

SIMPLICITY OF THE HIGHEST CUNNING: NARRATIVE ART IN THE OLD TESTAMENT*

The Finlayson Lecture for 1986

ROBERT P. GORDON
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

David L. Edwards observed some years ago that the Israelite monotheistic ban on images 'was the ruin of their art, but the making of their religion'¹. He was talking about the plastic arts, which was as well since the book in which he expressed this opinion itself comes close to being an anthology of Old Testament poetry and prose. Moreover, one of the theses of Robert Alter's already influential volume on biblical narrative is that Hebrew narrative writing owes its existence to the Israelite monotheistic 'discovery'.² For if Yahweh is sovereign in all history then that history may express unity and a sense of directness. In short, there is a story to be told: there is historiographical potential around. And if Yahweh is free and innovative and not always predictable in his actions, so too, to a degree, are the human beings whom he has made. 'I will be what I will be' may also be predicated of them. Thus Hebrew narrative characterization may not be reduced to the level of the 'flat' and 'static', as at least one generalizing comment from outside the world of Old Testament study would encourage us to believe.³ In the Old Testament, as Alter has noted, there is no room for the Homeric-type fixed epithet, for Hebrew characteristics cannot be pinned down like that.⁴ Such fixity ('the wicked Esau said') is characteristic of Targum, but that is pro-

* Delivered at the 1986 conference of the Scottish Evangelical Theological Society. The title of the paper is inspired by a diary entry of Thomas Hardy for 1885 in which he observes of biblical narratives, 'They are written with a watchful attention (though disguised) as to their effect on their reader. Their so-called simplicity is, in fact, the simplicity of the highest cunning.' See J. Moynahan, 'The Mayor of Casterbridge and The Old Testament's First Book of Samuel: A Study of Some Literary Relationships', in R. Bartel *et al* (eds.), *Biblical Images in Literature*, Nashville/New York, 1975, p. 85. An earlier form of this lecture was delivered in an Open Lecture series in the University of Cambridge in 1985.

1. *A Key to the Old Testament*, London, 1976, p. 35.

2. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, London, 1981.

3. See R. Scholes and R. Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, New York, 1966, pp. 164, 166.

4. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 127ff.

nouncedly in the post-biblical period when, for whatever reason, jejune-ness became a virtue in the rendering of Scripture.

The contrast with Homer runs much deeper, for the Old Testament has no place for epic, even though that might at first seem a natural vehicle for some of what now appears as narrative. Nor is it simply a question of genre suitability or flexibility. So often Hebrew laws, institutions and modes of expression have to be seen as reactions against prevalent norms and forms. There is a kind of 'unsaying' going on, as in the general account of creation in Genesis 1, or in the concept of after-life represented in shadowy Sheol, which appears to derive some of its shadowiness, not from a lack of ideas or speculation, but because in the religious tradition crystallized in Scripture there is a moratorium placed on prying into the after-life in the manner of other peoples. It may be, then that the same outlook is at work in the Hebrew preference for narrative, as Shemaryahu Talmon has argued.⁵ Epic in the Levant was associated with polytheism, crudity and bestiality (Ugarit is an obvious provider of examples), it featured in the ritual re-enactment of cosmic events, and it was basically ahistorical. Talmon concludes:

In the process of total rejection of the polytheistic religions and their ritual expressions in the cult, epic songs and also the epic genre were purged from the literary repertoire of the Hebrew authors. Together with the content, its foremost literary concretisation fell into disrepute and was banished from the Israelite culture. The epic elements which did survive – preponderantly in the literature of the monarchic period, *i.e.* from a time when the prophets were active – were permitted to infiltrate as building blocks of other forms of biblical literature, because they had lost their pagan import and had been neutralised (p. 354)

When, therefore, an Old Testament narrative begins to lilt, exhibiting poetic structure and rhythm, we should not assume that we are reading (hearing) vestigial epic. What is more likely is that we have versifying in the strict sense, of prose tending to verse, in order to emphasise, formalise or heighten effect.⁶

So a good proportion of the Old Testament is story-telling in prose; it is narration and it is accessible to inquiry by the methods and approaches appropriate to the study of narrative prose. This last point bears repetition since some readers of the Old Testament, while able to appreciate such an obvious literary feature as the repetition of key words, have reservations about applying the ordinary rules of literary criticism to sa-

5. "The "comparative method" in biblical interpretation – principles and problems", in *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, XXIX, 1978, pp. 352-6.

6. On this aspect of Hebrew prose see J. L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and its History*, London, 1981, pp. 59-95.

SIMPLICITY OF THE HIGHEST CUNNING

cred scriptures. And if we run our eye over a hundred years of Old Testament scholarship we may conclude that here too 'blindness in part is happened to Israel'. Concerns about units of tradition, sources, English-speakers looking for information about history, German-speakers for information about Israelite beliefs⁷ – all this has meant that too little attention has been paid to the finished literary artefact. There is substance to this criticism, but it is not the whole story, for the quality of the literature keeps asserting itself despite the fissive effects of some of the 'critical' approaches. Moreover, even under critical examination and the demands of doctoral dissertations it remains the case that not all the narratives of the Old Testament have taken on the appearance of smashed mirrors. The so-called 'Succession Narrative' in II Samuel 9 – I Kings 2 is a case in point.

In discussion of this sort notice should also be taken of what might simply be called a 'psychological factor' which impinges upon the awareness of both the scholarly and the general (or 'lay') reader of the Old Testament. We have difficulty in deciding how imaginatively a text should be read. How seriously should we take the presence or absence of a detailed narrative? It is a question which often presses itself upon writers of biblical commentaries, if my experience permits that kind of generalization. Nowadays when imaginative reading of biblical texts is widely practised and commended by those who emphasize the literary character of the Bible, even the biblical critic whose interests extend beyond mere textual stratigraphy may still be left bewildered by the uninhibited display of the outright literary practitioners. It is not necessarily the case that the biblical critic did not notice what his literary colleague proudly holds up to view. It may be that he has noticed and has immediately repented of his consorting with that underworld of undisciplined typology and allegory, and of limp parallelism, which it is his life's ambition to avoid. Again, the tendency of modern literary criticism to talk of levels of meaning, to the extent of playing down authorial intention,⁸ may alienate the biblical critic who, while aware of the significance of ambiguity and polyvalence in (some) Old Testament texts, knows well that there is usually an intended and, for the most part, recoverable meaning in what lies before him. He may even be using genre-terms, like 'apology', 'apologetic' or 'propaganda' in relation to some of the texts which he is studying.

Even so, it is widely acknowledged that much more could have been done for Old Testament narrative by modern critical scholarship. The historical-critical approach, its shortcomings notwithstanding, has yielded

7. J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament. Method in Biblical Study*, London, 1984, p. 162.

8. Cf. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, pp. 147-151 (discussing 'New Criticism').

much that is good and positive and will continue to do so, but there is obvious need for other approaches, including the literary, to be exploited more fully. It is also a fact that in the last twenty years or so, a steady flow of books and articles has appeared to fill the gap.⁹ Interestingly, the point is made often enough in such writings that there are many literary insights to be culled from writings of the pre-critical period (which, after all, is most of human history). Writers who 'consorted with the underworld' might better do justice to aspects of narrative which have tended to be overlooked by modern excavative activities. Alter, in illustration, reports the observation of the Jewish mediaeval commentator Rashi on the irony of 'We are all sons of one man' (Genesis 42:11), spoken by Joseph's brothers to their as yet unrecognized sibling when they appeared before him in Egypt with a request for corn.¹⁰ 'The holy spirit was kindled within them, and they included him with themselves as also being a son of their father,' says Rashi. Perhaps we shall wish to banish this observation to the underworld, or perhaps not. Certainly, of the several commentaries which I have consulted none has anything to say on the matter.

The foregoing comments will suffice by way of Lucan prologue. In what follows I want to say something about several of those features or techniques of Hebrew narrative-writing which justify the use of the word 'art' in the lecture title. I take 'art' to imply the self-conscious and intentional, even if that is a limiting definition. On the encephalographic probings of structuralism I shall have nothing to say. The gamut from 'soft' to 'hard' may be experienced with profit in, for example, David Jobling's *The Sense of Biblical Narrative* (1978).¹¹ At the same time it is true that, 'much that goes under the name of 'biblical structuralism' could be paraphrased without using any structuralist terminology, to everyone's gain'.¹² 'Structure' in what immediately follows is, of course, used with a very different (architectonic) sense.

1. Structure

It is the Old Testament that gives us such an artificial construction as the alphabetical psalm, most conspicuously in the case of Ps 119 which consists of twenty-two octaves each of which begins its lines with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The same concern for form and structure is apparent, even if not normally so emphatically, in Hebrew prose writing, from Genesis 1 onwards. The first chapter of Genesis has

9. In addition to the works mentioned in this article see in particular M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, Bloomington, 1985.

10. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 164.

11. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Supplement Series VII, Sheffield, 1978.

12. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, p. 134.

SIMPLICITY OF THE HIGHEST CUNNING

been subjected to much structural analysis, and rightly so. In the first place there is the division of the divine activity among six days; there are the punctuating occurrences of 'And God said'; and it is evident that there is an internal correspondence between days one to three on the one hand, and days four to six on the other, so that, for example, day one corresponds to day four as light corresponds to luminaries. The chief effect of such a telling of the story of creation is to show that indeed God did not make the world a chaos (*cf.* Is. 45:18). The ordered character of creation is reflected in the structured nature of the account. And given the rival cosmogonies and cosmologies developed in the ancient near east, this is a point of considerable theological import. How much further the structural dimension should be pursued becomes, however, a moot point. Michael Fishbane claims that the chapter is pyramidal in construction, with each day having more space allocated to it than the preceding. On this reading day six is climactic because of word-count, apart from anything else. But not only is Fishbane's an inverted pyramid, it is apparent that it is more like an unsuccessful attempt at a step pyramid since day five is described with fewer words (57) than day four (69).¹³

Another approach to the structuring of Genesis 1 is presented by Paul Beauchamp, who is impressed by the fact that days four and six talk about 'rule'.¹⁴ He concludes that day four, referring to the rule of the heavenly bodies, marks a high point in the progression of the creation narrative. Thus it is 'astres gouvernant' and 'hommes dominant' in Genesis 1.¹⁵ This treatment of the days in the creation narrative is greatly influenced by Beauchamp's view of the priestly calendar and the importance therein of the fourth day, but that is not our present concern. What is of interest is that this reading of the creation of sun, moon and stars conflicts with another which is more familiar and more convincing, namely that the failure to call the sun and moon by their usual names (rather than 'greater light' and 'lesser light'), in a chapter which has naming as one of its more significant features (see vv. 5,8,10), is probably deliberate and even polemical in intent. These heavenly bodies, of whose supposedly divine status Israel's neighbours made so much, are here restricted to their proper function of light-bearing. As for the stars, they are mentioned almost as if they are an afterthought, and as if the author's intention is to strike a blow against near eastern astral worship. It will be obvious that this anti-mythical interpretation, favoured by, for example, Gerhard von Rad in his commentary on Genesis, does not easily coexist

13. *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts*, New York, 1979, pp. 8f. Fishbane (p.9) claims that the 'minimal aberration' between the word totals for the fourth and fifth days is of no account.
14. *Création et séparation: étude exégétique du chapitre premier de la Genèse*, Paris, 1969.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 68 (*cf.* p. 116, etc).

with the more individualist explanation by Beauchamp.¹⁶ We may even begin to see the makings of chaos out of the cosmos that the narrative of Genesis 1 is patently intended to be.

Genesis 1 apart, the search for structures exhibiting internal coherence has become a major industry within the world of Old Testament study. 'Concentric', 'ring-structured', 'introverted' are the kinds of terms that are used to describe what structure-conscious critics bring to light. Chiasmus – the correspondence of items one and four and two and three in a verse such as

To you, O men, / I call out
I raise my voice / to all mankind (Proverbs 8:4)

is often highlighted at the microtextual level, and was evidently as much a feature of biblical compositional style as of other literature ancient and modern. At the macrotextual level chapters and whole books are now, virtually as a matter of course, subjected to analysis of this sort. Some times the result is reasonably satisfactory, and as a possible example of such 'purposeful symmetry' II Samuel 21-24 could be cited. There the accounts of famine and plague in chapters. 21 and 24 respectively, form the outer layer; lists of heroes and heroic deeds the subcutaneous layer (21:15-22; 23:8-39); while making up the 'core' are two poetic pieces glorifying the God of David (22:2-51; 23:1-7). The effect of this symmetry, once it is discerned and interpreted, is to give prominence to the psalm and poem at the centre, and thereby to God and his beneficent activity on behalf of the David who is harassed and threatened in the flanking sections of this 'Samuel Appendix'.

Unfortunately in most such exercises there is a high degree of subjectivity involved and the discovery of patterns in the text can depend in substantial measure on the discoverer's decisions as to what is, and what is not, significant. There are also questions of a practical nature that require airing. What do we know about 'essay planning' by ancient writers? And how practicable or effective were macrotextual structures likely to be, given that the ancient writers were normally writing on scrolls, and that without the use of the headings and such like that are characteristic of modern narrative writing? There is also a problem on the side of the biblical interpreter who, having discovered a pattern which accounts for a portion of text, may be seduced into thinking that he has in some sense gained control of the text. Whereas, if the truth be acknowledged, one of the most unsatisfactory aspects of the pattern quest is, for all the appearance of science and *savoir-faire*, its level of cerebral engagement with the biblical text.

16. *Genesis: A Commentary* (Eng. tr.; revd ed), London, 1972, pp. 55ff. Beauchamp (p. 102) explicitly rejects such an anti-mythical view.

2. *Inclusio(n)*

One of the set texts for Hebrew Paper III in the Cambridge University Theological and Religious Studies Tripos ends at II Samuel 19:9 (Eng. 8), until recently, indeed, at v.9a (Eng. 8a). This point marks the end of the Absalom rebellion. David has lamented Absalom's death, has been rebuked for his excessive grieving, and then we read: 'Then the King arose, and took his seat *in the gate*. And the people were all told, 'behold, the king is sitting *in the gate*'; and all the people came before the king.'

This examination prescription, which, for aught I know, may go back to the 'pre-literary' days of Old Testament study, exhibits a sound instinct. If we look at II Samuel 15 and the account of the beginning of the rebellion, we shall find that the trouble started in the gate, where Absalom used to stand in the early morning and sow seeds of disaffection in the minds of those who had come to Jerusalem seeking redress for wrongs suffered. And furthermore, the weakness in David's administration, according to Absalom at least, was neglect of the business of the gate, the administration of justice for aggrieved citizens. David's sitting in the gate in chapter 19 therefore takes us back to the beginning; it is an '*inclusio(n)*' rounding off a narrative segment by taking the reader back to the beginning of the story. Sometimes the repetition of a word used at the beginning will suffice to round off and refer back, sometimes words and themes, as in the present case, may be involved. In II Samuel, then, David's sitting in the gate has a symbolic function in that it marks the end of the rebellion and return to normality. Which city gate is not stated; presumably it was the gate of Mahanaim, David's headquarters during the rebellion. That it was not the gate of Jerusalem is immaterial; what matters is that David was *sitting in the gate*.

Anyone with an interest in the English essayists may well be reminded of Thomas de Quincey's 'On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth', the point of which is that this mundane detail of the knocking at the gate represents a return to normality:

It makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced; the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish: the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live, first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them.

These words have an aptness in relation to the Absalom rebellion and the king's sitting in the gate at the rebellion's end. But the biblical narrative has the added factor of *inclusio(n)* to reinforce this idea of return to normality. De Quincey's discovery inspires him to doxology ('Oh! mighty poet! Thy works are not those of other men . . .'). Presumably some praiseful conclusion about the biblical writer's skill would not be out of place!

3. Narrative Analogy

Narrative analogy is a technique whereby episodes which may be basically unrelated are made to resonate with each other through the reprise in one of words or ideas which belong in the first instance to the other. In this way it is possible to draw comparisons or contrasts between one character or situation and another, or between the responses of the same character in different sets of circumstances. Sometimes a relatively minor event may assume unsuspected significance by association with one of greater moment, while still more complex goings-on are also possible through the use of this technique of writing.¹⁷

Abraham Malamat's study of the Danite migration in the book of Judges provides a good example of the relatively minor being drawn into the orbit of the comparatively major.¹⁸ Malamat argues that in various points of detail the story of the Danite tribe's migration to the Laish area, as told in Judges 18, corresponds to the account of the *national* conquest and settlement as it is reported elsewhere in the Old Testament. Malamat himself speaks of a typology of conquest accounts, but the usefulness of this particular term is questionable since we are restricted (by definition) to two conquest accounts. Thus narrative analogy seems a better description of what Malamat has observed. The enhancing of a tribal tradition by presenting it *sub specie totius gentis* would be very much in keeping with the general approach in the book of Judges.

Three examples of the same phenomenon from the book of Exodus deserve brief comment. When we read in Exodus 1:7 that the Israelites living in Egypt 'were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied' the collocation of verbs used suggests a comparison with the creation ordinance ('Be fruitful and multiply', Gen. 1:28), which may indeed have influenced the Exodus narrator's choice of words. As the human family is to 'fill the earth' (Gen. 1:28), so the Israelites fill 'the land', whether the land of Goshen or the whole land of Egypt (Ex. 1:7). If in Exodus 1 we can see the influence of Genesis 1, then the verbal echoes may be intended to suggest that the Hebrews' prolificity in Egypt is a sign of divine blessing, no matter the reaction of the Pharaoh and his people.¹⁹

There may be a second instance of narrative analogy in Exodus 1, for, in a section which talks of cities, mortar and bricks, the Pharaoh says, 'Come let us . . . lest' (v.10), using the uncommon expression which comes in Genesis 11:7 in another section about a city, mortar and bricks. In both cases the issue is self-preservation, whether by the Babel-builders

17. Cf. the author's 'David's Rise and Saul's Demise: Narrative Analogy in I Samuel 24-26', *Tyndale Bulletin* XXXI, 1980, pp. 37-64 (42ff.)

18. 'The Danite Migration and the Pan-Israelite Exodus-Conquest: a Biblical Narrative Pattern', *Biblica* LI, 1970, pp. 1-16.

19. In source-critical terms both Gen. 1 and Ex. 1:1-7 are 'Priestly', so that the analogical comparison is valid from either a 'final form' or a 'source-critical' point of view.

concerned with overcoming the centrifugal effects of appearing in the 'primeval history' or by the Egyptians in the face of Israelite proliferation. The oblique commentary of the Genesis story may also encourage the reader to see the assault on the Hebrew community as being on a par with the Babel-builders' implied rebellion against God.

At the far end of the book of Exodus the influence of Genesis, or strictly of the cosmic creation narrative therein, is again in evidence. As the tabernacle construction is brought to its conclusion we read, 'Thus was all the work of the tabernacle of the tent of the congregation finished' (Ex. 39:32 // Gen. 2:1), and then we are told that Moses looked on all that the Israelites had done and blessed them (Ex. 39:43 // Gen. 1:28, 31). A comparison is thus made between the making of the earth for man and the making of the tabernacle for God. Much more may be involved, of course. Are we being informed that the man-made tabernacle is up to standard? Do we now have an established order of things as basic to (Israelite) life as the original creation? There is scope for reflection here. Others see a hint of the old mythic connection between creation-from-chaos and sanctuary-building, with the 'message' that the divine presence is not merely of the ethereal, cosmic order but is historically present to Israel.

4. Word-play

Word-play features in the Old Testament narrative in Shakespearian proportions. It is impossible to do justice to all that might be included under this catch-all title, but there are three variations on the theme to which attention will be drawn.

a. *Leitwort*. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig used the term to describe situations in which a word or root recurs, in any of its possible grammatical forms or derivatives, throughout a narrative.²⁰ By this means a theme is introduced and sustained as the key-word echoes at one point and another in the developing story. One of the best-known examples is the occurrence of *b^earakâ* ('blessing') and the root *barak* ('bless'), as also of *b^ekorâ* ('birthright'), in the Jacob cycle in Genesis. The occurrences of the word *nagîd* ('prince, leader') and of the apparently cognate verb *higgîd* ('tell') in the account of Saul's anointing as *nagîd* by Samuel (I Samuel 9-10) are of a similar order.²¹ There is thereby produced a stereo-phonetic effect: we remain aware that the sinuous story is first and

20. On this see Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 92f.

21. Cf. M. Buber, 'Die Erzählung von Sauls Königswahl', *Vetus Testamentum*, VI, 1956, pp. 6, 142; S. Shaviv, '*nabi* and *nagîd* in I Samuel ix 1-x 16', *Vetus Testamentum*, XXXIV, 1984, pp. 108-113.

foremost about the appointing of a *nagid* for Israel threatened by the Philistines.

b. *Pun*. There are puns in plenty in the Old Testament. Pun is responsible for a kind of 'gallows humour' creeping into the account of the interpretation of the dreams of the butler and baker in Genesis 40. The butler is assured that the Pharaoh will 'lift up his head' and restore him to his former position, but to the doubtless optimistic baker who (presumably) has heard this comforting message Joseph says that the Pharaoh will also 'lift up his head' – from off him! Another pun in similarly playful vein comes in I Samuel 25 in the story of Nabal who celebrated his sheep-shearing with excessive zeal. There is serious word-play on his name in the chapter (v.25), but a less-observed – and less serious instance of the same occurs in v.37 in reference to Nabal's recovery from his indulgence: 'And in the morning, when the wine had gone out of Nabal. . . .' Since Hebrew has a noun *nebel* meaning 'wine-skin, bottle', it is not difficult to appreciate that here Nabal is being treated as a wine-skin. Moreover, the verb is well suited to the pun, for if bread may be said 'to go from the bag' (*i.e.* 'run out', I Samuel 9:7) it seems idiomatically correct to say that wine 'goes out' from the wine-skin.

c. *Ironic repetition*. The ironic repetition of words or phrases is relatively common in the Old Testament and is a kind of word-play easily distinguished from *Leitwort* and pun. An example from II Samuel 11 will make the point clear. As a result of David's instructions to Joab, Uriah the Hittite has been put in a position of danger and has lost his life. When the report reaches David he replies (literally): 'Do not let this matter be evil in your eyes' (v.25). Of course not, for now the king is able to take Bathsheba as his wife. Two verses later, however, it is disclosed that 'the thing that David had done was evil in the eyes of the Lord'. The contrast is pronounced and deliberate. Now, granted that if the two statements were not in such a close relationship we might well render them by idiomatically distinct English equivalents, nevertheless is there not a case here for preserving the literal correspondence of the Hebrew? Is not some of the force of the concluding statement lost if with, for example, RSV we read in the one verse, 'Do not let this matter trouble you', and in the other, 'But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord'?

We have already heard the Babel-builders of Genesis 11 rouse themselves with 'Come let us . . .', which expression they utter twice, in vv. 3 and 4 of this compact, mordant satire on Babylon and what it represented to Israelite minds. But how ironical that when God decides to give the project its quietus, he stirs himself with the same rallying-call, 'Come let us . . . (lest)' (v.7).

The Babel-builders' attempt to 'make a name' for themselves is treated even more derisively in the Genesis narrative. A name? But the name

SIMPLICITY OF THE HIGHEST CUNNING

which they acquired for themselves was 'Babel', derived for the purposes of the narrative from the Hebrew verb *balal*, meaning 'confuse'. And the sense of irony is increased when so soon afterwards we read of God's promise to make Abram's name great in pursuance of a divine initiative which emerges against the background of the chaos of Babel. No ultrasound is needed to detect such ironies, and they are far more decisive for our reading and interpretation of the story than are any structural patterns which are suggested for it.²²

Finally, we shall consider the possibility that ironic repetition is a factor in a problem passage in I Samuel 16. At the end of chapter 15 the prophet Samuel has announced God's rejection of Saul, and he has the task of anointing a successor even while Saul is still *de facto* king. Samuel, aware of the risk involved in this enterprise, points out that Saul will kill him if he goes to Bethlehem to anoint one of Jesse's sons, as God has commanded him; and then comes the problematical sentence which is a certain contributor to most discussions of Old Testament ethics: 'And the Lord said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord' ". ' Which is what Samuel did; a sacrifice was arranged. Even so, the real business of the story is the choosing of one of Jesse's sons. Is God then encouraging Samuel to tell a half-truth? That is the problem. One recently published volume on Old Testament ethics expresses well the dilemma in noting that, whereas Saul had forfeited his right to know all the truth, Samuel did not have the right to deliver himself of an untruth.²³

It may be, however, that the mention of the sacrifice involves ironic repetition of a key element in Saul's own self-defence before Samuel in the narrative immediately preceding in chapter 15. There prophet and king are found in serious disagreement as to whether Saul has discharged his responsibility to prosecute the exterminatory 'ban' on the Amalekites. Samuel says that the king has disregarded his instructions, and Saul insists that he has complied with them. The weakness in Saul's case consists, in part, of the animal noises in the background. 'What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?', asks Samuel in lilting Hebrew (v.14). Saul has an explanation:

They have brought them from the Amalekites;
for the people spared the best of the sheep
and of the oxen, *to sacrifice to the Lord your God.* (v.15)

Samuel does not accept this self-regarding account of what has taken place, so Saul repeats his defence a few verses later:

22. E.g. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis. Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis*, Assen, 1975, p. 22.

23. W. C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, Grand Rapids, 1983, p. 95.

The people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, *to sacrifice to the Lord your God* in Gilgal (v.21).

Is it possible, then, that when dealing with I Samuel 16:2 we should be looking the verse up under 'irony' rather than 'ethics'? That in this case the fool is being answered according to his folly, in a manner which recalls the 'deceiver deceived' motif that appears elsewhere in the Old Testament? Perhaps we can occasionally be too solemn in our discussion of Old Testament problem texts.

One of the great benefits of the 'literary approach', and one which its exponents early appreciated, is its ability to make common ground for readers of whatever theological persuasion as they encounter the biblical text. For the orthodox believer a 'docetic' view of Scripture is something of an occupational hazard, and is exemplified in an extreme manner in the conviction in 'pre-papyri' days that the non-classical Greek of the New Testament was a special 'language of the Holy Ghost'. The 'literary approach' is a gentle pointer to the advantages to be found in a more realistic view of Scripture. The 'kenoticist', on the other hand, finds that in order to hear and interpret Scripture aright he must suspend disbelief, reading the narrative both sympathetically and imaginatively. On issues of historicity or hermeneutic paths may thereafter diverge, but we can at least be thankful for small mercies.