

SHOULD IRON-AGE TEXTS BE STILL READ IN A DIGITAL AGE? THE HEBREW BIBLE AND THE POWER OF METAPHOR

Abstract

Hebrew Bible has been used in the past often and almost exclusively to foil a New Testament passage, thus overemphasizing on messianic prophecies, to fuel and defend a dogmatic statement, thus resorting to allegory and typology as the key hermeneutics, or to criticize, (and even demonize) the Jews as Christ haters, while not plumbing the Hebrew Bible for its own identity and intrinsic relevance. In the following lines, I bring forth a few examples of what I call “the power of metaphor of the Hebrew Bible”. And I will do this with deep respect to this literary-religious corpus that has never lost its “best-seller” status, while looking at these ever ancient, ever new biblical texts with the eye of a student of Bible and Semitic philology, but at the same time struggling to listen to the child in me, to return to those days when at my mother’s knees (literally!) I heard for the first time about Noah and the Flood story. What comes next is a brief immersion into the Hebrew Bible theological grammar with no claim whatsoever of *ex-cathedra* authority in selecting the texts.



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Introduction

American theoretical physicist Lawrence Kraus, former director of “Origins Project at Arizona University,” wants us to see poetry in science while entirely overlooking the poetry of those “Iron-Age writings,” as he derogatorily calls the Christian Bible. One of the main goals of Lawrence Kraus’s latest book, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* – a condensed history of physics, from The Big Bang to Einstein and beyond, is just that: to detect and proclaim the poetry of the subatomic physics. This is a great and

salutary endeavor, any, indeed almost every believer shares it: to see in God's creation an opened hymnal book, the book of nature, that is. "The heavens recount the glory of God" exclaims tirelessly the old psalmist (Ps 19/18:2/1) reminding all that God is the greatest Artist who expresses himself through his creation. Nevertheless, any believer sees in God's eternal Word, vested in human words of Scriptures, so quickly discarded by Kraus as outmoded texts, a great deal of poetry infused by deep theology.

Is the Scripture – and here I mean above all the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament according to 2 Tim 3:16 – just an antiquated religious corpus reflecting simplistic views of some Iron Age peasants, as Kraus prematurely labels the biblical writers as a whole?

"God made man because he loves stories" – thus begins Elie Wiesel his famous book *The Gates of the Forest*. The famous author and 1986 Nobel Peace Prize laureate remind us that the Scripture is the great story man is repeatedly telling God with neither storyteller nor listener getting bored since both are exchanging hats, in taking turns by speaking and listening to one another.

While reading the Bible as the greatest story ever told, I must though agree with Brent A. Strawn, the author of *The Old Testament is Dying: A Diagnosis and Recommended Treatment* that the Hebrew Bible is more poetry than story due to its four characteristics which define poetry in general: 1) candor; 2) ambiguous and contradictory language; 3) contemporaneity; and 4) continuation. The last characteristic is, perhaps, the most important. Hebrew Bible as poetry invites its reader to be a co-writer, as it were, along with its initial writers via hermeneutics of continuous reflective reading and re-imagination.

In any event, stories and poems are made of metaphors, stylistic vehicles carrying the reader beyond the words – if one considers the etymology of the Greek term *metaphora*, from verb *metapherō*, "to transfer, change, alter," literally, "to carry over, beyond." Where to? To an ineffable space-time-state continuum, where the reader can recapture and luxuriate in the "sense of wonder." To such a "sense of wonder" does Jesus allude when he challenges his listeners: "Unless you turn (*straphēte*) and become (*genēsthe*) like children (*paidia*), you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 18:3). Children alone have their unique way to conjugate insatiate inquisitiveness with sheer excitement at life's wonders.

Sometimes, these images and metaphors are so peculiar, even startling or scandalizing, that Philo of Alexandria's phrase *hupēchountos heterou* "echoes of another [voice]" (*Quis rerum divinarum heres sit*, 1:259) may accurately apply to the imaginative poetry of Hebrew Bible.

The Prophetic Perfect and Its Theology (Done and Unfolding)

The verb system in Hebrew is aspectual, namely, there are two aspects (though not tenses) of the verb: perfective and imperfective. In a language with the tense category, time is perceived as linear having a beginning and an end and many moments between, perhaps with a climactic or middle point on the one-direction arrow of time. However, in Hebrew, time is seen as aspectual. Perfective aspect indicates that an action was, is, or will be completed. Imperfective aspect expresses an action that was, is, or will be incomplete or is still unfolding. As one can notice, the point in time is unspecified in either of the two aspects. What matters is the structure of the action or state: completed or unfolding.

So when the eighth century BC prophet *Yeša'yāhû* (Isaiah) of Jerusalem exclaims, in God's name, "My people went into exile!" (Is 5:13) using the perfective aspect *gālāh* "went into exile," he considers the event (going into exile) already completed in God's mind, yet remaining to become reality, which in fact will occur much later, in 586 BC, following the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

This way to convey future events or actions using the perfective aspect of the verb, commonly termed *perfectum propheticum*, the "prophetic perfect" (cf. Is 10:23; 11:9; 19:7; Job 5:20; 2 Chr 20:37), conveys a profound theological idea: If God looks at the action from inside as something completed, man looks at the same action from outside as something *yet* to be completed, and, hence, the usual rendition of this phrase with a future tense: "My people will go into exile." Because of these two different perspectives (i.e., human or divine) from which an event can be evaluated, the Hebrew Bible knows two ways of looking at time: aspectual (from God's perspective inside the event) as a simultaneity of points in time and tense-wise (from man's perspective outside the event) as the well-defined past, present and future points on the one-direction arrow of time.

Yahweh, God's Unfinished Name

By the end of Late Bronze age (13th c. BC), when biblical scholars usually place Moses and the exodus-event from Egypt, Ancient Near Eastern people used to think of their gods and goddesses in terms of quite concrete and mundane needs, getting to divinize any important aspect of creation that could offer them health, fertility, abundant offspring: from "river" (Nahar) to "sea" (Yam), from "sun" (Shamash) to "dawn" (Shahar), from an "almighty" being (El) to a daily "lord" of fertility (Baal).

However, in such a naturist religious context, Exodus 3 tells us a quite different and intriguing story about a Hebrew fugitive from Egypt named *Mošeh* (Moses), who while shepherding the flock of his father-in-law the priest Jethro, somewhere in Midian, in the thick of the Arabian desert (today, Saudi Arabia), came upon a fascinating yet terrifying sight: a bush blazing all in flames that were burning and yet unconsumed by the blazing fire. Coming closer to that awesome appearance, Moses hears a voice from the midst of the burning bush. He is told to return to Egypt and lead the Hebrews out of slavery. When asked about his name, the mysterious voice reveals his identity, though somehow reservedly and gradually.

“And God said to Moses, ‘*I am who I am*.’ And he said, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘*I am being* has sent me to you.’” Moreover, God said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: “Yahweh [*He is being*] God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This *is* my name forever, and this *is* my memorial to all generations” (Ex 3:14-15 [NKJ]).

The revelation of God’s name occurs in three steps: 1. “*I am who I am*” – or as I read it: it is not your business who I am; 2. “*I am being*” – I am with you, this is what you should now; and 3. *Yahweh* “*He is being...*” – I am the source of all what exists, but I cannot tell you more about myself: I have my reservations.

One may reasonably argue, “What is so impressive with this name *Yahweh*? Is not it just another name among many other divine names human history recorded in its thick book of ancient religions!” Not quite so, I would say.

First, this is the *personal name* of God. It is not a generic name based on man’s concrete needs and thus referring to a divine attribute. Exodus 3 represents a unique situation in the history of world religions when a deity comes forward and reveals its personal name to a human being. It is as if God would say, “Call me *Yahweh*!” – quite different than, for example, “*Elohim* created the heavens and earth” (Gn 1:1) – *Elohim* being one of the many generic names of Israel’s God, meaning “the Almighty.”

Second, God uses the verb “to be” portraying himself in terms of “existence” (*Yahweh*, “He is being...”) rather than in a concrete way (i.e., “sun,” “dawn,”.). This is an abstract, almost philosophical way in which God is depicted, as pure existence and source of everything that got into existence through his almighty word (see Gn 1). Existence is more than life. Existence is a vast ocean while life is just a raindrop.

Third, the name *Yahweh* is not a late literary invention dated to the exilic or post-exilic period (6th-5th centuries BC), as the 19th century biblical scholarship wanted us to believe.

Yahweh is a much older name going back quite likely to the Late Bronze period, to Moses' days. And this can be demonstrated on linguistic grounds. As it appears, *Yahweh* is the imperfective aspect of an old, frozen form of the Hebrew verb, "to be," namely the form *hawah*. Later on, during the biblical period of Hebrew language, due to a Northwest Semitic phonetic shift, -w- turning into -y-, the verb "to be" altered its outlook from the archaic *hawah* to the new form *hayah*. So, the presence of the consonant -w- instead of more common -y- in the name *Yahweh* testifies to its archaic origin – not a post-exilic literary construal, but rather a Late Bronze lexical item. And the archaic origin makes this name unique and hard to understand within the Near Eastern religious context unless one subscribes to Philo's explicative phrase, "echoes of another voice."

Fourth, *Yahweh* "*He is being ...*" is an unfinished name, an incomplete, grammatically incorrect nominal clause with no predicate whatsoever. But in the very incompleteness of this archaic name lies one of the most profound lessons of theology. The absence of the predicate in the nominal clause *Yahweh* means that God of Exodus 3 could be nothing or everything that humans could imagine. The divine name shows God's condescension: He is willing to share with us his attributes. We are called to identify what God could be for us in various moments of our lifetimes. *Yahweh* is blank check (so Yves Congar) offered to an always insecure, fragile and needing humanity: for an orphan, *Yahweh* means: "He is... my father"; for a widow, "He is... my husband"; for a sick person, "He is... my healer" and so on.

But the personal divine name *Yahweh* may signal something even more ominous. The imperfective aspect "He was/is / will be being ..." (i.e., unfolding action or state) along with the lack of a predicate paints the God of Hebrew Bible as shrouded in mystery, on a steady search of man and perhaps of himself, since the day he entered in a covenantal relationship with the humanity created in his image (Gn 1:26-27) – which makes me think of Abraham Heschel's seminal work *God in Search of Man*.

All Wrapped in Time (His Holiness, the Time)

When the Hebrew Bible opens with the well-known incipit, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," the emphasis falls syntactically on "beginning." Beginning of *what*? Ancient Jewish and Christian interpreters would *sola voce* reply: "beginning of time." Although not clearly stated, Genesis 1:1 implies that time was created before or at the same time with heavens and earth. If so, then time functions as the stage or matrix of the creation. All God created space-wise is wrapped up in that primordial time.

Remarkably, out of all creatures, Time is the only one that God *sanctifies*, namely, *sets aside* (from Hebrew verb *q-d-š* “to cut, to separate”) as the most representative of his six-day creative framework. No enigmatic moon, no shining sun, no solid earth, no blue-white heaven, not even an *imago Dei* human, but time alone is sanctified. According to Genesis 2:2-3, the institution of *Shabbat* is related to the sanctification of time or differently put it, *Shabbat* is that portion of time God *sets aside*, next to him. Hebrew *qādōš* “holy” is perhaps the most emblematic attribute of God, and the time comes second in terms of *holiness* or transcendence.

Abraham Heschel is quite right when, in his bestseller *The Sabbath*, he asserts almost prophetically, “Time is eternity in disguise.” The Hebrew Bible depicts the sanctified, quasi-divinized time or the “eternity in disguise” as “bracketed” by a relative beginning and a transformative *finale*-process.

It is worth noting that Gen 1:1 uses a construct phrase *be-rēšît*, literally, “in a beginning,” conventionally rendered as definite, “in *the* beginning.” Moreover, the expression *be-’achărît hay-yāmîm* (e.g., Hos 3:5) is commonly translated, following the Septuagint reading (*ep’ eschatōn tōn hēmerōn*), “in the last days,” or more accurately, “in the end of the days.” But *’achărît* “in the end,” maybe also rendered “on the other [side] of the days” (related to *’achēr* “other” and *’achar* “behind”). As time in Hebrew is more aspectual than linear, “other, behind” could intimate “parallel to” rather than “after, following” the flow of time. The image thus painted is that of time as a hanging curtain parallel to and concealing the serene eternity or the sanctified time (*Shabbat*).

One may then conclude that space and even eternity itself is all wrapped up in time. However, God is the only one who is enthroned above and is ahead of this all-governing time. Daniel 7:13 briefly describes God with the Aramaic phrase *’attîq yômāyā*’ unanimously translated, following the Theodotion reading (*palaïos tōn hēmerōn*), “Ancient of Days.” Yet, the participle *’attîq* derives from verb *’ātaq* “to move on,” related to the Akkadian *etēqum* “to go ahead, advance.” Thus, the phrase may be more accurately rendered, “the one who is *ahead* of days.” Time expressed here by “days” is in an incessant race with God-- but the latter is always “ahead” the forward-running and never-returning arrow of time.

I might mention that Hebrew Bible’s paramount fascination with the elusive notion of time in relation to space and God is unique within the grand Ancient Near Eastern religious chorus.

Three Steps in Fashioning Humanity

Fashioning humanity in three steps is one of the most complex and significant stories that Hebrew Bible puts forward – one of its unmistakable tenets when one compares the religion of ancient Israel with any other Ancient Near Eastern counterpart.

In the following lines, I would like to dwell on Hebrew Bible with few references to the Old Greek translation (Septuagint), which slightly yet significantly differs from the former. What we are told in the two accounts on the creation of humanity, namely, Genesis 1 and 2, could be again considered, to use Philo's coinage, an "echo of another voice" – so bizarre and singular this story is when the two accounts are read jointly following the canonical approach while paying special attention to the metaphorical language as part of the rhetorical approach.

According to the Hebrew text of Genesis 1-2, the story of fashioning humanity runs this way.

Step One

According to Genesis 1:26-27 (i.e., the Priestly source, composed around 6th c. BC), God deliberates by addressing someone or other, in the attendance, "Let us make humanity in our image and likeness" (v. 26), where the phrase "image (*šelem*) and likeness (*demût*)" is a hendiadys which should be rendered "in the very image." Thus, God's initial intention was to "make" (verb *'-ś-h*) "humanity" (*'ādām*, collective noun) "in [his] very image." However, something happened that humanity was eventually "created" (verb *b-r-*) only "in the image" of God, with "likeness" left outside (v. 27). The disparity between intention and action suggests that somehow humanity has been from the onset "lacking (verb *ch-s-r*) a little (*me'aṭ*) less than [becoming] God (*mē-ēlōhīm*)" (Ps 8:6/5). Hence humanity's tenacious longing after God, its prototype, even archetype.

Notably, the humanity that God created, though not distinguished as gender from the very beginning, did nevertheless contain the spores of the male-female distinction: "In the image of God he created it [i.e., the humanity]; male and female, he created them" (Gn 1:27).

The other creation account, Gn 2:7 (the Yahwistic source, composed around 10th c. BC) describes vividly and theologically the "fashioning" (verb *y-ṣ-r*) of humanity from the "dust" (*āpār*), unlike the animals that were made from the "ground" (*'ādāmāh*, cf. Gn 2:19). The "dust" metaphor intimates that humans somehow do not have a permanent place here but rather they vacillate, similar to the pulverized dust, between

earth and heaven in search for the “permanent city (*menoussan polin*) yet to come (*tēn mellousan*)” to use St. Paul’s own words (Heb 13:14).

God breathes his “breathing of life” (*nišmat chayyîm*) so that a piece of dust divinely touched turns into a “living breath” (*nepeš chayyāh*) of God – one of the most beautiful metaphors of humanity ever imagined! The “living breath” metaphor speaks volumes about humanity’s “inescapable” link to its Creator. St. Paul expresses so well this tight relationship between humanity and God when he addresses the Athenians: “In him we live (*zōmen*), and move (*kinoumetha*), and have our being (*esmen*)” (Acts 17:28). As “living breath” of God, humanity becomes part of God’s “respiratory system” if one wants to reflect further using the theologically loaded term *synkatabasis* (divine condescension).

Step Two

In Genesis 2:18, God surprisingly acknowledges that something is not quite good (or yet good enough) with the humanity monad-like he fashioned out of dust: “And God said, ‘It is not good (*lō’-tōb*) that *the* humanity (*hā-’ādām*) be alone or isolated (*lebadō*). I will make a helper (*’ezer*) like its opposite (*ke-negdō*).”

At that stage, humanity was still “isolated” from the rest of the living world distinguished as gender from the very beginning.

Genesis 2:21-22 describes the moment when God decides to configure the two genders already included in the primordial humanity (Gn 1:27). And he does so by creating the woman out of humanity. First, he brings a “deep sleep” (*tardēmāh*) upon humanity, and as a surgeon, he takes “one of its ribs” (*šēlā’*) (v. 21), and by an additional creative act, he “builds” (verb *b-n-h*) it into a “woman” (*’iššāh*) (v. 22).

The paradoxical phrase “helper like its opposite” alludes to the woman’s most important role vis-à-vis man, to be a partner of dialogue with him. Instead of flat monologue-like relationship, God wants woman and man to be engaged in a live, constructive dialogue even though dialogue sometimes implies opposition of ideas.

Step Three

But where is *the man* in whole this story?

Genesis 2:22 paints God as a best man and priest who officiates the first marriage in the Garden of Eden. God takes the woman he created and brings her to “*the* humanity” (*hā-’ādām*), which exclaims rather passionately: “This one at last is bone

of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called woman, for from man was she taken” (v. 23).

The last part of this verse is a pun or play on words, linking “man” (’iš) to “woman” (’iššāh) due merely to sound similarity. But this “folk etymology” underlines an important theological idea: Man is the result of his self-realization. When put in front of the first woman, the humanity identifies itself with a man. In other words, God creates the first woman (Eve), while the first man (Adam) is the result of his self-realization.

In sum then, the story on creation of humanity, as recorded in the two biblical accounts is fraught with great theological ideas: humanity’s unity underlined; woman being created by God and her important role as partner of dialogue; man realizes his gender distinction vis-à-vis the female counterpart; and, as a sort of finale, marriage as part of creation story seeks to restore the humanity’s initial unity and beauty.

Conclusion

I began my reflections by mentioning Lawrence Kraus and his crusade to promote science-poetry while reducing the Bible to mere Iron Age peasant stories. I tried to show that Scripture poetry overlooked intentionally by “new atheists” and regrettably by not few modern biblical scholars becomes obvious at a rigorous analysis of the rhetoric structure of biblical stories and its daring metaphors. Although written during the Iron Age, these stories have a paradigmatic value and can address the human person searching for meaning in any period, including our digital age.

Strangely, the Bible’s stories do indeed simultaneously open and close themselves to our existential questions. Maybe here, in the very ambivalent movement of these stories lies the fecund power of the metaphor – for a few minutes open as a flower allowing the reader to savor its fragrance – then hidden again in its unfathomable mystery.

And we are left once again with those “echoes of another voice” reverberating until a new reading begins.

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