



The Ancient of Days, William Blake, British Museum, 1794.

God: A Biography

by Jack Miles

KEYNOTE

The Image and the Original

That God created mankind, male and female, in his own image is a matter of faith. That our forebears strove for centuries to perfect themselves in the image of their God is a matter of historical fact. During the long centuries when the God of the Jews and the Christians was the unchallenged ultimate reality of the West, European and, later, American men and women consciously sought to model themselves on him. They believed that by trying they could make themselves into better copies of the divine original, and they bent themselves diligently to the task. *Imitatio Dei*, the imitation of God, was a central category in Jewish piety. The imitation of Christ, God made man, was equally central for Christians.

Many in the West no longer believe in God, but lost belief, like a lost fortune, has effects that linger. A young man raised in wealth may, when he comes of age, give his fortune away and live in poverty. His character, however, will remain that of a man

raised in wealth, for he cannot give his history away. In a similar way, centuries of rigorous, godly character-building have created an ideal of human character that stands fast even though, for many, its foundation has been removed. When Westerners encounter a culture with a different ideal, when we find ourselves saying, for example, "The Japanese are different," we discover, indirectly, the strangeness and durability of our own ideal, our inherited sense of what a human being should be. In innumerable external ways, Japan and the West have grown alike. Japan eats beef; the West eats sushi. Japan wears business suits; *kimono* has entered the Western vocabulary. Yet a deep difference abides, for Japan was looking into a different religiocultural mirror during the centuries when the God of the Bible was the mirror of the West. This book about God aims to place the biblical mirror, cleansed and polished, in the reader's hands.

For non-Westerners, knowledge of the God whom the West has worshiped opens a uniquely direct path to the core and origin of the Western ideal of character. But for Westerners themselves, a deepened knowledge of this God can serve to render conscious and sophisticated what is otherwise typically unconscious and naive. We are all, in a way, immigrants from the past. And just as an immigrant returning after many years to the land of his birth may see his own face in the faces of strangers, so the modern, Western, secular reader may feel a tremor of self-recognition in the presence of the ancient protagonist of the Bible.

How can an unbeliever enter the presence of God? From generation to generation, Judaism and Christianity have transmitted their knowledge of God in several ways. For the few, there have been and still are the demanding and sometimes esoteric disciplines of asceticism, mysticism, and theology. For the many, there is, remarkably perhaps, a book that an unbeliever no less than a believer may open and read. Knowledge of God as a literary character neither precludes nor requires belief in God, and it is this kind of knowledge that the book before you attempts to mediate.

Philosophers of religion have sometimes claimed that all gods are projections of the human personality, and so it may be. But if so, we must at least recognize the empirical fact that many human beings, rather than project their own personalities upon gods wholly of their own creation, have chosen to introject—take into themselves—the religious projections of other human personalities.

This is why religion excites so much fascination, envy, and (sometimes) rage in writers and literary critics who give the matter much thought. Religion—Western religion in particular—may be seen as literature that has succeeded beyond any writer's wildest dreams. Any character who "comes to life" in a work of literary art may have some degree of influence over real people who encounter the work. Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, in which

the title character models himself on the popular literature of his day, is an incomparably poignant and hilarious picture of this process in action. Cervantes surely thought about the influence that his own work would eventually have, and indeed he presents his "real" Don Quixote encountering people who know of a literary character by the same name. In our own day, millions fuse the real lives and the screen lives of movie actors, assign the combination an importance greater than any they concede to the real human beings whom they know, and then suffer the melancholy consequences. Their flesh is sad, alas, and they have seen all the movies.

No character, however, on stage, page, or screen has ever had the reception that God has had. God is more than a household word in the West; he is, welcome or not, a virtual member of the Western family. Parents who would be done with him cannot keep their children from him, for not only has everyone heard of him, everyone, even now, can tell you something about him. Playwright Neil Simon published a comedy, *God's Favorite*, some years ago, based on the biblical Book of Job. Few who saw the play had read the biblical book, but there was no need: They already knew what God was like well enough to get the jokes. If nothing is serious, nothing is funny, as Oscar Wilde once wrote. Whence came the serious God-idea in the minds of Simon's ready-to-roar Broadway audience?

It came almost entirely from the Bible and, in more specific human terms, it came from those who wrote the Bible. To the eyes of faith, the Bible is not just words *about* God but also the Word *of* God: He is its author as well as its protagonist. But whether the ancient writers who wrote the Bible created God or merely wrote down God's revelation of himself, their work has been, in literary terms, a staggering success. It has been read aloud every week for two thousand years to audiences who have received it with utmost seriousness and consciously sought to maximize its influence upon themselves. In this, it is certainly without parallel in Western literature and probably without parallel in all literature. The Qur'an comes immediately to mind, but Muslims do not regard the Qur'an as literature: It occupies, for them, a metaphysical niche all its own. Jews and Christians, by contrast, while revering the Bible as more than mere literature, do not deny that it is *also* literature and generally concede that it may be appreciated as such without blasphemy.

Religiously fostered appreciation of the Bible attends centrally and explicitly to the goodness of God. Jews and Christians have adored God as the origin of all virtue, a wellspring of justice, wisdom, mercy, patience, strength, and love. But peripherally and implicitly, they have also grown accustomed and then attached, over the centuries, to what we may call God's anxiety. God is, as I shall try to show in the book that follows, an amalgam of several personalities in one character. Tension among these personalities makes God difficult, but it also makes him compelling, even addictive. While consciously emulating his virtues, the West has unconsciously assimilated the anxiety-inducing tension between his unity and his multiplicity. In the end, despite the longing Westerners sometimes feel for a simpler, less anxious, more "centered" human ideal, the only people whom we find satisfyingly real are people whose identity binds several incompatible subidentities together. As Westerners get to know one another personally, this is what we seek to learn about one another. Incongruity and inner conflict are not just permitted in Western culture; they are all but required. People who are merely clever about playing various roles fall short of this ideal. They have personality—or a repertory of personalities—but lack character. Uncomplicated, simple people, who know who they are without ado and embrace an assigned role without struggle, also fall short of the ideal. We may admire their inner peace, but in the West we are unlikely to imitate them. Centered and all too centered, they have character but little personality. They bore us as we would bore ourselves if we were like them.

We make matters so difficult for ourselves because our forebears understood themselves to be the image of a God who, in effect, had made matters similarly difficult for himself. Monotheism recognizes only one God: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." The Bible insists on nothing about God more than on his unity. God is the Rock of Ages, integrity in person. And yet this same being combines several personalities. Either mere unity (character alone) or mere multiplicity (personality alone) would have been so much easier. But he is both, and so the image of the human that derives from him requires both.

God is no saint, strange to say. There is much to object to in him, and many attempts have been made to improve him. Much that the Bible says about him is rarely preached from the pulpit because, examined too closely, it becomes a scandal. But if only some of the Bible is actively preached, none of the Bible is quite denied. On the improbably unexpurgated biblical page, God remains as he has been: the original who was the Faith of our Fathers and whose image is living still within us as a difficult but dynamic secular ideal.

1 PRELUDE

Can God's Life Be Written?

Can a literary character be said to live a life from birth to death or otherwise to undergo a development from beginning to end? Or is a literary character—fixed on the pages of a book, trapped forever in the same few words and actions—the very opposite of a living, developing human being?

Contention on this point has shaped a century of *Hamlet* criticism, according to a recent survey by William Kerrigan, who calls the two contending groups the critics and the scholars. The critics, he says, dominant at the start of the century, believed in character. They believed that to talk about *Hamlet* the play, you had to talk about Hamlet the man: what he said, what he did, and how he changed during the time between his first and his last words onstage. The scholars, dominant in the middle of the century, took as their motto Hamlet's own line "The play's the thing." They believed that, empirically speaking, there was no Hamlet, only Shakespeare's words on the page, and that therefore one could legitimately talk only about them. If one went beyond them, it could not be into the imagined rest of Hamlet, for the rest was silence, to borrow another line from the play. One could go only into the rest of Elizabethan drama and Elizabethan society, seeking other plays that Shakespeare might have known, deepening one's knowledge of the language he spoke, and so forth.

The dean of the critics was A. C. Bradley, whose still influential *Shakespearean Tragedy* was published in 1904. The turning point from criticism to scholarship and from character to dramaturgy as a focus may be dated to 1933, when L. C. Knights wrote a famous essay, "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" mocking Bradley's assumption—naïve in Knights's view—that literary character could ever be talked about in its own right. Knights believed that Bradley's approach was perhaps appropriate for biography but certainly inappropriate for literary criticism.

For decades, Kerrigan shows, the triumph of scholarship over criticism seemed complete. Most of those now teaching and writing about Shakespeare were trained by scholars. Yet criticism never quite folded its tent, and in the last years of the century an interesting bifurcation has occurred.

On the one hand, the kind of historicism whose rise may be dated to Knights's essay has been succeeded by a "New Historicism" with intellectual debts to French thought. Broadly, where the Old Historicism sought to understand the history that was embedded in the text of the play, the New Historicism seeks to understand the play as itself embedded in history. Thus, Kerrigan writes:

Stephen Greenblatt [the best-known of the New Historicists] famously concludes his *Renaissance Self-fashioning* with the declaration that he had started to write a book on Renaissance individuals but discovered in the end that there are no individuals. One is somewhat amazed to learn at the beginning of his *Shakespearean Negotiations* that he started this book, too, in a quest for the writer's unique intensity but discovered in the end that there are no writers: "This book argues that works of art, however intensely marked by the creative intelligence and private obsession of individuals, are the products of collective negotiation and exchange."

The reign of scholarship continues, therefore; yet, on the other hand, at least a few erstwhile scholars are surreptitiously defecting to criticism, among them Kerrigan himself. "I was trained by scholars," he writes, "and speaking of 'character development' in *Hamlet* makes me uneasy. But I do not know how else to describe the shift from the self-loathing Hamlet of the final two soliloquies to the beautifully calm Hamlet of Act 5." Philosophically, Bradley was a Hegelian, and the struggle between him and Knights was a literary version of the long-running contest between German (or Continental) idealism and British empiricism. But both traditions trace, ultimately, to classical antiquity, and Kerrigan ends his survey with Aristotle:

So we need to understand Hamlet's beginning and his end, and need to put them together. Modern Aristotles puzzling out the mysterious tragedy of character, we must connect beginning, middle, and end.
That's the way it's done.

THE BIOGRAPHY OF GOD

That is the way it will be done in this book. I have begun this foreword with a discussion of *Hamlet* because I want to situate my subject in literature. I write here about the life of the Lord God as—and only as—the protagonist of a classic of world literature; namely, the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. I do not write about (though I certainly do not write against) the Lord God as the object of religious belief. I do not attempt, as theology does, to make an

original statement about God as an extraliterary reality. I do not write as a historian and therefore do not focus, as historians do, on the successive Israelite and Jewish communities that believed in God. My interest goes not to those believing communities but, after the fashion of A. C. Bradley, to the God they believed in. And I believe with Bradley, and against Knights, that the biographical effect—the artistic suggestion of a life—is inseparable from the dramatic or literary effect itself. Unless the viewer of *Hamlet* can believe that Hamlet was born and will die, unless the viewer's imagination is carried offstage into the life for which there is no direct evidence onstage, the play dies with its protagonist. A character understood to have no life offstage can have no life onstage. And so it is also with God as the protagonist of the Bible.

If biography is seen narrowly as a branch of history, then there can be no biography of a nonhistorical character. But God does have a first and a last appearance in the Hebrew Bible. We see him first as the creator, outside history, prior to it, masterfully setting in motion the heavenly bodies by which historical time will be measured. We see him last as the "Ancient of Days," white-haired and silent, looking forward to the end of history from a remote and cloudy throne. This book becomes a biography of a special sort by dint of its determination to describe the middle that lies between so vigorous a beginning and so quiescent an end.

The beginning and the end of the Hebrew Bible are not linked by a single, continuous narrative. Well short of the halfway point in the text, the narrative breaks off. What then follow are, first, speeches spoken by God; second, speeches spoken either to or, in some degree, about God; third, a protracted silence; and, last, a brief resumption of the narrative before a closing coda. The narrative suspense that lasts from the Book of Genesis through II Kings is succeeded, past that point, by another kind of suspense, one more like the kind jurors experience in a courtroom as different witnesses take the stand to talk about the same person. A sequence of testimonies—each in its own distinctive voice, with its own beginning and end—can be as effective as narrative in suggesting that the person about whom the words are spoken does not stop where the words stop. This is the biographical effect in another form. And even in this form, it is an effect that can include a sense of forward movement, of "What next?"

After action yields to speech in the Hebrew Bible, however, speech yields in its turn to silence. God's last words are those he speaks to Job, the human being who dares to challenge not his physical power but his moral authority. Within the Book of Job itself, God's climactic and overwhelming reply seems to silence Job. But reading from the end of the Book of Job onward, we see that it is Job who has somehow silenced God. God never speaks again, and he is decreasingly spoken of. In the Book of Esther—a book in which, as in the Book of Exodus, his chosen people faces a genocidal enemy—he is never so much as mentioned. In effect, the Jews surmount the threat without his help.

What is the meaning of the long twilight of the Hebrew Bible, its ten closing books of silence? The twilight is not followed by darkness: God does not die. But he never again intervenes in human affairs, and by accumulating implication, no further intervention is expected of him. His chosen people, returned from exile, cherishes him more than ever as his life ends—more, certainly, than when he vanquished Pharaoh "with mighty hand and outstretched arm" and led them through the desert to the promised land. Back then, they were recalcitrant, and he called them, bitterly, "stiff-necked." Now they are devout, but he has nothing further to say to them or about them—or to or about anybody or anything else. God and his people are beautifully, movingly reconciled as the Hebrew Bible ends, but it scarcely seems blasphemy to say that his own life is over.

This broad movement from action to speech to silence yields an account that might be called theography, as distinct from either theology or biography. A medieval mystic once wrote, "God cancels the successiveness of men," meaning that while human beings experience their lives one day at a time, God sees their lives' time as a portrait on a wall, every moment visible to him at once. But human beings have returned the favor with a vengeance, canceling the successiveness of the protagonist of the Bible by a tradition of Bible reading that regards the entirety of the text as simultaneous to itself, so that any verse may be read as the commentary on any other verse and any statement true of God at one point is taken to be true of God at all points.

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever," the New Testament reads at Hebrews 13:8; but that one late and questionable verse aside, there is virtually no warrant in the New Testament for any claim that God is immutable, and there is equally little in the Hebrew Bible. The origin of this view lies presumably in Aristotelian philosophy, with its view of God as the unmoved mover, existing in a single, eternal moment. True, the Lord God of Israel is the creator and ruler of time, and the Psalms delight in repeating that he lives forever. To that extent he is like Aristotle's unmoved mover. And yet, contradictory as this must seem, he also enters time and is changed by experience. Were it not so, he could not be surprised; and he is endlessly and often most unpleasantly surprised. God is constant; he is not immutable.

A strictly sequential reading of the Hebrew Bible is a way to recover the successiveness, the character development or theography, that "Aristotelian" exegesis has obscured. Thus, Christians pray "Our Father, who art in heaven . . .," as Christ did, and imagine that the being who says, at Genesis 1:3, "Let there be light" is a father, but God does not refer to himself as a father at that point. Only several hundred pages later, in II Samuel 7, does he do this for the first time. Jews pray "Blessed art thou, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe" and imagine that the God of Genesis is a king, but he does not present himself as a king until even later, at Isaiah 6. "Later" in this context does not mean later in historical time but simply later in the exposition, further along in a start-to-finish reading of the book. Historically speaking, the "time" when God says "Let there be light" lies outside time; but from the point of view of a reader beginning at the beginning of the Book of Genesis and reading straight on from there, we may still speak of "later" and "earlier." In this book, we often shall.

There is no pretending that a diachronic or straight-through reading of the Hebrew Bible is the only possible approach to the character of God as its protagonist. A synchronic reading is also possible. That is, instead of proceeding from beginning to end in quasi-chronological order, a critic may create a set of topical headings and gather under each all the texts that seem to belong there. But a self-consciously naive, start-to-finish approach, besides being more respectful of the integrity of the Bible as a work of literature, has, as we shall see, a surprising drama and pathos about it.

Because this is a literary rather than a historical study, deliberate naïvete of another sort becomes possible and indeed necessary. Critical historians of any period or subject are at pains to distinguish what really happened from what did not happen. Even when they are quite certain that they are dealing with a literary invention, their concern is not to appreciate the invention in itself as a work of literary art but to recover from it evidence about some real history, if only the intellectual history of its author. Myth, legend, and history mix endlessly in the Bible, and Bible historians are endlessly sorting them out. Literary criticism, however, not only can but must leave them mixed. The Book of Genesis says that God turned Lot's wife into a pillar of salt, an event that obviously has no status as history but one that for the purposes of this work must be counted as a moment in the life of God and as evidence, however minor, about his developing character. We may allow the historians to tell us what really happened. We may allow the theologians to tell us whether the real God would ever do a thing like that. For literary purposes, however, which are the only purposes of this book, the fact that the protagonist of the book does indeed perform this action on its pages is enough to bring it into the reckoning.

Skeptical readers may ask, of course, whether there is not, even in a secular era, something misbegotten about an attempt to understand God in terms so like those we use to understand human beings. Robert Alter writes in this vein:

There is little to be gained, I think, by conceiving of the biblical God, as Harold Bloom does, as a human character—petulant, head-strong, arbitrary, impulsive, or whatever. The repeated point of the biblical writers is that we cannot make sense of God in human terms.

But Alter exaggerates. One of the very earliest statements any biblical writer makes about God is that mankind, male and female, is God's image—an unmistakable invitation to make some sense of God in human terms. God rarely says of himself that he is mysterious and more than once implies the opposite, as when, speaking of whether his words are difficult to understand, he says:

Surely, this instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" (Deut. 30:11-12)

At a certain point in the Hebrew Bible, God does begin speaking of himself as mysterious. But nothing prevents us from asking why he does so then and not earlier. There is certainly no warrant whatever within the Bible itself for regarding God as a subject to be passed over in respectful silence.

As for whether Bloom is right or wrong that God may be spoken of as a human character, we may at least ask in what ways God differs from the human creature that, by his own testimony, he resembles to some degree. In other words, granting that God and mankind are not identical, in what ways are they different? What makes God godlike? What is special about his character? And, above all, we may ask, staying always within the confines of the Bible as a work of literature, how his earlier actions relate developmentally to his later ones. This question need not lose its

relevance even when we read the biblical books that come after the extended opening narrative. At those later points, one may listen as a biographer during an interview or (as suggested earlier) as a juror in a courtroom, not attempting to reconstruct events but simply receiving character testimony from a character witness. *How did he affect you? Did he frighten you? Did you love him? What was he after? Did he change much during the time you knew him? What most impressed you about him?*

These and similar questions are what move this biography forward.

One may find, of course, that there is no real development and that God is monotonously the same and impenetrably mysterious from first to last appearance. No outcome can be ruled out. What is required is only a fidelity to the humble and patient tactic by which any character gets to know any other. With sympathy and attention, the biographer must address apparent conflicts between an earlier statement by God and a later one, an earlier action and a later one, a statement at any given moment with behavior at the same moment, and so forth. Conflicts must be resolved either by identifying and sanctioning them as development in the character or by explaining why they are apparent rather than actual conflicts or—failing any other resolution—simply by acknowledging them: Knowledge of an unresolved conflict in a character may be the most crucial knowledge of all.

In real life, this is the most ordinary and necessary of interpersonal activities. We engage daily in an ongoing assessment of the people we live and work with. Someone does something out of character, and either we find a way to explain away the uncharacteristic action—"My son is ill," "My wife has just lost her job"—or we make a provisional revision of our understanding—"He always seemed so well-intentioned, but after this" This skill, so central to the living of life, is equally central to the appreciation of literature, an art made by an intensified reuse of human lives and human language. The Bible is unquestionably an unusual work of literature, and the Lord God is a most unusual character. But one of the two key premises of this biography is that neither the work nor the character is so inhuman that interpersonal appraisal is out of the question.

THE ORDER OF THE CANON AND THE COURSE OF GOD'S LIFE

The second premise of this biography is that the order in which the books of the Bible appear—the order of the canon—is a crucial artistic consideration. Earlier in this foreword I spoke of "a classic of world literature; namely, the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament," as if the two were interchangeable. But are they?

Jews and Christians alike have certainly regarded them as such. True, both groups know that the Christian Bible has two unequal parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. Jews may take offense at having their sacred scripture referred to as "old" by comparison with the conclusion of the Christian Bible. But both groups, including sophisticated literary critics of either confession, have invariably spoken of the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament as the same work under two different names.

But they are not quite the same work. The distinctive, broad movement of the Hebrew Bible from action to speech to silence is not matched in the Old Testament, whose movement is from action to silence to speech. The contents in either case are the same, but the arrangement is not. The Old Testament shifts the great prophetic collections—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets—from the middle to the end, leaving in the middle what we called earlier the books of silence, including Job, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. For the special purposes of a biography of God, the difference between the two arrangements is crucial.

One might wonder why this point should have to be made at all. Is the order of presentation not obviously crucial for all literary purposes? If Jews and Christians have combined traditional or received materials in such sharply different ways, is it not immediately clear that two different works have resulted? What must be stressed is how completely the Western tradition of regarding every verse in sacred scripture as simultaneous to every other verse—and therefore every book as simultaneous to every other book—has blinded modern critics to the importance of the artistic decisions by which, two millennia ago, two different editors or teams of editors arranged one collection of books into two different canons or tables of contents.

The story of how the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament diverged includes, improbably enough, a chapter from the history of technology. Muslim tradition has called Jews and Christians alike "peoples of the book," honoring the divinely inspired scriptures that preceded God's revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad. In the modern sense of the word *book*, however, the Jews might be more accurately called the people of the scroll. It is the Christians who are the people of the book as we know it.

At issue is no title or privilege but only the definition of a term. What we now call a scroll is a text storage device that the first centuries of the common era called a book. What we call a book—cut pages sewn together on one side—was then called a codex. The codex, invented sometime in the first century of the common era, was clearly distinguished at the time from a "real" book—that is, from a scroll. The pagan literary elite of the Roman Empire, the conservatives of their day, looked on the codex rather as some in our day look on an electronic publication. They were attached to the older format and adopted the newer one reluctantly. The Jews, who had been using the scroll for centuries, were only somewhat quicker to change, and for ceremonial purposes they have retained the scroll down to the present. The Christians of the Roman Empire—a poorly educated, lower-class group with no secular literary traditions to preserve and, as a new religion, with few sacred traditions to preserve either—adopted the new device immediately and universally. The codex may in fact be their invention. Whoever invented it, Christianity's enthusiastic adoption of it gave the new religion a technological advantage that undoubtedly fostered its spread.

The new medium had a message of its own, however. As smaller codices gradually yielded to larger ones, the possibility emerged for the first time of including all the Jewish scriptures in one textual "container." Because the standard thirty-foot scroll could hold no work longer than the Book of Isaiah, the various works that would become the Hebrew Bible had always been stored separately: many scrolls in many storage jar's. By keeping the constituent parts physically movable, the older text-storage system tended to keep them mentally movable as well and to forestall any tendency to edit them into a single, large, closed anthology.

The Christian scriptures, though also an anthology, had a different history, for they were born just as the codex was being born. Perhaps it is because the codex at first was not felt to be a proper book that the separate works of the New Testament have not traditionally been called books. There is no "Book of Matthew" or "Book of Paul." (True, there is the Book of Revelation, but Revelation is a late, consciously antiquarian exercise by a writer who is, among other peculiarities, fairly obsessed with the scroll as a physical object.) In all probability, the component parts of the New Testament came to seem the functional equivalent of chapters in a single work far earlier in their history than the component parts of the Hebrew Bible did.

The decisive moment came when the mode of storage the Christians preferred began to be extended to the inherited Jewish scriptures. The Christians, having taken these scriptures as their own, took this step first; the Jews did so somewhat later. As editors from either group realized that the order of the contents would now be fixed and visible, both would naturally have thought in a new way about the potential aesthetic or polemic significance of the order. In the end, the Jews made one decision about the order, the Christians made another, and so it came about that the last step in the editing of an edited masterpiece took place twice. The Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament are not quite two different works but, to speak more precisely, two very different editions of the same collection.

What motivated the Christian editor to move the prophets to the end of the newly edited Old Testament? Presumably his hope was that in this position the prophets would better announce their relationship to the now immediately following Gospels. Christianity believes that the life of Christ is the fulfillment of prophecy. The Gospels, which open the New Testament, make this point repeatedly. The Christian editor edited the Hebrew Bible to reflect this Christian belief.

Or so, at least, we may speculate. A rival school of thought maintains that two ancient Jewish canons have been preserved—a Palestinian canon, surviving in the Hebrew Bible, and an Alexandrian (or diaspora) Jewish canon, surviving in the Old Testament. In my judgment, stronger evidence supports the view that the order found in the Christian Old Testament reflects a Christian editor's conscious revision, but I admit that this cannot finally be determined.

Whatever the origin of the two editions, the difference between them is large enough that a biographer of God must choose on which he will base his account. For reasons that will not be completely evident until the very end of this book, I have chosen to base my account on the Hebrew Bible or, to use the standard Hebrew word for the collection, on the *Tanakh*. The word *Tanakh* is a postbiblical acronym derived from the Hebrew equivalents of the letters *t*, *n*, and *k* (pronounced *kh* under certain phonetic conditions), standing, respectively, for the Hebrew words *torah*, "teaching"; *nebirim*, "prophets"; and *ketubim*, "writings." If the Old Testament were renamed with a comparable acronym, it might be *Takhan*, for the Old Testament order is, roughly, teaching, writings, prophets. *Tanakh* is the name that I shall ordinarily use for the collection from this point forward. What is of decisive importance, of course, is not the name but the character of the collection itself.

The character of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament is such, to state what must be obvious by now, that the collection can be taken apart and put together in more than one way. The same necessarily goes for the character of God as its protagonist. A skeptic might conclude that the collection is so without an ordinary plot or an ordinary

protagonist that it is not at all amenable to the ordinary tools of literary appreciation. A close reading of the text, however, suggests that the Tanakh is partially plotted and partially not, while its protagonist is partially a genuine or "drawn" character and partially not. In short, we are faced with a kind of patchwork. Along the seams some of the patches may be pulled apart and put back together in a new configuration. But even at moments when literary intent is questionable, literary effect is undeniable. Indeed, a part of the enduring power of the Hebrew Bible arises from its partially aleatory or accidental character. In art, typically, nothing is left to chance. In the real world, chance accounts for a great deal. The air of reality within a work of art is enhanced, therefore, if chance is admitted or even feigned. Whether or not for conscious artistic reasons, chance has definitely been admitted to the Bible.

The order in which the life of the Lord God is told in this book is the order of the Tanakh (see Appendix, page 411); and, except where otherwise indicated, the translation quoted is that of the 1985 Jewish Publication Society TANAKH (JPS). I hasten to add, however, that though I am laboring just now to establish the differences between the Tanakh and the Old Testament, and though I do believe that we may speak of two classics rather than one, the similarities between them as regards their common protagonist are plainly enormous. The order of the books in the two canons does count, but by that very token the fact that the order is identical through the formative first eleven books means that from youth through young adulthood, so to speak, the Lord God is understood identically in the Tanakh and in the Old Testament. Only his middle and old age are understood differently. A biography-shaped modern interpretation based on the work of one ancient editor will necessarily be different from a comparable interpretation based on the work of the other. But there can be no doubt that the subject, God himself, is the same being in either case.

BIBLE SCHOLARS VERSUS BIBLE CRITICS

Like William Kerrigan, I have had scholars rather than critics as my teachers, and a brief word seems in order about the relationship of this work to the imposing body of historical scholarship about the Tanakh. As a branch of secular learning, this scholarship has taken the religion of ancient Israel rather than God himself as its proper object. In so doing, it has rarely if ever defined itself against literary criticism, as one branch of secular learning may define itself against another. On the contrary, its psychological and sociological "other" has always been understood to be established religious authority. When it thinks of an alternate approach to its own, it thinks of theology.

In spite of this, however, its results, attentively read, are of great literary interest. First, historical scholars, albeit for their own reasons, are typically far more attentive than the average critic of modern literature to "meaningless" details that sometimes turn out not to be so meaningless after all. Among these are many that bear on the character of the Lord God. Second, historical scholars have much that is valid and useful to say about the authors of the individual works that make up the Tanakh. Even a critic who wishes to focus on the effect of the work as a whole upon a modern reader will gain from being instructed as fully as possible about the ancient authorial agendas that he overrides.

The God whom ancient Israel worshiped arose as the fusion of a number of the gods whom a nomadic nation had met in its wanderings. A reader interested in tracking this process historically may do so through such impressive technical studies as *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* by William Foxwell Albright, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* by Albright's student Frank Moore Cross, and *The Early History of God* by Cross's student Mark S. Smith. These are works of controlled imagination as well as massive erudition. But a more literary reader may be prompted by them to ask, "How did all this feel to God?" an absurd question within the methodology of historical reconstruction but an utterly ordinary one—in fact, an indispensable one—for literary appreciation. Unless a playgoer is constantly alert to Hamlet's changing feelings, *Hamlet* as a play is incomprehensible. A. C. Bradley has continued to be read because, in effect, once inside the theater—once, that is, in the spellbinding presence of Hamlet come back to life—every playgoer believes with Bradley that Hamlet does not stop at Shakespeare's words.

To repeat, the question How did all this feel to God? is not a historical question, but a reader of the Tanakh asking that question will find one set of answers if he has first spent some time with historical scholarship and another if he has not. In their historical "genealogy" of God, scholars such as Albright, Cross, and Smith find that various divine personalities whom they recognize from extrabiblical sources have left traces on the pages of the Bible. A literary critic who knows their work may read this objective multiplicity back into the character of the Lord God as a literary protagonist, turning their observed inconsistencies imaginatively into God's experienced inner conflict. In this way, the emergence of monotheism from polytheism can be recovered for literature as the story of a single God struggling with himself.

The Tanakh has never *not* been such a story. Nothing needs to be added—no heavy psychological speculations, no sensational revelations from the latest archaeological dig, no readings between the lines—to bring this reading about. The contradictions, latent in the text all along, have never failed to have a marked aesthetic effect on the reader or hearer: The Lord God has always been intermittently baffling or irritating or inconsistent or arbitrary because of them. Historical scholarship simply helps to make the conflicts patent, turning muddy shades of gray in the Lord's interior life into clearly distinguishable tints. Here the sky blue of El, there the earth tones of "the god of your father," over there the blood red of Baal or Tiamat or the evergreen memory of Asherah. If the Bible is finally a work of literature, these historically distinguishable personalities need to be read back into—and then back out of—the one God, the *monos theos*, who came into being as they fused. After God has been understood in his multiplicity, in short, he needs to be imagined again in his riven and difficult unity.

Only when this is done does the Bible come into focus as a work of art rather than merely a defective work of history. Historians have generally recognized the powerful originality of Israel's religious synthesis even when they did not also believe, on religious grounds, that this originality was a revelation from God himself. But by regarding the Bible as just the most important among many sources for their history of the religion of Israel, they have failed to see that the Bible's own way of combining several personalities into one complex character is to plot them across a story in which God—rather than Israel—is the protagonist. The plot begins with God's desire for a self-image. It thickens when God's self-image becomes a maker of self-images, and God resents it. From this initial conflict, others emerge. The plot reaches its crisis when God tries and fails to conceal his originating motive from a single physically ravaged but morally aroused exemplar of himself.

The key methodological move in this rereading of the Hebrew Bible—and the reason why it may be called a biography—is a shift of focus away from the human actors and toward the divine actor. Without insulting or contradicting historical scholarship, his character must be allowed to emerge through another, critical but more subjective set of questions. Why did God create the world? Why, on flimsy grounds, did he destroy it so soon after creating it? Why, having for so long shown no interest whatsoever in the wars of mankind, did he suddenly become a warrior? Why, having attended slightly if at all to morality, did he become a moralist? As his covenant with Israel seemed to break down, what consequences loomed for him? What kind of life awaited him after that impending breakup? How did he adjust to his failure to keep the promises he made through the prophets? What is his experienced life as a being without parents, spouse, or children? Historical scholarship neither asks nor answers questions such as these. Criticism does. But historical scholarship, judiciously employed, can teach criticism to recognize what it is looking for when it sees it.

THE ONE AND THE MANY

A distinguished American publisher, asked how he had come to choose publishing as a career, answered: "My father was a reader; my mother was a striver." *I am my mother and my father*, he implied; *publishing permits me to live out my contradiction*. From the moment of conception, when twenty-three chromosomes from a male and twenty-three from a female become the first cell of a new human being, we are defined by our inner division. Our only identity is a lack of identity. We have nothing all our own. Upon that initial division of identity, other divisions intrude: racial, cultural, occupational, temperamental. "Eely Meely and a-Miley Mo"—a song sung by my nine-year-old daughter, Kathleen, and her classmates—includes the following very American quatrain:

My mother was a doctor,
My father was a spy,
And I'm the little pip-squeak
Who told the FBI.

As a boy of about fourteen, I heard a Chicago version of a verse

My mother was a Jewess,
My father was a bird,
And I'm the queerest fellow
That ever said a word.

Genetically speaking, everyone is the offspring of a mixed marriage, for, cloning aside, no other kind of marriage exists. As the children's jingles suggest, however, genetics is just the beginning.

The deepest justification for reading the Tanakh as the biography of God is that, in the way of a great many human biographies, it follows the divisions in a character as they find expression in a life's work. Before there was a successful publishing executive, in other words, there was a young man with contradictory inclinations. "Trying to find something to do with himself," we say, and the saying is exactly right: trying indeed not just to find something to do but to find something to do *with himself*. Not always, but often, that stage of interior division and quest ends in a life's work that permits the double or multiple personalities coexisting in a given immature character to find simultaneous expression and so to fuse in a mature and dynamic identity. Not always, but often, the work is eventually undermined by the very inner tension that initially made for its success. To pursue the publishing example, it may become impossible at some pitch of intensity to be both reader and striver. The achievement and the identity may then come crashing down. Or, more often, the achievement may pass, changed, into other hands, while the identity lingers.

The Lord God has no mother and father, but the otherwise engendered contradictions in his character do find an enactment in his life. His character fuses, explodes, and—just here the Tanakh differs most strikingly from the Old Testament—disintegrates without disappearing. Biblical Hebrew: interestingly enough, has no word for *story*, and the Tanakh does not end as a well-written story would end. But real lives never end that way. The Tanakh's failure here is its success. Death comes to many if not to most human beings as an interruption. The survivors are left thinking not about the story that is over but about the person who is gone.

So it is at the end of the Tanakh. A bewildering classic, produced by countless literary hands over many hundreds of years, it is held together by its central character far more than by any rigid structure or epic theme. The Lord God is at war with himself, but his war is our own, for culturally speaking we have been living with him for centuries. Before meeting him, everyone, absolutely everyone, has heard of him. Of whom else can that claim be made?

Asked if he believed in God, the psychologist Carl Jung answered, famously, "I do not believe. I know." Can God be known? I leave that question unanswered. What I claim is only that God's life as found on the pages of the Bible can be told. This book aims to be the telling.

2 Generation

He is talking to himself. No human being has yet been created to hear him, and the other divine beings whom he will address infrequently and almost in passing seem barely within his field of attention—bystanders at best, not collaborators.

When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day.

God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, that it may separate water from water." God made the expanse, and it separated the water which was below the expanse from the water which was above the expanse. And it was so. God called the expanse Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.

God said, "Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area, that the dry land may appear." And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the gathering of waters He called Seas. And God saw that this was good. And God said, "Let the earth sprout vegetation: seed-bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: seed-bearing plants of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that this was good. And there was evening and there was morning, a third day. (Gen. 1:1-13)

God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate day from night; they shall serve as signs for the set times—the days and the years; and they shall serve as lights in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth." And it was so. God made the two great lights, the greater light to dominate the day and the lesser light to dominate the night, and the stars. And God set them in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth, to dominate the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that this was good. And there was evening and there was morning, a fourth day.

God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and birds that fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky." God created the great sea monsters, and all the living creatures of every kind that creep, which the waters brought forth in swarms, and all the winged birds of every kind. And God saw that this was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fertile and increase, fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth." And there was evening and there was morning, a fifth day.

God said, "Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature: cattle, creeping things, and wild beasts of every kind, and all kinds of creeping things of the earth." And God saw that this was good. (Gen. 1:1-25)

He is talking to himself, but not about himself. He says nothing about who he is or what he intends, and the words he does speak are abrupt, not intended to communicate anything to anyone, least of all to explain anything, but only to enact. His first words are abrupt in the extreme. The sentence "Let there be light" (1:3), so stately in English, translates just two quick words in Hebrew: *yhi 'or*. The one-word sentence "Light!" would be a defensible English translation; for, if the sentence is a command, it is not spoken commandingly: One does not speak commandingly to oneself. It is rather as if a carpenter reaching for his hammer were to speak the word *hammer* aloud. Compliance with such a "command" is not even remotely at issue.

The scene has no narrator. It is not presented as a vision vouchsafed to some prophet privileged to witness God at work. Yet the effect is that of eavesdropping or spying. We come upon work in progress, and what strikes us about the worker is that, though he talks to himself, he does so without the slightest hesitation. He is not musing. He has something precise in mind, and each stage in his project leads without haste but with extreme economy and directness to the next. Light, first. Then the dome of the sky, opening like a gigantic bubble in the chaos of water: water above it, water below. Then the parting of the lower waters so that dry land may appear. Then vegetation from the newly exposed land. Then, on the fourth day, sun, moon, and stars for more light and for the reckoning of time; on the fifth, the living creatures of the sea and the air; and on the sixth, the beasts of the earth.

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