

DONALD L. TURNER
Nashville State Community College

DERRIDA'S BIBLE

A profile of *Derrida's Bible: Reading a Page of Scripture with a Little Help from Derrida*. Edited and with an introduction by Yvonne Sherwood. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. xv + 323 pp. \$79.00 (hardcover); \$24.95 (paper). ISBN: 140396663X.

This collection contains twenty articles, most of which, as the title implies, apply Derridean strategies and themes to biblical texts. Some devote more attention to Derrida, others to scripture, but all bring Derrida and the bible together in some way. Moreover, the collection engages a range of disciplines, including scriptural exegesis and poststructuralist hermeneutics, but also linguistics, literary criticism, ethics, and cultural and political theory.

In the introductory chapter, Lee Danes juxtaposes the two conflicting accounts of Jesus's origin in *Matthew*: the human genealogy through Joseph, David, and Abraham, and the derivation from Holy Spirit via the Virgin Birth. With scattered references to Derrida's later works, Danes links this coincidence of opposites to a vision of scriptural hermeneutics as both historically grounded and ultimately singular, a vision in which readers must not only recall and "authoritatively cite" biblical texts, but also "rewrite, recontextualize ... exceed, transform, subvert, [and] radicalize" them (28).

Three articles on linguistic issues comprise the second section. Mark Brummitt describes a story in *Jeremiah* about a prophetic scroll that proves troublesome (*Jeremiah* 36) to the Hebrew clerical bureaucracy. This scene illustrates "a system, set up in response to the word of Yhwh ... [that] cannot accommodate an excess such as the coming of the word of Yhwh," (42) and Brummitt links it with Derrida's description of "economy" and "the gift" — a relationship in which "the system constitutes itself by repressing what makes it possible, which is not systematic" (42). Brummit envisions freedom in scriptural hermeneutics and sees writing as fundamentally involving hospitality toward the Other.

Robert Seesengood's piece draws parallels between Derrida's reflections on writing in *The Post Card* (specifically his discussion of the ways that "the post" threatens both to expose and to misdirect or lose individual compositions) and the situation of biblical critics' attempts to ascertain the authorship of the Pastoral Epistles. Rather than attempt to gain such certainty, Seesengood marshals this scholastic failure to support a vision of the process by which the critical reader of

scripture becomes, through interpretative engagement, the “author” of the text she reads.

Brian Britt brings together the biblical story of the curse against Amalek (*Exodus* and *Deuteronomy*) and Derrida’s writings on negative theology, to illuminate the philosophical implications of ancient Hebrew “cursing” and provide cultural and historical context for poststructuralist theological discourse (74). Via discussions of Derrida, Heidegger, and Levinas, Britt elucidates the ways that biblical and poststructuralist discourses both link writing with ontology.

A pair of essays follows under the heading “specters and messiahs.” Alastair Hunter traces Derridean themes at work in references to the biblical character of Melchizedek (especially in *Genesis* 14 and *Psalm* 110), characterizing the Tanakh’s references to this character as “paradigm cases of the phenomenon of *aporia*,” in their being “violent” and “fleeting” events that “tantalize more than they inform” (86).

David Jobling’s piece begins by summarizing Derrida’s description in *Spectres of Marx* of the challenge posed to Marxist “orthodoxy” by Marxism’s uniquely “messianic” spirit—which for Derrida means an ideal future “day of justice” that is never fully realizable in history. Similarly, challenging Derrida in the spirit of his own discourse, Jobling maintains that a parenthetical aside in the body of *Spectres* can be read as the crucial section, speculating about why Derrida chose to restrict these biblical themes to parentheses.

The fourth section contains a pair of articles about identities and the boundaries between them. Bringing together Derrida’s *Monolinguisim of the Other* and the Book of *Judges*, Frank Yamada’s article describes the biblical “shibboleth” incident as symbolizing the “double-edged” nature of language, which can mark both assimilation and exclusion, establishing identity or condemning the Other. It closes with reflections on the fractured and hybridized nature of cultural identity.

Dmitri Slivniak’s piece proposes two interpretations of the Book of *Esther*. The first, her “constructive” interpretation, distinguishes the Jewish characters, who act wisely, from the Gentiles, who act foolishly. The second reading “deconstructs” the first by showing how the actions of a central Jewish character qualify as extremely “foolish”—according to the text’s own standards, and at a time when Jewish identity is a central element of the plot. The juxtaposition, she maintains, shows “how traditional Jewish identity is constructed and already deconstructs itself,” and she closes by suggesting ways this analysis can provide contemporary Jews facing acculturation and secularization with opportunities to creatively “reconstruct” their Jewish identities (137, 144).

The fifth, and broadest, section is titled “responsibilities, secrets, gifts” and deals primarily with ethical questions and the theme of death. Using the language of

Derrida's *The Gift of Death*, R. Christopher Heard's piece proposes a novel interpretation of the relationship between Abraham, Isaac, and Ishmael in *Genesis* 21 and 22. In contrast with Derrida, Kierkegaard, etc., who interpret Abraham's faith as the key to this text, Heard focuses on the actions and motivations of Ishmael and Isaac, showing how both brothers can be seen as "rejecting the benefits that might otherwise accrue from accepting the gift of another's death" (161). He closes with speculations about how this kind of generosity could affect military conflicts, pointing to the citizenry's ability to choose to forgo the profits of war, sacrificing their own interests by refusing to benefit from the "gift of death" offered by soldiers on both sides.

Oona Eisenstadt's piece contests Derrida's comparisons in *The Gift of Death* between Abraham and Melville's Bartleby as characters who reject impartial law, indicating instead a "preference" for the singular other. Eisenstadt presents Bartleby as "an embodiment of the law's refusal to prefer" (176).¹ For Eisenstadt, Bartleby's death, which follows his rejection of all preference, signifies the fact that ethical life requires actively providing comfort to individual others, while remaining aware of what Eisenstadt calls "the terrible secret of responsibility" — that such "preference" requires some sacrifice with regard to other Others, since focus in one direction forecloses attention to others (170).

Theodore Jennings's piece looks to Derrida's writings on "justice" for tools to help clarify and elaborate ethical concerns in Pauline texts. Jennings means to show that Derrida and Paul are after similar goals, by, for example, comparing the Pauline connection between "justice" and "grace" with Derrida's notion of "the gift." Jennings explores the tension in both writers between the notions of "grace" and "gift" on one hand and "law" and "works" on the other.

Andrew Wilson's article employs thoughts from Derrida's *The Gift of Death* (the *mysterium tremendum*) and *The Post Card* (the "dead letter office") in a novel reading of the closing scene in *Mark* — The Empty Tomb. Contrasting his approach with that of scholars who supply some "presence" to fill the "absence," Wilson prefers preserving the emptiness of the tomb "as a scandalous ambiguity" and a symbol of "radical openness" to that which cannot be reduced to language (201, 207).

In a "deconstructive reading" of the *Song of Solomon*, Marie Turner's piece enlists overlooked themes to challenge the text's apparent exoneration of God from responsibility for death and its dualistic vision, which presents a soul "weighted down" by the body. Drawing from Derridean texts that he sees as celebrating life while rejecting the traditional conception of immortality, Turner sketches a "theology of creation" that is also a "theology of death and decay," locating God in all of creation, including the process of death (225).

¹ When asked to perform various tasks, Melville's Bartleby famously responds, "I would prefer not to." Bartleby eventually refrains from all action and is led to prison, where he dies of starvation.

Grounded in reflections on Derrida's descriptions in *Archive Fever* of memory, the "death drive," and "messianicity," Francis Landy's article—the first of three pieces in a section called "endings"—details manifestations of feminine power in *Qohelet* (*Ecclesiastes*) 12, a text that is arguably overtly misogynistic (234). Landy's tone is koan-esque—for example, he ends many paragraphs with statements such as "The Messiah never comes and is always here" (233) and "Creation is uncreation, cosmos is anti-cosmos" (238). This method allows him to reflect on a variety of topics, such as the powerful imagery of blood, the "injustice of history," and the psychoanalysis of God.

Jennifer Koosed's article launches from reflections on Derrida's discussion of textuality and signification from *Limited, Inc.*, to show how the theme of death disturbs the text's structure, "disrupting meaning and interpretation" (253). Relating bodily death and decay to textual deconstruction and *differance*, Koosed describes the book's structural incoherence as a "decomposition" that replicates "the condition of all language and the fate of all bodies" (255). She closes, waxing Levinasian, with comments on how death, textual and bodily, signals radical alterity and "opens us ... to the responsibility that the face of the other demands" (257).

In contrast with much biblical commentary, including some of Derrida's, Sherwood's piece places Sarah's death at the center of *Genesis* 22 and 23, rather than viewing it as a mere supplement to the crucial event of Isaac's sacrifice. Broad in scope, it illustrates elements of Sarah's story that represent the process of deconstruction, the genesis of religion and ethics, the existence of Israel in particular, and the human condition in general.

In the first of two postscripts, Mary-Jane Rubenstein notes the collection's negligence with regard to the important Derridean theme of forgiveness, suggesting that this points to the fact that these essays perform acts of "unforgivable" transgression—heterodox and dangerous gestures of "disciplinary promiscuity" that should offend both traditional biblical scholars and "Derridean orthodoxy" (297). In the second, John Barton describes the way that Derridean or postmodern readings of texts are simultaneously playful and serious—concerned with marginality and triviality, without trivializing the text or the interpretative process—and he thanks such strategies for helping traditional biblical criticism see facets of scriptural texts that they might otherwise overlook.

This collection's greatest appeal will be among readers already familiar with both biblical texts and Derrida's philosophy (especially his later work, which, like this collection, is heavily inspired by Levinas, whose voice insistently prods us toward the intersection of ethics and religion).² Without both, many readers may require

² Prospective readers should note that the subtitle describes the contents much more directly than the main title; this is not, primarily, a book about biblical and religious themes in Derrida's texts, or Derrida's interpretation of scripture, but a book about

additional reading to fully appreciate some of the connections outlined here. For readers more familiar with Derrida's philosophy than they are with the bible, the collection offers a wide range of attempts to put Derridean strategies and themes to work in a new arena—one that might initially be seen as inhospitable to such treatment. These essays also offer students of the bible possible new ways to approach their texts, and while readers of certain temperaments might find some of these blatantly unorthodox interpretations refreshing while others might find them impudent, both should find them provocative. Beyond this appeal to various specialists, there is also something here for readers without background in either area, but with interests in literary theory, cultural and political philosophy, or ethics. I think that Derrida, as a writer whose work also spans such broad terrain, would have been proud to have inspired this collection.

DONALD L. TURNER received his doctorate from the Denver University / Iliff School of Theology Joint Program in 2005. He teaches philosophy and religious studies at Nasvhille State Community College.

©2006 Donald L. Turner. All rights reserved.

Turner, Donald L. "Derrida's Bible." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 7. no. 2. (Spring 2006): 91-95.

reading biblical texts in ways inspired Derrida's reading of texts. Indeed, some of the most interesting points in the collection occur when the contributors note ways that biblical texts contain the seeds for readings that undermine the established or conventional interpretation—the second movement of the deconstructive "double reading" (e.g., the articles by Seesengood, Slivniak, Heard, Turner, Landy, and Koosed). For two good secondary sources on religious themes in Derrida's philosophy, the interested reader is pointed to *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion*, by John Caputo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) and *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, by Yvone Sherwood (New York: Routledge: 2004).