The Hebrew Bible as Inspiration in Culture

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An attempt to assess in a short paper the fructifying impact of the Old Testament, i.e. the Hebrew Bible, on culture generally, foremost on western culture, runs the danger of becoming a compressed catalogue of biblical themes and motifs which were absorbed in many languages, literatures and the fine arts, in religious and speculative thought. To avoid this pitfall, I shall address my remarks to a mere selection of cultural phenomena, which are brought under scrutiny in our symposium, and are exemplified by the wide gamut of performances and exhibitions which take place in the framework of the Prague Festival, vividly illustrating the significance of 'The Old Testament in the Arts'.

Permit me to outline at first in swift strokes the inspiration which the Hebrew Bible effected on Jewish culture. The Hebrew Bible is the 'Book of a People', not less than Jewry is the 'People of the Book.' Post-biblical Jewish civilization, from the Hellenistic age throughout the era of the talmudic Sages and medieval times into modernity, bears upon it the indelible stamp of the biblical heritage, in the realm of conceptual thought and in respect to tradited modes of behavior, in communal life, and in the life of the individual. A well-known adage encourages every Jew to seek in the Hebrew Bible solutions to his problems, because in it answers to all questions can be found: הפוך בה והפוך בה דכלא בה (m. Avot 5,26). The tremendous, often traumatic crises to which the Jewish people was exposed in the course of history, by necessity also affected decisively the intellectual universe of Judaism. The thought patterns of the talmudic Sages, of medieval Jewry, of the Jew in the age of enlightenment and in the modern State of Israel–all of which found their expressions in a variety of linguistic and literary modes–differ indeed fundamentally, each in

its own characteristic way, from the world of ideas of biblical Israel. But despite centuries of geographical dispersion and the concomitant exposure to a diversity of cultural impulses–whether willingly embraced or accepted reluctantly–the umbilical cord which at all times bound and still binds the Jewish people to the biblical matrix was never severed.

Let me illustrate this phenomenon. Jewish authors of the Hellenistic era (ca. 200 BCE to 50 CE), viz. of the early post-biblical period, fused in their writings biblical literary traditions with the Greek language, biblical monotheism with facets of polytheistic paganism. It stands to reason that originally, Jewish-Hellenists rendered the Torah, viz. the Pentateuch, in the Greek vernacular for their Jewish compatriots in Egypt for whom the Hebrew original had become a sealed book, although tradition ascribes that translation, the Septuagint, to a college of Seventy who presumably prepared it at the command of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–247 BCE).[1] In the course of time, the other components of the biblical corpus were rendered in colloquial Greek. This early translation of the Hebrew Bible in a non-semitic language gave the non-Jewish world access to the Hebrew Scriptures. From now on, Judaism shared its holy literature with the world at large, at first with pagan Greece and Rome, and soon after with Christianity, with far more momentous results, and to a much lesser degree with Islam.[2]

Judaism never relinquished its claim to its patrimony. The Bible never ceased to be a most significant source of inspiration in Jewish culture. Biblical Hebrew and literary genres constitute the basis of the various ramifications of the Hebrew language and literature in all ensuing stages of development. At all times, Jewish poets and writers, artists, composers and dramatists drew in their creative work, and to this day continue to draw on pivotal biblical themes and figures. Modern Jewish, and specifically Israeli literature, folk-art and folk-music are replete with reworked biblical motifs.

[1] This tradition is preserved in the Epistle of Aristeas and is echoed in talmudic sources.

[2] J. Heller's presentation "Inspiration und Kommunikation nach Gen 2,7" addresses this issue. In this volume, pp. 23–27.

Jewish philosophy and religious thought have indeed undergone momentous changes. But the understanding of the place of humanity in the universe, and of the interaction of the divine and the human spheres, continues to reflect basic biblical notions. For Martin Buber and thinkers like him, 'Biblical Humanism' has remained a desirable prototype of societal organization and of political structures also in the present time. A romantizised picture of the past is reflected in the vision of an idealized future.[3]

However, from the very first centuries of the era, and with added force from the days of the Reformation, Christianity played a decisive role in making the Old Testament a source of inspiration in culture generally. In the wake of the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire, the translation of the Hebrew Bible in Greek was soon followed by renditions in Latin–the Vetus Latina and Hieronymus' Vulgate. In the ensuing centuries the Hebrew Bible was translated in close to 900 languages, spoken in the ancient, the medieval and the modern world, topping any best-seller list on any count. Revisions of such renditions are periodically required so as to absorb new insights won from discoveries pertaining to the Ancient Near East, and because each generation needs a translation which is adequate to its own world-view.

At times, a translation of the Old Testament, together with the New, inaugurated an era of literacy in the culture of peoples who before that event had been illiterate. In other instances, a translation of the Bible had a fundamental and decisive effect on the development of the language in which it was rendered, and concomitantly on the culture of the people who spoke that language. It will suffice to mention the significant impact of the King James Version on the ensuing evolution of English, of Luther's translation on the German language, and of Mendelsohn's 'Jewish' rendition of the Hebrew Bible which made German accessible to his co-religionists and opened the door for their becoming a creative partner in the shaping of German culture.[4] In view of all this it

[3] In contradistinction, contemporary thought occassionally challenges biblical ways of thinking. S. Schreiner's paper, "Die Erzählungen von *Bruno Schulz*," and Stefan Heym's, *Die Tagebücher des König David* provide appropriate illustrations. In this volume, pp. 183–200.

cannot cause wonder that the Bible was among the very first books to be published in print.

On a different level, biblical figures, motifs and terminology are readily absorbed in every-day language. In the Spanish language, Abigail, the wife of Nabal the Carmelite, who persuaded the irate David to spare the lifes of her husband and his household (1 Sam 25:14–35), is colloquially known as the prototype of a 'cunning' or 'scheming woman'. 'Der keusche Joseph' is teasingly used in German as the designation of a 'chaste' male who rejects the advances of females. The saying "If God so wishes, even a broom shoots" is not based on the similarity of a broomstick and a shotgun, as is commonly presumed, since this saying is known from before the invention of gunpowder. Rather, 'shoot' or 'schiessen' equal 'sprout' or 'blühen'.[5] The proverb derives evidently from the biblical tradition of 'Aaron's rod' (Num 17:16–24), which through divine intervention "sprouted, blossomed, and produced ripe almonds" (17:23) whereas the staffs of the querulous tribal leaders remained dry as before.

The inspirational impetus which culture derived and continues to derive from Hebrew biblical literature is often not directly transmitted. Rather, it is mediated in a variety of ways through the teachings, parables and narratives incorporated in the 'New Testament'. An important factor in this development was the introduction in the church service of lections from the Old Testament next to lections from the New Testament. E.g., a typological reinterpretation paved the way for the tale of Jonah's fish,[6] and the aborted 'Sacrifice of Isaac', set to music by I. Stravinsky and J. Mysliveček, and critically evaluated by Soren Kierkegaard in his *Fear and Trembling*, and a host of other biblical traditions to become staple motifs in the predominantly Christian ethos of western culture,[7] and ensuingly wherever the teaching of the

[4] Think also of Byron's "Hebrew Melodies", Herder's *Biblische Poesie*, and A. Dvořák's *Biblical Songs*.

[5] "Im Mai schiesst der Spargel."

[6] See S. Talmon, "A Unique Depiction of a Scene From the Book of Jonah in a Thirteenth Century Illuminated Hebrew Manuscript". In this volume, pp. 72–95.

[7] See K. Kogman-Appel, "The Iconography of the Biblical Cycle of the Second Nuremberg and the Yahudah Haggadah: Tradition and Innovation." In this volume, pp. 118–131.

Church spread. By means of such a typological or allegorical interpretation, traditions rooted in the Hebrew Bible were interpreted as prefigurations of events related in the Gospels. Thus, the 'Binding of Isaac', עקדת יצחק (Gen 22), is seen to prefigure the crucifixion. Similarly Jonah's stay for three days in the belly of the fish (Jonah 2:1–2) is presented as a prefiguration of the three days between the crucifixion and Jesus' fervently expected rise from the grave (Matt 12:40). All over the globe, philosophers and preachers, artists and authors were inspired in their thought and creative work by values drawn from the Old Testament in the garb of their New Testament reformulations. The Church emerged as the most prominent promulgator of biblical values as cultural assets world-wide.

Attention must be drawn to additional factors which decisively furthered the absorption of traditions drawn from the Hebrew Bible in Christian culture, and ensuingly in culture generally, foremost in the plastic and the performing arts. The biblical prohibition of making images nipped in the bud any visual representation of the deity, and distinguished Israelite culture from the ancient Near Eastern civilizations, foremost of Mesopotamia and Egypt, which cultivated extensively plastic effigies of humans and deities. By way of an inclusive interpretation, the biblical injunction was understood to prohibit also the making of images of humans, since Adam was created 'in the likeness of God' (Gen 1:27).[8]

Archeological discoveries and medieval manuscripts prove that in antiquity and in the Middle Ages, Jewish artists and craftsmen, and their patrons, did not always abide by this biblical command. Thus, in the mosaics of Dura Europos human figures are shown, and the sarcophagus of a famous sage in the catacombs of Beth She'arim is embellished with the head of Zeus. Equally, manuscripts of *haggadas*, Hebrew prayer books (*machzorim*), and compendia of biblical texts, are often ornamented with illustrations of human figures. But it still can be said that before the

[8] On this issue see M. Prudký, "'You Shall Not Make Yourself An Image': The Intention and Inspiration of the Second Commandment." In this volume, pp. 37–51.

Period of the Enlightenment, the biblical prohibition of making images severely curbed, almost stifled, the development of the plastic and the performing arts in Jewish culture.

In contrast, from early on, the Church freed Christian sculptors, painters and playwrights from the fetters of the biblical proscription. Already in the first and second centuries, Christian sepulchral and monumental art gives vivid testimony to this 'revolution'. Church leaders and patrons of various religious and public buildings soon began to vye for the services of artists whom they commissioned to beautify these edifices with paintings and portraits, sculptures, murals, frescoes and mosaics. Historical events reported in the books of the Old Testament, and the revered *dramatis personae* who figure in them, were chosen as objects of miracle and mystery plays, and emerged as ready objects for pictorial representation. The names of Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Tintoretto, Rembrandt, Rubens, Holbein and a galaxy of other great masters who beautified the imposing edifices of Christian worship became household words in western civilization. Through their creations, the Old Testament established itself as a source of inspiration on the grand scale in Christian culture,[9] and through it in culture generally.[10] Viewing the murals, paintings and sculptures in churches and cathedrals in any country may be likened to a journey through the books of the Old Testament and Israelite history.[11]

In this context, we should be reminded that the Hebrew Bible is not a 'book', but rather a 'book of books', an anthology of representative literary compositions which issued forth from various strata of the ancient Israelite society over many centuries. Not all constituent components of the Hebrew biblical canon hold equal fascination for the faithful or for the artist. Thus, the various collections of legal precepts were mostly neglected in Chris-

[9] See M. Balabán, "Die Kunst im Alten Testament als ästhetische Konkretion des Gottesgeistes." In this volume, pp. 52–62.

[10] These facts are visually brought to life in the rich offer of exhibitions in the framework of the Prague Festival.

[11] See Z. Všetečková, "Gothic Mural Paintings in Na Slovanech Monastery"; H. Hlaváčková, "The Old Testament Illuminations in the Bible of Wenceslav IV." In this volume, pp. 96–110.

tian culture. To a degree this pertains also to the wisdom writings. Interest centered on the prophetic books. The prophets were easily integrated in the Christian ethos as symbols of moral fortitude. Equally, the Book of Psalms occupies a prominent place in Christian devotion, so much so that many a Christian tends to conceive of the Psalter as a constituent part of the New Testament rather than of the Hebrew Bible. Psalmody gave a tremendous impetus to the development of Church music and music generally–songs, chants, chorals, oratorios and symphonies which revolve on biblical themes.[12]

Similarly, biblical narratives and historiography rank highly in Christian iconography, are abundantly reenacted in medieval miracle plays and mysteries,[13] and are recaptured in the plastic and performing arts generally, as well as in music. They depict situations and societal circumstances with which 'Everyman' can easily identify: family life, husbandry and agriculture, war and peace. Let me mention only some Old Testament topics and themes which have been and still are a perennial source of inspiration in culture, and found an expression in the Prague Festival: Creation (J. Haydn; D. Milhaud); the Garden of Eden; the Flood; the Tower of Babel;[14] the three Patriarchs and Joseph (P. Pokorný, Cantata "Death of Joseph")–whom the Bible actually portrays as a fourth patriarch; the Exodus from Egypt (G. F. Handel, *Israel in Egypt*); Moses and Aaron (dramatized in Schönberg's opera *Aaron and Mose*); Jephta and his daughter (G. Carissimi's oratorio *Jephta*); Samson (Milton, *Samson Agonistes*) and Delilah; Saul and the Witch of Endor; David (W. A. Mozart, *Davidde Penitente*; M. Castelnuovo-Tedesco, "King David's Dance"; A. Honegger, *Le roi David*; Händel's Oratorios) and Goliath (set to music by F. Kuhnah); Solomon (E. Bloch, Rhapsody "Schelomo"; K. Gold-

[12] See S. Segert, "Old Testament Poetry–Czech and Slovak Translations and Transformations," and the comprehensive survey by Moshe Gorali, *The Old Testament in Music* (Jerusalem: Maron Publishers, 1993). The wealth of concerts which graced the 'Prague Festival' gives eloquent witness to the inspirational impact of the Old Testament in music. In this volume, pp. 63–71.

[13] See B. Pranger, "Monastic Readings of the Old Testament (Re-Enactments of Old Testament Scenes)." In this volume, pp. 167–182.

[14] See M. Friedman, "The Tower of Babel in the Bedford Book of Hours." In this volume, pp. 111–117.

mark, *The Queen of Sheba*); the Prophets (F. Mendelsohn-Bartholdy, *Elijah*; E. Cossetto, and J. D. Zelenka, *Lamentatio Jeremiae Prophetae*; L. Bernstein, *Jeremiah*); Psalms (C. Monteverdi, "Laudate Dominum (Psalm 150)"; W. A. Mozart, "Alleluja;" I. Stravinsky, *Psalm Symphony*, J. D. Zelenka, and T. Avni, *De profundis*; B. Mikolášek, "Psalm II;" Z. Pololáník, *Cantus Psalmorum*; M. Stern, "Hannah's Song of Praise"); Job[15] and Daniel (V. Franz, *Oratorio Ludus Danielis*; B. Červený, "Daniel in Lion's Den"); Nebuchadnezar (G. Verdi, *Nabucco*), Naomi and Ruth,[16] Esther (from early on acted out in the *Purimspiel*, dramatized by Racine, and staged twice at the Festival, once by a puppet theatre), and many more.

The attraction which biblical narratives generally hold out for writers, artists and musicians lies in their authors' impressive faculty to tell their tales with succinct brevity, make a point, and bring home a lesson with incisive clarity. There is no waste of words. Biblical narrative style has a dramatic quality to it. Verbs outnumber descriptive vocables. A sentence may consist of a chain of verbs without connectives or intervening linguistic units, and thus confers an impression of ongoing action.

The scene of Yael's slaying Sisera in 'Deborah's Song' may serve as an illustration. The poetic Hebrew text records the episode in three verses, which contain altogether thirty-six parts of speech: sixteen verbs, and only twenty 'static' elements: nouns, adjectives, pronouns and connective vocables (Judg 5:25–27). Because of the large number of words of action, the one-dimensional stationary text conveys a visual impression of progressive motion, almost like in a filmstrip, or in a painting with successive registers. In translations, the number of verbs roughly equals their number in the Hebrew text. But the amount of non-verbal expressions is at least trebled. The increased volume of 'static' vocables results in a slowing down of dramatic motion. The difference comes most clearly to the fore in the last verse in which the pericope culminates (5:27): כרע נפל שׁכב בין רגליה כרע נפל באשׁר כרע שׁם נפל שׁדוד; NEB: "he sank down, he fell, he lay, at her feet he sank down and fell. Where he sank down, there he

[15] Petr Eben, *JOB for Organ*, inspired by his earlier work on Goethe's *Faust*.

[16] Discussed by K. A. Deurloo, "Naomi and Ruth; the Birth of the Son." In this volume, pp. 28–36.

fell, done to death"; Einheitsübersetzung: "(Zu ihren Füssen) brach er zusammen, fiel nieder, lag da, zu ihren Füssen brach er zusammen, fiel nieder. Wo er zusammenbrach, da lag er vernichtet."

Another example is provided by the bragging of the enemy in the 'Song of Moses' (Exod 15:9). Here, a succession of seven verbs, three of which are strung together, like כרע נפל שׁכב in the above instance,[17] is broken by only five 'motionless' vocables: אמר אויב ארדף אשׂיג אחלק שׁלל תמלאמו נפשׁי אריק חרבי תורישׁמו ידי. This linguistic condensation cannot be achieved in translations, because of the quite different structure of the target language. E.g, NEB: "The enemy said, I will pursue, I will overtake; I will divide the spoil, I will glut my appetite upon them; I will draw my sword, I will rid myself of them;" or Einheitsübersetzung: "Da sagte der Feind: Ich jage nach, hole ein. Ich teile die Beute, ich stille die Gier. Ich zücke mein Schwert, meine Hand jagt sie davon."

The proliferation of action words in the Hebrew original throws light on the motivations and the psychology of the *dramatis personae*. It compensates in a way for the dearth of interpretative vocables, and still leaves room for the reader for infusing his own interpretation in the reading of the text. Here is an illustration: the tale of Esau's selling to Jacob his birthright for a dish of lentils (Gen 25:29–34) again culminates in a string of verbs, which depict concisely Esau's actions, and at the same time are clearly intended to highlight the author's depreciation of the man. When Jacob gave the dish to Esau, the latter gobbled it up in haste and went on his way: ויאכל וישׁת ויקם וילך ויבז עשׂו את הבכֹרָה (25:34), NEB: "He ate, drank, got up and left. Thus Esau showed how little he valued his birthright;" Einheitsübersetzung: "er ass und trank, stand auf und ging seines Weges. Vom Erstgeburtsrecht aber hielt Esau nichts."

Also 'dialogue' does not serve predominantly the purpose of providing background information and a characterization of the *dramatis personae*, as is the case in other literatures. Rather, it

[17] Such strings of verbs can be occasionally found also in other literatures, as e.g. in Caesar's famous pronouncement, *veni vidi vici*, or in Schiller's description of the disappearance of the cup in the waters of the sea, in 'Der Taucher': "er sah ihn stürzen, trinken, und sinken tief hinab".

always is aimed at carrying the plot one step further. Pertinent illustrations are God's dialogues with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden tradition (Gen 3:8–19), or Abraham's dialogue with God before the destruction of Sodom and Gormorrah Gen 18:20–31). Another example: Thomas Mann retold the story of Jacob and his sons in over a thousand pages. The Book of Genesis covers the same ground in thirteen chapters, which fill not more than forty pages in any edition of the Hebrew Bible.

The dynamic quality of biblical literature, especially of the narrative genre, can be summarized as follows: Biblical authors 'paint in words', thus making up for the absence of the medium of 'narration by painting', which in ancient Israel was proscribed by law. As a result, biblical narratives, and many of its non-narrative parts, strike one as verbal versions of the register technique which was widely used in ancient Egypt and in Mesopotamia. As a result, biblical tales lend themselves readily to plastic representation, can be staged with ease, and put in music, especially dramatic music.

One other characteristic of the biblical literature should be highlighted. The Old Testament writings reflect, or are intended to reflect, the particular conceptual universe of ancient Israel, societal situations and one-time historic events which occurred in defined geographic settings. In this respect, biblical literature is 'dated' and tied-down to a world that is no more. But the abstention from overloading the stories with details which pertain specifically to the place and time of the reported incident or incidents, and the 'timelessness' of biblical tenets of faith and rules of human conduct, leave room for their application to totally changed circumstances. Thus, e.g. the Hebrew text of the Book of Jonah speaks of a 'fish' or a 'big fish' pure and simple that swallowed the prophet, leaving it to translators and exegetes to ruminate about what sort of creature that 'fish' was, a 'whale', a 'dolphin' or possibly a 'sea-monster' (LXX: κῆτος). Again, the author of the Garden of Eden tale contented himself with having Eve and Adam eat of 'the fruit of the tree' (Gen 3). Post-biblical exegesis specifies that the fruit was an 'apple', possibly on the basis of the double entendre of Latin *malum* which means both 'bad' and 'apple'. Or else, the apple of the Paris-Helena story, or of the Hebrides was somehow imported into the biblical tradition. This process of re-use and adaptation can be observed in the

biblical canon itself: Clear echos of the Joseph novel,[18] resound in the tale of Esther and Mordecai.[19] And the motif of the lowly Israelite exile who rises to prominence at the court of a foreign king can be applied in an Egyptian setting (Joseph), as well as in a Babylonian (Daniel) or Persian setting (Esther–Mordecai; Ezra–Nehemiah). The Janus-head-like quality of the biblical literature, being both 'dated' and 'timeless', enables post-biblical authors and artists to adapt their reworked or remodelled versions of biblical traditions to the conditions and the Zeitgeist of later periods, giving eloquent testimony to the pivotal place of the Old Testament in the arts throughout history.

In conclusion it needs to be stated that the evident inspirational effect of the Hebrew Bible on culture did not go unchallenged. Since Marcion, one can witness a periodically emerging religious opposition to the significant role accorded to the Old Testament in Christianity. There never ceased trends to cut out the Hebrew heritage, and have Christian faith and culture begin with Jesus and the Gospels. At times, one can notice attempts to substitute native folklore for the traditions of the Hebrew Bible, as a primitive precursor of the New Testament.

Again, the Hebrew Bible is not a purely religious document, but has historical dimensions which pertain to Judaism as a national entity. Therefore, political animosity and anti-Semitism tend to undercut the momentous significance of the Hebrew Bible for culture generally.

Last but not least. The crucial task of technology in modern civilization seems to be paralleled by an increasing reduction of humanistic values. This process necessarily puts in question the persistence of the Old Testament as inspiration in culture.

Let us hope that the Prague festival of the arts, and our symposium, will help to counter this process, and revive interest in a wide audience to accord to the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, in our time the momentous significance it was accorded in the culture of past generations.

[18] Especially of Genesis ch. 41.

[19] Foremost in Esth 2:21–23 and ch. 6.