

**THE SECOND COMING HITS BRAZIL:
HOW LITERARY REWORKINGS CAN REVITALISE SCRIPTURE**

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Abstract

This article seeks to provide evidence of the value and variety of literary rewritings of biblical stories and themes within the larger framework of the reception history of the Bible. Beginning with the episode in Matt. 2:16, it goes on to look at modern and postmodern re-inscriptions of the Fall, the Flood, Babylon, Ruth and the life of Christ. There is a broad division between rewritings designed to subvert the hegemonic over-determination of the biblical text itself and those which set out to use the biblical text as a platform for a more generalized social or political critique. Such rewritings vary in length between short, pithy poems and large-scale amplifications.

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Introduction

On the wall of my study there is a resin copy of a 14th century French stone carving depicting the Massacre of the Innocents. It is a constant reminder that biblical stories are transmitted in our culture through a great range of media. It is also evidence that a very short gospel pericope can have a weight out of all proportion to the space it occupies in the original text or (as we will call it) the ‘pre-text.’

In his article ‘Herod and the Children of Bethlehem,’ Richard France sets out the literary antecedents, within both the biblical and the classical traditions, of the episode in Matthew 2:16 which is usually referred to as the Massacre of the Innocents.¹ He is concerned with the metonymic background to what he considers was probably an actual historical event. This includes texts such as Jer. 31.15, Exod 4.19, and their development in Josephus and the Palestinian Targum, the story of Abraham in the *Sefer Ha-Yashar* and more distant analogues in Ancient Near Eastern texts. You could say that the study of the literary reception history of the Bible represents the mirror image of such a study. Taking the biblical text as a pre-text or ‘pretext,’ the literary reworking uses the biblical story as a way of illuminating historical circumstances (or whole spatio-temporal worlds) which are usually much later in time than those associated with the biblical text – and, of course, in the case of modern reworkings, much closer to our own epoch.

Of course, if France had addressed the question of *why* anyone should be interested in this trope in the first place, he might have been brought into the realm of reception-history. If he had, then those mythological antecedents of Matt 2:16, which he

¹ Richard T. France: ‘Herod and the Children of Bethlehem’, *Novum Testamentum*, Vol. XXI, fasc.2,(1979) pp. 98-120.

discusses might have been part of a wider picture of reception. The final part of the article explores the question of whether *das eigentlich geschehen ist* and concludes that, given Herod the Great's general reputation, it is entirely possible. What the article does not consider is the extent to which the event as represented in the short passage in Matthew 2 *really happened* to subsequent cultures as evidenced by artistic and hermeneutical responses to the text, in other words its Wirkungsgeschichte or impact-history. In this France's meticulously researched article is entirely typical of Biblical Studies until very recently.

As a topic within Biblical Studies, the Literary Reception-history of Biblical Stories has received more prominence in recent years with the appearance of the Blackwells Biblical Commentary Series and the *Encyclopedia of the Bible & Its Reception*, where the topic takes its place alongside the historical criticism of the text and aspects of reception history which are other than literary, including particularly the history of the text's formal exegesis.

At the same time this area of study also belongs to the fields of English Literature, the study of national literatures of Europe, America, Africa and so on, as well as what we find termed 'World Literature,' an appellation which increasingly applies to *all* literature in the era of global commodification.

Now at last we find biblical scholars dipping their toes cautiously into literary criticism and literary critics nudging their heads around the various doors of biblical studies. Just a few major figures, such as Robert Alter, seem to have an equal command of both disciplines. Yet rewriting as a specific area of concern still lags behind in terms of critical attention. Although we may feel that Biblical Studies as a discipline has been slow to respond to developments in reception-history, it is equally true that literary studies as a field of critical enquiry has until recently neglected the specific topic of texts as rewritings of previous texts, as Julie Sanders shows in her book *Adaptation and Appropriation*.

My own involvement with the subject has spanned at least thirty-six years, beginning with a short article in the Expository Times in 1975 on the literary treatment of the Akedah/Genesis 22 story and moving on through fits and starts to two books published in 2009 and 2010 respectively and a large number of articles in the EBR. The turning point in my researches came when I was prompted by Julie Sanders's book to go back to the work of the great theorist, Gérard Genette, the only major European critic to attempt to elucidate rewriting as a genre within literature. In *Palimpsests* (1982, Eng. trans. 1997), Genette provides both a history of rewritings, parodic and otherwise, and a detailed system for classifying texts which rewrite other texts. From Genette's great array of material, I have tried in my book *Reworking the Bible* to distil thirty-eight basic types of literary rewriting of biblical stories, settling on 'pre-text' as a term to describe the biblical original and 'hypertext' to denote the rewritten version.

What is the Value of Literary Reception Studies?

Those who are responsive to creative fiction (and one recognizes that not everyone is) know that it can deliver insights into the lives of people who live in completely different circumstances from those of the reader, enabling empathy to be built up with people of a different historical era, different ethnicity, different age-group, different gender, different sexual orientation or different socio-economic grouping, not to mention people of a different religious affiliation or people with ideological positions opposed to those of the reader.

This is a commonplace, but it still needs stating, in a time when all forms of enquiry are expected to justify their utility. If this is the comfortable, usually easily agreed aspect of studying literary rewritings of biblical stories and motifs, there exists (as I hope to demonstrate) a whole range of other dimensions to the topic, some of which take us into much more radical avenues.

In this paper I propose to discuss a number of literary reworkings of biblical stories. They will range between those in which the weight falls on critiquing modern society and those in which the weight falls on critiquing Christianity. Amongst those which might be classified as parodies, we will notice a divide between comic parodies and serious ones. But we will also find hypertexts which bridge that divide. (In passing we will also touch on the related topics of the written-up reception-history and author-centred studies.)

Some Initial Examples of Literary Rewriting

Returning to the trope of the Massacre of the Innocents which we considered at the outset, we might want to include in any written-up reception history the entire history of the development of the Holy Innocents as saints and the attendant legends. Within the field of literary inscription, it would be hard to avoid the vivid portrayal of Herod's massacre in medieval European drama. One might also include the vision of Luca Brocadelli described in her *Seven Revelations*.² Amongst recent novels, one might take Mario Vargas Llosa's *The War of the End of the World* as an example of a modern rewriting. This particular novel is at one level a reworking of Cunha's account of the brutal suppression of the uprisings which occurred in the backlands of Brazil in the late nineteenth-century, culminating in the massacre at Canudos. But it also a great amplification of the biblical trope based on Matthew 2:16, with the annihilated innocents finally comprising the men, women and children wiped out in Bahia province by the army along with the messianic leader, the Counsellor. The part

² See E. Anne Matter: 'Religious Dissidence and the Bible,' in Thomas J. Heffernan and Thomas E. Burman: *Scripture and Pluralism* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), p. 198.

of Herod is played by the ruthless, driven figure of Colonel Moreira César who stands for the wanton destructiveness of civic power, as well as the attempt to manipulate the historical account of his own actions.

Apart from anything else, this powerful novel is a reminder that the word-count of biblical pretexts may be in inverse proportion sometimes to their weight in literary reception-history. To take another example of a modern rewriting, Christa Wolf's novel *Störfall: Nachrichten eines Tages* (1987) – Eng. trans *Accident: A Day's News* – treats the Chernobyl nuclear explosion as the ultimate expression of the Fall (*Sündenfall*), the moment when human rapacity reaches its final and catastrophic phase, threatening all life, not just human life. This is the era of the nuclear arms race. The novel's German title, *Störfall*, more clearly connects with the biblical trope. I mention this because in the domain of literary rewriting actual titles have a particular importance, as Genette has exhaustively demonstrated. Wolf draws the reader into the world of an ordinary German citizen struggling with the euphemistic, inappropriately reassuring language of nuclear catastrophe (clouds, mushrooms) at the same time as keeping us in touch with the progress of the complicated brain operation being performed on her brother – the other side of the human fall into scientific knowledge. But it is the biblical image of Cain which prevails. Another novelist from the former DDR, Uwe Tellcamp, has written a novel *Der Turm* (2009) which uses the biblical Tower of Babel as a metonym for life in the former communist state.

From Latin America there are numerous examples of the genre of rewritten biblical story, but the one which is perhaps most striking is Vicente Lenero's *The Gospel of Lucas Gavilan* which is a radical- Catholic, neo-Marxist rewriting of the Gospel of Luke, set in contemporary Mexico. The only ambiguity is over whether this satirical tour de force is about the second coming of Christ or the first.

Technically, in Genettian terms, the novel is a proximization (transferring a narrative situated in first-century Palestine to twentieth-century Mexico) and also a revaluation of the pretext, introducing values which are absent from the original. It is, in addition, what I term a 'selective amplification,' expanding some episodes in the pretext and omitting others.

The overturning of the tables of the money-changers occurs twice, first as an attack on a sleazy magazine stand (164-5) and secondly as a physical attack on a church, which Jesuschristo accuses of succumbing to the values of high-street commerce (201). The name Judas, however, is both a slur-name for a man, Saturno Pena, who has betrayed his union (55.) and the designation which the chapter heading of Chapter 6 gives to Bull Lagunes. (It is interesting that the agent of the régime is called Freckles Montaya.)

There is some very simple and vivid updating of dominical sayings: "Nobody tears up a new suit to put patches on an old one." (61) Yet at the same time there is the ironic, postmodern, self-conscious reference to a colonial crucifix (103). And there is a

strange bifurcation in the conceit of the novel, in the sense that it takes place in a Christian country in the late 20th century and yet when Jesuchristo is engaged in the famous debate with the lawyer in Luke 10:25-37), the lawyer (who seems to be fully conversant with the Synoptics (118) seems to be unaware of the Parable of the Good Samaritan and has to be given the updated version (119-120), in which the victim is a cyclist and the Good Samaritan a trucker. The healing of the dropsical man on the Sabbath (Luke 14: 1-24) receives a major amplification as part of the narrative and, as one would expect, the parable of Dives and Lazarus figures prominently.

In the end Jesuchristo Gomez is arrested and tried for sedition and, despite “Pilate”’s belief that he is a harmless lunatic (237), he is beaten up and finally dies in a journey in a police van. The death coincides with an earthquake in the city, which allows one of his fellow-prisoners to escape in the confusion. Jesuchristo is buried in a common grave (despite the efforts of the rich and successful Don Pepo Artime to have him buried in a private grave) – a departure from the pretext, signalling the novel’s postcolonial distancing of itself from the Lukan narrative – and the resurrection is indicated by two episodes: the first is one in which the disciples are stung with despair but have their minds changed by the words of the man with the pickaxe; “As far as I’m concerned, those guys never die...”. The second is a more enigmatic episode (a reworking of the encounter on the Road to Emmaus) in which Jesuchristo seems to have been reincarnated in a man with tangerines travelling on a bus. He goes with the disciples to share a meal in Yecapixtla but then disappears by the time they awake in the morning. However he re-appears at a meeting of the revolutionaries “like a ghost” and tells them that the only way to prevent Jesuchristo from dying is to carry on his work. When they discover that the man with the tangerines is in fact a priest, they are despondent (“What happened to our leader was the fault of the priests”), but he tells them “Do not judge me for what I am but for what I do” and then walks away from them into the night.

I have already suggested the Genettian classification for *The Gospel of Lucas Gavilan*. Seeing it for a moment in relation to a theological agenda, we might locate it as part of the dialogue between orthodoxy and Marxism or between what we take to be a biblically inscribed space (St Luke’s Gospel) and a contemporary geo-political space. Angel-Martin Rodriguez-Pérez, in an article, describes the novel as a ‘demythification’ of the gospel portrait of Jesus, arguing that it turns something opaque in meaning into something ‘socially useful’ (to use his term).³ We might equally see it as demonstration of the rich range of trajectories found in reception-history.

Closer to home but a little further back in inscribed time, there is Jennifer Johnston’s moving account of the journey of two Irish soldiers to fight in the trenches of the 1st WW, *How Many Miles to Babylon* (1974), where the biblical topos of Babylon is

³ Angel-Martin Rodríguez-Pérez: ‘El Evangelico de Lucas Gavilán: Vicente Leñero’s Adaptation of the Gospel to Contemporary Mexico’ in *The International Fiction Review*, Vol.27, Numbers 1 and 2 (2000.)

refracted through the well-known nursery rhyme, which itself was a descendant of a Crusader song, casting an ironic and disturbing postcolonial light on the home background of the two men from Ireland under British rule.

More Complex Texts

Not all rewritings are direct retellings. The reworking of the Prodigal Son story is an important element within Irish Murdoch's novel *The Good Apprentice* (1985) but it is only *one* strand amongst others.

Some rewritings depend upon an unsettling contrast or dialectic between pretext and hypertext. Taking the pretext of the Good Samaritan, in Petr Proskurin's story 'Home Again' (1967) the same parable is problematized. The Good Samaritan here is a teenage boy who comes to the aid of a stricken enemy (German) soldier, yet his refusal of the dying man's plea to shoot him results in him bleeding to death.⁴ Or taking the motif of the Good Shepherd, the Scottish poet Robert Crawford's poem 'The Bad Shepherd' (2003) engages with the black pyres of burning animal carcasses resulting from the draconian measures introduced to defeat foot and mouth disease

Protest Rewritings

Less complex but just as challenging are the short, pithy poems which in my book *Reworking the Bible* I classify as 'protest parodies. These usually involve a reversal of the plot of the pretext. One example I give is David Rowbotham's poem 'Nebuchadnezzar's Kingdom-Come', where we find that in today's era of large-scale political imprisonment, those who land up in modern Babylons tend to discover that it is their own deities who are defeated. Poems as a whole tend, as Bakhtin observes, to be, by their very nature, monological rather than multivocal, but they can still contribute to multivocality and rewritings of parodies of biblical tropes are surely strong candidates here.

Cognitive Resistance and Politico-Social Critique

Rewritten biblical texts can be the platform for expressions of cognitive resistance to Christianity itself or to the metanarratives of contemporary culture. One thinks of

⁴ These and other rewritings of the 'Good Samaritan' pretext are discussed in my forthcoming article under that title in the *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*.

Phillip Pullman's novel *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* or (as a critique of the military-industrial machine) Don De Lillo's *Underworld*.

There is also the extraordinary discovery to be made that religion's so-called despisers often have some remarkably interesting things to say about the Bible. One thinks of Voltaire or Bertolt Brecht. Robert Alter goes so far as to describe oppositional rewriters of the Bible such as Kafka and Joyce as contributors to a canon which constitutes a 'transhistorical textual community', which by its iconoclastic efforts at engaging with the biblical text prevents it from slipping out of the cultural repertoire.⁵

The topic of subversion has been tackled in a very stimulating way in the volume of essays edited by Beth Hawkins benedix, *Subverting Scriptures*, which has as its final essay Shaul Magid's plea for Christians, Jews and indeed Muslims to go back to the subversive component parts (including the excluded parts) of the Bible. There is a sense, of course, in which anything is 'subversive' which draws attention to the fragmentary nature of the contents of the Bible or which challenges the received sense of it as a monolithic structure.

In general terms, 'subversion' denotes the resistance which some strong hypertexts offer to totalising discourse. It could also be described as the defence of polyphony. Within this category we should include the uncovering of indeterminacy within both pretext and hypertext, parodies which seek to challenge or mock the discourse of monological control (such as the medieval 'Cyprian Feasts'), rewritings which overturn political assumptions (novels by Toni Morrison, Don De Lillo, E. L. Doctorow) and all forms of irony (such as King David's preoccupation with this own literary future in Ballester's postmodern novel *Fragments of Apocalypse*.)

The Comic

Mention of parodies should remind us that rewritings do not have to be solemn simply because they are dealing with a biblical pretext. There are many examples of hilarity, ranging from Rudolf Fisher's novel *The Walls of Jericho* (a riotously funny appropriation of the Joshua story within the context of Harlem in the 1920s) to D J Enright's *Paradise Illustrated*, which gives us the low-down on the relationship between Adam and Eve. In a forthcoming contribution to a collection of essays on the Book of Job, I discuss some extraordinary comic (as well as serious) reworkings of that pretext in English and Irish Literature.⁶

The Written Up Reception History

⁵ Robert Alter: *Canon and Creativity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000, pp 9-19.

⁶ The volume *Job in Three Traditions*, edited by Mishael Caspi and John Greene (forthcoming.)

The writing of surveys of the literary treatment of biblical topics is a whole area of study in its own right. It can pose important questions about what is included and what is excluded in such surveys. In addition, placing (say) Shakespeare's *Henry V* within the literary reception-history of the Moses story can shed fresh light both on that play itself and the progress of a biblical story through culture.

Thinking again of the Good Samaritan story as a flowing river of literary appropriation, Langland's *Piers Plowman* is an interesting example of medieval awareness that 'life goes on', since here the Good Samaritan has palpably escaped the biblical pretext, in fact he is both internalized in Piers himself and externalised as a free-floating persona beyond the pretext and hypertext. Six or seven hundred years later, in our own time we glimpse the afterlife of the Good Samaritan narrative in Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, where, after the pattern of Augustine and Bunyan, Frank is rescued from his circumstances by a Good Samaritan. In this case it is Uncle Pa, who tells him to escape the night before his post office examinations: 'you'll be dead in your mind if you don't leave Limerick before you're thirty.'

Author-Centred Studies

Just as important as written-up reception-histories are author-centred studies. Obviously there are novelists and playwrights whose work owes much to the use of biblical material (from Chaucer to Margaret Atwood) but examining the literary works of less likely candidates can be equally, if not more, illuminating. Take for example Brecht. David Jobling has recently documented Brecht's long preoccupation with the biblical story of David.⁷ G. Ronald Murphy, a Jesuit scholar, has explored Brecht's parodic use of biblical texts in a book-length study.⁸ Or another example: in doing the research for my own article on the Bible in E M Forster (at first sight an unpromising topic) for the *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, I was surprised to discover or re-discover some interesting examples of biblical rewriting, particularly in the novel, *Passage to India*.

Three More Examples

O Babylon!

Derek Walcott's play *O Babylon!* (1976) is about the efforts of the New Zion Construction Company to evict a Rastafarian community from their shanty-town on the beach outside Kingston, Jamaica. The Rastas constantly refer to the capitalists and

⁷ David Jobling: 'David on the Brain' in..Claudia V. Camp, Timothy Beal and Tod Linafelt (eds.): *The Fate of King David*, pp 229-240 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2010.)

⁸ G. Ronald Murphy: *Brecht and the Bible* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980.)

the police force as Babylon. The developers' plans include a 'Babylon Lounge' on the site.

The spatial discourse is highly visible in this play, as the authorities and the Rastas struggle over the contested space on the beach. But there is also the invocation of the biblical place of exilic despair and hope and the whole cultural history of the term 'Babylon.'

The Way of the Women

Marlene van Niekerk's *The Way of the Women* (2004/2006) is a novel about relationships on an Afrikaans farm in South Africa in the 1950s and 60s, specifically the relationship of the farmer's wife Mil to her maidservant, Aगत. The time-span of the novel coincides with that of the apartheid era in that country and in many ways the relationship of the two women is a metonym for the movement from the full-blown era of racial segregation to its abolition.

The novel has been identified as a biblical rewriting by Cheryl Stobie in an article, which is at pains to apply not just feminist and postcolonial interpretations of the text but also Marcella Althaus-Reid's idea of the Bi-Christ. But simply treating the novel as a rewriting of the biblical pretext of Ruth, what do we find? First of all, a neutral title, but secondly we find name-changes. If this is a rewritten biblical story, then Naomi has become Mil and most importantly Ruth has become Aगत. Genette argues in *Palimpsests* that name-changes signal what he calls an 'unfaithful' rewriting, namely one which reverses or challenges the terms of the pretext.

The novel is a retelling of the biblical story of Ruth to the extent that the text deliberately refers to that biblical pretext as an authority and that the relationship between Mil and Aगत reflects the free woman/bondwoman relationship of Naomi and Ruth, here amplified and complicated to a degree which is in stark contrast with the sparse biblical story. The way in which Aगत prevails as the ultimate inheritor of the farm combines the position of Ruth in the biblical lineage which leads to David with the narrative of the final destination of Apartheid. Yet the name-change from Ruth to Aगत also (as we have said) signals a rebuttal or dismissal of the pretext, in Genettian terms. We could say therefore that the biblical story is a jumping-off point rather than a blueprint for *The Way of the Women*. Biblical stories exert their presence not only by being imitated but also by being modified and even rejected.

The Year of the Flood

One of the most recently published biblical-rewriting novels articulates perhaps the deepest and (to a large extent) repressed concerns of our age. Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel, *The Year of the Flood* imagines a Canada in the near future in which all the most disturbing tendencies in modern urban civilization have reached their zenith. The flood which occurs is a 'waterless flood' and takes the form of a pandemic plague which results from modern methods of food production and distribution, in

particular the genetic experiments sponsored by the ruthless Corporations which control the globalized economy. As civilization breaks down, ecological resistance groups are created led by a Noah figure. However, unlike the story of the biblical pretext, this story does not have a happy ending.

The literary reception of the Noah story, which I discuss in the second chapter of my book *Reworking the Bible*, shows over the centuries a remarkable capacity to reflect and articulate the deepest concerns of humanity. Obviously, to take any particular hypertext as the ‘culmination’ of the afterlife of the biblical text can only be temporary and provisional, since other works (some of them possibly masterpieces) may still emerge. But at this point in time Atwood’s novel does seem to offer itself as a sort of crystallization of our deepest anxieties about the direction which our consumer culture is taking, harnessed to an appropriation of the very biblical story whose public discrediting is one of the set pieces of the story of the Rise of Science in the eighteenth-century, as Norman Cohn has shown.⁹

Conclusion

By carving out literary reception-history as a distinct domain within biblical reception-history, we enable perspectives to emerge and links to be drawn which otherwise remain hidden. It *is* possible to see biblical rewriting where the evidence is slender or non-existent, but equally there has until recently been a tendency to downplay what Harold Fisch calls ‘the biblical presence’ in literature. Incidentally, there has been, one cannot help noticing, a sea-change in recent years in the willingness of the producers of indices in works of literary criticism to include the Bible or biblical names and personages.

In the course of our short survey today we have discussed:

1. Vargas Llosa’s vast novel *The War of the End of the World* as a large-scale amplification of the trope of the Massacre of the Innocents, combined with a rewriting of the Second Coming (misconstrued as a warrant for messianism) as a lament for human cruelty and folly.
2. Christa Wolf’s relatively simple use of the trope of the Fall to denote the horror of nuclear catastrophe and Margaret Atwood’s more extended rewriting of the Genesis flood story to convey the direction in which the global ecological crisis is taking humanity. Both of these are direct critiques of western civilization and (in Genettian terms, ‘proximizations’), seeking to update the biblical story to contemporary circumstances.

⁹ Norman Cohn: *Noah’s Flood: The Genesis Story in Western Thought* (London: Yale University Press, 1996.)

3. We have also seen how a rewriting of the gospel story, Vicente Lenero's *The Gospel of Lucas Gavilan*, can simultaneously critique the compromises of institutional Christianity and the power-structures of a Central American country, whilst yet maintaining a sort of Marxist ontological optimism about the Christian faith itself (we called it a selective amplification and localization of the Lucan gospel.)

4. More restricted in register but equally plangent was Jennifer's Johnston's novel *How Many Miles to Babylon?* deftly linking a biblical trope from the Crusades with both pre-Republican Ireland and the trenches of the Great War.

5. Marlene van Niekerk's novel was explored as a large-scale promiximization of the Naomi-Ruth relationship in the context of South Africa during the apartheid era. Just like the biblical story, the story of apartheid is one where we seem to know the ending. Yet the point of reading such a novel is not to get to the resolution of the story but to enter, imaginatively, its spatio-temporal world, its chronotope.

6. Rather more humorous, but making an equally determined bid to gain a purchase on the world it confronts was Derek Walcott's play *O Babylon!*, with its exposé of the dilapidations brought by western-style capitalism on an ethnic culture.

Probably the biggest hermeneutical issue for orthodoxy, whether Christian or Jewish, is that of the relationship of institutional and credal metanarratives to the postmodern contesting of all metanarratives. (In the case of Judaism this falls under the heading of 'post-Holocaust studies.' Elsewhere it can be the product of postcolonial studies or feminist studies or ecological critiques) This issue is manifest both in hypertexts which adopt the stance of subversion and in the modern critical approach which equates subversion with alterity, seen as source of insight into the human situation. It also arises from the general literary penchant for irony, which (at least for Kierkegaard) gives the individual access to a sense of transcendence.

There is no single prescription for evaluating the material of literary reception-history. There are many possible approaches. But I hope that you will agree that the task of mapping the terrain using a theologically and ontologically neutral system of analysis (such as the Genettian system of classification) is the first step in developing the sense of the literary reception of the Bible as a site in which there can be debate between all shades of belief and unbelief or half-belief. Obviously it can shed light on the history of the formal exegesis of the text, but it also opens up a sort of experimental domain in which the received sacred text is interrogated and re-imagined in widely differing cultures. I hope you will agree that this is a very fertile field for everything from biblical hermeneutics to pastoral theology and indeed the study of literature itself and of the human condition.

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