

# Original Light—Poetry from the Bible

by *Richard Chess*

Turn it and turn it, the rabbis say, for everything is contained in the *Torah*. To uncover what is already contained in the text but has not been seen before, rabbis use an interpretive strategy known as *midrash*. Taking the rabbis as my guide, I encourage my poetry students to approach many kinds of texts, including the Bible, the way the rabbis approach *Torah*. Their *midrashic* imaginations awakened, the students may hear themselves, for an exhilarating moment, speaking in the voice of Moses—or Miriam—to whom *Torah* is revealed, or find themselves hunched like J or E over sheepskin, stylus in hand, scratching what is revealed down or like Ellen Frankel, the contemporary visionary feminist author of *The Five Books of Miriam*, recording the voices of those women whose visions are not among those in the familiar five books. Of course, few of the students think of the Bible as source of inspiration for their own poetry. Furthermore, they wish to write *original* poems. At the beginning of the semester, their understanding of *original* and mine differ. An original: a poem in which is revealed what has always been here, just below the threshold of our awareness.

But can I convince the skinny, tongue-studded student that "everything" is indeed contained in, of all places, the Bible? He declares, "*I am what I am*: angry, frightened, hurt, wild, free. Not bound by your courtesies, your manners. F\*\*\* you. F\*\*\* . . . you." How can he say "I'm sick of your world, take your credit card, your Chlorofluorocarbon, your smart bomb and shove it" in the voice of father Abraham? He will not be tamed. He will not submit to the Bible's authority or to mine. He has to give Truth to us direct. To get Truth down now.

In the same class sits a balding woman in a wisp of pastel (a scarf). Her life largely behind her, she faces a void. Because she is too humble to claim that she can perceive the Without End (what the Kabbalists call *Ayn Sof*) and thus represent it in visionary poems, she casts her glance backwards and inward. Her goal: to make of her life a well-made poem and to lodge it here, on this page, in this room, where it will not come easily dislodged. Somewhere between her and the Without End. It's her way of giving shape, of passing on to those she'll leave behind, in a vessel that might endure, her life, the tales—the charms—that, like amulets, have protected her. Got to get it down now, she thinks.

Hoping to narrow the distance between us and the sacred, for our course text I've chosen a precise, plain, contemporary translation from the original Hebrew scriptures, *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*, published by the Jewish Publication Society. Open it, I tell them. Don't just hold it like a rock in your hands; break it open. Find the gap in the story, the lapse of time, the character known by name only, mentioned perhaps once in passing.

*So the Lord God cast a deep sleep upon the man; and, while he slept, He took one of his ribs. What did he dream that night?*

*So Jacob served seven years for Rachel and they seemed to him but a few days because of his love for her. But I'm impatient, and lonely, and young, and weary from 14-hours of work; I've got money in the bank and an ATM card in the pocket. It's Tuesday night around 10, it's raining lightly, and the high-speed line rumbles under Locust Street. Is that Rahab? Is this Jericho? See how she struts toward me, sensing my need, my wallet? What do you call it, the beast that lives inside you demanding to be fed, what do you name it to master it?*

Find the rhythm of ecstasy, the rhythms of desire and despair and rage, that's what I tell them, my students, what I tell myself. Ride it, that rhythm, into the body and out of it into a land you have not known, its horizon, its line, its openness, its dung, the folds of its hills, the thunder of its stones, its battering rods, the floods that of a sudden wash away its roads, its tenacious roots, its pillar of salt.

But what about this, our world, they think but do not say. How, in the Land of Nod, can I make a poem in which my life can dwell, my world reveal itself in all its glory and misery?

It is customary that when a human being builds a palace, he does not build it according to his own wisdom, but according to the wisdom of a craftsman. And the craftsman does not build according to his own wisdom, rather he has plans and records in order to know how to make rooms and corridors. The Holy One, blessed be He, did the same. He looked into the Torah and created the world. (*Bereshith Rabbah 1:1*, as cited in *Slayers of Moses*, Susan Handleman)

Pattern, design: one begins to see what can be—indeed, what is—by looking deeply into what has been, what comes before. Willing to sacrifice his only son through his beloved wife Sarah, Abraham is a model of terrific devotion to traditional reading: he hears the voice of God and obeys his commandment. Dante, model of poetic apprenticeship and mastery, canonical reading, looks in Virgil, revered poet from whom he learns the graceful style. Yes, one creates in the company of the ancestors and the ancestral texts. Yet to honor the tradition, as Whitman teaches, one must destroy it: "He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher."

How dare we destroy the Bible, they ask. Suspend your religious beliefs, I advise them, when sounding biblical texts for holes, omissions, jagged edges, contradictory statements of narration, fact. Of these, poems must be made. Though the writing of these poems may seem to be acts of desecration and destruction, they are actually sacred acts of creation. As intimidating as canonical texts may seem, they are incomplete until extended by means of new poems that reveal what is contained in them. "[I]t must always happen again," writes Eleanor Wilner in her poem "The Pillar."

it must always happen again:  
one generation to bring gifts, another  
to carry it all away again; one  
to bury what they came to honor, another  
to bring it to light again;  
and always,  
standing alongside, sending its small round  
cries into the night, the desolate sheep  
bleating for salt, its need driving us  
as we bend our backs to the task.

Our *midrashic* poems are necessary, poems in which biblical narratives and discourse and contemporary experiences are intertwined, deepening our insights into our own historical moment as well into the Bible. But even this noble justification of our work is not enough for two of the students. Their wills, their imaginations are surrendered to the *authoritative reading* of the text. They cannot, in good conscience, sanction unorthodox readings as would be found in the poems studied and written in the class. Consequently, they do not read Scott Cairns's prose poem in which Lot's wife, fleeing, with her daughters and husband, Sodom in flames, because "she could not turn her back on even one doomed child of the city," "turns her back instead," as she had to, as we must, "upon the saved." The saved are saved, they have no need of us. I let them, two of the brightest among our majors, drop the class.

The students who remain enter a land of strong voices. Disoriented at first, they ask "who is speaking?" "Is it my voice? Yours?" Where they have never been, there they hear themselves as if for the first time. The page burns but is not consumed.

Defying the curse of Genesis 3:14, "dirt shall you eat," Virginia Redfield boldly declares, "I do not eat dirt." Nearer to the end of her life than to the beginning, she enters nature, history, culture, art: "I am in the curve of the river, . . . in the red and white barber's pole, . . . the wooden coils of the Serpent, that old horn."

Bringing the psalmist's vision into post-modernity, Stephen Kirbach, punk with spiked hair observes, "Anything may shriek out of the stupid blue sky/today, a dead spy satellite or a post-soviet space station,/an aged 727 or an oak." "The entire surface of the earth seems to be covered with words," he wistfully observes in "Psalm for the Inarticulate."

The holes we find, we fill. It will take someone else, some future psalmist/poet to locate and explore the gaps in our own *midrashic* poems. Exposing, covering. Stripping away, layering on. Poem from sacred literature, poem from poem: original light raying into the world.

Richard Chess is an associate professor of literature and language at the University of North Carolina at Asheville. He directs UNCA's Center for Jewish Studies as well as UNCA's creative writing program. His first book of poetry, *TEKIAH*, was published by the University of Georgia Press in 1994. His second book of poetry, *From the Elul Notebooks*, will be published by the University of Tampa Press in Spring 2001.

© Richard Chess