

○ EDITORIAL

A literary critic who went into hiding during Stalin's 'iron broom' years, an award-winning writer of some stunning African-American novels, the story of a daughter-in-law who seduces her father-in-law, and a story of passionate friendship between two men – all these topics and more are covered in this issue of *The Bible and Critical Theory*. If you have not guessed the names lurking behind the topics, then they are, in order, Mikhail Bakhtin, Toni Morrison, Tamar in Genesis 38, and David and Jonathan in 1-2 Samuel. Deeply in the spirit of the journal – which seeks to bring together critical theory and biblical studies – most of the essays in this issue focus on the impact on biblical criticism of Mikhail Bakhtin's work. This reclusive and evasive Russian literary critic, who dodged the heavy blanket of censorship in the Soviet Union under Stalin, has emerged posthumously as a major figure in contemporary thought. Add to that the curious problem that we are not entirely sure of what Bakhtin precisely did write, since the suspicion remains that some of his work has turned up under the names of his friends, and we have a fascinating character indeed. Bakhtin, however, has also become increasingly important in biblical studies, as a series of sessions at the US meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature over the last few years indicates. In this issue we have four essays on Bakhtin and biblical studies, those by Christine Mitchell, Barbara Green, Bula Maddison and Judy Fentress-Williams.

However, so that he won't be left hanging like an afterthought at the end of my editorial, let me begin with a few comments on the one essay that is not about Bakhtin – Anthony Heacock's assessment of the story of David and Jonathan in 1-2 Samuel in the Hebrew Bible. The key issue for Heacock is how the story squares up in light of the development of the history of sexuality, especially the point that the categories 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' are relatively recent developments. They designate what passes for sexual identity based on a binary opposition that is an invention of our own recent past. That means, for Heacock, that to say the story of David and Jonathan is one of a homosexual relationship is simply a category mistake. Through a careful assessment of the texts and the positions taken on it, he prefers to read the story as one of male bonding, where one man was top dog and other bottom dog, so to speak.

The other four papers are about Bakhtin, and each of them sparkles in its own way. Christine Mitchell draws upon Bakhtin's notion of dialogism to reconfigure the definition of genre. For Bakhtin, a crucial contrast was between *monologic* and *dialogic* narrative. As the words suggest, whereas monologic narrative (and indeed truth) proceeds as though there were one dominant voice, dialogic narrative has at least two and usually many more. He refers not merely to the explicit dialogue between characters, but more to the quietly insistent 'voice' or indeed 'voices' that pick at and undermine the dominant one in a text. Bakhtin, however, goes further, arguing that meaning is generated through dialogism, and that language itself is inescapably dialogic and inter-related. Mitchell takes up this notion of dialogism to argue that genre is not so much monologic as dialogic: any genre is, if you like, a contested site. She argues that the two features of such a dialogic understanding of genre are power (especially via Foucault and his dispersed patterns of power) and eros (as both a productive act and as the desire for what is lacking). It is a finely argued essay that carves out some new directions for thinking about biblical genres.

Barbara Green's essay follows, giving us a different reading of Jonathan than that of Anthony Heacock. Green's argument, characterised by careful attention to word and sentence structure,

especially in 1 Samuel 20, also makes use of Bakhtin's idea of dialogism. In her hands it becomes the highly interactive process whereby each one's position is modified, shaped and reconstructed by interaction with another's. The interaction in question is that of David and Jonathan. In what she calls the 'education' of Jonathan, she traces how he begins by asserting that King Saul has no intention of killing David, for Saul would have told Jonathan so (1 Samuel 20:2). However, after a long interaction with David and then Saul, Jonathan's position moves to acknowledge that there is indeed deep enmity, so much so that 'Yahweh shall be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants, forever' (1 Samuel 21:1 (English translation 20:42)).

Dialogism turns up again in Judy Fentress-Williams' essay on the story of Tamar in Genesis 38. For any linear or monologic reading of the last chapters of Genesis, the 38th chapter is a disruption: with its story of the multiply-widowed Tamar disguising herself as a prostitute and enticing her father-in-law, Judah, to have sex with her and then bear children from the encounter, it seems to have little to do with the story of Joseph that surrounds it. Rather than a disruption, Fentress-Williams argues that Genesis 38 forms a dialogue with the chapters that surround it, so much so that it may be read as a guide to that larger story. It is a story within a story, one that comments and recasts the other story. She also makes use of Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope, or 'time-space', which she takes, quoting Bakhtin, as an 'organising centre', where the 'knots of the narrative are tied and untied'. This is precisely how she sees Genesis 38, an organising centre that is intimately engaged with the story in which it is embedded. As to how she does so, you will need to read the essay for yourself.

Bula Maddison's stunning essay on Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*, and its patterns of biblical allusion also make use of Bakhtin's notions of chronotope and dialogism. For Maddison, this novel, with its evocation of the slave narrative and the African spirit world, engages dialogically with the Bible, not merely for the sake of drawing upon the Bible for its various images, but especially for the sake of rewriting the Bible itself. She is particularly interested in the way it rewrites biblical apocalyptic. What we have here is double-voiced discourse in which one language – that of the novel – speaks in another – the Bible's. As far as the chronotope is concerned, the space-time intersection shows up in Morrison's use of 'rememory': rather than a linear notion of time, for Morrison the present and future are already unfolding in the past. Or rather, time mutates into space, for the idea of rememory operates within a cycle that is distinctly spatial.

There is much to chew on in these essays, at least intellectually. And then there are the book reviews, twelve in all, ranging from scandal to zombies, symbolism to secularism, to which registered members of the Society of biblical Literature have access. If you are a member and do not yet have access, please contact Sarah Cannon at Sarah.Cannon@lib.monash.edu.au.

This issue of *The Bible and Critical Theory* is unique in two respects. Firstly, apart from one essay, it is a joint publication with *Semeia Studies*, the exploratory book series of the Society of Biblical Literature. Four of the essays in this issue – those by Christine Mitchell, Barbara Green, Bula Maddison and Judy Fentress-Williams – will also appear later this year in a volume called *Bakhtin and Genre Theory in Biblical Studies* to be published by the Society of Biblical Literature. It is a partnership we hope to continue: print for the book, which will have a few more essays in addition to the ones published here, and e-publishing for the journal.

Secondly, this is my penultimate issue of *The Bible and Critical Theory* as managing editor. At the beginning of 2008, Julie Kelso will take the helm and seek to steer the journal on to a new phase. After more than three years (not counting the time it took to set up the journal), I feel I have done what I can, since I am far happier and, I think, better at setting things up than running them. Julie brings an energy and enthusiasm for the journal, along with a critical eye that will see it move on from the solid basis that it now has. I am sure the readers of the journal, who now appear at nearly all corners of the globe, will welcome Julie in this role.

Roland Boer, Editor, March 2007