

HEBREW BIBLE

BOOK REVIEW

THE BIBLE AS IT IS:

Bible Hermeneutics based on Modern Literary Theory

(On the Tenth Anniversary of Meir Weiss's book*)

Already before the appearance of Meir Weiss's book isolated attempts were made, as he himself points out (pp. 24-26), to place the achievements of modern literary criticism and its methods at the disposal of the interpreter of the Hebrew Bible. Thus he mentions H. Fisch's article (1955), Aryeh L. Strauss's demonstration of the method in his study of five Psalms (1959), Leo Krinetzki's analysis of Psalm 48 (1960) and L. Alonso Schoekel's lecture and articles (1959-1961). Further, the author points out that the basic principles of modern literary theory also find their expression in the works of translation and interpretation and in the philosophical articles of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig.

This is the first exhaustive attempt to prove the feasibility of the proposed method, as against the various theories of biblical criticism, paving the way for whoever chooses to read a poetic portion of the Hebrew Bible as an artistic creation.

In his introduction (p. 23) the author states: "In every generation, Biblical Studies accurately mirror the prevailing moods". In a brief review, he describes the stages of development in the various grasps of the humanities and literature in general and shows how the different theories of interpretation throughout the periods of biblical research paralleled these grasps.

The historicism and positivism that enslaved the humanities to the method of the natural sciences, and turned the study of literature into the study of the history of literature, gave rise in biblical research to a variety of approaches of the historical-critical method. Dilthey's reaction to the interest in the historical-psychological process of the formation of the artistic creation, and his presentation of the History of Literature as the History of Ideas (*Geistesgeschichte*) brought about the appearance of the Religio-Historical School and the History of Traditions trend. The anthropological and sociological approaches, the method of Form Criticism and the engagement in "pattern" research (*Patternforschung*) also paralleled what was taking place in the various approaches to the humanities in general.

* Meir Weiss, *The Bible and Modern Literary Theory*, Jerusalem, The Bialik Institute, 1962, 272 pp. Original Hebrew title: **המקרא כדמותו; שיטת מחקר והסתכלות במקרא**
על-פי עיקרי מדע הספרות החדש

According to the author, the common element in all of these trends and methods is the concern with external aspects of the literary text; what they lack is a treatment of the core, that is, of the literary (and biblical) text itself, a treatment which has its origin and end in the text alone, as the sole purpose of the study. These trends have dealt with historical, sociological and philosophical explanations of the literary creation. This has been their pretext for the exposure of social, economic, mental and spiritual processes and situations, whereas the work itself has been described as an artistic shell covering a core outside the work. (p. 12)

In contrast to this, the author presents the requirements of modern literary theory as it has come to expression in the two schools that crystallised in Switzerland and Germany (*Werkinterpretation*) on the one hand, and in England (New Criticism) on the other. These requirements include the treatment of the work itself, "of every word of it, of word order and word combinations, of synonyms, of metaphors, of syntactic phenomena, of the structure of each sentence in itself and of the structure of the work as a whole ...", and this, not by way of classification and statistics and "explanation of every single detail in itself, but explanation of each detail on the basis of the work as a whole, and explanation of the work as a whole on the basis of each detail". (p. 22) Only this *circulum hermeneuticum* (Steiger), only such a comprehensive viewing of the work in its totality and one-time character, maximally guarantees an internal, immanent interpretation of the artistic work, that is, a correct interpretation which penetrates the soul of the work. Thus, on the basis of Martin Buber's suggestion, the author calls it "total interpretation". (p. 194, n. 57)

Ideologically the method is supported by an examination of the changes that occurred in the last generations in the grasp of historicity, in the grasp of the concept "intention of the work", in the grasp of the concept "understanding" and in the grasp of the world in general and the world of the artistic work in particular. It is now acceptable to assume that the examination of the historical background, sources of influence and biography of the writer may at most confirm that the interpreter has proceeded in the right direction. He can grasp the uniqueness of the artistic work only through a consideration of the work itself, "of what is written in it" (p. 46), and through seeing it as an end in itself, and not as a means for secondary studies. (p. 15) At present we no longer ask what are the "intentions" of the writer in his work, or how his contemporaries understood him, but rather "what is written in the work". (p. 17) Furthermore, we now deny intellectual knowledge as the sole basis of understanding. "To the psychological, historical, verbal and intellectual understanding are added ... also the volitions and feelings that awaken in the reader under the influence of the text ... The old concept of the researcher and the object of his research standing opposite one another has been replaced by the concept of a coope-

ration between the work and the interpreter...". (p. 17) In addition, the method of total interpretation is based on the new view that essence and existence belong together. One no longer differentiates between core and shell, between content and form, between the content and the language of the poetry. The language does not serve the meaning, as in everyday life or in scientific statements, rather the language creates the meaning. The general principle is: the form is no longer understood as an incidental artistic dress that adorns some "idea". "The style of the work in all its manifestations is not an esthetic but an expressive matter." (p. 36) That is, the form is not a matter for esthetic observation, separated from the idea, the content, but rather is essential, and is not separable from the content, not even for the sake of the study alone.

In the first chapter of his book, the author examines the possibility of applying the method of total interpretation – which, as he claims, has been tried and tested in modern literary criticism – to biblical research. Since the Hebrew Scriptures are mainly literary texts, poetic texts, creations of the art of language, it is fitting that the primary objective of the study of biblical poetry should be the literary objective. Only that method which relates to the work as a unique manifestation will fit this objective. (p. 40) The other objectives, historical and spiritual, also require the total interpretation as a method that will grasp the work in its essence and therefore penetrate the internal meaning with maximum certainty. Henceforth, the way is open for a co-operation between biblical philology and literary interpretation, on the condition that whoever engages in classical critical philology should realise that for methodological reasons it has, to this day, missed the goal which it itself established: "The philological-critical method that we have known until now in biblical research is not philological because it is not truly critical. If the meaning of 'critical' in the philological method is caution against removing writings from their true meaning, guarding against an interpretation that does not fit the text, then we are forced to say that there is no existing critical method whatsoever in Biblical Studies." (p. 38) According to the preceding, a total interpretation of the text will guard the interpreter from abandoning the measure of objectivity required in a scientific investigation, since he will refuse to be influenced by findings and perspectives that do not directly grow out of the close reading of the work under examination. Employing Wehrli's formulation, the author describes the successful co-operation between various methods: "in the first place, the preservation and saving of the text, that is, philology in its narrow sense, textual criticism and technique of critical editions; secondly, the examination of the work's course of formation and its modes of existence, including its structures and appearances, that is, the poetics; thirdly, the study of the connections between various works in accordance with their classification from the standpoints of time and space, that is, the history of literature". (p. 35)

It must be pointed out that this division of tasks does not lay out a way for separate studies. They are organically connected with one another, particularly because of the special importance of the second point in Wehrli's scheme, that is, the internal literary interpretation.

However, from the point of view of textual criticism, it is necessary to ask how it is possible to relate seriously to the written text, and "to interpret it from within", when there is no certainty that it is original and reliable. In agreement with the school of the History of Traditions, the author answers that it is impossible to arrive at a more reliable text than the text of the tradition. Especially from a scientific standpoint, every attempt at emendation must be opposed, since every such suggestion of alteration is subjective. It is necessary to interpret the Hebrew Bible in its present version, or in any other version which objectively exists, and to point out which version serves as the basis of the interpretation. It is impossible to do more than this in our present situation.

The author takes sharp and penetrating issue with the schools of Form Criticism and "patterns" research, because they do not sufficiently consider the one-timeness and uniqueness of every literary work. In particular, Meir Weiss criticises Hermann Gunkel's claim of a pure literary method in biblical research. He points out how all of these methods are in fact concerned with issues "that are before, after and, in any case, beyond" the work and not in the work itself; for this reason he denies them the criterion scientific. (pp. 28 - 37)

In the body of the book, the author devotes a chapter to each of the components of the linguistic and artistic work: the word and word combinations, the metaphor, the sentence and the paragraph, the structure of the whole unit. In the midst of this, he interprets various passages of biblical poetry and shows in practice how the total interpretation breaks through to the soul of the work and lays bare its internal meaning.

In his penetrating study in the introduction of the book, the author has succeeded in bringing to light the weakness of the majority of the theories which the historical and literary schools of the nineteenth century applied to biblical research. He has shown how, on the one hand, these same theories failed to grasp the meaning of the texts, and how, on the other hand, they served a particular theology that distorted the essential message. In the body of his book, he has shown how it is possible to enrich the understanding of the internal world of the work and thereby to return many texts to their immanent simplicity.

Nevertheless, Meir Weiss remains as a "lone wolf" in his position. A few teachers whose main interest is purely literary employ the modern literary theories for an analysis of this or that chapter in biblical poetry, but the method has not penetrated the field of biblical research as such. The reasons for this, it appears to us, are varied and diverse, yet all stem

from one origin: the fact that though the Hebrew Bible is a literary creation, it is also more than this. From the purely scientific standpoint, one cannot illegitimise an "historical" interest in the various books of the Bible and in their authors; the use of the Bible to confirm theories in the history of religions is legitimate (obviously on the condition that the texts not be removed from their simple meaning).

From a methodological standpoint, it must be said that, despite the great expertise in the various branches of the research, only with great difficulty will one find a researcher who is able to unite in his person all that is required by Wehrli's scheme, and thus to prevent the philology, the study of the formation and the poetics from each going its separate way, parallel to the others, without coming into contact with them.

Above all, it is necessary to recall the "intention" of the Bible itself. The Torah intends to be theology (in the narrow sense of the word – the Word of God turned toward man). All else is in the sense of the human struggle with the same divine demand, which, according to the view of the historiographic writers, is expressed in human history and which, as depicted in the Prophets and Writings, is given to various interpretations and evaluations and creates various human reactions.

All in all, it is precisely the *intention* which is most important, the conscious intention of the creator, and it cannot be fundamentally ignored because of some "I believe" of a theory of criticism definitely appropriate to an artistic creation as such, but not always to an artistic creation that deals with contents important in themselves.

It remains to hope that he who occupies himself with the artistic, literary side of the Hebrew Bible, and with unclear passages, will find his way to the method of Meir Weiss by way of his most important book in this field.

Review by Pinhas Carny

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