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Introduction: the art of reading

Components I and II: language and time

In our world there are thousands of texts that have been stored and forgotten. Hundreds of these are texts of some substance, as they have great literary quality or form part of the normative texts of a religious community. Yet, we cannot say anything sensible about them until they become available to us and we are able to understand the language in which they have been written. You can only say that these texts have meaning if you recognize right away that their meanings or contents are hidden or potential. In short, a text only starts to function when it receives attention—only then does it affect someone. Without a reader a text cannot operate; it is no more than a silent shadow.

The relation between text and meaning is not a simple one. The supposition that "there is meaning in it" or that the text "contains" meaning in a similar way that a cup contains coffee is incorrect. The cup may simply be poured out without the contents being affected, but in the case of a text this is quite different. The word "exegesis" (Greek for "leading out") is misleading if we see meaning as a fixed and objective string of data which we have to coax out of a text. In reality, a text only speaks when a listener comes along. A text becomes alive and starts to speak only from the moment when we start to listen, and in proportion to how well we are listening. As loyal readers we, of course, want to respect and adhere to the words and structures of the text, but our action of reading, understanding and making connections is essential to these words and structures. Reading is certainly not passive, nor a form of easy consumption, even though our body seems to suggest this when we are lounging in our armchair. Reading is a specific mental ac-

tivity; it is *the action of conferring meaning to a text.* While reading, I am myself structuring the living or speaking text. Thanks to the reader's bestowal of meaning, the text moves from its dormant state to the state of speaking subject; what was only latent and potential now becomes patent and actual.

A story or a poem can only come into its own or blossom through the channel of a competent reader. This has consequences for our responsibility. As the meaning of a text is only realized through the mediation of the reader, our responsibility for its meaning is greater than the text's own. Moreover, this meaning is realized in the here and now; we confer meaning around the year 2000, not in 800 or 500 BCE. This may seem obvious, but it needs to be stated clearly. The effect of bestowing meaning on one's own readings and interpretations has hardly, if at all, been taken into account by established Bible scholarship (the so-called historical-critical school), which assumes its own attitude to be self-evident. This approach sets out to "understand the Bible texts within the framework of their own time," according to the slogan characteristic of these scholars. This attitude conveys a totally different message: the text comes from far away, dates from a long time ago, and is rooted in a radically different culture. Thus, there is a three-fold alienation which has discouraged many Bible readers, students of theology, and future preachers.

It is true that the text of the Bible comes from the Near East, that it is almost 2000 to 3000 years old, and that it originated in a culture which differed greatly from ours, both materially and spiritually. These differences should not be underestimated; yet these distances are only half-truths, and if you treat them as unshakeable axioms they will quietly turn into lies and optical illusions. There is a greater, more important truth, which is that these texts are well-written. If they are then so fortunate as to meet a good listener, they will come into their own without having to be pushed into the compartments "far away," "long ago" and "very different." As products of a deliberate and meticulous designing intelligence they have been crafted to speak for themselves, provided there is a competent reader listening closely. They are, after some training on our part, extremely able to reveal and explain themselves.

The living text

The text being read is the living text. The writer has been dead for centuries, as have been his audience and the society which formed the original environment (the context) for this literary production. Whether an oracle or a story of war, a Gospel or a lamentation, from the moment it entered the world and was distributed—"published" is too modern a notion—the Bible text started on the long and irreversible journey away from its origin. The very same holds for texts in general, and for you and me: once we are born, the umbilical cord is cut and the journey through time, space and culture commences, which is our life—away from the cradle, the year of our birth and the social context in which we started.

It is only natural that the Bible text should have quickly freed itself from its origin. The current rather infelicitous phrase is that the text has been *decontextualized:* maker, audience and context have long been lost. Of course, the writers knew that this was to be the fate of their stories, laws and poems—assuming for the moment that they were not born yesterday. Reading the Bible "within the setting of its own time?" A lofty goal, but in the first place this is a perilous enterprise since the setting is not there any more—it was lost about two thousand years ago. Secondly, it is hardly a viable undertaking, as we are not Israelites. The publication of a text implies that its umbilical cord is cut; from then on, it is on its own. Now, good texts can indeed manage alone, as from the beginning they have been designed to outlive their birth and original context by a long way. The writer knows that he cannot always accompany his text to provide explanations, clear up misunderstandings etc. He has to let go of his product completely; he should leave it to his poem or story to take care of itself on its own. So he decides to provide his text with the devices, signals and shapes with which it can withstand the onslaught of time and guide the reading activities of the loyal listener.

Left to its own devices by the maker, the text goes in search of a competent reader. Once it appears, the text travels through constantly changing times and contexts, always meeting new audiences and always subject to new and different views. As there are always new readers with ever different intellectual ca-

pacities, the meanings which they confer on the text constantly change, too. In this way you might even say that a text does not remain the same throughout the ages but, being a living (i.e. read) text, itself also constantly changes. It acquires an ever-growing history and ever-richer contents. Some texts die, by getting lost. Again, the similarity between text and human being is strong: we, too, make that journey. We are the same as ten or thirty years ago, and at the same time different. We have accumulated experience, which has enriched us—unless, being trapped in grief or bitterness, we consider ourselves impoverished.

The art of reading

The maker has written his text with the express intention of being outlived by it. Therefore, we, for our part, should not lock the Bible's stories and poems within the horizon and context of their origin. This is an artificial and one-sided approach, a reduction. It would be interesting to know more about the writer, his purpose (if different from publishing the exact text that we have from him now) and his circumstances, but none of this is actually essential.

What is essential? That which the text itself provides, the world it evokes and the values it embodies, and then, the confrontation, the interplay, the friction and sometimes the clash between all this and the reader's world and values. This book's motto, a quote from the philosopher Ricœur, means, translated literally: "it is the power of things said that moves the writer." And just as the maker of the text has been gripped and driven by the idea he wished to put into words, his readers may be driven and gripped by the same thing. The writer has been directly inspired by "things said," and the fact that he published his text proves that he was satisfied with the way he has rendered and shaped them. If we have sufficient training in the rules and structures embodied in his work, in turn we too can relate directly to what was said, on the basis of the power and instructions within the medium of the text form.

Under the scrutiny of the good reader, the world evoked by the text arises every time. It is a world in words which appears before our mind's eye, and a world which is evoked in our

present. Contact and commitment precede the rational consideration that the biblical text has originated at a triple distance. They also precede the approach which attempts to read a story or poem as an early Christian or Israelite would have done, 19 or 26 centuries ago. The resolve to project oneself into a person from that distant past is a noble one, but it does not get us anywhere compared to the power of what is said and the here-and-now of our contact with the text. The text only lives in and through the process of acquiring meaning.

The use of the word *sense* in English shows an ambiguity which aptly illustrates the reader–text relation. You can say: this text (or this explanation) makes sense (= offers a good explanation) as well as: we try to make sense of this text (we try to find an explanation, i.e. to understand this text). The ambiguity is telling: meaning originates on both sides. There is a fusion of a speaking subject (the text) and a listening subject conferring meaning (the reader) which is hard to fathom or describe. The meaning of the biblical text emerges from a dialog, which is located in the field of intersubjectivity, as hermeneutics (the science of interpretation) would have it.

We can also show the productive contribution of the reader as subject from another side. When we open a book, we are no longer neutral or objective. At that very moment, we have already expressed a *value judgment,* which is simply that we assume or expect to find something useful in that book. Opening a book is an action based on a choice; it is an action preceded by a decision. Next, a reading takes place, and that process of bestowing meaning will be the more successful, the more talent, education and sensitivity we are able to contribute and make subservient to our contact with the text.

We, as readers, need not be ashamed of our subjectivity, since the text cannot come to life through any other channel. This does not mean that we are at liberty to do anything we want to the text and subject it to the wildest speculations. We may do that, but we will then disqualify ourselves right away as interpreters; we would be indulging ourselves at the cost of the text. If we want to be good readers, we will be busy preserving a balance while reading, by constantly being aware of our own contribution and our propensity to read things into the text,

slant the text, overemphasize specific meanings, and allow ourselves to be led by our imagination. Good readers control their subjectivity: they do not deny it and know they need not be ashamed of it; on the contrary, they are able to employ it in a disciplined way for the good of the text.

Whoever says the Bible is old, remote and strange pushes the text too far away and as a result ends up with a formidable problem, namely whether the Bible "can still mean something for modern man." This, however, is a problem that people have created themselves by way of the three-fold alienation; it is unsolvable because it is a phantom problem. In reality, the Bible is very close—we have opened it, and already have expectations or assumptions about the values stored or presented in it—and its meaning takes shape thanks to our mental activity and the imagination we bring to the text. It is our own commitment that creates the field of intersubjectivity. After that, the question about the "relevance" of the Bible has largely become spurious.

Component I: language

Both sides of "meaning"—the reader who bestows it, and the text which "has" it—are reflected in the two questions which form the starting point for a sensible reading, and which are characteristic of a *natural attitude* towards any authoritative text. The first question we ask of a Bible text (and a lot of other valuable texts) is: what is it saying? What exactly is it telling me? The question which accompanies this one is also a sign of a positive attitude, one of trust: May I assume there's a message in its structure? This indicates a mentality which strongly differs from the anxious striving for objectivity, the fear of making mistakes and the fear of criticism from colleagues which has marked and constrained some scholars. Then there are the questions which should receive less attention, and a lower place in the order, carrying as they do an undertone of suspicion and a barely disguised longing for certainty: where does it come from? What was the writer's intention? Has it by any chance been put together from diverse materials? Which situation is it addressing? These questions have been persistently asked during the last two centuries, and they are legitimate enough, but they

were asked by Bible scholars who had no idea of the unique mode of being of the literary text, and who never got around to training themselves in the conventions and rules of the texts themselves.

I will go back to the first question, and give it a slightly different emphasis: *what* is the text saying? In the approach and method of reading proposed by this book, this question is answered by way of an apparent detour, by asking: *how* is it saying it? This shift of focus towards the "how" is an important characteristic of this guide. During our meeting with the widow, her distress and the never-ending stream of oil from her little jug, we were constantly pinpointing and testing formal and stylistic devices, and seemingly avoiding the question about the contents. Why is this shift from the *what* to the *how* necessary?

There are three important reasons, two negative and one positive, why it is sensible and productive always to ask the same question about every story or poem, inside and outside the Bible: how exactly has it been constructed? The negative reasons dissuade us from giving a direct answer to the question: what does it say? Anyone who tries is confronted with two lethal pitfalls. In our spontaneity, in our desire to know, or because of our need for certainty, we constantly run the risk—whether during our first or our thirtieth reading of the story—of thinking: I've got it! So this is what the story is about! In our naivety we fancy we have recognized what the text says, but what took place inside us is rather something like: we picked up a number of signals from the text and in our minds grouped these into a theme or point, without keeping an open mind for various signals not yet perceived. In this way, we have formed a picture of the whole which tends to become fixed. Such a reading, however, is only partial. The theme or point that we think we have seen the first few times we read the story, threatens to harden and petrify, and then to control and above all limit all our later readings. We often inflict the same fatal process of partial observation and premature interpretation on our fellow human beings.

Moreover, right from the start we are unconsciously subject to the influence of our expectations, prejudices and religious beliefs—a series of temptations which together make up pitfall

no. 2. A lot of Bible exegesis is little more than a confirmation of the writer's long-established convictions. With some twisting and pushing our loquacious mind usually manages to fit the text to our pre-formed mental patterns or even unconscious desires, and then maintain with the best of intentions that our ideas are straight out of the Holy Scriptures.

How can we avoid these pitfalls, then? Much is already gained if readers are willing to subject themselves to regular checks, and ask questions such as: what is the subject of my secret fascination? Which conceptions do I have about God, human beings and the world, which guide me and limit me in my contact with this specific text? Has my reading fallen victim to such and such particular hobbyhorses of mine? Even more is gained when one learns (a) to consciously destroy the image one has formed of a person or text, and start again from scratch, so that one can (b) adopt the attitude of a complete beginner, and become fresh and unspoilt again. In short, our basic attitude is of primary importance: it can guide us, stimulate us, limit us and paralyze us, and positively or negatively it determines the process of bestowing meaning on the text.

It is not easy always to be creative and alert, and reveal or identify one's own preferences; even with very open people it goes wrong often enough. Fortunately, we get some support in our aim to remain fresh and self-critical. This support comes from what I called the third reason why we should ask about the *how* rather than the *what*. This positive reason is the essential fact that the stories in the Bible are products of literary design, right down to the smallest detail, and usually very subtle, too. Related to this is the essential requirement that they should be taken completely seriously in their literary mode of being. It is a requirement which indicates what the reader's task is, and again proves that the meaning of the story originates only from the dialogue between ourselves and the text.

Language as art

Literary design implies that the writer has learnt how to handle his material, and is adept at exploiting all its possibilities. Where the visual artist works with paint, clay, or bronze, and as a

craftsman penetrates deeply into the secrets of his materials, the writer uses language. It is a good starting point for us as readers to realize that whatever a text does, it does through language. All meanings or contents in the Bible which are conceivable or could be even remotely relevant can only exist by means of language; they have been created in language or are evoked by language. Good readers will, in a way, follow in the writer's footsteps by loving language and handling it creatively. They like to fit jigsaw pieces together when reading, and to pinpoint how in the little piece about the woman with her jug of oil the polarities of life and death, debt and repayment, widow and prophet, reporting and direct speech manifest themselves as specific language signs.

The Bible reader who is dependent on a translation will lose sight of some details. This is a pity, but not fatal. In a book which by definition has to leave Hebrew and Greek aside, I cannot demonstrate the sophisticated word plays and phonetic patterns regularly used by the narrator to underline his points. I cannot appeal to the effects of rhyme and alliteration, and some word repetition disappears in a translation as well. This means that I will have to leave out almost all references to the style in the original. It cannot be helped; at levels above that of phonemes and word formation there will still be enough linguistic material to observe for us to remain in the narrator's tracks. In a translation we can still observe how sentences are grouped, who is allowed to speak when, how the narrator presents his subject matter, what is the valuable object which the hero is after, what makes the characters tick, whether the events are dynamic enough, which reversals take place, etc.

In this book I try to trace which rules and conventions guided the writer and can be pinpointed by us in the text as they are embodied in the text itself. The aim is to understand the stories from "within," after all, they have been designed to convey their message under their own steam. When we learn more and more about how a story has been constructed and by what means, and learn to understand what the purpose is behind all those techniques and structures, we will have penetrated deeply into the meaning and values of the text.

In this process, form cannot be separated from content. Every element of language is part of a system of signs, and is either itself a carrier of meaning—the most obvious example being the word—or it is for example a structural element (for instance the rules for sentence structure) and in this way also contributes to the shaping of meaning. Conversely, all content which the writer may possibly have wanted to include in his story and convey to his audience can only be conceived of, and can only exist, by virtue of the forms of language, style and structure which he selected for it. Thanks to the mastery of style and composition to which the beginning of 2 Kings 4 bears witness, the simple word "dead" links up with "live" at the end of the story, and obliquely acquires contact with the distress of the widow, and the slavery threatening her boys. It occupies the stylistic device of the "frame," and hence also contributes to the delineation of the literary unit, and marks the conclusion of the whole, given in the dual concept of problem and solution. In short, it functions on various levels at once. There is no form without content, and no content without (being carried or indicated by) form.

David's talent for metaphor

The power of language may be illustrated by a short exercise with 1 Samuel 17, the long story of David and Goliath. Everyone knows what happens there. Two armies face each other, ready for battle, and the armored giant Goliath, the Philistines' trump card, is standing in the middle, blustering. The young shepherd David is the hero, and his aim is clear: to gain the victory by immobilizing the champion fighter who has been mocking and taunting King Saul's ranks for 40 days—a round and holy number which symbolizes the total humiliation of Israel. If, however, we take the language really seriously, and the forms of organization in which the writer presents his material, there is a lot more going on, and some important things happen which far outclass the scenes in a B-movie.

I will start with a simple quantitative observation. It takes almost half a page for David to appear and prepare himself for action. He comes from another part of the country, and is dis-

qualified as a hero by his introduction in vv. 12-15: he is much too young; his father Jesse has only sent his three eldest sons to the front; the youngest (number eight in line) is not up to that by a long way. He merely has to take his brothers some provisions (vv. 17-19). The camera registers his arrival from v. 20; from that moment we again view the battlefield, but this time mainly through the eyes of the young man, vv. 22-27. His eldest brother snaps at him (v. 28)—another indication that David does not belong to the category of able-bodied men. And when David reports to Saul and tells him he wants to enter the arena against the Philistine, the writer also has the king speak words of disqualification, v. 33:

> But Saul said to David: "You cannot go to that Philistine and fight him; you are only a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth!"

This sounds sensible; moreover, it is well-meant. The speech has been rather subtly constructed by profitably exploiting both aspects of "youth." Saul uses it in a positive sense with reference to Goliath as a professional soldier, and negatively with reference to David. But Saul does not know what the reader has been told in the first half of the previous chapter (1 Samuel 16), which is that this young man has been anointed by the prophet Samuel and is destined to become the new king. So we follow this exchange critically, and detect some irony: here speaks the present king, who is doomed, and he is trying to keep God's candidate from what will be his biggest success, the humiliating defeat of Goliath!

David hardly needs our help, as he is quite capable of defending himself through language. His answer leaves Saul little choice than to tell David in his own way to go ahead. David's speech is long—a decision on the writer's part which is already suggestive—and has a special status. It is a story within the story and, unlike a regular story, does not describe one unique event, but recurrent incidents and habits: David tells the king about his practice as a shepherd.

> David replied to Saul: "Your servant has been tending his father's sheep, and if a lion or a bear came and carried off an animal from the flock, I would go after it and fight it and rescue it from its

> mouth. And if it attacked me, I would seize it by the beard and strike it down and kill it.
>
> Your servant has killed both lion and bear; and that uncircumcised Philistine shall end up like one of them, for he has defied the ranks of the living God. The Lord," David went on, "who saved me from lion and bear will also save me from that Philistine."

The main point about this mini-story (vv. 34-37) with its verb forms denoting repetition in the past is that its message forges a metaphoric link with the situation around Saul and David: the battlefield and the challenger who in everyone's eyes is invincible. There is only one person who has a different view, and he is working on his qualification as a hero through a speech full of self-confidence.

The following paragraph (vv. 38-39) is another one of good intentions not working out. David is allowed to try on the king's own armor, but it's no good. Of course not, the reader who has some sense of irony and symbolism thinks, why would the doomed man's cuirass fit the chosen one? A little later, Goliath sees a young man wearing shepherd's gear coming towards him. We can imagine his surprise, so the writer does not waste time telling us that. We do get his words, and again the writer employs two levels of knowledge. What we, listening together with Saul, have heard David say about wild beasts, Goliath does not know about. Without the faintest notion that even as he speaks them his words undergo a radical change in meaning, he calls out to David (vv. 43-44):

> "Am I a dog, that you come against me with sticks?" The Philistine cursed David by his gods; and the Philistine said to David, "Come here and I will give your flesh to the birds of the sky and the beasts of the field."

Goliath thinks he is asking a rhetorical question to which everyone knows the answer: of course he is not a dog. David and his audience (Saul and we readers) know better. We take this question seriously and discover: yes, Goliath is a dog. If only he knew he is now facing someone with experience in eliminating lions or bears!

The contrast between the two camps, Israel against the Philistines, with which the story started, lies at the level of the writer's material; it is no more than subject matter. A much

more important opposition has materialized in the meantime, one containing a paradox. Whilst the soldiers of both camps are after each other's blood and no one thinks he has anything in common with the other side, all those present on the battlefield are linked by a single ideology: the vulgar faith in weapons. The Master of Ceremonies for both camps is the champion in the middle, who by showing off his mighty armor embodies this conviction and drives it home to everyone watching. The writer has reserved no fewer than eight lines in the exposition for the famous weapon inventory: vv. 4-7. But then, the real opposition rises up in the middle of the chapter—an opposition of one against the rest. David is an exception, as he does not subscribe to the general ideology.

Whereas the Israelites let themselves be intimidated by the appearance of the giant and embrace the faith in weapons as ardently as their enemies do, David stands apart thanks to a metaphoric view of reality, whose origin he will later reveal personally by showing himself once again to be a master of language. David keeps his cool, and sees in the arena something totally different from what everyone else sees: a wild animal. This creative vision has far-reaching consequences. He eliminates the champion with a shepherd's practiced shot: with sling and stone.

We have all been brought up on the idea that Goliath was hit in the forehead. This, however, is unlikely. In the first place, it is strange that he does not collapse, or fall backwards as a result of the impact of the projectile. He falls face down on the ground. This not only means a physical fall, but at the same time, in a symbolic and religious sense, a prostration: without realizing it, he now worships the God of his opponent. Moreover, from the reliefs of Ramses III of Egypt we know that in the eleventh century BCE the Philistines wore sturdy helmets which certainly covered their foreheads. Finally, there is a point of language. In v. 49 we read that the stone that comes whizzing from David's sling "penetrates [Goliath's] *mitschô*." This Hebrew word actually means "front" and thus is less specific than "forehead." Now, the same word has been used earlier in the story, in the plural form (*mitschôt*), and appears, of all places, in the weapon inventory. From time immemorial this has been

translated correctly by "shin-guards" or "greaves." For v. 49 no other meaning is necessary at all!

What exactly happened? Twenty years ago, a spectacular theory about this has been published by a writer who died young, on behalf of her father, an American rabbi; it is time this became more widely known. David slings the stone right above the shin guard into the knee joint of Goliath's armor. As a result, this part of the armor is locked, so that the warrior is suddenly unable to bend his leg. This proves fatal, as according to v. 48 he has just started moving. Walking towards David with clumsy tread, he is hit, and hampered by the knee joint which will not hinge anymore, he has a nasty fall—on his face, as a natural consequence of his own movement. The correct translation of v. 49 would be that David "put his hand into the bag; he took out a stone and slung it; it struck the Philistine in the greave. The stone penetrated above the greave, and he fell face down on the ground."

This version offers a brilliant advantage, as Goliath now proves to have been incapacitated at the exact spot where his strength is situated—remember the weapon catalog and its length! A formidable irony at the expense of this colossus. What seemed to render him invincible has now proven fatal to him. His advantage, the massive armor, has turned against him thanks to David's cool eye and steady hand. The result of what can hardly be termed a fight has by this reading been given a point that is much more precise, much more compelling, and, as we shall see, much more in line with the theme presented by David the orator.

The narrator continues the irony: Goliath now lies on the ground powerless, sprawling under the weight of his own armor, and is then decapitated by his own sword: David has come running and has quickly seized it, v. 51. Goliath's knee in the literature of Old Israel is what in Greek literature is Achilles' heel, his only weak spot, and in the German *Nibelungen* epic the small spot on the hero Siegfried's back.

David saw something different than everyone else, because he looked with metaphoric creativity. He saw Goliath as a wild animal, so that the warrior's fate became that of a wild animal, struck down by an experienced shepherd. And yet, all this hap-

pens within the language: first, David gives his mini-story about sheep and mauling animals; next, Goliath unwittingly links up with this through his words about dog, birds and wild beasts. The metaphoric creativity is a product of linguistic creativity. David's language provides a re-description of reality, which makes reality itself different: no longer threatening, and manageable.

The use of metaphorical language goes even further, as we are now also able to transform the sheep. In the same way as the flock was saved thanks to the shepherd's intervention, Israel and its hosts are saved by the performance of the one person who did not let his imagination be paralyzed by the macho behavior of the other side. Thus, David has qualified as a shepherd on a higher level as well: he is called to look after his people.

That is not all, because David in the meantime has passed another test as master of language. The writer opts for David giving his most fundamental speech in vv. 45-47, i.e. before the duel can get under way. Again, David qualifies as an orator; he chooses the armored colossus as his audience for the self-confident words with which he announces Goliath's demise. Ironically, Goliath receives the dubious honor of being the first recipient of David's secret: the revelation of the source of David's metaphoric vision. And his birds and animals are taken from him by David:

> David replied to the Philistine: "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come against you in the name of the Lord of Hosts, the God of the ranks of Israel, whom you have defied. This very day the Lord will deliver you into my hands. I will kill you and cut off your head; and I will give the carcasses of the Philistine camp to the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth. All the earth shall know that there is a God in Israel. And this whole assembly shall know that the Lord can give victory without sword or spear. For the battle is the Lord's, and He will deliver you into our hands."

Thus, the writer makes David the character who in everyone's hearing, including the readers', is allowed to give a fundamental lecture in counter-ideology. David enlightens everyone, even before the ultimate act. The duo "sword and spear" is contrasted with the seemingly ridiculous duo "sling and stone," and

this *skandalon* (to use a New Testament word which has everything to do with powerlessness) gets at the real point: apparent power has been destroyed by apparent powerlessness. Twice, David's speech results in true knowledge, and it is there for everyone who wants to listen. In this way, a character within the story has been allocated the task of formulating a profound message at an early stage, before the readers can work out their own. So, David's words are a kind of self-explanation of the story; the power of language has, as it were, been raised to a higher power in David's two decisive speeches, the one about his flock, directed at the king, and the one about the true and invisible liberator, directed at Goliath: "the LORD of Hosts" (as both a modern translation and the King James Bible put it). Thus, the power of language respectfully points to the power behind the scenes as its source.

Component II: time

Language bears an essential relation to time, as the words follow each other. Whether we are speaking or listening, writing or reading, words can never sound simultaneously. Narrators have learned to make the most of the consequences. A good narrator will manage to transform the limits imposed by time into opportunities and advantages.

The nature of its raw material, language, makes literature a time-bound art. Narrative art even turns this into a matter of principle. A story contains so many intimate and intricate relations with time that we should start by distinguishing at least three kinds of time, if we want to avoid total confusion. After this analytical stage there follows the final test, a form of synthesis which focuses on the question of whether we are able to handle and connect these various forms of time, and can make them function in a literary and artistic way.

I will start with the distinctions. A story is itself a finite chain of language signs and takes time: this is narration time or discourse time. You could measure this form of time with a clock, but this would not be very useful as people differ somewhat in the time they need to read or recite a story. Hence it is convenient to express the length of narration time in the number of

words. A simple example: the Hebrew text of the creation story (i.e., up to Gen. 2:4a) contains 474 words which cover the very first working week.

This takes us to the second type or form, narrated time. This is the time or period covered by the text, and within which the events take place which are thought to be worth relating: the time *within* the story. The very first story of the Bible is an exceptional case where we can pinpoint the narrated time exactly: the week that is mentioned. Moreover, every paragraph covers one day. We also find a simple fourfold example in the New Testament: the gospel is the story of Jesus' life, the duration of that life is roughly the narrated time. Viewed a little more closely, Luke starts half a year earlier, as for his starting point he chooses the announcement of the birth of Jesus' precursor, John.

The narrator is not obliged to provide indications of narrated time, but he is quite capable of it. Whenever we hear this kind of information it is always important. In Judges 19 we are told explicitly that the Levite hangs around in Bethlehem for four days and a half, and what happens after that is described practically hour by hour, with the setting of the sun as an important point of reference. When the terrible night of Gibeah has ended, the narrator is equally clear about its opposite, the dawn. The story of Jacob's birth is carefully marked off by two measures: when Isaac marries he is 40 years old, 60 when he becomes a father. Sometimes we have to do some arithmetic: when someone goes from A to B, on foot or riding a donkey, we can estimate the traveling time by consulting an atlas.

The third type of time is not always relevant, but we cannot be sure of that beforehand. This is the actual sequence of the narrated events. Usually, the narrator reports most events in the order in which they occurred, thus respecting chronology and its linear axis. Yet even in such an early form as Hebrew narrative art it does occasionally happen that the writer deliberately abandons this type of sequence. He has two options: looking forward, or looking back.

The former option is less frequently used, as it usually does not contribute to dramatic tension. If it does occur, the writer has pressing reasons. For instance, I will discuss below the

striking case of 2 Sam. 17:14 where the writer deems it necessary to reveal to us from behind the scenes what God has decided about Absalom's revolt; weeks (i.e. of narrated time) before the prince is defeated we already hear that he is going to lose. As the battle between the troops of the expelled king and his son's army is reported in ch. 18, that text would seem the natural place to reveal that God himself had influenced the outcome. "Natural" here means: in conformity with the chronology of the revolt itself and its development.

The other possibility for escaping from the chronology is regularly employed, albeit seldom to any great extent. This is a technique which every film and video watcher knows as the flashback: looking back in time. We see or hear the story of character X who is 20 or 60 years old, and suddenly on page N the "normal" course of the action is interrupted because the writer or director wants to tell us what happened 10 or 200 years earlier in the family, village, etc. Obviously, such a flashback is always there for a purpose, but one often forgets to ask the slightly trickier question of why it should occur exactly here, on page N, and how its meaning is related to the adjoining pages. Certainly, this is a question of temporal dynamics, but often the answer is also revealing as to thematic structure.

Saul's long last hours

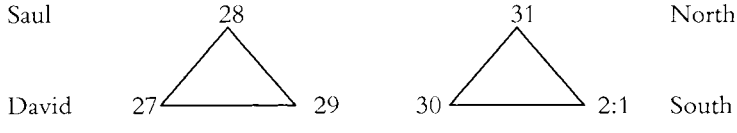
Here I will mention one example of disturbance of the chronological order; this is at the same time the most spectacular example of anticipation (prolepsis) which I know in the Old Testament, and an extensive one at that. The entire chapter, 1 Samuel 28 (which strictly speaking starts at v. 3), is such an intervention. It is about Saul's last night, just before he himself, three of his sons, and thousands of his soldiers will be slaughtered by the Philistines. What strikes us immediately is the fact that the writer has separated Saul's last night from his last day, although these periods form a natural unit (a 24-hour day). Saul's last day is not described until ch. 31, two units later than one would expect.

During his last night the desperate and exhausted king visits a medium in order to get some idea of his fate. He does manage

to make contact with the prophet Samuel, who from the other side of the grave implacably persists in condemning Saul. The prophet repeats that by failing to destroy the Amalekites (see 1 Samuel 15) Saul has not obeyed God's instructions, and announces "Tomorrow you will be with me." Saul understands that his last hour has struck and, devastated, falls to the ground.

When we then read the chapters surrounding this story, i.e. chs. 27 and 29, we notice that these are two tightly connected stories about David. David is here concerned with his problems as a vassal of the Philistines, the very power about to destroy Saul. Why then has this closely knit pair been separated by wedging in ch. 28 between them? What happens to David and the Philistines in ch. 29 takes place a few days before the night of ch. 28, which is why 28 is a prolepsis. In 29 the Philistines have only reached their meeting point near the coast, and they still have to march to the eastern part of the plain of Jezreel. When two days later they pitch their tents there, these are observed with terror from the northernmost slope of the mountains of Ephraim: Saul has arrived there on the low table mountain Gilboa. Saul's observation is reported in 28:5, whereas in ch. 29 the Philistines have only reached Aphek, in the coastal plain.

The same process is repeated around ch. 31. Why has the story of Saul's death not been linked to that of his last night, but been wedged in between the stories about someone else? It is placed between ch. 30 and 2 Sam. 1:1-16, which also form a distinct pair by placing David opposite Amalekites. The beginnings of an answer become visible when we make a diagram. From 1 Samuel 27 we count six narrative units, four of which are devoted to David who in the South-West is waging war against a band of Amalekites, and two to Saul who about 70 miles to the north is battling against the Philistines; they make up two groups of three:



This is a remarkable arrangement, and the creative reader tries to detect the reason behind it. The figure of two triangles results from the radical decision to separate (*disjunction*) three pairs which are naturally linked: 27 + 29 belong together as they present David as the vassal of the Philistine king Achish; 30 and 2 Samuel 1 belong together because David first defeats and kills a group of Amalekites, and a few days later executes a single Amalekite who has told him a mixture of truth and lies about Saul's death. It is curious how Saul and David are each on the war path, but separated in space, and that both of them become entangled with neighboring tribes with a nasty reputation in Israel and with which the other has had difficulties earlier.

The meaning of all this will only become clear to us as advanced readers if we are willing to do some homework and check the explicit indications of time which the writer has scattered through this sequence of six stories. I will skip the details for the moment and come straight to the fascinating result. Combination and deduction yield the outcome that David defeats the band of Amalekites in ch. 30 on the very same day that Saul, three days' march away, engages in battle with the Philistines and is defeated. The underlying time scheme results in a concurrence (*synchronism*) which conveys its own message: the victory by the chosen David coincides with the defeat of the rejected Saul. The separations (disjunctions) which the writer inserted in three pairs of stories provide him with the conjunction he needs for his theme: these stories are now side by side as chs. 30 and 31! The meaning of this is that the story of David's victory now borders on the story of Saul's fall. They should be adjacent, as they occur simultaneously.

Saul is defeated by that very enemy who formally is a friend of David's but yet does not mar David's reputation. David defeats that very enemy, the Amalekites, in battle against whom Saul met his final rejection by God. The synchronism shows conclusively that the conjunction in time is also a conjunction of theme, a conjunction of Providence. It vividly paints how the ascending line of David and the descending line of Saul are inextricably linked and coincide at one point in time.

Narration time versus narrated time

Time is an ingredient at every moment in the story. Every sentence in the story takes time (narration time), every sentence has some relation or other to the narrated time, and then there is the constantly shifting relation between discourse time (narration time) and narrated time. It is almost always worthwhile paying attention to the relation between these two forms of time, as this may indicate what is really important.

The narrator can simulate keeping in line with narrated time, so that the ratio between narration time and narrated time seems to be one to one. He creates this illusion mainly with speeches. When the writer has David speak to Saul, or character A to character B, this almost always takes the form of direct speech. In this way, the suggestion is that the characters are quoted literally, and these seemingly accurate words usually sound so natural that we tend to believe that this speech was probably spoken in "historical" reality just as it is given in the text. An attractive illusion.

In the information from the writer himself, the so-called narrator's text, the ratio between discourse time and narrated time is rarely one to one. Moreover, this relation usually shifts very quickly. The narrator is constantly manipulating the narrated time, stretching it, condensing it (for instance by summarizing), and then suddenly he will skip an episode. Sometimes the interplay of discourse time and narrated time is halted. This happens when the writer addresses us directly with information, comments and explanations. All the time he is drawing up an inventory of Goliath's equipment, there is no progress in the action; "the story is not moving." During the weapon show narrated time stands still.

In 1 Samuel 27 we hear that the refugee David enters the service of King Achish, and that as a vassal he is given a small town called Ziklag as his residence and home base. Then in v. 6 the writer notes: "that is how Ziklag came to belong to the kings of Judah, as is the case to this day." This sort of information does not form part of the action; again the clock of narrated time has been stopped for a moment, and thus the discourse time/narrated time ratio has been momentarily paralyzed. Is this piece of information an interesting historiographi-

cal tidbit? On the contrary, more likely a joke on the writer's part! Is there anyone on earth who could fix a day and year for "this day?" The writer here breaks with the detached position implied in the act of narrating, by breaking the time frame of what is narrated: suddenly and rather brusquely he draws a line between the distant past, the time of David, and "this day" of... whom, exactly? Our first suggestion would be: his own present, and the present of his first audience. But like all his colleagues he does not reveal when and where he lives, and the present of "this day" moves further along every day. Moreover, the writer knows that his first audience is just as mortal as he himself and will be continually replaced by new readers...

In these separate and easily recognizable sentences, where the narrator does not follow events but provides information and explanations, we have a kind of direct contact with him. We become conscious of his voice and his part in the whole. Usually, however, the writer hides behind the stream of the action and is eminently capable of creating the impression that events tell themselves. In that standard situation, discourse time and narrated time are in a state of permanent interplay, competition and friction. I will conclude this chapter with an example of this, which also shows the importance of a correct understanding of time.

The hundred years of Abraham

In the narrative cycle devoted to the first patriarch, roughly Genesis 12–25, the round figure "100" is handled in such a way as to provide us with a grip on both discourse time and narrated time. The actual story in Genesis 12 does not show a young man or a child as a future hero, but introduces Abram (as his name is until Genesis 17) when he is already 75 years old! Then in 25:7 we read that at his death he was 175 years old. These two figures indicate that the narrated time covers exactly 100 years. This might be a coincidence, were it not for the fact that this cycle devotes a lot of attention to aspects of time.

This cycle of stories is structured by means of 13 explicit designations of time scattered over the various narrative units, in 12 verses. The exceptional aspect of this string is that it consists

of exact specifications of age, mainly pertaining to the hero and his wife. For the benefit of those interested I will give the references here, with my apologies for the dull figures: Gen. 12:4; 16:3 and 16; 17:1, 17, 24, 25; 21:5; 23:1; 25:7, with at the beginning and end the ages of father and son (Terah 11:32 and Ishmael 25:17). The middle of a string of 13 items is the seventh, and this position proves indeed to be a pivotal and meaningful center. The writer has indicated this through various linguistic and stylistic signals. The verse in question is 17:17 which immediately stands out by containing *two* indications of age, for both husband and wife, and which is moreover a true poetic line of two half verses, spoken by the harassed and incredulous patriarch in answer to the announcement by God that he, an old man already, will yet have a child:

> Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old,
> or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?

Jews and Christians tend to adopt a rather one-sided view of this patriarch by concentrating only on his good sides; to them, he is the Founding Father of the faith. To me, the idea of the real Abraham's despair at God's promise of a numerous progeny, in Genesis 15–16, and here in 17 his unbelieving and cynical mirth at the absurd idea that this should yet come to pass, is much more engaging. I defend Abraham as the Founder of understandable and recognizable disbelief.

The number 100 not only governs narrated, but also discourse time. The composition of Genesis 12–25 contains an extensive middle section (five chapters, in fact eight literary units) which is devoted to Abraham's 100th year. It opens with two announcements from the deity: Isaac's birth, plus the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Genesis 18. This conjunction of individual life and collective death is realized in reverse order: the cities and their region are destroyed in Genesis 19, Isaac is born in 21.

This broad center is well marked through a combination of designations of age and other temporal indications. Its boundaries are carefully delineated. Here is the remarkable border line at the beginning of the complex:

> 16:16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.
> 17:1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram.

Here we have the last verse of ch. 16 and the first of 17. They are right next to each other, in a seemingly harsh juxtaposition, as if the numbers are about to clash. Here, at a stroke 13 years of Abram's life have been boldly skipped. A long period of narrated time is covered by zero discourse time! This daring hiatus, however, is no testimony of incompetence. It functions as the first demarcation of the central panel of life and death.

Exactly because of its disbelief, thinly disguised mockery and despair, the one-verse poem spoken by Abram in the middle of ch. 17 lends extra power and depth to the miracle of the coming child. After Isaac has been born (21:1-7, at the end of Abraham's hundredth year) and the neighboring Philistine king surrenders to Abraham's prestige (vv. 22-33), the last verse of Genesis 21 in turn mentions time:

> 21:34 And Abraham resided in the land of the Philistines a long time.

In the text that immediately follows, the beginning of Genesis 22, the boy Isaac has already reached the stage where he can carry wood and ask his father awkward questions (22:7)! So, there is also a considerable hiatus of narrated time between chs. 21 and 22; it leads me to believe that this gap has about the same length (in narrated time, in years) as the gap between 16:16 and 17:1. This would make Isaac 13 years old.

What is related next in Genesis 22 is hair-raising. Finally Abraham has a natural (not adopted) son, and now God orders him to sacrifice the child! It is clear that the writer in this way presents and accentuates the theme "progeny by miraculous means" one last time. He does this by way of a paradox, as God's command makes us think: has everything been in vain then?

Thus, a short period of narrated time (only a year in the life of the hero) is covered by a large amount of text, i.e. a lot of discourse time. This reveals much about the theme and purposes of the text. What is more, the shapes of time form the key

to the structure of the Abraham cycle. The structure of the composition as a whole can be found in the section 'The next 110 stories' at the back of this book.

Translations

A translation is made for people who cannot read the text in its original language; hence, a translation is a complete and real replacement. I take that very seriously, as this book was written for readers who have no knowledge of Hebrew and Greek. This is a situation in which most native speakers of English find themselves, and in principle there is nothing wrong with it. In order to put myself completely in that position, I have looked at the original text as little as possible and have written this book almost entirely in reference to translations.

Not everyone realizes that a Bible translation is a full and independent text in itself. This applies especially to the advocates of the so-called *idiolect* translations, who have the illusion they can only remain faithful to the Bible if they translate the text in a largely or even extremely Hebraist idiom—which usually means extremely literally. The idiolect aim is based on a sort of optical illusion: the only readers who can appreciate the (apparent) faithfulness of such a rendering are those few who are conversant with the original language, but it is exactly those people who by their knowledge of Hebrew are able to do without a translation, and who realize only too well how much of the sound, style and rhythm cannot be conveyed in any way. People who are dependent on a translation are by definition unable to see, let alone appreciate, in how far an idiolect translation does justice to the original text. There is one exception I know of: a very good rendering which succeeds in sticking remarkably close to the original is Robert Alter's translation of the book of Genesis.

A vast array of new English translations and paraphrases of the Bible are now available. The most readable among the reliable translations would be the following, in chronological order:

(a) In the first place the King James Bible (=the Authorized Version) must be mentioned: an intellectual monument, over 375 years old, which has had an enormous influence

on the development of the English language and which to many people—albeit mainly older churchgoers—is still *the* Bible.

(b) Then there is the influential revision of this translation: the Revised Standard Version (RSV), 1946–1952, now itself updated in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) (1989).

(c) The best-selling New International Version (NIV) (1978, revised 1983) is the most popular version in many churches.

(d) Finally, there is the Jewish Publication Society's 1985 translation of the Hebrew Bible. When citing texts from the Bible I have mainly chosen translations from this version, sometimes with minor adaptations; sometimes I have made a translation myself on the spot if this was necessary for my argument.