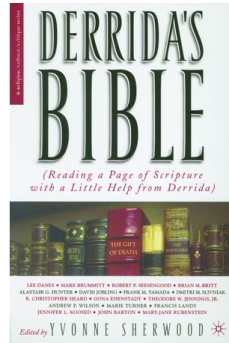


○ REVIEW OF *DERRIDA'S BIBLE (READING A PAGE OF SCRIPTURE WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM DERRIDA)*, EDITED BY YVONNE SHERWOOD

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Charlotte Berkowitz reviews *Derrida's Bible (Reading a Page of Scripture with a Little Help from Derrida)*, edited by Yvonne Sherwood (Palgrave Macmillan Press, 2004).



Derrida's Bible (Reading a Page of Scripture with a Little Help from Derrida), edited by Yvonne Sherwood, like its companion volume *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, edited by Sherwood and Kevin Hart (Routledge, 2005), is an outgrowth of the 2002 SBL-AAR conference *Derrida and Religion*. However, as the title suggests, the chapters that constitute *Derrida's Bible* are less about religion than about biblical text(s). These chapters are well served by Sherwood's introduction, which, with admirable clarity and good humour, expands on the concerns of their authors. These concerns are richly articulated in close, questioning and in some cases, I would suggest, potentially world changing readings of moments in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures that haunt and are interpretively haunted by (the binary logic of) western consciousness. The readings are facilitated by the late Jacques Derrida's meditations on language, writing, letters, the human and the role of death in the human experience, as well as on ethics, responsibility, Marxism and the 'Bible-as-confronted-by-biblical', i.e., as capable of disrupting *from within* its theologically and philosophically ascribed Truths (2). Sherwood writes, '[F]aithfulness-rupture could be taken as the linking theme of... this collection' (3).

Eighteen chapters follow the introduction, subsumed under and / but often exceeding seven section headings. These are 'beginnings'; 'writing, positing, erasing'; 'specters and messiahs'; 'boundaries / hyphens/identity-markers'; 'responsibilities, secrets, gifts'; 'endings'; and 'postscripts'. The faithfulness-rupture theme is introduced early in Lee Danes' Chapter One. Here Danes argues that in keeping with what he, like Derrida, sees as a Hebrew biblical tradition that establishes origins and hence original authority in 'negation and reconstitution', or, the 'repetition of absolute beginning', the Gospel of Mark locates the authority of Jesus in a gap. This gap is a 'secret' that Danes' close reading discovers in the tension between Jesus' negated paternal Jewish genealogy and his birth from the divine impregnation of a human, virgin woman (26).

The very authority of the Gospel, Danes writes, emerges with and from the tension that creates this gap. But then, in language that dismayingly recalls the masculine bias of the logic that troubles Derrida and motivates his early work, Danes forecloses the (secret?) feminine potential within this ‘fertile and virginal space’ to counter the same authority, and with it the authority of the Son who is the same as the Father. For, Danes explains, this space ‘comes to be’ only if the reader ‘authoritatively’ and ‘freely enters and hovers above [it] like the [spirit of] the [male-female] creative God’ of Genesis. ‘[L]oving[ly]’, if authoritatively hovering above this freely entered and linguistically feminised space, the *desiring* reader ‘impregnates’ both it and him- or herself (28, 30). The auto- and homoerotics of this impregnation of self and feminised (impregnated) other by a reader whose identity, irrespective of sex, Danes now codes as masculine (impregnator), brings to be ‘the God-child authority, the resurrected Jesus’ (28). For Danes, the impregnation that leads to this birth points to the foundation of biblical authority and hermeneutics in the golden rule that enjoins love of the neighbor, the other. But for this female reader, the nature of this love is rendered suspect by a narcissism that privileges masculinity, ‘dissemination’, and impregnation – in short, the phallus – over femininity, willingness to yield to the otherness of the other, and the generative capacities of the human maternal body.

If Danes’ chapter begins with such receptivity to a *différance* that it later refuses, the chapters in the second section stay the course. These, by Mark Brummit, Robert P. Seesengood and Brian M. Britt suggest new directions for future biblical scholarship and open the way for new (ly desired) meanings. These new meanings cannot be called ‘absolute’ beginnings. Rather, like Danes’ gap, they emerge from within ancient words. Brummit, for example, reads Jeremiah 36 with *A Taste for the Secret* in which ‘Derrida admits to “an interest in things that [both] irritate the system” and represent “that subterranean region in which the system constitutes itself by repressing what makes it possible”’ (42). Hence, in the prophetic account of the ‘journey’ of a scroll that disturbs the structure of the royal court in Jerusalem as it passes from God’s speech to writing and through destruction to rebirth, Brummit can uncover a tale that suggests that it is less speech than writing and less disclosure than concealment that keeps God’s word(s) alive.

In a similarly deconstructive reading done with Derrida’s *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, Seesengood finds in Paul’s Pastoral letters (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) and the scholarly controversy that surrounds their authorship a corrective to the logic that divides author from reader. Likewise, reading with *The Postcard*, as well as with Derridean works on negative theology, memory, origins and the work of Emmanuel Lévinas, Britt finds in the Hebrew Bible’s paradoxical injunctions to ‘blot out’ and yet ‘remember’ the enemy, Amalek, a writing ‘under erasure’ that anticipates poststructuralist literary theory and postmodern literature (61).

The new is found within the old throughout this collection in biblical moments that are both pregnant with potential meaning and yet virginal (hitherto unknown). One such discovery appears in Alastair Hunter’s historically informed close reading of Genesis 14. By scrutinising Abram’s encounter with ‘The Missing/Mystical Messiah... Melchizedek’, king of Salem, Hunter finds a challenge to not only Christian messianic rhetoric and claims to supersede Judaism, but the messianic structure of all three ‘Abrahamic’ religions (93). Another kind of challenge appears in David Jobling’s controversial analysis of the injustice that Jobling perceives as characteristic of contemporary Israeli policy vis-a-vis the Palestinian population. Derrida’s critique, in *Specters of Marxism*, of Marxist ‘messianic eschatology’ as well as the later Marx’s attempt to ‘cut... loose from’ the memory of the violent injustices of the communist past facilitates Jobling’s

reading Israeli injustice and its accompanying violence as stemming from ‘destructive’ Jewish and Christian messianism (103, 106, 110). This destructive messianism is a Derridean ‘ghost’ of ‘the day of justice’ that ‘haunts human history’ and mutually upholds a biblically encouraged amnesia concerning the unjust ‘appropriation of Jerusalem’ by David, another prototypical messianic King (102, 110).

In Frank M. Yamada’s analysis of the ‘Shibboleth’ episode in Judges 12, violence makes / marks cultural identity and difference. This violence begins in the self-division of language (shibboleth / sibboleth), whose internalisation results in self-estrangement, or, in Derrida’s terms, ‘exile’. Nonetheless, like the Jordan river, language affords ‘crossing over places’, ‘space[s]-between’ words, where, in the cultural theorist Homi Bhabha’s terms, a ‘hybrid’ identity can come to be (121, 131). The challenge of linguistic identity likewise reverberates throughout Dimitri Sliwniak’s reading of the book of Esther, which in turn provides a deconstructive-reconstructive ground for rethinking contemporary ‘Jewish difference/identity’ (144). Reading with Derrida’s *The Gift of Death* and guided by Islamic, Christian and Jewish interpretive traditions that prize ‘the rejection of the benefits [of] the gift of another’s death’, R. Christopher Heard discovers in Abraham’s expulsion of Ishmael and near sacrifice of Isaac the potential for a new guiding ethic of responsibility, new Jewish, Islamic and Christian identities (161). The question of responsibility is likewise taken up in Oona Eisenstadt’s well wrought argument that in Chapter 3 of *The Gift of Death*, Derrida works under the secret influence of Lévinas to shift Keirkegaardian (God-focused) thought on the meaning of Abraham’s actions in Genesis 22 into a Lévinasian (ethically oriented) mode and hence extend to every human being the chance / choice to be a messiah, a comforter of others.

Responsibility to others, the role of the reader in choosing / determining meaning, justice and the potential within the Bible to facilitate reconceptions of the human, the Godly and the messianic; all these resonate throughout the final chapters of this collection. For example, Marie Turner’s important reconsideration of The Wisdom of Solomon suggests, as Derrida asserts in *The Gift of Death*, that death is integral to God’s creation and not the fault of the devil and those others to whom a divisive theology ascribes the devil’s work. Likewise, Francis Landy’s reading of Qohelet 12: 1-7, done with Derrida’s *Archive Fever* and midrashic texts (*Lamentations Rabbah*), discovers a world of loss whose only hope is in the feminine, in a maternal voice that warns against investing hope in ‘any messianicity’ (243).

For Sherwood, reading Genesis 21 and 22 (the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael and the binding of Isaac and subsequent death of his mother, Sarah), such a voice emanates from the Hebrew narrative. For, in connecting these stories with the letter *waw*, the letter of conjunction (‘and’), contradiction (‘but’) and temporal conversion, the narrative calls into question the masculinist / messianic theologies that it has seemed to uphold. In my own work, the *waw* emerges as a synecdoche of the Torah, which venerable tradition allies with Wisdom and in which I find linguistic ways of return from exile that are grounded in Desire for the prelinguistic experience of interconnection with all life through the mother (Berkowitz 2005). Therefore, I find Sherwood’s chapter especially compelling. But, as I hope the above makes clear, hers is just one of many provocative pieces in this collection that gesture, with help from Derrida, toward ‘an Other Word’, another heterogeneously created world (285).

REFERENCES

Berkowitz, Charlotte. 2005. “Tree of Letters,” Tree of Life: How a Letter of the Torah Can Transform (the Human Being Made in) the Image of God’. *The European Legacy* 10 (7): 703–716.