

Review of Kirsten Nielsen, ed., *Receptions and Transformations of the Bible. Religion and Normativity 2*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2009.

Eric Repphun, University of Otago

*Receptions and Transformations of the Bible* is the second in a series of three volumes to come out of a three-year co-operative project within the Faculty of Theology at Aarhus University addressing the broad theme of “Religion and Normativity”. It is an anthology of short essays exploring the interrelated themes of biblical authority and the constant re-negotiation of both what the Bible *is* and what it *means*. As set out in Kirsten Nielsen’s introduction, the book addresses a series of questions that are crucial for anyone who seeks to understand the changing religious landscape of contemporary Europe:

As a canon the Bible has a normative function in Christianity, just as the written and oral Torah is normative for Jewish communities. But it is not only in religious practice that the Bible plays an important role. It is reflected in various ways in historical and modern literature and in philosophical thought on the nature of life. How then can the Bible be understood as ‘normative’ today? Is it still normative as a historical account? Is its worldview in any sense normative? ... Is the Bible in a sense ‘normative’ when used as a source of inspiration for a more authentic life? (p. 10)

The book is divided into three roughly equal parts, each with an introduction under the modest rubric of “general reflections”. The first part, “Receptions and transformation of the Bible in literature”, is the strongest and most cohesive of the three sections. David Bugge’s introduction develops an intriguing typology for classifying literary reception that serves as a broader context in which to read the individual essays. The first, Kirsten M. Andersen’s “Necessary Fiction”, offers a detailed analysis of the novel *Doré’s Bible*, by Sweden’s Torgny Lindgren. Lindgren, she argues, employs a “dialectic of irony” in his tale of a young man entirely formed by Gustave Doré’s illustrated edition of the Bible. The novel’s narrator sums up what is in a sense the dominating theme of the present collection: “Without his Bible I would have been someone else” (p. 37). Laura Feldt’s “Fantasising the Fall” is, arguably, the best single essay in the collection, taking on Philip Pullman’s popular and influential trilogy of fantasy novels, *His Dark Materials*. Though there have been many pages written about Pullman’s representation of Christianity, Feldt manages to say something new and compelling here; she argues that Pullman’s masterpiece is not, as so many others have claimed, anti-Christian. She does a particularly good job of placing *His Dark Materials* into the long history of interconnected receptions of the biblical narrative of the Fall:

[T]he anthropological vision put forward in *His Dark Materials* seems to correspond more closely to the Old Testament story of the Fall, as we understand it today, than to [the] Church’s version of the story as presented in the trilogy ... Rather than opposing religion as such, *His Dark Materials* attacks authority-bound religions and ideologies and argues instead – in accordance with contemporary transformations of the religious landscape – in favour of self- or individually-based religions. (p. 60)

The next article broadens the scope of analysis considerably as David Bugge takes on the novelist Milan Kundera’s writings about writing. Bugge argues that there exists “a striking parallel between the Christian Gospel and Milan Kundera’s meta-literary reflections on the art of the novel ... [W]hen Kundera states that the novel is ‘the imaginary paradise of individuals,’ one might ask if this ‘paradise’ is so different after all that from that of Christianity” (p. 65). Kundera, in this way not unlike Pullman, “frames his theory of the novel in explicit opposition to any sort of religion” (p. 65), but Bugge argues that he nonetheless remains indebted to the Christian vision of paradise, for centuries the authoritative picture of the afterlife in the European imagination. In the section’s final essay, Jakob Nissen offers “a minister’s reflections” of the works of Martin A. Hansen, a Danish writer who in later life converted to Christianity and sought “to reconcile Christianity and

modernism" (p. 78). Much to his benefit, Nissen treats this single instance of reception as part of a long and highly complex historical process that has resonances far outside of its original Jewish and Christian contexts.

The second section, "Receptions and transformations of the Bible in philosophy", takes a rather different approach. In her introductory essay, Marie Vejrup Nielsen wrestles with the ambiguous place of the Bible in contemporary Europe, where it retains an undeniably normative status but at the same time finds its authority "constantly being challenged from a variety of angles" (p. 90). In the first essay, Iben Damgaard discusses Søren Kierkegaard as a reader of the story of Job. For Damgaard, Kierkegaard advocates a practice of reading in which the reader is "expected to transform the text into action" (p. 101). Damgaard further expands the territory of reception as he explores how Kierkegaard incorporated his vision of reading into his enigmatic methods of indirect communication:

Through a rich variety of literary devices and perspectives Kierkegaard attempts to produce an alienating distance to the biblical text that forces us to see it anew on the one hand, and proximity and contemporaneity with the biblical text on the other since we are constantly encouraged to ask ourselves how we would react if our existence lay like broken pottery around us. (p. 105)

The volume takes yet another direction when Maria Louise Odgaard Møller traces the various transformations of Jesus in the sermons and homiletics of the theologian and philosopher Knud Ejler Løgstrup (1905-1981), in Møller's assessment "one of the twentieth century's greatest Danish thinkers" (p. 106). Løgstrup's Jesus is wholly rooted in and dependent upon his humanity, a Jesus who reveals God to humanity only "by living completely in mercy" (p. 109). This picture of Jesus, Møller argues, especially in contrast to the one presented by Paul Ricoeur, is a *reduction* of Jesus that ignores the divinity upon which so many orthodox Christian interpretations rely. Marie Vejrup Nielsen finishes the section with another of the collection's standout essays, a refreshingly subtle and reasoned study of the use of biblical names and narratives in the work of populist evolutionary biologists E. O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins, two of religion's most outspoken contemporary critics. There is no denying the importance of teasing out the long and at times exceedingly subtle traces of the biblical literature even in those works that are on the surface openly hostile to Christianity.

The final and, frankly, weakest section of the book, "Receptions and transformations of the Bible in religious communities", takes a more explicitly theological turn. Marianne Schleicher both introduces the section and provides its strongest essay. Taking a welcome step away from Christianity, she focuses on Jewish receptions of the Torah as both scripture and as a sacred artefact. In such "artefactual use of scripture", content takes a back seat to the Torah's physicality, which points towards something interesting: reception is not always a matter of narrative or symbology, but is also revealed in the ways a physical object is treated and understood by a community. Johannes Nissen examines the "theology of scriptural performance", which theorises the relationship of the reader to the text in Christianity as one of *conversation*. Using language that almost precisely echoes Iben Damgaard's piece on Kierkegaard, Nissen argues, "to interpret a text is to put it to work, to perform it in a way that is self-involving so that our interpretation involves our own commitments and risks" (160). Anthology editor Kirsten Nielsen finishes out the volume with an intriguing study of contemporary hymns. Writing of the Danish Lutheran Church's newest hymnal (authorised by the Queen in 2002), Nielsen argues that the hymnal both reinforces and challenges the Bible's complex position of authority within the gathered community.

One of the undeniable pleasures of reading *Receptions and Transformations of the Bible* is delving into cultural territory that some readers will find unfamiliar. Though many readers will be familiar with Søren Kierkegaard, who makes an almost obligatory appearance in these pages, for many this will be the first encounter with figures such as the country priest Løgstrup or texts such as the Danish Lutheran hymnal. For the most part, these essays are compelling if unspectacular demonstrations of both the depth and the breadth of the field that is often called "reception

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history". If anything, we can perhaps take the authors and the editor to task for being too abrupt, too matter-of-fact; the works here are short and very much to the point. While some of the prose might be a bit staid, even lifeless, there is also a refreshing lack of the "unintelligible word salad" (to borrow a phrase from Bill Cooke) that plagues so much contemporary academic writing. On a final note, perhaps the greatest compliment we can pay this volume is to note that most of these authors wear their theological clothes lightly, allowing scholarship, rather than apologetics, to win the day.