David is still very much the dominant one, but the fact that she poses a threat to the *status quo* is symbolized by the impotent figure of her only possession, the house-god. Seeing that it has no vulva and no phallus, and that therefore it has no power, David allows her to keep it. Bathsheba's fondness for the god appears initially to be like the fondness one might have for a childhood toy, and with an indulgence appropriate to such feelings,

David instructs her as to what God is really like:

“‘God does not allow himself to be given form by human hands,’ he said, with laughter still bubbling in his throat. ‘God cannot be captured in a piece of wood.’”<sup>135</sup>

He argues that without a phallus it can neither harm nor help Bathsheba, but in response she replies that it contains its godly strength within itself. In the ensuing conversation, it appears that David's concept of God is very similar to that held within Canaanite fertility religion, which was supposedly displaced by the Israelite worship of Yahweh. Yet as the novel progresses it emerges that these ideas do not satisfy him, they are not perhaps as secure as he had thought. What undermines them is Bathsheba, with her questions and apparent self-sufficiency. The seeds of this process of undermining are foreshadowed in this early conversation - a conversation which also has its comic element. In response to David's speech, concluding with the warning that without the phallus all would degenerate into primeval chaos, Bathsheba apologetically explains that originally the god had such an enormous phallus that it kept falling over, so she cut it off with her father's knife and rubbed the place smooth with a stone. David is outraged by this: claiming that she has castrated her own god, robbing him of his strength, he insists that what is holy must never be violated. It is only when she reminds him that it is only an image made of wood, and that he would not have allowed it in the house if it had had a phallus, that he calms down.

The growth in Bathsheba's confidence finds David beginning to seek her opinion on matters of state. It is with regard to the siege of Rabbah that David's seeking of advice from Bathsheba is first recounted - by Bathsheba herself in her words to the scribe. She claims that David himself has commanded her to be his only queen, and in token of this she now wears a full-length robe, a garment of office. He has asked her whether or not he

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<sup>135</sup> *op. cit.* p. 45

should go out to take Rabbah. When she suggests others whom he might ask, he claims that they will only tell him what their will is; he wants the advice of someone who will tell him what he himself wants. This indicates the degree to which David already feels Bathsheba knows him in a way that none of his other wives ever have. Her own thoughts bear this out. She remarks that he rarely goes to the women's house now, or sleeps outside; he sleeps mostly with her, such that others comment that he is like her suckling child. He is preoccupied with the uncertainty of the succession, speaking often of "the one whose identity he does not know."<sup>136</sup> Bathsheba observes that he cannot cope with uncertainty. When finally she recounts the giving of her advice to the King, what is to be conquered is not so much the city of Rabbah but his indecision; to this the conquest of the Ammonites and their god Moloch is secondary.

Having watched David's departure however, Bathsheba is filled with fear for his life - comical fears, given that the true situation at Rabbah is so far from the images of battle she envisages. Equally comical is the picture of this 'queen' with her travelling companions, the bloated and slumbering Mephibosheth, and Shebaniah, apparently so uncomfortable away from his usual role within the walls of palace and temple. Her hope of arriving in time to stop the battle before anything terrible happens to David appears akin to the folly of a teenager in love. Though she may have felt some real change in their relationship as she gave her advice to him, her clinging response upon finding him illustrates the extent to which she has become totally dependent on him.

Whereas Bathsheba's words to the scribe convey her growing strength and influence over David, his convey his anxiety about her. She seems to trust in nothing. Addressing God through his words to the scribe, what he says of her reveals as much about his own attitude to his wives as it does about the change in her:

"She is a wife and yet not a wife; she seems to be a real human

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<sup>136</sup> *op. cit.* p. 80

being. I do not understand her...

She speaks to me without my having commanded her to speak, she comes to me unasked, she eats at my table, my servants obey her word, I ask her advice... She mimics Thy prophet Nathan so that we cannot control our mirth... I do not think that anything is holy for her."<sup>137</sup>

He discovers a further sphere of her influence: his scribe has also been hers for some time. Although these observations cause David some concern, he seems unchanged in so far as his speech reflects confidence in the Lord and in his own position. Within a few years of Solomon's birth however, this appears to be changing. Bathsheba is found to be present at the King's daily meetings with his officials, although no one can remember how this extraordinary practice began. Despite all outward appearances to the contrary, this is entirely by Bathsheba's design:

"She sat at the window, half turned away as if to indicate that she was not fully taking part in their discussions, as if her presence were just incidental and completely without significance. And whenever David asked her a question, she always apologized for not having been listening, she was just a poor woman who understood nothing of the administration of the realm, and she made him repeat his question.

Then she gave her answer very clearly and unhesitatingly, and the secretary immediately wrote down her words."<sup>138</sup>

Yet David too is wily, and these meetings take on something of a game; he seems to try to find flaws in her thinking or to expose her weaknesses to the officials, whilst she sometimes refuses to answer the questions. Yet there is something of a watershed moment, when David admits that things do not seem as clear cut to him as they have in the past. The

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<sup>137</sup> *op. cit.* p. 104

<sup>138</sup> *op. cit.* p. 112

question of the succession becomes more prominent as the novel progresses, as David ages and the matter remains unresolved. In his new state of indecision and uncertainty he remarks to Bathsheba,

“The Lord will never forsake me. But he seems to be blurring the world in my sight. He is creating difficulties with my vision and thought, nothing is so sure and certain as before, He is robbing people and things of their individual identities.”<sup>139</sup>

Bathsheba replies that this is how things have always been, only he has not seen it this way before. The fear is evident in David that as his vision and conviction weakens, hers seem to be increasing. As if to deny even the possibility of this, he closes the conversation with a dogmatic firmness that belies his true state, for in private his struggle with the control she has over him is clear. The language he wants to use to her is the language which conveys the familiar image of God as a loving shepherd in Psalm 23: “You restore my soul, you lead me in the paths of righteousness, you anoint my head with oil.”<sup>140</sup> He knows that he can never say that to her, because in doing so he would be giving himself up to her entirely. He wants advice about her, but the only one of his advisors who could help him is Bathsheba herself. He knows he has to reassert his authority as King, yet feels he can never force his tongue around appropriately authoritarian words if addressed to her. Recalling his friendship with Jonathan, he outlines the terrible burden of love. Whilst his words echo the rhythms of St. Paul’s well-known celebration of love in 1 Corinthians 13, they in fact convey its antithesis:

“Love, which never fails, is a consuming sickness. It is impatient and insistent, it is full of envy and puffed up, it behaves itself in an unseemly manner and seeks its own self-interest. It rejoices in iniquity and deceit,

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<sup>139</sup> *op. cit.* p. 114

<sup>140</sup> *op. cit.* p. 121

it hopes for everything but believes nothing and endures nothing."<sup>141</sup>

David wishes that Bathsheba were like Ahinoam, who remained outside him, never having 'gnawed her way into his being' as Bathsheba has done. He fears for Bathsheba, in that her passion seems to have no object, but exists only in itself. He wishes that she might direct it in a desire for holiness and for the Lord, although he dismisses this as impossible for a woman to feel. He fears too that she has a passion to rule, but might be consumed by it in her lack of understanding. He desires to wrap her in fat, to shackle and imprison her passion. The effect of that the reader knows only too well - any passion Mephibosheth may have had to exercise his claim to the throne as a descendent of Saul has been truly shackled by the obesity imposed upon him by the King.

Following David's admission to Bathsheba of his indecision, Bathsheba begins to take a more prominent role in the manipulation of events. Amnon's rape of Tamar is the consequence of a complex web of emotions and desires: Amnon's lust for Tamar, David's restrained desire for her, Bathsheba's jealousy of her and fear of rejection, Bathsheba's passion for Absalom, her discovery of the extent to which she has power to influence events, and Absalom's silent ambition. It is clear from a passage spoken to the scribe in which she too ponders the question of succession, that Bathsheba's love for David is not as total as it may have been at the time of the taking of Rabbah. She claims to have chosen Absalom, then says that the scribe must not write that down. Learning via Shebaniah and Jonadab of Amnon's affliction, his lust for Tamar, Bathsheba is provided with an opportunity to assist fate and fortune:

"She was not over-hasty. Shebaniah and Jonadab and Amnon were in urgent need of advice and support, and perhaps Tamar also needed help.

The thoughts she conceived now would flow out into the world like water

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<sup>141</sup> *op. cit.* p. 122

in the furrows of the field, and bring forth fruit.

And she could not stop her heart from thinking: Absalom."<sup>142</sup>

Rather than sons, it is now her thoughts which, once conceived, will affect the course of events in the world she knows. She is aware of the momentous nature of what she is about to do:

"It was the first time she had contrived the occurrence of momentous events in this fervent yet self-possessed manner, even devising hitherto unfamiliar events. It was far more momentous and significant than saying to the King, 'Yes, you must take Rabbah!' or saying to Solomon, 'No, you must not drink any more of that sweet wine.' It was an exercise in thinking as a holy act."<sup>143</sup>

The change that has taken place in Bathsheba is suddenly noted by Shebaniah, who, whilst inevitably involved in the intrigue, is uncomfortable with Bathsheba's casuistic reasoning. Although elsewhere Bathsheba has made it clear that David is just an ordinary man, when it suits her she employs his reasoning, excusing the inexcusable with arguments of holiness and election. Unable to counteract her argument, Shebaniah looks at her and sees how she has changed from the time of their first meeting:

"She appeared confident and untroubled. Imperturbable. And suddenly he noticed what he had not noticed before despite his daily proximity to her: her limbs had lost their slender, youthful look, she was no longer a young girl with a figure like a lily stem, her whole body was broader and heavier, her shoulders had grown as if to enable her to lift and bear the burdens of men. He had not thought that she would ever change. He had believed that she would remain as she was that first night when he had sat

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<sup>142</sup> *op. cit.* p. 136

<sup>143</sup> *op. cit.* p. 137

guard over her sleep in Uriah's house.

It gave him a feeling of calm confidence to discover suddenly that even her body had become that of a queen. He was sad to see it."<sup>144</sup>

His only remaining concern is for the reaction of the King. He sees that Tamar is holy for David, and fears that he will kill Amnon and take her back. Bathsheba's response, although delivered with characteristic confidence, makes evident the inconsistency in her thinking:

"He will admire Amnon's courage. Superhuman courage is needed to carry out what God has forbidden. The King himself no longer has that degree of courage."<sup>145</sup>

Clearly Bathsheba uses the idea of God for her own convenience. Initially, the related ideas of holiness and being chosen are used to encourage Amnon's case. Next it seems that the Lord is judgmental, will not approve, and will need to be appeased. Almost in the same breath the Lord is as good as blamed for Amnon's lust, yet by the end of the discussion in commending the human courage that will be manifest in doing something which is forbidden, she again distances God from the sordid events which are to take place. Shebaniah remains fearful, envisaging disaster and death, needing the Queen's reassurance that for him nothing essential will change: he will always be the boy who plays the lyre. All that remains is for Bathsheba to instruct him about what is to happen so that he can repeat it to Jonadab, and Jonadab to Amnon. Bathsheba's version of the events apparently anticipates a happy ending, although it seems more likely that she knew what would really happen - Amnon violates and then rejects Tamar, and Bathsheba makes sure that both the King and Absalom know what has happened. Then she waits for Absalom to take his revenge.

Between the account of the rape of Tamar and the narrative of Absalom's revenge at

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<sup>144</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *op. cit.* p. 139



the sheep shearing two years later, Lindgren makes the reader privy to more of Bathsheba's musings to the scribe, and portrays the culmination of her passion for Absalom. Her thoughts on Goliath reflect something of a post-Enlightenment reading of the biblical text, questioning the received interpretation. Bathsheba is thinking about Goliath, and recounts the version of events told to her by David. The main thrust of her thoughts is encapsulated in the comment that the washerwomen have Goliath's helmet now, and they use it for washing the bed linen. What was once a sign of tremendous achievement and great renown for David has become a domestic utensil. Bathsheba questions the size of Goliath and of his spear; she questions his apparent stupidity; she cannot believe that being uncircumcised makes a man less wily and prudent than the circumcised. On hearing the story a second time, she had realised that the measurements had grown a little:

"Then I realised how it is: David's kingliness caused everything in his vicinity to grow, even stories; his power does not allow anything to remain as it was."<sup>146</sup>

And of what really happened she concludes:

"Perhaps Goliath was very tall. But he was a totally ordinary man. His sword was made long after his death to support the rumour of his giant stature. He was heavy and clumsy, and David felled him with a stone from his sling at close range, and that was well done. But it was not a miracle of the Lord, it was hardly even a heroic feat of a Benjamite shepherd; it was only what could have been expected of David.

So I often think of Goliath now, the terrible giant from Gath."<sup>147</sup>

Whilst embodying within the narrative the explicit questioning of the biblical text, Lindgren also embraces something of the intertextual play characteristic of the biblical

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<sup>146</sup> *op. cit.* p. 160

<sup>147</sup> *op. cit.* p. 160-1

literature. In the same way that certain motifs - creation and exodus, for example - are employed in a variety of biblical texts, striking up resonances between texts, so Lindgren repeats particular images, enhancing their impact. Rejected by Absalom, Bathsheba tears at his face with her fingernails, foreshadowing the tearing of the rose thorns at the time of his death. Her passion has turned into loathing but, though changed, never dies. After hearing the news of Absalom's death at the hand of Joab, he receives the same treatment.

Bathsheba's reflections on David and Goliath, and the narrative of her manipulation of events concerning Amnon and Absalom, at times give the impression that she is totally self-contained, emotionally detached from what goes on around her, and absorbed in the discovery of power within herself. The episode with Absalom illustrates that this is not the case. Yet as subsequent events unfold, it is clear that whilst she is still emotionally involved with David and still, to some extent, dependent on him, the dependence in the relationship is now clearly weighted more towards David's need of her. Just as Bathsheba's presence came to be accepted at the meeting between the King and his officials, so when David wishes to be alone with the Lord following the murder of Amnon by Absalom, Bathsheba remains with him, part of his solitude. She continues to advise him, subtly steering the course of events:

"I give my advice to the King only when he asks for it. He often asks for my advice when I have already given it to him. I stand at his right hand."<sup>148</sup>

One of the characteristics of Bathsheba's increasing confidence and power is her utilitarian attitude towards other people, most notably displayed in the episode of the great census. Her interest in and competence with numbers is registered early on in the book as something she learned from Uriah, and strikes a contrast with the other women whose

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<sup>148</sup> *op. cit.* p. 183

inability to count is noted. Hearing David refer to his "countless people," Bathsheba points out that they are not countless, simply uncouneted. Having been encouraged by her, David is heard in his words to the scribe claiming that the Lord has commanded him to count the people. Nathan warns him of punishment, and Joab objects on the grounds that the people are holy. Bathsheba has no concept of a people as holy, stating baldly that

"The only possible knowledge about a people is their number. When human beings are counted they lose their individual characteristics and are transformed into a people."<sup>149</sup>

Her concept of the holiness of human life extends only to the boundaries of the royal house. Her answer to Solomon on the question of whether they too would be counted is that "One cannot belong both to the house of David and to the people. To count us would be to degrade and defile us."<sup>150</sup> In the conversation of David and Bathsheba after the event, she reinforces his conviction that it was the Lord who instructed him to undertake the census.

This blurring of Bathsheba's advice with the word of the Lord is increasingly pervasive as the novel draws to its conclusion. Language and imagery which may seem appropriate to speaking of God are associated more and more with Bathsheba. It is Bathsheba who engineers the return of Absalom to Jerusalem, and via Shebaniah and Jonadab, who instructs Absalom to set fire to Joab's field. It is as David sleeps in the arms of Bathsheba on the eve of Absalom's rebellion that he is filled with a sense of deep peace:

"Everything was about to be fulfilled, in one way or another. The Lord would direct his life towards its preordained and perfect end. He slept with a smile on his face, and a faint image, a shadowy dream, flashed through his mind, that he was already sleeping in the arms of the

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<sup>149</sup> *op. cit.* p. 182-3

<sup>150</sup> *op. cit.* p. 183

As they ride out of Jerusalem following Absalom's self-proclamation as king, David is aware of her presence:

"He did not turn round to survey the exodus. He had never been one to look back. Bathsheba looked backward and forward - that was the kind of person she was. No, David did not even see that she was riding at his side, but he felt it, as he always felt her nearness. His heart was aware that some mysterious and spiritual substance flowed forth from her, an aura or a sound or light or energy, and that it was this unseen emanation that held him upright on his ass."<sup>152</sup>

When they stop for the night in the Valley of Kidron a tent is erected for David and Bathsheba, made from untreated asses hides which filled the air with the heavy stench of blood. David likes the familiar smell; it reminds him of the tabernacle of the Lord where he feels at home, and especially of the holy of holies.

"The holy of holies, thought David, raising his head higher on her breasts so that he could put his lips to the skin beneath her ear. He lay at her left side. He had entwined his left hand with hers and placed it between her thighs. The holy of holies."<sup>153</sup>

This is reminiscent of the language David uses of Bathsheba to the Lord, immediately after their first encounter and following the death of Shaphan.<sup>154</sup> There he speaks of Shaphan having to die because he had looked upon Bathsheba "at the very moment of her selection", and had seen what was holy - a reflection of the idea that ordinary mortals could not look upon what was holiest and expect to live.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> *op. cit.* p. 202-3

<sup>152</sup> *op. cit.* p. 209

<sup>153</sup> *op. cit.* p. 221

<sup>154</sup> *op. cit.* p. 25

<sup>155</sup> see for example Exodus 19.21-24 and 34.29-35

In the tent in the Valley of Kidron they speak of love, and in the almost sacred intimacy of the tent David considers one particular aspect of love: not being able to do without:

"He could not understand how he could ever have lived without Bathsheba.

When he thought about his youth, that was what surprised him most: she

had not been there."<sup>156</sup>

David's dependency on Bathsheba is complete, such that when she is confident that he recognises this and she asks him about the succession, who he would have chosen had Absalom not chosen himself, he can only give one response:

"And he knew he had no choice, he could not bear to lose her, he could not allow himself to make the slightest movement of his lips that she might misunderstand. No price was too high: to be forced to do without her would be like being forced to do without the Lord.

'Solomon!' he cried. 'Your son Solomon!' "<sup>157</sup>

That declaration Bathsheba had sought for a long time; now all she has to do is to ensure that what has been promised comes to pass. When the battle with Absalom and his followers is over and David and his entourage return to the city of Jerusalem, it is Bathsheba's carriage that heads the procession, "shamelessly, even presumptuously, in front" of the King - an act justified by her as common sense.

Having achieved her own prominence, it is Bathsheba who characteristically sees that the next potential king, Adonijah, is also brought to ruin. This she achieves by encouraging him in his enterprise, via the now familiar route of his servants. When recounting this to the scribe, it emerges that others are beginning to perceive what David had once feared: that she does indeed have a passion to rule. She is the one who has received

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<sup>156</sup> *op. cit.* p. 223

<sup>157</sup> *op. cit.* p. 224

emissaries from other cities, and it is to her that Nathan has said, "Yes, you are the one who shall reign after him."<sup>158</sup>

Bathsheba has conquered the King, as she had resolved to do. In his last moments, it is only she who can provide the warmth and security he needs. It is only she who can give an answer to his final question, "What is the nature of the Lord?" Her contriving of events persists until after his death. Having heard David's final words which concern Bathsheba herself, the reader is perhaps surprised to learn that Bathsheba had his last words written down by the scribe. These however are not the words already heard, but "a psalm, one of the longest psalms he had ever composed"<sup>159</sup> - a psalm evidently composed in fact, by Bathsheba, to mark the close of David's reign, and the beginning of hers.

#### King David

In the course of discussing Bathsheba's character, the preceding section has already examined something of the way in which David is portrayed in the novel. His virility and power, and the strength of his conviction about God and himself are all very much in evidence in the opening pages of the novel. David evidently has power over many lives, not simply in terms of exercising the authority of a king, but more than that in seeming to have the power to create and destroy life which is associated with God. There is a strong sense of identity between David and the Lord, who he claims is the only one who understands him. This identity is formally recognised in the symbolic dying and rising of the king in the New Year festival, yet in the heart of David himself all is less secure. The sense of dis-ease which was noted in the opening paragraphs of this chapter continues to be an undercurrent throughout the novel, as often it is evident that things are not what they

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<sup>158</sup> *op. cit.* p. 241

<sup>159</sup> *op. cit.* p. 249

seem: the battle at Rabbah is a mock battle, the women's well in Jerusalem is a mock well - and even when it seems to have been filled due to the miraculous nature of the self-chosen 'King' Absalom, that also is not what it seemed: what fills the well is something of the physical nature of Absalom, defiling the mock well.<sup>160</sup> There is an emptiness at the heart of things which is evident even in the tabernacle of the Lord. There in the holy of holies lies the shewbread, and

"There too lay the invisible fragrant bread that only the Lord could see and smell, the shewbread of shewbread, which the priests, imitating ordinary bakers, kneaded with ritualistic sweeping movements, and with which they performed a baking ceremony at the altar for burnt offerings. Feigned bread, mock bread, imaginary bread, bread baked with nothing but religious ritual."<sup>161</sup>

This element of pretence is evident too in David's early dealing with God. Using phrases from Psalms 38 and 25, he brings his desire for Bathsheba - and recognition that she belongs to another man - before the Lord.

"The Lord liked to see man as he really was. As he spoke he lowered his voice to a whispering sibilance rather than speech; he did not want the Lord to hear how strong and demanding his spirit actually was."<sup>162</sup>

His conversation with God has a hollow ring; without pause for breath it seems from David's words that he is convinced that God has commanded him to kill Uriah. Similarly, when he addresses God through his words to the scribe concerning Shaphan, he seems to be blaming God for the boy's death. As was the case in *God Knows*, there remains an ambiguity about whether he has really heard the voice of God or whether he in fact uses God to justify his own desires and intended actions. In *Bathsheba* however, there is a

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<sup>160</sup> *op. cit.* p. 214

<sup>161</sup> *op. cit.* p. 13

<sup>162</sup> *op. cit.* p. 14

hollow core to David, something that is well hidden, the concealment reinforced by the close identification between the King and the Lord, but which is gradually exposed by Bathsheba for what it really is - a place of uncertainty, vulnerability, and indecision.

In the opening sections of the novel, the sense of an emptiness at the heart of things is covered by religious ritual and the repetition by David of things which he takes to be certainties. The conversation David has with Bathsheba about her house-god testifies to this, illuminating something of David's self-understanding. He speaks of 'man' being made in God's image, which for him means that God is like a man, a reversal of the theological principle that humankind is in some sense like God. It is the phallus that is the means of conquering death, of regeneration, of maintaining the fertility of the earth through the seasons. These ideas are also evident in David's understanding of his kingship, of his own sexual activity, and therefore hint at his understanding of his own relationship with God. When Bathsheba reminds him that her god is only a wooden idol, his reply is revealing:

"'Yes,' he said. 'Yes, you are right. No genuine idols may come into my house, my house shall be pure and righteous, my house shall be the home of the truth. In my house all idols and fig-tree carvings must be divested of their power. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.'"<sup>163</sup>

Is he quoting from the Ten Commandments? Or does his use of this last sentence imply something more significant: that in David's self-understanding the God who lives in a tent in the palace garden is somehow so dependent on David for a human face that the house of the King is temple as much as palace, and the occupant around whom its life revolves is more than an ordinary mortal? The language Ahinoam uses of him at one point suggests that in the perception of others the latter seems to be the case. David reports a conversation with her in which she speaks of him as "the one who is"<sup>164</sup> - biblical

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<sup>163</sup> *op. cit.* p. 47

<sup>164</sup> *op. cit.* p. 123



language used only of God, reminiscent particularly of God's self-revelation to Moses at the burning bush.<sup>165</sup> Most of the time when David is portrayed with other characters he is treated as a king who is closely identified with what is godly. Even when Bathsheba has rejected this assessment of David, she nevertheless maintains this view in others, because it suits her to do so. Only once in the first half of the novel is there a private admission from David of his humanity, and a clear recognition of his accountability to God. This occurs when David is confronted by Nathan about his conduct towards Uriah: he briefly admits that he cannot deceive God, although quickly puts responsibility for his actions back on God. Although initially claiming to bear no guilt, he is urged by Nathan to answer honestly the question of whether he thought the Lord would be deceived by his excuses:

"David sat in silence for a long time. Then he sighed and said, 'No, at the bottom of my heart I do not believe that. But I would not be the person that I am if I did not try. I am always looking for excuses. That is the way the Lord has made me - resourceful, cunning and wily. He fashioned me as a man of excuses and expedience.'"<sup>166</sup>

Whatever David's self-understanding might be, the narrative makes it clear that others do not see him as he sees himself. In the attempts of others to maintain his self-delusion he at times can seem to be a rather pathetic figure. This is particularly true of the way in which the conclusion to the siege of Rabbah is portrayed. Rabbah is a dying city, diseased and almost without water. David's failure to arrive and take the city means that Joab is in the ludicrous position of trying to keep death at bay until he comes, so that he can play the conqueror. Faced with the already vanquished king, Hanun, the two men converse about the nature of God's presence and help. This becomes unbearable for David, who is all too aware of seeing in Hanun something of himself:

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<sup>165</sup> Exodus 3.13-15

<sup>166</sup> *ibid.*

"He could see in this vanquished, destitute king something that he knew was also in himself, but he could not say what it was: a sense of abandonment and apprehensive trust or impassioned indifference. No, he could not put into words what it was, he knew only that they were, in some mysterious way, reflections of each other...

The situation was quite simply too ambiguous and disturbing, much too pregnant with meaning. It was unbearable."<sup>167</sup>

The absurd braying of the royal ass breaks his reverie, and David switches back into the mode of behaviour expected of a conquering king. Yet it is only Absalom, bearing the Ammonite crown, who truly looks the conqueror, and the events of David's later life are foreshadowed: David the fleeing and almost vanquished King; Absalom the pretender claiming the crown for himself.

David lives with an awareness of his kingliness and special relationship with God. As Bathsheba works her way into his self-understanding, she becomes a place where he can express his doubts. Previously when he expressed any doubt it was to the scribe, who was then commanded not to write it down.<sup>168</sup> In portraying this 'humanizing' effect and eventual dominance of David by Bathsheba, Lindgren nevertheless maintains David's credibility as a character. The wily and acute mind which is very much in evidence early on in the novel remains evident to the end. Amnon is not able to hide from his father the true nature of his complaint, even though all involved in the plot seem to think that David will be taken in. When Absalom explains the scratches on his face as the effect of having ridden through a rose thicket - in doing so foreshadowing the circumstances in which he would meet his death - David recognises the 'rose' as being in effect the nails of a "wild

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<sup>167</sup> *op. cit.* p. 91

<sup>168</sup> see p. 104, where David acknowledges Bathsheba's comment that Rabbah was a mock battle, and also discovers that she has been using the scribe for some time.

and embittered woman."<sup>169</sup> To the scribe David reveals his awareness of the plotting that goes on around him, even of Bathsheba's involvement in it:

"Absalom is still in Geshur. I have decided: when two years have passed, I shall let him return to Jerusalem. Joab will try to persuade me. Perhaps Bathsheba will too: Absalom was like a son or brother to her, son or brother, nothing more. They will try to inveigle me. I shall let myself be inveigled."<sup>170</sup>

Here too, in the sense that he 'protests too much', there is a hint of his awareness of Bathsheba's true feelings for Absalom. Even when David is close to death, he surprises Bathsheba by revealing that he was aware of her shooting Shebaniah.

By the end of the novel David appears more truly human. Maintaining the front of certainty which apparently characterised his self-understanding and his understanding of God had prevented any admission of weakness, of which doubt was a part. The security offered to him by Bathsheba enables him to admit weakness, to admit in his last moments that holiness - which he had sought for all his life - no longer helps him. Yet even here on his deathbed, when it seem that Bathsheba has conquered him completely, his final paradoxical utterance suggests that he has retained just a little critical distance, perhaps having allowed himself to be inveigled as he had earlier said he would, not quite capitulating entirely, except by his own choice:

"You are perfection, Bathsheba. Your perfection is your greatest flaw."<sup>171</sup>

### The nature of life

Much of the novel *Bathsheba* touches on questions of being and non-being, on the

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<sup>169</sup> *op. cit.* p. 166

<sup>170</sup> *op. cit.* p. 188

<sup>171</sup> *op. cit.* p. 249

meaning of human existence, and on identity. Bathsheba herself is a very strong character - her character developing out of her resolution not to have her individuality extinguished in being conquered by the King. Within the context of the novel she is ahead of her time, striking a sharp contrast with the other women who are present yet barely feature in the narrative. They first appear early in the novel as Uriah is approaching Jerusalem. The pattern of their daily lives is contrived, created by David to fit what is considered appropriate for women: "Women need a well to gather round."<sup>172</sup> For women whose livelihood depended on their own labours in fetching water, the well would be vital as both a source of water and as a place of meeting. But the well that David has made is a mock well which has no bearing on their physical existence. The real water was carried into the palace by servants, collected from the subterranean channel designed to serve the palace. Even so, the women gather at David's well every day, sometimes offering travellers a cup of mock-water for refreshment. They enacted what was expected of them, to the extent of acknowledging the rule against the drinking of water - the water that did not exist - from the well during their monthly cleansing. In contrast Bathsheba is - as David says to the scribe - "a wife, yet not a wife" but "a real human being."<sup>173</sup> The many other wives, are somehow less than human, there only to satisfy the desires of the King and to bear children. The only other of his wives who is given any suggestion of character and dignity is Ahinoam, the first to bear David a child, and the one who became midwife to all the others. The existence of these other woman wanes as Bathsheba's role develops. As they die off, he mourns them "with an ever lighter heart."<sup>174</sup> Death gives cause for reflection on the passage of time; the women talking continuously about the passing of days, months and years:

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<sup>172</sup> *op. cit.* p. 31

<sup>173</sup> *op. cit.* p. 104

<sup>174</sup> *op. cit.* p. 120

"Most of them could not count them and did not know their names; they knew the names only of the months that had special significance, the months of conception and birth. This uncertainty and confusion transformed time into something mysterious and frightening - time gnawed at their skin and withered their flesh and they could not protect themselves against its ravages... Everything was constantly in the process of waning and drying up and draining away. And at the end nothing more remained of human beings than there was water in the King's mock well.

And they were amazed when they found that their thoughts about time had brought them to that tired and terrible admission: Yes, the well was empty, it has always been empty, nothing could be drawn from it but emptiness."<sup>175</sup>

The existence of the women is portrayed in the novel as dependence on men - for a woman's life to have any meaning she has to be someone's wife or concubine. This is evident from the way in which Bathsheba is spoken of as Uriah's possession, and from the fate of Tamar. Amnon, the guilty one, suffers some distancing from the King, but not even Tamar's name was ever to be mentioned in David's presence: "She was annulled; he was allowed to keep his name."<sup>176</sup> In the storeroom in Absalom's house Tamar gives birth to a son, but he is not allowed to live. Finally, when Absalom is away at the sheep-shearing, she dies. As is the case with other parts of the narrative, one thing is described, with the very clear suggestion that something else was really the case. What is described with some beauty is Tamar's apparent dependence on the life and strength of her older brother; a dependence to the point of not being able to survive without him. Yet what appears in fact to have happened, is that Absalom himself is responsible for her death.

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<sup>175</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> *op. cit.* p. 156

"When she was left alone, she no longer had the nourishment she required, and she simply faded away....

Absalom had said: 'She must disappear.' That was all.

Absalom had also given orders that if she died she was to be buried without mourners, without songs and funeral feasts, in an unmarked grave."<sup>177</sup>

The question of existence is not however purely an issue for the women. It raises the wider question of power, and the ability of the powerful to dictate the nature of another person's life. This is relevant particularly in relation to the lives of Mephibosheth, Shaphan and Shebaniah.

Shaphan and Shebaniah are almost indistinguishable. Both are considerably younger than the King, and yet at times feel older and protective towards him. They are in turn the King's closest companions, not friends and confidants, but those to whom belongs the responsibility for soothing the King with music when he needs it, with making sure that his every need is catered for. They are nobodies, in that their lives count for nothing if divorced from performing that role. They are adults, yet retain something childlike in the pitch of their voices, in their desire to please, in the sense of innocence they bear. Shortly before his death Bathsheba asks Shebaniah about the nature of his life:

"Our very existence comes from involvement. By involving ourselves in the lives of others we create ourselves. Without involvement with others we would not exist."<sup>178</sup>

As Bathsheba goes on to speak of the limits of involvement, like Shaphan so long before he realises that he has transgressed those limits. Bathsheba lifts her bow, and in death gives meaning to his name: Shebaniah, the pierced.

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<sup>177</sup> *op. cit.* p. 173

<sup>178</sup> *op. cit.* p. 225

Mephibosheth is not a nobody, but he is a prisoner of David, and struggles to maintain his identity in the face of David's stifling shackles of generosity. As is seen time and again in the novel, it is a case of something relating to David which is not as it seems. Following the death of both Saul and Jonathan, and his establishment in Jerusalem, David asks whether there is anyone left of the family whom he can love instead of Jonathan. There is Mephibosheth, who is then brought to the palace and ordered to eat at the King's table every evening, who is never to be hungry or thirsty. Yet this generosity robs Mephibosheth of his wives and children, and of enjoyment of his land. David seems genuinely to care for him, carrying him to his bed in his own arms, such that Mephibosheth is "once again a little child sleeping in the arms of God."<sup>179</sup> In such generosity however, David has effectively removed any threat that Mephibosheth might have posed to his own position. He has done what at one point he desires to do with Bathsheba when he fears she has a passion to rule, and that is to shackle her in fat. The bloated Mephibosheth sees himself now as a sacrifice, with every meal for him being a sacrificial meal. Nevertheless he loves the King, and cannot imagine attempting to flee. In effect he has no choice; he knows that to return to his land means to lose his life, and so he retains his weakness, which is all he now has to offer to the King. He dies a week after David, and the place of his grave is unknown.

### **The nature of God**

The observation has already been made that David's answer to Bathsheba's question, "What is the nature of the Lord?" is characterized by contradiction and a depiction of love which is unrecognizable as love. The second time the question is asked is in David's recollection of the time when he found Shaphan. The boy was seven years old,

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<sup>179</sup> *op. cit.* p. 50

the sole survivor of the pillaging of his home by David's soldiers in the conquered city of Berothai. His brothers had been taken prisoner, his parents and sisters lay dead around him. In the midst of this carnage David found him, and offered what were apparently to his mind words of comfort: "It is God who has done this." Fearful and trembling, Shaphan asks him, "What is the nature of God?"<sup>180</sup> David's answer offers little from which to draw comfort:

"He is mighty. He is mightier than life and death together. He is so powerful that we may not even express his real name."<sup>181</sup>

The King reflects on how terrified Shaphan was, like a bird caught in a trap - like Bathsheba in fact.

Shaphan and Bathsheba were both conquered by David, and both at the point of their capture ask about the nature of God. It is Uriah who utters the question the third time, from the same perspective, that of one who sees he is finally caught with no way of escape. What actually happens to Uriah is reflected in the way in which the story is told. He is depicted sympathetically as a rather simple man, somewhat dull, yet loyal and brave in his service to the King, and capable of being moved by scenes of beauty. He is a faithful soldier for whom "life was but a discharging of duties."<sup>182</sup> This sense of heavy slowness characterizes his return to Jerusalem - both his progress on horseback and his thoughts on the purpose of his summons. He has left behind an army waiting: waiting for the arrival of their King and the end of the siege. When he sees David the conversation does nothing to clarify the purpose of the visit. David speaks fervently about holy madness, and about why a soldier should not ask the question 'why?'. It is in what is unspoken that all

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<sup>180</sup> *op. cit.* p. 25. The use of 'God' here rather than 'the Lord' is consistent with the fact that the latter was used by Israelites (and those who adopted their faith) to convey YHWH, the personal but unutterable name of God. 'God' would be used generally in the context of non-Israelites, like Shaphan and the people of Berothai, who were Canaanites.

<sup>181</sup> *op. cit.* p. 23

<sup>182</sup> *op. cit.* p. 30



is revealed: as Uriah names Bathsheba, it is as if a curtain falls and the spasm which briefly contorts David's face reveals the truth. Having spent a weary night with the servants Uriah is summoned to the King again. At this point the narrative slows down even more, shifting into the present tense with a detailed description of the silent meal they eat. The servants clear the debris of the meal; the two men sleep, then in the stillness and low light of evening David quietly pronounces Uriah's fate. Their earlier conversation is recalled as David explains that he is to lead the assault on Rabbah: that is, he is to be the outburst of holy madness Joab has been waiting for. That the transformation of the dull and solid Uriah into one impelled and frenzied by madness can only be achieved by drastic measures slowly dawns. Uriah resists David's suggestion that the Lord has chosen him, but when clarity comes shouts out the realisation that he is to be sacrificed. Only the Lord, David points out, can make the distinction between being sacrificed and being chosen. At this point, almost to himself, Uriah utters the question, 'What is the nature of the Lord?' The response this time contains no suggestion of love or even specifically of might, but of a wild and unstoppable force:

"And David replies: "He is an implacable and merciless god, he is a desert god, in the desert he came to us, he is a destructive god, a god of fire and wind, he still has sand in his hair."183

Reflecting something of that image of God, Lindgren in the final moments of this encounter conveys David's implacable cruelty by his words suggesting the very opposite. As Uriah vomits into the fire bowl,

"David merely watches him calmly and sympathetically - who can look at a person in distress without feeling compassion? Then he commands the servants to bring in a new fire bowl to replace the one that has been

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183 *op. cit.* p. 41

polluted and extinguished."<sup>184</sup>

The ease with which the polluted fire bowl can be replaced suggests the ease with which David can have Uriah's life extinguished and replaced. The narrative shifts back again to the past tense, and the action moves swiftly on, piling cruelty upon cruelty as Uriah is castrated and anointed in a parody of sacrifice. Strapped up like a dummy he is carried back to the camp, and freed of his fetters he hurls himself towards the city with an unceasing scream of pain, the manifestation of holy madness that Joab had been waiting for.

Thus far, the nature of the Lord is suggested in incomprehensible 'love', power and cruelty. Ahinoam accuses him of being one who steals life - in contrast to the biblical image of life-giver. Bathsheba recounts to the scribe Ahinoam's reaction to the death of the first child, known as the Blessed One. In grief, she cries out "Why does God go among us like an angel of Death! A child-stealer! What is the nature of God?"<sup>185</sup> It is Mephibosheth who provides an answer:

"He is as He is. He exists in all the ways that can possibly be imagined,

He has all the qualities that there are and that we can conceive..."<sup>186</sup>

He goes on to speak of God's unfathomability and inscrutability. It is an answer full of paradox, in effect saying that the answer to the question cannot be known. This view is conveyed by Bathsheba, who in the privacy of the scribe's company reflects on her belief that her house-god is a god too: "The world is full of gods. There is a god for every person. We do not have to be precise on the question of God."<sup>187</sup> Thinking about the new child in her womb she says that bearing children is "complying with God's will and carrying out His work... I believe that God is life and humankind."<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> *op. cit.* p. 78

<sup>186</sup> *op. cit.* p. 79

<sup>187</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> *op. cit.* p. 80

Further suggestions as to the nature of God emerge in the account of David's entry in to Rabbah, with regard to the Ammonite god, Moloch. An image of Moloch was carved outside the royal palace in Rabbah, but he was in fact understood to be an invisible god who lived within the body of the King "and remained there for as long as the King lived and retained his power. Perhaps God was simply power."<sup>189</sup> However, there remains the question of whether it is the presence of the god which gives life and power to the King, or whether it is the vigour of the King which sustains belief in the presence of a god; for "when their need of him was greatest, he was often no longer present."<sup>190</sup> Hence the weakened and defeated King Hanun greets his conqueror with the words, "My God has forsaken me."<sup>191</sup>

Having arrived independently at Rabbah and witnessed Shebaniah's frenzied attack on the watching children, Bathsheba asks herself how God can let such things happen. Her question however is heard by David, whose answer is didactic, given with certainty; yet it conveys an image of irreconcilable qualities within the nature of God:

"God is perfect and good. But He is also a creator. And a creator cannot be good. When He creates, He steps out of his perfection and becomes like us. Then anything can happen, then He destroys with one hand and creates with the other. That is the way it is."<sup>192</sup>

Bathsheba continues to ask questions about the identity of God, his presence yet unfathomability, in contrast to David's often didactic statements about what God is like. Her observation of the workers on the building site sums up what she thought in private. There were many different gods worshipped by the slaves, workmen and overseers, none of which seem to Bathsheba to have any great substance. When anything bad happened, the

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<sup>189</sup> *op. cit.* p. 87

<sup>190</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>191</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> *op. cit.* p. 100

gods would be called upon, often all at once:

"Often, so many gods were called upon at the same time that no individual names could be discerned - the gods were mingled in a general roar or wailing, and Bathsheba thought that this deep-throated, howling chorus of human pain, this confused dissonance, perhaps constituted the real name of the one true God."<sup>193</sup>

The next time that the question 'what is the nature of the Lord?' is asked, it comes from the lips of Tamar, the now violated daughter of the King. Tamar tries to remind Amnon of his promise to keep her and protect her, pointing out that casting her out is an even greater crime than violating her. He responds by claiming that the Lord gave her into his power and that he could do nothing other than what he did: "I loved you with the love with which the Lord has filled me."<sup>194</sup> Weeping, she asks about the nature of the Lord. Shebaniah reports to Bathsheba:

"'I have never seen Him,' Amnon replied. 'I know Him only through his deeds. But He seems to be terrible. Terrible and omnipotent.'

"And he added: 'He is so capricious that I have ceased to fear Him.'"<sup>195</sup>

Tamar comes back at him with an accusation that God is a convenience for Amnon:

"You do not know Him at all. You only use His name to blaspheme and jeer."<sup>196</sup>

There is no real answer given to her question, only the suggestion of God's power, and the uncomfortable implications of Bathsheba's statement: if there is no distinction between love and violation, what does it mean to say God is love?

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<sup>193</sup> *op. cit.* p. 111

<sup>194</sup> *op. cit.* p. 147

<sup>195</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>196</sup> *ibid.*

Shaphan, Uriah, Ahinoam, Tamar, and even Bathsheba in the first instance, all utter the question about God's nature in a crisis situation, when faced one way or another with human mortality. This is true of Absalom too, although he does not genuinely seek an answer. His death, like his life, has no place for the godly or holy. He had chosen himself, and contrived to make that chosenness a reality. When he sees that his failure is complete, as he dangles from the branches of an oak tree, the question is uttered as a comment on the absurdity of his situation. Joab considers an answer, not realising "that Absalom just wanted to say to himself: Man's life is absurd. The Lord should never have created us!"<sup>197</sup> When it is given, Joab's answer reflects Absalom's plight and his own experience:

"'The Lord is weighty,' he said. 'Our God is the weightiest in the whole universe. He weighs you down so that your neck will soon break. He is weight itself.'

For that was what Joab had seen of God: His weightiness. He had seen stones drop, men fall, walls collapse, asses and camels sink under enormous burdens, kingdoms come crashing down. Everything had been unremittingly cast down to the ground by the weight of God."<sup>198</sup>

As a footnote to this, Bathsheba describes to the scribe Joab's behaviour following his support of Adonijah and the proclamation of Solomon as the next king. As David lies dying, Joab wanders around the palace:

"He feels the terrible weight of the Lord upon him. He has become stooped, his legs bent and stumbling; God has begun to press him down towards the earth. Now he knows the nature of God."<sup>199</sup>

Finally it is David himself who, in a mirror image of his first conversation with

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<sup>197</sup> *op. cit.* p. 232

<sup>198</sup> *op. cit.* p. 232-3

<sup>199</sup> *op. cit.* p. 244

Bathsheba, asks her the question, 'What is the nature of the Lord?' Her answer is as unhesitating and certain as his was then: "He is like me. He is exactly like me."<sup>200</sup> In the security and warmth of her presence he derives the comfort from this answer which he had never experienced before, despite all his early certainty about the nature of God. His early answer to Bathsheba that the Lord was like him conveyed to her something incomprehensible, characterized by lust, uncertainty and power. In the tent in the valley of Kidron she had redefined love for him:

"To be side by side, neither above nor below.

To put one's soul in one's hand without fear, and hold it out.

To inflict this exquisite pain on one another unceasingly.

Not to be able to do without.

To give oneself up as Mephibosheth gave himself up to wine."<sup>201</sup>

David had long realised he could not do without Bathsheba. Now in his dying moments as they once again lie side by side, he gives himself up to the security of her presence. Whereas once the Lord's almost tangible presence could be met in the tent in the palace garden, he is now out of the picture, eclipsed by the entirely tangible reality of Bathsheba herself.

## Conclusion

Bathsheba's voice is very much a post-modern voice. Unlike the biblical literature and other kinds of theology which sustain some sense of transcendence outside themselves, the novel brings everything within its world. Whereas in the former there is no hermeneutical tradition in relation to God himself, in the latter everything is subject to criticism. So it is in the novel that Bathsheba questions the received story, and although

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<sup>200</sup> *op. cit.* p. 248

<sup>201</sup> *op. cit.* p. 223

she explores questions to do with God the nearest she seems to get to a conclusion is to accept a plurality of gods, and the view that it is not necessary to be precise on the question of God. The answers given to the oft repeated question, 'What is the nature of the Lord?' reflect the experience and circumstances of those who provide the answer. Answers given by David reflect his own capacity for cruelty and destruction. Amnon's answer reflects his own lust. With Absalom hanging by his hair and on the point of death, Joab speaks of the weightiness of God. In the end, Bathsheba's answer to the question is one that meets David's need, God created in her image. The novel offers a variety of views of God, none of them very positive. Where psalms are quoted expressing God's love, there is evidently a great gulf between what is said and the current experience of those speaking and listening. God means different things to different people in different situations; he is not to be located in idols, in the King, or even to be found in religious ritual. Ultimately God is unreachable, and human beings are left only with the security or cruelty they find in one another, with the struggle for power over one another, perhaps with the confused crying out to an unknown god akin to what Bathsheba heard on the building site when some disaster occurred. In this sense *Bathsheba* is a very dark novel, pessimistic about human relationships, and about the possibility of God being anything other than distant, irrational or cruel.

The experience of writing about *Bathsheba* resembles that of interpreting a parable, as expressed by Nathan within the novel. Stating that a parable must be able to be interpreted in many ways, the prophet continues to instruct David, comparing the images of a parable to cloths laid on top of one another on a weaver's shelf:

"When you hold up one image to the light you must remember that a new image lies waiting in the darkness: beneath every pattern another pattern

lies hidden."<sup>202</sup>

It is a novel of many layers which resonate with significance, inviting further exploration. It is a novel which raises questions, but which provides no single clear answer. When David states that all he demands of a parable is clear instruction, Nathan's reply, in keeping with other aspects of the novel, is contradictory:

"A good parable contains an infinite number of pieces of clear instruction  
- yes, even countless pieces of clear instruction that contradict and  
exclude one another."<sup>203</sup>

This approach to interpreting parables which Nathan describes contrasts with the approach David has to his own utterances as they are written down by the scribe. The role of the scribe is described with the following observations on his task:

"The object of writing was to reduce the transience of words.

What was written remained the property of the speaker. It was hidden in a compartment in the floor, and was never put to use. It existed, which was enough....

With the scribe the King was compelled to speak slowly, every word had to be the result of a decision; and that perhaps was the scribe's true role - to check and restrain the flow of thoughts, to open the words one by one so that the speaker was forced to look into them...

The object and significance of writing was the act of writing itself."<sup>204</sup>

This suggests that what is important about the act of writing is that words and meaning are fixed, 'reducing the transience of words'. However, it also suggests that in order for this

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<sup>202</sup> *op. cit.* p. 58

<sup>203</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>204</sup> *op. cit.* p. 23



to remain the case, the written words have to be hidden away. The fact that the scribe has had his tongue cut out appeals to David as something of great significance, conveying the purity of his task: words cannot pass from his lips into a dangerously transient form of existence, but only from his pen, such that they are fixed and then hidden away.

Each of these contrasting attitudes to words is evident in the novel as a whole, not just in the views of different characters. The precision of Lindgren's style reflects the care with words that is noted above in the comment that writing acts as a restraint, forcing the speaker to look into each word. Yet the narrative itself and the way it relates to the biblical narrative of David and Bathsheba much more displays both the transience of words and the endless possibilities of interpretation. Both David and Bathsheba rewrite their story as the narrative progresses. David does this within a single conversation with the Lord, for example in his justification of the deaths of both Shaphan and Uriah. It also happens in a much more long-term view. David asks Bathsheba if she remembers how Absalom was as a child, and she seems to play along with his apparent lapse of memory, answering as if she had been there. Similarly, whereas initially she recognises that she has been stolen from Uriah, towards the end of the novel she comments that Uriah abandoned her and David kindly took her in. There is a sense of play about the narrative, in the foreshadowing and echoing of events and images. It has already been noted that Shebaniah's life and death echo Shaphan's, that Absalom's explanation for the scratches on his face foreshadows the actual circumstances of his death. Similarly, the way in which Amnon first catches sight of the "frighteningly beautiful" Tamar, is a repetition of David's first sight of the "terrifyingly beautiful" Bathsheba.

The very existence of the novel represents a condemnation of the view which tries to hide a text away, rendering it out of reach of interpretation. Such an attitude is chillingly captured in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. There the Bible is locked

away, brought out only to be read by the Commander to the captive handmaid and other members of the household:

“The Bible is kept locked up, the way people once kept tea locked up, so the servants wouldn’t steal it. It is an incendiary device: who knows what we’d make of it, if we ever got our hands on it?”<sup>205</sup>

This desire to control something potentially dangerous is also reflected in Ivan Karamazov’s ‘poem’, ‘The Grand Inquisitor’. The Inquisitor argues that the freedom Jesus brings is destabilizing, that the control of the Church is necessary for people to cope, insisting to Jesus that “you have no right to add anything to what you have said already in the days of old.”<sup>206</sup> Both of these examples illustrate the view that the Bible somehow contains ‘truth’ or ‘meaning’ as something which exists in isolation to any particular context. Yet Lindgren’s retelling of Bathsheba’s story reflects the views expressed by Nathan about the interpretation of parables, that the task of interpretation is endless, there being many layers and many patterns to be discovered. As in the midrashic approach to interpretation, it is seen as an endless dialogue with the text. The novel’s relationship to the Bible is that of one literary work to another, breaking down the conventions surrounding biblical interpretation. David’s attitude to the scribe represents an attempt to close a text, to fix meaning, and therefore to render it useless. As the narrative makes clear, he cannot succeed in this. Just as his desire for simplicity and certainty in theology is undermined by Bathsheba, and by the questioning of his own experience, he likewise loses any ultimate control he may have had - or thought he had - over his words. As was noted above, his final words which are written down after his death are not in fact his, but

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<sup>205</sup> Atwood, Margaret *The Handmaid’s Tale*[1985] London: Vintage, 1996. Ch. 15, p.98

<sup>206</sup> Dostoyevsky, Fyodor *The Brothers Karamazov*[1880] trans. David Magarshack, London: Penguin, 1958 (reissued 1982) Part Two, Book 5, ch.5 “The Grand Inquisitor”, p.293.

are evidently Bathsheba's.<sup>207</sup> His story is out of his control; it cannot be hidden away, but is out in the open, vulnerable in a post-modern world where words and meaning are transient, where nothing is fixed, and everything is questioned.

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<sup>207</sup> This provides an explanation for what may appear to be a contradiction within the biblical text: the fact that there are two final speeches of David, in 2 Samuel 23 and 1 Kings 2 respectively. Lindgren, like Heller, has taken up the deathbed narrative of the first two chapters of 1 Kings as a key to his own narrative. There the last words of David are terse and politically directive. The other 'last words' however, in 2 Samuel 23, are more in the nature of a psalm, and perhaps less credible as the words of a dying man. It is widely accepted that the last four chapters of 2 Samuel (ch. 21-24) are not part of the Succession Narrative (ch. 9-20) which in fact is thought to conclude with the first two chapters of 1 Kings. Lindgren's novel relates entirely to this narrative.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to examine the relationship between two modern texts of fiction and the biblical text to which they relate. Neither of these novels can be said to fall within a traditional framework of Christian interpretation. *God Knows* is clearly written from a Jewish perspective, coming from the United States where religious and theological conservatism have been particularly important within both Jewish and Christian faith communities. *Bathsheba* has something of what might be called a cold Nordic quality, with God's absence becoming increasingly evident as the novel progresses. One of the major themes of the study has been to look at the way in which western Christianity has traditionally approached the interpretation of the Bible, and to contrast this with a Jewish midrashic approach. It remains therefore to look again at the question of whether or not the relationship between these two novels and the biblical text can be understood as a kind of modern midrash. The argument is that this can be done up to a point, but that it is the differences between these novels and midrash that prove to be most fruitful in seeking an answer to the question of how the relationship between the texts is best understood.

### Midrash and the novel: common ground.

There are certainly similarities between these novels and a midrashic approach to a biblical text. In the earlier chapter on midrash reference was made to Boyarin's understanding of midrash, based on the concept of intertextuality. His three main points are that a text is always something of a mosaic of earlier discourse, that it may be

dialogical in nature, and that cultural codes operate - consciously or unconsciously - which both constrain and allow the production of new texts within the culture. The importance of debate and dialogue has been noted as of central importance in midrash, rooted as it is in argument between the rabbis in the *beit midrash*, the place of study. The mosaic and dialogical characteristics of a text are two sides of the same coin, and both are evident in the opening pages of both novels, but are particularly obvious in *God Knows*. David offers authoritative opinions on other texts which relate to him - the books of Samuel and Chronicles - as well as on many other biblical texts. Not only that but either by direct reference, quotation or allusion he takes issue with other non-biblical texts: works of English literature, European music and works of art. Although far less ostentatious in manner, the same is true of *Bathsheba*. Through the character Bathsheba the biblical text with which the novel is engaged is questioned, and contrasting views on writing and interpretation are presented through David's use of his scribe and of Nathan, who only very reluctantly gives the King a single definitive interpretation of his parable. A further similarity between the novels and midrash relates particularly to *aggadic* midrash. Certain characteristics of *aggadah* which have been noted can be observed in the novels discussed. There is the fact that although matters of doctrine are not worked through systematically, questions about God, his attributes, and relationship to humanity are raised. Answers may be suggested, but no single correct interpretation is claimed. The concerns of a particular generation are brought to the biblical text, and the way in which they are dealt with reflects the situation from which they arise. As in *aggadah*, there is a great sense of play about the narrative in both novels - again, evidently more exuberant in the Heller, more subtle and ironic in the Lindgren. Re-telling the biblical story is a perfectly legitimate form of *aggadic* interpretation, with the use of anachronism and other such 'embellishments' recognised as a means of illumination, not

distortion of the text.

These similarities between a midrashic approach to the biblical text and the two novels under discussion are all literary. The differences however are more to do with Boyarin's third point about the culture within which the new texts are produced. True midrash is always a product of a faith community: it is to do with the relationship of that community to its sacred text, and is a corporate activity, a continuation of the dialogue initiated by God in the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. It was noted earlier that *aggadah* evolved in a context of conflict - conflict with both external and internal issues. In this context *aggadah* served as a way of deriving guidance from the Torah, strengthening faith and admonishing where necessary. This is not so with *God Knows* or *Bathsheba*. Neither conveys a sense of faith in the Bible as a sacred text, nor do they make any claim of belonging to a faith community, yet in different ways they do relate to the Bible as a significant text inherited within their respective cultures. Heller's David, with the voice of a modern American Jew, is clearly relating to the Bible as the sacred text of his culture, although it is probably more true to say that culture for him is in fact a clash of cultures, provoking the unresolved identity crisis: what does it mean to be a Jew in post-Holocaust, late twentieth century America? This question of identity is evident in his struggle with God - questioning God's nature, his existence, rejecting and yet not able to do without. In *Bathsheba* the authoritative voice of David is gradually undermined by Bathsheba. As individuals continue to ask about the nature of God, by the end of the novel the story has effectively been rewritten such that there is no longer any sense of divine presence; indeed, what looms ever larger is the question of whether there ever was such a presence.

## Midrash and the novel: points of departure.

If the similarities between these modern texts and midrash are accepted, what then becomes evident through the differences between the two genres is that the novels reflect a situation where there has been a rupture between sacred text and community. There remains the intertextual play, but rather than a sense of acceptance and faith there is one of uncertainty, agnosticism, and cynicism. Such characteristics may well evoke in the reader a sense of mistrust - particularly that is in a reader who retains a sense of belonging to one of the faith communities for whom the biblical text is sacred. Such a sense of mistrust is not peculiar to the present time. In the introduction to this thesis the doubts of the seventeenth century poet Andrew Marvell concerning Milton's 'Paradise Lost' were noted. Marvell was concerned that Milton's 'Paradise Lost' would in some way violate the sacred text, that it in fact represented the kind of rupture with - and challenge to - the faith community mentioned above. These doubts are put to rest however, and he goes on to claim that Milton has preserved the "things divine", remaining himself "inviolable". A similar fear is expressed by Doctor Johnson, who in his *Life of Waller* is particularly scathing about 'poetical devotion', claiming that poetry will always be inadequate as a means of expressing things divine.

"Poetry loses its lustre and its power, because it is applied to the decoration of something more excellent than itself. All that pious verse can do is to help the memory, and delight the ear, and for these purposes it may be very useful; but it supplies nothing to the mind. The ideas of Christian Theology are too simple for eloquence, too sacred for fiction, and too majestick for ornament..."<sup>208</sup>

Earlier in the same work he had commented that "The essence of poetry is invention" - to

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<sup>208</sup> Quoted by David Jasper in *The Study of Literature and Religion: An Introduction* London: Macmillan, 1989

try and convey Christian theology through poetry therefore, and by implication through any kind of fiction, is to try and hold together two irreconcilable entities: the truth of sacred scripture, and inventiveness, which suggests a pull in the opposite direction.

This dismissal by Johnson of poetry and fiction on religious subjects raises a wide range of questions about the nature of biblical writing and about the appropriateness of certain interpretive approaches to biblical texts. The suggestion that 'Scriptural truth' and 'inventiveness' are irreconcilable implies a failure to recognise the creativity of the biblical writers themselves. Is it possible with integrity to claim that non-biblical poetry and fiction are inappropriate ways to convey biblical and theological concepts, when poetry and narrative are two major genres of biblical literature? The fact that this false divide between 'fiction' and 'truth' has pervaded biblical study has been extensively explored by Meir Sternberg in *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*. He points out that traditionally the term 'fiction' has been used to denote 'nonhistoricity', implying that which is both inventive and falsifying. The implication of this is that whilst history writing is perceived as being inseparable from factual truth, fiction writing is perceived as being specifically opposed to it. Sternberg highlights the fact that the real issue is not the presence or absence of truth value in any given text, but the commitment to truth value. History writing is not simply 'a record of fact', but a discourse that claims to be a record of fact. Similarly fiction writing is a discourse that claims freedom of invention. The fundamental difference between these two kinds of writing, which for so long have been forced into opposition, is not to do with the presence or absence of a truth value, but in the truth claim of a particular text.<sup>209</sup> Johnson's remarks indicate the pervasiveness of this false dichotomy exposed by Sternberg, and serve to highlight one of the contrasts between the Christian approach and the Jewish approach to biblical interpretation

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<sup>209</sup> Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985 ch. 1. 'Literary Text, Literary Approach: Getting the Questions Straight'



outlined in the two opening chapters of this study: that for about fifteen hundred years Christian interpretation conveyed a sense of the ultimate interpretive goal being a concept of truth which lay beyond the text itself, whereas for the rabbis interpretation was much more to do with the linking up of different verses of the text, on the understanding that they illuminate one another. In terms of the two novels studied here, it is important to recognise that they can be seen as part of a long and vibrant tradition of rewriting biblical texts, a tradition rooted within the biblical corpus itself.

### **The Rewritten Bible.**

In the chapter on midrash it was noted that Jacob Neusner includes the literature categorized as 'rewritten Bible' in his very broad definition of midrash. More often than not, other scholars would disagree with this, however Neusner includes it on the basis that midrash is to be understood not simply as an identifiable genre of literature but also as a type of interpretive activity. It is an approach that emphasizes the way in which biblical literature has in the past been understood as a living and developing tradition, not as a closed text or texts. The book of *Deuteronomy* is one example of rewritten biblical literature, re-presenting as it does parts of the book of Exodus. Rewritten biblical literature usually bears witness to a particular purpose in writing, be it theological, political or some other. *Deuteronomy* reflects a concern to remind the Israelites of the northern kingdom of Israel - prior to the fall of that kingdom to the Assyrians - of the old legal and cultic traditions: traditions relating to the identity of the people of Israel as a chosen people in the days of their encounter with God through Moses, before they entered the promised land. *Deuteronomy* reminds them of the obligations that flow from this identity, at a time when society is more complex and they experience more pressure to

conform to foreign religious cultic traditions.<sup>210</sup> The books of *Chronicles* are another obvious example within the biblical canon. One of the major issues for the Jewish people in the post-exilic period was again the question of identity, especially in terms of the defining boundaries of their community at a time when political boundaries ceased to have any bearing on this question of identity. One of the ways in which the Chronicler stresses the unity of God's people is to stress in the rewriting of past events the importance of the one kingdom united under the Davidic dynasty, which in turn is closely related to the idea of the Kingship of God. As Heller's David notes, in *Chronicles* he is a pious whitewash of his former self as encountered in *2 Samuel*. The Chronicler has left out all that would mar this conception of a divinely anointed king uniting the people under the rule of God.<sup>211</sup> Many other examples of this literary activity can be found amongst the body of texts loosely defined as intertestamental. The book of *Jubilees*, the *Genesis Apocryphon*, and the *Life of Adam and Eve* are all examples of texts which relate very closely to biblical texts, rewriting with some specific purpose in mind, or simply filling in what were perceived to be gaps in the biblical text. All of these texts are clearly products of the particular concerns of a particular time. Centuries later, an equally vibrant tradition of re-presenting biblical narrative can be found in the mediaeval mystery plays of western Europe. At a time when relatively few could read, and fewer still had access to the Latin text of the Vulgate Bible, these plays brought the voice of God and the major biblical characters into the immediacy of the market place. The seventeenth century brings Milton and his epic rewriting of the early chapters of Genesis in *Paradise Lost*. Other poets take up biblical narratives as a means of exploring issues for their own day. Dryden appropriates the story of Absalom in *Absalom and Achitophel* to write about political machinations of his own time. In the nineteenth century Byron uses the story of Cain to

<sup>210</sup> See Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy*, London: SCM Press 1966.

<sup>211</sup> See H.G.M. Williamson, *1 & 2 Chronicles*, (New Century Bible), London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1982.

ask unpopular questions about God and the nature of existence in *Cain: a Mystery*. Perhaps one can even see the interpretive activity of those New Testament scholars of the Enlightenment who sought to reconstruct the gospel narratives, such as Reimarus - rewriting to include 'rational' explanations of apparently miraculous events - as part of this interpretive tradition of the rewritten Bible.

Amongst the examples mentioned above, the biblical and intertestamental works are all examples of rewriting which seek to preserve the sacred. In addition to this, given that these works are all presented in the same manner as biblical texts, they seem to be claiming scriptural authority - not necessarily equal to that of the biblical texts, but clearly claiming to be closely identifiable with them, and part of the same tradition. Anything which in the 'parent' text may have been perceived as in some way defiling that which is holy has been omitted, or else given an 'acceptable' explanation. These are texts which reflect a concern to clarify, to eradicate ambiguity or paradox. Marvell, Johnson and T.S. Eliot would surely have applauded the authors' motives, the preservation, or even defence, of the sacred text being of similar concern to each of them. Of the later works mentioned however, the popular literature of the mystery plays displays no such preoccupation. If anything, both this genre and the later poetry mentioned have something of the subversive about them, whether or not this is explicit. Liturgical and folk elements are both very much in evidence in all the major surviving play cycles, and Richard Axton draws particular attention to the influence of the Midsummer Watch on the Chester plays. The former was described in a thirteenth century sermon as containing 'not only joy on the day of St. John's nativity, but also foolery and profane love-making, bonfires, unlawful and lewd plays in public places..., eating and drinking.'<sup>212</sup> The manner of presentation of the biblical narratives in these mystery plays is closely related to the

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<sup>212</sup> Axton, *European Drama of the Early Middle Ages*, (p.182), London : Hutchinson & Co. 1974

popular motifs of contemporary secular drama, tying in with what the audience of the time would have expected and related to. Reflected in these texts is no explicit desire to preserve or protect the sacredness of the Bible, but rather an effect - to a greater or lesser degree - of exposure: exposure of what is uncomfortable in the biblical text, of ambiguity and paradox.

Stepping back for a moment from particular texts, the notion of texts as both exposing and concealing needs a little exploration. As a starting point it is not necessary to go further than Auerbach's essay *Odysseus' Scar*, the opening chapter of *Mimesis*<sup>213</sup>, for his well-known comparison between the writing of Homer and the patriarchal narratives of *Genesis*. He points out that in Homer, there is nothing that is not in the foreground of the narrative. Specific details are given as to time, place, characters involved; if a god appears the reader knows where he or she has come from and what they have been doing. Nothing is concealed, nor is there anything didactic to be teased out. Auerbach comments that "Homer can be analysed... but he cannot be interpreted."<sup>214</sup> In contrast, the biblical narrative tends to be sparse, with only so much detail as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative, often leaving only the barest hints as to time and place. God speaks as if from nowhere; there is little psychological explanation as to relationships between characters, with thoughts and feelings left unexpressed, or suggested only in fragmentary speech and silence. Auerbach comments on the elements of suspense in these narratives, and notes that they are 'fraught with background'.<sup>215</sup> This is in contrast to the style of Homer, where whatever is being described is done in such a way as to convey the sense that this is the only perspective. Auerbach speaks of Homer's work as narrated reality, bearing a simplicity which is absent from the biblical narratives. In the case of the

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<sup>213</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis, the Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. W.R.Trask, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968

<sup>214</sup> *op. cit.* p. 13

<sup>215</sup> *op. cit.* p. 15

latter, there is a tyrannical truth claim, such that doctrine and promise cannot be separate from narratives; rather they are incarnate in the narratives. The biblical stories with their drive to "overcome our reality"<sup>216</sup> therefore demand interpretation in a way that Homer's stories do not. The essay concludes with the following summary of the two styles, Homeric and biblical:

"The two styles, in their opposition, represent basic types: on the one hand fully externalized description, uniform illumination, uninterrupted connection, free expression, all events in the foreground, displaying unmistakable meanings, few elements of historical development and of psychological perspective; on the other hand, 'certain parts brought into high relief, others left obscure, abruptness, suggestive influence of the unexpressed, "background" quality, multiplicity of meanings and the need for interpretation, universal-historical claims, development of the concept of the historically becoming, and pre-occupation with the problematic."<sup>217</sup>

Auerbach's analysis has been affirmed by later scholars, who whilst they may quibble, have not presented any radical challenge to these important observations. Robert Alter affirms Auerbach's comments on the binding of Isaac as both "resoundingly right" and "too sweepingly general", pointing out that such an analysis would have to be modified for other biblical narratives - those of David for example, present a psychological complexity which, he argues, is absent from the text explored by Auerbach.<sup>218</sup> Sternberg's section on 'The Drama of Reading' provides a comment about reading biblical narrative which seems to pick up exactly on Auerbach's observations quoted above. As far as reading such a text

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<sup>216</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>217</sup> *op. cit.* p. 23

<sup>218</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, ch. 1 'A Literary Approach to the Bible', New York: Basic Books, 1981

goes, he writes that

“...the scarcity of commentary forces us to evaluate the agent and action by appeal to norms that remain implicit, to clues that may have more than one face, to structures that turn on reconstruction, to voices partial in both senses, to models of character that resist polarization. Insofar as knowledge consists in the relations between part and whole, the piecemeal, secretive storytelling makes at best for difficult unity.”<sup>219</sup>

Paradox, ambiguity, perceived gaps in a text, all provoke and maintain the drive to interpret. As Auerbach has shown, a text in which everything is present in the foreground can be analysed but not interpreted. The kind of exposure which the popular literature of mystery plays and novels mentioned above exemplifies is not one which might reveal the kind of detailed clarity of Homeric texts. In speaking of exposure it is rather the exposure of those very things which sometimes interpreters seek to eradicate - the problematic gaps and things which sit uneasily with preconceived ideas of what fits in with Christian doctrine. Auerbach also notes in his essay the way in which after the Reformation great cultural changes and what he calls ‘the awakening of a critical consciousness’ led to doctrine becoming a disembodied image, severed from the biblical narratives which were then increasingly likely to be viewed simply as ancient legends.<sup>220</sup> The novels at the heart of this study are reminders of what Auerbach observes: that doctrine is incarnated in biblical narrative. To try and extract it is to be left not with ‘ultimate truth’ which is somehow the goal of reading the text, but with an impoverished theology and appreciation of the biblical literature. The kind of theology which is found in these novels is not systematic theology nor is it credal theology; it is dramatic theology, theology which is about the bruising encounter with the text. In the passage quoted above Auerbach refers to

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<sup>219</sup> Sternberg, *op. cit.* ch. 1 p. 47

<sup>220</sup> *op. cit.* p.15-16

the universal-historical claims of the Old Testament text, starting as it does with Creation and speaking of the Last Days. It is this all-encompassing scope which he contrasts with Homer's work: the latter seeks to make us forget our own reality for a time whereas the former seeks to overcome our reality. The retelling of the story in *God Knows* and *Bathsheba* is in both cases an example of allowing that encounter with the text which exposes its problematic nature, allowing the gaps and silences to speak in the context of the present time and particular culture.

Some of the particular issues have already been touched on in each of the individual chapters on the novels. It is appropriate here to draw together some of these different threads. There are specific theological issues which emerge from the two novels, but these can also be looked at together. Although in some ways the cultural contexts in which each of the novels was produced are quite different, common concerns are evident. Both novels testify to a world in which the life of an individual might be characterised by inner uncertainty, by the questioning of self-identity, a sense of loss, fear of misrepresentation, and a sense of the emptiness of life. Tied up with this group of anxieties are two more related areas of concern: issues surrounding power and personal autonomy, and the question of whether or not an inherited tradition of belief in God is to do with an existing reality separate from but concerned with human life, or whether such religious ideas are in fact merely constructs of human hopes of not being alone, and which are now better dispensed with. Particular developments in various aspects of life this century which have contributed to these somewhat pessimistic ideas can be identified within the novels. Reference to the Holocaust has already been noted in relation to David's preoccupation with the death of the innocent child in *God Knows*. Developments in feminist thinking, and the change in the position of women in western society are evident in both of the novels' treatment of the character Bathsheba, vastly differing as they are. Religious pluralism is

an issue raised particularly in *Bathsheba*. All of these issues touch on that of power. Ideas which in the past were widely accepted concerning who exercises power over whom in human relationships, and whether there is an 'ultimate power', have now been replaced by widespread uncertainty and loss of confidence.

Many of the issues raised in the novels are to do with the 'limit-experiences' of human life. The questions asked are about the edges of human experience: about whether life and indeed death have any purpose; whether there is any ultimate referent for human life - that which has been known as 'God'; and if so, given the nature of human experience, what kind of a being might that be? Unlike systematic theology, the theology of these texts is incarnated in the narrative - as it is in the biblical texts upon which they are based. These novels are examples of theology worked out in a context of vulnerability rather than defence: the kind of vulnerability David Tracy and Werner Jeanrond speak of<sup>221</sup>, as opposed to the defensiveness evoked by the language of Marvell, Johnson and Eliot for example.

### **Approaching the text: a bruising encounter.**

The starting point for this thesis was to ask the question 'In what sense, if at all, can the two novels *God Knows* and *Bathsheba*, be understood as valid commentaries on, and interpretations of, the story of David found in the Hebrew Bible?' In terms of literary genre and general approach the nearest recognised form of interpretation to them is *aggadic* midrash, but they cannot simply be fitted into this category of writing in that they both convey a sense of the relationship between text and faith community having been broken.

Earlier it was noted that the suggestion that 'Scriptural truth' and 'inventiveness' are irreconcilable implies a failure to recognise the creativity of the biblical writers

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<sup>221</sup> see Introduction and ch. 1 of this study



themselves. To that can be added a failure to recognise the necessary creativity of the reader of biblical narrative. The omniscience of the narrator has been quite extensively discussed by Sternberg and others in recent studies of biblical narrative.<sup>222</sup> Although omniscient, the narrator does not fill in every detail, but chooses to leave gaps which demand the attention of the reader, who employs a degree of creativity in filling them with meaning. In the past, both rabbinic and Christian approaches have displayed distinct creativity in reading the story of David, with the particular concern of absolving David, the Lord's anointed, from the stain of murder and adultery. The gap between the concept of holiness and the reality of David's behaviour has been too uncomfortable for some interpreters to live with. Yet it is precisely this discomfort which points toward the distinct importance of the novels in their approach to the narrative of 2 Samuel.

Images of discomfort have been evident in the language used above to speak of the relationship between these two novels and the biblical text. There is the image of brokenness, of rupture, of a bruising encounter with the biblical text, an encounter where the uncomfortable gaps are exposed and not concealed or plastered over. Where there is an evident break with the faith community, there is nevertheless a relationship - one defined by its brokenness: it is not a case of the biblical text having been abandoned or subjected to ridicule. Although there may be a struggle to find meaning and relevance in the biblical text, there is still a sense of recognition that it cannot be ignored. Val Cunningham speaks of this in his article '*It is no sin to limp*', based on Genesis 32.22-32, the narrative of Jacob's struggle with the mysterious stranger at Jabbok:

"Whether we like it or not, our culture, our consciousness is haunted by

<sup>222</sup> see Sternberg, *op. cit.* ch. 1; also Alter, *op. cit.*, esp. ch. 6 'Characterization and the Art of Reticence'; Frank Kermode: *Poetry, Narrative History*, 1990 Bucknell Lectures, ch. 1. 'New Ways with Bible Stories'; Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, JSOT Supplement, Almond Press 1989; and Gunn & Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford Bible Series OUP 1993.

the God of Jacob. This God, like this story, just won't go away. Our whole experience is marked indelibly by this past and by successive encounters with it, and our whole culture limps after it."<sup>223</sup>

Even where there is no faith, the significance of the Bible in western culture cannot be brushed aside. Looking at what happens to Jacob, who is wounded in his struggle, Cunningham speaks in this article of limping as a necessary part of the encounter with God; it was necessary for Jacob, not just an unfortunate chance encounter. Jacob struggled until his demand for a blessing was heeded, but

"The grip of the divine wrestler persists - and harshly. He leaves a mark - an inerasable mark - that's a kind of scarring, a legacy of pain."<sup>224</sup>

This legacy is still with us, and Cunningham traces some of those this century who have consciously recognised this narrative as "a story of the necessary wrestle with God and the Bible."

"I.A. Richards cast Wittgenstein as a modern Jacob. Freud evidently saw himself as one wrestling like Jacob with the God of his fathers and being lamed in the process. Roland Barthes wrestles with the story of Jacob as an illustration of the structuralist's wrestle for meaning in all of the Biggest Books. Jacques Derrida casts himself as another Jacob, wrestling with the Book and with postmodernist literature... Harold Bloom sees himself as yet another Wrestling Jacob, in the footsteps of Wrestling Sigmund - as he calls him - agonising over the meaning for our time of the Bible..."<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Valentine Cunningham, 'It is no sin to limp', published in *Literature and Theology*, Vol.6, No.4, December 1992

<sup>224</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>225</sup> *ibid.*

To this list might be added Heller's David, wrestling with the God he has inherited in late twentieth century American Jewish culture. Who is this God, and what language does he speak - that of the King James version of the Bible, or colloquial American slang? The characters of *Bathsheba* likewise belong amongst these wrestlers: what is God like and where is he to be found? Is he a God of inaccessible holiness, a God to be sought yet never found, or a God whose voice is somehow heard in the howling chorus of human pain?

In discussing the various examples of 'rewritten Bible', it was noted that some of the rewritings display a concern to smooth over inconsistencies or uncomfortable characteristics and events. In contrast the novels were recognised as effectively exposing such things, exposing the biblical text as gapped, ambiguous, and paradoxical. In recognising this, these novels can be said to reflect a truly biblical ability to live with paradox - something that has been lost in the desire often encountered to seek certainties, to pin down meaning. The image of a wounding encounter with the text explored by Cunningham in *'It is no sin to limp'* offers a metaphor for the relationship between such novels as *God Knows* and *Bathsheba* and the biblical text. An encounter between two irreconcilable entities is bound to involve bruising. It is not always possible to read the Bible honestly and at the same time to hang on to preconceived ideas about its 'message'. Every reader will have such preconceived ideas, and therefore every encounter with the text necessarily involves the possibility of being changed. One cannot extract a message from the story of David which can be presented detached from the narrative in which it is incarnated.

Searching questions are uttered in the pages of these novels, questions relating to the presence or absence of God, the character of God, the 'creation' of the God encountered in the pages of the Bible. These questions are uttered far from the confines of the certainties sometimes found in works of biblical interpretation or distinct faith

communities, uttered here in the wilderness of not knowing. Similar themes of wilderness and the silence of God are found in the work of Jacques Derrida. Derrida speaks of all writing being secondary - not just works of interpretation, but also the original writing of Scripture. "Writing is the moment of the desert as the moment of Separation."<sup>226</sup> It is when we no longer hear God speak that we take words upon ourselves, and writing is necessary. He takes up the image of the breaking of the Tablets of the Law, the first time they were given to Moses, as an image of rupture: of rupture within God (he speaks of God interrupting himself); and of marking the break between original speech and repetition, for the tablets have to be given again, and the second giving is recounted shortly after the first. Referring to Jabès, with whose work he is concerned in this chapter, this image of rupture is explored as an image of the separation of the Jew from God by sin: it was sin that caused the tablets to be broken, sin that caused the expulsion from the garden. Derrida quotes Jabès, "The garden is speech, the desert writing."<sup>227</sup> It is in this context of separation that literary activity takes place - both that which produced the biblical texts themselves, and that which constitutes the multifarious works of commentary, seeking to understand. What is so significant about the biblical narratives is precisely the gaps and spaces, the ambiguities, the inexplicable. As Hartman puts it (following Auerbach), readers coming to these narratives are forced "to become interpreters and to find the presence of what is absent in the fraught background, the densely layered... narrative."<sup>228</sup>

Significantly, many of the twentieth century figures mentioned here are Jewish - Freud, Bloom, Jabès, Derrida, Hartman. One theme of this study has been to highlight the distinction between Christian and Jewish approaches to biblical interpretation. Yet in

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<sup>226</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, London: Routledge, 1978. ch. 3: 'Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book'.

<sup>227</sup> *ibid.* p. 68

<sup>228</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, 'The Struggle for the Text', in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986

exploring this and in reading the two novels, perhaps what is particularly important is that we are urged to acknowledge the aporetic side of the Christian hermeneutical tradition - a strand of interpretation which is akin to aspects of Jewish interpretation in emphasizing what cannot be known, the darkness of God, the wilderness, the 'via negativa'. In his book *in the Reading Gaol*, Cunningham speaks of the Judaeo-Christian recognition of the rupture within the interpretive tradition. He characterizes the two strands as the rabbi and the poet, the former an interpreter "who seeks final signifieds and original truths", and the latter one "who eschews final truths for mere delight in the play of signifiers".<sup>229</sup> Both of these are to be found in both traditions:

"Alongside the idea of the revelatoriness of the Open Book, the Light of Scripture, the historicism and referentialism of the Word, alongside the claim to true teleology and to the reality of God..., there has always functioned a counter-set of equally felt realities: the dark side of the Deity, the mystery of the absence of God and the averted divine face..., the troubling silence of the heavens, the founding wilderness experience..."<sup>230</sup>

At the focal moment of Christian redemption, the cry of desolation from Christ on the cross is the cry of that Jewish wilderness agony - a moment in which for the Christian, God's presence and absence are simultaneously felt. Cunningham argues against such critics as Susan Handelman that it is not possible to drive a large wedge between Judaism and Christianity, and he exposes deconstructionism as being essentially biblical: it has no terms of argument of its own but is parasitic on this negative tradition of interpretation. After all, it is the deconstructor Derrida who points us not only to the breaking of the

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<sup>229</sup> Cunningham, *in the Reading Gaol: postmodernity, texts, and history*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994. p. 394

<sup>230</sup> *ibid.*

Tablets of the Law, but beyond that to Babel, where the great deconstructor God 'deconstructs' the never-to-be-completed tower, confusing the language of the people. This is the God who reveals his name, yet whose name is unpronounceable.<sup>231</sup>

To call the novels *God Knows* and *Bathsheba* 'valid commentaries' would be to mislead, for they bear little resemblance to the literary genre of biblical commentary. They are however, very much to be considered as valid interpretations in a postmodern sense: they are participatory, interactive; we are drawn into their dialogue with the biblical text and other texts, and as a result engage in a debate with our contemporary context. Their narrative form enables the reader to enter into the story in a way which a commentary does not, for the reader of the latter maintains a certain distance from the text, tending to view it as object. The narrative of the novel however enables a much more immediate encounter with the biblical text, an encounter with the biblical characters questioning their own representation, motivation, experience and beliefs. The novels illustrate that which Christian theologians, biblical scholars, and theorists of language and literature are all prone at times to deny: that the relationship with the scriptural is essential to all contemporary literature, a relationship that cannot be ignored. It is the "master relationship, and that in all our contemporary engagements between word and world, in all our words about words, and especially in all our words about words-and-the-world, our practice and our theory are commanded above all by a relationship with... traditional thought and traditional words about the Word that have been the essence of the preceding so-called Christian centuries."<sup>232</sup> Unconventional commentaries these novels may be, but they illustrate that - like David's clinging monkey - the Bible cannot be shaken off, and for as long as that remains true, the dialogue of interpretation will go on, in all its multifarious forms.

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<sup>231</sup> Derrida, 'Des tours de Babel', discussed by Cunningham, in *in the Reading Gaol*, ch. 8.

<sup>232</sup> Cunningham, *in the Reading Gaol: postmodernity, texts, and history*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1994. p. 364

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