

## TEACHING THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>

Korpus besedil Svetega pisma je že desetletja predmet literarnega preučevanja v delih Evrope in v Združenih državah, v »postkomunističnih« deželah pa so se na univerzah s to tematiko začeli ukvarjati šele pred kratkim. Preučevanje korpusa predstavlja značilnost splošnejšega procesa sekularizacije in znanstvene analize, v katerem se Sveto pismo razume kot kulturna in psihološka osnova sodobnega človeka, čemur pa nekateri nasprotujejo. V pričujočem prispevku skušam orisati splošne parametre, v okviru katerih bi lahko Sveto pismo obravnavali v visokošolskih učnih načrtih filoloških oddelkov, ter sistematiziram različne možnosti literarnega pristopa. Tradicionalni koncept »zgodovinsko-kritične« interpretacije primerjam s sinhronim branjem, ki omogoča potrditev literarnih kvalitet besedila, na katerega običajno gledamo kot na dokončano in zaključeno entiteto. V prispevku obravnavam možnosti, ki jih ponujajo različne šole in metodologije literarne kritike: strukturalizem in semiotika, Nova kritika, arhetipska kritika, teorija bralčevega odziva, dekonstrukcija, feminizem in študije spolov.

Sveto pismo, poučevanje, književnost, visokošolski učni načrti, strategije interpretacije

Studying the biblical corpus as an object of literary observation has been practised for decades in parts of Europe and the United States, but has only recently appeared in the universities of the »post-communist« countries. It constitutes a feature of a more general process of secularisation and scholarly analysis, in which the Scriptures are understood, yet disputed, as a cultural and psychological fundamental of the modern individual. The proposed paper endeavours to outline the general parameters within which the Bible could be treated in the academic curricula of philological departments, systematising the various possibilities of a literary approach. The traditional concept of a »historical-critical« interpretation is contrasted with a synchronic reading that facilitates an acknowledgment of the literary qualities of a text that is commonly viewed as a finalised and closed entity. The paper discusses the possibilities offered by different schools and methodologies of literary criticism: structuralism and semiotics, New Criticism, archetypal criticism, reader-response criticism, deconstruction, feminism and Gender Studies.

the Bible, teaching, literature, academic curricula, strategies of interpretation

Over the last three decades we have witnessed an unprecedented increase in attention to the literary specifics of the biblical text. Teaching the Bible as literature

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has turned into a constant presence in the undergraduate and the postgraduate schedules of most universities in Western Europe and in the United States. Since the early 1990s it is also making its way throughout the universities of the so called »post-communist« countries. As everywhere else, the secular method of teaching the Bible encounters a number of problems stemming from the dominant theological, mostly Christian, tradition of biblical studies. In spite of the great interest among students, there are still few university teachers who are skilful enough to venture an accomplished course. Under these circumstances even a complementary introduction of biblical knowledge within some other literary course (theoretical problems of literature or history of West-European literature for example) can mark a change and eventually the beginning of a new academic tradition.

According to popular belief, »among the various academic disciplines literary criticism would appear to have the greatest potential for shedding light on the task of biblical hermeneutics«. <sup>2</sup> I should make clear that this statement was written in 1987. Since then we have witnessed the vigorous development of feminist biblical studies, which nowadays seem to be a significant rival of the literary approach. These two trends share the ability to represent an accomplished alternative to traditional biblical exegesis even within the secular paradigm. A very important question then would be: how is this becoming possible? In an influential reference work, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, we can read that »literary critics in general do not believe it is necessary to use the traditional disciplines of biblical research or to employ the findings of these disciplines«. <sup>3</sup> This probably begins to answer our question by posing another: what does »disbelief in the traditional disciplines of biblical research« mean?

Ever since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the textual study of the Bible has been dominated by the so called *historical-critical method*. It was the German scholar Wellhausen who first introduced the idea that we should discern in the Old Testament five different sources, or five different types of textuality, created at different times between the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. The verbal corpus as we know it is the final compilation and redaction of very different pieces of writing that were brought together in order to constitute the canon of the Hebrew Bible. Having in mind that the five main sources have progressively been fragmented into smaller pieces of authorship in a certain book, it is not difficult to imagine what the philological work on the Bible has been after Wellhausen's hypothesis was accepted as irrefutable truth. Generally speaking, it turned into an incessant work of distinguishing, defining and commenting on the historical circumstances under which every single piece of discourse had been created by means of expert knowledge in ancient Hebrew and history of the ancient Near Eastern world.

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<sup>2</sup> Silva Moises, Foreword, *Temper Longman 3, Literary Approaches to the Biblical Interpretation*, Michigan, Grand Rapids: Academic Books 1987, VII.

<sup>3</sup> D. Robertson, The Bible as Literature, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume, 548.

Modern literary studies on the Bible appeared in the 1970s, bringing to the field of this five-source tradition the revolutionary idea that the Bible should be analysed and discussed as an entirety, a non-historical entirety, I should add. They introduced the synchronic methodology of approach versus the diachronic, or the historical-critical method of interpretation. Some even started speaking of the necessity of »total interpretation«, having in mind a completely a-historical, if not anti-historical way of reading the Bible without paying any attention to the differences of vocabulary, style and narrative manner in its different parts.<sup>4</sup> Even nowadays the opposition *synchronic versus diachronic* makes the basic point of distinction between traditional and new critical approaches to the Bible.

Throughout the following three decades, the new literary approach to the Bible gradually spread among various schools and representatives of various methodological approaches inside Literary Studies themselves: New Criticism, structuralism, Reader Response criticism, deconstruction, Women's and Gender Studies and so on. Despite the obvious methodological differences which govern their work, they all focus on the biblical text as it is, without any regard to its prehistory, biographical authorship, or social and historical circumstances of writing.

The school of New-Critical approach was the first to dare enter the sacred field of traditional exegesis. In 1972 Robert Alter published a famous book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, followed by other American writers; British researchers, especially a group located at the University of Sheffield, including David Gunn and Adele Berlin, joined in these efforts. As we know from their theory, the New-critics consider the literary work to be self sufficient, they regard it only as a piece of art, an arte fact, or a verbal icon. Consequently, the Bible represents for them a vast body of narrative techniques, poetic figures and rhetorical devices to be subjected to a most meticulous analysis.

The structuralist approach to the Bible as literature has been dependent mainly on the work of Propp and Greimas. Accordingly, it is the paradigmatic brand of theory (in opposition to Jacobson's and Levi-Strauss' syntagmatic approach) that dominates the field. Most work deploys in the field of narratology; these are predominantly studies of plots and characters after patterns and theses, which are popular in structuralist linguistics and anthropology.

Deconstruction could have been a very appropriate methodology when applied to the textual reality of the Bible.<sup>5</sup> The scholars following its theoretical guidelines have always been preoccupied with puns, implicit meanings and diversions of interpretation – all that which has focused the centuries-long efforts of Talmudic rabbis. In a more daring turn of thought we can even call the rabbis precursors of deconstruction, being in a never-ending pursuit of hidden meanings. The main problem with modern deconstruction, unlike the ancient one, is the necessity of

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<sup>4</sup> A good case in point would be Michael Weiss's *The Bible from Within: The Method of Total Interpretation*, Jerusalem: Magnes 1984.

<sup>5</sup> See also *Temper Longman III, Literary Approaches to the Biblical Interpretation*, 121.

having perfect skills in biblical Hebrew, and this refers not only to those writing on the Bible but also to those who are reading their work.<sup>6</sup>

Let us now suppose that an item most generally called the *Literary Study of the Bible*, finds its place on a post-graduate schedule. What are the directions, in which we could enunciate the thematics and the problematics of the course? Understandably, it is not possible to discuss the vast array of possibilities, I shall only mention briefly some of them.

A **study of genres** would be a very popular solution. It has a long history since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century German scholar Hermann Gunkel introduced the commentary of literary genres into Old Testament and Oriental studies. Working basically on the *Book of Genesis*, Gunkel came to the conclusion that it represents a collection of legends, originally transmitted verbally, which were later collected into cycles, and the cycles were then furnished with a framework and intrinsic connections. An academic course, which seems appropriate for undergraduate student could make good use of the Bible in order to illustrate the theoretical study of literary genres. The Bible itself can become a main object of interpretation at a postgraduate level of education, and the previously accumulated theoretical knowledge can be applied to the task of defining and discussing the availability of certain genres. The possibilities in this line are almost limitless; there is – in a more or less accomplished state – a vast versatility of genres. Let me name just a few of them: the cultic hymn, the psalms, the didactic narrative, the prophetic story and parables.

Issues connected with narrative or **narrative study** is another popular solution. It might be centred on the biblical narrator who is a proverbially all-seeing, all-knowing figure and is supposed to have served as a prototype of the »omnipotent narrator« for much of the Western novel. Narrative study may bring the research to non-traditional solutions of traditional enigmas in the biblical stories. A good example would make the popular story of Cain and Abel. »The question over the rejection of Cain's sacrifice has plagued readers of the Bible for centuries. Was Cain's sacrifice unacceptable because it was not a bloody sacrifice? Or was it rejected because it was not offered in faith? The enigma of Cain's sacrifice has arisen because the Old Testament remains silent on the subject of Cain's motives for bringing his sacrifice and God's motives for rejecting it. The text introduces Cain and Abel very abruptly and tells only briefly the story leading up to Abel's murder.«<sup>7</sup> The New Critical researcher Bruce Waltke starts investigating the story in search of plausible motives for God's and Cain's behaviour by implementing techniques of narrative analysis. He makes use of Robert Alter's assertion that *character contrast* is a favoured device of Hebrew narrative. Waltke detects two differences concerning the ways in which the two brothers accomplish the rite of sacrifice. Abel brought to the altar the »firstborn« of his flock, and then offered to

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<sup>6</sup> *Temper Longman III, Literary Approaches to the Biblical Interpretation*, 124.

<sup>7</sup> *Temper Longman III, Literary Approaches to the Biblical Interpretation*, 91.

God the fat which was considered to be the best part of the animal. Cain's gift is called just »fruits of the soil«, it is not specified as »the first fruits« and there is no allusion to its high quality. Waltke draws the conclusion that »Abel's sacrifice is characterised as the best of its class and ... Cain's is not. The point seems to be that Abel's sacrifice represents heartfelt worship; Cain's represents unacceptable tokenism«. <sup>8</sup>

The study of style is another way to bring the Bible into play when teaching literature because the ancient Hebrew library is a real treasury of rhetorical devices, both in poetry and prose. The narrative for example is highly dependent on the work of two basic mechanisms of literary character: *redundancy* and *parallelism*.

Until recently redundancy, and particularly the amplification of certain events in different versions of one story, was considered to be a result of the compilation work that brought together verbal pieces of different sources, and redactors did not dare to leave any of them. The three versions of the *Creation Story* in Genesis offer an example. The opposite of redundancy, omission, or the elliptic mode of telling stories in general was also seen as a consequence of historical, rather than of narrative character. Literary researchers of the Bible define both redundancy and omission as »typical features of Hebrew narrative style«. Instead of attempting to reconcile the contradictions by a semantic or historical interpretation, they investigate the very ways in which both redundancy and omission occur in the text. Omission especially has attracted a lot of attention being often labelled »gapping« or »narrative reticence«. <sup>9</sup> The Israeli literary critic Meir Sternberg has called it a »system of gaps« thus asserting that there is a specific logic in what seems most illogical in the Hebrew text. <sup>10</sup>

**Parallelism** is also qualified as a device of major importance, especially when the poetic books of the Old Testament – such as *The Psalms*, *The Proverbs*, *The Song of Songs*, *Ecclesiastes* or *Job* – are the main object of interpretation. Cases of parallelism may be traced either semantically or linguistically, depending on the methodological approach applied. The figure of *chiasm* has recently attracted a lot of attention from students of the Bible who follow poststructuralist or deconstructionist theory.

Though there is not time enough to expand in more directions of teaching the Bible as literature, I could not abstain from mentioning one more: **biblical study in the field of intertextuality**. All the books are composite texts in which different pieces of discourse interrelate with one another. The process of their redaction may be perceived as an ultimate exercise in the art of intertextuality. Michael Fox even states that it is the epitome of all Western intertextuality. <sup>11</sup> The books themselves incessantly refer to each other inside the frame of the whole canon. Let us think of

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<sup>8</sup> B. Waltke, Was Cain's Offering Rejected by God Because It Was Not a Blood Sacrifice? WTJ 48 (1986), 363–372.

<sup>9</sup> See in detail *Temper Longman III*, 96.

<sup>10</sup> M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1985.

the *Book of Ruth* for example; it is hardly comprehensible without knowledge in certain social traditions coming from other books of the Pentateuch, basically from *Leviticus* and *Deuteronomy*. Still another level of investigation is presupposed by the specific locations of the Bible among a vast body of texts – sacred and secular – which have been created in the Near East and Greece over tens of centuries. Recent discoveries of apocryphal gospels have brought this level of intertextuality to the front of biblical studies.

Apart from the possibility of teaching the Bible as literature, I should also mention that biblical interpretation can be quite successfully integrated into many areas of interdisciplinary character, or where literature collaborates with other humanities. Let me just name a few of them: Studies of folklore and mythology, Anthropology, Psychology of literature, Women's and Gender Studies, Nationalism and literature, and Postcolonial Studies. The modern ways of teaching the Bible beyond the theological paradigm appear indeed limitless and nothing would justify their absence from the contemporary university curriculum. We must admit though, that such teaching also holds some risks, especially in countries with a rather strong religious tradition. It inevitably enters a contest not only with the existing theological literature, but also with the religious upbringing of these people who regard secular comments on the sacred text as an offense against their belief. The concept that the Bible is a sacred book which cannot and must not be viewed as literature is particularly popular. The great author T. S. Eliot uncompromisingly wrote only 70 years ago: »The persons who enjoy these writings solely because of their literary merit are essentially parasites; and we know that parasites, when they become too numerous, are pests. I could easily fulminate for a whole hour against the men of letters who have gone into ecstasies over 'the Bible as literature'.«<sup>12</sup>

Is the Bible literature? This question is only the beginning of a long and complicated debate. Let us put it aside for now and content ourselves with the words of Northrop Frye: »The Bible is as literary as it can be without actually being literature.«<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> M. Fox, *The Redaction of the Book of Esther: On Reading Composite Texts*, Atlanta: Scholars Press 1991.

<sup>12</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Essays, Ancient and Modern*, London 1936, 95.

<sup>13</sup> N. Frye, *The Great Code*, London: Ark 1982, 62.