

THE BIBLE AS POETRY

The Bible is one of the foundational documents of Western culture. Indeed, the word *bible* simply means “the book.” In its pages, you’ll find the origins of not one or two, but three great world religions. Between its covers, you’ll encounter a multitude of authors and genres, from court histories and laws to love songs and lamentations. There’s something in the Bible to offend nearly everybody, and Holy Writ has been blamed for various modern ills from sexism and homophobia to our current environmental crisis. But by the same token, there’s something in the Bible to please nearly everyone, and you can quote favorite passages that promote whatever your pet cause happens to be, from pacifism to plural marriage. It’s a book of contradictions that’s been used to justify revolution and reaction. The Bible is a religious Rorschach, where people turn seeking revelation and more often than not find a reflection of their own private prejudices.

But beyond this, the Bible is also a grand book of poetry, a consideration that seems to be lost on fundamentalists who insist that every word of the scriptures is true. “God wrote it and I believe it” just doesn’t work with this volume. When the Psalms admonish the rivers to “clap their hands, and let the hills sing aloud together,” intelligent readers don’t suppose that rivers possess arms or hands that can break into a round of applause. In the synagogue service, of course, the scriptures are sung, not spoken. The syllables are savored for their sound as for their sense, enjoyed for the melody as much as for the meaning. So for Jews at least, it’s hard to forget that the Good Book is a collection of poetry, and that not every line is to be interpreted literally.

The New Testament is equally figurative. When Jesus says to Peter three times, “Feed my sheep,” smart readers realize that Jesus isn’t giving his chief disciple lessons in animal husbandry. Rather, he’s speaking in allusions, just as he’s speaking allegorically when he talks of other men being his brothers or women his sisters or God as his father. He’s not referring to biological realities in these cases. He’s using turns of speech, as when he talks about camels going through the eyes of needles, or advises his listeners to cut off their hands or pluck out their eyeballs. Jesus pushes the bounds of language, using expressions that invite listeners to take a fresh, unorthodox look at the world, which is the poet’s business.

Paul is right when he says that “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life,” and those who expect the Bible to be letter perfect in details of history

or geology or other matters-of-fact usually miss the deeper meanings of the text. Asking “Did it really happen that way?” is almost always the wrong question. When Robert Frost says that “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and sorry that I could not be one traveler and travel both, long I stood and looked down one to where it bent in the undergrowth” you would miss the point entirely if you asked exactly where this yellow wood was located or precisely when this incident took place or whether this traveler shouldn’t have been carrying a global positioning system or at least a cell phone to help him figure out what road he was on. These are the wrong questions, because the poet is not writing about a specific time or place. He’s invoking a time out of time, because the yellow wood is everywhere and nowhere, like the Garden of Eden, or the Kingdom of God, or the Land of Milk and Honey, not real estate you’ll ever find with a map or compass, but that can be located nonetheless if you know where to look. As Emily Dickinson writes,

*I never saw a moor,
I never saw the sea;
Yet know I how the heather looks,
And what a wave must be.
I never spoke with God,
Nor visited in heaven;
Yet certain am I of the spot
As if the chart were given.*

Yet many today are deaf to poetry, are no longer certain of what heaven means, or where to find it, that place Rabbi Shalomi talks about where all our cells seem to be communing with some greater spirit of life. We suppose the purpose of language is convey information, when sometimes its real aim is to hint at things that can't be said. As James McAuley complains:

*Christ, you walked on the sea,
but cannot walk in a poem,
not in our century.*

*There’s something deeply wrong
either with us or with you.
our bright loud world is strong*

*And better in some ways
than the old haunting kingdoms:
I don’t reject our days.*

*but in you I taste bread,
freshness, the honey of being,
and rising from the dead:*

*like yolk in a warm shell—
simplicities of power,
and water from a well.*

So much of the Bible is poetic or metaphorical. And a metaphor, in modern Greek, is not some complicated literary device but is simply the word for a moving van or delivery truck, how you get your baklava from the bakery to the store. *Meta* means “over or beyond.” *Pherein* is to bring or carry. So a metaphor is a vehicle intended to transport things from one place to another: in the case of poetry, intended to take us out of our mundane, prosaic preoccupations with getting and spending--the sleep-walking of daily existence--into a more conscious and aware mode of being.

I think of religion as the poetry of life. That's my simplest definition. And I was reminded of the power of poetry to transport us to new places when my wife and I went to see a production of *J.B.* not long ago. *J.B.* is a modern version of the book of Job, written by the poet Archibald MacLeish. Job, of course, is a very ancient story about an innocent man who suffers and challenges the justice of God's universe. Most of the Hebrew original is in verse--but scholarly translations don't always manage to get the tonalities right, more concerned with literal accuracy than with what I'd call the athleticism of language--the ability of words to run and jump and grab you by the throat. Ironically, academia and fundamentalism have this in common, that both frequently take words that ought to be alive and fluttering with energy and stick them through with a pin, nailing down definitions like a butterflies tacked and classified, with all the life drained out.

“Perish the day when I was born,” is how Job starts his long complaint in the New English Bible. The Revised Standard Version is even more stilted, “Let the day perish wherein I was born,” which is an exact transcription of the old King James, language that might have worked in Elizabethan times but not anymore. “Perish the day” is a phrase our great aunts or grandmothers might have used. But here's how Stephen Mitchell renders it, a cry that I think comes closer to catching the real agony in Job's voice: “God damn the day I was born and the night that forced me from the womb,” or in an even freer rendering of the poem by David Rosenberg:

Rip up the day that I was born

*and the night that furnished a bed
with people to make me*

*let death's shadow
hold the ether mask there
clouds obliterate it*

*a total eclipse
blackout
swallow it a tiny pill*

*and that sweat that night beginning me
black oil absorb it
a hole drilled deep in calendars*

That sounds more like a man who's been abused, who's lost his wife and kids, whose reputation has been dragged through the dirt, and whose friends have all abandoned him, who's alone and coming unglued, face-to-face with the utter blind indifference of things. And the extent to which either Job or *J.B.* make sense of that indifference is the extent to which their authors are genuine poets, for poetry is one of the few comforts I've found in times of loss. It's not that one can paper over the grief with fine words or sweet phrases. Rather, it's that good poetry comes out of the depths and speaks to the depths and reaches for the places that ordinary language can't go.

"It may even be that all poems are only tentative versions of something so intimate it can never be written down," says Norman Fischer, a poet and Zen practitioner who was inspired to create his own rendering of the Psalms after visiting the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. Listening to the prayers being chanted there forced him to consider to whom those prayers might be directed, and he immediately saw the connection with his own verse.

"For some years I had been giving thought to the question of who the audience for my poetry actually was," he explains. "I came to see that I was not writing for ordinary persons, not for colleagues, not for poetry lovers. The person to whom my poems actually seemed to be addressed was someone much more silent and much more profoundly receptive than any human being could possibly be." As a practicing Buddhist, Fischer isn't suggesting that he's writing poems for God. But he's not just journaling to himself, either. There's a listener that every poet's trying to reach, not a particular somebody but not a nobody, either, and still less

some shriveled abstraction of humanity in general. When Fischer says You, he means the same nameless You to whom Shakespeare devoted his sonnets, who may or may not be the same You that is being addressed in the Bible, in what Fischer calls a Zen-inspired translation of Psalm 8:

*Your Unsayable Name: it covers all the earth
And your presence extends ever outward
From the furthest conceivable point*

*When I behold the night sky, the work of your fingers
The bright moon and the many-layered stars which you
have established
I think:*

*A woman is so frail and you remember her
A man so small and you think of him*

*And yet
In you woman and man become as angels
Crowned with a luminous presence
And you have given them care for the works of your hands
Placed the solid growing earth under their feet*

*Flocks of birds and herds of deer
Oxen and sheep and goats and cows
Soaring birds and darting fishes
All that swims the paths of the sea*

*O you whom I am ever addressing
Your unsayable name covers heaven and earth.*

In olden days, it was taken for granted that the inspiration behind the poem was a muse or goddess or some other numinous being. And this is how I like to think of the Bible, as a book written by ordinary mortals, flawed, tormented, sometimes confused and frequently wrong, but calling out in a hundred different inflections to the unknowable, unnameable You. And we like tourists at the remains of the old temple eavesdrop on those conversations. Not always understanding the strange prayers we overhear but catching the authentic notes of joy and struggle in the voices, we know we've stumbled onto a holy spot, a place where we can hear the hills begin to sing and listen as the rivers clap their hands.

