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The Bible: Utopian, Dystopian, or Neither?

Or: Northrop Frye Meets Monty Python

In *The Great Code* (1982), Northrop Frye rewrites the mediaeval and early modern myth of human existence as progression from Fall to Judgment from a humanistic and Romantic perspective, recoding the Bible as a series of utopian visions which together constitute a single grand utopian vision. This article in turn rewrites Frye's Code from a modern Western perspective which eschews both naïve optimism and tragic vision for a dark comic or Pythonesque view of life, recognizing the absurdity of human ambition and pointlessness of human existence, while laughing in the face of it. By splicing Frye's optimistic sequences in a different way, it is possible to produce quite another code, which is neither utopian nor dystopian, yet always disappoints. The paper thus lays out a myth of disenchantment as a decoding of the biblical narrative, concluding that the human predicament is insoluble, because neither God nor humanity have the power to change.

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The present article examines a utopian construction of the Bible as a whole, a construction that I propose to adjust first into a dystopian one, and then into one that moves beyond either utopia or dystopia.[1]

In *The Great Code*, a major reading of the entire Christian Bible strangely underexploited (though occasionally cited) in biblical scholarship's recent adventures with literary criticism, Northrop Frye articulates and elaborates a view—established from late classical to early Modern Europe—of the biblical narrative as a unifying, civilizing myth of human existence from Fall to Judgment.[2] In Frye's secular updating of that view,[3] the Bible affirms not a cosmic divine plan, but rather humanity's vision of what it might become, what we humans really wish in our imagination to be. Frye's reading is optimistic, humanistic, and romantic (in the technical sense of following the medieval-early modern romantic genre), but with a relative neglect of irony, ambiguity, paradox, and conflict. Perhaps such an absence, together with its paradigmatic reading, accounts for its lack of popularity among literary critics who already in 1982 were embracing the virtues of variety, polyphony, and open-endedness—not to mention deconstruction—as much in the Bible as elsewhere in Western literature.[4]

Frye's plotting of the biblical "Great Code" in the literature of Christendom (with a slight concession to the Jewish canon) functions on several

[1] On "utopia" generally, see Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1990), and the discussion at the end of this essay. A good introduction and bibliography can be found in Ruth Levitas, "Introduction: The Elusive Idea of Utopia," *History of the Human Sciences* 16, no. 1 (2003): 1–10. Further discussion relating especially to the Hebrew Bible is in Ehud Ben Zvi, ed., *Utopia and Dystopia in Prophetic Literature*, Suomen Eksegeettisen Seuran julkaisuja 92 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006).

[2] *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1982).

[3] Despite which, Frye's code is quite consistent not only with mediaeval Christian views but also with modern evangelical ones in its emphasis on *topoi* such as fall, deliverance, and redemption. It is also consistent in its concentration on the narrative of the Bible rather than other parts of the canon such as the Psalms, Wisdom Literature and the Epistles. Frye might have discharged himself of this criticism had he distinguished between the Bible and the biblical myth. But he did not!

[4] For an excellent critique, see Lynn Poland, "The Secret Gospel of Northrop Frye," *The Journal of Religion* 64, no. 4 (1984): 513–19. Although I choose here to offer a counter-reading of Frye, and I accept that a holistic reading of this kind is a valuable resource in dealing with the Bible as a modern cultural artefact, I have much in sympathy with the view of George Aichele that "the canon prevents readers from freely reading the texts of the Bible" (*The Control of Biblical Meaning: Canon as Semiotic Mechanism* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001), 12). Yet I hope to demonstrate that there is considerable freedom, too, in reading it as a canon.

integrated levels. Typologically, he plots seven phases of "revelation." First is Creation (Genesis 1–3), with its antitype in Revelation 21:1, the vision of the "new heaven and the new earth." Second is "Revolution," beginning with the encounter of Yahweh and Moses; then "Law," "Wisdom," "Prophecy," "Gospel," and "Apocalypse." A second, sequential analysis produces a series of what Frye calls *mythoi*, comprising six falls and rises, each wave recapitulating and developing the previous one, as in the following diagram:

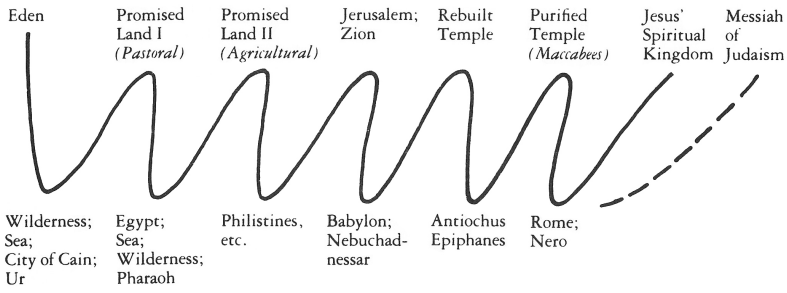

Figure 1. Northrop Frye's Great Code (note the Jewish variation [broken line] leading to the Messiah of *Judaism*).

A third level of analysis plots the metaphorical relations of the troughs and crests: the crests are home and the soul; the troughs are oppression and evil. The deliverers of Israel—Abraham, Moses, Joshua, the Judges, David, and Solomon—are also interpreted as prototypes of the Messiah. Frye's *Code* emerges from these complementary analyses as a tightly constructed one, and framing these rises and falls is a single movement, a giant *mythos*, falling from the Garden downwards and then moving upwards to the celestial city of Revelation. This movement is the fall and redemption of humanity itself. Such a U-shaped scheme is of course basic to most storytelling, and in this case it opens with a perfect world, defaced by humans but still destined for perfection.

Frye's Bible is both romantic and a comedy, though in the technical literary sense of each term, and not the modern romcom. It not only frames the Bible as built from a series of utopian visions, but constitutes the entire text itself as a utopian vision, a grand myth of harmony, correspondence, and completeness.

While Frye presents his reading as humanistic and not religious, his analysis shares a good deal with the mythology of mediaeval Christendom and

indeed with modern evangelical, supersessionist Christianity: while he recognizes the possibility, or necessity, of a "Jewish" code, his *Code* is one that tends to subsume the Old Testament within the New. Contemporary scholarly constructions of the Bible do not generally recognize either a divinely authored, or a humanistic code, but for the most part a collection, more or less fragmented, of ancient texts, which are studied within the cultural context of a post-Christian, postcolonial world. The Christian Bible is divided, for the purposes of scholarly treatment, into Old and New Testament, the Old Testament itself commonly replaced by "Hebrew Bible" (the differences between these last two being frequently overlooked).[5] Partly because of the close cooperation of Christian, Jewish, and non-religious scholars in the latter, it is rare to find—as was common only a half-century ago—any kind of appeal to the New Testament in elucidating Hebrew Bible/Old Testament interpretation. Such exercises are almost exclusively the domain of conservative evangelical Christian commentators.[6] The unity of the Christian Bible is thus very peripheral to the modern scholarly agenda.[7]

But even if the Christian Bible were to reestablish itself in literary (rather than theological) terms, what kind of myth, if any, might a contemporary Western-born global culture incubate in it? Tragedy, doom, and despair? Despite the apocalyptic warnings of nuclear destruction, uncontrollable viruses, widespread human poverty, terrorism, and the reality of global financial collapse, the modern Western zeitgeist is *not* drawn to a tragic vision of life. But neither is it naïvely optimistic in the way that it seems to have been during the late nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, despite punctuation by two horrific major Western wars. One contemporary vision, a modern adaptation of the mediaeval myth that once exploited the sense of anxiety

[5] One of the byproducts of the recent cooperation of Jewish and Christian scholars (and their respective non-religious relatives) in the study of the "Hebrew Bible" is that "Old Testament Theology," formerly a major genre of the (Christian) discipline, has virtually disappeared. Many will find this a benefit, since arguably these writings have no intrinsic theology, only one imposed from religious presuppositions.

[6] Among the more interesting is R. W. L. Moberly, *From Eden to Golgotha: Essays in Biblical Theology* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992). One notable exception to this rule is John F. A. Sawyer, *From Moses to Patmos: New Perspectives in Old Testament Study* (London: SPCK, 1977).

[7] Modern interest in canon likewise recognizes that the processes of canon formation for each of the Testaments are different, while the adoption in most scholarly circles of the "Protestant," i.e., substantially Masoretic, canon (followed by Frye) of the "Old Testament" has vanquished any historical link between the two, since the earliest Christian Bibles are in Greek and include books outside this canon.

that characterized the 1960s and 1970s but now seems to persist regardless of such endorsement, is the conviction that God will bring the world to an end (in a manner predicted in the Bible) ushering in what will be a Utopia for the chosen few and a dystopia for the vast majority. But more deeply entrenched, at least in Europe (and, one might add, drawing partly on a Jewish comic tradition) is a different type of comic myth about utopia. I mean "comic" in its contemporary sense of "humorous" or "funny." This myth expresses a recognition of human fallibility and the absurdity of human ambition; yet it also recognizes the fear of the tragic, a fear assuaged by laughter. As an example of such humour, applied to a biblical story, we might cite *Monty Python's Life of Brian*. In this hugely popular satire on religious belief—and on the entire oeuvre of "Jesus movies"—credulity, the miraculous, messianic optimism, and even crucifixion are paraded with a call to "always look on the bright side of life"; and this in a world where human nature and human enterprise—including religious belief—are irredeemably vain, pointless, and often brutal, where the dark side of life is all too evident but largely sublimated into dark (or even light) humour.[8] As Ehud Ben Zvi has said, "utopian representations are one of the ways in which world-critiques can be formulated,"[9] and the Pythonesque representation envelopes a central part of the biblical story within a modern imagination of the world and the way we behave in it. The essential difference between the two imaginations is that, while according to both, the world may rightly be supposed to work in a proper and orderly way, according to Python it never did, it does not, never will—and, most importantly—is not supposed to. The myth, expressed in no great theme but a multitude of episodes, is fundamentally anti-utopian.

Frye's *Code*, however, is comic in the technical literary sense. It moves always towards fulfilment, resolution, perfection, being made up of a cycle in which each episode opens with promise and vision followed by complication and descent, and ending with redemption or resolution—which in turn

[8] See Philip R. Davies, "*Life of Brian* Research," in *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium*, ed. J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen D. Moore, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 266 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 400–414; James G. Crossley, "Life of Brian or Life of Jesus? Uses of Critical Biblical Scholarship and Non-orthodox Views of Jesus in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*," *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* 1, no. 1 (2011): 93–114.

[9] Ehud Ben Zvi, "Constructing Utopias: Utopia/s and/in The Collection of Authoritative Texts of Late Yehud: General Considerations and Some Observations," New Directions in Social Scientific and Cultural Studies Approaches in Biblical Studies, University of Derby, July 9, 2011.

prepares for the next wave. The structure is typological, but the narrative sequence is linear and at each conclusion stands a utopia: Eden, the Promised Land, the Messiah, the New Heaven and Earth.

One can, however, by splicing Frye's sequences in a slightly different way produce quite another code: initial promise, promise failing, vision corroding, plan disintegrating—to be succeeded by another promise doomed to the same outcome, whether the result of human or divine fallibility, or ill will, or lack of faith. This scheme can be perceived to represent an overall dystopian vision, but it is also possible, and perhaps more reflective of our modern inclination, to see the failure of promise simply as the way things are, as inevitable. Both utopia and dystopia can be exposed as mirages, as products of a culturally (and religiously) embedded creed of progress or purpose in human life. Hence, even resignation to "the way things are" finds itself provoked and sustained by the human propensity to continue believing that we can—or should be able to—learn from experience and improve our individual or collective performance. This instinct can give rise to renewed trust in the next plan, vision or promise, however often such trust is impelled forever towards disappointment. Again, as Ben Zvi has observed, "Cognitive studies show the importance of hope at the individual level. More importantly for our present purposes, hope is necessary for the successful social reproduction of historical groups."[10] I might add, "for individual psychological wellbeing also." In what follows I want to lay out this myth of disenchantment as a decoding of the biblical narrative, including what Frye calls its "revelations," specifically wisdom and prophecy.

I begin with the narrative scheme, as diagrammed earlier. The prototypical *mythos* for Frye was Creation to Exodus: but it can be replotted as from Creation to Flood. Moreover, in such a replotted episode lurk the strongest of clues that the *Great Code* is disillusionment, for we find here a sequence of deceits and disappointments. The opening chapter of Genesis presents a totally organized deity[11] who makes a good, panglossian universe in which

[10] Ehud Ben Zvi, "Constructing Utopias."

[11] The unschooled reader, incidentally, may think that Elohim ("God") made the universe out of nothing, unaware that the very first verse is, in the original Hebrew, grammatically (or ungrammatically) ambiguous. The deception of the text is thus perpetuated by the translator who transforms a Hebrew biblical text that is sometimes corrupt into one that always makes sense. The translation "In the beginning" implies a clean slate; "when God began" (which is rather more probably the meaning) leaves a chaotic universe in place before its organization. While on this topic, the use of the plural "let us make humankind" in v. 26 seems to point to

humans, being made in the divine image will take charge. Everything is good and ordered in complete harmony with a divine will.

Already in the second chapter this optimistic scenario begins to collapse. The deity issues a command to humans not to eat of the fruit of a certain tree because it will quickly cause death. So the world is not quite perfect after all, nor do humans rule over it: a central part of it is lethal and can dispose of its supposed "rulers." Outright deceit also enters with this command, since a snake (also part of the "good" creation) contradicts the divine threat about consumption of the dangerous fruit, and events show the creature to be correct and the creator deceitful. Yahweh admits the truth of the consequences, to himself or his peers, but nevertheless punishes the humans for failing to comply with that deceitful warning. The image of a somewhat impersonal but good god, in total control, thus disintegrates into one of a petulant parent who deceives and then punishes his created children, in whom deceit and violence then understandably also arise, *since they are made in his image* and will mimic his faults, whether consciously or deliberately.

The downward curve steepens: Abel's murder by Cain is provoked by the creator god's arbitrary response to their offerings: another factor in the collapse of an ordered and stable world is that the god's behaviour cannot be predicted, because it is not rational. Moreover, he can change his mind: not much later he wishes he had not created humans at all (and those made in his image will replicate their maker's partiality and change of mind). The disintegration has further to go: the god decides upon a Final Solution of extermination because of human wickedness (and from whom did they learn it?), but undermines it by a decision to spare one family, whose survival therefore means that humans will continue in their wicked ways; yet for this very reason the god promises to himself that he will not try to exterminate them ever again. We have reached almost the point of absurdity, and this is the prototypical, clearest statement of the worldview described earlier. There is no consistency and no competence in the maker of the world: how can one expect otherwise from the creation? The modern reader may well respond to the story with a mixture of horror at the violence and scale of the proposed remedy and laughter at the way in which the perpetrator frustrates his own plan. Shooting oneself in the foot is not an inappropriate description

other unnamed beings, thus casting some doubt on the impression of a single autonomous deity. As with all initially naïve approaches, suspicion begins (like sin: Gen 4:7) often over a very small matter, small enough to be initially disregarded until hindsight illuminates it.

of these actions. But—if we modern readers turn our eyes back to our modern world—such bumbling defines the condition of the creatures as well. This is surely the paradigm of the story of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, of the loss of lives and other resources in fighting enemies with whom we must in the end negotiate. Or our reaction to global warming or nuclear proliferation, where our nature prevents us from taking the action that our intelligence tells us we must. This is how creation was: this is how the world is: this is how we *images of god* behave. We are all of us foolish.

The first cycle of the newly-read code approaches its end with the dispersal of a humanity that is from now on unable even to communicate with itself! But the cycle is not complete without a new promise and a new plan, because the end lies not in realization of the absurdity but in hope that it can be overcome, trust in another vision. Here that final call is the beckoning of Abraham, which is supposed to furnish a means of blessing to all the newly created nations as well as Abraham's own descendants. It is thus in principle a universal plan (British readers[12] will understand if I call it a "cunning plan").

The second cycle therefore begins with the apparent acceptance of the invitation. Yet as it proceeds, clarifications and obfuscations are introduced. Central to the unfolding is a lack of trust on *both* sides, as if Abraham had already learnt something from the preceding cycle.[13] On the deity's part the extent of land promised fluctuates and the small print materializes. For example, the territory is already occupied by already settled Palestinians, and Abraham *himself* will never get any of it except for a field, which he has to buy. The rest is for his descendants, and at some distance in the future. What is more, no direct descendants seem to be in prospect, since Sarah is barren. Ishmael is expelled, then Abraham is ordered to kill Isaac. Later (Genesis 18) the two protagonists negotiate over the threatened destruction of Sodom, and despite reluctantly promising not to destroy it, Abraham's god does so anyway. For his part, Abraham leaves his promised land for a better life in Egypt, offers his wife to Pharaoh, and returns only after being told to. Nor does he show much reluctance in attempting to sacrifice his son.

His descendants are likewise devious: his grandson Jacob deceives his father and then Laban (who had previously deceived him). Joseph in turn

[12] Or others fortunate enough to be acquainted with the adventures of Blackadder.

[13] Philip R. Davies, "Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding," *Bible Review* 11, no. 4 (August 1995): 24–33, 44–45, reprint "Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding," in *Abraham and Family*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Washington: BAS, 2000), 21–40.

tells tales on his brothers and deceives them when they arrive in Egypt; in the meanwhile they had deceived their father into believing him dead. Eventually the entire family leaves the Promised Land to settle in Egypt. By the beginning of Exodus, the promises and blessings are therefore not just largely unfulfilled but on the verge of collapse: the family is in a foreign land (by its own choice), but now becomes enslaved. This second cycle ends, however, with Moses's encounter with Yahweh and the promise that the Israelites will be liberated and taken to the land previously promised. The blessing on the nations is at this point forgotten, and the promise offers what had previously been promised, but this time the offer will be made to remove the existing inhabitants and provide the utopia of a land of milk and honey.

The third cycle opens with the escape from Egypt, which takes place with only a few false starts. The sequel involves trudging through the desert, plenty of hunger and thirst, and midway the promise is spelled out at Mount Sinai with an abundance of small print (more than the average legal contract these days). The whole package is resented by many of the prospective clients: rebellion breaks out, the people want to go back to Egypt, refuse to conquer their promised land because it looks too dangerous, and are punished by having to wait to die off before their children can enter the land. Then Moses dies. But this episode ends with a partial occupation of Transjordanian territory and the renewed promise of a successful military campaign.

The fourth cycle opens with a successful invasion, in line with the promise, and a distribution of the land among the tribes. But once into the book of Judges, it transpires that only one tribe (Judah) actually wins all its land, the remainder having to share it with the existing occupants or even to be subservient to them. Life degenerates, under a series of increasingly dubious judges, into a pattern of disobedience, foreign oppression and rescue, culminating in civil war. The choice of a king (in 1 Samuel) to bring stability again seems at first successful, but ends in his defeat by Philistines and his death. But again hope and promise spring forth: a divinely chosen king is secretly anointed whom God will establish for ever in a "secure house"; a promise somewhat smaller in scope, perhaps, but it forms the topic of the next cycle.

The fifth cycle predictably narrates the collapse of monarchic Israel and Judah, and the "secure house": after initial success the house loses ten out of its twelve tribes, the kingdom is divided and each part comes to destruction and deportation. But the cycle is shared by two narrations, one in Kings and the other in Chronicles, and each understands the promise of the "secure house" differently. In Kings, while the royal dynasty comes to a deserved

end, there is just a hint that it is not quite done. The last king is alive and well. In Chronicles, the promised "house" seems to have been understood to mean the temple, and although this is also destroyed, it is rebuilt and the cult restored (the failure of promises can sometimes be obscured by redefining the promise). Promises of both the restoration of the royal house and the international status of the sanctuary issue forth from the books of Zechariah and Haggai, bringing the fifth cycle to a resounding and somewhat apocalyptic conclusion.

The sixth cycle describes the (inevitable) collapse of this project. No new Davidic king appears, while the stories of Ezra and Nehemiah portray a society beset by opposition, internal conflict, and financial misbehaviour. Ezra himself confesses (Neh. 9:36) that the Israelites are still slaves in their land anyway. Or rather, the people of Judah, the rump of Israel, for the people of Israel are—at least following the Kings narrative—never again restored: forever after the "ten lost tribes" haunt the messianic imagination (though according to Chronicles these tribes are still in Samaria but refusing to join with Judah). And in addition to these permanently exiled tribes, many Judeans remain abroad and from time to time meet persecution too, as the books of Daniel and Esther relate. Daniel (fourth in the sequence of prophetic books if we follow the Christian Old Testament canon; closer to the end in the Jewish canon) describes the culmination of this cycle of dispersion: a prophecy of the desecration of the temple itself. But it also promises a quick end to all distress: destruction of the oppressor, rebuilding of the temple, resurrection with vindication and punishment meted out accordingly. Malachi, the ending of the Christian Old Testament, reinforces this hope in a combined promise and threat of the divine Final Solution, including the return of Elijah.

At this point (see the diagram above) Frye wished to see a messianic utopia that he assigned to "Judaism." But the Hebrew Bible, of course, frustrates what is essentially a Christian Code by placing Chronicles, in the majority manuscript tradition, at the close of the canon, out of its narrative sequence and superseded by events narrated in the previous Ezra–Nehemiah. If one were to construct a Frye-like Code of the Hebrew Bible one might perhaps better sketch out a different scheme with the endings of Genesis, Kings, and Chronicles, dividing the canon into three parts, each ending on the brink of a fulfillment of some kind. I agree entirely with Ben Zvi's observation about multiple utopias in the Hebrew Bible and indeed among its authors: they envisage various fulfillments to the woes of the present. The

books of prophets, especially, play with numerous scenarios: enemies destroyed, conversion of nations, the personal utopia of obedience to the Torah bringing joy, blessing and sometimes prosperity. At the very end, however, Chronicles presents a utopian vision set *in the past*, under the glorious reign of David, and without declaring that this state was somehow recreated in the present, or that it should or would return. Perhaps the utopia of Chronicles (and thus of the Jewish canon as a whole?) is rather like some versions of the Christian heaven, a condition of permanent and joyful worship in an unending world, a blissful boredom. The Christian view may wish the Jewish utopia to be messianic as does Frye himself, but only in order to show its continuity with the New Testament rather than, say, with the Talmud. Without such sequels, the code emerges differently: with expectation of a return to the land and a restored temple if we take seriously the closing words ("let him go up…"). That itself is the goal, and no further promises or disappointments are in sight. The cyclic movement has come to a full stop and perhaps the perfection of creation is somehow restored in the unchanging worship of the god of heaven.

But Frye's Great Code constitutes the Christian Bible and so it progresses through the New Testament. The arrival of Jesus (via Malachi, Elijah, and John the Baptizer) furnishes the close of the sixth cycle, not the beginning of a new one, for Jesus represents the issue of a number of promises from the Old Testament. Matthew's gospel says that he will "save the people from their sin" (Matt 1:21), Luke's that he will "inherit the throne of his ancestor David" (Luke 1:32), and the Fourth Gospel that he will bring eternal life. It has to be conceded that this abundance trumps most of the promises of the Old Testament.

The seventh cycle commences. Nevertheless, how these promises again fail. John the Baptizer dies; Jesus dies; the Jews do not get a new king (unless you count Agrippa), and are not saved from their sin. The temple, it is predicted, will be destroyed (and this promise does come about). The story of Jesus's resurrection and ascension does not fulfil the promises to Israel, whether of the Old or New kind, but merely postpones them to a further stage, his triumphant return, which is the promise that governs the eighth and final cycle. If we attend to the historical events that accompany the formation of the New Testament, we discover that this final promise does not so much rehearse as contradict most of the promises that have preceded. Israel does not get its land or its deliverer, but loses its temple and, according to various apostolic statements, loses its chosen status too. To be sure, the

world begins to be evangelized mainly thanks to Saul's conversion. But Israel does not accept its messiah and will not be saved unless or until it believes in Jesus. The Jews are left behind, while divisions within Christian communities are soon evident: problems of church order and orthodoxy emerge while the expectation of an imminent return of Christ fades. Roman persecution of Christians is reflected in the book of Revelation. The final cycle, and the entire Bible, thus ends up not as any kind of fulfillment but only the vision of a fulfillment—in effect a reiteration of the promise of the Final Act of the History of the World. In this finale, the Roman empire and the emperor, the symbol of the forces of evil, will be destroyed, sinners will be judged and condemned. Jesus will return in glory, there will be a new heaven and new earth. Alas, the vast majority of humans will not participate in this utopia: only 144,000 people will. For the rest, dystopia!

The question facing anyone in our time who has read this great myth from beginning to end is simply this: whether the final promise should be believed on the basis of what has been narrated. Christians have waited 2000 years, and no new promises have arrived. Many wait still, and hope. Maybe, after all, the promise means not quite what it says, but rather that righteous individuals will go straight to heaven (as the bereaved relatives tend to hope, rather than being reconstituted at an uncertain point in the future to the sound of a trumpet), with the earth carrying on as normal, perhaps even forever? But the issue here is not whether our view of the world or our personal inclination leads us to wish for or expect such an ultimate consummation. The question concerns a competent reading of the Bible, and specifically whether or not the Bible itself really induces or compels us towards hope of the fulfilment of the last promise.

We may find it more congenial to perceive the god of the Bible somewhat like a politician, always offering jam tomorrow, always ready to mislead, and in the end unable to deliver, achieving little or nothing of his or her manifesto. The Western electorate is still keen to encourage democracy around the world, but has lost trust in its own politicians, their dreams and their promises, their predictable failure, and (even worse) their inability to admit failure or the incapacity of their profession to conjure more than the most modest of successes. But we continue to vote, or most of us do, some in hope, some out of habit, some out of tribalism, some because of a sense that we have to take responsibility for whoever we choose to let us down. To the intelligent *voter* the Bible speaks very directly. It tells us of a history of promises and tells us also what happened to them and what always will hap-

pen if you believe a politician—especially a celestial one. But ultimately, this is not cynicism, unless we profess the notion that it can or should be otherwise: that the world was made in order to work properly, that we were created to ensure this, and that some day we will get there. But these delusions are precisely what the long history of Christian reading of the Bible entertains. Cynicism, moreover, might abandon any attempt to improve the world; and this would be unwise. The world may not get better, but it can always get much worse.

By way of providing some additional buttresses to my construction of the biblical code, I adduce a few examples of how the scheme of failed promise works within the Bible in two of what Frye called "phases of revelation": wisdom and prophecy. The classic exposition of wisdom as a world-view is expressed in the book of Proverbs: the universe is solidly built on morality and reason, so that the righteous and wise prosper, the wicked and foolish fail. This is because (Prov 8:22–23) "wisdom" was present in the act of creation, endowing everything with the principle of moral order and just retribution. Most of the wisdom psalms echo this conviction: "I have been young, and now am old" says the Psalmist (Ps 37:25), "yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken nor their children begging bread." The author of Ps 1, likewise, claims (v. 4) that the righteous prosper, while the wicked are "like chaff that the wind drives away." But this is not apparent to every biblical writer. One psalmist writes "Help, Yahweh, for there is no longer anyone who is godly; the faithful have disappeared from humankind. They utter lies to each other and speak with flattering lips and a two-timing mind" (Ps 12:1–2). Qoheleth and the author of Job each in their own way challenge this optimistic vision too, the one observing that virtue makes no difference to the quality of life, the other exploring suffering, human ignorance, and divine deceit. Daniel offers a reconciliation: the world does not offer justice here and now, but when it is finally mended there will be rewards and punishments. But until then things will only get worse. And this is the divine plan! The promise that wisdom gives, of a morally ordered universe, can only collapse under the weight of experience.

The prophetic books collectively affirm that prophets represent an institution for the reliable communication between god and people: they will tell what will happen, raising hopes or fears for the future. But in practice, the institution is unworkable. For there turn out to be false prophets as well as true ones, and humans cannot tell them apart. There is no mechanism for determining whether the prophet is honest. Deuteronomy 18 acknowledges

that prophets can correctly predict and yet still be false; they can do miracles and yet still be false; their veracity can in the end only be judged on whether they agree with what has already been written down (which makes their prophecy useless). But even this limited usefulness depends on a reliable god. But he can lie or change his mind. He lies about Sodom (Gen 19) and changes his mind about Nineveh. Outright deceit is uncovered in story of 1 Kings 22, which has a large number of prophets all announcing the *intended* (and presumably transmitted) message from God. But the prophet Micaiah contradicts them, claiming that Yahweh has sent a lying spirit to deceive the king. The other prophets faithfully relay the message while Micaiah betrays the deity (just as the deity is betraying the king). He is therefore really the false prophet. 1 Kings 13 warns the reader that even false prophets can utter true prophecies, and woe betide even the true prophet if he believes them! The two cases of wisdom and prophecy show the same pattern as the whole Bible: despite first impressions, neither can be relied upon. Each collapses under its own contradictions or its own denial of reality.

And so to the basic question: how to read the Bible code, how to understand the canonical message. My argument is not that the Bible is deceitful: quite the opposite. The modern reader who can be bothered to read it in its entirety—that is important—will find in it a transparent exposé of the failure of each promise along with a human propensity to remain hopeful, despite experience. The reader who decodes in this manner will know very well how to receive the glorious tableau of the Book of Revelation, having been prompted again and again to recognize such prospects for the mirages that they are.

Is this decoding a piece of tongue-in-cheek Pythonesque satire, a fanciful exercise in how the Bible *might* be decoded by a facetious modern reader? This conclusion would be far too hasty. Anyone familiar with the stories of gods in the world's cultures will recognise the deity that the Bible discloses. These gods can be venerated and feared but not trusted. The myth of medieval Christendom, from fall to redemption, from birth to judgment, stands like a barricade between us and an ancient worldview that was perhaps not so different from our own. Our experience tells us that while humans can be good, deceit and injustice are nevertheless inescapable. Power corrupts, death is the end, human nature weak. Religion, the gods, do not save us from ourselves and we are not destined for some glorious utopian existence either on earth or somewhere else. We want things to be better, we feel the need for hope, but do not expect its fulfillment.

And yet. We can read the Bible in conformity with our own view of the reality of the world and of human nature. I have argued that to read it as I have proposed suits the modern zeitgeist. Evangelical Christians will read it as it has always been taught to them: as the history of their salvation (and no-one else's!) There are those who think that there is only one right way to read the Bible: that it has an eternal and unmistakeable message. My argument is that this is not necessarily the message: there are more coherent readings to which the Bible itself prompts us. But a more insidious argument to be drawn from this essay is that the Bible is not a refuge from the world: it is not a repository of truth, an oasis, a textual utopia. It does not point us towards a utopia, either, but back towards our own world and our own selves, and their many and inevitable shortcomings.

Postscript: Utopia/Dystopia and Critical Theory

Being no critical theorist (i.e., one who can usually be identified by the habit of organizing ideas into names and theories expressed in incomprehensible jargon) but rather an exegete, I originally conceived the reading above as an exercise in textual interpretation (or, more grandly, counter-reading). But in identifying a slightly cynical anti-utopian zeitgeist I was of course wandering from the path of synchrony, where history and chronology can be ignored, into the domain of critical theory.

Utopia has been a rather heated topic in twentieth-century Marxism, which sees it either with Marx as something inimical to action, imagining another world instead of creating it, or, like Bloch, as an urge or vision that can give rise to specific, conditioned forms of hope, and thus seek to change the world: that is, concrete utopias should be distinguished from non-concrete ones (Mannheim's distinction between ideology and utopia makes a somewhat similar, though not identical, distinction).[14] Utopia as historically conditioned, as relative, as visions of a solution to discrete problems predominates in the recent essays collected by Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash and in the

[14] Ernst Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, 3 vols. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986) (*Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 3 vols. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1938–47)); Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) (*Geist der Utopie* (Munich: Duncker & Humblot, 1918)); Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (London: Routledge, 1936) (somewhat altered from *Ideologie und Utopie* (Bonn: Verlag von Friedrich, 1929)).

"anti-anti-utopianism" of Fredric Jameson, for whom the utopian impulse is expressed in historically conditioned "forms of hope."[15]

On the other side of the divide, John Gray, in analyzing the modern movement of utopian thought, has argued that it is essentially a (sublimated) religious impulse, even when it seems overtly a reaction against religion, as in the Enlightenment.[16] According to Gray, the contemporary reaction against utopia (which, rejecting Bloch's distinction, he defines as something that cannot be realized under *any* circumstances) has led to its replacement by apocalyptic forms of religious belief. He also argues that modern politics is but a chapter in the history of religion. Had I the space, I would argue that to reduce politics to religion takes exactly the wrong direction: that religion may rather be seen as an expression of politics, and particularly, in the history of Judaism and Christianity, of monarchic politics. For while many modern secular states have abandoned the idea of absolute monarchy, they retain the idea of a divine totalitarian monarchy, replete with the language of power, destruction of enemies, and commands to obedience and worship as found in the repertory of Christian liturgy and art. To realign the politics-religion axis, we have to reconfigure deities as politicians (something that we may find anticipated in the classical world, until Roman emperors started being deified during their lifetimes). Our modern disenchantment with politics should, in my view, rather than prompt a flight *to* religion (or to the Bible), invite us to widen that disenchantment to heavenly politicians too. But Gray has a point, too: the less one trusts human politicians, the greater the invitation to have recourse to the celestial and infallible politician.

It is rare that the Bible itself is admitted into philosophical company, but the Anti-Utopian Code that I have read above is prefaced by two important principles: first that the divinely made world falls apart (somehow!), and second, that the human species originates in a utopia from which by its own choice—witting or unwitting—it is forever expelled. The promise of some kind of return, or even a voyage towards, a utopia is constantly frustrated. For

[15] Michael Gordin, Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash, *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historic Possibility* (Princeton: Princeton Univerity Press, 2010); Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007). Among the science fiction works addressed by Jameson, I would like to have seen an extensive engagement with C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (London: Bodley Head, 1938), a powerful rewriting of the biblical myth better known from the 1956 film *The Forbidden Planet*.

[16] John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (London: Allen Lane, 2007).

neither God nor humanity will change. Our modern experience is, indeed, surely that unsolved problems persist in most cases because they are insoluble; that politics is not the art of the can-do, but of the (very little) possible. We may wish or need to dream, but we will not dream away our own pride, greed, or tribal loyalty. What we might do is love ourselves and others better, of course. Whether this was the ideal of the historical Jesus of Nazareth is in the end hard to say. But it doesn't need anyone special (let alone a god) to work this out, does it?