



The Bible as Literature Is the Bible Literature?

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Genesis 22: 1–13 Acts 17: 22–31

The title chosen for the series of addresses for Sunday evensong services in this chapel this term is 'The Bible as Literature'. Had it been instead 'The Bible and Literature' the task of this term's seven preachers – among whose number I am honoured to include myself – would have been both easier and more difficult. Easier, because we could have indulged ourselves and the congregation in a pleasant Cook's tour of the wonders of Western literature, luxuriating in the debt owed to this agglomeration of ancient near Eastern writings we call the Bible by such splendid monuments as the Medieval mystery plays, Dante's *Commedia*, Caldéron's *autos sacramentales*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the innovative, hectic poetry of the still neglected Christopher Smart, the great narrative arcs of fall and redemption of the nineteenth-century novel and – and I could go on. Perhaps that brief taster makes you wish these sermons were indeed to take place under the heading, 'The Bible and Literature'. But such a heading might have made things harder too, since any attempt in the short space of an evensong address to encompass the impact of the Bible on literature, to take the measure of literature's response to the Bible, would surely be felt barely to scrape the surface of this vast topic.

At any rate, the title we do have – 'The Bible as Literature' – poses a much sharper problem. Is the Bible literature? I have two answers to this question and they are, predictably, 'yes' and 'no'. Let's start, to shake things up a bit, with 'no'. The story of the sacrifice of Isaac is one of the central stories of both Hebrew and Christian Bibles, known in the Hebrew tradition as the *aqedah*, or the 'binding', and associated as it happens with the liturgy for Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, which passed but a couple of weeks ago, and vital to the Christian tradition with its typological foreshadowing of the still greater sacrifice in the New Testament of the Son of God Himself. This story also formed the focus of two of the greatest reflections on the relation of the Bible to literature. Writing under the pseudonym of Johannes de Silentio – John of Silence – the great Danish theologian, controversialist, and seducer, Søren Kierkegaard, set himself the task of trying to understand Abraham's apparent readiness to sacrifice his son – and not just any son either, but the son God granted him beyond any reasonable biological expectation in his great old age, a son who, moreover, would be, Abraham had been promised, the father in his turn of nations upon nations. Kierkegaard's reading of this story is, amongst other things, the greatest reflection on omnipotence of God in the Western theological tradition: because He is almighty, God can both promise Abraham a son as the foundation of nations

and require the sacrifice of that son. This must inform, I think, what is surely the most poignant moment of the story:

My father, and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.

One way to read this is as a dreadful acknowledgement on Abraham's part that he owes Isaac to God and that God has already, therefore, provided the sacrifice. But that does not help explain why Abraham answers Isaac quite so precisely: God will provide a lamb for the sacrifice. Perhaps, simply, he is lying in order, stretching a charitable reading to breaking point here, to protect his son. But in fact, Abraham believes what he says and, moreover, is both absolutely ready to yield Isaac to God and absolutely believes he will not, ultimately, be required of him. Abraham's faith in God Almighty is absolute and as such, for Kierkegaard, beyond reason – it is absurd. Kierkegaard cannot understand him, but venerates him for all that nonetheless.

He cannot understand him, that is, in the way that he is perfectly able to understand a comparable case of child sacrifice from one of the earliest instances of Western imaginative literature (and I'm hoping you'll forgive the anachronism). The story of Iphigenia, which chiefly comes down to us in plays by the Greek tragedian Euripides, tells of how, like Abraham, the Greek king Agamemnon was told by the gods that, for the winds to blow his ships to Troy in order to get the Trojan war underway, it would be necessary to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia. Agamemnon agrees and, unlike Abraham, is not spared the need to undertake the sacrifice of his child, which does, nevertheless, have the promised effect of bringing the winds to speed his ships to their fate. That, for Kierkegaard, however, is not the only difference. More important is the fact that Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia, abhorrent as to us it no doubt seems or ought to seem, is for something recognisable: it fulfils a purpose in which others are invested and have an interest. Abraham's potential sacrifice of Isaac would do no such thing – in fact, insofar as Isaac holds within him the seed of the nations, it does quite the opposite, destroying the interests of many. So, the lesson I might draw from this reading for my purposes is that while literature from its earliest examples – and in its archetypal form, tragedy (Aristotle) – experiments with how the interests of individuals intersect with those of others, this seminal biblical story does not. Literature is readily comprehensible; the Bible, by contrast, attests to the mystery – the terrifying mystery – of faith.

The comparison of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac with Greek texts that have often been viewed as the very foundation of the Western literary tradition was to be reprised to brilliant effect some hundred years after Kierkegaard's dazzlingly virtuoso account. The Jewish philologist, Erich Auerbach, hounded from his post at the University of Marburg by the National Socialist regime, exiled in Istanbul, without the resources of a university library, turned back to what he considered the signal attempts in Western writing imaginatively to present reality. The result, his book *Mimesis* (the title is the Greek word for 'imitation', by the way), is a towering achievement in the history of literary criticism. It begins with an extended reflection on the differences between the story of Abraham and Isaac and the story in Homer's *Odyssey* of Odysseus' return from the Trojan war – the war that, in a way, the sacrifice of Iphigenia had enabled. In Homer's epic poem, everything, according to Auerbach, takes place in the foreground, is narrated in detail,

every actor in the poem comes from somewhere, has a clearly narrated background – in fact, has no background at all, since nothing of any significance remains concealed.

In the story of Abraham and Isaac, by contrast, everything is in the background, mysterious, no happening is explained, established in a sequence of events, or given a rationale. God breaks into the narrative, but does not come from anywhere in particular; Abraham's thought and decision-making processes, as Kierkegaard recognised and struggled with, are completely opaque to us. As Auerbach summarises: 'Far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, [the Biblical narrative] seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history.' Literature entertains, diverts; the Bible seeks to overcome and claim its readers for its own.

This all seems like a pretty emphatic 'no' to the question that forms my title. And with St Paul on the Areopagus, that 'no' seems only to become more emphatic. Renewing the Mosaic proscription on graven images, the Apostle seeks to replace what the King James Version tellingly translates as 'art and man's device' with the good news of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Paul does not simply want to dismiss art – to dismiss literature, we might say. He knows what a powerful countervailing force to his message it has the potential to be. No, he does not want to dismiss it, he wants to devour it. This is where my 'no' starts to shade over into 'yes', for this is Paul, not only the great systematiser of the Christian religion, but its great writer, its first – may we even say – poet. For one thing, he is willing, of course, to quote the Greek poets, the adversaries he has come to cope: 'For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring'. And this is Paul, the master of the rhetorical shifts of the letter to the Romans, of the moving imagery of the letter to the Corinthians, and more. And I suppose this is also the moment at which I should return to Kierkegaard and admit that in addition to the example of Iphigenia, Kierkegaard adduces a Biblical example, that of the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter. The story of the general who vows in the heat of battle to sacrifice whatever comes first to greet him out of his house were he only to return victorious, who returns duly victorious, and is greeted by his jubilant daughter is, as in the plays of Aeschylus and Euripides, a tale of the terrible juxtaposition of the rival claims of family and country – a terrible juxtaposition that we may nevertheless comprehend as a tragedy. The Bible contains many such examples of the literary, of course, but what Paul's imaginative brilliance brings sharply into view is the need at once for the Bible to fend off the blandishments of the literary, while also claiming them for the proclamation of the gospel.

Of course, the relationship between the Biblical and the literary is not an easy one, in which literature simply yields up its store of fancy goods to Biblical narrative or in which the Bible serves as a treasury of readymade narratives ripe for retelling. The relationship is a dynamic tension, more like, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's resonant phrase, a 'war-embrace' than a happy marriage. It is part of the imaginative brilliance and religious daring of Milton's great account of how the nativity of Christ put to flight the pagan gods that it takes place in a poem. Indeed, when Milton asks, 'Say heavenly Muse, shall not thy sacred vein / Afford a present to the infant God?', we might sympathise with the Muse's apparent silence, keeping quiet to avoid the fate meted out to the pagan deities and other demi-gods later in the poem.

The poet, Abraham Cowley, who entered this College in 1636, attests quite how difficult being both a poet and truly faithful could be. His epitaph to Richard Crashaw, his friend, fellow poet, and Catholic convert, begins,

Poet and saint! To thee alone are given
The two most sacred names of earth and Heaven;
The hard and rarest union which can be,
Next that of Godhead with humanity.

Poetry and sainthood, literature and the Bible – ‘The hard and rarest union which can be’ – so hard a union, in fact, that it is next only to the union of human and divine in Christ Himself. But such a union can be, as it was, for Cowley, in Crashaw, and as it surely is in some of the most memorable moments of the Bible and of literature alike.