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*A Theology of Literature*

*The Bible as Revelation in the Tradition of the Humanities*

by William Franke

Wipf and Stock, an imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers

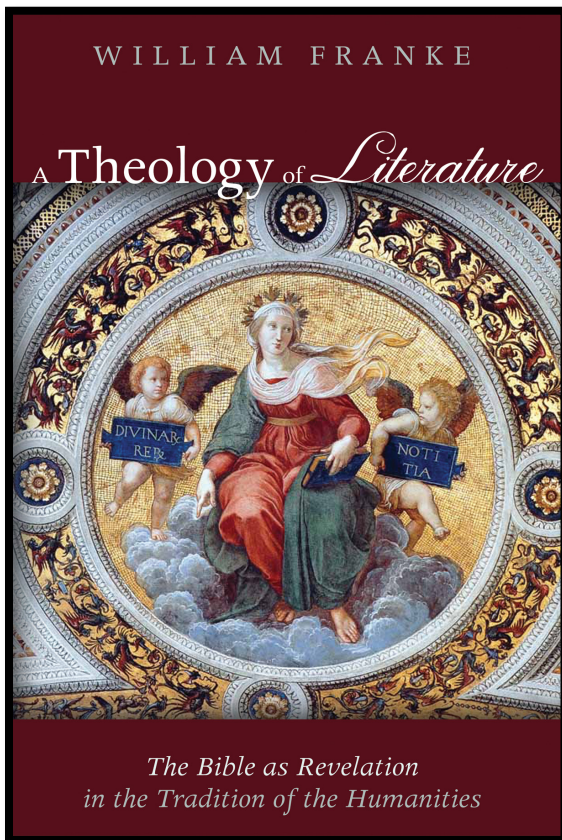
978-1-5326-1102-5/ paperback / \$17

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## New Title From William Franke

*A Theology of Literature*

*The Bible as Revelation in the Tradition of the Humanities*



With the tools of far-reaching revolutions in literary theory, and informed by the poetic sense of truth, William Franke offers a critical appreciation and philosophical reflection on a way of reading the Bible as theological revelation. Franke explores some of the principal literary genres of the Bible—Myth, Epic History, Prophecy, Apocalyptic, Writings, and Gospel—as building upon one another in composing a compactly unified edifice of writing that discloses prophetic and apocalyptic truth in a sense that is intelligible to the secular mind as well as to religious spirits. From Genesis to Gospel this revealed truth of the Bible is discovered as a universal heritage of humankind. Poetic literature becomes the light of revelation for a theology that is discerned as already inherent in humanity's tradition. The divine speaks directly to the human heart by means of infinitely open poetic powers of expression in words exceeding and released from the control of finite, human faculties and the authority of human institutions.

**William Franke** is a philosopher of the humanities and a Professor of Comparative Literature at Vanderbilt University. He has also been Professor of Philosophy at the University of Macao (2013–2016); Fulbright-University of Salzburg Distinguished Chair in Intercultural Theology and the Study of Religion; and an Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung research fellow. His single-authored books have been published by the university presses of Chicago, Stanford, Notre Dame, Northwestern, Ohio State, and the State University of New York.



## Interview with William Franke

The main title of your book, *A Theology of Literature*, is rather expansive in scope – it's the title of a manifesto – while the subtitle, *The Bible as Revelation in the Tradition of the Humanities*, narrows the focus to a particular text. This title seems to adumbrate your conception of the relationship between literature and the Bible. What is that relationship?

Picking up on your suggestions, I would say that the book is a manifesto for literature as a revelation of the highest sort of truth of which the human heart and intellect are capable, and at the same time a manifesto for theology as the source and core of traditions of human knowledge. The Bible is taken as an outstanding example of both types of discourse, literature and theology, in some of their most marvelous and miraculous revelatory capacities.

In the introduction to your book, you ask, “What is a theological reading of the Bible, and what is a literary reading?” This question suggests different methods, different purposes, different outcomes. But you put forward another way of thinking about the relationship between the theological and the literary. What is that way?

The usual idea of the “Bible as literature” is that one can read the Bible just as good literature without presupposing any kind of religious belief. This makes it palatable to many who would otherwise not be interested. My approach, likewise, is to read the Bible for all that it is worth as literature, but I find precisely there the Bible's most challenging and authentic theology. Understanding literature in its furthest purport requires a kind of belief in language and the word. It entails a hopeful, loving, and faithful sort of understanding of what is said, and that already constitutes the rudiments of a theology. This is to take the Bible as an especially revealing example of a humanities text. The greatest of these texts generally contain an at least implicitly theological (or sometimes a/theological) dimension to the extent that they envision the final purpose of life and the meaning of the world as a whole. Whether or not they speak of “God,” such texts are in a theological register wherever the unity and origin of existence are in question. Personalizing this origin as “God” is one interpretation that remains inevitable and imaginatively compelling for us, since we are persons.

You are not reading the Bible as literature in the same way that many others have been doing over the last several decades (even though Robert Alter, one of the foremost practitioners of that art, appears frequently in the pages of your book). Which aspects of the “Bible as literature” approach are, in your view, problematic, at least for your project, and which do you find of continuing value?

The tendency to *reduce* the Bible to *mere* literature is the approach that I wish to eschew. I emphasize that the Bible is truly revelatory *as literature*. This enables us to understand theological revelation, too, in a non-dogmatic sense, as having a much more general human validity. Appreciating the literary

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qualities and excellence of the Bible remains as crucial to my project as to the traditional approach. However, I stress that these literary features are not merely aesthetic effects or ornaments. They can be revelatory of the real. The ultimately real and true, which exceeds objectification and its inevitable oppositions, cannot be apprehended except through the imagination.

**When you speak of the Bible as revelation, what do you mean?**

I mean especially that it enables uncanny insight into the nature of reality as a whole and in its deepest core. Revelation conveys an infinite intelligence of life and of everything that concerns us as humans. I recognize knowledge as “revealed” to the extent that it rises beyond ordinary limits to a degree of knowing that somehow fathoms the whole or total or infinite. This means for many that revelation comes from God. But even before presupposing that we know anything about God, we can simply let revelation emerge from this extraordinary capacity of the mind to transcend itself toward what it cannot comprehend. In certain encounters with others, we can experience an infinite depth of love and life that boggles the mind and exceeds comprehension. It can transform our lives. Theological revelation is a compelling interpretation, handed down over generations in the human community, of this register of experience.

**You seem to make a distinction between revelation and theological revelation. What is that distinction, and what import does it have for your argument?**

No, I would rather emphasize the continuity between theological revelation and revelation in a more general, phenomenological sense of things simply coming to be known or openly “disclosed.” This is important for keeping theology connected with the rest of human knowledge, although human knowledge itself, all along, has also harbored something that transcends it and all its finite means. I say “all along” because this problematic of the self-transcendence of knowledge towards an extra-worldly Other can be traced to the Axial Age in the middle of the first millennium BCE. Of course, a relationship with the Other who reveals himself or herself or itself as God belongs to the full sense of theological revelation as understood in biblical tradition. I consider this as a degree of revelation of our relationship with others envisaged in its absoluteness.

**What do you mean when you talk about the “poetic potential” of language? Does all language have such potential, even what we might not typically think of as poetic – or even literary?**

Language has infinite potential for meaning, and poetic language shows and exploits this potential most intensively. Language can be thought of as beginning with one word like “OM” that means

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everything all at once. By a process of disambiguation, more limited and specific meanings are differentiated from each other and assigned to different words. However, poetic language reverses this process and allows us to hear the multiple meanings buried in our metaphors and to divine the original unity of meaning in language behind the rationally differentiated senses of words in the language that we pragmatically employ, yet with loss of its potential wholeness of meaning.

**Your book is concerned with the Bible as a humanities text. What is a humanities text and what does a humanities text do? Might we think of any text as having the potential to be a humanities text, as long as it is read "humanistically"?**

Yes. Being a humanities text is a matter of how a text is read. But certain texts lend themselves more than others to touching on matters of deep and perennial human concern: life and death and love and war, greed and heroism, suffering and hope for liberation, redemption, etc.

**You state that, prior to modernity, texts, including the Bible, "exercise[d] sovereign authority in determining [their] own meaning and in interrogating the reader and potentially challenging the reader's insight and very integrity." In secular modernity, by contrast, "texts taken as specimens for analysis are dissected according to the will and criteria of a knowing subject considered to be wholly external to them." What implications have modern, secular readings of the Bible, and of literature more generally, had for human knowledge and, indeed, for human existence; and how does our present time – what you call "the 'post-secular' turn of postmodern culture" – change how we relate to the Bible and literature?**

The modern, secular era is the era of the individual knowing subject. The self-conscious human subject becomes the ground and foundation of all knowing, emblematically with Descartes's "I think therefore I am" as the inaugural proposition of modern philosophy. Hegel construed the history of philosophy this way. Texts become artifacts created by finite human subjects. Prior to this modern era and its constitutive Narcissism, the creation of the text was a much more open affair. It was not under the control of a unitary finite subject, the author. Human authors could be channels for revelations from beyond their own ken. Readers could explore texts for revelations from a higher authority than just the author's own intention. Augustine's reading the Bible as meaning infinitely more than its presumable human authors, starting with Moses, were able to comprehend is a good example (*Confessions*, Book X-XIII).

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You quote John 1:14 (“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us”) and claim that this statement “announces a general interpretive principle: the meaning of tradition is experienced only in its application to life in the present.” Could you unpack that a bit?

Meaning in literature and life is much more than just an intellectual sense or dictionary definition. How words mean for us is rooted in our way of existing in the world. They have to take on our own flesh and dwell in and with us in order to realize their full potential to signify. This fact is conveyed poetically by the doctrine of the Incarnation that is clairvoyantly and beautifully expressed in the Gospel of John.

*A Theology of Literature* largely consists of explorations of the revelatory aspects of varying literary genres in the Bible. You look at mythology, epic, history, prophecy, apocalyptic, literature, poetry, and gospel. In the conclusion of your book, you suggest that “[a]ll of these genres, in some manner, are summed up and recapitulated in the Gospel.” This is convenient, since we can't discuss each of these genres in depth. How, in brief, does the Gospel provide such a summation and recapitulation?

The gospel is a prophetic word in which the archetypal myth of Genesis and the epic history of Exodus and the words of the prophets are fulfilled by the apocalyptic event of Christ as Savior. It contains the life history of the Redeemer and includes many of his own sayings uttered with all their poetry (“Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin,” etc.). It brings all these various forms and genres of revelation to a culmination in a word that exceeds all genres, not least history, in order to recast the mold of meaning and the very meaning of “truth.” Its truth is made in being enacted and incorporated by those who believe in it and live it. In the terms of I John 1: 6, these are those who would “do the truth” (ποιουµεν τὴν ἀλήθειαν).

Your book is able to cover significant portions of the Bible despite its brevity, but of course it can't cover everything. The legal materials are one type of literature that doesn't get extended treatment, so I'm curious how you might understand them as revelatory texts within the tradition of the humanities.

The legal materials fundamentally express a relationship with God. They enable Israel to live in fellowship with the Lord and as sanctified by his love. “O Lord how I love thy law!” (Psalm 119: 97) exclaims the psalmist. The legal prescriptions in the Bible reveal God and the way to God in very particular circumstances and social conditions. But the relationship with God that they model is potentially valid in all times and places for those who wish to embrace the law as a gift for living in intimacy with the Almighty.

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**What dangers might accompany the recovery of texts as authoritative sources of truth in our post-secular, postmodern age? How might those dangers, should they exist, be avoided or met?**

The authority of texts read in the perspective of a theology of literature never exempts the readers from responsibility for the implications and consequences that they draw from the text. The authoritativeness of the infinite potential for meaning that is inherent in these texts is in a dimension of depth that underlies all meanings and all being and all creatures. It does not valorize some over others. These determinations are always made by human beings, and they alone bear the responsibility for their choices and acts. The power and authority of the text resides in its infinite potential before the emergence of any divisive distinctions and oppositions. This type of authority of the text does not absolve humans of responsibility. It rather reveals their infinite responsibility for whatever authority they claim or evoke. They give this authority a determinate shape and particular application that is all their own. They are answerable for whether or not their interpretation respects and protects all creatures and creation.

**Questions by Chris Benda, Divinity Librarian, Vanderbilt University**

## An Excerpt from *Postmodernism, Literature, and the Future of Theology*

If the Gospels presented only the objective facts of Jesus's historical existence, they would not be able to say what is most important about him, for that is revealed only by his significance in the lives of the people whom he meets and who believe in him. It is his life-transforming power for the individuals who were changed by their belief in him that is supremely important, indeed miraculous. His followers were given new hope and were empowered to love in previously unattainable ways, ways for which they could not possibly have accounted otherwise. A purely factual account of Jesus's life—one-hundred per cent certain and demonstrated—would never be able to witness to the experience of this sort of power. A historian could, at most, tell us about a man, whereas those who believed in Jesus personally perceived and experienced God. The idea that Jesus was a divine being, the Son of God—how could that ever be an observable fact and be recorded as such? How can such a conviction even be meaningful, except within the context of a personal relationship? If you look, you see a man. And if you insist on looking for objective, empirical proof of his being something else, you will never know what Jesus meant to those who knew him and followed him and loved him and believed in him and found in him their salvation.

To appreciate the Gospels accurately, even just as literature, we need to read them not as transparent to the historical Jesus but as testimonies of faith. This makes it to a large degree futile to inquire: Did it really happen that way? What is being recorded fundamentally is how Jesus was experienced. To understand the Gospels as gospel—as the unique literary form and genre of religious testimony that they are—we need to ask instead: What meaning does that which is recounted have for those who experienced and perhaps still experience it? This is the meaning that can be interpreted and re-experienced as true in the present by readers in all ages, hence also by us still today. The Gospel is based on witness to purportedly historical happenings, yet it is fully unveiled never as naked history but rather always only for those who have made the commitment and decision of faith. Indeed, if humanities texts generally give us history and tradition always mediated by present reality and beliefs, this is acutely true in the case of the Gospels. For intrinsic to the Gospels as a genre is a further purpose beyond simply recording something that happened in the past: they deliver their testimony in order that the reader or hearer of the word of the Gospel might believe in turn and be saved (John 20: 31). Their message is directed towards an actualization of God's saving grace through Jesus in the lives of hearers and readers now, in the present tense of the Gospel as it is proclaimed, even if it is only being read in private to oneself.

If the Gospel is also in some sense a history, it is best understood as a prophetic type of history. For what is at stake is a living of history in the present and in light of a divine revelation of its meaning. Such revelation takes up a point of view outside the sequence of past events, one not attainable from within that series. The Gospels are indeed prophetic in the way that the whole Bible is prophetic, namely, in the sense that by recounting history they reveal something beyond history, what in a certain traditional language of faith can be called eternity. This is something which cannot be grasped as an objective fact in the order of the past or the future: it can only be lived and fathomed in the infinite freedom and openness of the present. As such, it is not fully formed and determinate but is rather in the process of determining all facts in their deepest significances. History in this way opens to "eternity." But this eternal dimension of significance to human life cannot be experienced as anything positively given. It is projective rather than positive, and it claims the whole individual in the intimate sphere of personal experience and decision. The "revelation of Jesus Christ" cannot be approached without such directly personal engagement.

## Praise for *Postmodernism, Literature, and the Future of Theology*

“Well known for his distinguished work on mysticism and the apophatic, in this new monograph William Franke offers a remarkable development in the field of literature and theology. Building on the foundations laid by earlier scholars in both biblical studies and literature, Franke examines different genres in both testaments, from myth, epic, the prophetic, the apocalyptic, and the gospel, to offer a biblical theology that is inherent within the text rather than imposed externally upon it. It is a brilliant example of what Paul Ricoeur once called thinking biblically, and will be a profoundly important book for anyone within the humanities as well as theologians, liturgists, and biblical critics.”

—David Jasper, University of Glasgow

“William Franke’s book demonstrates the variegated way in which the Bible provides ‘a model for humanities texts.’ Not only does he rightly seek to relate the reading of the Bible to other texts in the humanities, but also underlines the fundamental importance which the Bible has had in its contribution to hermeneutics. Historical contextuality, and the way which texts are a means of self-reflection, have been part and parcel of engagement with the Bible down the centuries and are all too easily ignored in modern biblical scholarship.”

—Christopher Rowland, University of Oxford

“This is a brilliant new book by one of the world’s most accomplished scholars in the area of literature and theology. Offering a lucid and compelling account of the nature of revelation, Franke reads a range of biblical texts in ways that are simultaneously thought-provoking, illuminating, readable, and constructive. A Theology of Literature is a wonderful achievement, and certainly worth reading.”

—Mark Knight, Lancaster University

“William Franke views the Bible with a fresh eye. He has the scholar’s learning, the theologian’s quest for revelation, and the poet’s understanding of where language can take us. He writes with extraordinary clarity about complex issues and texts; he gives a new sense of all that the literature of the Bible has in store.”

—Peter S. Hawkins, Yale Divinity School

