
Plurale tantum

Only when viewed from a distance does the Bible appear as a single book. Its Greek and Latin name ‘Biblia’ is a ‘plurale tantum’: it is given only in the plural, since, more than a book, it is a library, a quite heterogeneous collection of books. And yet, its holiness and its normative character in several religious traditions determine a powerful drive towards unity, hence “the” book, ‘the book of books’, the book par excellence, the archetype of every other book. It is the source, the beginning of every commentary and of every translation, the singular origin of the vast variety of books populating the world (until yesterday?). The Bible itself reassures us, in the words of Qohelet, if we are concerned over the possible end of book-culture: “of making many books, there is no end” (Ecclesiastes 12,12a). Unfortunately, this is not necessarily good news, since “much study is a weariness of the flesh” (12,12b). The perpetual dialectic inherent in any holy text, that is in any discursive revelation, is thus delineated quite clearly: even if there would be one text, there would be, of necessity, many interpretations. But one, normative, interpretation, such as has been attempted at times in this or that religious community, could not efface the duality it institutes with the pure text it purports to interpret authentically. No fundamentalism, therefore, can be justified, unless one wishes, in abolishing the dimension of the commentary, to cease listening to God’s voice. As a matter of fact, the holy text itself can already be described as a commentary, a translation as it were. One can assume, in fact, that God spoke Hebrew, but a common language is no guarantee that the listener, or the reader, understands what has been said or written exactly as it was meant. Moreover, a plurality is presupposed in any communicative act: the sender, the message, the receiver. If one opens the book(s) and reads, the text says:

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“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth”. These few words represent not only the incipit of the Bible, a sublime text, according to Pseudo-Longinus, but also the beginning of creation. Two things are created, not

one: the heaven and the earth. If one looks carefully, one becomes aware that the first creature, heaven (ha-shamayim), is actually in the dual number, the first step towards the plurality of heavens. The plurality haunts this passage in many more ways. To name only a few: the designation of God employed here is Elohim, which is grammatically connected with a verb in the singular (bara) but is a plural according to morphology. Christian interpreters, in fact, commented on this singular-plural as a mysterious reference to the Trinity. A subtler instance of plurality, from a grammatical point of view, is the very form ‘reshit’ (beginning), which can be taken to be in the construct state, a peculiar feature of Hebrew, and of Semitic languages in general, strictly connecting one word with its specification. If this is the case, then even the word ‘beginning’ cannot be taken as absolute, but rather in connection to what follows, creating a suspense, typical of the construct state, for what comes next, anticipating the development contained in the beginning.

These considerations are resumed with a characteristic sense of synthesis in the Jewish exegetical tradition, concentrating on the very first letter of Genesis: the beginning of every beginning or, in the world as a book, the incipit’s incipit. The first letter is a ‘bet’, corresponding, in the Hebrew system of numeration, to the number two. Of course, the form of the letter, its name and its numerical value, have been most variously interpreted, for example according to its form, as an invitation to read further, and not to inquire about what is above, behind or beneath; as a name (bet), meaning ‘house’, or as the initial of berakah, that is ‘blessing’, as a number, in order to hint at the fundamental duality of the written and oral Torah. Many other interpretations of this fact could be added, but the main point seems to me centered on an absence rather than a presence: not ‘aleph’, the first letter of the alphabet, equivalent to the number one and initial of Elohim, God, is in the beginning, but ‘bet’, the number two. The preposition ‘be-’ designates in Hebrew, among other things, the instrument and it is immediately attached to the means by which anything is done. God created the world with the beginning. By means of the Bible was the world created. One wonders much less, in light of this, that the world resembles the Bible at least in this: it is inhabited by a radical plurality. It is created in space and time, and both these dimensions presuppose plurality: with one point or one instant only, there would be no space and no time. There would be nowhere to go, no movement, and without movement,

as a matter of course, no time. Revelation creates the space in which it occurs and, by the very same token, it generates an unrelenting movement towards an ever-growing plurality. What about the unity of God and the immutability of His word? There are in fact two directions of the movement initiated by creation and its parallel expression in revelation, dialectically bound: to the expansive movement of differentiation, generation, commentary is constantly coupled the opposite movement towards the absolutely simple core, to the One above all differences in space and time. As long as the world endures, though, the drive toward unity produces, intentionally or not, more plurality. If one takes, for example, the age of humanism, one observes that the powerful appeal to go back to the sources, combined with the new features of the printing press, provoke not only a growing standardization and unification of the various and diverging versions of the Biblical text witnessed in thousands of manuscripts, but led at the same time to the flourishing of polyglot editions of the Bible and to the printing of numerous translations. Plurality as the innermost content of Biblical revelation can cause some surprise, if one's vision is biased by an uncritical adhesion to the rigid idea of monotheism as its main outcome: as there is only one God, there should be only one Bible. But the Bible is named, as I have tried to show, only in the plural, as the Psalm has it: "The heaven, even the heavens, are the Lord's, but the earth hath he given to the children of men" (Ps. 115,16). "The children of men" is the same expression found in a hermeneutical principle formulated in the midrash Sifre Numeri: "the Torah speaks in the language of the children of men". And the children of men are many, as many are the languages they speak. One possible translation of the verse 11 of Psalm 62 seems to hint exactly at this: "God has spoken once, two things I have heard". The deep unity of the message of God, the hidden 'aleph', as it were, can only be reached embracing the plurality of its reception, which is documented and treasured in the present catalogue. What holds together this immense diversity of testimonies of devotion, study and art? What distinguishes this peculiar book, or rather collection of books, from any other book? Qohelet suggests that their sheer number wearies the flesh, the Torah on the other hand, revives the soul (Ps. 19,7). The contradiction is only apparent, since both Qohelet and the Psalmist are right, as it is beautifully illustrated by this book of books.

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