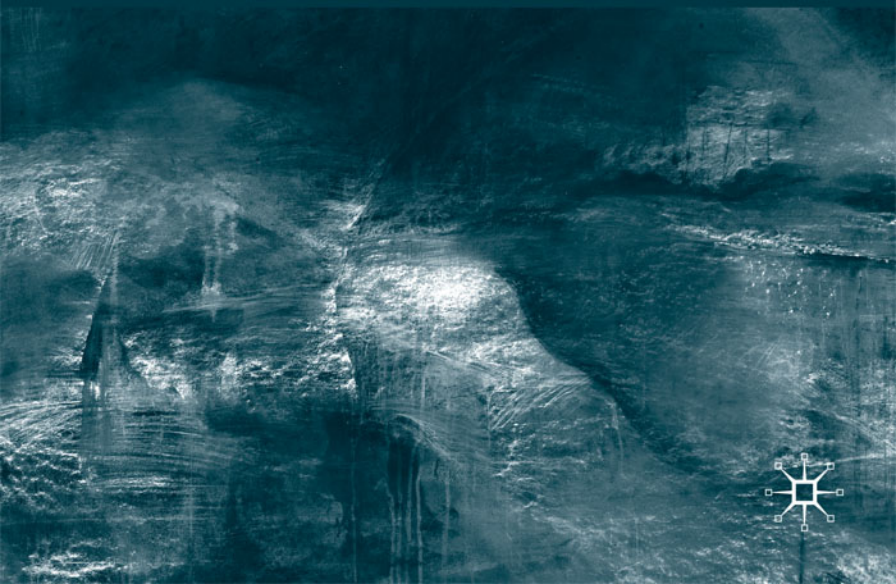
SUBVERTING SCRIPTURES

Critical Reflections on the Use of the Bible

EDITED BY BETH HAWKINS BENEDIX



Subverting Scriptures

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Reluctant Theologians: Franz Kafka, Paul Celan, Edmond Jabès, Studies in Religion and Literature, ed. John Mahoney (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003).

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Printed in the United States of America.

For my sons, Campbell and Tobey,
who subvert daily, in the most delightful ways.

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Contents

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Every written work is always collaborative. It is with gratefulness that I have learned from the contributors to this collection that writing can also be a true dialogue. To them, my deepest thanks for their patience, energy, thoughtfulness, collegiality, and commitment to this project. And for this dialogue . . . may it ever continue. The original spark of inspiration for this collection came as I set about creating a syllabus for a course in biblical literature. To my students at DePauw University who took this course (in its first and subsequent incarnations), I owe a special debt. Thank you for so graciously allowing me to test out my half-baked ideas and for helping me to shape them more fully. To Josh Goldberg, who painted the stunning image—*Endlosung*—that graces the cover of this volume: no other image could possibly fit better or mean more. To my husband and best friend, Jim: this, like so much else, could not have happened without you.

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Introduction

"The Bible is *back*!" Jacques Berlinerblau announces in his recent tour-de-force *Thumpin' It: The Use and Abuse of the Bible in Today's Presidential Politics*.[1] However we may greet this news—with celebration or horror—Berlinerblau describes an indisputable reality: the Bible is enjoying a resurgence of, well, biblical proportion in the public arena. And, as Berlinerblau also demonstrates, conservatives and liberals point to the Bible (often to the very same verses) to provide grounding for positions that may be vehemently opposed to each other. In his inaugural address, Barack Obama gestures no less than three times to the vague biblical worldview to which the majority of U.S. citizens subscribe.[2] As he lambastes the Bush administration (an administration that articulated its mission in blatantly biblical terms), he soberly informs his audience, "We remain a young nation, but in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things. The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness." He concludes with the very phrase that Bush made famous—and infamous—in the wake of September 11: "God bless you. And God bless the United States of America."

In the most transparent way, Obama's choice to turn to scripture (i.e., the Bible) in the moment that he pledges to undo what has taken place (largely) in the name of scripture illustrates the malleability of biblical texts to serve and undercut all manner of political platforms. But, even more critical, his choice demonstrates the expectation that the Bible can and should be a (if not *the*) source that will aid him in repairing the damage of the Bush administration. This expectation deserves reflection, if only because it places in such sharp relief the ways in which the Bible has permeated the world stage. Obama's choice reminds us that public gestures to the Bible are no longer (and perhaps never were) empty: these gestures are *always* political. And the stakes have become quite high.

The essays in this collection examine a range of biblical gestures and their attendant political concerns. As a group, we explore this basic set of questions: what are writers *doing* when they point to the Bible in their work? Which biblical texts, specifically, are they pointing to? Why *these* biblical texts? What is the relationship, in other words, between biblical text and political message for these writers? For the sake of clarity, it's possible to suggest that there are two basic "camps" that our writers fall into: one group tends to look at the Bible from a vantage point of nostalgia, as a source to which we might turn (or return) for guidance and instruction. The other group tends to look at the Bible with suspicion and distrust, seeing in it the seeds for widespread injustice. This framework is too simple, though; it fails to account for the ways in which the two paths actually converge and inform one another. Because what links these projects together is their conviction that *the world is broken*, that *it is in need of repair*. For all of these writers, the biblical texts they reference are central to the kind of change—repair—they advocate.

All of the writers highlighted in these essays perform the inherently political work of subversion. Some argue that a given biblical text (or set of texts) provides a key to subverting a set of undesired, unethical, unjust, or downright murderous conditions. Others argue that various biblical texts or narratives must themselves be subverted, as they are responsible for creating these conditions in the first place. All treat the Bible absolutely seriously (if some more humorously than others) as a text that needs to be reckoned and wrestled with. All agree that these stories mandate a kind of action, for good or for ill. Whether they ultimately retrieve the Bible (or pieces of the Bible) as a potential source of reform or denounce it as antithetical to reform, these writers are engaged in what we might call *revaluation*. Nietzsche gives us this term, naming his own full-scale analysis of Western morality the "revaluation of all values."[3] In this, his "formula for an act of supreme self-examination on the part of humanity," he contends that we will know for the first time "great politics," largely by coming to recognize that "all power structures of the old society . . . are based on lies."[4] While many of the writers highlighted in this collection would take issue with the basic antagonism and hostility that Nietzsche displays toward a religion-based morality, many also would second his charge to us to look at our values critically, with the awareness that they are man-made and historically contingent. The Bible, for these writers, marks a most productive and necessary site for revaluation; it is here, they tell us, that we need to look most critically. The essays are divided into four parts, which build on one another to illustrate

the ambiguous, ambivalent, and interdependent relationship between the two basic approaches highlighted above. Taken as a whole, these essays should demonstrate that biblical subversion is a messy business, motivated by a set of conflicting and equally powerful impulses.

The first part, "Setting the Stage," attempts to define subversive scripture. Using Johnny Cash's little known novel *Man in White* as his point of departure, Jay Twomey asks a basic question: what constitutes a biblical rewrite? He points to the essentially social function of literature as a "critical, counterideological tool" and argues that, in this light, "biblical rewriting is always subversive, ironic or deconstructive—whatever the author's intentions." Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg contrasts various "literal" and "literary" rewritings of the story of Noah in her chapter. Jumping into the contemporary debate between science and religion, she shows how important "getting the story right" is for creationists; no less important is it for those who approach the story from a literary perspective. In the course of taking up an explicit question—how do we distinguish between the literal and the literary?—Cushing Stahlberg introduces and explains the practice of rabbinic *midrash* (the practice of interpreting and giving voice to the "gaps" or "spaces" in biblical texts).

It is through this lens that we can understand "literary midrash"—the term we might use to describe what all the writers highlighted in these essays are doing. Like the rabbis, these writers use the gaps or spaces—the silences—in the biblical texts as their point of departure. Unlike the rabbis, whose biblical interrogations are always driven by the desire to uncover the mind of God in the text, these writers look at the biblical text as a disparate literary work that reveals, instead, the mind of the authors who created it, and that reflects the cultural conditions, biases, and values of the authors' time. For some of the writers we will encounter, God (or a belief in the possibility of transcendent value) is still present in the text, but this presence is mediated or refracted, through this filter. For others, this presence becomes something of a nonissue; what is more important for them is considering how the biblical authors depict God and how this depiction informs a set of values that are then *called* transcendent. In this way, literary midrash occupies the liminal space between belief and nonbelief, between the religious and the altogether secular.

The second part, "Between Speech and Silence," treats two authors who write in the shadow of the Holocaust: Elie Wiesel and Paul Celan. From this vantage point, John K. Roth and John Felstiner argue, they (re)turn to the Bible to recover it, to disentangle it from its complicity (direct and indirect) in the Nazi genocide. In his meditation on

Wiesel, Roth describes the landscape and theological challenge of the space both Wiesel and Celan occupy: "In a Holocaust universe, a God who is doing the best God can is either not as good as was thought or scarcely deserving of trust. What has to be asked religiously is whether we should settle for an innocent but ineffectual God or whether we must run the risk of relating to a God who is really Master of the Universe but less than perfectly good by standards we can comprehend." It is the classic question of theodicy, a question with which both Celan and Wiesel wrestle, with the aim of restoring faith, even if it is a fractured, precarious, tentative faith.

As Roth and Felstiner both indicate, an important component of this "wrestling" is linguistic. In a "Holocaust universe," language itself has become suspect, complicit in systematic destruction. Wiesel and Celan remain ever conscious that the narratives we tell always bear this destructive potential; their biblical interrogations teeter between speech and silence: they start, falter, stop, and start again, painstakingly charting out that space where language might be used for healing, even in the midst of so much loss. For Roth, Wiesel's work enacts a persistent encounter with the Bible, an encounter of protest, rebellion, and questioning within the context of faith. Roth names this the "face-to-face" encounter; both sharp protest and deeply intimate act, the (re)turn to biblical texts provides space for dialogue in general and Jewish-Christian dialogue in particular. Felstiner's Celan, too, promotes an encounter, a dialogue, facilitated by his poetic rewritings of biblical texts. As Felstiner illustrates, the Hebrew that Celan uses (and leaves untranslated) with increasing frequency in his later poetry becomes itself the mark of a uniquely Jewish encounter, the embodiment of his charge to create a new language capable of expressing both recovery and irreparable loss.

The essays in the third part, "Revolution, Rebellion, Liberation," exemplify what we might call the "Janus-faced" nature of biblical subversion. Part utopian visions, part vehement social protest, the authors treated here display a deep ambivalence about the role of the Bible to shape a world desperately in need of repair. The biblical texts highlighted here have redemptive potential, the potential to incite revolution, to empower those who are disenfranchised, marginalized, or violently oppressed. At the same time, these very same texts can and have been used to justify disenfranchisement, marginalization, and violent oppression. The act of biblical subversion here signals the transfer of power from those who have it to those who don't. Subversion becomes, specifically, appropriation, and, in this way, liberation: the act of removing a biblical text from a historical context where it

has been used to oppress and placing into the hands of those who have been its targets.

Qiuyi Tan's essay treats Margaret Atwood's disturbing novel *The Handmaid's Tale* as a deconstructive reading of the Bible, which both caricatures and aims to expose the fundamentally patriarchal agendas of biblical texts and their interpretations. Paying particular attention to the ways Atwood parodies Isaiah, Tan argues that Atwood "hijacks" the biblical text to make it more appealing and applicable to a feminist audience. In her essay, Anna Hartnell suggests that Toni Morrison's novel *Paradise* embodies a "midrashic search for meaning" that is emblematic of mainstream expressions of Christianity in the African American context. Hartnell provocatively argues that Morrison uses the Exodus narrative both to conduct a scathing critique of American exceptionalism and to imagine a spirituality that spills over the narrow confines of the "Judeo-Christian," establishing a debt to both traditions even as it moves beyond them. Ellin Jimmerson's essay focuses on the poetry of Ernesto Cardenal, a Roman Catholic priest and former minister of culture in Sandinistan Nicaragua. In a fascinating, full-scale biblical exegesis and theological reversal, Cardenal points to the creative violence of Genesis to promote the legitimacy and necessity of violence in Nicaraguan resistance to the United States–installed Contra regime. In his massive *Cosmic Canticle*, he repeats the first line of Genesis again and again to demonstrate the violent beginning of life; in doing so he suggests that "the inverse of violence is not nonviolence; it is immobility, sterility, and lack of existence." Thus, he promotes an authentic and authenticating violence: the violence that paves the way for freedom.

As the title of the final part suggests, these essays aim to expose the "will to power" in the Bible and the ways in which the Bible is culled to establish, take back, or maintain authority. The inescapable violence that Cardenal points to is one of the most transparent markers of this will; where Cardenal finds it a regenerative source, the writers treated here point consistently to the explicit and persistent biblical narratives that would seem to encourage—if not mandate—the destruction of those who don't pledge allegiance to the one, true God. These writers trace the consequences of these narratives—both in terms of *realpolitik* and identity politics—in the current global landscape. At issue for Beth Hawkins Benedix and Ranen Omer-Sherman is the mechanism of the covenant and the God who stands behind this covenant. In her essay, Benedix argues that Kafka and Pinter return again and again to foundational narratives depicting the covenant (for instance, Sinai and the binding of Isaac) to perform a sustained critique of the violent

exclusivism that harbors at its heart. The chaotic and often nightmarish visions they describe, she suggests, can be read as warnings that we not take our myths too seriously, lest we be destroyed by them. Omer-Sherman's essay, an extended analysis of Simone Zetlich's novel, *Moses in Sinai*, suggests that Zetlich rewrites the "master narrative" of Exodus in an effort to topple this authority and grant power to those "enslaved" by this narrative. In his careful attention to the psychological dimensions of Zetlich's rewriting, Omer-Sherman establishes the dialectic of power and submission, oppression and acquiescence, that forms the backdrop for the essays in this last part. So, too, he approaches the current political crisis in Israel from a "mythic" vantage point that makes plain its urgency at the same time that he complicates any reductive readings of this crisis.

W. David Hall's essay explores the prominent "rhetoric of suffering" and persecution employed in contemporary evangelical Christianity to affect public policy. He focuses on the extraordinarily popular Left Behind series as an example of contemporary apocalypticism; through its use of the book of Revelation the series appeals to its primarily evangelical audience by fashioning an identity of victimhood for its readers (an identity that is often at odds with the real conditions these readers enjoy). At the same time, Hall suggests, the "rapture" motif is compelling precisely because those responsible for "victimizing" the evangelical protagonists (i.e., secularists, those who believe in the wrong things, and/or those who display their belief in the wrong way) are "left behind" and disposed of in the most grisly ways. This is the will to power writ large: taking pleasure in the destruction of those who are perceived to be the enemy.

In the final essay of the collection, Shaul Magid challenges us in no uncertain terms to look closely and critically at the Bible. His premise is that the very act of canonization (determining which books to include and which to exclude from the Bible) is violent. He pleads for us to "return to the Bible before it became *the* Bible to revive its subversive and dissenting nature and to rethink, what, in fact, the Bible has to offer." The radical prescription he comes to is this: "theological innovation generated by a literary revolution"—an unapologetic, starkly clear-sighted accounting of the Bible (both Old and New Testaments, as well as the Qur'an) as a collection of disparate texts, some of which are "blatantly problematic" and should be decanonized. He asks us to imagine what kind of Bible—if any—can "survive and contribute to a new global vision."

We end here, in some ways having come full circle. Magid sounds a cautionary note: "the violence of exclusion lies at the very heart of

the sacred." But he also reminds us of, and returns us to, the most basic question that the writers highlighted here have pursued: what set of powers do these biblical stories serve? Magid explains, "it is only when the Bible is desacralized . . . when one posits that it contains both truth and falsity, that its sacrality, and truth, emerges." Here, in this space where modernism slides into postmodernism, our writers wrestle with what kind of truth—if any—can come out of "falsity." They return, as if despite themselves, to the Bible again and again, convinced that it has something to teach us. They wrestle, like Jacob with the angel, with what should be preserved and what cast aside. In doing so, they enact the call that Magid makes plain in the final chapter: that we *take back* the power to write and rewrite the Bible, not as *the* definitive text, but as a text continuously being rewritten and confronted—a *living* text.

Notes

1. Jacques Berlinerblau, *Thumpin' It: The Use and Abuse of the Bible in Today's Presidential Politics* (Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 4.
2. See, for instance, the August 30, 2005, survey administered by the Pew foundation ("Religion A Strength And Weakness For Both Parties: Public Divided on Origins of Life," http://people-press.org/report/254/religion-a-strength-and-weakness-for-both-parties, especially the category "Most Important Influence on Views about Development of Life." According to a 2007 Gallup Poll, 82 percent of Americans identify with Christian religion, 62 percent are "active members of a 'church or synagogue.'" See Gallup, "Questions and Answers About Americans' Religion," http://www.gallup.com/poll/103459/Questions-Answers-About-Americans-Religion.aspx. Sam Harris cites earlier surveys conducted by these groups in his *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006), 93.
3. Nietzsche gives this name to his project most forcefully in *Ecce Homo*. See Walter Kaufmann, trans., *On the Genealogy of Morals/Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 326.
4. Ibid., 327.

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Part I

Setting the Stage
What Is Subversive Scripture?

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Chapter 1

A Funny Thing Happened on the Road to Damascus

Piety and Subversion in Johnny Cash's *Man in White*

Jay Twomey

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person . . . plagues . . . if anyone takes away from the words of the book . . . God will take away that person's share in the tree of life.

—Revelation 22:18–19

And I looked down from heaven upon the earth, and saw the whole world, and it was nothing in my sight and I saw the sons of men as though they were naught, and a-waning, and I wondered and said to the angel: "Is this the greatness of men?" And the angel answered and said unto me: "It is."

—Vision of Paul[1]

When is the fictional reworking of a biblical story or motif subversive? Is it possible to theorize the difference between pious and critical intentions in different rewrites if each ultimately, perhaps necessarily, updates and thus distorts its biblical source? And since the recrafting of biblical texts is never performed in a literary vacuum, might one reader's piety be another's irreverence given subversive analogues in a larger intertextual context? I'd like to hint at some possible answers to these questions by examining a novel about the life of Paul, titled *Man in White*, by

Johnny Cash. Few are aware that Cash, of Fulsom Prison fame, was a novelist as well as a singer-songwriter. His first and only novel was published in 1986 after many fits and starts and with the consistent encouragement of Billy Graham; its relatively idiosyncratic portrait of Paul will be the focus of this chapter. But before turning to Cash's novel, before examining its odd intermingling of piety and subversion in an effort to think through the questions posed above, it might be best to raise a methodological issue: what is rewriting, anyway?

Rewriting, like other hybrid genres, is often easy to recognize but terribly difficult to define. Even the two most interesting recent studies of rewriting—those of Christian Moraru and David Cowart—are to a certain extent at odds with one another over just what would constitute so-called rewritten texts, even if they agree in their basic principles. For Moraru, a rewrite is a renarrativization of an earlier prose work (he does not discuss poetic rewrites) and is characterized by extensive parallels in "storytelling structure" between one work and another.[2] Cowart, who uses biological tropes, considers rewriting a form of literary symbiosis in which host and guest texts enter into some form of relationship. For Cowart, rewriting is a category so broad that he considers it central to literature itself,[3] even if his specific interest is in the kind of rewriting that appropriates and recasts some of the characters and actions of prior texts: something more than "ordinary intertextuality" and yet less than, or at least not necessarily as extensive as, a full-scale appropriation of the prior text's overall plot structure.[4]

The question becomes even more complicated when one tries to define biblical rewrites. Theodore Ziolkowski's study *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus*[5] offers a classificatory scheme of no less than seven categories, including the fictional transfiguration of the title, for critical differentiation among New Testament rewrites. Novels like the one we are concerned with in this chapter—Cash's *Man in White*—are, in Ziolkowski's terms, fictionalizing biographies: essentially, a kind of historical novel. Such a fictional work would not qualify as a rewrite in Moraru's terms, nor would it seem quite to accord with Cowart's definition either. Both clearly, and understandably, given their interests in postmodernism, prefer to think of rewrites as texts that self-consciously counter, subvert, critically respond to, or deconstruct the original text and/or its cultural, ideological significance. Indeed, rewriting, in Moraru's memorable phrase, is "intertextuality with a conscience," with a sense of the social function of literature as a critical, counterideological tool.[6] Among biblical rewrites, perhaps only a handful of texts would satisfy, in any obvious way, these criteria. José Saramago's masterful *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*,[7] for

instance, and Gore Vidal's *Live from Golgotha*[8] are subversive from start to finish; both toy with contemporary Christian sensibilities and call into question the texts upon which those sensibilities are based. Zora Neale Hurston's *Moses: Man of the Mountain*[9] may take a different approach in that it aims to retell Exodus in such a way as to affirm African American folklore and spiritualities rather than to critique its biblical original; still, it would be hard to deny that its social function, its conscience, has a critical cultural dimension sometimes significantly at odds with its biblical sources.

But if *these*, and works such as these, are rewritings proper, how is one to characterize Cash's novel, which is manifestly not offered as critical, deconstructive, or subversive? Where, on the spectrum of options available to the postmodern theorists of rewriting, do such works fall? The question is a useful one because it seems to me that what Cowart, Moraru, and others understand to be the postmodern element, which I'll deploy quite anachronistically, has been a feature of rewriting forever: rewrites write their original texts *differently*, changing them and, in the process, the way one thinks about and experiences them, and this is precisely why one wants to experience (read, see, hear) rewrites in the first place.[10] But I would go further, qualifying the "differently" above in more specifically postmodern terms: biblical rewriting is always subversive, ironic, or deconstructive—whatever the author's intentions. That is to say, the changes an author makes in rewriting a biblical text are unlikely to be entirely neutral or without theological significance. One important reason for this, of course, is that the Bible as sacred scripture is protected cultural territory—witness the massive defensive campaigns launched by conservative groups at every perceived slight in New Testament reworkings from Nikos Kazantzakis to Terrence McNally.[11] But even the best-intentioned of pious rewriters are likely to cross certain unacceptable lines, too, because of the ambiguities inherent in the original material. Jacques Berlinerblau's sardonic claim regarding the Bible (including those gaps and fissures biblical rewriters tend to want to fill in) is *apropos*: "the [Bible] spawns so many enigmas that even an atheist cannot help but wonder if some red, grinning, Martini-sipping demon . . . placed it on earth to beguile the more thoughtful ones."[12] These enigmas provide fertile soil for variation upon, and deviation from, an only apparently stable biblical norm. In the case of the Pauline literature, as we will see, one has to deal somehow with Paul's "lost years" and with certain inexplicable mysteries at the heart of his revelation. How to fill in those gaps? How to exploit and yet be faithful to those textual fissures and absences?

Additionally, there's the question of the literary/cultural context in which a work is produced; a novel such as Cash's will be read in light of similar works, and the juxtaposing of these texts can produce, or at least enhance, an element of subversiveness. One needn't posit direct lines of influence to trace the warp and woof of intertextuality in the fabric of biblical rewriting in general. This is as much a matter of a writer's awareness, conscious or unconscious, of the world of prior rewrites as it is a matter of reception, of the ways readers read these texts, especially readers attentive to the intersecting threads of literary interest across a variety of works.[13]

All of which returns us to the question, is *Man in White*, then, subversive? The answer, I think, must be yes, for all the reasons suggested above. Moreover, even though Cash is a religious writer, it would, quite frankly, be surprising if his novel didn't, in some way, disturb convention. This is the Man in Black, after all: the perpetually rough-around-the-edges singer-songwriter whose first and only novel was written during years of alternating drug addiction and rehab, a period punctuated by dreams and experiences one can best characterize as hallucinatory.[14] That his book is at its most inventive precisely in its depiction of Paul's visionary experiences only helps to reinforce this sense.

Modeled on Sholem Asch's 1943 novel *The Apostle*[15] and John Pollock's 1966 literary biography *The Apostle: A Life of Paul*,[16] Cash's *Man in White* relies heavily upon nonbiblical sources, especially in its characterization of Paul. It differs from its precursors, however, in two important ways. First, it limits itself to the early period outlined in Acts 7:58–9:29, that is, to Paul's activities as a persecutor of Christians, his Damascus Road experience, the "lost years" between this moment and his ministry proper, and his first brief sojourn in Jerusalem as a Christian[17]—there is nothing in *Man in White*, in other words, about Paul's communities in Corinth or anywhere else, no reference to his letter writing, nothing but the initial years. Indeed, Cash spends a great deal of time—nearly half the novel—on Paul's life and conflicts as a Pharisee before turning to the conversion in sections he entitles "The Illumination," "The Wandering," and "The Revelation."[18] It is only in the brief "Epilogue" that we learn much of anything at all about the Paul we know from the New Testament, although his future work is implied in the novel's final section, "The Fellowship." In my view, this narrowed focus makes Cash's book rather more compelling than other rewrites of Paul's life because it allows for significant creative leeway, filling in the gaps in the original texts rather than trying to plot out, and more or less unsuccessfully to make cohere, all the details in Acts and the Pauline Corpus. The second way in which

Cash's novel stands alone among its closest peers is that *Man in White* depicts a Paul subject to visions and divine encounters to a degree far in excess of what one finds in Asch and Pollock. I will spend the rest of this chapter discussing one of these visions in particular as the locus of subversion in Cash's portrait of Paul.

That something funny, unusual, and totally unexpected happened to Paul is, I suppose, not really open to question. Even Friedrich Nietzsche assumes Paul experienced, at the very least, a moment of personal enlightenment—albeit a despicable one in his view.[19] According to the versions of the story in Acts (there are no analogous reports in the Pauline epistles), Paul encountered the divine Lord as he was traveling to Damascus from Jerusalem on a sort of Temple sting operation. The being, who spoke from within a great light, identified himself as Jesus of Nazareth and said that Paul had now been commissioned to bring word of the Jesus movement—the gospel—to the Gentiles (Acts 9:3f; 22:6f; 26:13f).

In his own letters, however, Paul's allusions to his encounter with the risen Jesus are short on details. What he does say is that he received his gospel in its entirety from a divine encounter (Gal. 1:15–17). He also indicates here and there that he had additional moments of revelation throughout his missionary career (Gal. 2:2; 2 Cor. 12:9). However, the only description of a visionary experience in Paul is that of 2 Corinthians 12:1–5. Here, Paul writes of a privileged journey to "the third heaven" and to "Paradise," where he heard "unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter." It is unlikely that this is the Damascus Road event since, according to Paul's estimate, it would have occurred in the early 40s CE, whereas Acts and 1 Corinthians 15:3–9 strongly suggest an earlier initial encounter with the risen Christ, perhaps within a year of the Crucifixion.[20] It is probably better, then, to consider the heavenly journey as an additional encounter with the divine—one that, whatever its historical content, has often been a thorn in the side of interpreters because it can seem a challenge to the authority of the Damascus Road experience and thus to Paul's very gospel. [21]

Asch and Pollock tend to underemphasize the vision of 2 Corinthians, especially in relation to the Damascus Road event,[22] whereas Cash does nearly the opposite. In *Man in White*, the Damascus Road experience is followed almost immediately by a number of other, less groping and more articulate encounters that culminate in the heavenly journey, the startling vastness of which all but eclipses that prior experience outside the city walls. Cash's Paul is swept out of the world and sees "the stars swirling as if from a wheel. He [sees] a galaxy. The

galaxy of millions of stars or suns, billions of suns, with great distances between each. He [sees] worlds that shone and sparkled with colors and light that he had never known before" (133). He is taken to the very dwelling place of God, "beyond the outer reaches of space," where he sees "the Light of Creation" (133) and, looking back, the earth, "a precious blue and white marble spinning in a sea of darkness" (134). All of this text is accompanied by relevant citations from the Bible and is interspersed with concepts from Jewish thought to provide a solidly ecumenical substratum to Paul's very awkward and ill-defined visionary journey in 2 Corinthians 12.[23]

In some (i.e., in certain strict creationist) circles, Cash's exposition of the reaches of the cosmos could be cause for consternation. For example, citing from Job 26:7, he has the Man in White tell Paul during their extraterrestrial jaunt, "See how [God] hangs the *worlds* upon nothing"?[24] Why "worlds," plural, when most English translations have "world" or, more commonly, "earth"? Maybe he is simply borrowing from the King James Version of Hebrews 11:3, for instance ("the worlds were framed by the Word of God")? Or is he suggesting that our earth is simply one among many, many others and possibly not primary in creation? And while it may be purely coincidental, it is difficult not to hear in "the galaxy of . . . billions of suns" an echo of (atheist) Carl Sagan's "billions and billions." It is possible, of course, that Cash, like his mentor Billy Graham, simply felt that whatever science reveals is God's creation, and thus in his eyes there may have been no problem at all in thinking of Paul's visionary experience in terms familiar to us from astronomy and space photography.[25] Nevertheless, such an anachronism is odd in a work that claims, seriously, to rely upon historical research (5). And one finds a certain discontinuity between an apparent coincidence of the atheological view of the universe from contemporary scientific cosmology and Cash's own insistence that "the Bible, the whole Bible, [is] the infallible, indisputable Word of God" (16).

What makes Cash's description of Paul's journey to the third heaven especially curious, however, is not just that it toys with non-biblically inspired scientific perspectives but also that it has a precise literary analogue in George Gordon Byron's *Cain*.[26] Byron's 1821 drama, or "mystery" as he called it, came under attack for blasphemy because of the extent to which it undermined biblical literalism with its references to George Leopold Cuvier's geological speculations.[27] Byron may have protested that Cuvier's work was "not contrary to the Mosaic account," but many of his first readers were unconvinced.[28] In any event, what matters for our purposes is that Cain learns about

"pre-Adamite" earthly beings, and previous incarnations of the world, by taking a cosmic journey with Lucifer, not unlike the one Cash's Paul takes with the Man in White. Cain remarks, when Lucifer speeds him to the heavens, "I tread on air and sink not."[29] Paul, in Cash's novel, feels "weightless, suspended in the air somewhere above Damascus—no, farther—somewhere out of the environs of the world" (133). Both are then shown the earth in its remoteness.[30] Both comment on the multiplicity of worlds—Cain even asks if each has its Eden, to which Lucifer replies, "it may be."[31] Both are struck by the beauty of the universe. And finally both are returned to earth changed men. The change in Cain, however, is for the worse. His cosmic vision impresses upon him the enormous scope of space and time and, most importantly, his own insignificance. It also confirms something he'd long suspected: that there is more to the story of creation than his parents knew, that God is not all in all. Born of this disturbing awareness, we are led to believe, is the will to kill Abel.

Had Byron so chosen, he could have written another drama altogether (perhaps titled *Abel*) in which God, not the devil, shows a human being the earth from space. After all, Byron draws upon John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, perhaps the most significant biblical rewrite in English. In *Paradise Lost*, Adam gets, if not a tour of, then a fairly detailed scientific lecture on, the cosmos.[32] Byron, however, chooses Cain as the hero and Lucifer as his guide and embraces the most radically unbiblical scientific thinking available to him as the context of their journey. Clearly he had to expect that his play would be rather surprising in its unorthodoxy; as he put it in a letter, when Cain and Lucifer embark on their "voyage among the stars . . . you may suppose the small talk which takes place between [them] . . . is not quite canonical."[33] If Cash's Paul experiences the universe of Byron's Cain, then—at least formally speaking—Byron's Lucifer has become Cash's God. At the very least, this parallel highlights the (unconscious, unintended) hubris inherent in Cash's portrait of Paul. Paul is told to "see the earth now through the eyes of the creator" (134); while Byron's Cain merely learns about the history of God's creation, Cash's Paul actually inhabits the divine vision, becomes God. In Western literature since Augustine at least, the desire for such an apotheosis is quintessentially sinful, if not (think Goethe's *Faust*) a delusion fostered by Satan himself. The divine Voice in Cash's novel, then, although meant to be Christ, shares an unexpected affiliation with (at least literary) evil. It would be easier to distinguish between the devil and God in Cash had he, as Byron does at least peremptorily, indicated something of the difference between the two. However, despite Paul's concern

with demonic powers (1 Cor. 7:5; 1 Thess. 2:18; etc.) and despite the not-infrequent references to Satan in Asch and Pollock—even in Pier Paolo Pasolini's sketch Satan plays a significant role[34]—to the best of my knowledge Cash doesn't mention the devil even once. Perhaps it wasn't necessary to give the devil his due since the Man in White is so evocative of Byron's Lucifer, at least in these central scenes.

Cash has (mis)appropriated a Byronic, or more generally Romantic, hubris, granting to his Paul a knowledge of the cosmos that in Byron's text is tantamount to rebellion against God. Why? Is it because he thought that this hubris, so long as it wore the outer garb of piety, would suit Paul's own frequently boastful rhetoric? Is Cash trying, as Byron was, to challenge mainstream religious orthodoxy? In his introduction, after all, he reports encounters with critical interlocutors who tried to pigeonhole his Paul in ways he found limiting (1–3). Or should readers simply assume that the language of, and images from, astronomy that one finds in Cash were simply not available to Byron, that the 165 years separating *Cain* from *Man in White* have a way of taking the edge off notions once considered blasphemous? Seeing Earth from space does seem to give us now a God's-eye view of our existence.

I am not arguing that Cash is performing a double rewrite of 2 Corinthians 12:1–5 and Byron's *Cain*. My point is rather that reading intertextually, one may discover or, if you like, produce a troublingly subversive dimension in texts that otherwise are manifestations of a religious sensibility.[35] Cash himself seems worried at the idea that, as a creative writer, he may have delved into the Bible's secret truths inappropriately. He claims, defensively, that he is not "God's liar"—a writer who assumes that the truth of the Bible can be enhanced by his creative work; the Bible, he says, doesn't "need further illumination . . . truth is its own illumination" (8). Still, and almost at the very same moment, he also acknowledges paradoxically that where the Bible is silent his novel fills in the gaps by drawing upon his own "at times strange imagination" (16). One cannot help but be struck by the irony that this strange imagination, which Cash assumes is of a piece with the New Testament truth, gestures toward the blasphemy of a Byron, jutting out at right angles from a more orthodox faith.

Now, Cash would not subscribe to Berlinerblau's notion of the Bible as an enigmatic text so impenetrable as to resist even the best interpretive efforts. Yet isn't Cash's *Man in White*, if it must in its own creative exegesis of Paul's heavenly journey make use of images and language so utterly alien to Paul, also a mild form of counterexegesis—a reading against the traditional grain—especially when considered alongside undeniably subversive literary analogues like *Cain*? After all, despite

his assertion that he only invents "where the Word is silent" (16), Cash has clearly taken the liberty simply to ignore what would have been Paul's understanding of heaven in favor of another, more accurate—or at least more contemporary—one, and the result is actually a negation of one of Paul's (albeit minor) truths about the way God has ordered his world. That is, Paul's cosmology would have envisioned a central earth surrounded by several, probably seven, heavens, even though Paul visits only the third of these.[36] Cash, on the other hand, sends Paul out into a universe in which multiple solar systems punctuate the vast emptiness of space. More critically, in the New Testament material Cash draws upon, Paul remains silent about his experience because "it is not lawful for a man to utter" what he heard. Protecting divine mysteries is also key in Byron and Milton. Lucifer rebukes Cain's desire to learn the secrets of heaven with the sharp rejoinder, "Dust! limit thy ambition."[37] Raphael tells Adam in *Paradise Lost* that "Heav'n is for thee too high / To know what passes there; be lowlie wise: / Think onely what concernes thee and thy being; / Dream not of other Worlds, what Creatures there / Live, in what state, condition or degree."[38] But Cash's novel more or less traffics explicitly in this forbidden knowledge: Paul, in his visionary cosmic journey, sees the universe that contemporary science sees, that we all see any time we visit a planetarium or even watch a sci-fi film. The divine mystery of God's heavens—a mystery both preserved and insisted upon by Paul—is rendered as both beautiful and accessible to human sensory experience.

Although *Man in White* reads like a first novel, one that quite possibly would not have been published had it not been for Cash's fame, it still is, from a pop-cultural perspective, an intriguing window into the religious imagination (and sociocultural world) of one of America's most famous performing artists. It would be interesting to consider songs like "When the Man Comes Around" and even "Man in Black" in terms of this novel's theological assumptions, to reflect upon Cash's own representation of religious experience in music and prose fiction. But *Man in White* is also important simply as an example of rewriting's subversive, ironic, and self-deconstructive potential. That we are concerned in this case with a novel of faith only helps to further underscore the claim that all rewritings are subversive (even if many do not mean to be so). Whatever Cash's intentions, *Man in White* reworks its biblical sources within complex literary and cultural contexts. It invites intertextual comparisons with a play that was considered blasphemous by its first readers. It exceeds the boundaries of Paul's mystical vision of the cosmos in a way that challenges, ironically, the validity of that vision (and hence the validity of its religious

content). And it refuses to comply with a biblically mandated gag order on descriptions of the heavens. The result is, of course, not exactly irreverent and not especially audacious; it is just an example of paradoxically pious subversion by the Man in Black.

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NOTES

1. Section 13, p. 153. The Vision or Revelation or Apocalypse of Paul is a late-fourth-century apocalypse purporting to recount Paul's experiences on his celestial journey.
2. Christian Moraru, *Rewriting: Postmodern Narrative and Cultural Critique in the Age of Cloning* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001), 20.
3. David Cowart, *Literary Symbiosis: The Reconfigured Text in Twentieth-Century Writing* (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1993), 13.
4. Cowart 6–7.
5. Theodore Ziolkowski, *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972).
6. Moraru 20.
7. José Saramago, *Gospel According to Jesus Christ* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994).
8. Gore Vidal, *Live from Golgotha* (New York: Random House, 1992).
9. Zora Neale Hurston, *Moses: Man of the Mountain* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991).
10. See, for example, Kristin de Troyer's *Rewriting the Sacred Text* (Boston: Brill, 2003) for similar reflections upon the motivations of ancient redactors and authors of apocryphal texts.
11. When McNally's play *Corpus Christi* ran in Cincinnati, where I live, a conservative Catholic group launched an intensive campaign to shut the play

down. For more on the controversy, see http://www.citybeat.com/2003-06-18/onstage2.shtml.

12. Jacques Berlinerblau, *The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2005), 88. Berlinerblau promotes the critical work of "counterexegesis" as an attempt to destabilize apparently secure biblical interpretations by insisting upon the historical, linguistic, and textual complexities (and incoherencies) of the Bible. It is an exhortation to nonbelievers that they take religion seriously, in the words of his subtitle, in order to combat bigotry, religious violence, and fundamentalisms of all stripes.
13. See Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990), esp. 135n2.
14. See Cash's introduction for the story of this novel's genesis and long gestation. All Cash citations indicated in parentheses throughout the chapter.
15. Sholem Asch, *The Apostle*, trans. Maurice Samuel (New York: Putnam, 1943).
16. John Pollock, *The Apostle: A Life of Paul* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969).
17. Needless to say, Cash interpolates a good deal of material from elsewhere in Acts and the Pauline letters into this abbreviated narrative as well, including Paul's period of wandering prior to his first visit to Jerusalem (Gal. 1:17–18) and Jesus's warnings to Paul in Jerusalem from Acts 22:18.
18. New Testament scholars usually make a point of noting that if conversion means a radical shift of spiritual allegiance from one religion to another, then Paul's experience was not a conversion. Earliest Christianity, we hardly need note, was a Jewish phenomenon.
19. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge UP, 1997), 41.
20. That is, around "fourteen years" prior to the writing of 2 Corinthians, which scholars place in the mid- to later 50s CE. In Galatians 2:2, Paul refers to another revelation besides his initial conversion experience. This seems to have been at least seventeen years, and quite possibly more, after the resurrection event (see Gal. 1:18 and 2:1), which would give us a date of about 50 CE. Clearly, any attempt to accurately date the events of Paul's life is subject to a certain amount of frustration. In addition, since Paul uses the third person in 2 Corinthians 12:1–5, it is difficult to know what he really means in the passage. The historical Paul, however, is less important for our purposes than the Paul of tradition.
21. Tertullian, for instance, rails against heretics who appropriate for themselves Paul's "unspeakable" doctrine as a secret teaching. Paul only received the one gospel itself perfectly in accord with God's word in the Hebrew scriptures, which nothing else he may have heard or seen could

possibly change (*Prescripton Against Heretics*, 24, which can be found in the series Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 3. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994.). Calvin similarly considered it problematic to place too great an emphasis on Paul's heavenly journey. Only fanatics and enthusiasts would consider 2 Corinthians 12 *the* model for religious experience. Paul himself, although he'd seen the third heaven, still placed his trust entirely in "the doctrine of the law and of the prophets" rather than in visions (Institutes of the Christian Religion 1.9.1, trans. Henry Beveridge. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989.).

22. Asch 402; Pollock 38–39.
23. Cash's references to a capitalized Voice and Light are suggestive of the Bat Sol and Shekinah, respectively—concepts that he would have researched for the novel. See the introduction for his discussion of sources.
24. Italics mine.
25. See http://www.calvarypandan.org/angel_of_light.htm.
26. In the following references, I will refer to Byron when citing from the play and to Steffan when indicating criticism published in the scholarly edition of *Cain*. See the bibliography, under Byron, for further information.
27. See Steffan 6–17, 264.
28. Steffan 157.
29. Byron 191.
30. One could draw a parallel between Cain's journey and the fourth century Vision of Paul, from which my epigraph is taken. Both look back upon the insignificance of Earth in some terror. Cain, when Lucifer points out "the dust which formed [his] father," asks incredulously, "Is this our Paradise?" (Byron 192–93).
31. Byron 199.
32. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1674, 12 Nov. 2006, http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/pl/intro/index.shtml. See VIII.
33. Quoted in Steffan 8.
34. Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Saint Paul*, trans. Giovanni Joppolo (Paris: Flammarion, 1980).
35. Rewriting is "troublingly subversive" in the sense I have in mind especially for the Christian reader. Within Judaism, for instance, the issue would undoubtedly be framed differently. See David Jacobson, *Modern Midrash: The Retelling of Traditional Jewish Narratives by Twentieth Century Hebrew Writers* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987). Jacobson argues that in Jewish literature the rewrite, what he calls modern midrash, is both subversive and culturally/religiously enriching at one and the same time.
36. See J. Edward Wright, *The Early History of Heaven*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), esp. 139–40, 148–50.
37. Byron 224.
38. Milton VIII: 172–76.

Chapter 2

Refuse, Realism, Retelling

Literal and Literary Reconstructions of Noah's Ark

Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg

The world that the Fisher Price toy company has created for its Little People—small plastic figures designed so that two- to five-year-olds might engage in "imaginative play"—includes many familiar aspects of American life: a mechanic's garage, an airplane, a school bus, and a family home. One anomaly in the mostly modern collection is the Noah's ark set, which includes one boat, two elephants, two lions, two zebras, and one bearded Noah, in tunic and sandals, carrying a staff on which is perched a dove. Yet Noah and his menagerie are somehow consonant with the Little People universe. The imaginative player who chooses to combine his playsets can introduce the ancient patriarch to modern amenities: Noah fits in the seats of the garage's cars, the airplane, and the school bus. He can also be made to sit, quite comfortably, on the toilet on the second floor of the dollhouse—no doubt a relief, as the Little People ark has no facilities.

That the dollhouse contains a toilet suggests that the toy designers at Fisher Price are not squeamish about bodily functions. That the ark does not reflects the preservation of a sanitized version of the biblical account. In the popular imagination, Noah builds a big boat—rustic, yet neat; massive, but efficient and ordered—and fills it with animals that cohabit happily, desist from eating one another, and never defecate. Thus, while the story of the ark has become domesticated—in its Fisher Price incarnation and otherwise as a staple of children's nurseries—it has not been demythologized.

Demythologizing can occur in a number of ways, including stripping a story of its mythic content and stripping it of its mythic status. This chapter examines literal and literary readings of the flood story, focusing in particular on the ways that interpreters imagine what life was like aboard the ark. It traces a hermeneutic tendency apparent in some ancient and medieval Bible interpretations, and prevalent in conservative Christian creationist readings, to supply ostensibly realistic—and specifically scatological—details to flesh out the sparse biblical account. Curiously, a number of contemporary novels by secular writers have also turned to the flood narrative, offering creative retellings of the biblical myth that dwell on the grim conditions aboard the ark: Jeanette Winterson's *Boating for Beginners*, Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*, and David Maine's *The Preservationist* (unwittingly) duplicate the interpretive moves of conservative Christian interpreters, imagining Noah's voyage as swishing with slop. That two such disparate constituencies—creationists and creative writers—make much of the muck aboard the ark is surprising indeed. Their shared vision of life aboard the ark comes from radically different, indeed mutually untenable (even antagonistic), stances toward the Bible, which makes the overlap in their interpretive output all the more striking.

The biblical account of God's commandment to Noah to build the boat, to load onto it his family and two (or seven twos) of each kind of animal, and to dwell within it while waters covered the face of the earth leaves as much unsaid as said. As we will see, literal and literary readers alike access the ark experience through the gaps in the biblical text, filling in what Genesis omits. Curiously, despite the fact that the two readerships have fundamentally different attitudes toward scripture, both fill the scriptural lacunae similarly, supplying seemingly realistic details about material conditions aboard the ark. The common hermeneutics yields opposing results. As we will see, literal interpreters seek to strip the scripture of its mythic content by bringing the flood story into the realm of the real: appealing to science, they describe what the ark *itself* was really like. Shed of its mythic qualities, myth therefore becomes fact. The literary interpreters we will consider here also imagine what it was *really like* aboard the ark: in their case, however, their turn to realism gives an air of absurdity rather than authenticity to the flood narrative. Their demythologizing thus demotes the story by stripping it of its mythic qualities—its sacred status as cosmogony that builds and orders community. With this demythologizing comes a subversion of authority: in presenting alternative accounts, these novels undermine scripture's singular claim to authority.

There has always been an impulse to fill in what the Bible leaves out. For ancient and medieval interpreters, Noah's story was a source of much speculation, not all of it theological. Rather, many of the gaps that begged to be filled were distinctly practical. What kind of lighting was there within this floating box? How did beasts like the *re'em*, a fabulous ox of enormous height, fit inside?[1] How were flying insects contained? Were the fish also gathered within or did they survive in the floodwaters? And what *did* Noah do with all that dung? This last question, which might not occur to many readers, becomes an imaginative industry. Modern interpreters—literal and literary alike, each with impulses toward realism and reason—give considerable attention to scatological concerns. By one interpreter's calculations, "The ungulates alone would have produced tons of manure a day. The waste on the lowest deck at least (and possibly the middle deck) could not simply be pushed overboard, since the deck was below the water line; the waste would have to be carried up a deck or two. Vermicomposting could reduce the rate of waste accumulation, but it requires maintenance of its own. How did such a small crew dispose of so much waste?"[2]

Comical though it might seem to the reader disposed to view the Bible as myth or metaphor, the literalist here poses his question scientifically. Earlier interpreters were far more speculative. Ancient Jewish exegetes involved themselves in their own form of "imaginative play": the writing of aggadic midrash, or "elaborative legends,"[3] that filled in gaps in scriptural stories. Genesis Rabbah, a fourth century midrashic collection, preserves two views about waste management on the ark. Some interpreters maintained that the bottom of the ark's three stories held garbage; the second housed Noah, his family, and the clean animals; and the third, the unclean animals. Others held that the animals were on the bottom story; the people in the middle; and the refuse on the third floor, to be shoveled out through a trapdoor by Noah and his family.[4] Speculation continued through the centuries: Origen posited a five story ark, with the bottom two stories holding food and offal;[5] Rashi agreed that the refuse was contained on the bottom of the ark's three floors; Hugh of St. Victor imagined a three-story ark with a four-cubit-high "sentina"[6] for waste on the first deck.[7]

We find a variant of this curious hermeneutics, which is as attentive to the natural conditions aboard the ark as their supernatural causation, in contemporary creationist accounts of the flood. These want to show not only that a universal flood did indeed take place, as the Bible recounts, but that this flood was scientifically plausible. At a moment when Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett appeal to science for proof of religion's obsolescence, creationists harness science to bolster the

truth of scripture. Not content simply to insist upon the singularity of scripture—to declare its *sui generis* nature and its uniquely authoritative voice—these creationists attempt to validate the "truth claims" of scripture through the criteria of modern science.

Hence a peculiar phenomenon emerges: "creationism utilizes the structures and discourses (if not necessarily the methods) of science in a bid to circulate its beliefs."[8] Hydrologist John C. Whitcomb and theologian Henry Morris, who teamed together to offer a "Christian 'flood geology,'"[9] ground their explanation of the flood in a science that relies significantly on miracle. In their view, for instance, the plenteous waters that flooded the earth came from "a 'vapor canopy' [God created] during the seven days of creation . . . [The flooding] does not owe its origins to the normal processes of rainfall and evaporation. This canopy, 'which existed only during the antediluvian period,' is thought to explain where the floodwaters came from. When this canopy collapsed, the massive floodwaters rained down."[10] Likewise, the gathering in of the animals can be explained by a science heavily inflected with wonder:

> Even as God instructed Noah, by specific revelation, concerning the coming Flood and his means of escape from it, so he instructed certain of the animals, through impartation of a migratory directional instinct which would afterwards be inherited in greater or lesser degree by their descendants, to flee from their native habitats to the place of safety. Then, having entered the ark, they also received from God the power to become more or less dormant, in various ways, in order to be able to survive for a year in which they were to be confined within the ark while the great storms and convulsions raged outside.[11]

Or, as J. David Pleins summarizes skeptically, "God put [the animals] into 'supernatural hibernation' to simplify the feeding chores."[12] This dormant state lies beyond the explicatory scope of zoology: it is purely an invention of what Langdon Gilkey calls the "changeling" that is creation science—"half misinterpreted religion and half misinterpreted science."[13] And yet scientists with theological agendas continue to proffer it as a response to the question of the waste.

According to John D. Morris, PhD in geological engineering[14] and president of the Institute for Creation Research, this primeval hibernation was a capability endowed by God: "The origin of [animals'] mysterious hibernation ability has no ready explanation in science. Might we not suppose that the loving Creator endowed animals onboard the ark with this survival mechanism? There was probably

no need for such an ability before the Flood. All animals today are descended from those on the ark and all have inherited it. Since science has no better explanation for its origin, this supposition, which fits all the facts, should be given due consideration."[15] Evidently, the origins of the hibernation instinct are deluvian—a capacity endowed (and, presumably, inscribed in the genetic code) by God specifically to make the voyage easier. As we well know, hibernating animals (or animals that don't eat) don't defecate. Additionally, even those animals that do not hibernate nowadays may have gone into a state of temporary suspension. Morris notes, "Many other animals (and perhaps nearly all) are able to enter into a period of relative dormancy or estivation when faced with a danger they cannot overcome and from which they cannot flee. In such a state they require minimal food and exercise, and excrete little."[16] Thus Christian science solves the problem of refuse. (It should go without saying that the solution raises as many questions as it answers.)

An end run around science is not always necessary. In the walk-through model of Noah's ark at the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, "the walls are covered with murals that show how Noah's family took care of the animals, including engineering speculations about food and waste management."[17] These speculations are based in articles published by the museum's parent organization, Answers in Genesis, "an apologetics (i.e., Christianity-defending) ministry, dedicated to enabling Christians to defend their faith, and to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ effectively."[18] In one of these articles, "researcher" John Woodmorappe contends that "it is not necessary—or required by Scripture—to appeal to miracles for the provision and daily care of the animals on the ark. Many solutions to seemingly insurmountable problems are rather straightforward."[19] Among these readily solvable problems is that of waste aboard the ark. Woodmorappe proposes a number of ways that the ark's structure may have accommodated the waste: "One possibility would be to allow the waste to accumulate below the animals, much as we see in modern pet shops. In this regard, there could have been slatted floors, and animals could have trampled their waste into the pits below. Small animals, such as birds, could have multiple levels in their enclosures, and waste could have simply accumulated at the bottom of each." Happily, Noah and his family might not have needed to muck out all those cages themselves. Moreover, they could have let the manure accumulate in the holds indefinitely as, according to Woodmorappe, the motion of the ark on the waters would have prevented methane build-ups and thus removed "the danger of toxic or explosive manure

gases."[20] Or, quite possibly, the methane, "which is half the density of air, would quickly [have found] its way out of a small opening such as a window,"[21] thus removing the hazard of a gas buildup. But these are not the only solutions to the staggering question of the waste. One of Woodmorappe's ark designs includes "sloped floors [that] would have allowed the waste to flow into large central gutters. Noah's family could have then dumped this overboard without an excessive expenditure of manpower."[22] The remaining concern—"the problem of manure odor"[23]—needs no miraculous intervention either. Woodmorappe gently reminds his reader that "throughout most of human history, humans lived together with their farm animals. Barns, separate from human living quarters, are a relatively recent development."[24] In Woodmorappe's estimation, Noah and his family would have been quite inured to the smell: "While the voyage of the ark may not have been comfortable or easy, it was certainly doable, even under such unprecedented circumstances."

Woodmorappe's assertion that the journey would have been "doable" understates his mission. He, like the other literal readers of the Bible we have encountered here, is not merely concerned to show that the biblical story could have happened. Rather, their aim is to show that it *did* happen. This is precisely the opposite goal of the authors whose novels we are about to consider: they seem to understand scripture as the "Authorized Version" of something that did not happen, and therefore they (paradoxically) seek to present alternate visions of how that which did not happen happened. The narrators of these tales repeatedly claim to present the "truth" that the Bible masks. This rescripting (or even descripting) of scripture is often an ironic enterprise that undermines the authority of the Authorized Version by embellishing it, layering on details that suggest authenticity but in fact highlight the absurdity of the canonical account. In sharp contrast to the seriousness that pervades the creationist accounts, the literary retellings are marked by a sense of playful engagement with the Bible, even as they reveal the darkness unarticulated in Genesis.

In his discussion of flood geology, David Pleins notes, "The reader who fears for the Bible, or values the Book as a work of great literature in its own right, or is simply sympathetic to the power of myth will be left wondering if the hydrological story is the only side that matters."[25] And certainly, it is not. But it is interesting that our literary interpreters—who are likely to count themselves among those readers who fear for the Bible, value the Bible as a great work of literature, or are sympathetic to the power of myth—are concerned with some of the very same details that occupy the hydrologists.

The relatively rosy picture Woodmorappe paints stands in sharp contrast to the bleak depiction of conditions aboard the ark offered by contemporary novelists who have revisited the story of the flood. These novelists, like the ancient and contemporary religious commentators, engage in what Fisher Price's toy developers dub "imaginative play" and what others might call "midrash." The imagining repeatedly turns to the question of the smell aboard the ark. *Boating for Beginners* (1985), Winterson's comic revision of the flood story, opens and closes with Soames, a biblical archaeologist, and his assistant, Gardner, atop Mount Ararat. Looking for the remains of the ark, Gardner muses, "If it did happen, . . . it must have been awful, all those smelly animals and all that pitch."[26] His rumination gently raises the question of the real conditions behind the myth (if one can entertain the idea of truths that underlie a fiction). Three other contemporary novels—Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (1984); Barnes's *History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (1989); and Maine's *The Preservationist* (2004)—don't merely speculate: they detail just how awful it was.

In Barnes's version of the events, a nonhuman stowaway aboard the ark recounts what really happened. Having captured the attention of the human reader, he offers a report stripped of bias: "Now, I realize that accounts differ. Your species has its much repeated version, which still charms even skeptics; while the animals have a compendium of sentimental myths."[27] His telling, however, will not suffer from subjectivity, from the taint of nostalgia. He, after all, was a stowaway, *not wanted on the voyage*. He asserts, "When I recall the Voyage, I feel no sense of obligation; gratitude puts no smear of Vaseline on the lens. My account you can trust."[28] This new authority makes claims to authenticity. From the outset, he dispenses with any romantic notions about the voyage: "It wasn't like those nursery versions in painted wood which you might have played with as a child—all happy couples peering merrily over the rail from the comfort of their well-scrubbed stalls . . . Remember: this was a long and dangerous voyage."[29] Thus realism replaces sacred scripture, becoming the tactic by which the myths of Genesis are destabilized. The sanitized version of the flood, the one captured in toiletless Noah's ark toys, is shunted aside to give voice to the objective "truth."

Strangely, this truth is not in the details, exactly: presumably Barnes (like our other authors) no more thinks events happened as he recounts them than they transpired as the Bible indicates. Rather, the filling in of the biblical gaps through a proliferation of specifics allows larger truths to be revealed. In presenting the story from a different perspective—that of a stowaway, no less—Barnes gives marginalized

figures access to a story that has been the exclusive domain of one group: human descendants of Noah (and, even more specifically, the faithful among them). Telling the story from the point of view of an animal, and one without legitimate claim to a place aboard the ark, allows Barnes to raise questions about God, humans, and the preservation of a canonical memory of the relationship between God and humans. In the stowaway's telling, God and Noah are both suspect: "I don't know how best to break this to you, but Noah was not a nice man. I realize this idea is embarrassing, since you are all descended from him; still, there it is. He was a monster, a puffed-up patriarch who spent half his day groveling to his God and the other half taking it out on us."[30]

"Us," the animals, are unwitting participants in this divine-human drama. Barnes's narrator is quick to assert, "We didn't know anything of the political background. God's wrath with his own creation was news to us; we just got caught up in it willy-nilly. *We* weren't in any way to blame (you don't really believe that story about the serpent, do you?—it was just Adam's black propaganda), and yet the consequences for us were equally severe."[31] The animals suffer deeply: like the wicked humans, most are obliterated by the flood, but even those who survive have an unhappy existence aboard the ark. This is due in part to the material conditions on the ship, in part to the hierarchies established in the covenant between God and Noah: "Noah—or Noah's God—had decreed that there were two classes of beast: the clean and the unclean . . . There was, as you can imagine, deep resentment at the divisiveness of God's animal policy."[32] This system of clean and unclean not only "made very little sense,"[33] it changed how the animals perceived one another. The stowaway laments, "If only we could have seen some glimpse of logic behind it all; if only Noah had explained it better. But all he did was blindly obey. Noah, as you will have been told many times, was a very God-fearing man; and given the nature of God, that was probably the safest line to take."[34]

Barnes's account of the flood suggests that the collective memory that recalls a righteous Noah is a flawed one, that the destruction of the world in the name of the good would necessarily be a physically messy and morally disturbing business, indeed that any divine covenant that privileges a single man is profoundly troubling theologically. But these are not the overt concerns of the story. The tale is explicitly concerned with setting the record straight, with getting the "truth" out.

"Truth" is also the goal of Findley's ark story. From the outset, *Not Wanted on the Voyage* explicitly subverts the biblical account, undermining its truth claims. The first page of the book presents a fragment of

the authoritative text: "And Noah went in, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives with him into the ark, because of the waters of the flood" (Gen. 7:7). And the second sentence in the book is uttered by the new authority, by Findley's narrator, who says, "Everyone knows it wasn't like that."[35] The biblical account misleads: it omits the panic, the trampling, the doomed humans clamoring to board the ark, the dread Noah's family felt.[36] The biblical account gives the impression of a seafaring excursion. But, as Findley's narrator is quick to establish, "It wasn't an excursion. It was the end of the world."[37] And the end of the world, by its very nature, was unlikely to be a tidy affair, no matter how solid the construction of the saving ship.

Findley's ark is designed around a Well of Darkness: a pit at the center of the boat that runs from the upper deck ("where Noah had his quarters in the Castle and his Chapel with its Pagoda"[38]) down the depth of the lower three decks. In the darkness, at the very bottom of this well, live the large animals, "whose size it had been feared would sink the ark."[39] The three lower decks are "a labyrinth of corridors and passageways that [run] behind and in between the various cages, pens, and stalls where the animals were housed"[40]; beside the passageways run gutters that empty into spillways that can be opened by spouts to discharge waste into the waters outside. Thus is the dung managed. But even within the first few days, Findley's ark has a distinct odor: "The air was already fetid with the stench of animals confined without windows. There were also the heavy smells of rancid pitch and the fresh-cut planks of gopher wood, which gave off a perfume of almost sickening sweetness. The only mitigating smells were those that came from the lofts of straw and sweetgrass and the warm, familiar smell of cooking from the galley."[41]

By contrast, in Maine's account of the story, told in turns by Noah, his wife, his sons, and his sons' wives, the stench of animals is never mitigated by anything. In the view of Mirn, the name Maine gives Japheth's wife, being inside the ark is like being a creeping thing inside a dark log and crawling with other creeping things. It's "cramped and stinky and hardly any light to see by. The smell of tar fights with wet fur and dung from the animals . . . Everything's *damp*, inside and out, the desert giving off a surprised wet-sand smell."[42] Mirn has an unusually good rapport with creeping things and flying things—she is the one who gathers onto Maine's ark the millipedes, grasshoppers, frogs, newts, and snails, the one who spends the voyage playing with the lizards, snakes, and chicks. When she speaks of the stink, it is unpleasant but tolerable. For Noah, whom Maine dubs Noe,[43] it is intolerable: "Hell is something like this, he thinks. The smell alone is enough to

send him outside again: the stench of dung both animal and human, the stale six-day-old air choked by the wife's cookfire and the overheated bodies of all creation. Other layers add spice to the miasma: Japheth's acid vomit, the cat's urine."[44] The belly of the ark, a place that recalls the bottom of Findley's Well of Darkness, is particularly offensive: the hold is blighted by "a dull effulgence of elephant dung, of rhino shit and wet hippo gas."[45]

By everyone's account, days aboard the ark are spent ensuring that the ship remains seaworthy and trying to contend with the animals. Going down to the lower decks to inspect the workings of the ship requires "swimming through the monkeys that bombard [one] with shit"[46]; their refuse, combined with that of the other animals, gives the humans the impression of "drowning in shit."[47] The ark is a "ship full of animal dung that needs mucking out on a regular basis."[48] Maine envisions no slat-floored cages "like in modern pet shops," no gutters and spillways with spouts opening to the waters outside. Maine's animals are in no state of supernatural hibernation; their bodies and bowels are hardly dormant. Rather, they eat and defecate, as animals do, and so Maine's passengers spend their hours "climbing between decks with . . . bucket[s] of antelope manure on [their] shoulder[s],"[49] "collecting buckets of dung from the holds below, clambering up the ladder[s] to the deck"[50] carrying pails of camel and wildebeest dung to the rails of the boat and "dumping it overboard."[51] As son Cham reports, "It is an endless job."[52] Of course, with specimens of all creation tucked safely aboard the ark, how could it have been otherwise?

On the surface, this question of how it must have been arises because the Bible does not supply the details. When our contemporary novelists fill in the gaps, they offer thick descriptions. They focus on the foul smells, the enduring dankness, the interminable labor. They write in a realist vein. Consequently, the result of their imaginative play is not so different from the result of the fundamentalist science we encountered earlier. Our secular writers and our religious exegetes alike see the gaps in scripture and are compelled to fill them. In the end, everyone is determined to explain where the waste went.

But what drives this imaginative play, this fabrication of the squalid details? While we could speculate at length about what anxieties are revealed in their focus on the diurnal details of life aboard the ark, on the feeding of the animals and the mucking out of their cages, what the literalists are doing with the flood story is relatively transparent. They are aligning science and scripture so that the truths of the latter jive with the laws of the former. Admittedly, this interpretive

enterprise requires contortions of both science and scripture, as we saw in our overview of literalist interpretation, but the hermeneutical impulses are relatively straightforward. The same can hardly be said of the literary exegesis we are considering. What are our writers doing with the biblical text, and why?

Many would describe the interpretive activity of Barnes, Findley, Maine, and Winterson as a form of midrash,[53] "the Jewish tradition of the interpretive retelling of biblical stories that began within the Bible itself, developed in the rabbinic periods and . . . has continued to the present."[54] Unlike legal exegesis, which is a more constrained form of interpretation, there has always been considerable interpretive freedom in midrash: the midrashist "could add, deviate from, change or permute the tradition he had received."[55] Much of midrash was expansive or elaborative: filling in scriptural gaps, developing characters' biographies, supplying missing dialogue, and offering motivation for, and explanation of, actions. Because so much of midrash seems to be creative—poet David Curzon defines the term as "rabbinic flights of interpretive imagination"[56]—many have used the term to describe any writing (Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and secular) that expands on the Bible. By Curzon's definition, modern midrash has three characteristics: it is "a response to a specific and very short biblical text, the response is imaginative, and it makes a point."[57]

Our novels clearly fall into this category of modern midrash. The designation helps us identify what the novels are doing, although a brief consideration of the most essential aspects of traditional Jewish midrash will also highlight something equally important: what these novels are *not* doing. Midrash arose out of political and religious crises in antiquity, and so its filling in of the biblical gaps was not merely a creative or aesthetic undertaking. Rather, for ancient Jews it was a means of grappling with contemporary problems, providing moral instruction, and bolstering faith.[58] Thus, past its openness and freedom, midrash is driven by a single rule, by one theological principle: God is the divine author of the text. The rabbis would not push the text to make it say anything that defied this basic principle, and its corollary, that the Biblical text is therefore perfect and perfectly harmonious. The midrashic enterprise was an attempt to smooth over problems and apparent omissions in the biblical text, but this attempt was always made from within the bounds of a theological perspective, one that held God as the author of the text. While they grapple with contemporary problems, our modern writers are hardly concerned with moral instruction and bolstering faith. None seem interested in asserting that God is the author of the Bible; they seem more inclined

to Emily Dickinson's view that "the Bible is an antique volume— / written by faded men."[59]

The difference between the writerly (literary) and the theological (literal) enterprise, then, lies not in interpretive method or in descriptive output. In our case, both yield strikingly similar results: renditions of a biblical story that focus heavily on material conditions aboard the ark. Rather, the difference lies in attitude toward the scriptural account. The contemporary writers—or, more accurately, the narrators of their books—see the Bible not as the word of God, not even as the Authorized Version, but as one possible version of a foundational myth. Thus their demythologization involves stripping the text of its mythic *status*. Moreover, each novel sets out not to present an alternate telling but to offer the "authentic" one. Each narrator is explicit in his or her desire to destabilize the biblical account.

Winterson's version is the most audacious. Framing the novel are long passages from Genesis, accompanied by the following explanation of the story *Boating for Beginners* has to tell: "All this was happening a long time ago, before the Flood . . . Of course, you know the story because you've read it in the Bible and other popular textbooks, but there's so much more between the lines,"[60] including the fact that Noah is a ridiculous human being, the owner of a pleasure boat company. He and his sons—and their God—are capitalists, and their goal in the creation of the divine and the divine narrative is profit. Noah and "the Unpronounceable" are "collaborating on a manuscript that [will] be a kind of global history from the beginnings of time showing how the Lord had always been there, always would be there and what a good thing this was. They [are] anxious to make the book dignified but popular, and [have] decided to issue it by installments starting with *Genesis*, or *How I Did It*."[61] The creative endeavor includes back-projecting God—whom Noah created by accident—into primeval history to "make it look like God did it all from the very beginning"; they "put in a lot of stories about how mysterious he is, and how no one knows where he came from."[62] Their book, *Genesis*, simplifies the actual events, ridding them of potentially complicating factors. As Noah explains, "We're creating a text full of mystery and beauty and we're supposed to be a simple civilisation. All archetypes are simple civilisations. How can we say, 'And God spake unto Noah and told him to build an ocean-going ark from fibre-glass with a reinforced steel hull'? It reads like an enthusiast's magazine, not the inspired word of God. Gopher wood is much more poetic. Try this,' Noah cleared his throat: 'Make yourself an ark of gopher wood; make room in the ark and cover it inside and out with pitch.'"[63] Thus the Authoritative

Version comes into being. This version gains its authority not due to its authenticity but because of its author—(ostensibly) penned by God, it will come to be inscrutable, or almost so.

In *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, the biblical account and its authors come under terrible scrutiny. This story is not that of a patriarch and his God, but of those whose lives are commandeered by them. Here Noah is a tyrant who makes the lives of those aboard the ark virtually unlivable. Fundamental to this story about Noah's reign of terror—a story that speaks to the danger of fanaticism—is the idea of the silencing of all but the authoritative voice. In Findley's account, all antediluvian creation is able to speak. Noah's wife, Mrs. Noyes, directs a choir of singing sheep; her cat Mottyl tells her what she's thinking; the fairies whisper their secrets to her. When the ark alights, however, the nonhumans' capacity for speech has disappeared. When Mrs. Noyes assembles her flock to sing, she is greeted by "silence. Not a word . . . Only baaa. The sheep would never sing again."[64] The trauma of the ordeal on the ark robs the animals of their voices (and posterity of alternate versions).

This is the second fall, an anticipation of the second Babel. Suddenly, only one species can speak; only one can create truth. But, according to Findley, the speech this species produces is not the truth. Traumatized by the events, the women recoil from the task of presenting an authoritative account of the destruction and renewal of the world. They cannot write a story glorifying the God who drowned the earth and stole speech, nor can they perpetuate the myth of Noah's alleged blamelessness. So they maintain instead their own private records. Shem's wife Hannah keeps a journal, in which she notes, "By God . . . if women had writen stories, they would have writen of men more wikkednesse than all the sex of Adam may redresse."[65] Mrs. Noyes provides her own story, the version we get in the novel, the one that begins "everyone knows it wasn't like that." She depicts the mythical voyage scarcely hinted at in the Bible and in the bleakest of terms: "the whole world [was] reduced to . . . four storeys of earth and heaven rounded by the stinking yellow walls and sticky pitch of a leaking gopher wood ark."[66]

This is not merely a subversion of the biblical story, but a demythologizing of the subsequent popular imagining of the event. Mrs. Noyes's account is hardly the image perpetuated by centuries of children's Bibles and captured in Fisher Price's cheerful plastic boat. Through his feminist retelling, Findley undercuts the way the "authorized version" has shaped itself in our culture, taking to task not only

the patriarchal order of Genesis and its God, but the authority of Genesis as well.

In a more gently feminist mode, Maine also dislodges the Torah from its divine setting and locates it very much in the material world, in the muck and mire of Noah's great big boat. Throughout the story, the women have more cunning and self-awareness than the men do. They ensure the survival of creation. Maine's retelling of the flood story ends with Japheth proclaiming yet again, "We'll have a Hell of a story for the grandkids." His wife smiles a small smile and thinks to herself, "It's something he says all the time now, but what's the point of telling a story if we can't even get it right? I hardly remember Bera and Ilya talking about how they collected their animals. I should have asked them again but I forgot. Of course people will tell *some*thing, it was the end of the world after all. A story like that won't be forgotten. But things will get added and left out and confused, until in a little while people won't even know what's true and what's been made up."[67] In time, through tellings, the story will accrue new details and shed others. A new account, remote from the facts, will become part of the canon.

Until then, however, our novelists give us the authentic version. The authenticity, of course, is asserted tongue in cheek—one is reminded of the refrain from Winterson's *The Passion*: "I'm telling you stories. Trust me."[68] As we have seen, these stories are explicit in their being stories. However, even were the narrators not so forthcoming with their desire to unmask the "truth," the content of these novels would betray itself as fiction (and so, in turn, cast the Bible as fiction). Written a generation after "the death of the traditional realistic novel,"[69] these novels undermine tradition precisely through their realistic detail, through their focus on raw sewage and the stench of confined beasts. The attention to detail, particularly the wallowing in squalor, lends an absurd quality to the accounts. We don't need the narrators to cajole us with "I'm telling you stories," nor do we need them to reassure us with "trust me." The narratives themselves, knee-deep in slop and stinking of dung, tell us. By virtue of conveying the flood story in real terms, these novels render scripture (and their own recastings of it) utterly unreal.

We can see what the novels are doing. We return, then, to the question of why. We can read these various accounts—all of which are simultaneously funny and heartbreaking, familiar and unsettling, realistic and wholly fanciful—as offering a double critique. On the one hand, they critique the Bible itself. These readings, unlike their literal counterparts, are not premised on belief: they are built on skepticism.

Not only do they all know that the story of the flood did not happen as the Bible tells it, they know it did not happen at all. And yet rather than dismiss the story outright, they take it up. Their refutation of the canonical account is simultaneously an embrace of it. One thinks, here, of Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein's beautiful and impossible assertion, "The God of my unbelief is magnificent." These novels reveal a similar tension: the Bible is so utterly unbelievable that it must be taken seriously. It must be engaged, not merely to be debunked or disavowed, but to be both stripped of meaning and made more meaningful.

In addition, our works offer a critique of authority, of hegemonic discourse. On some level, all our novels are unsettling the idea that there should be only one account of anything. Our writers clearly don't think they're writing a new (or correct) Bible; rather, they seek to challenge the fact that the canon privileges a singular voice. The concern is with access. Our novelists see the Bible not as the literalists do, as a historically accurate record of God's covenant with humans, but as part of a common cultural and literary legacy. In rewriting biblical stories, they are asserting both that there is no one single way to read the canon and that there is not (or cannot be) a single canon. Whereas literalists seek to give the definitive (which, in this case, means scientifically verifiable) account of the definitive account, the literary interpreters insist on the right of many to interpret the canon and, in so doing, to create new accounts.

The aim of the realism of the flood scientists is precisely the opposite. They want to assert that the Bible is the only version (and that version reflects scientific truths). Moreover, that version can only be read one way (as historically accurate). Their focusing on the very practical concerns of waste production and management is not intended to destabilize the biblical record. Quite the contrary: the apparent accuracy of the details grounds the story and renders it actual and thereby authentic. And it is through authenticity that scripture gains its authority. In the contemporary interpretive climate, authenticity is invariably linked to scientific validity. When once the claim of divine writ would have been sufficient authority, here the deployment of the sciences is part of the literalists' "strategic attempts to co-opt the power and authority of dominant discourse to make a point."[70] Or, quite possibly, the engagement with the scientific discourse is not calculated at all: skeptics contend that literalists "misunderstand Genesis by turning faith in God into something that now must require 'scientific proof.'"[71] Appealing to science robs the story of wonder. No matter the origin of the impulse, however, the result is the same: science

becomes the arbiter of authority. The more "scientifically accurate" the Bible is, the more authority scripture has.

In his study of "the alteration in the attitude towards the Noah story" from antiquity through the Renaissance, Don Cameron Allen notes that "the study of the corruption of facts into myths is very instructive and useful."[72] He goes on to say, "When the religious Aeschylus and the not-so-religious Euripides undertake to write on the same subject, the contrast is striking. Aeschylus follows the theme with trembling devotion, but Euripides is so dubious of the tradition that he is quite capable of confusing events in a story . . . In other words, what Aeschylus accepted as a fact, Euripides perceived to be a myth, and as a consequence his reason succeeds in freeing his imagination."[73] Aeschylus and Euripides' spiritual predispositions lead them to divergent treatments of the same myth. Driven by belief, the first clings loyally to the tradition, while skepticism propels the second off in new directions. The literary outcome is precisely what we might have guessed it would be: divergent and mutually contradictory narratives.

In the case at hand—that of literal versus literary biblical interpretation—something quite different happens, however. Our Aeschylus and our Euripides produce virtually the same text. The literal reader of the Bible, in marrying scripture to science, comes up with a gap-filling narrative that in many respects closely resembles that of the literary reader whose imagination has ostensibly been freed by disbelief. The interpretive confluence highlights the degree to which readings that submit to tradition can overlap with those that subvert it. Accuracy, authenticity and authority become the bywords of all kinds of imaginative play. Just as the Fisher Price Little People can transcend the playsets for which they were created such that old Noah can fly in an airplane and ride in a car, the literal and the literary, the scriptural and the skeptical, can be made to occupy the same spaces. Dwelling on the dung can either legitimize or delegitimize Genesis: it depends entirely on who's doing the interpreting.

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Notes

1. See Genesis Rabbah 31:13. Pirke R. Eliezer (xxiii) notes that the giant Og was saved by hanging fast to the side of the ark. According to the Talmud, the boiling floodwaters cooled around him (Talmud Zevachim 113b).
2. Mark Isaak, "Problems with a Global Flood," *The Talk/Origins Archive*, 30 Apr. 2009, http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/faq-noahs-ark.html#caring.
3. "Judaism," *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, 17 June 2007 http://search.eb.com/eb/article-35350.
4. Genesis Rabbah 31:11; Sanhedrin 108b.
5. See Don Cameron Allen, *The Legend of Noah: Renaissance Rationalism in Art, Science, and Letters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949).
6. See John C. Rolfe, "Some References to Seasickness in Greek and Latin Writers," *The American Journal of Philology* 25.2 (1904): 192–200.
7. Allen, 72.
8. Alexandra Boutros, "Creationism in Canada," 9 June 2007, http://www.therevealer.org.
9. J. David Pleins, *When the Great Abyss Opened: Classic and Contemporary Readings of Noah's Flood* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), 44.
10. Pleins, 55.
11. J. C. Whitcomb and H. Morris, *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and Its Scientific Implications* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961), 73–74.
12. Pleins, 56.
13. Langdon Gilkey, *Creationism on Trial: Evolution and God at Little Rock* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1998), 40.
14. Like many Christian scientists, Morris (University of Oklahoma, 1980) received his degree from a secular institution. That creationists flaunt their academic credentials causes some consternation within the secular scientific community. See, for instance, Cornelia Dean, "Believing Scripture but Playing by Science's Rules," *New York Times* 12 Feb. 2007, 30 Apr. 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/12/science/12geologist.html?r=1&oref=slogin.
15. John D. Morris, "Dr. John's Q & A: How Could Noah and His Family Care for the Many Animals on Board the Ark?" Institute for Creation Research, 30 Apr. 2009, http://www.icr.org/article/2465/.
16. See Morris.
17. Stephen T. Asma, "Dinosaurs on the Ark: The Creation Museum," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 53.37: B10.

18. "About Answers in Genesis," Answers in Genesis, 30 Apr. 2009, http://www.answersingenesis.org/about.
19. John Woodmorappe, "Caring for the Animals on the Ark," *Answers Magazine* 2.2: 36–38, 30 Apr. 2009, http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/am/v2/n2/caring-for-the-animals.
20. Woodmorappe, 38.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Pleins, 13.
26. Jeanette Winterson, *Boating for Beginners* (London: Minerva, 1990), 6.
27. Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 4.
28. Ibid., 4.
29. Ibid., 3.
30. Ibid., 12.
31. Ibid., 6.
32. Ibid., 10.
33. Ibid., 11.
34. Ibid., 11.
35. Timothy Findley, *Not Wanted on the Voyage* (Toronto: Penguin, 1984), 1.
36. Ibid., 3.
37. Ibid., 1.
38. Ibid., 197.
39. Ibid., 198.
40. Ibid., 197.
41. Ibid., 197.
42. David Maine, *The Preservationist* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), 89.
43. Maine takes his names from the seventeenth-century Douay-Rheims translation of the Bible.
44. Maine, 101.
45. Ibid., 135.
46. Ibid., 116.
47. Ibid., 121.
48. Ibid., 110.
49. Ibid., 110.
50. Ibid., 101.
51. Ibid., 117.
52. Ibid., 101.
53. Midrash here refers to aggadic midrash.
54. David C. Jacobson, *Modern Midrash: The Retelling of Traditional Jewish Narratives by Twentieth Century Hebrew Writers* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 1.

55. Joseph Heinemann, "The Nature of the Aggadah," *Midrash and Literature*, eds. Sanford Budick and Geoffrey Hartman (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986), 53.
56. David Curzon, *Modern Poems on the Bible: An Anthology* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1994), 3.
57. Curzon, 4–5.
58. Heinemann, 49.
59. Emily Dickinson, "The Bible is an Antique Volume."
60. Winterson, 12.
61. Ibid., 13–14.
62. Ibid., 110.
63. Ibid., 137.
64. Findley, 384.
65. Ibid., 288.
66. Ibid., 280.
67. Maine, 229.
68. Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion* (New York: Grove/Atlantic, 1987), 5, 13, 40, 69, 160.
69. Eileen Williams-Wanquet, "Towards Defining 'Postrealism' in British Literature," *JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory* 36.3 (Fall 2006): 389.
70. Boutros.
71. Pleins, 59.
72. Allen, 139.
73. Ibid., 139.

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Part II

Between Speech and Silence

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Chapter 3

Face to Face

Biblical Traces in the Philosophy of Elie Wiesel

John K. Roth

Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.

—Exodus 33:23

For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.

—1 Peter 3:12[1]

God looks on . . .

—Elie Wiesel, *Ani Maamin*

The Bible abounds with allusions to faces.[2] But what is a face? Eyes, ears, a mouth, a nose, skin smoothed and lined over bones and teeth—these are facial parts, but they do not make a face, at least not alone. Expression—that is closer to the mark. Pain and pleasure; speech and silence; laughter, song and tears; joy and sorrow; kisses and curses; frowns, smiles, fear, hate, anger, love, trust, innocence, and guilt—faces reveal and mask, tell and hide who we are. "One face with many faces" is a description that fits everybody. A person lives in each expression, even as none expresses us completely.

With its emphasis that "the face of the other" confers unending responsibilities on me and you, the ethics of the philosopher

Emmanuel Levinas underscores the importance of the face, which we deface or allow to be defaced at everyone's peril. I can meet you face to face, but I cannot meet myself in the same way. In such encounters we reveal ourselves to others and thereby to ourselves. What happens then makes all the difference. By meeting face to face honestly, openly, and compassionately—or by forgetting, refusing, or not caring to do so—people are changed for good or ill.

Something else, as the Bible reminds us, makes faces crucial. They are images and symbols that help adults and children to encounter God. The Jewish and Christian traditions protest against idolatry, against all tendencies to elevate creature over Creator. No use of human characteristics, however sophisticated, can describe God fully. But far from voiding speech and imagination, God's transcendence releases both. Biblical writing—whether in the assertion that human beings are created in God's image, or in the testimony that God speaks through prophets, or in the Christian claim that God entered human flesh—identifies God as a person. It does so without apology, because experience of God can be communicated in no better way. Thus, God is said to have a face. People live under and with, for and against, that face's multiple expressions and emotions.

What would it be like to meet God face to face? Some biblical testimony contends this experience would be so awesome it would kill us. Would we find God's face is against those who do evil? If so, what would that mean for us—and for God? Would face-to-face encounters with God be occasions for celebration, thanksgiving, and rejoicing—even after the Holocaust, Cambodia, Rwanda, and Darfur, to mention only some instances of atrocity and genocide that scarred the twentieth century and now the twenty-first century as well. "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace" (Num. 6:24–26): can contemporary men and women still receive and extend that ancient benediction?

Biblical themes, at least traces of them, pervade virtually all of the many books by Elie Wiesel—Auschwitz survivor, Nobel laureate for peace, human rights activist, and profoundly Jewish writer. This chapter concentrates on two of those works—*Ani Maamin* and *Messengers of God*—that reflect especially on the faces of God.[3] They do so not by speaking about God directly but rather by telling the stories of Jewish people who heard a benediction and sought to understand and endure its promise. These stories suggest that while God is not directly discerned face-to-face on this earth, God's faces can be seen

indirectly in the faces of human suffering and joy, despair and faith, courage and work.

While these writings by Wiesel nurture a specifically Jewish spirit, they also convey important lessons for Christianity—my tradition—especially because Christian conviction stresses the importance—the goodness—of something like a face-to-face encounter between God and human individuals. Writing to Corinthian Christians, for example, Paul sets out some fundamentals: "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). And again, "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully know" (1 Cor. 13:12). In meeting faces—those of God and humanity—a richer, more ambiguous, more powerful, and problematic imagery is scarcely to be found. By putting face-related biblical themes in the shadow of Birkenau, the epicenter of the Holocaust, Wiesel insightfully and ethically bears witness to that fact and to some of its implications for Jews and Christians and, indeed, for all of humankind.

Is This Your Blessing?

Wiesel suggests that this question is Jacob's—the same biblical Jacob whose dream revealed a ladder to heaven, the same man who received twin blessings. In one of them, God said that all families of the earth would be blessed by Jacob and his descendants. He should have known there was a catch. Dream blessings are risky, and yet Jacob counted on them. Still, maybe he was not so sure. Biblical editors arranged the tradition about him so that possibility is real; another night—once more in sleep?—Jacob met a stranger. Was it a man, an angel, an embodiment of the divine? The text is ambiguous, but there was a struggle. It lasted until dawn and left Jacob bruised and limping, but Jacob seemed to win. His prize? Another blessing: "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:28).

There is more. Jacob asked the identity of his adversary and got a question in return: "Why is it that you ask my name?" (Gen. 32:29). Was it in the way that question was asked or just that his question was answered with a question? Maybe both of those, or neither, but still Jacob felt, heard, and saw enough to believe that he had encountered God: "So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved'" (Gen. 32:30).

Peniel (the face of God). Israel (he who strives with God, or God strives). Receiving and giving names like those, Jacob must have kept wondering what to expect, and when events unfolded as they did, Jacob must have wondered how they fit with divine blessing. One can imagine Jacob asking God, "Is this your blessing?" The moods in that asking could range widely to include despair and protest as well as an expectation about the future, one that holds God accountable. In a poem called *Ani Maamin*, Wiesel explores those possibilities by using *a song of expectation that* echoes and amplifies biblical traces in Wiesel's philosophy. Where, for example, is *encouragement* found for those who expect a Messiah who has not come and is therefore too late? How can *courage* be renewed for those who affirm that the Messiah has come, even as evidence to the contrary mounts after the Holocaust and every other genocide?

Singing and strengthening courage go together. Why do people sing? They sing because they are happy or blue, carefree or burdened, confident or afraid. They sing to intensify joy already real or to find release from pain by crying out. All of these moods and desires require and inspire courage that is needed to cope with the human condition. True, one of the best things about singing is that one can do it without thinking, without being philosophical, even without caring. And yet songs can have words full of meaning and rhythms that evoke feelings. They can convey, transmit, and break tradition. They are never heard in a vacuum. Rather, they move in a matrix of experience—personal and shared—that makes the songs we sing not an arbitrary or indifferent matter.

Hopes, fears, feelings—songs live and die with them, and thus it is not difficult to reach an understanding that songs are appealing because they are encouraging. Protest, lament, love, faith—whatever their mood, songs are ways of coping, of celebrating. Of course, songs and singing are not always innocent. Both can unleash vast destruction. Both can breed absurdity, carelessness, a courage that is false. The songs we sing, the ways we sing them—both bear watching as we discern how important it is to foster the right kind of courage.

"O sing to the Lord a new song" (Ps. 96:1, 33:3, and 98:1): but why a *new* song? Why not an old one or the same one? The answer is not clear, although in these cases it appears to involve the experience of victory, vindication, and a blessing for Israel made good. Thus, there is a contrast between these psalms and others that cry out in lamentation, asking "how long" and pleading for God to heed the people's plight and save them. Although Wiesel's song has more in common with the latter, *Ani Maamin* is also a new song, one sung not only to God but

also to humanity. It is also new because it is related to the twin blessings received by Jacob: Wiesel's song attests to the courageous faith of Jews who have been a blessing to all generations, because of—and at the same time in spite of—a horror-not-of-their-own-choosing. It also seeks to bring human lives face to face with God, so that both will strive for each other. "*Ani maamin* . . . I believe." The words continue, "*beviat ha-Mashiah* . . . in the coming of the Messiah." Wiesel calls the song lost-and-found-again. "Both affirmation and provocation," he writes, "it cannot help but evoke uneasiness. And yet. . . ."[4] As this biblically inspired song-story reveals, courage can be found in the *uneasiness* that the story within the song evokes.

In November 1973, Wiesel's song was heard in a cantata version, which premiered at Carnegie Hall about six weeks after Israel's Yom Kippur War. With music scored by Darius Milhaud, Wiesel's poetic text was based on a song he learned as a boy before the Holocaust. Its words come from one of Maimonides's thirteen Articles of Faith: "I believe. I believe in the coming of the Messiah, and even if he tarries I shall wait for him on any day that he will come. I believe." That song has been sung and silenced, lost and found, in so many places. In Nazi death camps, for example, some Jews found it impossible to sing "*Ani maamin*"; others found it impossible not to do so. Faith, hope, and courage were lost. They also survived. Wiesel's writing is proof of that.

Wiesel's Ani Maamin is a song about a song, but even more it is a plea for singers—muted and released, destroyed and living, human and divine. It focuses on the victims of humanity's darkest hours, but Wiesel both remembers those who perished and speaks to all who survive and live "after" and therefore need courage to endure and serve. God is included. Wiesel wants people to sing in pain and protest, in remembering, celebrating, and thanksgiving. Although it appears that "the silence of God is God" (87) or that "God chooses to be question" (75), Wiesel hopes that God's silence includes listening and that God as a question is not God's only face. In spite of—and at the same time because of—God's hiddeness, Wiesel longs for God to sing a new song: one of love's triumph over hate, life's victory over death.

"They leave heaven and do not, cannot, see that they are no longer alone: God accompanies them, weeping, smiling, whispering: *Nitzhuni banai*, my children have defeated me, they deserve my gratitude" (105). Wiesel's *Ani Maamin* imagines a meeting between God and three biblical figures: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These patriarchs work to gather "the echoes of Jewish suffering in the world, and make them known in heaven" (15). When history's pain and injustice climax in Nazi slaughter, the observers return from the earth to challenge God

with Holocaust reports, urging intercession. Undaunted by God's initial silence, the spokesmen tell their story with every skill and emotion they can muster. Defenses for God are not wanting, even—or especially—in heaven, but the desperate situation of their people inspires courage in Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who refuse to rest content with circumstances that make a mockery of familiar consolation.

Abraham, father of faith and therefore most courageous of men, battles an unidentified voice whose identity is clear. Its name? Temptation. Its desire? Acquiescence. Should not people recognize that God acts as God chooses and that their task is to accept God's will without question? Abraham resists: God permitted him to plead for Sodom and Gomorrah; nothing less will do when the lives of a million children are at stake. But temptation speaks again: although the ways of God are beyond understanding, God knows what God is doing. Trust in that understanding must suffice. A second time Abraham demurs: He can see what is happening. Death and dying are everywhere. He agrees that the ways of God are beyond understanding. That reality is precisely what cannot and must not be understood or accepted.

A new strategy is adopted by the tempter: less thunder, fewer threats, more long-range assurance. There is nothing without meaning. There are ordeals, but God shares them, and their outcome is salvation that makes evil cease to be. No, no, no . . . there is too much and too little in this accounting. There are too many ordeals and not enough salvation, so the question must be asked, "What kind of messiah is a messiah who demands six million dead before he reveals himself?" (69, 71).

There is not much more to say now: God wills, takes, gives back, breaks, and consoles . . . that will have to do, will have to be enough. But this Abraham is no Job. He will not make Job's response—"the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21)—not yet, at any rate. Isaac and Jacob agree. It is too late for consolation—for the restoration of an ancient homeland in Israel, a place among nations, Jerusalem recovered—none can make up for the loss.

The voice resounds, tougher now. It asks questions instead of giving quasi answers and deceptive consolations: Does God owe you an accounting? What have *you* done with creation? God will evade responsibility by holding men and women accountable, even if they are—at least in relative terms—the innocent, just, and faithful.

Which is worse: God's silence or the voice that defends God by temptation? It is a moot point. But in combination they leave the patriarchs without hope. Having tried their best, the best that can be done is to return to their forgotten people. They will tell them the

truth that they deserve to know: "God looks on and God is silent" (83). Such knowledge will not assuage their people's pain, but it may encourage them—in spite of, and at the same time because of, their hopelessness—to make their dying a revolt, a protest, a repudiation of God's absurd silence.

Slowly the patriarchs retreat from heaven, remembering, experiencing, and recounting once more in amazement tales of Jewish belief and courage. They are not recalled. Silence prevails . . . but then the unexpected starts to happen. Watch God's face as Abraham witnesses the imminent death of a mother and her children. Abraham snatches a little girl and tries to run her to safety, but he is too late. Abraham heard her whisper, "I believe in you" (91). Who is she referring to when she says *you*? Abraham? God? The Messiah? She is referring to all three. For that child, they are inseparable, and Abraham's care for the little girl is so intense that the tear in God's eye forms unnoticed.

Isaac, too, gets involved in a repetition of his own experience, only this time with no reprieve. The scene is a latter-day Mount Moriah. Isaac is not alone, but with an entire Jewish community that faces a consuming fire. Unexpectedly, the community's judge breaks out in song: "*Ani maamin*." He knows there will be no Messiah on earth for him. His song is for Isaac's testimony, for God's reprieve, for the world's future. Moved, blessed, pained by what he sees, Isaac also does not—cannot—see that God is looking through a veil of tears.

Jacob is looking, too. He sees a man celebrating Passover. The setting, however, is all wrong. The man has no family, no food or drink, no deliverance to celebrate. He will not see Jerusalem next year, for next year he will not exist. And yet, in this Egypt-without-an-exodus, in this wilderness that knows no law but that of dying, the prophet of promise, Elijah, is invited, even expected. A Passover that happened once and that will happen no more is remembered and affirmed. The reason? So that Israel itself will not let Jacob down. So that a people, defended by Jacob, will not let his dreams come to naught through his children's rejection. So that Elijah and God will know the blessing and defiance in a continued striving with God: "Auschwitz has killed Jews but not their expectation" (103). What Jacob sees also prevents him from encountering the face of a now weeping God. God acknowledges defeat. His children deserve gratitude. God begins to move.

The movement is in God's face. It is weeping, smiling, whispering—but to what effect? God's tears are tears of grief, guilt, remorse, compassion, love, and joy all at once. God's smile is one of knowing, of admiration, of vindication, of the stubborn and harsh determination that good is balanced enough against evil to let men and women

continue on their heartbreaking way alone. The whisper says, "What have *I* been doing? What are *you* going to do?" The overall effect is that many emotions become one; it is only God's face that moves. Once more the Messiah is delayed. The unfinished tale of his expected coming will have to be moved forward, leaving in suspense the question of whether he has been on the way all along.

Other questions remain. Where, for instance, does this biblically inspired song-story leave Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? It leaves them "heartened by another hope: their children" (105). But what does that message mean? Where does it lead? Moreover, what about the stark truth that the patriarchs were going to tell their people? If the patriarchs did not see God's tears, did anyone? And what difference would that make?

Wiesel's Ani Maamin seems to be mostly—but not completely—silent on those points. Mutual support, encouragement and a yearning for solidarity are what this song is all about. Whether fact or fiction, a tradition of patriarchal intercession gave strength where life was desperate. And that same strength circled back to nourish the disillusioned Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Who is supporting whom? It is difficult to answer, although one thing is clear: if the circle is broken anywhere, it is endangered all around. But wait. What is the nature of this support? Does it still rest on the false premise that somehow God cares? Should the patriarchs be honest about that and leave everything in shambles?

That last question is not as easy to answer as it may look. Before it can be handled well, another must be posed, one apparently unrelated: in Wiesel's *Ani Maamin, what* made God start to cry? Oh, of course, it is only a story, and it proves nothing, but then courage is not a matter of proof anyhow. To the contrary, courage makes sense only where there is a lack of proof, and since sound courage is needed, a story about God's tears is not without significance. The trouble is that *Ani Maamin* does not make clear what it was that brought God to tears. There is no moment when "that's it" and tears begin to flow for one reason alone. The factors are mixed and circular; they are hard to say. One ingredient, however, is surely located in the fact that there are individuals, even a people, who live a courageous faith so unjustified and so unwarranted that God can begin to be justified, God's self-chosen existence is warranted, only if God is moved to tears. Justified? Warranted? True, those categories may be alien to God. The faith that they are not alien to God is part of the courage that Wiesel's *Ani Maamin seeks to inspire*. Who would understand these things better than Abraham, the father of faith; Isaac, who knows that God has the power to kill but also to redeem if God will use it; and Jacob, who became Israel only by refusing to let God go. So . . . what will they do?

They will speak the truth. But what is that? It is to say that in this world, God is unlikely to intervene to change events to fit human desire, not even if God weeps over them. And then it is to sing "*Ani maamin*." It is to say, too, that one factor in God's nonintervention is precisely that same singing. And it is also to say that the alternative—not to sing "*Ani maamin*"—robs us of courage that must exist to prevent further deterioration. How does this logic work? What keeps it from dishonesty?

Take the latter question first, and the response is realism. More than any other century to date—although the twenty-first century is still in its early stages—the twentieth century was one of mass murder and death. The world may well be worse—not better—than ever before. The kingdom of God has not come on earth. It is not even breaking in upon us; it is unreasonable to think that it will. And yet that same realism is both a sufficient and necessary reason for singers of "*Ani maamin*." Without such singers, realism courts despair too much. It misses opportunities to turn despair against itself. And yet again, to sing "*Ani maamin*" here and now is paradoxical. To sing "*Ani maamin*" in the twenty-first century is to sing out of despair, because of despair, and in spite of despair. As long as "*Ani maamin*" is sung, despair does not prevail—at least, not entirely. And where despair does not prevail, God stops short of despair and lets a world governed by human decisions move along.

It is a circular scenario, a theater in the round. It is absurd, mad. Yet there is sense to it, a sense that impels us to make all the sense that we can—or else to give up on our children, each other, and ourselves. "*Ani maamin*" must be sung. One sings it not primarily for God but for humankind. Sung well—not without thinking, not without choosing well the times and places, not without knowing who one's fellow singers are and should be—"*Ani maamin*" provides challenges and encouragement that are much needed. Paradoxically, even a refusal to sing the song, which entails awareness of "*Ani maamin*," can still be a stance that resists despair and defiantly insists that there must be rebellion against destruction's reign.

Why should we sing "*Ani maamin*"? It is a Jewish song, one that disclaims—at least by implication—that Jesus is the Messiah who has already come and who is also here and now. How can a Christian sing that song? There are many ways, none of which requires a change in any of the words: "I believe. I believe in the coming of the Messiah, and even if he tarries I shall wait for him on any day that he will come. I believe." Sung in a Christian style, "*Ani maamin*" affirms a coming that has already come. At the same time, it incorporates an

expectation with which Jews can agree by saying that the coming of Jesus as the Christ is not enough. Jesus comes and tarries . . . promises are made and their fulfillment is postponed . . . God suffers and weeps and both are insufficient. Yearning into the future is not less a Christian perspective than it is a quality of Jewishness. Indeed the yearning of the Christian's "*Ani maamin*" should involve a depth that inclines Christians toward being as Jewish as they can be.

Christians share the biblical history of the Jews. The difference is that Christians add to that tradition a set of claims and promises beyond that of the Jews. Those extra claims and promises are the basis of Christian hope for the future, but they now mix and mingle with worldly experience to create extra burdens and problems, too. Unless Christians violate a basic component of Jesus' teachings and give up on the world, an honest facing of events should make us, as Christians, ask, *Because the Messiah has come, in spite of the conviction that the Messiah has come, what are we to do until the Messiah comes?*

As a Christian asks that question, every realistic response forthcoming is fraught with freedom—not freedom that promises release in deliverance but rather freedom that delivers us from evil only by challenging us to resist it. Thus, if Jews sing "*Ani maamin*" today, they know that there is no Messiah for this earth, apart from the human effort that makes his coming real. The Christian who sings a version of the same song also affirms that the Messiah will tarry, just to the extent that Christians fail to be the body of Christ and fail to present their bodies "as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (Rom. 12:1).

Fueled so much by Jesus' question—"But who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15)—Holocaust flames are akin to "a refiner's fire" (Mal. 3:2): they make plain that all of us now living await redemption. Without the touches—both protesting and healing—that we place upon each other, there will be little evidence of it in our midst. Ruin and rubble are too deep for credibility to hold when Christians argue that it is clear that the Messiah has come, let alone when they advance, without protest, claims that "there is salvation in no one else" but Jesus (Acts 4:12). We are free to find nourishment and courage where and when we can, but the Holocaust is a revelation that exclusiveness must never reign again.

When Christians sing "*Ani maamin*," they should affirm that Jesus is their way, truth, and life; but they should protest from that same stance every view that would read the second part of that pronouncement—"no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6)—as forming a requirement for admission to the kingdom of God. For Christians, to sing "*Ani maamin*" is to sing on behalf of all

of humanity, not by condoning all that people do but by trying as best one can to follow Jesus and his teaching: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). To obey is to sing "*Ani maamin*" and vice versa. Taken together, those ingredients affirm the worth of life and care for and hope about its destiny. As they meet needs that cry out desperately, those qualities form the best appeal that Christians can make for others to join them.

Degradation takes such a toll that many people will find sheer foolishness in "*Ani maamin*." No matter, or rather all the matter in the world. Just because it is madness to sing "*Ani maamin*," that may be the best reason for singing it, for hearing its call, for joining in a version Jewish, Christian, or what have you. And whatever versions are offered and sung, let them do all they can to encourage one another for the sake of undermining the inclination to inflict atrocity and genocide. If we do so, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—even Jesus—and even all of us besieged by a future closing in, up, and out may be able to see God's tear-stained face. His is a face that is not deferred beyond death but that even now, by means of human acts if by no other, is found to bless and keep by lending courage, to shine and be gracious by sparking determination, and to give the peace that can come only in striving well.

Is this your blessing? That "*Ani maamin*" can still be sung? That it is still possible for persons and communities to encourage one another? That it is not too late, even after some say the Messiah has come, for the Messiah in us all to move and work in our midst? That God has not withdrawn but remains as One worth striving for and against? Could these ideas hold answers? No, not alone. But they are some of the right questions.

Three more questions make a story that Wiesel likes to tell. When the angel awakens one who has died, inquiries are made: What is your name? How did you use your life? Did you look for redemption? That's all. Quizzing about belief in God is not a top priority, nor is the Jesus question: "Who do you say that I am?" True, the questions raised are not unrelated to those issues, but they are less theoretical and more direct. And what are the answers expected by the angel? I am daughter of . . . or son of. . . . To identify oneself not as an isolated individual but as a member of a family, a people, a tradition, a cause, a humanity—that is crucial. And then, I tried to serve others. The angel looks for compassion that resists absurdity and indifference. And yes, with the first two answers as context for the third, I did expect more and a better life, even against despair.

As I have heard Wiesel tell this story, he does not elaborate what happens to those who answer well and to those who do not. But that

nonending is because the angel's questions are really questions about courage and blessing *now*, not queries for the afterlife. Thus, they lend themselves to answering by "*Ani maamin*." "What is your name?" "*Singer of 'Ani maamin*.'" "How are your using your life?" "*To sing 'Ani maamin*.'" "Are you looking for redemption?" "*Ani maamin*."

THEN WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? START WORKING

Driven from the Garden of Eden and apparently rejected by God, Adam and Eve discovered paradise lost, shattered bitterly for reasons without reason. True, they still had each other, but even that relationship was a mixed blessing. Once, the sheer goodness of life had been its own purpose. No more. The purpose of life was now a question. Then something happened: in their anguish, not only did they find themselves closer than ever before, but "suddenly they discovered a purpose to their existence: to perfect the world which until then had been no more than created."[5]

Centuries later an ageless dialogue sounded yet again.

> God, who is perfect, took six days to create a world that is not, how is that possible?
>
> Could you have done better?
>
> Yes, I think so.
>
> You could have done better? Then what are you waiting for? You don't have a minute to waste, go ahead, start working.[6]

Those lines are clear enough, but still there is confusion. Who is speaking? Is the conversation between God and humankind? And if so, who plays which part? Is the dialogue between two people, or is it carried on in one mind alone? Or is it all of these at once? No matter—all the versions make *work* the issue . . . and it is.

A question for Wiesel: What is work to you? His answer, "Justification. I have to justify every second of my life."[7] Thus we come to *Messengers of God*, a series of biblical portraits and legends that deal with work, justification, and every second of our lives and God's life. Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Abraham and Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and Job—the task that Wiesel sets for himself in this book is to tell and retell their stories. What is its premise? "Only today, after the whirlwind of fire and blood that was the Holocaust, do we grasp the full range of implications of the murder of one man by his brother, the deeper meanings of a father's questions and disconcerting silences. Only as we tell

them now, in the light of certain experiences of life and death, do we understand them" (xiii–xiv). Strange that Noah is missing—survivor of the Flood, recipient of God's rainbow promise: never again. But then it must be remembered that Wiesel is a Protestant.

Sometimes, some Christians think that category is theirs. Not only is Jewish "Protestantism" far older, but also it is often more profound than its more recent Christian versions. The latter affirm God's sovereignty, God's disappointment with human life gone wrong, and the importance of grace experienced through faith. Jewish "Protestantism" gives equal time to other themes: faithfulness must contain allegiance to God that includes disappointment with *God's* use of power. Affirmation of the importance of grace must be balanced with honesty that yearns for human well-being and thus strives for God/against God.

Messengers of God omits Noah's story on purpose. Its absence is a protest, for that story is one-sided. God sent the Flood because of displeasure with humanity. That is understandable, at least in part, but what is unacceptable is Noah's acquiescence. According to the biblical record, no words of protest on behalf of creation came from his lips. He simply followed orders, and one sad result led to another: disappointment with God was doubly warranted, not only over the sheer waste of the Flood, but because the new world that began with Noah's survival was not new enough. Its foundation was indifference. For that reason, Noah's legend is not repeated. Its lesson speaks best in silence. As for those whose stories do appear, their lives are flawed and imperfect, but all are Protestants—Jewish-style.

One thing more about Wiesel's Jewish Protestantism: it recognizes that God, too, has a Protestant face. Free as God is, God protests that human beings must release the world from bondage to evil and thereby undo much of what God has permitted. The source of all courage, God protests that we must encourage Him not to give up on the world and that we must do so by making life worth living even when it seems not to be. Claiming that God wants obedience, He apparently breaks divinely given laws by doing too little, contending in turn that the only workable corrective is for men and women to lodge their own protests through justice and compassion that take obedience one step further. Wanting reconciliation with humanity, God's seeking of us is so disturbing that it asks us to be reconciled to God in striving or not at all. Wanting love, God forces debate and defiance to be among its qualities. Hiding, God insists that He wants to be known. Aiming at victories, God asserts that the best ones come when He is defeated, when action for God/against God prevails.

Such thinking seems far removed from Protestantism of a Christian variety; it is too close to blasphemy or to no faith at all. But the point is to underscore that, for Wiesel, such expressions are not only possible from inside a community of faith; they are indispensable. If God is not seeking rebels to take a stand against misery, absurdity wins hands down. And for a person in a community of faith—Jewish or Christian—that victory is one that neither God nor humanity must be allowed to have. Of course, everything depends on *how* a rebel decides to stand. It is one thing to rebel against God or the teachings of one's tradition as steps in rejecting or denying them. It is quite another to do so as the means of pursuing them more profoundly and passionately. Who should understand this approach better than children of a God-of-protest who "chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; . . . chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; . . . chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are" (1 Cor. 1:27–28)?

Bound together strangely, with protest as love and love as protest among the most important links, God and humankind strive for and against each other. According to *Messengers of God*, the worldly task for humankind is monumental: "It is given to man to transform divine injustice into human justice and compassion" (235). Life is not fair. Although the Holocaust escalates that reality, unfairness was also a fact in the beginning. Not in detail, perhaps, but in outline things were intended to be that way. Error, deception, and guilt were originally seeds in the Garden of Eden. Bias, favoritism, hurt feelings, vengeance, and murder formed the brotherhood of Cain and Abel. Promises, tests, obedience, trust, survival, and hope—these did not make a world of rationality and justice for Abraham and Isaac, but they did create a people.

In the beginning . . . foreshadows of Auschwitz could be found. Jacob fought to secure a blessing, and the world still shakes trying to fathom its nature and portents. Wily Joseph escaped jealous brothers, worked his way to the top, handled Potiphar's wife beautifully, and made himself a *Tzaddik*—a just man. He had too much success. Unfortunately, his people paid the price. Leadership and the law are associated with Moses. But even this man, the closest to God of all, saw only God's backside and had to glimpse the future from so far away that he wondered about the One in charge. That unseen face—was it ugly beyond belief or simply blank and expressionless? Or if not those, then why was it concealed? Was it too dazzling, too sublime, or too good for a human being to see? Is it not appropriate for a creature to be so familiar with the Creator? These are partial reasons; however,

none of them is enough to satisfy one who is made to pose the question "Why?" nor is it enough for God to be self-justified *unless* the question is put to God constantly and God's returning silence is found unacceptable. And as for Job, our contemporary (Jewish or not, who knows?) whose life had been unfairly good to him, should his testing have been (unfairly?) commensurate?

Wiesel's messengers imply that one face of God is that of unfairness and injustice. That face is also a mask that reveals—through human rebellion—that God elects for us to have hard, impossible, and moral work until, and through, death. What about the face of this God who incites, permits, suffers, endures, and survives a universe fractured by the Holocaust and ruined by so many other atrocities and genocides? When everything is totaled, does the face belong to friend or foe? The messengers' answer is both . . . and the degree to which it is one or the other largely depends on how we choose to live.

Even now a protest must be entered. Holocaust experiences leave Wiesel suspicious about finding answers to ultimate questions. Answers oversimplify, falsify, and settle what is rightly unsettled and unsettling; they relax tension where it should be felt ever more. Wiesel has put the point as follows: "I have nothing against questions: they are useful. What is more, they alone are. To turn away from them would be to fail in our duty, to lose our only chance to be able one day to lead an authentic life. It is against the answers that I protest, regardless of their basis. Answers: I say there are none."[8]

That saying is hard to understand and accept. As for the understanding, Wiesel's protest is not a total rejection of answers to questions. It is directed instead at *explanations*, particularly explanations of the Holocaust that would claim to be authoritative in any final sense. More specifically, the target is theological explanations of that kind. Short of claims for finality, completeness, or obviousness, answers are not so bad or impossible. We can scarcely live without them. But the need and the protest are a refusal to rest content with any answers. Answers are made to be probed, tested, and found wanting. They exist to be questioned, to be turned into questions that force us beyond. Religiously speaking, such action means to find God in the breaking of encounters in which God seems lost from view, just as it means that we find ourselves in giving our lives for others.

In the beginning . . . at the end . . . and between, questions and uncertainties abound. Such conditions are not the demise of religious thought and practice—far from it. They are the challenges and the opportunities that clarify too easily forgotten tasks that both have had all along: "To use the experience. . . . To transmit. To communicate

by deed and word. To safeguard. To tell the tale, omitting nothing, forgetting nothing" (28). And for what purposes? Here the answer is straightforward: to liberate and heal, not by settling anything, but by caring so that people—and even God—may move each other beyond indifference, numbness, and the giving up of hope.

"One part of him yearned for God, the other for escape from God" (31)—so Wiesel describes Adam's post-fall condition. For many people—perhaps even most of them—that tension no longer exists. It relaxes in the conclusion that God is dead, or never was, and that we must place our bets on men and women or lose by default. There is truth in that view, although it is not as neat and simple as might be wished. One difficulty is that ours is a world that, arguably, is sliding away from optimism and trust in "progress" toward ever greater uncertainty. Conviction hangs suspended: will or can we come out ahead in facing twenty-first century dilemmas?

Driven, at least in part, by awareness of the Holocaust and its aftermath—including more genocide—the erosion of an optimistic humanism takes varied forms. They include increased cynicism and despair, renewed determination to restore confidence, and even revived yearning for God. Where the latter occurs, however, the need may do well to have a crucial twist, one that reinstates the tension that Adam felt. Such yearning will not be simply the response of a creature acknowledging faults penitentially to a perfect creator and then going on the way rejoicing, born again. A sense of having been defeated and judged by God may be present, but having tasted the reality of freedom and power, human yearning for God in a post-Holocaust world may well contain anger and rebellion against God for the uses made of God's own creative urges. Times of trouble are times of opportunity for religion. After Auschwitz, however, religious life that excuses God without trying God equally will fail to meet and inform raw emotion—feelings that could nourish a revival of a realistic humanism-with-God rooted in acceptance/protest of the fact that "it is given to man to transform divine injustice into human justice and compassion" (235).

Abraham was favored by God. Wiesel describes him as "a man for all seasons, blessed with all talents and virtues, deserving of every grace" (70). Abraham would be the father of a people, but the drama of his life centers on an original holocaust: God's commanding test that Abraham should offer his only son, Isaac, as a burnt offering. Such testing was contrary to reason; it was beyond reason, yet Abraham acted obediently. But the point is that Abraham's obedience was not just obedience—not as Wiesel tells the story. Abraham also tested

God to see how far God would go. Abraham won. God relented. Is this a perverse reversal of the biblical account? Perhaps, but after Auschwitz, Wiesel urges us to read the Bible with new eyes. Too often God has not relented. Abraham discovered God's guilt, but the greatness of Abraham is in his refusal to give up on God, in his protesting intercession with God for the sake of his people because of, and in spite of, the hard responsibilities laid upon them.

Moses opens up still other dimensions of the divine-human encounter. "After him," says Wiesel, "nothing was the same again" (181). Think of it: what would life be without Moses? There would be no Torah, nothing to set Jews apart from other human groups. There would be no Christianity, no antisemitism, and no Holocaust. None of us Jews or Christians would be here—not even God would exist, at least, not as those traditions have understood God. But there is Moses standing before those homeless wanderers, setting before them life and death and urging them to choose well. Moses set much of history's course.

Moses knew God as One who sets people free. He also knew God as a consuming fire and even as One who "tried to kill him" (Exod. 4:24). Far from Moses's own first choosing, "he filled two equally difficult roles: he was God's emissary to Israel and Israel's to God" (200). More than one writer contends that the God of history, not to mention God's covenants with human creatures, went up in smoke from Nazi ovens. That conclusion is hard to resist if we see the faces of God only in terms of traditional notions of full omnipotence and total goodness, but Wiesel's Moses never had such illusions. He recognized the sovereignty of God and knew that to confront God was to stand on ground that was holy but not simply good. Thus, he came to understand that to enter self-consciously into relation with God is to find oneself in a struggle for liberty that requires people to contend with God as well as with themselves and each other.

Moses discovered that God's possible relationships to history could come in many stripes and colors, and what he came to realize is that God's actual dealing with humanity reveals a God who cares, but who does so largely by leaving people to sort out a gift of freedom that is incredibly vast, wonderful, and yet immensely destructive. Directives are given and pacts are established as part of the bargain, but they increase the tension more than they dissolve it. It is amazing, then, that Moses did not find God a cosmic sadist, God's face a hollow mask of indifference broken only by mocking laughter.

What led Moses to be steadfast in refusing to give up on God? First, Moses saw that people are forgetful, foolish, and cowardly—and

even worse, they are deceitful, calculating, treacherous, and ready to sell souls for almost any price. Yet the counterpoint was that people could be different—not likely perfectible but surely less imperfect than people often are. Second, an irreplaceable source of courage to struggle for good against evil could come through a sense of covenant with God, so long as it was understood that human service for God required one to be against God, too. Moses—so often pictured as the obedient leader who constantly had to deal with a people stubborn in their rebelliousness—was actually the most profoundly rebellious of all. Without God, Moses could be nothing. With God, Moses saw ways to bring people to places from which they could at least catch glimpses of a promised land. One religious task, Wiesel's Moses suggests, is to explore whether we can see not the face of a God of history who pulls the strings of events, nor even who uses people as instruments of God's own judgment, but rather the face of One whose covenant with a world of freedom requires our moral rebellion, including protest that holds both God and humankind accountable, if that covenant's goodness is to flourish.

Visions of persuasion and power—further implications for Jewish and Christian religious life—are focused by hearing Cain speak to God: "I could bring this farce to an end; that may even be what You want, what You are driving me to. But I shall not do it, do You hear me, Master of the Universe, I shall not do it, I shall not destroy, do You hear me, I shall not kill!"[9] (64) And then what happened? Cain did it. He murdered his brother, Abel.

Why did Cain murder Abel? A common interpretation is that Cain was jealous because Abel's gift to God had been found more acceptable than his. But there is more, at least in Wiesel's version. Cain also felt himself tormented by God, pushed by God toward going against God. Not that the going against God would always be wrong, but in this case it would bring needless waste. The only hitch is that neither Cain's awareness nor God's forestalled murder. Deliver us from evil? More than Jesus, Cain may be the first author of that prayer.

Cain's perceptions about divine persuasion rub many human hopes the wrong way. God structures the world intentionally so that it may yield madness, violence, and brutality of real but unimaginable proportions. Such things do occur, but it does not seem right to accuse God. It is our fault. Thus, we tend to settle for a purely good God or no God at all. It is safer that way, more comforting. But those conclusions are problematic, especially if we take Cain to be our contemporary. We might like to think that God is always doing the best God can, but in a Holocaust Universe, a God who is doing the best God can is

either not as good as was thought or scarcely deserving of trust. What has to be asked religiously is whether we should settle for an innocent but ineffectual God or whether we must run the risks of relating to a God who is really Master of the Universe but less than perfectly good by standards we can comprehend. The fragmented, mystical quality of Wiesel's faces of God leaves any final picture clouded, but Wiesel inclines toward the second view. True, God's power is limited by virtue of the decision to underwrite human freedom, but this limiting is a self-limitation that God elects in creation, and there is ultimately nothing to necessitate that the decision cannot be modified to permit God's intervention. Moreover, although Wiesel has said that "God does not want man to suffer; man suffers against God," he has also said the following of his people: "Who didn't persecute us in history? Even God made us suffer."[10]

A God who is pure but weak or One who is powerful but of questionable virtue: toward which end of that spectrum should one lean? Is one view more faithful to facts than the other? Does one hold out more hope? We shall have to see. Meanwhile, as Wiesel seems to do, Cain likely favors the second option. Probably it would be likewise for Abel.

Messengers of God contains too many messages to relate them all in this chapter. A final messenger, however, must have his say. Wiesel gives him a voice this way: "Job spoke his outrage, his grief; he told God what He should have known for a long time, perhaps since always, that something was amiss in His universe. The just were punished for no reason, the criminal rewarded for no reason. The just and the wicked were subjected to the same fate—God having turned His back on them, on everyone. God had lost interest in His creation; He was absent" (229–30).

If Wiesel's Job, a just man, were here today in our post-Holocaust world, where atrocity and genocide rage on and on, what would he have to say? Maybe, "I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with God. . . . See, he will kill me; I have no hope; but I will defend my ways to his face" (Job 13:3, 15). Would he say, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another" (Job 19:25–27)? After God "answers" him out of the whirlwind—"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" (Job 38:4)—would Job say, "Now, having seen you with my own eyes, I retract all that I have said, and in dust and ashes I repent" (231–32; Job 42:5–6)?

The last passage is especially troubling because it suggests, at the end of the day, a simple resignation. Or is more going on there than meets the eye at first glance? Wiesel suggests that, far from resignation, Job's answer is resistance and rebellion instead, masked and expressed in hasty abdication. Ultimately, God cannot be defeated. That fact may be both Job's and our hope and despair, Job's—and our—cause for lamentation and thanksgiving. But in confessing—when God, with greater reason to do so, did not—Job, says Wiesel, "continued to interrogate God" (235).

Biblical traces in the philosophy of Wiesel, especially those involving faces, indicate that, although questioning leaves no relationships unchanged, it need not cancel them. Done well, questioning pushes relationships deeper, makes them more profound and lasting. The Lord bless you and keep you? The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you? The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace? The Holocaust and its reverberations remain: Wiesel and his protesting reading of scripture; atrocity and genocide that rage on and on; God, you, me, and us. Face-to-face encounters with all of these realities still challenge creation and its Creator to make that benediction work.

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NOTES

1. See also Psalms 34:15–16.
2. This chapter is an adaptation of portions of my book *A Consuming Fire: Encounters with Elie Wiesel and the Holocaust* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979). The chapter's biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible.
3. Other books in which Wiesel focuses explicitly on biblical figures include *Five Biblical Portraits* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame

Press, 1981), *Sages and Dreamers: Biblical, Talmudic, and Hasidic Portraits and Legends* (New York: Summit, 1991), and *Wise Men and Their Tales: Portraits of Biblical, Talmudic, and Hasidic Masters* (New York: Schocken, 2003).

4. Elie Wiesel, *Ani Maamin: A Song Lost and Found Again*. Trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Random House, 1973), 11. Further citations from this work are noted in parentheses within the essay.
5. Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God*: *Biblical Portraits and Legends*. Trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Random House, 1973), 28. Further citations from this work are noted in parentheses within the essay.
6. The dialogue quoted here is attributed to Rebbe Menahem-Mendl of Kotzk and one of his disciples. I set the lines in a context different from the one reported by Elie Wiesel. For comparison see Wiesel, *Messengers of God* 35–36.
7. See Harry James Cargas, *Harry James Cargas in Conversation with Elie Wiesel* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), 80.
8. Elie Wiesel, *Legends of Our Time*, trans. Steven Donadio (New York: Avon Books, 1972), 222.
9. In Wiesel's telling of the story, he adds the following words: "Had Cain spoken thus, how different history would have turned out!" The suggestion is that if Cain had spoken this way, there would have been no murder. My account takes another step, perhaps pushing Wiesel's idea further.
10. See Cargas 19, 20.

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Chapter 4

Mother Tongue, Holy Tongue

On Translating and Not Translating Paul Celan[1]

John Felstiner

Beneath that evergreen energy we have for perfecting our English versions of Charles Baudelaire, Rainer Maria Rilke, García Lorca and others, there runs a counternotion, a reluctance to translate authentic verse at all. Let me not translate, not render the precarious adequacy of poetic language even more precarious. And when a writer must remake his native tongue to speak what he has to, as Paul Celan did with German, and when he builds into his speech a drastic questioning of language and poetry themselves, then I feel the translator's reluctance all the more keenly, almost as a matter of principle.

Franz Rosenzweig, before he and Martin Buber began translating—or better, voicing—the Hebrew Bible into German, wrote to Gershom Scholem, "Only someone profoundly convinced of its impossibility can undertake translation."[2] In what now appears to me an instance of Rosenzweig's idea, I have become profoundly convinced of the impossibility of translation by the very possibility of not translating, indeed by the sheer necessity of it at times. What convinces me is the inalienable presence of Hebrew words in Paul Celan's German poems. These words almost all derive from scripture or liturgy, and even when

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they are simply proper names of people or places, the Hebrew does not merely afford me a breather, a translator's holiday. Really, it resounds with purpose.

In the midst of a late poem Celan wrote that bears on the European Jewish catastrophe, like virtually everything he wrote, there occurs the Hebrew word *Aschrei*, or "happy"—the title and opening of a familiar morning and evening prayer drawn from the Psalms: "Happy are they that dwell in Thy house, They are ever praising Thee."[3] Celan calls the line immediately following *Aschrei* "a word without meaning, transtibetan." This is partly because no Jewish communal presence was left in Germany, much less any such happiness for one person; and partly, I think, because *Aschrei* must sound strange and distant to Celan's German listeners as their tongue does not comprehend just what he has to say. No thoughtful translator of this poem would render *Aschrei* into the vernacular with the German verse surrounding it any more than you would expect to see *Shantih* taken out of Sanskrit at the end of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Still the mere presence of Hebrew in Celan's poems opens deeper questions than whether or not to render it. When I translate his poem, and refrain from translating *Aschrei*—when I leave the Hebrew thanksgiving intact, I am assenting to Celan's paradoxical gesture of communicability hidden within incommunicability, of communion within exile. Or to put the paradox another way, the Hebrew makes up for that answerlessness that, Celan said, German passed through during the Nazi years; and yet *Aschrei*, isolated by double spacing from the German verses around it, can also seem palpably forlorn. In my version, I am perpetuating Celan's gesture. For if the Hebrew word says tacitly, "Here something cannot be uttered in German," then I should probably not utter it in English either, in the American Diaspora. Exile implies a strangeness that may preclude the assimilative act of translation. As for that even stranger moment, not in exile but in the land of Israel, when a Hebrew translator lights upon *Aschrei*, that question needs a longer look at the poet and the poetry.

A Jew born in 1920 in Czernowitz grew up in touch with four languages. Bukovina, of which Czernowitz was the capital, had just passed from Austria to Rumania. Thus, Celan's mother tongue was German, he spoke Rumanian at school, had a fairly intensive Hebrew education until his Bar Mitzvah, and—in Czernowitz, half of whose population was Jewish—was also exposed to Yiddish. In his teens he ardently read "Verlaine and Rimbaud, and also began deciphering Shakespeare in the original. He went to France in 1938 to study medicine, and then, just before the war, came home and took up Romance languages. Amid the stringencies of the 1940 Soviet occupation, he learned

Russian. By the age of twenty, then, Celan's linguistic genius brought him to Rumanian, Hebrew, French, English, and Russian-languages from which he later published verse and prose translations."

But in his early twenties, Celan suffered the massive injury destined for Jews at that time. In July 1941 an SS *Einsatzgruppe*, aided avidly by Rumanian troops, began destroying Czernowitz's Jewish community. Celan spent eighteen months in labor camps; during that time he heard that his parents, exhausted by forced labor in the Ukraine, had been executed. In the camps, he also wrote poems, translated Shakespeare sonnets, and learned some Yiddish. When asked by friends at home what work he had to do, all he would say was *Schaufeln*! "Shoveling!"[4]

In Celan's first published poem *Todesfuge*, and particularly in the fatal repetitions of this "Deathfugue," his private suffering found a plural voice:

> Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening
> we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night
> we drink and we drink
> We shovel a grave in the sky there you won't feel too cramped.[5]

Written toward the end of 1944, when Jews were coming back to Celan's native Bukovina and telling their stories, this astonishing lyric somehow gave voice to the unspeakable in highly articulated stanzas. *Todesfuge* eventually became ensconced in anthologies and schoolbooks, in its way the "*Guernica*" of the leading postwar German language poet.

The fugue-like repetitions in *Todesfuge*, its most notorious quality, open a way for me to reverse the process of translation, to recover that loss at least. One motif, *Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland*, recurs four times during the poem (and has echoed ever since in German anthology titles, chapter headings, and epigraphs). After translating it the first time, "Death is a master from *Deutschland*," I find that the next time round, I can bring back a touch of German without baffling the reader—"Death is a master *aus Deutschland*." Then again the next time, a bit more—"Death is *ein Meister aus Deutschland*"—until finally in my version the camp commandant "plays with his vipers and daydreams *der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland*." Borges's character, Pierre Menard, translator par excellence, once "wrote" two chapters of *Don Quixote*, in Spanish. Here it is Celan's fugue that lets me render German back into German.

The word *Deutschland* has actually figured twice earlier in *Todesfuge*, when the commandant writes home *nach Deutschland*—"to Germany," one would say, except that I would rather not. In the process

of translating, I have almost always found myself justifying an interesting choice on expedient as well as essential grounds—that is, prosodic as well as semantic. Celan's commandant *schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach Deutschland*. The abrupt alliteration and inexorable rhythm would stumble if I said he "writes when it grows dark to Germany your golden hair Marguerite." What's more, for twenty-five years after composing *Todesfuge*, Celan never again said *Deutschland* in a poem, as if that one utterance had used up its meaning for him.[6] Also, we know the word well enough already in *Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles*. So I leave it to sound and resound in German: he "writes when it grows dark to Deutschland."

Another word in this poem resounds with a communal force: *Sulamith*, the poem's last word, which by then has figured three times in a kind of couplet or, more exactly, a modulation:

dein goldenes Haar Margarete
dein aschenes Haar Sulamith.

In the first verse, the camp commandant writes home to his fair-haired darling, an ideal Romantic composite of Faust's Gretchen and Heinrich Heine's Lorelei. Then another voice calls to the ashen-haired *Sulamith*, a cherished name from the Songs of Songs (7:1): "Return, return, O Shulamite; return, return, that we may look upon thee." She is the beloved, a comely maiden the hair of whose head is like purple, a princess, the Jewish people itself and thus a promise of return from exile. Because the name Shulamith occurs only this once in the Bible, its meaning lies open: perhaps from the Hebrew root *shalem*, "complete," "whole," akin to *shalom*, "peace," and to *Shlomo*, "Solomon"; or perhaps from *Yerushalayim*, "Jerusalem." Whatever rich sense we give her, *Todesfuge* makes her the archetype of Jewish longing, now burnt to ash.

But why bring up so much around a name that in any event needs only to be transliterated? Because the full process of translation, I believe, entails all that and more. It helps to know, for instance, that in 1806 the first German language periodical for Jews, vouching for that famous symbiosis, was called *Sulamith*.[7] If the two lines closing Celan's fugue form a chord at all, it cannot mean, as German critics sometimes like to think, that Margarete and Sulamith "once again extend their hands to each other."[8] In fact, an English couplet works nicely to seal that coexistence in all its caustic finality:

your golden hair Marguerite
your ashen hair Shulamith.

Charles Gounod's great *Faust* and Hector Berlioz's as well have always romantically heightened the name Marguerite for me, and from that height we can get the irony of a rhyme by pronouncing the poem's last word as in Hebrew.

This motif too, as it recurs during the poem, I let find its way back home. Throughout "Deathfugue" the two voices tag and shadow each other—"your golden hair Marguerite / your ashen hair Shulamith"—so that word by word each time they occur, I can veer them back round to German by the poem's close: *dein goldenes Haar Margarete, dein aschenes Haar Sulamith.* What is happening here? Perhaps the American reader gets, along with a touch of the original, an uncanny sense of German invading and occupying this poem. My translating and then not translating suggests a radical ambivalence in Celan's relation to the German language. For a man who lost his family, homeland, and Jewish culture, and for a poet whose *Muttersprache*, or mother tongue, was the only thing not taken, it seems good to make up the loss in translation, at least, by rendering this poem back to him. Yet the language that fashioned a jargon for genocide "had to pass through a frightful muting," Celan once said, "pass through the thousand darknesses of death-bringing speech."[9] He could never forget this; no poem goes free of it:

> You my words with me go-
> ing crippled, you
> my straight ones.[10]

So reverting to German as I translate *Todesfuge* may actually expose the ambivalence of a poet who let more and more darkness and silence into that language.

In 1948, having emigrated from Bukovina to Bucharest and then fled to Vienna, Celan finally settled in Paris. During the 1950s he studied Germanic philology, married the gifted graphic artist Gisele Lestrange, translated from various languages (for a living sometimes, or—brilliantly—for the love of it), and wrote and published his own work. His poems at this time become condensed in both syntax and cadence and grow more conscious of the "word" they have to deal in. But one thing they scarcely do during the '50s, and that will mark Celan's lyrics as of 1960, is to voice foreign terms amid and against the German. Only the 1954 poem "*Schibboleth*," with its Hebraic title and a Spanish rallying cry, breaks into words that do not bear translating.[11] After evoking the destruction of two popular movements—the Austrian Socialists in 1934, the Spanish Republicans in 1939—Celan says,

> Cry it, the shibboleth,
> into the alien homeland:
> February. No pasarán.

Since the Nazis had a hand in both destructions, this passage takes on sharp overtones of Celan's own homeland made alien. But against the Nazis in Bukovina, such a cry as *No pasarán*, "They shall not get through," could hardly have been raised, as it was in Spain and originally at Verdun. To find a way through his memories, he thinks of the "*shibboleth*," a password the tribe of Gilead used against Ephraim, who mispronounced it "*sibboleth*" (Judg. 12:4–6). German could have provided a good word for "*shibboleth*," so perhaps the Hebrew term serves as password for Celan himself: the word may give him safe passage back through a destructive history. And because German has not assimilated the word as much as English has, *Schibboleth* rings even more Hebraic in Celan's verse than in my translation.

By the late '50s, the European Jewish catastrophe seems to have overtaken Celan a second time, with distinct effects on his writing. Two things strike me about the poems of this period collected in *Die Niemandsrose* ("The No-One's Rose," 1963): they practically crackle with polyglot energy, and they turn repeatedly to Jewish themes. Almost nothing like this shows up in Celan's earlier work, and I wonder how the two phenomena are connected. Certainly they both enliven the activity of translating.

We hear in these poems—along with Celan's odd compounds and fractures, disruptive syntax, repeated or truncated syllables, and his arcane, archaic, technical, playful, and neologized German—we hear "*baobab*," "*menhir*"; Friedrich Hölderlin's babble, "*Pallaksch*," "*Kannitverstan*"; a nonsense title, "*Huhediblu*"; poems called "*Radix, Matrix*," "*Havdalah*," and "*Mandorla*"; we hear "*Pneuma*," "*Anabasis*," and "*Benedicta*." We see three poems with French titles and more with French quotes in them, others with Latin, Spanish, English, Russian, Hebrew, and Yiddish. People's names crop up in the poems (Hölderlin, Nelly Sachs, Paul Celan, Heinrich Heine, Marina Tsvetaeva, Osip Mandelstam [and Mandelbaum, Bandelmaum, Mandeltraum, Trandelmaum, Machandelbaum, and Chandelbaum], Abadias, Berenice, Petrarch, Abraham, Jesse, Jacob, Rabbi Judah Loew, and Orion) as well as the names of places (Zurich, Paris, Eden, Tübingen, Czernowitz near Sadagora, Edom, Friuli, Siberia, Brest, Kermorvan, Huesca, Petropolis, Tuscany, Warsaw, Vitebsk, Cracow, Russia, Karelinia, Moravia, Prague, Normandy, Bohemia, Tarussa, Pont Mirabeau,

Niemen, Elbe, Rhine, Oka, Kolchis), and then one proper noun that is both a person and a place—Babel.

The semantic explosion in this one book of Celan's lands his translator (like his reader) smack amid questions of linguistic currency and poetic intelligibility. Take any of the words that spot Celan's verse—Pallaksch, Mandelstam, Rabbi Loew, or Czernowitz near Sadagora. A translator can only carry them across as such and let the reader make the most of them. Yet with these words, Celan was not dealing in a universal currency, such as William Butler Yeats's Byzantium, Ezra Pound's Cathay, T. S. Eliot's Carthage, Robert Lowell's Jonathan Edwards, to which we all have (or, we're told, ought to have) access. The people and places Celan names, the odd words or phrases he cites, he derives most specifically. Thus in his "Rogues' and Swindlers' Ditty Sung in Paris Emprès Pontoise by Paul Celan from Czernowitz near Sadagora," you may—after hearing an echo of Villon—recognize Czernowitz as the eastern outpost of the Austrian empire, overrun by Soviet, then Nazi, then Soviet forces again, and you may even know that Sadagora, the town Celan styles as a major city "near" which Czernowitz lies, was a Hasidic center until the war.[12] But this playful title enfolds a more specific loss, that of the poet's mother, who was born in Sadagora. Similarly, you may well see that Celan's poem "Zurich, At the Stork," dedicated to Nelly Sachs, arises from a meeting with her at that hotel.[13] But the poem's full sense emerges if you know that when Sachs was awarded a German literary prize, she went to stay in Zurich and crossed the Bodensee to receive it, so as not to pass a night on German soil.[14] Although the translator may remain innocent of such knowledge and still translate, the deepest reaches of specific truth in words such as Sadagora and Zurich can subtly affect the way one renders the rest of the poem that does need translating. After all, it was such specific truths that incited virtually every one of Celan's poems.

Bearing the imprint of specific truths, his poems of the early '60s contain a number of truly opaque terms and citations. Although these invite translation or at least annotation, possibly their very strangeness matters as much as their meaning. For one poem, Celan takes an epigraph from Marina Tsvetaeva and leaves it in Cyrillic.[15] An English (and a French) version of Celan's poem actually translate the epigraph, "All poets are Jews."[16] But I suspect that he meant his audience to stumble over that Russian saying of Tsvetaeva's, who took her own life in 1941 and who, like Mandelstam, was disregarded after the war. I suspect that the epigraph helped Celan in "this so golden West," as he called it, to insist on his East European identity. In 1962, he liked to sign his letters "*Russkij pöet in partibus nemetskich infidelium*,"

or "Russian poet among the German heathen"; that year marks the height of Celan's own yearning toward the east.[17] What's more, Tsvetaeva's phrase, *Syuh paetty Zhidy*, really means "All poets are Yids"—in "this most Christian of worlds," as she says. Thus Celan's Cyrillic epigraph also asserts—in a language his German admirers would have trouble perceiving—that his poetry drew its strength from a defiant Jewishness.

Although Hebraic words do occur in Celan's verses before 1960, they are either names—Jacob, Ruth, Naomi, Miriam—or more or less assimilated terms—*shibboleth*, amen, hosanna. In *Die Niemandsrose*, for the first time, he needs the Hebrew tongue itself, he needs words fully current inside that tongue but not outside it. Clearly these words must keep their integrity, and anyway, most of them hardly bear translating. "Hawdalah," entitling a poem to his mother, means "difference," but really refers to the Saturday evening ritual dividing the Sabbath from the working week (GW, I, p. 259).[18] *Tekiah!* in another poem, means "blast" but allows of no real translation, being the first ceremonial blowing of the *shofar*, a call to renewal, at the New Year's service.[19] In a poem called "Tabernacle Window," Celan gathers the lost world of European Jewry, tracing them to Vitebsk and to "Ghetto and Eden."[20] Then, with something like Kabbalistic inspiration, the poet

> paces off
> the letters and the mortal-
> immortal soul of the letters,
> goes to Aleph and Yud . . .

That is, the poet goes to the primal unvoiced letter, *Aleph*, which also begins God's first commandment, and to the smallest letter, *Yud*, which begins the tetragrammaton and in German also means "Jew." Finally, having seen the Star of David flare up and die down, the speaker arrives at

> Beth,—that is
> the house, where the table stands with
> the light and the Light.

Since *Beth*, the first letter in the Bible, also means "house," Celan is translating for us on the spot, bringing us home to the Sabbath evening table with its candlelight reflecting the light of redemption. In going "to Ghetto and Eden," this poem traverses the entire arc of

Jewish time, and it does so *literally*, going "to *Aleph* and *Yud*," lest the same ones who sowed black hail in Vitebsk, Celan says, "write it away" again. What can these monads of Judaic experience—Eden, David, Vitebsk, Ghetto, *Aleph, Beth, Yud*—have meant in Germany of the early '60s, witnessing a surge of neo-Nazism and anti-Semitism at home and the Eichmann trial in Israel? Celan's poem gives a home to these words, whose untranslatability marks them also as unassimilable by the German reader.

And why, then, does a burst of polyglot energy in Celan's work seem to synchronize with an access of Jewish consciousness? Together the two phenomena bespeak an attempt "to orient myself," as he said in 1958, "to explore where I was and was meant to go."[21] Certainly he found himself seeking out new verbal resources because he felt the lyric vocabulary was inadequate, exhausted. What's more to the point, the seven or eight other languages migrating into his verse call into question the German around them; they render the mother tongue problematic.

Years before, in an elegy to his mother, Celan had asked, "And mother, you bear it, as once on a time— / the gentle, the German, the pain-laden rhyme?"[22] In 1961, when questioned by a Paris bookseller about bilingualness, he replied, "I do not believe in bilingualness in poetry . . . Poetry—that is the fateful uniqueness of language."[23] That fatefulness, Celan's orphaning and exile within his mother tongue, overtook him by 1960. The idiosyncratic quotes from his reading or his memory, the people and place names bridging Western to Eastern Europe, the foreign phrases—whatever else they signify, these identifying marks all show Celan testifying insistently to the distinctiveness of his own experience. And that experience involved wandering in exile—as Eliot might invidiously have put it "Czernowitz Semite Parisian." Hasidic Bukovina, Celan told a German audience in 1958, had been "a region in which human beings and books used to live."[24] Like the language in his poems, the Jewishness in them traces a meridian that stems from "Czernowitz near Sadagora" and returns to that origin by way of what was lost.

Take *Die Schleuse*, "The Sluice," whose closing stanzas voice loss and recovery in the same breath:

An	To
die Vielgötterei	poly-goddedness
verlor ich ein Wort, das mich suchte:	I lost a word that sought me:
Kaddisch.	*Kaddish.*

Durch
die Schleuse mußt ich,
das Wort in die Salzflut *zurück-*
und hinaus- and
hinüberzuretten:
Jiskor.

Through
the sluice I had to go,
to salvage the word back into
and out of and across the salt
flood:
Yizkor.[2]

By converting, so to speak, from German to Hebrew, Celan's stanzas repossess what was taken from him—taken, specifically, by the eradication of a culture and the murder of a people. But even as the aura of a prewar Jewish childhood forms around the Hebrew words, in themselves they denote human loss. *Kaddish*, Aramaic for "holy," is a prayer for the dead and actually a praise of God, traditionally recited by the surviving son. *Yizkor*, Hebrew for "May He remember," identifies a service commemorating the dead. As a translator making my way through the arduous wording of Celan's closing stanza—a sort of sluice in itself—I feel his loss but feel relief as well in arriving at *Yizkor*, the ritual word preserved in italics, strange to German listeners perhaps, but free and clear of translation, inalienable because it is native to Jews everywhere.

Inalienable, beneath what might seem a mishmash of people, places, and tags from other tongues, Celan was orienting himself, seeking what was truly and inalienably his. In the summer of 1959 he composed his "Conversation in the Mountains," a beautifully cadenced prose dialogue between two Jewish "babblers" whose encounter points Celan "on the way to myself."[26] Then in a poem called "Radix, Matrix," he speaks to his mother as the womb of "that race, that murdered one."[27] He finds words to survive deracination and eradication:

Root.
Root of Abraham. Root of Jesse. No-one's
Root—O
ours.

If we ask what made Celan, around 1960, feel such a sharp tug from the Jewish past—we find various causes. He had encountered "inalienable truth" in Osip Mandelstam's writing, passionately translated many of Mandelstam's poems, and later dedicated *Die Niemandsrose* to him; he was reading Buber and other Jewish thinkers again and absorbing Gershom Scholem's studies on the Kabbalah.[28] Meanwhile Celan began to suspect the German public of adopting "Todesfuge" as an artful, assimilable reparations-poem. And when a groundless plagiarism charge by

Yvan Goll's widow was revived in the German press in 1960, he felt this campaign as "clearly connected" to a recrudescent German anti-Semitism and neo-Nazism, which were by then afflicting him terribly.[29]

During this anguished time, Celan somehow did write the poems in *Die Niemandsrose*. "With art go into your very selfmost straits," he said in his great "Meridian" speech of 1960, "and set yourself free."[30] His letters of the time bear witness to the straits he was passing through, the narrow path "to *Aleph* and *Yud*" of poems that salvage their remnant of hope: "Root of Abraham. Root of Jesse. No-one's / root—O / ours." In particular, I think the genesis of these poems emerges dramatically from two very different kinds of letters Celan was writing to Alfred Margul-Sperber and to Nelly Sachs. To Sperber, a Rumanian Jewish poet-mentor whom Celan loved deeply, he recounted bitterly the campaign against him in Germany. To Sachs, a fellow-exile who, twenty years after fleeing Nazism, fell prey to persecution mania, Celan was tender, jocular, and heartening. Sometimes—and here I sense the genesis of his poems—the two sorts of letters come within days of each other.

On July 20, 1960, Celan writes to Nelly Sachs from Brittany about bicycling with his five-year-old son Eric: "You certainly can't ride as well as Eric—only a few can do that!—that's probably why you write poems. Which, I won't hide it from you, is far less difficult."[31] On July 28, he sends her a piece of plane-tree bark with orders to grasp it between thumb and forefinger and think of something good. And "*poems*," he says, "especially yours, are even better plane-tree bark. So please, write again—and let it find its way into our hands." But then two days later, Celan is writing bitterly to Sperber about "the machinations of neo-Nazism in the Federal Republic" and the consequent "attempt to destroy me and my poems" by a plagiarism campaign.[32] "Hitlerism reborn," he says, accuses him of "charlatanism," of "duping the so good people of Germany by . . . depicting in such a tragic way the legend of my parents murdered by the Nazis." Yet a week later he writes to Nelly Sachs: "I even see the words waiting for you. Nelly, the words, which you inspire with yourself and your new brightnesses—to all our joy." And ten days later, "Look, Nelly, the net is pulled away! . . . Look: it's getting light, you're breathing, you're breathing free."

Undoubtedly Paul Celan was also speaking to himself when he urged this on Nelly Sachs. Here, in these letters, one can see a psychic and lyric genesis: anguish barely stayed by hope. Around 1961 Celan wrote a poem whose language—whose languages, I should say—enact the dynamics of someone whose survival remains predicated upon salvaging the word. This poem, "Benedicta," takes its title from the

Latin Ave Maria and its epigraph from a Yiddish ghetto song, touches on the Greek for "spirit," and plays the German-Catholic against the Yiddish Word for "blessed."[33] Yet despite, or rather because of, this linguistic maneuvering, the poem moves compellingly—and tries the translator as it goes:

BENEDICTA

Zu ken men arojfgejn in
himel arajn
Un fregn baj got zu's darf
asoj sajn?
Jiddisches Lied

Ge-
trunken hast du,
was von den Vätern mir kam
und von jenseits der Väter:
——Pneuma.

Ge-
segnet seist du, von weit her, von
jenseits meiner
erloschenen Finger.

Gesegnet: Du, die ihn grüßte,
den Teneberleuchter.

Du, die du's hörtest, da ich
die Augen schloß, wie
die Stimme nicht weitersang
nach:
's mus asoj sajn.

Du, die du's sprachst in den
augen-
losen, den Auen:
dasselbe, das andere
Wort:
Gebenedeiet.

Ge-
trunken.
Ge-
segnet.
Ge
bentscht.

BENEDICTA

Tsu ken men aroyfgeyn
im himl arayn
Un fregn bay got tsu s'darf
azoy zayn?
Yiddish Song

Hast—
thou hast drunk,
what came from our fathers to me
and from beyond our fathers:
——, Pneuma.

Bless-
ed be thou, from afar, from
beyond my
guttered fingers.

Blessed: you that hailed it,
the Tenebrae lamp.

You that heard it, when I shut my
eyes, as
the voice ceased singing
after
's mus azoy zayn.

You that spoke it among the
sight-
less ones, the pastures:
the same, the other
word
Blessèd.

Drunk-
en.
Bless-
ed.
Ge-
bentsht.

Celan's Latin title needs no translation and actually resists it. He wanted precisely that traditional, hierarchic, and sacral aura from the Roman Catholic Ave Maria, *Benedicta tu*, "Blessed art thou among women," just as the title of an earlier poem, "Tenebrae," sets that somber office of Holy Week above his own verses depicting the Jews' excruciating death.[34] From the title "Benedicta" Celan's lines immediately move into ambiguity, addressing a woman—Mary, yet perhaps his mother or his wife, and possibly Nelly Sachs, all of whom descend from "beyond our fathers." She has drunk "- -, Pneuma." Celan told one critic his printer originally dropped the comma between "Pneuma" and the dashes preceding it.[35] Thus those dashes signify an omission. I'm tempted to supply, silently, the Hebrew *Ruach* from Genesis 1, which like "Pneuma," its Greek translation, means "wind," "breath," or "spirit." In any event, "Pneuma" may well have come to the poet from Scholem's 1960 study of Kabbalism, where on the Sabbath "a special pneuma, the 'Sabbath-soul,' enters into the believer."[36] And some years later Celan called Jewishness "not so much the *theme* but rather the *soul of my poetry*"—"*pneuma*."[37]

Having spoken "Benedicta" and "Pneuma," from the Vulgate and the Septuagint, Celan makes his way toward Jewish utterance. His next phrase, *Gesegnet seist du*, speaks as from God to humankind or a parent to a child: "Be thou blessed." Then, after the "Tenebrae lamp" moves us from Annunciation to Passion (by way of *Leuchter*, which also means "Menorah," a Jewish candelabrum), Celan's fourth stanza brings back another sort of sacred speech from his own experience: the Yiddish epigraph qualifying the whole poem's theology. But should I translate the Yiddish? Yes, and no—depending on what we're to make of it. This song, adopted in the Vilna ghetto, laments the Jews' imprisonment and wonders about going up to heaven to ask God why things should be thus.[38] Certainly Celan's German readers would catch the Yiddish, though not without a sense, at times condescending, of its strangeness. There is no American equivalent—Black and Chicano dialects do not exactly provide one with the peculiar linguistic and ultimately tragic historical relation of Yiddish to German. So let it be, let the epigraph remain dimly understood yet unassimilated. To translate it would rob this poem of its particularity, especially when the song's refrain comes back, changed now from the question "should it be so?" to "it must be so," *'s mus azoy zayn*. Celan hadn't very much use for Yiddish before the war, but for months in labor camp he heard the language. That association must have taken root in him.

It is Jewish victims he means, in the next stanza, by "the sightless ones," modeled on the *Shechinah*, God's indwelling female presence in the world, who is said to have wept out her eyes in exile. And when Celan echoes these *augenlosen* with *Auen*, it's worth rendering that as "pastures" rather than "meadows" so as to touch off the irony of Luther's twenty-third psalm with its promise of comfort in the valley of the shadow of death. Who then spoke this benediction? The Holy Ghost said to Mary, *Benedicta tu, Gebenedeiet bist du*, "Blessed art thou among women." But the poem has been converging on a Jewish fate and cannot end with *Gebenedeiet*—a verb, incidentally, that Celan used only once before, linking his parents' murder with the 1648 Cossack massacres: "Jacob's heavenly blood, blessed with axes."[39] Here he calls *Gebenedeiet* "the same, the other / word"—semantically the same, a cognate, yet profoundly other than *Gebentsht*, the Yiddish for "blessed" that Celan ends *Benedicta* with. *Gebentsht*, like the ghetto song, must be left intact, because it voices a desperate blessing obliterated in so many mouths.

"Perhaps I am one of the last who must live out to the end the destiny of the Jewish spirit in Europe," Celan wrote in 1948 to relatives in the new state of Israel.[40] That destiny crystallized for him when he first met with Nelly Sachs in May 1960. Shortly before, she had addressed him in a letter: "Paul Celan, dear Paul Celan, blessed by Bach and Hölderlin, blessed by the Hasidim."[41] Their meeting in Zurich, to judge from the poem Celan dedicated to it a few weeks later, does seem to have brought out postwar Hö1derlin"s struggle with the joys of Bach and Hasidism.[42] Celan says,

> The talk was of your God, I spoke against him, I
> let the heart that I had,
> hope:
> for
> his highest, death-rattled, his
> wrangling word.

Evidently he found something too redemptive and transfiguring in Nelly Sachs's vision of the European Jewish catastrophe. Yet Celan's poem notes something else:

> On the day of an ascension, the
> Minster stood over there, it came
> with some gold across the water.

It was late May—Christ ascending into heaven, Zurich's great cathedral mirrored in the river—and the two Jewish poets saw this sign from another source, a light shining over the water toward them. Soon afterwards, Sachs visited Celan's home in Paris, and "as we spoke a second time about God," he reminded her that summer, again "the golden gleam stood on the wail." Seven years later he still remembered this light: "Once, in a poem," he writes her, "there even came to me, by way of the Hebrew, a name for it."[43]

The poem Celan means, an unusually heart-lifting one, arose around the time of Israel's astounding victory in the 1967 war:

NAH, IM AORTENBOGEN,	CLOSE IN THE AORTA'S ARCH,
im Hellblut:	in bright blood
das Hellwort.	the bright word.
Mutter Rahel	Mother Rachel
weint nicht-mehr.	weeps no more.
Rübergetragen	Carried across,
alles Geweinte.	all that was wept.
Still, in den Kranzarterien,	Still, in the coronary arteries,
unumschnürt:	unconstricted
Ziw, jenes Licht.	*Ziv*, that light.[44]

Here Celan's taproot to Kabbalistic sources passed by way of Gershom Scholem, who describes the *Shechinah* as God's presence among the suffering and the exiled of Israel, and as Mother Rachel weeping for her children. Scholem says this presence "can reveal itself in an unearthly brightness—this is often called the light (*Ziv*) of the *Shechinah*."[45] Now *Ziv*, a far more esoteric term than *Aschrei*, *Tekiah*, *Yizkor*, *Kaddish*, *Havdalah* and the others, could come through clearly to only a handful of Celan's readers. Perhaps for that reason, he himself half-translates it for us within the poem: "*Ziw*, jenes Licht," Celan says, "*Ziv*, that light." But why mention the Hebrew when he will translate it anyway? Because, in effect, *Licht* or "light" scarcely does justice to the spiritual provenance of *Ziv*—"divine effulgence" would be more like it—and saying "that light" only gestures toward an ineffable experience. Clearly Celan is grateful that the name "came to me," as he says, "by way of the Hebrew," and it counts immensely for him to summon in one word an inheritance of Judaic mysticism that might embrace his mother along with Rachel and the *Shechinah*. Above all, to name that radiance puts Celan, who had absorbed Walter Benjamin's thoughts on

language, in communion with the naming power of God. And *Ziv* does not bear translating because, in the Kabbalist view, Hebrew is itself the *Ursprache*, the primal speech toward which a translation say, between German and English—can orient us.

Whether or not the Six-Day War evoked all this, the event did inspire another poem that summons Jewish tradition to create an image of return from exile. On June 7 and 8, 1967, Celan wrote *Denk dir*:

> Just think:
> the peat-bog soldier of Masada
> makes a home for himself . . .
> those with no eyes and no shape lead you free through the tumult.[46]

By naming Masada, where Jewish zealots tragically resisted Rome, and literally in the same breath citing the "peat-bog soldier" of the Nazi camps, Celan links up a redemptive scheme in which an exiled people repossess Jerusalem. Two years later, while visiting the state of Israel for the first time, he ended his recitals in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv with *Denk dir*.[47] He also favored there another poem he had written shortly before coming: *Du sei wie du*, "You be like you," a prophetic lyric that creates a proof of (and against) translation.[48]

What *Du sei wie du* demands, only the reader as translator can attempt to fulfill. The poem intersperses Celan's lines with Meister Eckhart's medieval German version of Isaiah and then closes with Isaiah's words themselves, preempting Eckhart by translating him back into Hebrew:

DU SEI WIE DU, immer.	YOU BE LIKE YOU, ever.
Stant vp Jherosalem inde	*Ryse up Ierosalem and*
erheyff dich	*rowse thyselfe*
Auch wer das Band	The very one who slashed
zerschnitt zu dir hin,	the bond unto you,
inde wirt	*and becum*
erluchtet	*yllumyned*
knüpfte es neu, in	knotted it new,
der Gehugnis,	in myndignesse,
Schlammbrocken,	spills of mire I swallowed,
schluckt ich, im Turm	inside the tower,
Sprache, Finster-Lisene,	speech, dark-buttress,
kumi	*kumi*
ori.	*ori.*

Really, those last two words are translating Eckhart's Middle High German imperceptibly, and unless you recognize the Hebrew of Isaiah 60—or unless you remember *kumi ori*, as I like to think Paul Celan did—from the traditional Sabbath hymn *Lecha dodi*, which beckons the *Shechinah* and her people from exile: "Awake! Awake! for thy light is come. *Arise, shine*"—*kumi ori.* Celan's poem moves from a German mystic preaching Isaiah, through a Jewish poet tying his bond anew, to an image of speech itself buttressing the dark. If the medieval German calls to mind Eliot and Pound's practice of mythic citation, then Celan's *kumi ori* goes even deeper, I think. By speaking Isaiah's prophetic imperative to close *Du sei wie du*, the poet binds himself to a people that have stayed like themselves chiefly through the spoken word. Take the Biblical passage immediately preceding *kumi ori*—Isaiah 59:21: "This is my covenant with them, saith the Lord: My spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed, saith the Lord, from henceforth and for ever." Then chapter 60 begins, *kumi ori.*

Whether translating medieval German into Hebrew, as in *Du sei wie du*, or Latin into Yiddish, as in *Benedicta*, or Hebrew into German, as in "Tabernacle Window" and "Close, in the aorta's arch"—in these instances, as well as in his own brilliant versions of Mandelstam, William Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, Arthur Rimbaud, and others, Celan stays alive to translation as a recovery and renascence of the word. In particular, the Hebrew word in its own way mattered to him. In a handful of poems like *Du sei wie du*, Hebrew is the *wahr gebliebene, wahr gewordene*, if I may adopt that phrase from elsewhere in *Die Niemandsrose*—it is speech that "remained true" and thus "became true."[49]

Celan's poem says, "You be like you, ever": Isaiah's words need not be translated—the poet via Eckhart has already done that—and need not even be understood. The point is that Celan speaks them: in "myndignesse" or mindfulness, having swallowed the mire of exile, he finds the words in his mouth. For a gloss, I go back to Franz Rosenzweig, who once made a German version of the Hebrew Grace After Meals. He said he would hide his translation from a Jewish guest who could just barely read Hebrew, because "the least comprehended Hebrew word gives him more than the finest translation." Rosenzweig calls the need for translation "our predicament": German-speaking Jews "cannot avoid this path that

again and again leads us out of what is alien and into our own"—into touch, I think he means, with Judaism.[50]

Even Rosenzweig—in the suffering and paralysis of his last years, painstakingly translating the Bible through Isaiah before he died in 1929—could scarcely have imagined the path back from "what is alien" of someone like Paul Celan after the Holocaust. Certainly the poems ending in *Ziv* and *kumi ori* have a bold ring that is untypical for Celan during the late '60s. In the Hebrew, for a brief moment, his voice seems whole and syntactically free.

A test of whether he himself was up to a luminous imperative such as *kumi ori* came in his long-awaited visit to Israel in October 1969. His friends there, survivors, and others from prewar Czernowitz, saw him engaged intensively with the Israeli experience and also almost lighthearted. For one friend there he wrote out *Du sei wie du*, and instead of putting *kumi ori* in transliterated form, as the published version has it, he wrote a Hebrew script that looked perfectly natural to him. Only in the land of Israel, it would seem, could the holy tongue, the father tongue, take on the intimacy of a mother tongue. Speaking to a Tel Aviv audience, in one and the same sentence, Celan linked three revealing thoughts: "I think I have a notion of what Jewish loneliness can be, and I sense as well . . . a thankful pride in every homegrown green thing that stands ready to refresh anyone who comes by; just as I take joy in every newly won, self-feelingful, fulfilled word that rushes up to strengthen those who turn toward it."[51] Celan had turned toward the Hebrew word, but somehow the whole text, the dense fabric of existence in the land of Israel, may have felt charged with more promise and demand than he could meet.

After a brief stay, Celan went back to Paris. At times he spoke enthusiastically about returning to Israel for good, and he wrote a spate of poems—some buoyed up, others depressed—that were grounded in his experience there.[52] They name certain places—Jerusalem, Absalom's Tomb, Gethsemane, the Gate of Mercy, Abu Tor, and Neve Avivim—but use no Hebrew speech. At the head of this group, however, which was found after his death, Celan placed a poem entitled *Mandelnde*, "Almonding woman," that does contain Hebrew and that he had written a year before going to Israel but withheld from his last two collections.[53] Possibly this poem about deferring his Jewishness, these verses that issue in another, poignant Hebrew imperative, felt too unrealized to be published:

MANDELNDE, die du nur
halbsprachst,
doch durchzittert vom
Keim her,
dich
ließ ich warten,
dich.
Und war
noch nicht
entäugt,
noch unverdornt im Gestirn
des Lieds, das beginnt:
Hachnissini.

ALMONDING ONE, you half-
spoke only,
though trembled up through
from the bud,
you
I let wait,
you.
And was
not eye-
reft yet,
not yet enthorned in the realm
of that song which begins:
Hachnissini.

The stimulating difficulties of translating this poem do not begin with its last word. But when the poem breaks into Hebrew—or say, when *Hachnissini* breaks into and concludes the German poem, that word purifies Celan's text. What's more, he does not tack on a German equivalent. Thus the Hebrew makes a final gift to the translator, a sheer identity, a restful haven. Celan's *Hachnissini* does not even require fresh English transliteration, as do many of his Hebrew and Yiddish usages ("Kaddisch" to "Kaddish," "Hawdalah" to "Havdalah," "Ziw" to "Ziv").

What, then, of the word itself? Chaim Nachman Bialik, the grand master of modern Hebrew poetry, composed in 1905 a poem that begins *Hachnissini*, "Bring me in":

> Bring me in under your wing,
> and be mother and sister to me,
> and let your breast shelter my head,
> a nest for my thrust-out prayers.[54]

I have often wondered why the figure of a sister had so strong a hold on Celan. As his parents' only child and then an orphan, maybe he wished he had a sister. And in survival, possibly he saw his mother, cut off at forty-seven, waiting to become his sister—"the daughter of your being dead," he calls it in an early poem to her.[55] At another level, the homeless, lovelorn speaker in Bialik's lyric, which Jews have known by heart for generations, can be heard appealing for comfort to a figure of the *Shechinah.* All this flows into that song that ends, *Hachnissini*—into Celan's lyric invoking an "almonding woman," Judaism personified, whom

he "let wait." In Jerusalem, visiting Yehuda Amichai, Celan recited some Bialik—possibly that familiar first stanza. His own poem, as it closes, opens again with Bialik's opening word, "Bring me in," truly a *shibboleth* that must be spoken in Hebrew to be admissible, and practically a sacral term that should come true immediately in the uttering of it.

Why did Paul Celan not return and settle in Israel? No single clear reason emerges, but perhaps I can suggest, tentatively and symptomatically, a translator's reason. If a poem such as *Mandelnde*, converting to Hebrew only at the end, were wholly translated into Hebrew, something decisive would be lost: namely, that surprise, that turn of breath, that difference of the Holy Tongue.[56] I mean that Celan may have needed, along with his pain, the tension of living in the Diaspora. However much the Jewish children speaking Hebrew on their own soil moved him, that pure Sabbath, that messianic fulfillment, was "not yet" for him—he was "not yet enthorned in the realm / of that song which begins: / *Hachnissini*."

A few months after returning to Paris, in late February 1970, Celan met with the Israeli poet David Rokeah. They talked, Rokeah says, "about poems, his and mine; about possibilities and impossibilities of translation; about Jerusalem, his and mine."[57] Presumably they worked together on Celan's versions of Rokeah's poetry, because in early March, two appeared in a Swiss paper.[58] One of them opens on the word "Amen," an ecumenical term that can pass unnoticed within a German translation, In the other poem, entitled "Abroad," for Rokeah's word *Shalom* it's oddly touching that Celan wanted no equivalent but simply wrote it *Schalom*, the Hebrew sounding a good deal less at home in German than does *Amen*.

Later in March, Celan took the occasion of Hölderlin's bicentenary celebration in Stuttgart for a reading of some recent poems. He had wanted to do this, out of an affinity with Hölderlin that had manifested in several earlier poems and stretching back to his teens. But in this last journey to Germany, the reading turned out badly: Celan's audience was baffled by his clipped, cryptic lyrics.[59] The "Hölderlin of our time," Nelly Sachs had called him, and maybe that was the trouble.[60] Sometime around then, Celan wrote a brief poem that begins,

ICH TRINK WEIN aus
zwei Gläsern
und zackere an
der Königszäsur
wie Jener
am Pindar,

I DRINK WINE from
two glasses
and plow away at
the king's caesura
like that man
at Pindar.[61]

Given the extraordinary literal and metrical translations from Pindar that Hölderlin worked on just before his period of mental derangement, I am convinced that Celan meant (among other things) German and Hebrew by the "two glasses" in this poem, which he grouped along with his Israeli poems. In other words, if Hölderlin drew deeply on Greek sources—Pindar and classical tragedy—to infuse the German language and spirit with a sacred myth, then Celan felt something of a kindred need for Hebraic mystical and liturgical sources. In this poem, though, such a hope seems too late. After the poet's likeness to Hölderlin:

Gott gibt die Stimmgabel ab	God turns in his tuning fork
als einer der kleinen	like one of the lesser
Gerechten,	tsaddiks,
aus der Lostrommel fällt	the lottery wheel spills
unser Deut.	our two bits.

At the end of April, around Passover, Paul Celan drowned himself in the Seine.

He left behind three sheaves of poetry unprepared for publication. His last poem, dated about ten days before he died, turns on words that he had kept by him ever since his earliest writing: dig, dark, stone, eye. This poem does not come to any unprecedented or ultimate clarity, except possibly in its final word, Sabbath—a word unspoken before in Celan's poetry, a word unchanged in translation yet nonetheless compelling to the translator:

REBLEUTE graben	VINEGROWERS dig up
die dunkelstündige Uhr um,	the darkhoured clock,
Tiefe um Tiefe,	deep upon deep,
du liest,	you read,
es fordert	the invisible one
der Unsichtbare den Wind	summons the wind
in die Schranken,	into bounds,
du liest,	you read,
die Offenen tragen	the open ones bear
den Stein hinterm Aug,	the stone behind the eyes,
der erkennt dich,	it knows you,
am Sabbath.	come the Sabbath.[62]

The concerns that always beset Celan have not left off here. Turning over deep soil as if it were time, drawn into narrows by the supernatural,

recognized by hard stone: for the sake of such encounters and recognitions, this poem tells us, *du liest*, "you read."

And when do such things occur? In this final poem, *am Sabbath*: the day God rested, a day of peace, fulfillment, renewal, freed from time, anticipating redemption. Before now, Celan has used this Hebraic word only in compounds—"Sabbath candles," "Sabbath radiance" and he has spelled it *Sabbat*, without "h."[63] Now he writes it one letter longer, *Sabbath.* So finally, his poem (and its English version) comes down to this silent choice. The "h" reflects a Masoretic pronunciation and looks antiquated in modern German. Although Luther used it in writing *Sabbath*, twentieth-century editions of his Bible do not; Heine does not in his *Prinzessin Sabbat*, Buber and Rosenzweig in their own writings do not. A Schocken book called *Der Sabbat*, published in Nazi Germany in 1935, spells it without "h," but when Gershom Scholem cites the book, curiously enough he tacks on an "h."[64] In fact, I have found this spelling primarily in Scholem's studies of the Kabbalists, for whom the Sabbath figured so decisively in promising an end to exile. There's no knowing whether Paul Celan had this decisive sense of the Sabbath in mind on April 13, 1970, when he wrote his last poem. I do know that the day before, writing to a friend in Israel that his Kafka seminar had been going well, he quoted Kafka's aim as an artist: "To lift the world up into the pure, the true, the immutable."[65] And years before, in his "Conversation in the Mountains," Celan had spoken of the Sabbath without naming it: "that evening on which a day began, a particular day that was the seventh, the seventh, upon which the first was to follow, the seventh and not the last"[66]All this and more—though it seems extravagant to say so—flows into one silent letter, Celan's last, a moment of choice that seems blessedly no choice at all for the translator.

And yet if Celan's slightly archaic *Sabbath* in German takes on a radical Judaic cast, the same spelling in English does not. A couple of other suggestive options do come to mind. "Shabos," the Ashkenazic and thus Yiddish sounding of the Hebrew *Shabbat*, carries warm, homey, comforting overtones in English, and *Schabbes* has for centuries been found in German lexicons. But the "h" Celan wrote goes beyond that hominess. I could try "Shabbat" itself, used once upon a time by German-Jewish poets and current in the Diaspora (witness the American Heritage dictionary). But paradoxically, "Shabbat," with its Biblical and modern Israeli resonance, dodges the challenge of Celan's final word.

It is hard to answer so charged a word with anything but an identity: SABBATH. Possibly the resulting dissonance between a spelling, archaic in German, but everyday in English, and the difference

between Paul Celan's Diaspora and my own—possibly these displacements create the only condition for truth in translation. Starting from German *Sabbath* and from English "Sabbath," with cognates rooted in the Hebrew, we get two different lines of sight pointing back to a single source—a source lost to us now in the seventh day of Creation, the miracle nearly eclipsed by the Holocaust, or possibly not lost, but pointing ahead to a Sabbath still to come, a free and open time and place that everything Celan wrote reaches toward.

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Notes

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Part III

Revolution, Rebellion, Liberation

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Chapter 5

Textual Hijacks

Between the Book of Isaiah and *The Handmaid's Tale*

Qiuyi Tan

And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcases of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh.

—King James Version, Isaiah 66:24

Now we turn our backs on the church and there is the thing we've in truth come to see: the Wall. . . .

Beside the main gateway there are six more bodies hanging, by the necks, their hands tied in front of them, their heads in white bags tipped sideways onto their shoulders. . . .

We stop, together as if on signal, and stand and look at the bodies. It doesn't matter if we look. We're supposed to look: this is what they are there for, hanging on the Wall. . . .

What they are hanging from is hooks. The hooks have been set into the brickwork of the Wall, for this purpose. The hooks look like appliances for the armless. Or steel question marks. . . .

What we are supposed to feel towards these bodies is hatred and scorn.

—Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

Two texts, one biblical, one futuristic, connect on a poignant image of death and lasting judgment. The verse closes the book of Isaiah, balancing God's earlier promise of salvation for the faithful with a somber warning of the eternal punishment awaiting the rebellious. The

second, an early passage from Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, details one macabre function of the city wall encircling the Republic of Gilead, an authoritarian theocracy that has taken over the United States of America. The bodies of state criminals are hung a second time on the Wall for public display after a mass execution, or "Salvaging" in Gilead-speak, an event fully state-orchestrated with the enforced participation of Gilead's inhabitants. The Wall is a chilling, futuristic counterpoint to Isaiah's dark prophecy: the hooks suspending the dead bodies on the Wall literalize the biblical "worm," extending the victims' torture (or "fire") beyond death so that they remain an "abhorring unto all flesh," unto the inhabitants of Gilead who have to witness both the process and aftermath of their violent deaths. Read against Isaiah 66:24, the Gileadean Wall realizes in dull but alarming technical detail the violent potential of the verse, otherwise poetically and aesthetically contained by metaphor. The two texts mirror each other in yet another way: the act of looking at the spectacle of violence heavily implicates the spectator in the act of violence.

Biblical references in *The Handmaid's Tale* have caught the attention of most readers since the novel's publication in 1985. The Gileadean dystopia has been described as the result of a dangerous institutionalization of the Bible,[1] a purposefully distorted application of Old Testament Texts,[2] or simply "biblical fundamentalism."[3] Gilead exists in a world threatened by nuclear pollution, pandemic diseases, and plummeting fertility rates. The country is in civil war; the U.S. government taken over by a fundamentalist military regime that emphasizes rigid state control in every aspect of daily life and a return to traditional values. The story is told by Offred, a Handmaid, or surrogate mother, forced to produce babies for elite barren couples in the state-enforced fertility program. As the novel's closing chapter tells us, Offred's narrative is the transcription of an audio tape recording that was unearthed in a more enlightened, imaginary future and studied with interest by academics as a relic of Gileadean society, implying that the regime eventually fell.

Existing scholarship has taken up the motif of fertility and surrogate motherhood extensively in comparative readings with Genesis, while less attention has been given to the novel's broader themes of apocalypse and salvation that offer specific connections to the book of Isaiah. Covering a long and critical period in biblical history, Isaiah prophesies the pagan nations' invasion of the land of the Israelites, the purge of evil and idolatry from Israel, and finally the promise of redemption for the remnant of the faithful. These events are emphasized throughout the book as part of God's grand design. The world's

end climate of environmental and political calamity in Atwood's Gilead offers a futuristic parallel to Isaiah's divine apocalypse. The military takeover of the United States by a fundamentalist Christian group offers a subversive mirror to the fall of Israel and Judah under God's wrath. In Isaiah, the idolatrous are punished, their sinful practices are eradicated, and a New Jerusalem is promised to those who are obedient to God. Similarly in *The Handmaid's Tale*, the permissive American culture of political, religious, and sexual freedom is subdued, its booming sex industries cleaned up to make way for neo-Puritan Gilead, where only the pious or those of practical value to the utilitarian state are allowed to live. The unwanted have been forcefully relocated before the onset of the war, or sent to the heavily polluted Colonies as expendable labor.

Overall, the two texts can be taken as variations on the biblical storyline of apocalypse-restoration-salvation: Isaiah's prophetic narrative exists before the apocalypse; Offred's retrospective account comes after. Atwood's imaginative extension of Isaiah can be understood along the lines of what David Jasper calls an exercise in close reading—which plays with the biblical text on the writer's own terms—introducing new characters, situations, and possibilities in a fictive game that has serious implications for the interpretation of the Bible.[4] This intertextual exercise could be subversive in challenging established interpretations, but a critique directed at the worldviews and cultural systems that inform earlier readings is not necessarily destructive to nor even critical of the text itself. The new text could be understood as an imaginative rewriting that actively explores, questions, and consequently, enriches and illuminates the original text.

Located within this framework, Gilead can be read as Atwood's extended allegory for the death of the text. Society is ostensibly organized along biblical precepts, but the locked up Bible in Gilead, for all intents and purposes, is a dead text. Women are strictly forbidden to read and write, and no one is allowed to challenge the governing interpretation, which insists on a fundamentalist literalism that drains the text of metaphor and alternative meaning. The Ceremony is a grotesque instance of this enforced blindness to metaphor. In Genesis, Rachel faces a fertility crisis and says to Jacob, "Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her" (Gen. 30:3). Under the official Gileadean interpretation, Rachel's figurative "bear upon my knees" is transmogrified into a grossly disturbing ritual of sexual intercourse involving a Commander, a Wife, and a Handmaid. Offred describes the Ceremony, which is as unpleasant for her as it is for her Commander's Wife, Serena Joy:

> Above me, towards the head of the bed, Serena Joy is arranged, outspread. Her legs are apart, I lie between them, my head on her stomach, her pubic bone under the base of my skull, her thighs on either side of me. She too is fully clothed.
>
> My arms are raised; she holds my hands, each of mine in each of hers. This is supposed to signify that we are one flesh, one being. What it really means is that she is in control, of the process and thus of the product. If any. The rings of her left hand cut into my fingers. It may or may not be revenge.
>
> My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Below it the Commander is fucking (116).

The end result of transposing the biblical text onto Gileadean reality is a ludicrous one, but the dark humor in this episode stems from a certain ingenuity in expanding a single figure of speech into an elaborate ritual. As with the Wall, Atwood expands the interpretive potential of the biblical original to a physical extreme, taking an almost graphic, visceral pleasure in exposing the invasive potential of the text. The joke here is directed against those who take the Bible at its word, and Atwood seems to ask, how far can one go in the attempt to produce fixed meanings from the Bible?

Fortunately, not all of Gilead's uses of the Bible have such disturbing consequences. Biblical terms are appropriated into the social language with comical effect. The Chariot and Whirlwind, metaphors for God's warlike anger against the rebellious nations, are luxury car models. All Flesh, a poetic reference to humanity, is a butcher shop "marked by a large wooden pork chop" (34). The deflating transmutation of biblical metaphors to daily commodities has the effect, in postmodern terms, of short-circuiting the interpretive connection between the word (signifier) and the thing (signified), with the final effect of killing the metaphor all together. In Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of the sign, signifiers rely on interpretation to generate meaning, a process that gives the reader or perceiver agency in meaning-making and the text a consequent level of open-endedness. The power implications of this transaction between reader and text is precisely what Offred hints at when she calls the Bible an incendiary device: "Who knows what we'd make of it, if we ever got our hands on it?" (108).

For the political elite, suppressing the Bible is necessary because the text, as Barbara Johnson points out, can always pass into the hands of the "other," who can then learn to read the mechanism of his or her own oppression[5] and eventually unravel the mechanism. Indeed, the fact that people have no recourse to textual evidence is taken up

by several critics as one of the most depressing aspects of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Analysing Gilead's biblical roots in a number of Old Testament texts, Dorota Filipczak argues that Atwood's vision of a Bible-centered society addresses the patriarchal abuse inherent to the Bible, but also locates the abuse in responses to the text that may itself be void of patriarchal intention. Her conclusion is dismal: "It seems that the unpredictable aspects of the 'incendiary device' remain locked up safely throughout Atwood's book. The Bible that is used to perpetuate the male garden is never allowed to subvert it. The fact that the biblical texts talk to each other and sometimes deconstruct each other is not really noticeable in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Consequently the struggle against interpretive closure enforces the stereotype of a monolithic text destroying its victims."[6]

The Gileadean Wall no doubt encircles a suffocating ideological space, especially for women. Yet Filipczak's assertion of the Bible's frustrated potential as an incendiary device and the consequent tragedy in Atwood's novel may be overemphasized. Ironically enough, Gilead's leaders have arguably proven the unpredictable aspects of the Bible with their extrapolative invention of the Ceremony from Genesis 30:3. More importantly, Filipczak's conclusion neglects the ways in which the novel "talks" to the Bible and challenges Gilead's governing interpretation through Offred's subversive narrative. The form of the story itself enacts a symbolic liberation of the otherwise repressed and silenced. The novel is, after all, the eyewitness account of a Handmaid, a societal underclass of surrogate mothers oppressed by the state and despised by other women. Offred is a twentieth-century North American woman made to replicate the biblical role of Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah, Egyptian handmaids to key Israelite mother figures of the Old Testament whose infertility lapses made them offer their maidservants as concubines to their husbands.[7] In a society where everything derives meaning from its biblical precedent, Offred takes her place among the marginalized, ethnically differentiated female slaves whose social standing was hardly threatening to their mistresses, whose possible influence over their masters was not represented in the biblical text, and finally, whose voices were little heard—or at best largely alienated—in androcentric biblical scholarship.[8] Yet in a symbolic reversal of her marginalized status, Offred speaks (into a tape recorder) and her speech is eventually transcribed into text and studied by latter-day academics as a historical account of Gileadean life. Not only does the "other" disrupt the patriarchal structure of both biblical and Gileadean authority by "writing" her

own text; this text, with its commentary on Gilead's faux-biblical discourse as well as the rigorously controlled biblical original, radically opens up both for discussion.

Through Offred, Atwood offers a reading strategy that counters Gilead's oppressive use of the Bible, a fierce but rejuvenating critique of the text and some of its conventional modes of interpretation. Offred's general distrust of the stability of language is catching. Her insistence on the multiple meanings of words and her refusal to commit to any one version of her story lends itself to a commentary on the nature of narrative in general, inflecting our reading of the biblical text, any text. "This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction," she says. "It's impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out; there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described . . ." (168). Offred does not only say that the nature of reality is too rich to be described with language, she also says that the textuality of language is too loaded to render univocal accounts of lived experience. Her narrative exemplifies Roland Barthes' notion of the Text, a playful force of simultaneous signification and subversion that feeds on the activity of associations, contiguities, and overcrossings within the semantic field, resulting in what he calls the "infinite deferment of the signified."[9] Textuality in Offred's narrative shows up in her solitary mental escapades, in one of which she plays a circular game with the different meanings of a term: "With that man [you loved] you wanted it to . . . work out. Working out was also something you did to keep your body in shape. . . . If you worked out enough, maybe the man would too. Maybe you would be able to work it out together, as if the two of you were a puzzle that could be solved; otherwise . . . the man, would go wandering off on a trajectory of his own, taking his addictive body with him and leaving you with bad withdrawal, which you could counteract by exercise" (283). From sustaining a relationship to physical exercise to trivial problem solving, Offred reflects on the numerous, not always evidently, associated possibilities of a single term. The humor in this verbal exercise lies in the changing references of "work out" over the course of the passage so that meaning is radically switched, jumbled up or lost within the multiple significations of the term by the end of the tongue-in-cheek, comically inadequate anecdote on couplehood. To rephrase Offred, you want the relationship to work out, so you work out (to keep in shape); but if the relationship doesn't work out, you can counteract the pain by working out (more exercise). The wry combination of logically unrelated uses of the term demonstrates the semantic

plurality of words (sufficient to cover a significant aspect of human life) and the fundamentally unstable or even arbitrary relation of the signifier to the signified. The final effect, in the spirit of Barthes, is the continual deferment of closure.

Certainly, juxtaposing *The Handmaid's Tale* and Isaiah gives two radically different narratives: Offred—or Atwood—is keenly, even obsessively aware of the textuality of her narrative in ways that the biblical author(s) is (are) not. The structural differences between the two texts demonstrate the Barthean distinction between the Text and the work. While the Text insists on an "irreducible plural" of meaning, the work demands a coherent interpretation tied to the concept of authorial intention, the author being considered father and owner of the work.[10] Within the patriarchal tradition that sees the Bible as a sacred text bearing the Word of God, Isaiah is clearly a work. Meaning is determined by the prophet's intention, in turn determined by the Lord who commands the prophecy. True to this tradition, conventional biblical scholarship has been focused on deciphering the divine message, reconciling the text's inconsistencies, and extracting its hidden logic.[11]

As secular critics, however, we are free to discard the religious assumption of divine authorial control. Even as Barthes distinguishes between work and Text, he suggests that what divides the two may be a question of reading practice: "The work is normally the object of a consumption; . . . the Text requires that one try to abolish . . . the distance between writing and reading, in no way by intensifying the projection of the reader into the work but by joining them in a single signifying practice."[12] Thus how the reader reads can conjoin work and Text: whether the reader plays or collaborates with the text to produce and execute (rather than simply consume) the text *makes* the Text. With this shift to an analysis of reading practice, Barthes installs the theoretical premise for Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, a sustained textual analysis that refuses to take the text for what it is or pretends to be. This counterintuitive reading, or reading against the grain, undermines the seeming coherence of the text, taking the critical assumption that every text, or every interpretation of a text, presents a major claim that is achieved through the necessary erasure or distortion of "other" claims whose traces nevertheless remain detectable to the reader.[13] The result is a creative interaction with the text that vacillates between fidelity to, and absolute transgression of, the apparent meaning. Offred demonstrates her interpretive self within this framework when she refuses to "read" the Gileadean social code the way its leaders intend it to be read.

To return to the Wall, Offred's response to the tableau of corpses is a deliberate distinction between what she is supposed to feel (hatred and scorn) and what she wills herself to feel (blankness). Her interpretation of the hanged men—not simply political criminals but also politically neutral scarecrows and snowmen—is a refusal to passively consume the state's calculated psychology of fear and inadvertently participate in the violent punishment inflicted on the bodies. She engages in a rebellious renegotiation of the image that acknowledges but nevertheless tries not to answer to the intentions of its murderous creators, a delving into the spectacle's "other" significations that crosses over its apparent closure (that people who disobey the state are punished with death by hanging, on both ropes and hooks) onto something else, something less politically effective. The corpses become domesticated scarecrows almost out of a child's story; the blood seeping through the white bag is a smile; the brutal hooks holding them to the wall are steel question marks.

The question mark offers an apt symbol for Offred's general attitude toward life, a questioning consideration of all possibilities and contingencies that is the ethical antithesis of Gilead's totalitarian posture against anything heterogeneous or ambiguous. The reach of Offred's deconstructive question mark extends beyond a critique of the Gileadean textual practice to a reinterrogation of the Bible itself, which brings us back to the question, how truly incendiary is it? This question could be answered by a closer look at the value-laden binary oppositions that define Isaiah and *The Handmaid's Tale*. At first glance, the two texts present worlds in reverse. Atwood's answer to Isaiah's New Jerusalem is a totalitarian nightmare, while Offred's idealized United States represents the depraved Israel condemned by Isaiah. Despite the apparent opposition, *The Handmaid's Tale* resonates surprisingly with Isaiah at a moment of pathos for the lost world, which raises compelling questions for an "other" interpretation of biblical salvation.

Characteristic of the nostalgia that permeates Offred's narrative, the novel opens with a haunting elegy for the high school gymnasium: "The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there; . . . I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls, felt-skirted as I knew from pictures. . . . Dances would have been held there; the music lingered, a palimpsest of unheard sound"(3). Contrasting with the present tense that she uses to describe the monotonous Gileadean present, the past tense of these lines are poignant in their reference to the end of all the colors, smells,

textures, and sounds of the rich physical life, both public and private, that used to inhabit what has now been turned into the Red Centre, an austere training institution for future Handmaids. This passage finds an unexpected echo in Isaiah 24, a melancholy description of the fall of the nations: "The new wine mourneth, the vine languisheth, all the merryhearted do sigh. The mirth of the tabrets ceaseth, the noise of them that rejoice endeth, the joy of the harp ceaseth. . . . There is a crying for wine in the streets; all joy is darkened, the mirth of the land is gone" (Isa. 24:7–11). It is hard not to read in the repetitive involvement of these lines an empathic pathos for what was lost after God's devastation. No doubt they are some sentimental distance from Offred's nostalgic retrospection that remembers the gymnasium as one invokes the rich sensuality of a long-lost Eden, but a striking resonance occurs where both passages elicit the pathos that comes with the termination of festivities, describing an "end" that has taken place but that is still lived in the soundlessness, joylessness, or stillness of the present. Offred's elegy thus "speaks" to the biblical text through an extrapolative invocation of Isaiah's "the mirth of the land is gone."

This moment of pathos presents a logical fissure in Isaiah where an intertextual reading with the Gileadean dystopia draws out meaningful implications that might have been suppressed in the Isaianic salvation narrative as we know it. Pathos in Isaiah may have been unintentional, perhaps a side effect of the narrator's relational rhetoric[14] that pitches the transience of mortal pleasure and endeavour against the eternal power of God. A convincing description of humanity's total devastation by a divine power thus uses the emotive, repetitive verse that can strike a true note of human distress. Even if intended, pathos is clearly marginal to the central argument (a stern reproach of the failure and faithlessness of humanity), a suppressed lament against God's inevitable destruction all but drowned out by the text's forceful assertion that this divine punishment will rightly destroy the idolatrous and deliver the faithful. In this vein, Isaiah's early chapters (1–33) often take the form of a diatribe against the community's irreligious behavior, and excessive alcohol, music, and general revelry (among others) are identified as the source of the community's distraction from God: "Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink . . . till wine inflame them! And the harp, and the viol, and the tabret, and pipe, and wine, are in their feasts: but they regard not the work of the Lord, neither consider the operation of his hands" (5:11–12). Here is a straightforward condemnation of the evil effects of the harp, the *tabret* and wine that makes the later lament for their disappearance quite inexplicable. On one hand, the prophet vilifies mortal pleasures; on the

other, the text offers palpable traces of mourning for their passing. The incongruity of pathos gives special meaning to the vibrant energies of a decadent world even as other parts of the text unequivocally denounce this world's brevity and impotence in relation to its creator. Thus nested within Isaiah's fierce moral diatribes are distinguishable allusions to a certain positivism of the very thing it condemns. This incoherence can be reconciled; if we trace their references through the Bible, music and wine are also signs of divine favour, and one may argue that it is the divine (as opposed to human) manifestation of music and wine that the prophet is really mourning. For the deconstructive reader unencumbered by the need to make sense of the text, however, this logical breach is an expressive space that can lead to "other," more unsettling, interpretations of the salvation narrative. Could the idolatrous nations, albeit frivolous and drunk on too much bad wine, represent a golden age of human civilization and flourishing of the arts, an affirmation of human autonomy from an oppressive religious ideology, for instance? Does Isaiah inadvertently demonstrate human agency—indeed freedom—at the point of idolatrous rebellion?

At the crux of these questions is a destabilizing critique of Isaiah's fundamental assumptions. Is the earth after god's devastation and subsequent restoration better? Is salvation necessary or even positive for the survival of the human race? On the darker power implications of divine salvation, a closer reading of Isaiah offers more revelatory material. Envisioning the restoration of Judah the prophet says, "We have a strong city; salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks" (26:1). Borrowing from earlier secular theorists who have expressed suspicion at the prison-like quality of the Garden of Eden, the redemption promised within these walls and bulwarks is similarly troubled by the ambivalently charged motif of enclosure.[15] A similar line in Isaiah 32 reads, "And my people shall dwell in a peaceable habitation, and in sure dwellings, and in quiet resting places" (32:18), a disturbing echo of Gilead's suffocating law and order, secured by barbed wire, emergency floodlights, and machine-gun toting soldiers. Read against the idolatrous nations' festive energies, these "sure dwellings" and "quiet resting places" promised for the chosen survivors in the restored city take on the funereal, sterile serenity of a tomb. For a Gileadean woman, consenting to be "saved by childbearing" is to surrender to the regime's constricting pronatalist ideology[16] that enslaves women's bodies and puts women's minds under state control. Similarly in Isaiah, to be saved by God is to enclose humanity within the wall of fatally punishable rules constructed by the deity. The concept of divine salvation—saved by God and God alone—is inextricably tied to that of oppression.[17]

A comparative reading of Isaiah and *The Handmaid's Tale* thus complicates the role of God in the biblical universe. Atwood's dystopian theater of disempowered individuals in a totalitarian regime resonates with the authoritarian ethos inherent in the biblical interaction between mortals and an all-powerful deity. In line with Derrida's rejection of the "violent hierarchies" or binary structures of domination (divine/human, eternal/transient, faithful/idolatrous) guarding the Judeo-Christian tradition, Atwood's suspicion is arguably directed at the idea of absolute authority—both religious and textual.

The radical thrust of biblical intertextuality in *The Handmaid's Tale* is a demonstration that the Bible does not simply produce fixed meanings for the reader's ready consumption. It paves the way for Jacques Berlinerblau's secular hermeneutics, a critical method asserting that not all contradictions in the Bible must, or can be, resolved.[18] The assertion of scriptural incoherence is an ethical claim: it recognizes human agency in the act of interpretation as opposed to the religious concept of an immutable scriptural authority that conscripts all human action under God's plan. It is freedom to choose and freedom from the domination of authoritative exegeses, a reading strategy that frees the text from any one interpretation that could subject it to political use. Even as Atwood rejects the Bible as the monologic Word of God, her deconstructive engagement with the Bible is telling about her approach to it as a literary repository, a Barthean Text. Deconstructive reading hijacks the work's surface-level cohesion to a vision of Truth, but the freedom of it lies in a constant, questioning protest to the colonizing influence of established interpretations or apparent closures.

As Offred tells us, "Whatever is silenced will clamor to be heard" (190). What is hopeful in *The Handmaid's Tale*, an otherwise dreary narrative of gender and political oppression, is an unwavering belief in the text, its unsettling indeterminacy but heartening capacity to generate a multiplicity of meanings. In an uplifting critique, Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor overturns the novel's reputed dystopian affiliation by identifying Offred's open-ended verbal ironies with the dialogical notion of utopic process. The concept sees utopia not as a final destination but a constant, transformative re-negotiation of our surroundings.[19] To follow her argument within the framework of deconstruction and the plural Text, another instance of this utopic process can be understood as the antifundamentalist act of interpretation, our free initiative as active readers to seek out the repressed margins, to listen to whatever has been silenced and is clamouring to be heard.

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NOTES

1. Dorota Filipczak, "Is There No Balm in Gilead?—Biblical Intertext in *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Journal of Literature and Theology* 7.2 (June 1993): 171.
2. Hilde Staels, "*The Handmaid's Tale*: Resistance through Narrating," *Margaret Atwood's novels: a study of narrative discourse* (Tubingen: Francke, 1995), 157.
3. Arnold E. Davidson, "Future Tense: Making History in *The Handmaid's Tale*," *The Art of Margaret Atwood: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Arnold E. Davidson and Cathy N. Davidson (Toronto: Anansi, 1981), 117.
4. David Jasper, "Literary Readings of the Bible," *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Criticism*, ed. John Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 29.
5. Barbara Johnson, "Writing," *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 48.
6. Filipczak, 183.
7. Hagar was handmaid to Sarah wife of Abraham (Gen. 16), Bilhah handmaid to Rachel and Zilpah to Leah, both wives of Jacob (Gen. 30).
8. Bilhah and Zilpah were portrayed as silent pawns in the birthing rivalry between Rachel and Leah. The children they bore were given names chosen by their respective mistresses, who participated in a domestic struggle to claim possession of Israel's offspring and assert their importance to the Israelite clan as mothers. Even Hagar, who was defiant to her mistress, was firmly put in place by Abram and later, by an angel of God who said

to her "Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands" (Gen. 30:9).

9. Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," trans. Stephen Heath, *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1977), 158.
10. Barthes, 159–60.
11. Jacques Berlinerblau, "Free will and Determinism in First Isaiah: Secular Hermeneutics, the Poetics of Contingency, and Emile Durheim's Homo Duplex," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71.4 (December 2003): 768.
12. Barthes, 161–62.
13. Johnson, 46.
14. Term borrowed from Berlinerblau, who highlights that "one technique for demonstrating the unsurpassed greatness of Yahweh consists of sharpening the contrasts between him . . . and . . . humans. . . . This type of relational rhetoric invariably creates something of a zero-sum game; in order to glorify the deity more and more, humanity must be accorded less and less (771).
15. See Ann Druyan, "Ann Druyan Talks About Science, Religion, Wonder, Awe . . . and Carl Sagan," *Skeptical Enquirer* 27.6 (Nov/Dec 2003), Oct. 6, 2008, http://www.csicop.org/si/2003-11/ann-druyan.html. See also Dorothy Jones, "Not Much Balm in Gilead." *Canadian Literature* 11.2 (Spring 1989): 31–43, esp 33.
16. Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor, "From Irony to Affiliation in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," *Critique* 45.1 (Fall 2003): 87.
17. Berlinerblau informs the discussion with the term "Yahwistic determinism," the idea that the thought and action of both individual human beings and entire nations are wholly determined by this deity within his immutable divine plan.
18. Berlinerblau, 768.
19. Wagner-Lawlor, 93.

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Chapter 6

Exodus and Redemption in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

A Magical Encounter with the Bible

Anna Hartnell

Introduction: Exodus and America

Paradise is a story of communal founding cast in the contours of the biblical Exodus. Toni Morrison quite self-consciously draws on this pivotal biblical text because it charts precisely the trajectory followed by the protagonists of her novel *Paradise*: from slavery to freedom to mastery. In this way Morrison highlights the allure that the Exodus story has had for modern liberation movements the world over.

The Exodus narrative is seductive because it tells not only of the Hebrews' escape from Egyptian slavery under the protective eye of God, but it also sees this formerly enslaved group named God's "chosen people." This exalted status means that the newly adopted Israel will act as a "light unto the nations"—an example to the rest of the world—while being rewarded the "promised land" as national home. Among the diverse groupings that have appropriated this national founding myth, America stands out as having most successfully converted the initial position of vulnerability to one of unquestioned strength.

The embattled sense of American identity formulated by the first Puritan settlers as they claimed their "New Israel" is clearly worlds away from a national vision that has—through the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century—assumed the mission of exporting its political culture and moral values to the rest of the world as "light unto the nations." Yet I suggest here that a reading

of Morrison's novel uncovers the journey that links these profoundly different moments, and that charts the process whereby former slaves assume the trappings of mastery. The irony that *Paradise* unravels is the fact that African Americans, in contesting the national institution of slavery and its unfolding legacy of racism, have frequently imagined their own story of liberation in strikingly similar terms.

A version of the story of national exceptionalism as told in Exodus has long functioned in African American culture as a powerful counter narrative to mainstream notions of American exceptionalism—which early on sanctioned the subjugation of U.S. blacks. But as Morrison's novel vividly shows, what initially begins as a counter narrative can come dangerously close to resembling the master narrative it set out to negate; thus the African American communal narrative traced in *Paradise* comes increasingly to look like a repetition—rather than a contestation—of a racist U.S. mainstream. This chapter explores the way this process is elaborated in *Paradise* via an encounter with the Bible.

Paradise, I suggest, represents Morrison's attempt to tackle the controlling text of Western culture, from creation and covenant depicted in Hebrew scripture to the apocalyptic imaginings of the Revelation of St. John the Divine. This chapter will show that the trajectory of the communal self-narration in *Paradise* moves inexorably from its conception in Exodus, through a Gospels worldview, to ultimately picture an "end" in visions of apocalypse. What begins as a story of exile and uncertainty—as exemplified by the Exodus narrative—soon morphs into a static and exclusionary vision of "home," the boundaries of which are rigorously policed, as are the boundaries of the city in Revelation.

This movement in *Paradise*—from oppressed to oppressor—marks a slippage in the Christian story from the gentle message of the Gospels to the violent possibilities of self-authorization that arguably emerge in Revelation. Between these two very different Christian visions presented in the novel, the Hebraic book of Exodus plays a critical mediating role, by both privileging the position of the slave and anticipating the path to mastery. In this way, *Paradise* speaks to the dangerous simplifications that can arise from the coupling of the notion of the "chosen people" with the book of Revelation that closes the Christian New Testament.

The novel thus critiques the notion of religious election as road to violence, yet it also suggests that the path is not necessarily inevitable. Morrison's novel can, in this sense, be seen as an important intervention in debates centering on the highly charged links between religion and politics, race and nation, that are so apparent in our contemporary world. Though published in 1998, *Paradise* can be read

as a poignant comment on the post-9/11 resurgence of covenantal theology in the United States, and the ethnocentrism that this theology so often points to. By tracing the novel's positioning in the midst of a series of biblical tropes and oppositions, this chapter examines the nature of Morrison's timely warning.

Exodus: the Path Back to Egypt

The appropriation of the Exodus narrative that permeates African American culture is the point of departure for Morrison's novel. *Paradise* traces the painful ironies embodied in the "Exoduster" movement, which saw large numbers of African Americans migrate out of the South in 1879 after witnessing the region's failure to deliver on the promises of equality, political rights, and physical safety to its black population. This movement led to the formation of a number of all-black towns, most of which failed within a few years, in part because of their necessarily insular foundations.[1] *Paradise* depicts a fictive all-black communal settlement, Ruby, which is itself the culmination of a forced exodus from white *and* black communities, that reject those who eventually found Ruby on the basis of their exceptionally dark complexions. In an intensification of the fate that really did afflict the historical all-black towns, Morrison shows the fictive town of Ruby adopting the separatist—and even racist tendencies—of those communities that rejected them. Ruby thus comes to embody a disturbing mirror image of white supremacy. In this sense the novel charts an Exodus narrative that finds itself on a circuitous pathway back to Egypt.

The religious coordinates of this story, heavily implied by Morrison's chosen title, become apparent in the novel's powerful opening scene. "They shoot the white girl first" is the controversial first line of *Paradise*, and it soon becomes clear that the perpetrators of the massacre Morrison has us witness believe their actions to be sanctioned by God. These perpetrators are the leading men from the town of Ruby, who have come to the convent that lies on the town's edge to kill the group of "lost" women who have found refuge in the convent and whose identity as pariah figures appear to threaten the integrity of the town itself. The novel reads, "God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby" (18).

These shocking scenes of murder provide the narrative's frame, and are justified by Ruby's leaders in the name of protecting a hard won and seemingly fulfilled dream: "Freedmen who stood tall in 1889 dropped to their knees in 1934 and were stomach-crawling by 1948. This is why they are here in this Convent. To make sure it never happens again. That nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town

worth the pain" (5). What Ruby's inhabitants desire is to wall in their home against seemingly invasive forces that threaten the town from both within and without. This desire issues from the fact that the community's story originates in a primary tale of rejection, a tale that comes to be mythologized in the town and known as "the Disallowing." The novel does not offer this founding story to the reader whole, but rather offers fragments that can be pieced together. Following Emancipation and the brief period of black and white integration during Reconstruction, the protagonists that eventually come to populate Ruby are rejected as potential citizens of burgeoning all-black towns because their skin appears to be "unacceptably" dark, irremediably black. Thus, having escaped the tyrannies of white legislated slavery, these freedmen run into the racial prejudices of those they assumed to be their kin.

After "five glorious years remaking a country" (193), the sacrifices to the altar of the nation made by the future citizens of Ruby are decidedly rejected, not only by white racism but also by color codes operating among "lighter" black Americans. "Thrown out and cast away" by their own people, Morrison's protagonists come to form a "tight band of wayfarers bound by the enormity of what had happened to them" (189). Group identity is thus grounded in the experience of suffering, an experience that in turn initiates a journey. And so they find themselves "going into Indian country with no destination and winter on the way" (98). And yet from this seemingly hopeless wilderness period emerges a leader, Zechariah, who, like his biblical namesake, similarly wishes to rebuild the temple of a shattered promise.

The parallels with the Israelites' exodus out of Egypt are unmistakable. Yet where the endless cycles of betrayal that haunt the biblical narrative bear witness to Israel's uneasy sense that it remains slave to its own destiny—that is, to the controlling will of Yahweh who has merely taken the reins from Pharaoh—no such understanding is carried through into the rendition of Exodus in *Paradise*. Thus, where the biblical Exodus features many examples of God punishing Israel for its transgressions, and Israel eventually surrendering to God's will following brief moments of rebellion, the communal leaders that inhabit *Paradise* exhibit an overwhelming assumption of self-mastery. This is ironic for a community that believes itself to be founded on God's will, and Ruby emerges as a peculiarly godless space, in which the town's leaders come to stand in for divine authority, and where sacred text is substituted for the town's own founding story. In this way Morrison's narrative accelerates the theme of idolatry—the violation of the second commandment—that pervades the Exodus text.

Clearly reminiscent of the "stiff-necked" biblical people that populate Exodus, Morrison's fictive community memorializes its founding story. In what is arguably a *warped* repetition of the Israelites' injunction to remember and recount the story of their going out from Egypt, Ruby does something similar with its own "original story." The town's firm belief that "Ruby's different" (117)—in large part based on the sense of purity they derive from their "8-rock" blood—is apparently confirmed by the fact that, at the start of the novel, no human being has yet died on the grounds of the young town (even the murder of the convent women takes place on the town's periphery). The widespread belief in the town that the reaper is "barred entry" (296) is indicative of the fact that Ruby's robust account of itself lays claim to all that is immortal.

The citizens of Ruby have thus fled from the race theories of other white and black communities only to run headlong into a warped reflection, a race mirror of their very own making. Similar to the historical black towns' failure to maintain an identity that marks them off from the racist white world surrounding them, Morrison's protagonists are left asking themselves "how could so clean and blessed a mission devour itself and become the world they had escaped?" (292). I suggest that *Paradise* answers and transforms this question primarily by offering us a model of reading, one that reorients Ruby's Exodus rendition away from its singular route to violence, its path back to Egypt. For in spite of the failure of Ruby's self-critical functions, Morrison's text nonetheless brands this "new Eden"—a frozen image of the promised land—with the twinned necessities of death and dialogue, thus subjecting Ruby's inhabitants to the very conditions of a "fallen" world that their community had tried so hard to guard against.

Between "War" and "Paradise"

"Paradise" was the title given to Morrison's novel by her publisher; Toni Morrison herself wanted to call her 1998 novel "War." What emerges is a text in which these diametrically opposed states turn out to be two sides to the same coin, where the pursuit of paradise leads to violent conflict. It is fitting that a novel permeated by conflict should have led to a dispute about names, names that determine very different kinds of narrative. Fitting because at the heart of these "wars" in *Paradise*—that center not only on race and religion but gender as well—there is a wider conflict about language itself. This linguistic conflict is staged across the vexed terrains of biblical narrative.

While critical interpretations of *Paradise* have on the whole emphasized the process whereby Morrison's text introduces multiplicity into the town's otherwise singular self-narration, I suggest that the biblical framework within which Morrison's intervention takes place has often been construed in an overly simplistic way. Most critics agree that *Paradise* includes a thorough critique of religion. Yet while it has been widely recognized that Morrison's story engages with both Old Testament and New Testament accounts of the yearning for a promised land, critics on the whole refer to Morrison's engagement with the "Judeo-Christian" tradition, making little attempt to wrest apart these two terms to interrogate the basis on which they are united. Those few critics who have negotiated the slippage incurred in the term "Judeo-Christian" seem to have concluded that the novel charts and valorizes the movement from an Old Testament "God of wrath" to New Testament "comforter."[2] By this reading, religious violence issues from the former and is transformed by the latter; the divisive tendencies of the covenantal relation that appears in Exodus are in this account transcended by the universalism of Christ's call to evangelism.

Thus Philip Page characterizes the convent women as "Christ figures, who must die so that others may soar." And yet Page's idea that the movement in the novel is "from the Old Fathers, who, like Old Testament patriarchs, are full of religious zeal and insist on God's justice, to the New Testament overtones of a merciful God,"[3] contradicts a recurring theme in the novel: Morrison's notion of the importance of "the ancestor as foundation," the sense that "nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection."[4] This surfaces following the convent massacre when Deek (or Deacon, who, along with his twin brother Steward, sits at the center of the town's leadership) comes to deeply regret "having become what the Old Fathers cursed: the kind of man who set himself up to judge, rout and even destroy the needy, the defenseless, the different" (302). This does not support a reading that sees the world of the Old Fathers as lacking New Testament mercy; rather it suggests that somewhere along the way the vision of the Old Fathers has gone horribly wrong. What this indicates is that while the initial vision of the town, rooted in its founding narrative of exodus and religious election, may have sown the seeds of its downfall, this vision may also hold out the promise of redemption. This does not, therefore, support the notion that *Paradise* traces a supercessionist narrative that seeks to discard Old Testament wisdom.

Thus I suggest that to read the "resurrection" of the convent women that takes place at the end of the novel in the light of the Christian

notion of eternity and the message of the New Testament—over and against the Old—is to misunderstand the politics of reading that emerges in *Paradise*. Indeed, it is the notion of timelessness as represented by Christ's resurrection that constitutes part of the problem, part of what has set the town's pursuit of paradise on course for war. As Reverend Richard Misner reflects in the novel, "Ruby, it seemed to him, was an unnecessary failure. How exquisitely human was the wish for permanent happiness, and how thin the human imagination became trying to achieve it" (306). This desire for permanent happiness, for the stability of place, and the security of home, has also led to a dangerous embrace of stasis, a state that has quite literally brought Ruby's story to a standstill: "About their own lives they shut up. Had nothing to say, pass on. As though past heroism was enough of a future to live by. As though, rather than children, they wanted duplicates" (161).

This line powerfully recalls the closing section of Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*, which repeatedly states "it was not a story to pass on" in the very act of passing the story on.[5] This points to a paradox that I suggest is also at work in *Paradise*: while stories, both communal and personal, can be profoundly unhelpful, they are also vital. What is needed then is not to discard founding narratives but rather to revisit them in order to open them up to new possibilities of reading and interpretation. Ruby may be "deafened by the roar of its own history" (306), but unblocking the passage to the future lies in a reexamination of the past. This message, I suggest, can be found in the way Morrison rescripts Ruby's narrative in relation to the Old and New Testaments, or, more correctly, the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament.

As Page suggests, Morrison's novel does "construct an elaborate model of reading and interpreting," but his image of "all the participants' brows . . . furrowed in hermeneutic concentration" seems just as close—if not closer—to the interpretive practices of rabbinism than the Christian tradition in which Page locates *Paradise*. Page argues that Ruby moves from "a restrictive fusion to a liberating fragmentation,"[6] but his sense that this happens along a supercessionist axis is considerably complicated by Susan Handelman's claim—supported, I argue below, by *Paradise*—that the Christian vision of the word made flesh points toward a "theology of silence."[7]

From the Gospels to Revelation

In Mark's Gospel, the man possessed by demons tells Jesus that "my name *is* Legion: for we are many" (Mark 5:9). Susan Handelman glosses this episode by explaining that the early church fathers turned

to "faith in a Saviour who was the absolute and ultimate signified, who exorcized the demons of the text, its unmanageable pluralism, and centered it in himself as fulfilment."[8] A similar observation could be made of Morrison's fictive town, which has also turned the exorcism of multiplicity into an article of faith. In Ruby's—as in Mark's Gospel—plurality makes for what is "unclean," and calls for the ultimate symbol of unity and purity as the only possible "cure." While the convent women are the victims of this process of purging, their deaths ultimately turn on an act of interpretation; for the men of Ruby find for their murderous deed a basis in scripture.

Morrison depicts the leaders of Ruby's men, Steward and Deacon, fondly recalling formative moments from their childhood, "sitting on the floor in a firelit room, listening to war stories; to stories of great migrations—those who made it and those who did not; to the failures and triumphs of intelligent men—their fear, their bravery, their confusion; to tales of love deep and permanent. All there in the one book they owned then. Black leather covers with gold lettering; the pages thinner than young leaves, than petals. The spine frayed into webbing at the top, the corners fingered down to the skin. The strong words, strange at first, becoming familiar, gaining weight and hypnotic beauty the more they heard them, made them their own" (110–11). The very physicality of the book is deeply implicated in this act of claiming the biblical migratory tradition as "their own"; indeed, the book is shaped by their hands, "fingered down" to what is the book's own yet connective "skin." This most canonical of books thus seemingly invites Steward and Deacon to write themselves into its action and become part of its whole. The "hypnotic" powers of biblical language conforms to the "monologic reading of Scripture" that Handelman characterizes as "the province of the Church Fathers."[9] Pointing toward an ultimate fusion of body with text, the twins find in these words the final destination for this wandering trajectory—and thus an end to the interpretive process. In this sense what begins as a story of exodus and migration is rendered static by a process of reading that is also an act of worship. Here *Paradise* points explicitly to the danger inherent in the biblical Exodus, which narrates an experience of exile that anticipates the eventual laying down of roots. Thus this moment in the text sits in a metonymic relationship with the rest of the novel, which is also structured around this tension that haunts the book of Exodus. Analogous to singular and fixed interpretations of sacred text, narratives of rootedness resist themes of exile and change.

Ruby's self-conception thus resonates with a fixity that underpins John's Gospel: a fixity quite literally embodied in the sense that word

has indeed become flesh, the promise thus materialized. But the town's resistance to change also clearly derives from the fact that Ruby is the result of an earlier settlement, Haven—Ruby thus believes itself to exist in the form of a second coming. So as Megan Sweeney observes, while Ruby's "founding fathers" initially conceive of themselves as "crucified Christs," *Paradise* emphasizes their "movement from the position of crucified to the position of crucifier,[10] a movement that implies a slippage between the gentle message of the Gospels to the violent possibilities of self-authorization that arguably emerge in Revelation. So just as election in Exodus makes possible the substitution of mastery for slavery in that text, the linguistically fixed expression of a human god in John's Gospel enables a message of suffering and sacrifice to flip over into one of violence and self-authorization.

This latter possibility, realized in Revelation, clearly makes its way into *Paradise*. Ruby's patriarchs conceive of their mission to kill to be one of protection from "the mess" that "is seeping back into *our* homes, *our* families" (276). Their mission to root out the elements of "sin" that they believe infect their town shows the men of Ruby to have come a long way from the injunction in Exodus that "thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exod. 23:9). In Revelation this conflation—prohibited in Exodus—is made between enemy and outsider just as it is in Ruby; as the text of Revelation explains, all that may enter "through the gates into the city" are "blessed," "for without *are* dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie" (Rev. 22:15). This process whereby sinners are separated from the saved is vividly recalled by the mission of Ruby's leaders in *Paradise*; in the eyes of the men of the town, the convent women are precisely these "dogs": "Bitches. More like witches" (276).

The fear of "contamination" in *Paradise* is clearly very real—the alternative values of the convent do threaten the integrity of the town. But in fact it is elements in the town that are seeping outwards toward the convent on its border, and this is what emerges as truly frightening: as Consolata puts it, "scary things not always outside. Most scary things is inside" (39). The irony is that in enacting the warning that seals the text of Revelation—"if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and *from* the things which are written in this book" (Rev. 22:19)—the men of Ruby also project an "end" to the survival of their own community. For the novel draws a parallel between the endpoint imposed on Ruby's narrative, and its physical capacity to

evolve into the future. The wombs of Ruby appear to dry up as barrenness infects not only the town's self-sanctioned narration, but also its ability to reproduce. Thus the novel stages a direct clash between the generative text of Christian apocalyptic thought—Revelation—and the creation myth of Genesis. For the men of Ruby believe that "part of the charge had been to multiply" (113), and they are unable to recognize that such a charge is thwarted by their single-minded compulsion to sacralize and repeat the circumstances of their communal founding.

I argue that Morrison's novel dramatizes the violence that ensues from faith in a God that prohibits multiplicity; and that in fact her text offers a site from which the potential of Genesis might be renewed. This potential lies not in a reading of Genesis that mourns the exile from the Garden of Eden, but rather one that embraces that exile as the necessary condition for reproduction. This kind of biblical reading latent in *Paradise* recalls a brand of rabbinic hermeneutics interested not in closing down the possibilities of sacred text—as is clearly the case in Revelation and its reflection in *Paradise*—but rather opening it up to multiplicity and otherness. Morrison thus supplements the Christian story that runs through *Paradise* with a Jewish "ancestor," and in so doing turns the implications of the Christian Revelation on its head.

Genesis: The Scattering of Babel

The linguistic fixity that names a memorialized past is in fact turned upside down by the violent resolution of the town's "blocked" dialogue: "Bewildered, angry, sad, frightened people pile into cars, making their way back to children, livestock, fields, household chores and uncertainty. How hard they had worked for this place; how far away they once were from the terribleness they had just witnessed. How could so clean and blessed a mission devour itself and become the world they had escaped?" (292). The shock of the massacre of the convent women results in a variety of rapidly proliferating and incompatible versions of the story: "every one of the assaulting men had a different tale and their families and friends (who had been nowhere near the Convent) supported them, enhancing, recasting, inventing misinformation." That the multiplicity of stories leads Reverend Misner to reject all its versions rapidly "becoming gospel" as not "sermonizable" is highly significant. The notion of "altered truth" that Ruby's actions bring upon itself questions the very basis upon which the town's own "Gospel" is founded (297).

And indeed, the streets in Ruby named after Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John pay tribute to the seemingly orderly—yet actually chaotic—process

of canon formation, pointing as they do in four different directions. These streets then accumulate cross streets, streets named after figures who came later to supplement the evolving word with their own. Thus the very map of Ruby contradicts its singular vision. *Paradise*, then, stages a linguistic fall that ejects its protagonists from their "new Eden" and scatters the logic of their stories in a notably Babelian performance. In so doing, Morrison resignifies the scattering of Babel along the lines described in her Nobel lecture:

> The conventional wisdom of the Tower of Babel story is that the collapse was a misfortune. That it was the distraction or the weight of many languages that precipitated the tower's failed architecture. That one monolithic language would have expedited the building, and heaven should have been reached. Whose heaven, she wonders? And what kind? Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives. Had they, the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet. Complicated, demanding, yes, but a view of heaven as life; not heaven as post-life.[11]

The scattering of Babel is thus the maintenance of the knowledge of human finitude that began with the ejection from Eden, one that is marked by Morrison not with "sin" but rather the survival of human life. Such a vision is close—though not identical—to currents in the Judaic tradition that, as Gabriel Josipovici explains, see idolatry in the concept of the tower and celebrate the separation between heaven and earth, the ruthless differentiation of human tongues, as that which is life. In contrast, the predominant Christian interpretation of the failure of the tower mourns the separations that God imposes between human and the divine as the result of "original sin."[12] Morrison's Nobel speech does not reject the idea of paradise altogether—rather she sees its achievement as "premature"—but she reads the tower's collapse not as misfortune but rather a necessary stage on the way to the genuine achievement of understanding between different human beings. She thus arrives here at a reformulated understanding of "paradise" itself.

A similar trajectory can be traced in Morrison's novel. Like conventional Christian readings of the collapse of Babel, Ruby too has mourned the gap between human and divine through a fantasy of union; its inhabitants have rebelled against the frustrations of dialogue and interrupted the life-cycle inaugurated in Genesis. Yet in fact it is the moment of "Revelation," the moment of murder, that paradoxically makes way for the "desertification"—the emptying out—of

Ruby's narrative of Exodus. Like the biblical text itself, which teeters on the moment of communal founding and casts its culmination and its promise into an ever-receding future, *Paradise* ultimately denies its protagonists their dream of freedom as self-mastery, and invokes instead Moses's dying glimpse of the promised land. This moment comes at the end of the novel as its protagonists realize the fragile foundations of their "hard-won heaven" and are forced back into a position of self-questioning and doubt. This period of critical self-awareness and dialogue can be likened both to the scene of fraught communication invoked by Morrison's Nobel speech, and to the exiled Israelites in the book of Exodus who remain throughout that text condemned to the wilderness period.

Yet as Jacques Derrida writes, this risk of "*desertification*"—or, to use an analogous metaphor, the experience of the wilderness—can "also *render possible what it appears to threaten. The abstraction of the desert can thereby open the way to everything from which it withdraws.*"[13] Deconstruction invariably anticipates reconstruction. For "it is not easy to take the way of the desert"[14]—and quite possibly impossible. Thus while Morrison's novel unravels the religious dream it so vividly conjures, it nonetheless points in the direction of another kind of "promise" in which the confusion of Babel gives way once again to the shapes of a now transfigured community.

Paradise is not a text that denies the logic of narrative. While the women of the convent, in contrast to Ruby, learn a multivoiced model of speech in which "it was never important to know who said the dream or whether it had meaning" (264)—the "sin" of which does indeed invade the town—they are not immune from the dream of identity, the allure of "home" that drives the novel. On arrival at the convent, all the women encounter Consolata, who acts as a mother figure who performs this vital consolation that is her name: "Connie was magic" (173). While the town gains its "magic" through the Christian narrative in which its inhabitants would write themselves as living gods, Consolata gains her magic via an authority decidedly forbidden by the Christian church; it is a magic that supposedly pollutes the town's purity and brings about a tide of guilt in Consolata for "everything holy forbade its claims to knowingness and its practice" (244). And in this way Consolata similarly subjugates nature to her will by "stepping in" between people and their mortality. And yet, as her guilt attests, Consolata's conjuring practices are clearly part of an African spirituality apparently foreign to the dominant western tradition on which she was raised: Christianity and its Hebraic "other."

Between Exile and Redemption

So while *Paradise* deconstructs the power of Christianity via the "rebellion" of its Judaic "ancestor," the novel also reconstructs a notion of agency through its evocation of magic. The principal manifestation of "magic" in the novel comes at its close with the physical return of the murdered convent women. This magic, I suggest, significantly strains a reading that would cast it in the light of the Christian resurrection story.

In his study of the influences of conjure practices on black Christianity, Theophus Smith emphasizes that the practice of magic asserts both tonic and toxic aspects in a way that both refuses its own redemption and, by extension, conjoins elements of good and evil that appear radically separate in their Christian manifestation. Such a view is underscored by the nature of the convent women's "magical" resurrection, which, the text strongly suggests, suspends them between the lands of the living and the dead, thus fulfilling the angelic role of communicating between human beings and an ultimately uncertain beyond. The women are not Christ-like figures, for while they return to key scenes of suffering in their former lives, the spirit of their return is only ambivalently cast as one of forgiveness, and the warrior-like clothing they don suggests that Billie Delia's hope that they return to avenge their deaths might be closer to the truth. In this sense their resurrection should be understood as at a remove from mainstream notions of Christianity, and in the context of a specifically black Christianity. Harold Bloom claims that "West African religion exalted a distant God, while providing for a crowded intermediate realm where lesser gods mingled with the ongoing spirits of dead ancestors."[15]

I suggest that the resurrection of the convent women owes as much to this intermediate realm as it does to Christianity's foundational myths. The novel leaves entirely unresolved the relationship between the returned convent women and the divine resurrection. The space between them can be viewed as a magical "in-between space" that cannot lay claim to the certainties of redemption for its power is diffused and thus located at an irrevocable distance from the domain of the absolute. In this way Morrison suspends the novel's conclusion between the poles of exile and redemption—her novel does not affirm a vision of endless questioning of communal values, but neither does it envisage the ultimate redemption of those values.

Thus *Paradise* harnesses this conjunctive aspect of magic—that embraces a model of power both tonic and toxic—to show that the dialectic between the God of mercy and the God of justice need not

be a Hegelian one that will always privilege a higher term. This move is directly captured in the figures of the returned convent women, whose function seems to be caught between the apparently opposing goals of punishment and forgiveness. This "in-between space" that they occupy in death has its correlate in the home they find in life: the convent. Contrary to the views of some critics, the convent does not represent "paradise," a binary opposition to Ruby, but similarly inhabits a supplementary in-between space capable of transforming Ruby precisely because it is not the absolute "other" that the town's men believe it to be. Thus just as the town is full of examples of the confusion between human and divine, so too is the convent, which is replete with idols and which resonates with the women's yearning to conjure tangible representations of divinity. The difference between Ruby and the convent is that where the former claims redemption via a story of self-empowerment, the latter achieves a form of self-empowerment via a partial embrace of exile.

An essay by Gillian Rose speaks forcefully to this difference that is emphatically not an opposition. In "*Athens and Jerusalem: a Tale of Three Cities*," Gillian Rose describes a painting by Poussin: *Gathering the Ashes of Phocion*. It features two women gathering the ashes of a dead husband and master who, having offered himself as a model of civic virtue in Athenian public life and then unjustly accused of treason, is condemned to death, his ashes banished to the outside of the city walls. The classical architecture of Athens looms behind and frames the image of the mourning women, of whom Rose asks, "Do they bring to representation an immediate ethical experience, 'women's experience,' silenced and suppressed by the law of the city, and hence expelled outside its walls? No. In these delegitimate acts of tending the dead, these acts of justice, against the current will of the city, women reinvent the political life of the community."[16]

Rose categorically rejects the notion that through their act of defiance the women have somehow abandoned old Athens for a New Jerusalem; and it seems that an equivalent rejection should be made for *Paradise*, which vividly depicts the violence inherent in just this kind of claim. To argue that the convent women's opposition to Ruby is a declaration of a "New Jerusalem" would be to valorize a reinscription of precisely the move made by the town's patriarchs; as Rose contends in relation to Poussin's painting—to do so would be to "completely efface the politics" of their resistance.[17]

Rose argues that "the unsparing revulsion against fallen idols and the rush to espouse their formerly degraded 'others' perpetuate dualisms in which all the undesirable features of the original term are reinforced and

reappear in its ostensibly newly revealed and valorised 'other.'"[18] I suggest that a similar sentiment motivates *Paradise*, which does not seek to unequivocally condemn the men of Ruby and elevate the women as ethical "others." As Morrison writes, her notion of "home" seeks to move "the job of unmattering race away from pathetic yearning and futile desire; away from an impossible future or an irretrievable and probably non-existent Eden to a manageable, doable, modern human activity."[19] Morrison thus places herself squarely inside the dilemma diagnosed by Rose: "It is the abused who become the abusers; no one and no community is exempt from the paradoxes of 'empowerment.'"[20] Thus *Paradise* does not capture an "idealised presentation of Judaism as the sublime other of modernity"—a characteristic Rose attributes to the "ethical" turn of postmodern thought.[21]

Like Rose, Morrison's terrain is this "third city"—"the city in which we all live and with which we are too familiar"[22]; yet as Morrison writes, "if I had to live in a racial house, it was important, at the least, to rebuild it."[23] To this end Morrison enlists a notably transfigured Christianity in *Paradise*. So the desire for God, for possession of the other, for the safety of truth, for security of selfhood, for the comfort of belonging, for immortality, for the dream of a permanent home: *Paradise* in no way suggests that people should or could avoid these desires; rather it shows the catastrophe that comes of the attempt to "make whole." Christianity expresses this profound desire and Morrison's novel is not concerned with repressing this expression. *Paradise* does not rule out the idea at the heart of its name, rather it insists on its constant reimagining.

By interrupting the direction of travel of Christian supercessionist accounts, and returning the authors of an apocalyptic tale to the scene of Genesis, Morrison invokes what Theophus Smith describes as "the lonely God" of Genesis, "a God who yearns to coinhabit a world of other beings." Smith likens this figure to the conjurer figure in African American folk tradition, and claims that the creation myth of Genesis is central for a tradition that has from its inception sought to "conjure God for freedom."[24] The lonely conjurer figure offers a way in to understanding the function of the divine in *Paradise*.

By the close of the novel it is clear that there exists an intraversible distance between human and divine. When Richard and Kate see glimpses of an opening—a door or a window—suggesting "another realm" they ask themselves and each other the only question they can ask: "What on earth would it be? What on earth?" (305). The idea of this "beyond" acts in *Paradise* as an insistent reminder of the provisionality that conditions worldly understanding. Yet the novel is also

populated by a number of figures who see themselves as conjurer figures: Consolata, Lone, and Toni Morrison herself—who magically resurrects the convent women—being the primary examples. Yet unlike the men of Ruby who identify their powers with those of God—and whose usurpation of God's authority is irreversibly suspended by the end of the novel—these female conjurers remain skeptical about the powers they wield not as God but as human beings. At an intraversible distance from the divine, the conjuring powers that assert themselves at the end of *Paradise* are based in the ambivalent terrains of magic, the authority of which is consequently cast into shadow. The novel therefore gestures to a narrative that projects and achieves visions simultaneously affirmatory, consoling *and* deconstructive, revisionary.

What we get in *Paradise*, then, is a glimpse of redemption. This glimpse is brought to us through the portrait of a woman, Piedade, the text's comforter, singing to another woman in her lap. The novel's final lines read, "Around them on the beach, sea trash gleams. Discarded bottle caps sparkle near a broken sandal":

> There is nothing to beat this solace which is what Piedade's song is about, although the words evoke memories neither one has ever had: of reaching age in the company of the other; of speech shared and divided bread smoking from the fire; the unambivalent bliss of going home to be at home—the ease of coming back to love begun.
>
> When the ocean heaves sending rhythms of water ashore, Piedade looks to see what has come. Another ship, perhaps, but different, heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time. Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise (318).

We are left with an image comparable to Lurianic Kabbalah's breaking of the vessels. The luminous shards of creation are scattered, fragmented, and yet they invite, tempt, even charge human hands with the task of healing the rupture—so as to hasten the coming of divine redemption.

Conclusion: Exodus and Transformation

The text of *Paradise* releases Ruby's paralyzed story by undermining its monologic foundations and staging a linguistic fall at the heart of the town's self-narration, a narration that is forced to tell not of paradise's realization but rather of its loss. As Katrine Dalsgard argues, Morrison is involved in critiquing American exceptionalism—which is thoroughly dependent on the story of Exodus and the idea of chosenness that sits

at the heart of that story—and the consequent "violent marginalization of its non-exceptionalist other."[25] Thus Ruby's early history mimes the process of nation building, and it comes to form a microcosm of the nation itself.[26] The town's narrative ultimately fails to maintain a clear distinction between it and its nonexceptionalist others at the convent, and this novelistic thread points to the larger contexts of *Paradise* itself, which, in featuring a black American appropriation of the narrative of national exceptionalism, deconstructs the racial criteria that implicitly informs many articulations of American chosenness.

If *Paradise* were primarily concerned with critiquing Judaism and celebrating the event of Christianity as some critics suggest, Morrison's entire critique of American racism would be redundant. Hers is not a novel aimed at critiquing the chauvinism that haunts the heart of Jewish election. One only need look at the very different contexts that frame the Israeli national project to see that religion has played a much more vexed and ambivalent role in Jewish nationalism—or Zionism—as compared to its counterpart in the United States. Indeed, prior to the establishment of Israel in 1948, many religious Jews, while supportive of the idea of a Jewish State, felt that to see the State of Israel as the realization of biblical promise was blasphemous.[27] For most traditions of Judaism insist that the current world is radically unredeemed, and no action in unredeemed time can claim the sanction of God. This is the context for rabbinic hermeneutics, a tradition of biblical interpretation dedicated to unraveling the multiple meanings of sacred texts that can never, in unredeemed time, yield a final meaning. While I've argued here that Morrison only partially adopts this position of radical undecidability in *Paradise*—her text does cautiously imagine a form of worldly redemption—I've also suggested that she unequivocally refutes the logic of final meanings as encapsulated in the Christian book of Revelation.

My suggestion then is that while the Exodus text does harbor within itself the possibility of a dangerous and exclusionary narrative, the book itself vigorously problematizes the idea of election and defers the achievement of the promised land; undoubtedly the Israeli national project has harnessed key motifs from this narrative to buttress their own story of national founding, but these appropriations are deeply strained by a religious tradition that has, on the whole, cautioned against the declaration of worldly redemption—as exemplified in the all-important second commandment, the ban on images of God. Clearly the figure of a resurrected Jesus radically transforms this idea by ushering redemption into the world rather than holding it out as a future ideal. While the Gospels highlight the sacrificial aspect of Jesus's redemptive function,

Revelation presents a much more violent vision of Jesus as warrior. And whereas the message of the Gospels seemingly universalizes the potentially divisive notion of election inaugurated by Exodus, by suggesting that proximity to God—and thus redemption—is to be found in faith in Jesus Christ, Revelation takes it to terrifying extremes. It follows a divisive logic that separates the sinners from the saved, as represented in a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil. In an intensification of the exclusionary narrative that hangs over Exodus, Revelation casts salvation for those branded with God's name as an absolute certainty—a certainty that is wholly absent from the troubled covenantal relationship portrayed in Exodus.

By exploring the uniquely violent outcome of the mapping of the Exodus trope of election onto the apocalyptic world of absolutes in Revelation, *Paradise* participates in a school of thought that sees Revelation as a key text—if not *the* key text—in American evangelical thinking, one that makes for a frighteningly literalistic rendering of the Bible.[28] For the frozen communal narrative that takes hold of Ruby parallels just this kind of biblical fundamentalism and leads to a robust version of the Exodus narrative entirely divorced from the sense of provisionality that arguably should filter readings of that text. Morrison's novel then is not an affirmation of a Christian reading of the Old Testament, but rather a critique of what is a specifically *Christian* narrative of "the chosen people" that sits at the center of America's triumphalist discourse about itself.

Morrison's novel does not reject all forms of agency as irrevocably polluted by the potential abuse of power, but by invoking the power of magic, Morrison does eschew the taken-for-granted redemption intrinsic to expectionalist rhetoric; she also taps into a prophetic current in the black tradition that has remained largely dormant in a post-civil rights landscape notably bereft of Martin Luther King's "beloved community." This is a tradition that has in recent years been partially revived in public discourse by the rhetoric of national exceptionalism deployed by Barack Obama. Obama's national vision is grounded in faith in the American project, but this faith is mitigated by a jeremiad constantly attuned to the difference between the real and the ideal; though the significance of Obama's self-designation as a biracial black man has been much debated, the African American struggle for equality within the United States has clearly played a major role in shaping his vision of social justice. Central to Obama's call for "a more perfect union" is the need to address the nation's "original sin" of slavery. Echoing King and the thrust of Morrison's novel, this dream of national redemption—a "perfect union"—is rendered fundamentally incomplete. This rhetoric

is part of a prophetic tradition for which, *Paradise* suggests, Exodus remains a relevant and powerful symbol of transformation.

Toni Morrison's novel *Paradise* thus insinuates a disruptive vocabulary at the heart of the American national narrative and its redemptive trajectory. It casts a definitive shadow over the nation's self-elected role as beneficiary of a special promise and harbinger of a special destiny. By emphasizing America's foundations in slavery and genocide, Morrison reveals a nation that has, from its inception, transgressed the biblical vision in which it was born. For while the early Puritan settlers cast the founding of the new world in the shape of the Exodus narrative, its origins in violence surely breached the boundaries of the covenantal relation that confers the status of God's "chosen people." In highlighting the violent exclusions that issue from America's founding religious vision, *Paradise* sounds a notably prophetic call to a nation that has asserted itself —with disastrous social and political consequences both at home and on the world stage— through an exceptionalist sense of its design and "mission."

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Notes

1. See Norman Crockett, *The Black Towns* (Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1979).
2. See Philip Page, "Furrowing All the Brows: Interpretation and the Transcendent in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," *African American Review*, 35.4 (2001): 637–49, and Gail Fox, "Biblical Connections in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," *Notes on Contemporary Literature* 34.3 (2004): 7–8.

3. Page, 646.
4. Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation*, ed. Mari Evans (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984), 344.
5. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Picador, 1988), 274–75.
6. Page, 638; 645.
7. Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1982), 5.
8. Handelman, 81–82.
9. Ibid., 81.
10. Megan Sweeney, "Racial House, Big House, Home: Contemporary Abolitionism in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, 4.2 (2004): 43.
11. Toni Morrison, *The Nobel Lecture in Literature, 1993* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 19.
12. Gabriel Josipovici, *The Book of God* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988), 175–76.
13. Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 55.
14. Josipovici, 106.
15. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 245.
16. Gillian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 35
17. Rose, 25.
18. Rose, 3.
19. Toni Morrison, "Home," *The House that Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 3–4.
20. Morrison, "Home," 5.
21. Ibid., 26.
22. Ibid., 34.
23. Ibid., 4.
24. Smith, 28.
25. Katrine Dalsgard, "The One All-Black Town Worth the Pain: (African) American Exceptionalism, Historical Narration, and the Critique of Nationhood in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," *African American Review*, 35.2 (2001): 237.
26. See Chanette Romero, "Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and Nation in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," *African American Review* 39.3 (2005): 415–30.
27. See Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Shocken Books, 1971) and Adam Zachary Newton, *The Fence and the Neighbour: Emmanuel Levinas, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, and Israel Among the Nations* (Albany: State U of New York P, 2001).
28. See Michael Northcott, *An Angel Directs the Storm: Apocalyptic Religion and American Empire* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004).

Chapter 7

"In the Beginning—Big Bang"

Violence in Ernesto Cardenal's *Cosmic Canticle*

Ellin Sterne Jimmerson

Introduction

There is one thing Western Christians who are concerned about the uses and abuses of the Bible do not want to hear. It is that violence is theologically legitimate. Indeed philosophical nonviolence, exemplified by such historical-theological heroes as Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., is a central tenet of contemporary Western Christianity. Certain non-Western interpreters of Christianity, however—whose contexts and experiences are quite unlike those of even the assassinated American leader—call the certainty of this tenet into question. Nicaragua's Ernesto Cardenal—one of the most widely read poets in the Spanish language, a Roman Catholic priest, Latin America's most idiosyncratic liberation theologian, and former Minister of Culture during the Nicaraguan Government of Reconstruction (1979–1990)—intentionally blurs the line between violence and nonviolence as the West understands those concepts. He is less interested in choosing between violence and nonviolence than he is in confronting the West's preoccupation with the distinction. This distinction and the choice it promotes, he suggests, are culpable in prolonging the intense suffering of the Nicaraguan people. He is interested in foregrounding the inescapability of violence and in developing a distinction between two fundamentally different kinds of violence.

One the one hand, according to Cardenal, there is the violence of a God-ordained, evolutionary/revolutionary movement toward holistic communion, the kind of procreative violence a woman associates

with childbirth. This is the violence of "freedom fighters" like the American Revolutionaries. On the other hand, there is a capitalism/imperialism/militarism-ordained violence that, according to Cardenal, deals in systemic suffering. This is the violence of the United States's domination of Nicaragua.

VIOLENCE IN THE NICARAGUAN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Cardenal's politics, religion, and poetry foreground the inescapability of violence. For most of the twentieth century, he correctly remembers, it was the context of life for Nicaraguans under the Somoza National Guard military dictatorship, which was installed and backed by the United States and was one of the greediest and most brutal in Latin America. The Somoza National Guard military dictatorship had its roots in the inherent violence of the 1823 Monroe Doctrine and successive policies by which the United States unilaterally pronounced Latin America a thing it alone would consume. By the middle of the century, the "greatest prize in the Western hemisphere" was Lake Nicaragua.[1] The gold rush was on and Americans were in a frenzy to establish control over the isthmus so they could get from the east coast to California quickly. The obvious solution was to appropriate Lake Nicaragua, build a series of locks through the navigable Río San Juan, then dig an eleven mile long canal from the western edge of the lake to the Pacific Ocean.[2]

The first serious American contender for the riches was an evangelical from Nashville, Tennessee. William Walker, the "Grey-Eyed Man of Destiny," proclaimed his belief in an American style of democracy, struck a deal with Nicaragua's Liberal party, invaded the country in 1855, captured the Conservative party stronghold of Granada, set up a puppet Liberal regime, and had himself elected president. Walker proceeded to legalize slavery, ensure forced peasant labor for landowners, and appropriate major landholdings. His brief reign ended in 1860 when Honduras tried and executed him.[3]

While technically an independent state once again, Nicaragua was never free of the predations of U.S. foreign policy. When Liberal President José Santos Zelaya (1893–1909) tried to negotiate a canal treaty with Japan and Germany, for example, U.S. President William Howard Taft (1908–1912) backed the Conservatives in an effort to overthrow Zelaya at the Atlantic port of Bluefields in 1909. Then, arguing for a need to "protect U.S. lives and property," he landed U.S. Marines and forced Zelaya to resign.[4]

When the United States decided to withdraw the Marines in 1927, it left the country in the hands of an American trained National Guard whose first commander was not a Nicaraguan but a U.S. Marine Corps colonel named Robert Rhea.[5] The United States made contacts with President José Maria Moncada (1928–1932) via Anastasio Somoza García. Somoza's qualifications for the job were social—he was likeable, he spoke breezy American slang and, according to the wife of the former U.S. Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson, he danced like a dream. Somoza solidified his ties to U.S. power brokers by sending his sons to West Point Military Academy and Louisiana State University and by manipulating America's knee-jerk fear of communism.[6]

Concurrent with Somoza's rise through the American sociopolitical ranks was the emergence of Nicaragua's General Augusto César Sandino. Beginning in 1927, he waged a successful six-year war against the U.S. Marines and their Nicaraguan allies, developing in the process the techniques of modern guerrilla warfare. Sandino was committed to ridding Nicaragua of U.S. imperialism. He also wanted to rid Nicaragua of the National Guard, which he concluded early on was "an embryonic monster that could one day betray Nicaragua."[7]

Early in 1934, Sandino made a mistake—he agreed to a peace settlement with President Juan Bautista Sacasa (1932–1937). On his way to the presidential palace in Managua, he was murdered on Somoza's order. Somoza quickly maneuvered an election that led to his presidency. By the time he was inaugurated on January 1, 1937, he was both president of Nicaragua and Director of the National Guard, which had extended its control throughout Nicaragua. The notorious Somoza family dynasty (1937–1979) had begun.[8]

Violence and Nicaraguan Poetry

While Sandino was being ambushed, Somoza entertained his National Guard officers at a soirée featuring the reading of poetry. Sandino himself had noted the intrinsic Nicaraguan connection between fearlessness, national issues, and poetry: Nicaraguans are "intrepid, political, even poets by nature," he wrote.[9] Since the late nineteenth century in Nicaragua, where the act of writing a poem is a political gesture, *modernista* resistance literature has sought an antidote to U.S. hegemony, taking up the issues of national sovereignty and the role of the artist-intellectual. The literary coup d'état was motivated by military hegemonic moves—the Spanish American War in 1898 and the carving out of the Panamanian state as a result of U.S. intervention in 1903.[10]

In 1954 Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal learned to handle a machine gun so he could participate in the April Rebellion plot to assassinate Anastasio Somoza García. The conjunction of poetry with assassination made perfect cultural sense in Nicaragua, a country where many of its revolutionary icons are poets. A sample of a long list illustrates the point. Rigoberto López Pérez was a poet who attempted to inaugurate the "beginning of the end" of the tyranny. He succeeded in assassinating Somoza in 1956.[11] Twenty-year-old poet Leonel Rugama became a hero when he died in 1970 in a blitzkrieg of National Guard firepower, famously insulting the Guard before he died by shouting "Surrender your mother!" During the 1960s and 1970s, the poems of Nicaragua's Rubén Darío, the *modernista* movement's "center of gravity," were read strategically by Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) (Sandinista National Liberation Front) founder Carlos Fonseca Amador and for spiritual reasons among guerrillas in the northern mountains. Daniel Ortega, who became coordinator of the Government Junta of National Reconstruction after the triumph of the revolution in 1979 and Tomás Borge Martínez, who cofounded the FSLN in 1961, were poets.[12]

Violence, Poetry, Revolution, and Christianity in Nicaragua

There is a strong Christian strain among Nicaragua's poet revolutionaries. Leonel Rugama left his seminary to join the urban guerrillas in Managua. Tomás Borge is a mystical Christian who once announced, after a failed effort to exhume the remains of Nicaragua's General of Free Men, "Sandino has been resurrected!" Borge and Ortega included four Catholic priests in the socialist Reconstruction government. One of them was Ernesto Cardenal, who by then was not only a Roman Catholic priest and liberation theologian but also one of the most widely read poets in the Spanish-speaking world.

Cardenal was born in Granada, Nicaragua to an upper middle class family in 1925. In 1947, he went to Columbia University, studied Ezra Pound's poems, and returned to Nicaragua. He borrowed national, anti-imperial political goals and such literary strategies as a willingness to shock the reader from the *modernistas*. He developed his own literary style, however, which he called *exteriorismo* (exteriorism). His literary aim was to document the deadly systems of *Somocismo*, imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism. His sociopolitical aim was to overthrow the Somoza regime. To achieve his goals, he used

explicit language, montage-like literary rearrangements of reality, disjointedness of chronological time, and historical subject matter.

After the 1954 April Rebellion, Cardenal underwent a conversion to Roman Catholicism and strict nonviolence. His conversion was prompted by the rebellion's violence. Among other horrors, his close personal friend Adolfo Báez Bone had been castrated and murdered, possibly at the hands of Somoza himself. He added biblical interpretive filters to his poetic arsenal. In 1966, at the urging of American poet Thomas Merton—who had been his novice-master at a Trappist monastery in Gethsemani, Kentucky, in the early 1960s—Cardenal and Colombian poet William Agudelo established, in the midst of Lake Nicaragua, the former "prize of the Western hemisphere," a small Christian commune devoted to contemplation, nonviolence, the arts, and Bible discussions. Over time, the *campesinos* with whom the commune shared the archipelago became artists, poets, and informal Bible exegetes. In 1977, many of the younger ones joined the FSLN led effort to overthrow the Somoza National Guard regime.

Concluding by 1972 that priestly calls for nonviolence would prolong the intense suffering of the Nicaraguan people, Cardenal scandalized his international admirers with a decision to publicly support the guerrillas. His participation in the 1954 April Rebellion followed by a postrebellion conversion to strict nonviolence followed by a theoretical return to violence may seem like vacillation. However, his central theological, historical, and poetic concern remained constant. He longed for the fullness of life to triumph over the protracted, intense suffering of Nicaragua and reluctantly concluded that hope for Nicaraguan life was inconsistent with philosophical nonviolence.

Cardenal's turn from nonviolence coincided with Managua's violent 1972 earthquake. The earthquake struck Nicaragua's capital city at 12:34 a.m. on December 23 as the city's elite were preparing for a lavish Christmas. Later, Tomás Borge wrote that Managua shattered "like a castle of cards constructed by a Peruvian sorceress."[13] Approximately ten thousand people were killed. Hundreds of thousands more were injured or left homeless. Over 80 percent of the capital's businesses were destroyed; 35 percent were pillaged. The presidential palace, the American embassy, and an additional Somoza residence later had to be razed. National Guard soldiers, often led by their officers, engaged in extensive looting. Massive amounts of foreign aid poured into Nicaragua. Most of it ended up in the already deep pockets of Somoza and his family as well as those of his business and Guard cronies. It was one of the most damaging and revealing episodes in Somoza and National Guard history. The United States stayed by Somoza's side.

VIOLENCE: THE NICARAGUAN CONTEXT (STILL)

In understanding Cardenal's movement away from philosophical nonviolence, it is helpful to understand the depth of Somoza's pockets on the one hand and the depth of the poverty of the Nicaraguan people on the other. In other words, as Cardenal appears to have concluded, the real choice was not between violence and nonviolence. The choice he faced was whether to confront the violence of Somoza's deep pockets and of the poverty of Nicaragua. It is also crucial to understand that the "key to maintaining [Nicaragua's] system of exaggerated social and economic inequality [was] control over the Guardia Nacional."[14] Cardenal had concluded that to continue urging strict nonviolence was the equivalent of choosing not to address Nicaragua's systemic violence and maintaining its death dealing and thus inherently violent inequality.

By the 1970s, Anastasio "Tachito" Somoza Debayle, Somoza García's son and dynastic heir, by objective standards was the richest man in Central America and by U.S. columnist Jack Anderson's subjective standard the "world's greediest ruler."[15] He owned one-fifth of all Nicaraguan farm land, three of its five sugar mills, both of its two meat processing plants licensed to export, numerous agricultural processing plants, one hundred sixty-eight factories, a radio and television station, transportation and marketing companies, Nicaragua's only airline, a Mercedes-Benz plant, and his own banks. He controlled one-fourth of the industrial economy and dominated a national treasury willing to finance further operations.[16] The relationship between the poverty of the Nicaraguan people and the wealth of the Somozas was typified in yet another of their businesses, one called Plasmaferesis that exported Nicaraguan blood.

By contrast, more than one-half of the 2.5 million Nicaraguans endured violent poverty. They suffered chronic malnutrition, disease, and a lack of health care facilities. The average life expectancy was 49.9 years, or 22 years less than the United States average. Nicaragua had the world's highest homicide rate, an extremely high rate of accidental deaths, and the highest rate of chronic alcoholism in Central America.[17] Violence was the context of Nicaraguan life.

The key to maintaining the stability of the system was the National Guard. The Guard's budget was devoted, not to military hardware, which would have allowed Nicaragua to combat external enemies, but to intelligence geared toward controlling the dissent and possible insurgence efforts of its own people. A study in the early 1970s revealed a "monomaniacal concern with internal security" among

cadets.[18] The Guard was adept at torture and "disappearance." Its members seemed to enjoy their jobs.

The FSLN-led revolution began in earnest on October 13, 1977. The cost was staggering. Between 1977 and July 19, 1979, fifty thousand Nicaraguans died and three hundred thousand were wounded in the overthrow of the dictatorship. Shortly after the guerrillas ousted Somoza, a handful of Nicaraguans and the United States, under President Ronald Reagan and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), funded the *contra* counterrevolution. Although the World Court found in favor of Nicaragua in a suit against the United States, the *contra* war continued. The result was another thirty thousand deaths. For Nicaragua, which is about the size of Alabama, the figure is estimated to be proportionate to a United States death toll of 2.25 million people.[19] Reagan's foreign policy included an intense opposition to liberation theology. In other words, Cardenal and other Nicaraguan liberation theologians were being opposed neither by philosophical violence nor philosophical nonviolence. They were opposed by the real violence of Somoza and his National Guard and by the real violence of the U.S. president, the CIA, and the *contras.*

Cosmic Canticle

When Ernesto Cardenal published *Cosmic Canticle* in 1989, one might have expected a volume characterized by despair and a sense that death was destined to triumph over life in Nicaragua. Instead, his purpose was to provide consolation and hope to Nicaragua: "the aim of my Canticle is to console."[20] Running to almost five hundred pages and consisting of forty-three separate songs, *Cosmic Canticle* is Cardenal's theological and poetic *magnum opus.* A central strategy is to reconcile Nicaragua's violent context with the premise that God is in control of a cosmos oriented to life.

Cosmic Canticle is not Western academic theology in which a consistent argument progresses linearly from one finely tuned point to the next. Instead, like all his poetry it is a montage of loosely associated vignettes and porous associations. It is literarily elliptical, allusive, epigrammatic, intellectually freewheeling, and theologically hard-hitting. It consists of long documentary passages complete with citations, canonical and noncanonical biblical filters, previously published poems, allegories, parables, gossip, personal reminiscences, and other literary types. It is notable for its plethora of named scientific, anthropological, and spiritual influences ranging from radiation and quantum field theories to ancient flood and resurrection myths.

This chapter explores four of the biblical filters Cardenal uses to unravel the meaning of violence in *Cosmic Canticle*'s forty-three cantos. They are the initial Genesis line, "In the beginning," biblical eroticism, the motif of creation crying out in the agony of childbirth, and the theme of the Kingdom of Heaven. In his elliptical, associative manner, Cardenal draws a comparison between Nicaragua and a woman in childbirth. The consolation is that which loved ones offer to a woman in labor—it cannot last forever. The longing for new life that motivated the "beginning" approach, the erotic act, and the pregnancy that brought you to this time of agony will end in a new life.

The title of the first canto, "Big Bang," signals Cardenal's use of the theory in physics that the creation of the universe resulted from a cosmic explosion. The theory implies that creational change and violence are linked in the physical structure of the cosmos. Cardenal immediately gives the theory a theological twist. The first line of *Cosmic Canticle*, "In the beginning there was nothing," simultaneously references the creationism of Genesis while recalling the creationism of the Big Bang.[21]

According to Cardenal, if creation began because God decided to address the cosmos through an explosive, violent movement, there must have been a prior time characterized by the inverse. That inverse time was not a time of nonviolence; it was a time of immobility. Before the Big Bang, there was "nothing united, nothing together, / there existed nothing that existed, only immobility."[22]

Cardenal's central theological premise—that is, that a divine-cosmological union via an explosive, creational change structured the cosmos—is underwritten in a central literary strategy. The phrase "In the beginning," alluding to Genesis, is the first line of twenty-two of the forty-three songs and is one of the key means by which he fleshes out implications of his premise. By repeating the phrase throughout *Cosmic Canticle*, Cardenal offers as consolation the idea that the violent beginning, the violent Genesis, the violent Big Bang was the origin of life. He is suggesting that the inverse of violence is not nonviolence; it is immobility, sterility, and lack of existence.

In the introduction to the second canto he writes, "In the beginning / —before spacetime— / was the Word / All that is then is true. / Poem."[23] God, he suggests—the architect of creation called out of nothingness and separation by a grand cosmic act of violent change—is the God of reality expressed through reference. Among the implications of reference for Cardenal is the creational eroticism of the universe and of the act of writing poetry. Referring to the Chilean father of *Creacionista* (Creationist) avant-garde poetry, he says, "Each

thing is like a 'like.' / Like a 'like' in a Huidobro poem. / The entire cosmos copulation."[24] Cardenal offers consolation to Nicaragua in the idea that the universe by its structure is erotic—creation results from attraction and movement. By the same token, the act of writing a poem is a violent, destabilizing, creative act. The inverse of writing a poem, he suggests, is not writing prose; the inverse of writing a poem is adjusting to immobility, sterility, and lifelessness.

Cardenal proposes that an inverse law of physics—the second law of thermodynamics or entropy—is also in the structure of the cosmos. Entropy has to do with matter and energy deteriorating to ultimate states of inert uniformity. Roughly speaking, this means that systems inevitably wind down until they are immobilized. Or, in Cardenal's paraphrase, "Venice, its balconies crumbling like Gorgonzola cheese."[25]

The second law of thermodynamics relates to the discovery of the expansion of the universe and the concept that the galaxies are receding. There is built into the structure of the cosmos the certainty that as one thing advances another thing gets left behind. Translating the principle into visual images, Cardenal poses and answers a rhetorical question: "Approaching train sharper. / And heavenly bodies bluer as they approach / and redder if they are receding. / Why is the night black . . . / It is black because of the expanding universe."[26] In the oblique way characteristic of his poetry, Cardenal is theorizing that the blackness of Nicaragua's long night of suffering is related to its inevitably expanding universe. Or, put another way, Nicaragua is groaning in the agony of bringing into being new life with the restructuring of reality that implies.

With "Beyond and Closer to Home," Cardenal begins to emphasize a second biblical motif, that of the Kingdom of Heaven. He believes there must be coherence among physics, theology, and history. Indeed, this is one of the central challenges he wants to make to Western theologians who insist on a split between theology and science. Cardenal insists that the inverse of faith is not science; it is unreality. At their best, theology and science have the same purpose, he believes. That purpose is to comprehend reality and to put all reality into total relationship. Therefore, he concludes, the Big Bang theory, the long capitalism, the Somoza National Guard, and the *contras* perpetuated the Nicaraguan night; and the Kingdom of Heaven must be understood in relationship to these things because all are reality. He writes, "But earthquakes and eruptions / are the delayed consequences of the explosion of the stars. / Which is why I maintain, I repeat, / the heavens are here on earth."[27] What is at stake is neither

the Big Bang theory nor biblical creationism; what is at stake is the Kingdom of Heaven in Nicaraguan real time.

By repeating the phrase "for argument's sake," Cardenal sardonically clarifies one of the overarching purposes of his poetry, which is to call into question the chesslike, linear, argument-based mode of Western intellection that he associates with imperialism, militarism, and capitalism. One of the intentions of this mode of intellection, he suggests, is to promote an apparent rift between such things as faith and economics or between violence and nonviolence. He uses the Western idea of an "argument" against itself by relating it elliptically to theology, cosmology, capitalism, and hunger. He ties "For argument's sake, say God laid out the stars / say for argument's sake that he laid them out, . . ." to lines suggesting that the "logic" of capitalism is the violence of hunger.[28] "For argument's sake," he continues, "'Threat of rice over-production' / in India. / Threat of wheat overproduction. / The horror of abundance and efficiency."[29] By typographically separating the words "in India" from the rest of the line, Cardenal drives homes the point that if capitalism causes suffering, capitalism is violent. The inverse of the violence of capitalism, he believes, is not philosophical nonviolence. The inverse is an economy geared to promoting and sustaining fullness of life.

Cardenal has articulated a central philosophical principle. He believes that one's most basic theological conclusions and one's most basic economic conclusions are necessarily connected. Cardenal is convinced that the reality that God has been in creative control of the cosmos since before the Big Bang must be brought into direct contact with the reality of the massive violence of capitalism. Cardenal is insisting that if God is the God of the explosive, change-oriented, life-generating violence of procreation, then capitalism, because its violence is deadly, is a moving counter to God's structuring of the cosmos. The consolation is that capitalism, then, already must be receding or undergoing the process of entropy implicit in the second law of thermodynamics. If that is so, the Kingdom of Heaven must be approaching.

Cardenal encourages the insight that the scientific principle of entropy and its relative, the concept of the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven, were made manifest in 1959. It is almost without debate that the most important event of the twentieth century in Latin America was the Cuban Revolution. Not only did the revolution achieve the impossible—overthrowing the U.S.-backed dictatorship—it brought to Latin America what the Church had not even seriously attempted. It brought hope to Latin America that the future could be different from the present reality of immobilizing poverty and despair. By

importing into his montage of loosely related concepts the memory of Ernesto "Che" Guevara, the still-iconic architect of the Cuban Revolution, he implies that the winding down of capitalism is related to the life-generating violence of evolution, which in turn implies the violence of revolution: "The first fish / died of suffocation. The first fish that leaped onto land / was like el Che."[30] In *Cosmic Canticle*, the issue for Cardenal is not choosing between philosophical nonviolence and violence. The only issue, the only real choice, was the violence of evolution and revolution—an inherent movement into the future—or the violence of capitalism/militarism/and dictatorship and the time-stopping continuation of Latin American suffering. The issue was whether the evolutionary, future-oriented Kingdom of Heaven would ever be realized in Nicaraguan real time.

In a visual passage, Cardenal relates how the insight that "el Che" was an evolutionary figure prompted a vision in San José de Costa Rica. He writes, "some neon signs, drugstores, cars / kids on motorbikes, gas stations, bars, people on the sidewalks / groups of girls in uniform, workers in groups / and I saw everything organized by love."[31] He interprets the vision by obliquely importing his third biblical motif—that of humanity crying out in the pain of childbirth: "The whole of creation / was clamoring, clamoring in full cry for / the Revolution."[32] For Cardenal there is a complex yet basic trajectory—love leads to communion, which leads to procreation, which leads to pain of birth (which is violence), which leads to the death of the old system (which is both revolution and evolution). The distinction between procreative, evolutionary violence and nonprocreative, nonevolutionary violence is whether it leads to life or immobility on the part of suffering humanity.

Cardenal makes his first reference to the *contras* and their Nicaraguan victims in a water-based parable: "The sailor thrown into the water one night by the Contras [sic] / he knowing it was 38 fathoms deep— / he remained hidden in the dark on his plank."[33] He weaves in Christological references to the three o'clock crucifixion hour, appearance of an orienting star, and the spoken word that calms the sea.[34] In his allusion to the great depth of the water, coupled with the "sacrificing" of the sailor by the *contras*, Cardenal relates the sailor at once to Jonah and Jesus. By extension, he connects these three figures—each struggling to overcome the dangers of the water—to Che Guevara's evolutionary meaning.

Developing the motif of water as the context of evolutionary movement, Cardenal ties together eroticism, evolution, and revolution with vague hints at procreational violence: "Our teeth have their origin in

sharks / but later as mammals we acquired lips that could suck / and because of those lips that could suck we acquired kisses."[35] Moving backwards in time, he shifts his focus to Augusto César Sandino, the Nicaraguan hero for whom Nicaragua's Sandinista National Liberation Front was named. Cardenal suggests that the architect of modern guerrilla warfare was one of the principle figures in the "evolution of freedom."[36] By calling Sandino, murdered by Somoza's agents, the "firstborn of murder-victims," Cardenal matches Sandino to Jesus, executed by agents of the inherently violent Roman Empire.[37] His point is that violence, not philosophical nonviolence, is the context out of which freedom evolves.

With "The Darkest Before Dawn," Cardenal foregoes weaving together theology and science. He moves decisively into the realm of recent Nicaraguan history where truth was being contested and where violence on the part of Christian revolutionaries and sympathizers like Ernesto Cardenal had become an international issue.

The opening line signals the reversal. Cardenal has made it clear that theology and science are a single pursuit—the pursuit of reality or truth. He is ready to make it clear that theology cannot be salvific if it is not brought into direct contact with Nicaraguan reality. Gone is the abstract "In the beginning" motif and in its place is the concrete "now" underlined by the case he has built for his own reliability as a witness to truth: "I'm going to tell you now about the screams from the Cuá."[38] The abstract biblical "groaning" has become more concrete—screams. His focus has switched from authentic eroticism to the perversion of sexual predation. In his documentary style he describes the horrors of the September repression prior to the 1979 Sandinista victory over the U.S.-backed Somoza regime and its infamously rapacious National Guard: "A guard summoned her, Cándida, / come and wash these pants / but it was for something else / (Somoza smiling down from his picture like an Alka-Seltzer ad)."[39]

He continues to document the horrendous violence of Somoza's Nicaragua: "A boy of eight beheaded" and underscores the reliability of the accusation: "say the Capuchins."[40] Relentlessly recounting episodes, cast of characters, and other details of the five-year long repression that accompanied Nicaragua's decision to fight against the United States sponsored Somoza National Guard regime, Cardenal concludes that by July 19, 1979, the date of the miraculous victory, the country had become a "great tomb of martyrs."[41] Violence and death were the context out of which the miracle occurred.

Cardenal then switches to U.S. President Ronald Reagan, the religiously and economically inspired architect of the *contra* assault on

the Nicaraguan Government of Reconstruction. Reagan had a profound belief that God was the God of capitalism and that communism and socialism were the economies of Satan. Because of its strong critique of United States hegemony of Latin America and capitalism and its opposition to military dictatorship and to the reactionary Church, which supported all of the above, Reagan was also one of the most important opponents of liberation theology. He reinforced his theology and foreign policy with a reckless buildup of nuclear weapons.

Cardenal trenchantly contrasts Reagan with English cosmologist Stephen Hawking and American astronomer Carl Sagan. As Cardenal interprets them, both scientists theorized that the universe is communal by nature. But Reagan's cosmology, he correctly suggests, unlike those of Hawking and Sagan, was informed by the movie *Star Wars* and a fundamentalist Christian interpretation of the book of Revelation, which had convinced him that the "balance of terror had Biblical authority."[42] His cosmology, religion, opposition to liberation theology, and *Star Wars* missile initiative were violent in the death-dealing sense. The consolation, Cardenal concludes, is that they were doomed to ultimate failure. Reagan had not comprehended the basic reality that in the beginning, before the expansion of the universe, a Bigger Bang than *Star Wars* implies violently created a "world ideal for life" rather than death.[43]

At the physical and thematic center of *Cosmic Canticle* is the twenty-fourth canto, "Latin American Documentary." The canto consists of a country-by-country inventory of the horrors domestic military dictatorships allied with U.S. businesses and a reactionary church brought to the continent. Cardenal's casual style, devoid of elaborating commentary, adds to the horror of his Latin American tour. He moves around from the northwestern plains of Venezuela and Colombia (in "Los Llanos he uncovered a terrible secret: / tiger hunters who at times went hunting / for non-animals"); to Central America ("Streets of San Salvador: / like dogs run down by a car. / 'no completely convincing evidence' / (the massacres) says the State Department"); to the Caribbean ("bodies thrown to the sharks in Trujillo City"); to Chile ("Victor Jara sang there. / Without a guitar and without hands sang in the Stadium / When the officer told him 'Sing motherfucker' / he sang"); and then to Nicaragua's Atlantic coast ("the Miskito with his tongue cut out and his mouth sewed up with / wire").[44] He ends with a grim synopsis: "In the telescopic sight. The child is in the sight. / He's playing in the school yard. / The guardia laughed afterwards. / Like someone who's killed a bird."[45]

Cardenal's overall aim is to console Nicaragua. The documentation of horrors, then, must be brought into alignment with the proposed reality of the Kingdom of Heaven. His fourth biblical strategy is to associate the Kingdom of Heaven with the erotic structuring of the cosmos. He abruptly begins to reminisce in a painterly fashion about the paradise Nicaragua once was and could be again. Drawing on color and locale, he remembers his friendship with Bosco Centano, one of the poets who left Solentiname to join the revolution: "Once in the Pacific, off the coast of Nicaragua, / fishing red snapper with Bosco / in the blue sea with blue sky, / the sea like ink."[46] He segues again to his proposition that life is generated by eroticism, which implies communism: "And suddenly two turtles, coupled, / one mounted the other / making love in the sea / the same act in the sea for millions of years / out of love / for the human species / and at its culmination / communism."[47] The inevitability of the Kingdom of Heaven, he suggests, with the communism it implies, is being announced in the eroticism of the turtles.

According to Cardenal, turtles have coupled and procreated for millions of years in the sunlit ocean behaving in ways that are true to their genetic predisposition. In his allusive style, he then suggests that the inverse also is true. Whatever goes against basic genetic predisposition is unreality, or a lie, leading to death. In a casual, throwaway line, he borrows the name of the Reagan-backed *contras* to underline his point: "And the lie is against the species (human species), / the lie is *contra natura*, / against human nature."[48] With the double entendre, Cardenal hints that the *contras* are destined to fail because they operate *contra*, or against, God's system.

Reagan, who like the dragon in the book of Revelation threatens to sweep the stars from the sky, has already taken retreat in a locale far away from color and light. Cardenal believes that Reagan and the *contras* may have the power to behead eight-year-old children, but they do not have the power to overcome the erotic impulses of the universe—impulses that have prompted turtles to procreate in the seas for millions of years and women to endure the agony of childbirth. Reagan and the *contras* may have the power to overcome the FSLN victory, but they cannot overcome a God-structured cosmos crying out in the agony of childbirth, crying out to bring humanity into fullness of being.

Cardenal defies the categories of Western Christian theology. This is partly because he is convinced that the categories of Western Christian theology, including the split between theology and politics, contribute to Nicaragua's suffering. In particular, he positions Reagan

not only as a political figure, but as a theological figure who must be reckoned with as such. The issue is whether Reagan is an antierotic, theological figure of sterility destined to be overcome by God's erotic ordering of the cosmos.

In "Epithalamium," or song in honor of a bride and bridegroom, Cardenal begins to bring *Cosmic Canticle*'s third biblical filter, eroticism, into focus. He believes it was authentic eroticism that inaugurated the beginning of humankind: "It began with the infinitesimal, humble courtship of two algae cells / in the romantic water medium. / Their amorous flagellae [sic] draw close to each other and caress / and then the cellular contents fuse."[49] From the beginning the desire to unite, move, and transmit life has been in humankind's genetic makeup. Cardenal suggests that unity among human beings and with God is evolving in a kind of cosmic sexual act. As he puts it, addressing Christ in overtly political tones: "The girl's alone at this party. / I'm waiting for you, compañero. / Come."[50] Then he paraphrases in more overtly sexual terms: "The stars are rubbing, sexual act, orgasm. / That's why they're so hot. / The atmosphere swells unrestrainedly and turns a red hue. / Rubbing, coitus. / The Trinity is movement. Pure Act. / Or pure sexual act."[51]

"The Canticle of Canticles" is the forty-first song in his long poem. At twenty-seven pages it is the lengthiest canto. It is also the only one explicitly taking up the subject matter and language of a biblical book: the Song of Songs. He begins with his by now standard introduction: "In the beginning . . . / Big Bang. / Let's go back to the first origin, the spark / from which everything comes."[52] Linking Genesis to the Song of Songs and to the erotic love affair at its center, he writes, "My love: your smooth dark body of turned mahogany, your tongue like the flame-tree flower. / Your teeth a row of herons on the banks of the Ululali."[53] Here is Cardenal's most sustained argument that "attraction is the basic reality of the universe."[54] He offers consolation in the idea that union in the Eucharistic sense and unity in the communistic sense are the erotic ends of history. Reiterating his premise that sex is a basic principle of the cosmos and that God's initial approach to the universe was a thoroughly erotic act with life as its purpose and outcome, he makes his case via a myriad of examples. Noting that there is no such thing as "natural" or "unnatural" in sex, Cardenal describes sexual oddities that hint that authentic, procreative eroticism is inherently violent.[55] There are, for example, eels that "make love only once and perish," insects for which "the penis comes away from the male along with the entrails, / it remains inside trailing the male's entrails, / the wings sag, and the empty body tumbles in a spin," and buzzards that,

"in a commotion of ruffled feathers, / trample over the carrion with love-cooings / amid the cracking of putrefied bones."[56] In his allusive way he is referencing his earlier point that creation results from love and movement underlined with hints of violence and death.

In *Cosmic Canticle*'s final song, Cardenal returns to the beginning. The title, "Omega," references John of Patmos's title for Christ: "I am the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end." It simultaneously references the elementary physical particle characterized by ultimate union: "Center of centers, irradiating from the center of a system of centers / like a single point. Omega point. Where nothing more will fit together."[57] The concept is central to *Cosmic Canticle*: "In our most intimate being, closer to everyone. / There is our end, / because where we are going is where we came from, / the beginning."[58] It was the meaning of the Nicaraguan revolution and the Christ event: "Thy kingdom come. / May the revolution come to the entire earth."[59] This is the Omega point of the consolation he offers—that the eventual triumph of the Nicaraguan revolution, the real-time Kingdom of Heaven, has been announced by God in the violent, reality-revealing, theologically erotic Christ event. The last stanza of his epic ends with a final question and a final reference to Genesis when everything began: "And earlier / what would we finally see? / When there was nothing. / In the beginning . . ."[60]

CONCLUSION

Ultimately Cardenal does not choose between violence and nonviolence. Instead, he draws a distinction between two fundamentally different kinds of violence. Each unquestionably leads to suffering. According to Cardenal, one is God-ordained, procreative, evolutionary, and revolutionary and will culminate in holistic communion. The other has been ordained by capitalism, imperialism, and militarism and deals in death and division. However, that kind of violence will eventually exhaust itself because death, division, and brutality run against God's procreational cosmic plan.

Central to Cardenal's strategy is the squaring of scientific and theological theories. Also central to his strategy is the development of a relationship between eroticism and violence. One kind of eroticism leads to the violence of childbirth. Another leads to the violence of rape and pornography. They have something in common. Nevertheless, each is fundamentally different from the other. Cardenal is making a theological argument—he is saying that violence is inherent in God's ordering of creation. The choice is not between violence and

nonviolence. The choice is between violence that results in union and life and violence that results in division and death.

Cardenal also is a priest offering consolation. He is promising that like a woman enduring the agony of labor pains, the long night of Nicaragua's suffering cannot last forever. In the beginning, he is saying, God made an erotic approach to creation. The result was a cosmic explosion that set in motion the evolutionary structure that one day will bring Nicaragua to birth, in space and time, in the Kingdom of Heaven.

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Part IV

Exposing the Will to Power

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Chapter 8

Babel Revisited

Kafka and Pinter Critique the Covenant

Beth Hawkins Benedix

Introduction

In the Summer 2001 issue of *Critical Inquiry*, James Conant imagines "Kafka in Florida,"[1] revisiting the absurdities of a voting machine gone terribly wrong. In this "*précis* of a Kafka story,"[2] we as an audience are transplanted from Franz Kafka's penal colony into the electoral college. The Harrow, the murderous instrument of a lost system of justice that destroys and is ultimately destroyed by the officer who mourns this lost system in Kafka's story, becomes here the physical signifier of and vehicle for the perpetuation of a broken, if not altogether corrupt, system. From our post-September 11 vantage point, forced upon us just months after this summer issue went to print, Conant's placement of Kafka seems almost unbearably quaint. In the same way that Kafka's work seems to take on a horrifying prescience when viewed through the filter of the Holocaust,[3] here, in this cataclysmic moment separating "before" from "after," the interpretive stakes suddenly become higher. Taking Conant's lead, we can now imagine Kafka in the space of utter ruin the responses to this moment represent—from the American campaign to spread democracy and "liberation" to the attendant atrocities of terrorism and state-sanctioned violence. If we strain to listen, we can almost make out his barely perceptible warning to recognize the inevitably fatal consequences of national myths cloaked in religious rhetoric.

With Harold Pinter, we need not strain to hear. His condemnation of bully politics disguised in redemptive or messianic tones is

altogether clear. In his 2005 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he pulls no punches, presenting us with his own hypothetical scenario:

> I know that President [George W.] Bush has many extremely competent speechwriters but I would like to volunteer for the job myself. I propose the following short address, which he can make on television to the nation . . . "God is good. God is great. God is good. My God is good. Bin Laden's God is bad. His is a bad God. Saddam's God was bad, except he didn't have one. He was a barbarian. We are not barbarians. We don't chop people's heads off. We believe in freedom. So does God. I am not a barbarian. I am the democratically elected leader of a freedom-loving democracy. We are a compassionate society. We give compassionate electrocution and compassionate lethal injection. We are a great nation. I am not a dictator. He is. I am not a barbarian. He is. And he is. They all are. I possess moral authority. You see this fist? This is my moral authority. And don't you forget it."[4]

With unconcealed contempt, Pinter exposes the hypocrisies and lethal simplicities of a platform grounded in a vision of chosenness. He intimates that Bush comes by his "moral authority" honestly in that he follows the absurdly simple equation bolstered by any number of biblical texts that those who have power are granted such power by God to its natural conclusion. Stripped of any nuance or complexity, the statement imagined and placed by Pinter into Bush's mouth demonstrates the basic causal logic of a covenantal system: a system, that is, that lies at the heart of the three monotheistic traditions currently threatening to destroy each other in the service of the same God.[5] As forceful and direct as this statement is, Pinter's plays are often far more oblique. While biblical references liberally pepper his work, and while we are left with a rather sinister impression of the world that traffics in such references, Pinter, like Kafka, vehemently refuses to provide answers to the numerous questions he poses by way of his oblique gestures. We as readers are left scrambling to put two and two together, sensing that time is running out to solve the equation that—if we could only gain perspective—is altogether clear.

This chapter demonstrates something of an experiment: imagining Kafka alongside of Pinter, privy to the same political landscape and equally disturbed by the toxicity of religious rhetoric, I consider how Kafka and Pinter might contribute to the growing conversation concerning the collision of politics and religion. This approach obviously requires a healthy dose of speculation and relies on the assumption that when Kafka and Pinter make biblical references, they are doing

so for a reason: namely, to call into question various truth claims bolstered by a biblical worldview. It is my view that Kafka and Pinter have something vital to say to us, perhaps precisely because they force us to draw a set of troubling conclusions that they lead us to but stop short of directly proclaiming. Ample work has been done on Kafka's influence on Pinter; Pinter himself makes no secret of his debt to Kafka.[6] But I'd like to try something different here. Reversing the logical trajectory leading from Kafka to Pinter, I want to suggest that we consider Kafka through the lens of Pinter, reading back into Kafka something of the deliberateness and vehemence of Pinter's Nobel address. At the same time, we will be reading Pinter's drama through the clear political framework his Nobel address provides. At the risk of violating both writers' preference for artistic ambiguity, I want to suggest that the urgency of these projects and the implications that these projects have for the so-called *real* world are anything but ambiguous. At bottom, their political critique is powered by a merciless (if sometimes less than transparent) attack on what they view as the inevitability of violence at the heart of monotheism. The biblical references they make—sometimes quiet, sometimes more pronounced—provide an entry point into how they come to frame this attack.

One final introductory comment: the attention Kafka and Pinter pay to what we might call the mythical underpinnings of the Bible demonstrates a palpable ambivalence. Samuel Beckett offers a helpful way to think about the nature of this ambivalence. When asked about the theme of his play, "Waiting for Godot," he sometimes referred to a passage in the writing of St. Augustine: "'Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned.' I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them . . . that sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters."[7] Beckett's move to distinguish belief from an interest in the so-called "shape" of this biblical passage provides an important touchstone for our discussion. Kafka and Pinter make much the same distinction that Beckett does. They explore the legacy of the Bible in their own contemporary contexts at the same time that they recognize that the weight and complexity and shape of the biblical narrative are *textual* products. They recognize that stories are no less powerful, and may in fact be more powerful, *because* they are stories. And their reverence for the power of storytelling comes to look much like a reverence for the stories themselves. Neither can shake the weight of the biblical tropes that creep back again and again into their work. But their obsession with the *literary* power of these tropes also contains an accusation: we have forgotten that, while indeed powerful,

these stories are, at bottom, *stories*. Their voices reach a nearly prophetic pitch with the urgency of their plea that we remember this important detail. They play their various obsessions before us with the hopes that, in the cumulative effect of seeing these dramas unfold over and over and over again, we might become more aware of the literary nature of these obsessions. Once we become aware that these are literary constructs, that we have come to see the world in a very particular way because of the story we have been repeating collectively as a culture, we can then begin to demystify this story. In this essay, we will consider the stories that provide the most interesting "shape" for Pinter and Kafka, the stories that provide them, in turn, with the richest source for this demystification.

PART ONE: PINTER

In January 2003, Pinter made a speech to the British House of Commons, in which he castigated Tony Blair in no uncertain terms, describing the "stink of hypocrisy" exuding from this scene: "One of the more nauseating images of the year 2002 is that of our Prime Minister kneeling in the church on Christmas Day praying for peace on earth and good will towards all men while simultaneously preparing to assist in the murder of thousands of totally innocent people in Iraq."[8] Here hypocrisy consists specifically of the disjunction between professed belief in a God of a very particular type and action taken despite that belief. Tony Blair is a hypocrite, in other words, because, despite his public worship of a peace-loving God, he chooses to sanction indiscriminate violence. This is slightly different from the charge he launches against Bush in the Nobel Address. It would seem that Bush's God, unlike Tony Blair's, in fact mandates this violence. In both cases, Pinter establishes the inextricable link between "God" and politically expedient action; whether it is in the form of Bush's calling on divine aid or Blair's humbly seeking divine justification for the decision to back the United States in its declaration of war on Iraq, the arguments for going to war are most powerful—and most despicable, in Pinter's opinion—precisely because they take recourse in deeply rooted religious belief. And for him, the real danger comes not so much in claiming to hold a belief that one doesn't really hold simply for appearance's sake as it does in truly adhering to a set of beliefs that necessitate violence. Bush is dangerous because he *believes* in the biblical portrayal of a God who commands war. He is dangerous because he views power in absolute, biblical terms, rather than in the more mundane and slippery terms of a psychologically rooted will-to-power.

Pinter's plays are haunted by the trace of this God.[9] The landscapes he constructs are stifling—suffocating under the weight of this absolute power. The sets are sparsely furnished, the action nearly always occurring in one room,[10] the momentum on stage generated by intensifying dialogue among several characters whose relationships to one another are at once nebulous and thoroughly binding. Conversations that are initially completely banal at some point begin to produce a sense of dread and impending doom; the absurd and comic slide into the terrifying with barely a warning.[11] In this regard, his plays perform Hannah Arendt's governing premise in her landmark case study of Adolf Eichmann, *The Banality of Evil*: so-called evil does not belong to a realm separate and apart from human experience; it harbors at the heart, rather, of the most mundane and commonplace interactions. Evil happens in a whisper, without fanfare, without the deliberate intention to commit "evil"; it happens when, for instance, someone truly believes that his charge to facilitate genocide is somehow a noble pursuit.

While Pinter might argue with Arendt's use of the term "evil" and the ease with which such a term might allow us to discount it as something other and outside of our control, he nevertheless does subscribe to the notion that—whatever we *call* this impulse to destroy—it begins in many ways with language. He, like Arendt, writes in the shadow of the Holocaust, using his plays as a way to confront how language could have become so deadly, how so clinical and clean a term like "The Final Solution" (*Endlosung*) could have come to designate the brutal extermination of millions of people. It is something of a truism now, half a century later, but writers for whom the Holocaust was the most immediate and graphic point of reference understood the power of rhetoric to create new modes of thinking to justify the destruction of others. They understood that the most violent campaigns begin with rhetorical arguments employed strategically to gain adherents. They understood that violent language eases the possibility—perhaps previously unthinkable—for physical violence.

Pinter, like other playwrights associated with the Theatre of the Absurd, explores the link between cliché and dehumanization. Roughly speaking, the thinking goes something like this: when we resort to cliché and the superficial trappings of pseudoconversation, we squander an opportunity for real, authentic connection. Every time we allow a platitude to stand in for complexity, nuance, or uniqueness, we damage the relationship, demonstrating indifference rather than genuine care. These unintended slights, largely harmless in the context of our busy lives (after all, nothing would ever get done if we used every

encounter to its full, profound potential) become harmful—violent—when they mask a desire to exploit or subjugate another person. There is a slippery slope between the unfortunate private conversation that never moves beyond the realm of the superficial and public policy that systematically destroys a group of people. From Pinter's post-Holocaust vantage point, he issues this warning: beware the conversation that consists mainly of clichés; it is a signal of indifference that threatens to become brutal.[12]

"The Room"

In his play, "The Room," Pinter describes a prophetic visitation and its violent outcome that takes place in the midst of these clichéd conversations. The action of the play is simple: a woman and her husband—Rose and Bert—occupy a room in a boarding house. We watch as a series of unexpected visitors come in and out of the room—the landlord, a couple looking to rent a room, and, finally, a blind, black man, who has been living in the basement. Bert leaves for a short time—time enough for the couple to find their way from a wrong turn to the basement up to Rose's room. They have been told that this room will be vacant shortly. Bert returns just after the blind man delivers a cryptic message to an increasingly agitated and combative Rose. The play ends when the previously passive Bert flies off into a rage and, presumably, murders the blind man. The atmosphere is claustrophobic, stultifying. Rose seems to feel safe in this room, but we gulp for air.

In this play, as in his others, Pinter leaves open any number of questions. There is much that we don't know. What we *do* know is that we grow increasingly uncomfortable as we watch the play unfold. What we *do* know—at least on some basic level, even if we can't quite articulate it—is that our discomfort is tied to coming face to face with something so intimately familiar it terrifies us. Freud calls this feeling "the uncanny." In German, he points out, the term (*das Unheimlich*) has at its core that which is most familiar, our home, where we live (*heim*).[13] The uncanny forces us back into ourselves, forces a shudder at the instinctual recognition of who we are and what we might wish to leave behind.

So what is it that Pinter forces us to confront here? What feels so uncomfortably familiar even in this most bizarre of exchanges? In my view, it is his evocative treatment of the prophetic encounter that becomes so terrifying. Pinter introduces us to a landscape that has immediate resonance for an audience trained even marginally in Judaism and the biblical narratives central to the tradition. In the opening moments, the conditions at play in this room are suddenly announced—if just

barely audible—to the Jewish members of the audience. And these conditions create an air of inevitability in the events that follow; the crushing weight of a causal system that cannot be reversed.

The announcement comes in the form of a rather veiled, but important, reference to the *Shema*, the basic proclamation of Jewish faith (drawn from Deut. 6:4). When the landlord intrudes on an uncomfortable scene—Rose chattering incessantly to her silent husband—he knocks and lets himself in, justifying himself with the statement, "I knocked." Rose responds with, "I heard you . . . we heard you." The repetition and insistence on "hearing," in my view, signals the *Shema*. The prayer reads *Shema, Yisrael, Adohai Elohenu, Adonai Echad*—"Hear, Oh Israel, the Lord is Our God, the Lord is One." The core beliefs of Judaism are all contained in this statement: the dialogical nature of the covenant between God and humans, the vehement adherence to a particular and singular God, the exclusive attachment of this God to the people Israel. "Hear" is an imperative, an obligation. In this one word can be read the mechanism of the prophetic tradition: the entreaty to remember the covenantal relationship and all that this relationship entails. The Hebrew phrase, *Elohenu* (Our God), uniquely captures the paradox at the center of the Jewish notion of covenant; the intimate pairing of self and wholly other suggests a reciprocal relationship, even if the parties involved are unequal in power. But it also vaguely suggests a wish on the part of the people Israel to claim this God as its partner and its own. "Our God" can just as easily become "not-your-God," a parceling out of the province of this God that can be read as an act of aggression. Captured here in this statement of faith is also a reference to Genesis 32:25–33, which commemorates Israel as a symbolic site of struggle. In this odd and enigmatic passage, Jacob inexplicably wrestles with a man who later hints that he is God. This man, frustrated that Jacob won't give up the fight, "touches the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was strained" (Gen. 32:26). Still not giving up, even after this rather dirty dealing, Jacob refuses to let go until he is blessed. The blessing comes in his being renamed Israel (literally, "struggling with God"—"for thou hast striven with God and with men and hast prevailed") (Gen. 32:29).

In one oblique gesture, Pinter reminds us of the conditions that intrude into this room when the door opens up to the world just outside, of the messy constellation of impulses the *Shema* reflects: a wish for community and connectedness, for protection and dominion, for power and submission. In her reply to the landlord's knock, Rose has, in effect, acknowledged the legitimacy of call and response in this space, the legitimacy, that is, of the covenantal relationship, and her

acknowledgement would seem to set in motion the events that follow. Her early comment that her own room is "better than the basement, anyway" establishes an antagonism between these spaces, and the potential worldviews offered up by these spaces. This hazy antagonism that exists prior to the knock on the door expands to fill the new world order ushered in by this knock. But these self-assurances read more like protestations, more like denial; she knows it is only a matter of time before the relative safety of her small world will be threatened. And indeed it is. Pinter's quiet reference to the reciprocal nature of the covenant, bound up in the enacting of call and response, complicates Rose's own role in hastening this threat. She is not an entirely passive and unwitting recipient of this intrusion on her safety, in other words. In fact, she yearns for the distraction this intrusion provides her from her solitary and uneventful life.

The central moment of the play occurs when, as if by wish fulfillment, two visitors—Mr. and Mrs. Sands—arrive at Rose's door. In an encounter highly reminiscent of Exodus 19—the making of the covenant at Sinai—the man in the basement sends them there. The topography of the biblical text is decidedly vertical, emphasizing the detail that the Israelites are prohibited from climbing the mountain, from even touching the border of the mountain, lest they see God and die (Exod. 19:12–13). So, too, the Sands' journey is described in vertical terms. Looking for a room, they go down to the basement, where they travel through two partitions in the increasing darkness. Suddenly a voice calls out, asking if they need help. Cloaked in darkness, as God's is in Exodus (19:18), this voice leads them to seek out the vacant room upstairs. Mr. and Mrs. Sands relate the trip that eventually leads to Rose's room in terms that echo Moses's numerous ascents and descents of Sinai; "we'd been up. We were coming down." At the end of their account is an unsettling moment of recognition: they have been told by the man behind the partition that Rose's room is vacant, or soon will be.[14]

Pinter once described his work as tragedy that becomes tragic at the point when it is "no longer funny."[15] We might identify this moment as that point. Rose's anxiety becomes palpable here. She has a vague notion of whom the voice belongs to, and she is just starting to recognize the precariousness of her supposed safe haven. Our bemused confusion with the events on stage turns to something like fear when we start to consider, along with Rose, the sinister implications of her suddenly "vacant" room. But what does Pinter mean by weaving this moment of recognition, this moment of mounting anxiety so tightly with the making of the covenant at Sinai? And what does it mean that

Rose effectively brings on this moment by opening the door before there is a knock?

The movement of the play speeds up, giving way to the enigmatic arrival of Riley, the man in the basement. When he enters, Rose assaults him with a barrage of insults. Up to this point, her chatter has been rather constant, but it is short, vacuous. Her animosity is a radical departure from the hospitality she has shown to all of her other—unexpected—guests. He deflects her insults gracefully, cutting through them with the precision of the message he has come to deliver. "Your father wants you to come home," he says. Then he completes the message: "Come home now, Sal." Against her protests (which grow weaker and weaker as soon as he calls her by this name), he breaks through her hostility until, finally, "She touches his eyes, the back of his head and his temples with her hands."[16] It is at precisely this point that Bert reenters.

When he does, he speaks for the first time, to tell Rose about his experience driving in the cold, dark, icy world outside. He describes his control of the car in gendered terms: "I drove her down hard," he says, again and again. When he sees Riley, he inexplicably knocks him off of his chair, and then beats him to death. The play ends with Rose clutching her eyes, saying, "Can't see. I can't see. I can't see."[17]

The lights blackout, and the curtain falls. We can imagine an audience sitting stunned, transfixed, overwhelmed by the evocative nature of what they have just witnessed—been forced to witness: a prophetic message delivered and sealed by blood, the starkness of the last line ringing in the dark theatre.

Making Sense of "The Room"

So what are we to make of this play? What are we to do with Pinter's choice to lean heavily on the Exodus narrative to provide the backdrop for the bizarre events that transpire, at the same time that he takes clear departures from the biblical narrative? Indeed, he writes the departures into the dialogue of the play, so that we as an audience are forced to reflect on the implications of these departures. For instance, while the God presented in Exodus seems a wrathful, potentially vindictive character—a force bent on maintaining the boundaries of his power and on punishing anyone who has not been expressly invited to cross this boundary—Riley is described by the Sands as polite. His gentle demeanor, when we meet him, confirms their description. Rose asks the Sands, "Is he old?" and though she does not say it, we can hear faintly in this question the added characteristics she expects of this

man: *Is he white*? *Does he have a white beard*? In short, the characteristics we've come to associate with the God of the Hebrew Bible. When he appears—a middle-aged, black man, more humble than wrathful, more intimate than inaccessible—he defies the vague expectations we probably share with Rose. But even given this defiance, he is the agent of Rose's "homecoming"; at least part of his function seems to be that he allows Rose, by herself, to come to the conclusion that she has been living a life that is less than authentic, less than engaged. When he calls her by the name that she has clearly been hiding from, he gives her the opportunity to recognize that she has been misspending her days in this room. Once she sees her situation with clarity, she can no longer *see*, as we suspect that Riley's blindness is the mark of his own clear existential vision.

Riley's message is prophetic in its basic charge that she *remember* her connection to her father, to the paternal force that gave her the name she has been running away from. He calls her back into the covenantal relationship, in other words.

It is the air of inevitability and the loss of autonomy that accompany this "calling back" that Pinter points to as the source of violence. Indeed, Rose has been stripped of—or has willingly stripped herself of—the freedom to move outside the confines of this room. Her first line in the play is in fact a statement describing the world outside and her clear fears about venturing out into this world: "It's very cold out, I can tell you. It's murder."[18] A statement that seems at the time overblown and irrational, it is enacted and made literal over the course of the play. But it is also reversed; murder is committed *inside* the very room that was supposed to have been a refuge. It is perhaps this truth—that violence cannot be contained; that it seeps through the barriers we construct against it—that blinds Rose.

That Riley—who Pinter associates with both the God and the prophet figure of the Hebrew Bible—is the victim of inevitable murder seems to me crucial. That we as an audience are cast in the role of helpless onlookers to (and, thus, participants in) this event provides more than a mere suggestion to me that Pinter is gesturing to Friedrich Nietzsche's famous "death of God" scenario. Nietzsche's madman, a classic prophet in his own right, is tortured and frantic that no one pays attention to the two-pronged message he brings: "God is dead." "We have killed him." He asks us how we are to deal with the magnitude of this event and crime and goes on to plead that the space carved open by this death be filled by our "becoming gods ourselves, simply to appear worthy of" the "greatness of this deed too great for us."[19] The scenario the madman describes, then, is something that

forces our accountability, but, at the same time, liberates us. It is horrifying, it is tremendous, but it gives us the new freedom to consider possibilities well outside of the context of what this God—victim (and product, Nietzsche also argues) of our bloodlust—once represented.

Like Nietzsche, Pinter presents a scenario both horrifying and potentially liberating in the murder of Riley. And he challenges us to consider what the symbolic murder of God—specifically the God of the Hebrew Bible—could mean. He confronts us with something that he—like Nietzsche—takes to be a basic truth about human nature: we crave power; we crave being connected to systems that have and wield power. The gods we construct (as reflections of us) exhibit this same basic craving; we in turn succumb to the overwhelming power with which we have endowed them. The narrative of Exodus of which Pinter reminds us is profoundly a narrative about power: about who has it, who doesn't have it, and what will happen to those who don't have it, should they choose to pursue it. Riley's violent death confronts us with another disturbing possibility: we prefer the oppressive systems we create to the uncertainties of autonomy. The seeming inevitability of his murder is both confirmation of our cowardice—of our fear of changing course even in the face of disaster—*and* a concrete enactment of the violence that we harbor at the heart of the specific narrative we've constructed to combat uncertainty. That Riley is a black man murdered in the midst of what seems to be an exclusively white community suggests something else about this narrative: it is a narrative that establishes lines of "inside" and "outside" and dispenses blessings and curses accordingly.

The covenant at Sinai is the third covenant made in the Hebrew Bible: the first, with Noah, contracts the entire human community, the second, with Abraham, establishes an exclusive link between God and Abraham's descendents. This covenant with Moses is more exclusive still, laying out in painstaking detail God's expectations of a specified people, the fulfillment of which are now connected conditionally to a specified land. While this narrowing covenant coincides in places with various pronouncements describing a code of hospitality (i.e., the law of the stranger that mandates treating the stranger, the "other," in our midst with kindness and compassion), it is fundamentally concerned with establishing and maintaining an identity that is best described as self vs. other. This is an identity defined by its opposition to—its antagonism to—those who have not pledged allegiance to the same God. With the added stipulation of lineage, this is an identity that is finally determined by blood. So, fittingly, these two exclusive covenants are sealed by blood, first with the mark on

the flesh by circumcision, then with the blood sacrifice, which Moses first "sprinkles on the people" (Exod. 24:8) and with which he later anoints Aaron and his sons as priests with sole access to the sacrificial altar (Exod. 29:20). Notably, as blood marks the bond of the covenant, it also marks its transgression; witness, for example, the brutal slaughter of three thousand men who participated in the construction of the golden calf (Exod. 32:28). The God who initiates this covenant describes himself as a "jealous God," a God who demands allegiance above all others, in recompense for his having delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. This covenant announces a sovereign power over subjects who owe a debt to him. There is little generosity here and even less margin for error.

To the extent that Riley stands in for this God, his murder can perhaps be considered the lashing out of subjects who have grown tired of living under this rather brutal totalitarian rule. As products of this system, they have lost both the ability and desire to truly connect with one another; more often they seem to resent one another's presence, and their exchanges read more like a series of parallel soliloquies than conversations. But, given that nothing comes of his death—save for Bert's having finally surrendered to what we suspect must be rage just barely contained—and given that Riley in no way embodies the menace that Rose imagines when she allows herself to think of the man in the basement, it is difficult to think of his murder as either redemptive or liberating. What his murder does, it seems to me, is expose with perfect clarity the explosive potential—indeed, *probability*—of a worldview that is founded on the principles of indiscriminate power and exclusion of the "other." The potentially redemptive quality of the message Riley delivers—the counternarrative that the law of the stranger offers to this worldview, that is—doesn't stand a chance in a world governed by these principles. Hospitality rings false in a world where the stranger is summarily defeated; authenticity is nearly impossible when well-being hinges precariously on one's choices falling into line with mandated loyalty.

Pinter returns to the Exodus narrative again and again in his plays, most notably "The Birthday Party" and "The Dumbwaiter." As with "The Room," his references to the narrative in these plays are most readily connected to the emphasis he places on what we might call verticality. That is, the moment of reckoning, the moment when the covenantal relationship is announced to the main character as a stark "either-or" (either you accept the terms of this relationship or you die, basically) our attention as an audience is drawn to the vertical lines of the set.

Pinter's emphasis on the vertical is not accidental. It is, rather, a central factor in his reading of the Exodus narrative. Recall Moses's

numerous ascents and descents of Mount Sinai. Both locations—on top of Sinai and at the foot of the mountain—are sites of struggle, of jockeying for power, with God ultimately and always on top; the cloud of smoke that cloaks him provides another level of distance, unassailable under pain of death. By drawing our attention to the vertical shape of the worlds he constructs, Pinter forces us to come to terms with an essentially hierarchical vision. A vertical worldview, by nature, renders equality and reciprocity impossible; someone is always *below*, someone else always *above*. Pinter pairs this verticality persistently with his telltale brand of ambiguity (his own cloud of smoke, as it were), refusing to provide a clear and definitive picture of what is *actually* occurring on stage. We, as an audience, have the extraordinarily strange experience of witnessing events that we can intuitively recognize but cannot quite describe through a haze that lifts only in time to see the bodies—metaphorically and literally—piling up before us. This haze, too, is no accident. Paradoxically, he deliberately produces this haze as a means of forcing us to experience how such a commitment to hierarchy, to giving ourselves over to a power at a remove of height and distance, impacts our ability to see clearly. If we were able to see clearly, the assumption seems to be, we wouldn't choose a system so oppressive that it leads inevitably to violence, we wouldn't choose to be tied, to submit, to a God of our own creation who makes such unreasonable and divisive demands to satisfy his own vanity. We wouldn't choose to be comforted by complacent and self-righteous gestures to this God disguising political and all-too-human motivations for war. We would choose either to create another God who would enable meaningful and peaceful interactions or to do away with the idea of God altogether.

Part Two: Kafka

> *Prague. Religions get lost as people do.*
>
> —Kafka, *Fourth Octavo Notebook*, 1918

Pinter's set of assumptions about the ethics associated with the God of the Hebrew Bible echoes closely the project Freud takes up in *Moses and Monotheism*, his controversial exploration of the psychological underpinnings of monotheism and the role of this particular prophet. His premise is that monotheism grew out of a scenario of primal murder and is kept alive by means of a perpetual vacillation between blood lust and remorse, the opposed fantasies of domination

and submission. Freud asks, as if shaking his head in bewilderment, "why the people of Israel adhered to their God all the more devotedly the worse they were treated by him—that is a question which we must leave open for the moment."[20] In actuality he does not leave this question open, he's woven it into the very fabric of the argument he pursued earlier in *Future of an Illusion*: masochism defines an intimate relationship with a God constructed to exact punishment. He suggests that a basic function of the covenantal structure is to provide a framework for socially expedient behavior; it charts out, in other words, a code of conduct ensuring basic survival. This code of conduct is most convincing—and more difficult to transgress—when associated with a divine or sacred figure. In Freud's specific rendering of the argument, he suggests that, out of fear of being left to our devices, we construct a world from familiar materials: our conflicting desires to please and be loved by our parents and to free ourselves from them is the most basic model and therefore the most readily available.

While Pinter—like Freud—readily acknowledges the constructed nature of this God, and seems loath to associate anything remotely redeeming with submitting to this type of God, Kafka appears much less willing to summarily reject a God who may be the only source of justice and judgment available. His ambivalence on this issue is so central it is almost visceral; he acknowledges the cruelty, the arbitrariness, the profoundly unethical behavior of this God at the same time that he seems unable to shake the nagging doubt that it is precisely the verticality enforced by a belief in this God that makes ethical behavior possible for us, if not for God. Indeed the question Freud "leaves open" in *Moses and Monotheism* provides the precise philosophical backdrop for Kafka's project, which prominently features the wish to be connected to a judging, punishing other. Kafka's fiction persistently explores the peculiar conflation of love and fear, affection and hostility that Freud argues we project onto God as the supreme father figure. Similarly, in Kafka's world punishment is a sign of intimacy, an almost voluptuous expression of wish-fulfillment.

At the same time that he creates in sweeping strokes figures that evocatively resemble the God of the Hebrew Bible, Kafka returns again and again to the specific stories that are foundational for covenantal theology, as if haunted by their "shape." His parable of Abraham,[21] for instance, provides perhaps his most extensive and explicit rewriting of a biblical text. In this parable, he quickly dispenses of the biblical Abraham as unworthy of our reflection; having been given everything by God, he argues, God's command for him to sacrifice his most beloved son makes perfect sense. There's nothing more to

consider. He imagines several other versions of this character that might be more interesting: an Abraham who is so busy taking care of his day to day business that he ignores God's call when it comes or an Abraham who is too engrossed in studying his holy books to pay attention to the actual voice of God. Kafka quickly leaves these imagined Abrahams behind before settling on the one that becomes in many ways emblematic of his literary project: a self-deprecating *nebbish*, a deluded character he compares first to Don Quixote and then to a student brought to the front of a schoolroom only to be humiliated and scorned by his peers.

Taking his cues from Sören Kierkegaard—who chides us in his *Fear and Trembling* for not recognizing the staggering implications of the *Akedah* (Gen. 22) and so rewrites the story several ways so that we can't help but see these implications[22]—Kafka creates a flesh and blood character in his Abraham. He acknowledges Kierkegaard's horror with the sparse biblical narrative, with the absence of an account of the larger consequences of Abraham's actions; indeed, if Abraham were the biblical Abraham, "we would be enraged,"[23] sickened by his decision to sacrifice his most beloved son. What he suggests, in championing this new version, is that the biblical story does not provide the most productive message. That, in fact, the biblical story is rather barbaric. In his rewriting, he retrieves what he believes to be the instructive potential of the story even as he rejects the apparent message of the original story: to hold up a figure who would unflinchingly kill his son as a testament to his faith. Abraham, in his estimation, is a more worthy figure for our consideration when he is paralyzed by self-doubt, when he recognizes how ridiculous he looks to others for believing that God would have actually called him. In short, he champions precisely the opposite type of character than Kierkegaard goes on to champion, his so-called "knight of faith." Kierkegaard suggests that, if we are to truly follow through to the implications of the *Akedah*, we have to recognize that Abraham is placed in an untenable position: he has to make the horrifying decision to fulfill God's command at the expense of public opinion (which would, justifiably, condemn him), or to ignore God. While Kierkegaard, too, is sickened by the choice the biblical Abraham goes on to make, he argues that his choice to acknowledge God's command—and, therefore, to reject the established rules of society—represents the essence of authenticity. In Kierkegaard's view, the "crowd" detracts from authenticity, forces us to compromise our principles. For him, true faith should inspire dread, because its demands require that the faithful head out—entirely alone—on an uncharted path with an uncertain outcome.[24]

Kafka, on the other hand, is squeamish about this set of conclusions, even as he agrees with Kierkegaard that it is difficult to respond to the biblical Abraham with anything other than rage, and that the faith demanded of the biblical Abraham would require a turning away from the world overall. Kafka suggests that we reconsider our relationship to this text, that we reconsider the kind of ethics that it prescribes, that we imagine a scenario where the collective, the community, would be the space of—rather than detractor from—authenticity. By painstakingly (and, in true Kafka fashion, humorously) taking us through the steps of revision, Kafka reminds us of a biblical narrative that has such familiarity we no longer see in it the ethical paradox it contains: this basic reiteration of the covenantal argument (Abraham is bound by the covenant he has made with God) violates the prohibition against murder (the sixth commandment, Exod. 20:12). As he does this, he forces us to see more plainly the kind of God that we have constructed and made sovereign and the nature of the covenantal relationship we have bought into.

We have discussed how Pinter's muted reference to the *Shema* signals his critique of covenantal theology. Curiously in this regard, the last lines of Kafka's parable also recall the *Shema*: "It is as if, at the end of the year, when the best student was solemnly about to receive a prize, the worst student rose in the expectant stillness and came forward from his dirty desk in the last row because he had made a mistake of hearing, and the whole class burst out laughing. And perhaps he had made no mistake at all, his name really was called, it having been the teacher's intention to make the rewarding of the best student at the same time a punishment for the worst one."[25] Kafka casts this hypothetical scenario in the context of a call and response, attributing his Abraham's predicament to a possible mishearing of God's command. Presenting us with an Abraham characterized primarily as an object of ridicule, Kafka reminds us of the barely audible reference in the *Shema*—Hear, Oh *Israel*—to Jacob's humiliation of Esau; he is not only sanctioned in this humiliation but rewarded for it when he steals his brother's birthright (Gen. 27) and later achieves the name Israel to signify his wrestling with the angel (Gen. 32:29).

That Kafka should gesture to the *Shema* in the context of his rewriting of the *Akedah* (in itself an internal challenge to covenantal theology; why, after all, should God make this brutal command of Abraham, with whom he's already established a covenant?) suggests how deeply suspicious Kafka is of the basic claims to faith that reinforce a covenantal model. His making central the humiliation of Esau that is only barely audible in the *Shema* underscores *why* he is so deeply suspicious. Conflating Abraham with Esau, he establishes a figure who more readily captures the inherent injustices and cruelties of a covenant; he gives

voice, in turn, to the forgotten Esau, reminding his readers that the arbitrary casting out of this figure, and others like him, prepares the way for the covenant—marked in blood—at Sinai.

Kafka in Context

Just as we cannot ignore the historical context of Pinter's plays—we cannot forget that Pinter, a British, Jewish playwright, began writing in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, and continued until his death to speak out vehemently against what he described as crimes against humanity perpetrated mainly by the American government—so, too, can we not ignore Kafka's historical reality and the way this reality informs his literary project. From his vantage point as an assimilated Jew in virulently anti-Semitic turn-of-the-century Prague, Kafka's emphasis on the element of humiliation in the *Shema* and, by extension, covenantal theology comes as little surprise. In a letter to Milena Jesenská—his friend and confidante—Kafka describes the scene outside his bedroom window, the aftermath of a violent pogrom: "Just now I looked out of the window: Mounted police, *gendarmerie* ready for a bayonet charge, a screaming crowd dispersing, and up here in the window the loathsome disgrace of living all the time under protection."[26] Earlier in the letter, he wonders about the various choices open to the Jewish community of Prague—choiceless choices, really, an equally problematic set of options: "Isn't the natural thing to leave the place where one is hated so much? (For this, Zionism or national feeling is not needed.) The heroism which consists of staying on in spite of all this is that of cockroaches which also can't be exterminated from the bathroom." As Kafka looks on this scene, the prevailing sentiment for him is shame—for the Jewish community overall and for himself, a helpless, if detached, member of this community. Either choice the Jewish community makes in the face of the pervasive violence—Zionism or staying on in spite of it all—is then laden with this shame.

The statement above only begins to hint at the complicated relationship Kafka had to his own Judaism and, by extension, to Zionism—a relationship, I want to suggest, that is absolutely central to his biblical preoccupations. In his diaries, he elaborates on what he feels is the enormity of his task as a writer. An "assault on the last earthly frontiers," he calls it, "if Zionism had not intervened, it might easily have developed into a new secret doctrine, a Kabbalah."[27] He proclaims elsewhere, "I am an end or a beginning."[28] His language is self-consciously prophetic, his claims dramatic; he is writing both within and against a tradition, as mystic and rebel, shattering all formal descriptive categories at the same

time that he clearly announces his hope to create a new Kabbalah. Here, Kafka blames Zionism for his inability to create, for all intents and purposes, a new scripture (albeit a subversive one). Elsewhere, he suggests it has taken Judaism hostage ("having caught the hem of the Jewish prayer shawl").[29] In the spirit of speculation with which we began this discussion, and at the risk of anachronism, one wonders how closely related Kafka's ambivalence to Zionism is to Pinter's.

Outspoken and passionate about his conviction that the Palestinians are the victims of criminal acts of the Israeli government, Pinter has achieved something of a pariah status as an "Anti-Israel Jew."[30] Would Kafka's signature join Pinter's on the numerous public letters he and other "leftist" intellectuals have written, pleading for justice on behalf of the Palestinian community?[31] We can't know the answer to this question, of course. And Kafka's deepening sense of connection to Judaism and sympathy for Zionism toward the end of his life (he had begun provisional preparations to move to Israel when he died) complicates our speculation. What we do know is that Kafka expresses his uneasiness with Zionism in largely theological or religious terms, and in terms that reflect his understanding that Zionism is a key (if not *the* key) political issue of his time.

If we consider the tone of Kafka's above statements, we might find more stable footing. Indeed, these self-consciously prophetic remarks resemble Nietzsche's, who, in his *Ecce Homo* (his near-frenzied final work before syphilitic madness turned to silence) proclaims, "I am no man, I am dynamite."[32] If less obviously pleased by his own rebel status, and if less convinced about the sheer explosiveness of his claims, Kafka nevertheless acknowledges his project as a breaking point. Like Nietzsche, Kafka sees himself to be engaged in a "revaluation of all values."[33] Nietzsche's assumption, in launching this revaluation, is that we have forgotten that we—and not some transcendent force—are the authors of the values we live by. We have crippled ourselves by our vehement refusal to take responsibility for our own lives.

With the same sense of urgency, Kafka is asking us to engage in a similar process of revaluation, and for much the same purpose: to help us to establish a set of values that will be conducive to living in accordance with who we are, with our eyes wide open to the wrong turns we've already taken on this path.[34] Kafka's revaluation differs markedly from Nietzsche's in his explicit casting of his project in religious terms; his strategic use of the Bible to critique its claims and expose its shortcomings aids this project. In the same way that we can identify two distinct components of Nietzsche's revaluation—the descriptive and prescriptive—we might approach Kafka's use of biblical stories

from these two vantage points that eventually converge: he uses these stories to describe the human condition and to chart out a viable ethics in light of (and in spite of) this condition.

We recall his Abraham parable. Why does Kafka rely on the framework of the *Akedah*—one of the foundational narratives concerning covenantal theology—to ask us to imagine a "hero" so different from the one proposed there? Perhaps it is because he views the basic mechanism of the covenant as ethical, if in dire need of revision. His comments about Zionism, taken together with his parable and the "hero" he offers us, suggest that his basic uneasiness with Zionism stems from its claims of exclusiveness, the claims it makes, that is, of a "chosen" people to a chosen land. The picture outside his bedroom window tells a different story—a story of unfounded and undeserved persecution, indeed, but not one that necessarily bears any traces of "chosenness." Like Nietzsche, Kafka is both a sharp-sighted realist and incurable idealist: the sordid and ugly reality he has no problem describing never quite diminishes his faith in humanity to choose a path that will remedy this reality. And so, from that bedroom window, he witnesses at once the sickening expression of hatred against a group to which he happens to belong, he worries that this group has contributed in some provisional way to its own suffering by means of its potentially divisive theological claims, and he imagines another way to look at the world, a way that—if only we could buy into it—would move us beyond this fatal antagonism.

It is in the spirit of this "other way" that we might approach his musings on the fall from Paradise and what it means to live in a fallen world. He writes, for instance, "Expulsion from Paradise is in its main aspect eternal: that is to say, although expulsion from Paradise is final, and life in the world unavoidable, the eternity of the process (or, expressed in temporal terms, the eternal repetition of the process) nevertheless makes it possible not only that we might remain in Paradise permanently, but that we may in fact be there permanently, no matter whether we know it here or not."[35] His description of the fall as a process of "eternal repetition" (*ewige Wiederholung*) provides a crucial key to our understanding of how and why Kafka conducts his biblical exegesis. Nietzsche uses this phrase in "the greatest weight" section of his book, *The Gay Science*.[36] In this section, Nietzsche asks his readers to place themselves in a hypothetical situation: imagine that you have been forced to live your life over and over again, every moment of it, the most painful and horrible and despicable as well as the most sublime. How would you greet this news? Would you be crushed by terror and repulsion? Would you embrace this possibility and, in so doing, affirm the choices you have

made along the way? Would you say *no* or *yes* to life? Nietzsche's scenario is in fact a litmus test for the quality of our lives and the values we subscribe to: are we living, in other words, in such a way that we can say *yes* to the demon who imposes an eternally blemished life on us? What would it mean to say *yes*?

Kafka's invocation of Nietzsche here in the context of a discussion of Genesis 2 suggests that he is concerned with the existential consequences of this story. He, like Nietzsche, is asking us to assume a kind of hypothetical or conditional premise: what if it is true that we are living in a fallen world? What does that mean in terms of the action we can or should take because we inhabit this world? Like Nietzsche, he wants us to be able to say "yes" to life.[37] Kafka's understanding of "who we are" is in crucial ways different from Nietzsche's; for our purposes, it is enough to suggest that Kafka's journals describe his persistent attempts to chart out the relation of self to other and the ethical obligations entailed by this relation. In a project often marked by hesitancy, uncertainty, ambivalence, and self-doubt, Kafka is convinced of one thing: we live in a world of relation. While the locus of power for him shifts perpetually from self to other, and though the demands the other makes are often overwhelming, it is a dangerous delusion to act as if we are alone. And this conviction, too, is both descriptive and prescriptive: our basic condition—"fallen" creatures thrown into an inescapable connection with one another—should enforce a set of behaviors that makes the healthiest and most productive use of this condition. An exclusive covenant, a worldview that carves up this human community, pitting us against one another in a futile sibling rivalry for the favor of the same—cruel and insatiable—God, is perhaps not the worldview most conducive to this set of behaviors.

Enter Babel

Among Kafka's biblical preoccupations is the story of a jealous God who thwarts his subjects' attempt at community, the attempt, that is, to build a monument to this God. He motions obliquely to the story in a central moment of his novel *Amerika*. After losing his job as liftboy, Karl Rossmann is taken into the bowels of the Hotel Occidental, where the mysterious inner workings of the hotel are revealed to him. As is typical for Kafka's protagonists, Karl learns the "truth" only when he can no longer make use of it. Strong-armed by the head porter into viewing the sprawling mass of bureaucracy and nonproductivity that define the hotel, Karl unwittingly sees for himself raw, consolidated, transparent, *power*:

> The walls of the office consisted entirely of enormous panes of glass, through which you could see the incoming and out going streams of guests in the vestibule as clearly as if you were among them. Yes, there seemed to be no nook or corner in the whole office where you could be hidden from their eyes . . . Moreover, the porter's office and the vestibule were in direct communication with each other, for at two great sliding windows sat two under-porters perpetually occupied in giving information on the most diverse subjects. These men were indeed overburdened, and Karl had a shrewd guess that the Head Porter, from what he knew of him, had circumvented this stage in the course of his advancement. These two providers of information . . . had always at least ten enquiring faces before them in the window opening. Among these ten, who were continually changing, there was often a perfect *babel* of tongues as if each were an emissary from a different country.[38]

The description goes on for several more breathless pages, depicting a scene hopelessly fraught with the perpetual motion and substitutions of nameless, faceless underlings attempting to carry out the Head Porter's inscrutable commands, under his ever-watchful eye. We witness, along with Karl, a communication breakdown of the largest order: underporters delivering messages to messenger boys who fail to deliver them to the masses outside; messages unsent and unreceived, round and round in the din of constant, indecipherable, chatter.

Indeed, like his two other novels, *The Trial* and *The Castle*, *Amerika* can be read as an allegory of Kafka's idiosyncratic vision of the expulsion from Paradise as "eternal." In many ways like Voltaire's *Candide*, this novel chronicles the adventures of an innocent young man, a stranger in a strange land, who is expelled from "the best of all possible worlds" when it becomes clear to those who govern said world that the young man in question either cannot or will not abide by that world's rules. In terms no less bawdy than Voltaire, Kafka tells his own version of a fall of biblical proportion. Karl persistently "falls"—from the grace of his parents, from that of his Uncle, from that of the Hotel; each fall pushes him farther and farther into exile. Kafka misses no opportunity to remind us of the biblical contours of his tale: from his choice to name the title of the chapter that precedes Karl's arrival at the Hotel Occidental "The Road to Ramses" (Ramses is the pharaoh traditionally associated with the biblical Exodus) to his persistent and rather blatant casting of events in biblical terms (Uncle Jacob as God, Karl as reluctant prophet, etc.).

The opening moments of the novel demonstrate quickly how we are to regard the mythic landscape Kafka constructs in the "Amerika," he never visited. The statue of Liberty that greets Karl with arms

outstretched and glittering in the sunlight carries a sword rather than a torch, a testament to the amalgamation of brute force and opportunity that Kafka imagines governs the workings of this world. The substitution of sword for torch provides a not-so-subtle commentary on the eclipse of rationality in the face of this brute force. Nothing is illuminated here, in other words; it won't be knowledge or understanding of the truth that guides Karl on his way. Instead, he will be brutalized—both literally and figuratively—into obedience to a system whose rules are both arbitrary and inaccessible.

The mythical landscape Kafka has constructed here has surprisingly relevant political implications. If we are to read the Hotel Occidental as repository and symbol of all things "West," so, too, are we associate all things West with the *sine qua non* of exploitation and oppression. There have been several studies of this novel as a social critique.[39] Generally in this regard, Kafka ends up looking like a champion of socialism and condemner of capitalism. While this description captures his project overall, I think there is another dimension to his critique that links him more closely still with Pinter. Indeed, in launching his critique from within a deliberately biblical landscape, in depicting at length the persistent cruelties that Karl goes through, and in showing violence to be the basic mechanism that propels Karl from one moment of his journey to another, Kafka associates the biblical narrative—and specifically the arc of the story that ties the Fall together with the Exodus—with images of Western "progress" that exploit and demolish individual liberty. And, in doing this, his strategies are eerily prescient of, even as they subvert, the ways in which the United States government has married political and biblical rhetoric, particularly in the wake of September 11.[40]

Read in the broader context of Kafka's literary project, *Amerika* explores one of Kafka's most persistent and nagging doubts: if we accept that brute force must accompany "opportunity," we grant credence to those systems that oppress. We buy in, in other words, to worldviews that establish as a praxis the exclusion of those who would reject this same exclusionary model. Kafka's relentless pairing of a specific theologically coded symbolic landscape with this more or less secular premise about the nature of nascent political systems suggests that we might read his work overall as a cautionary tale about the ways in which we construct the sacred to bolster the all-too-human will to power. In a move connected intimately in spirit to Nietzsche and, it turns out, to Pinter, Kafka exposes the theological mechanism of this exclusion. This mechanism, he suggests, is the covenant itself, is a theology based on the circumscribing of boundaries between "self" and

"other," "insider and outsider," and the systematic ousting of those who fall on the periphery of these boundaries. The specific reference to Babel at a moment when power is exposed so transparently and, by extension, when sacred is again linked to secular suggests an attendant concern: the worldview attached to an exclusive covenantal system undermines any possibilities for true dialogue; innovation, as it were, is dissolved in the noisy space of a language that is marked, too, by its relation to a higher and arbitrary Other.

Babel Revisited

But there is yet another way, it seems. Paradoxically, the metaphor of Babel offers Kafka an alternative path even as it helps him to describe the impasse we have reached. He gives us these two short parables:

> THE TOWER OF BABEL
> If it had been possible to build the tower of Babel
> without ascending it, the work would have been permitted.
>
> THE PIT OF BABEL
> What are you building?
> I want to dig a subterranean passage.
> Some progress must be made.
> My station up there is much too high.
> We are digging the pit of Babel.[41]

The second parable answers the first. The pit of Babel is the creative (albeit self-denigrating) solution to the impermissible work of building the Tower. Despite and because the condition "up there is much too high," "we" band together in an effort to effect change, to make progress, where change is possible. Kafka makes this basic point again and again in his notebooks and fiction, a variation on his maxim: "If you were walking across a plane, had an honest intention of walking on, and yet kept regressing, then it would be a desperate matter; but since you are scrambling up a cliff, about as steep as you yourself are if seen from below, the regression can only be caused by the nature of the ground, and you must not despair."[42] The hope that is betrayed by this last line—*and you must not despair*—is every bit as fierce as it is tempered by his realism. This is a hope that is described tentatively in terms of a covenant that potentially bands together the human community in the face of the innumerable difficulties of life itself. In his writings, Kafka predominately describes a symbolic landscape that

"predates" the covenants with Abraham and Moses (his Abraham parable and a few short musings on Moses are exceptional in this regard). Perhaps we might read his choice to do so as an implicit promotion of the first covenant: the one that an increasingly irrational God makes with Noah to protect the entire human community and all living creatures from his wrath. There are no rituals of exclusion tied to this promise, no statements of identity born out of opposition to another group. And so, too, there is no blood sealing the pact. Just a bow in the sky with the promise of no more destruction (Gen. 9:12–17).

CONCLUSION

And so it finally comes down to this, a rather simple suggestion, really: that we turn *to* one another rather than *against* one another, because we all share the bond of being human. Kafka and Pinter hope against hope that we can hear the urgency of this simple suggestion, as they trust on some level that their devastating critique of an exclusive covenant—their assessment that we need to move beyond this theological construct doomed by its brutish and transparent simplicity—will be met with thoughtfulness, rather than offense. Kafka and Pinter warn us against buying too quickly into a logical framework that *looks like* a system of accountability, but is, in actuality, a recipe for violence, indifference to suffering, and the loss of autonomy.

Their critique cannot be more relevant. Signs of covenantal theology are everywhere. We need only look to Jerry Falwell and Pat Roberston's remarks immediately following September 11,[43] or the remarks of theologians attempting to find cause for the Indonesian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, or Bush's 2004 inaugural address promoting the Mandate of America to "liberate" the world, closed up tightly with the heavily charged phrase, "God Bless America." Not to mention the devastation of Iraq, or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or countless other scenarios that have at their core an unshakable belief in the *rightness* of one side to the exclusion of the other. The only language that appears to fit, ironically in the context of an argument intended to dismantle the very fabric of this language, is prophetic: we are in the midst of an all-too-human conflagration of dire proportions, a conflagration that threatens to grow ever stronger by the persistent and stubborn adherence to the mythical narratives that fuel it.

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Notes

1. "In the Electoral Colony: Kafka in Florida," *Critical Inquiry* 27.4. (Summer 2001): 662–702.
2. "In the Electoral Colony" 663.
3. See, for example, Russell Samolsky, "Metaleptic Machines: Kafka, Kabbalah, Shoah," *Modern Judaism* 19.2 (May 1999): 173–94.
4. See http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2005/pinter-lecture-e.html.
5. See, for instance, Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Is Religion Killing Us? Violence in the Bible and Quran* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 2003); Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997).
6. "A Conversation with Harold Pinter." *Charlie Rose*. 1 March 2007.
7. Quoted in Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1961), 53.
8. See http://www.haroldpinter.org-HouseofCommonsSpeech.
9. See Ruby Cohn, "The World of Harold Pinter," *The Tulane Drama Review*, 6.3 (1962): 55–68.
10. See Esslin, 235.
11. Esslin, 242.
12. Cohn, 57.
13. This is the subject of his 1919 essay, "Das Unheimlich," which took E. T. A. Hoffmann's story "The Sandman" as its focus.
14. Harold Pinter, *The Birthday Party and The Room* (New York: Grove, 1960), 108.
15. Esslin, 242.
16. Pinter, 115.
17. Ibid., 115–16.
18. Ibid., 91.
19. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 181.
20. Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones. (New York: Vintage Books, 1939), 143.
21. *The Basic Kafka* (New York: Washington Square, 1979), 172–74.

22. Sören Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (New York: Doubleday Anchor Book, 1954), 26–37.
23. *The Basic Kafka*, 173.
24. Kierkegaard, 64–77.
25. *The Basic Kafka*, 173.
26. *Letters to Milena* (New York: Schocken, 1954), 213. Quoted in Ernst Pawel, *The Nightmare of Reason: A Life of Franz Kafka*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1984).
27. Franz Kafka, *Diaries*, trans. Joseph Kresh, Martin Greenberg, and Hannah Arendt. (New York: Schocken Books, 1951), 399.
28. Franz Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, ed. Max Brod., trans. Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1991), 52.
29. Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, 52.
30. A scan of Web sites devoted to editorials of this sort include: http://www.jewishcomment.com/cgibin/news.cgi?id=11&command=shownews&newsid=371 and http://www.israpundit.com/archives/2005/10/harold_pinter_a.php.
31. See, for instance, http://www.robertfulford.com/2005-10-17-pinter.html.
32. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 326.
33. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo.*
34. See Jane Bennet, "Kafka, Genealogy, and the Spiritualization of Politics," *The Journal of Politics* 56.3 (August 1994): 650–70, esp. 655, 669.
35. Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, 31.
36. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 273.
37. See Kafka, *Blue Octavo Notebooks*, 54.
38. My italics.
39. See, for instance, Michael Burwell, "Kafka's Amerika as novel of Social Criticism," *German Studies Review* 2 (1979): 192–209.
40. Bennett explores the rhetoric of Bush senior, bizarrely reminiscient of Kafka even as it is entirely "unKafkaesque" in its aims, 651.
41. *Basic Kafka*, 171.
42. Kafka, *Blue Octavo Notebooks*, 21–22.
43. Nelson-Pallmeyer, 14.

Chapter 9

Masters, Slaves, and the Implacable Deity of the Wilderness in Simone Zelitch's *Moses in Sinai*

Ranen Omer-Sherman

Every Jewish child, brought up with even a modicum of Jewish literacy, learns through the Passover liturgy that the Jews were condemned to wander the desert for forty years. In this tradition, the desert is a realm of enlarged spirit and liberating transformations. As the story begins, the tribe that descended to Egypt with Jacob is now a "swarming" (*vayishretzu*) mass. "Fruitful and multiplying," the descendants of Jacob are also fully assimilated to their environment. Indeed, as Avivah Zornberg asserts, this is the primal crisis of Exodus: "How to be redeemed when Egypt, that enervating soulscape, has one in its pincer grip? From such a perspective, Israel in Egypt *cannot* be redeemed; no separation is possible—in the same way as, in terms of mythic thought, the baby held in the womb *cannot* be born, must remain monstrously but all-too-implausibly immobilized forever."[1] Accordingly, if the divine mission is to expunge from them all traces of idolatrous Egypt, the austere desert would seem to be the right place. But as Ilana Pardes observes, once in the wilderness, the Hebrews' progress toward redemption is anything but assured; in her analysis, the biblical desert contains fissured identities, radical skepticism, and questioning of official narratives of the nation.

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Unlike its anointed patriarch, the desert wanderers, unconvinced by the binds of collective identity, are "confused and fearful about homecoming": "The wandering Israelites are skeptical about the very premise that Canaan is their homeland. The only land they wish to return to is Egypt. But they end up in the wilderness, between Egypt and the Promised Land, returning to neither."[2] Zornberg's and Pardes's stirring meditations are representative of a growing number of feminist and psychoanalytic biblical critics who have persuasively forged exciting ways to link the emergence of a national identity to that of a human birth; each addresses the urgent problems of nurture that confront a wandering population of individual adults reduced to dependence on an invisible deity in their harsh environment.

Signaling her own spirited engagement with this recent mode of interpretation, the Jewish American writer Simone Zelitch provocatively calls her novel *Moses in Sinai* (2002) "a Last Temptation of Christ for Jews." Contemporary Jewish writing often tries to *validate* the grumblings and rebellions in the wilderness of Exodus, finding that *subversive* spirit as important as the *official* trajectory toward homecoming and nation-building. One of the more provocative moments of dissent in BaMidbar (book of Numbers) is the portion often called simply *Korah*, where the assault on Moses's leadership is led by a coalition of opponents with different gripes and different goals. The portion identifies Korah's complaint that Moses and Aaron have usurped too much authority: "You have too much! For all the community, they are all holy, and in their midst is the Lord. So why should you raise yourselves up over the Lord's assembly?" (Num. 16:3). This complaint seems to have directly inspired *Moses in Sinai*'s highly sympathetic approach to the problem of heresy and dissent.[3]

Zelitch's most significant innovation concerns the polarities of obedience and authority as embodied by Moses's austere faith and Korah's humanistic rebellion. In interviews, the novelist has often affirmed that her earlier novels (*Louisa, Confession of Jack Straw*) were explorations of the contradictions that exist in political movements, especially those concerning the struggle toward a compassionate society. *Moses in Sinai* clearly intensifies Zelitch's preoccupation with the possibility of living without becoming masters or slaves or without the "slaves" (oppressed) becoming the masters or oppressors. Toward this end, Zelitch renders the desert as the preeminent space of human agency and possibility.

The desert of the Hebrew Bible endures as a particularly inspiring template for the modern Jewish writer's provocative interrogation of the limits of homogeneity. This owes in part to the fact that, as Douglas Rushkoff observes, the Talmudic imagination stresses that Sinai

was a place where "God was experienced differently by everybody . . . the Israelites who witnessed him 'directly' at Mount Sinai each saw a different image of God."[4] For Zelitch, this affirmation of individual perception works as a difference that would resist the tyranny of the same, inaugurating an imaginative bridge between the individual and the official narrative unprecedented in previous spiritual and social constructions of reality. Thus, whenever one approaches the fraught relation between the individual and the collective in modern Jewish literature, especially the problematic status of the "heretic," it bears remembering that ancient affirmation of difference.

There is another vital way to approach the problem of the divine and human agency. As critic William Kluback incisively observes of Edmond Jabès's entanglement with the meaning of Jewish textuality, "the presence of God would destroy the question. Absence is the realization of what was or what can be. When we speak of the absence of God, we speak of creating a world in which the presence would reveal holiness and majesty. But in such a world there could be no human life."[5] After all, as Lurianic Kabbalists have taught throughout the centuries, it is God's very withdrawal that enables humanity to participate in Creation. And it is precisely in the context of this critical opportunity for innovation that Zelitch's novel, with its ever-shifting perspectives on the nexus of power, obedience, and the meaning of human agency, compels our attention.

* * *

Zelitch's novel begins with a Pharaoh obsessed by his dream-life. Frightened by what seems a particularly portentous nightmare, he summons the twelve elders of the tribes of Goshen, protesting to them that "a black fish came to me and whispered in my ear that a son would be born who would shorten my life and drive you . . . into the wilderness of Sinai."[6] Ironically, long before they even set foot there, Zelitch's Israelites hate the wilderness more than they do their present condition with a deep, soul-enervating dread. Dumbly accepting the Pharaoh's will that they should dispose of their newborn sons, the fathers ritualistically obey: "Before a mother rose from her childbed, the father would take the newborn, swaddle him, stuff his mouth with stone and straw, and bear him to a basket to the wadi where a current would carry him away to the Red Sea." For their part, the mothers answer their daughters' curiosity ("What was that?") with the laconic reply, "It never was . . . Blessed be our Lord Pharaoh who keeps us from death in Sinai."[7] The collective's distinct reluctance to accept the desert initiation emerges

as a crucial dynamic that deepens *Moses in Sinai*'s overarching concern with human will and agency. Four centuries after Joseph, the Hebrews still loyally interpret his disturbing dreams in exchange for a permanent dwelling: "The Pharaoh was not often troubled by dreams, so he was surprised to find himself sitting bolt-upright one morning with his hand on a wildly beating heart. Without rising from bed, he called for the twelve elders . . . they kissed the earth between his feet and piled his lap with their rods of judgment. He said 'A black fish came to me and whispered in my ear that a son would be born who would shorten my life and drive you out of Goshen into the wilderness of Sinai.'"[8] For their part, the tribal elders are as dismayed as their sovereign by such a prospect, denying that they harbor any thought of departure. As Hur the elder of the Levi proclaims "If such a son is born, we will all die"; for the tribes of Goshen are unified in their certainty that the Sinai is a singularly threatening waste where "even the shadows of the rocks were poisonous, and snakes ate men."[9] Zelitch repeatedly employs the desert as a signifier for the paralyzing terror of those on the verge of revolutionary progress.

Indeed, the very thought of this realm grips Moses himself, when, fleeing the contained world of the pharaoh's household, he pauses at the edge of Sinai, a conflicted man, uncertain of his path: "He felt a shiver like a spasm. He could go back to Goshen, kill every master, free the slaves. Another shiver. He was shivering with joy. But then his heart misspoke itself and divided with such force that he lost his footing and lay breathless on the rubble . . . Behind him lay Goshen and before him lay the Sinai. In Sinai there were snakes, thorns, acacia and birds of prey. No one could walk there and live . . . He entered Sinai because he was afraid."[10] Zelitch's remote/near deity, dwelling perhaps in the jagged cliffs of high latitudes and yet nowhere at all, is as dangerous and violent as the Sinai landscape. He bears a striking resemblance to Annie Dillard's deadly God.[11] Dillard's negative theology presents a similarly severe imperative: "We do need reminding, not of what God can do, but of what he cannot do, or will not, which is to catch time in its free fall and stick a nickel's worth of sense into our days. And we need reminding of what time can do, must only do; churn out enormity at random and beat it, with God's blessing, into our heads: that we are created, *created*, sojourners in a land we did not make . . . Who are we to demand explanations from God?"[12]

Dillard has little patience for the infantilizing assumptions of modern faith: "We people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute."[13] For Dillard, laying bare the conditions of time, danger, and death to which we are all subject, it is no accident

that God, in the Hebrew and other traditions, is often located at the summit of mountains. Similarly, in Zelitch's disturbing foray into biblical fiction, her savage, implacable desert weans readers from looking with much hope in the universe for a God of compassion, instead, coaxing onward toward a more human-centered ethics. Her meditation on the Israelites' nascent desert theology is unflinchingly honest, especially in limning a desert that, utterly withholding its "meaning," drives the individual *inward*, rather than depending on the notion of an intimate, sympathetic God who guides the destinies of human beings or whose ways can be fully justified. Yet what is most striking about Zelitch's ostensibly secular retelling, is her apparent determination to hedge just a little on the matter of divine vs. human agency, allowing readers the freedom of their own faith perspectives as here in her evocative portrayal of Mount Sinai: "There was the mountain, an ordinary mountain such as might rise out of an ordinary plateau. It was red-brown, dung-colored, like any Sinai mountain. No fire, no sheer sides, even a clear trail to the summit. Yet every Hebrew stood, deadened with fear. In the silence, the earth hummed, a hum that came from the mingled reverberation of the Hebrews."[14] It is hardly clear whether the enduring implacability of the mountain is divine "presence" or a natural "absence" filled by the Israelites' anxious bleating. Against a domesticated, "personal" God of consolation who rules a benevolent natural world, Zelitch's Moses confronts the remote and inexplicable: a deity whose significance resides solely in His capacity to lead human beings toward their truest potential through the rigor of the Law. Blinking as they emerge from centuries of slavery to dwell forty more years in exile from the Land, the people learn in the desert that there is no need for sovereignty for God's will to be done by those who are fully roused to consciousness in the present.

Notwithstanding the ostensible focus of her title, Zelitch is equally interested in the provocative figure of Korah, who insists on fulfilling the promise of living without becoming either masters or slaves. Her Korah seems to have a slyly anachronistic sensibility. It is as if, looking back at the biblical past through the enormity of all the failed political revolutions and ideologies of later history, he would halt the vicious succession in which the "slaves" (oppressed) invariably become the "masters" (oppressors), as in William Blake's Orc-Urizen cycle wherein no rational or authoritarian ordering of any system, whether the universe or society, can permanently sustain itself without aggravating unbridled energy that invariably engenders new political and imaginative forms.[15] Zelitch interprets Korah's rebellion as a microcosm of the master narrative of the original crisis embodied in the coming out of Egypt in Exodus, the sins and backslidings that

followed, and the inscrutability of the Lord's judgment. Her Korah embodies the egalitarian forces of outspoken dissent, addressing the well-being of the alienated community.

As for Moses, though some readers have found the novel's intentions (especially vis-à-vis its source material) rather enigmatic, the novel lucidly employs the spectacular desert showground as a lens for recognizing the stranger who is intimately known, the antagonistic other who is also the double, and the double who is always intrinsic to the divided self. Zelitch's Moses, "running away from certainty" seems to recognize his own nature in the "cleft rock" he strikes to produce the life-giving waters that sustain his flight: "The border of Sinai is lined with goat bones, thorn bushes, or the Red Sea. Deeper in, cliffs of brown stone shelter snakes so poisonous that they could pass over the shadow of a bird and make it fall. It was there Moses walked . . . Sometimes he would take his staff and strike a rock again and again to force up a little water . . . Yet, once he raised his staff to strike . . . Moses felt pity for the rock. 'So I am divided,' Moses said to the rock."

But this identification is an ephemeral conceit and Nature and the lonely man remain at violent odds with each other (as they do throughout the desert experience). For the latter, with a "blazing unity of purpose," strikes the rock "even after water flowed."[16] As Zelitch imagines the repressed sensual and pagan currents from which Judaism struggled to emerge, the desert experience plunges individuals into increasingly destabilizing encounters with alterity. Moses often seems in danger of losing himself. Even the "holy" creatures that cross his path seem to bear witness to the dangers of subjectivity that all too witlessly melts into the landscape: "The snakes of Sinai are so black they look like gold; their eyes are the color of olives. As the snake slid past the bare feet of Moses, it shed its skin . . . Moses took up the snake skin and held it to the sun. It felt hot, fragile and holy . . . As night fell, Moses thought: it is not the skin of an ox, taken by slaughter, but a skin shed cleanly, left behind."[17]

As with the cleft rock, the snake's cast-off skin seems to signal something vital about the essence of Moses's own condition. Throughout the novel, Zelitch's tormented outsider struggles with the nature of his own layered identity as well as the onslaught of mysterious new paradigms and the snake-skin, "shed cleanly," seems to conjure up the attractive prospect that "it is possible to live without doing harm." Immediately after slaying an Egyptian overseer, Moses, anguished by his own violence, found himself irresistibly drawn toward the desert's meditative space. Now he eagerly accepts the "hot, fragile and holy" gift as a token of his own redemption from violence.[18]

In Zelitch's reanimation of Moses's flight into the wilderness, the young Egyptian prince finds unquestioning welcome in the tents of a desert chieftain who lays out the lean rudiments of what will grow into the complexities of Mosaic law and justice: "Seek righteousness. Do not slander. Use sound weights and measures. Do not oppress strangers."[19] In spite of the sensible clarity of this message, Moses staggers back as if unable to bear the weight of the role of leadership that awaits him. Shy and tentative as he is, Zelitch presents his humble movements in ironic counterpoint to the retributive anger of the desert prophet more familiar to us: "Moses took a step back, for as the old man sang, he felt his blood turn to clay, and his feet crunched on two tablets, and cracked them to bits." [20]

Wedding the Midianite maiden named Zipporah, Moses tends his father-in-law's sheep, living in the slow time of the desert. While elsewhere in Sinai, Hebrew slaves as well as others imported from distant Nubia toil in the turquoise mines, Moses, serenely caring for the flocks, acquires "quiet, wholesome pity for the world. He would not let Jethro's daughter's slaughter sheep, though it meant they ate no meat and that the flocks multiplied to no purpose. He silenced complaints by watering and grazing those sheep himself."[21] Here, Zelitch is thinking of Exodus 3:1: "Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God." Though leading his flock in the wilderness as a shepherd poetically anticipates the epic burden of leading a people, Zelitch prefers to dwell on the nature of a man content to tolerate the "sand fleas, snakes, and sheep" that inform his daily labors, paradoxically growing so enamored of Creation in spite of his harsh environment that he protests even the mundane actions that sustain human life: "To Zipporah, he said 'Do you not even pity the wheat you thresh to make those cakes? It was a seed. It troubled itself to grow. It struggled and suffered.'"[22] Zipporah responds only with affectionate (if mildly derisive) laughter, but the reader sees her husband's poignant misidentifications with the animal and vegetable worlds as the first halting steps toward an expanded consciousness that will be essential for the prophetic imagination, for leading a people in the wilderness.

Three years after the birth of his son, Moses visits the tent of Jethro, who lies on his deathbed, while the evidence of his instruction rests in piles around the two: "as years passed, Moses had learned to carve the laws. Jethro would rest a cold hand on Moses' hand to be sure it was moving in the right direction. Moses felt the piles of fresh clay press in from all sides, clammy and malleable, as he dug into the tablet

with the little brass knife . . . By now, the clay tablets lay piled so thick against the walls that [Jethro] sat inside a narrow chimney."[23] Zelitch's wry description of the scribe's symbolic space cryptically underscores the fateful enclosure of the law that will hem the people in the desert (like Moses's "bleating sheep" which are "safe, penned in"), will henceforth divide them from all other peoples in a refuge that, in the ages to come, at times will feel claustrophobic and at others a radical freedom. In portraying Moses, Zelitch underscores the profound loneliness of a leader alienated from his own people and who, seeking God, experiences only brief ecstasy, and lasting violence, in submitting to that God. In Zelitch's ironic retelling, it would seem to be Moses, and not the bush, who is afflicted by divine fire, burnt but not "consumed." One day, he suddenly bursts into flame and burns until Zipporah circumcises their son, which quenches the flame, eliciting Zipporah's observation "You have been a bridegroom of blood to me." The complex biblical passage invoked here, often referred to as that of "the bloody bridegroom" (Exod. 4:24–26) has perplexed many biblical scholars but has been midrashically read by a few to be an allegory of the severe emotional stress experienced by Moses who at this point most acutely feels his soul torn between Egyptian and Jewish identities.[24] From this point, trailing ash and blood, Zelitch's Moses sets out to redeem his people: "He walked into his task as he might walk into a wind" (116).[25]

* * *

When at last Moses prevails to ensure his people's peripatetic destiny, Zelitch evokes Pharaoh's pursuit of the Israelites into the desert in an unusual light; it is not out of jealousy for their new-found freedom nor because he has second thoughts about losing his slaves. Zelitch's imaginative rendering seems to fulfill the logic of the people's reluctance to make a clean break with Egypt's fleshpots, as expressed in Exodus and Numbers, for this Pharaoh, finding both his land and Egyptian firstborn males stricken by the strange invisible God of the Israelites, determines to drive them out of his land. It is as though nothing short of expulsion (and here Zelitch is faithful to the ages of forced exile that follow) would reasonably persuade the Israelites to enter the poisonous desert expanses:

> At once, the Pharaoh knew what must be done. He turned from the Angel of Death and spoke not to Moses, but to God. "So now they cannot turn back . . . So they must go to Sinai, for they will never be

> allowed to stay in Goshen now that you are killing in their name. And now I will tell them to take their flocks and gold and never to return." Through the last rag ends of dark, the Pharaoh mounted a bright chariot, and all of Egypt wondered at his holy anger as he drove the twelve tribes . . . Through the rushes, arrows flew, until at last those tribes were trapped against a deep Red Sea.[26]

As if Zelitch cannot bear to ignore any of the possible inversions that might be applied to the ancient story, Zelitch audaciously conjures up a pharaoh repelled by an estranged minority's fundamentalist violence.

At precisely the same moment (though it occurs earlier in the narrative), Zelitch imagines a people alienated from their own origins, whose oral myths inspire indifference for most, but provoke urgent, important questions for just a very few. For the latter group, even before Moses, the desert instills a special sense of wandering as a cognitive process of recovery of lost identity. In response to his people's complacent fulfillment of Pharaoh's edict, a peripatetic Hebrew muses that in the old legends, "Abraham was told to spare his son, and now we slay our own sons willfully . . . In those tales, we had one master, and now we have another. Who was our master then? Who is our master now?"[27] While the others hasten to assure him that "Lord Pharaoh" is part of the natural order that follows the patriarchal succession, this Hebrew obdurately riddles "elders, wives and children" for ten years, "sworn to wander until he knew the name of the master who made Abraham spare his son."[28] This anonymous Hebrew never lingers at night in the camps of those who have slain their firstborn, increasingly persuaded that his answer may lie in the ineffable stillness beyond the compromised human community: "He liked the feel of a rock below his head, the wadi to his right . . . and a wind passing across his face. At times he believed the wind itself would give the riddle's answer, a truer answer than a slave could find."[29] Moses too, will discover the desert as a site that "weans away his anger," promising lucidity: "If he kept walking, he could live an honest life. The stones gave off a hot, sharp scent that cleared his head, emptied it like a porcelain basin to let light shine through."[30] But Zelitch's Moses remains a singularly alienated and alienating figure.

Accordingly, Zipporah names their son "Gershom" (Stranger), which upsets her husband. She calmly insists that, "you are a stranger to me. Our souls are strangers."[31] She accuses him of a God-fever so ardent that she fears he will one day inadvertently break her neck. In Zelitch's ironic displacement of Moses's call to God's summons—"I'm here. Here I am"—an impassioned Zipporah protests, "You're

not here!" as if Moses's God-orientation lacks human immediacy and warmth, translating into a "hereness" that is a spiritual elsewhere, all too remote. For Moses, God is a constantly beckoning "something else . . . immediate, urgent, advancing on him and forcing everything else into insignificance."[32] Increasingly, he locates its mysterious presence in the dry austerity and white light of Sinai where "The vastness of the wilderness opened before him, but now he could not take the time to wonder, to fear, to feel at home, to feel displaced, to feel anything but himself, called by name. If once he had surrendered to the Sinai, now he saw it only as something he must pass over as a hand passes over a table to reach for something no one else can see."[33]

Once again, Zelitch's sly riff on a key biblical phrase makes for playful new meanings. Instead of the Angel of Death "passing over" the House of Israel as Egypt's own first-born infants are struck down, Moses's own reach amid the naked stone of Sinai assumes almost divine proportions, an ambition that exceeds the comprehension of anyone else and like the original, suggests an implacable force bent on its own inexplicable purposes. For that reason, the young Korah's initial attraction to, and subsequent grave disappointment in, the Israelite priestly hierarchy, must be understood as an anxiety over repetition, a fear that the priest clan whose power grows day by day in the desert, will reproduce the masters and slaves dialectic of Egypt. And yet ironically, Zelitch's Moses is a leader most reluctant to lead, who insists to his obdurate brother Aaron that "I am not leading . . . I am running away . . . from all of you."[34] It is as if he shares Korah's deep skepticism toward the end of wandering, the inherently disappointing nature of arrival with its attendant restoration of political hegemony and conservative stability.

At the other end of the spectrum, Zelitch's Korah, a figure that the rabbinic imagination consistently casts as one of Scripture's most villainous figures for orchestrating a nearly disastrous insurrection, comes across as far more sympathetic, a portrayal that seems to owe a great deal to his condition of acute in-betweenness. Dwelling in a liminal space between slavery and freedom, Korah spends most of the novel boldly speculating about the true nature of human liberation, longing to know "When will we be home," or what would constitute "home," and most of all, "What is the god's name?" Ever since he was a child, when a mysterious old man instructed him that "you are home and you are homeless. You are a Hebrew in Sinai," Korah's soul has been tormented by the enigma of that identity.[35]

He grows into an embittered doubter, alienated by Moses's distant leadership and the mundane authoritarian culture that has begun to

form. When a stranger arrives in the camp with his young son seeking a new form of human community—"I have been told that here there are no masters and no slaves"—Korah insists on disillusioning him: "Take your son and go, for we have a master now."[36] When pressed by the stranger, who hopes that the "master," might at least signify some new hope for a benevolent deity, the disenchanted Korah, who sees the return of hierarchal relationships as the end of the exhilarating days of desert anarchy, bitterly strips him of that final hope too: "A god?" the man asked. "The High Priest," Korah answered. "And he has an overseer named Moses who holds a whip called Law."[37] Later, Dathan, another notorious dissenter (the Bible claims he was swallowed up by the earth in Num. 16:32), offers Moses a compelling rationale for his actions. He pleads to preserve what they have achieved: "'Canaan means the end of everything. Once we have land we have owners, we have gold. We both know.' 'What do we know?' Moses asked. He sounded tired. Dathan struck the tent post with his fist. 'You know that if we have Canaan we'll have Lords again. We'll be like everyone else. We'll have masters and slaves. You don't want that.'"[38] But when an unmoved Moses offers only one choice—"do you stand with Aaron or with Korah," Dathan angrily opposes him in measured terms curiously reminiscent of Bialik's retelling of the obdurate stand of the "Dead of the Desert": "We walked away from Pharaoh's law. We'll walk away again . . . We'll write the Law of Feet." Intuiting that Moses must be as disgusted by the regime as he and Korah, he pleads, "Get up. We'll go together. We'll leave these sheep and wolves to Canaan where they'll kill each other."[39] In the end, the dilemma of territory and reconquered space fittingly emerges as the overarching concern that preoccupies Zelitch's weary characters. For, as David Jacobson insists, the Bible's ancient stories must be retold "to emphasize possible connections between what went wrong with political sovereignty in biblical times and what [is] going wrong in modern times."[40]

As of this writing, it seems that every day one awakes to the news of another group's (Palestinians in Gaza, Israelis in Sderot) collective suffering over tensions rising out of the territorial possession of the "Holy" land. Precisely because the impact of biblical materials on the contemporary condition of *all* of our lives has been made manifestly evident by the global repercussions of the conflict between Israel and Palestine, readers everywhere may be more interested than at any previous time in examining how such writers, working through a lens of constructive anachronism, are self-conscious about inhabiting a strange confluence of past and future, not to mention striking spatial

congruencies. Anticipating the archaic conflict over Canaan between colonizers from the desert and the colonized, Zelitch underscores a pattern of disruption that hasn't changed over the centuries. Her counternarrative quietly insinuates that Zionism, whatever its moral strength and historical necessity, must be viewed as the fatal reiteration of this conflict. In this regard, *Moses in Sinai* affords readers an unusually sharp juxtaposition of ancient and all-too contemporary understandings of justice and human liberation.

Interestingly, an unusual but respected current in biblical scholarship supports Zelitch's challenging reading of the tensions embedded in the transition from the desert experience to regained territory. In Harry Berger's representative formulation of this counterreading, "The failure of the Mosaic revolution was built into the very premises it started from, and into the very conditions of its origin and triumph. A phantom double of the pharaoh, what the Egyptians would have called an *akh*, a vital force emanating from the tomb, traveled with the fugitive Israelites, stored its potency within their early image of Yahweh, and waited for the time when they would inevitably return to spiritual Egypt, not as slaves who had been betrayed or forced into captivity but as the captors and victors themselves."[41]

Berger sees "the seeds of Egypt" fatally germinating and "carried within . . . the Mosaic revolution . . . the royalist and antiroyalist trajectories are certainly present in the text, twining and untwining throughout."[42] This sense of a fatal repetition is what Dathan and Korah fear, and, to Zelitch's credit, *Moses in Sinai* brings alive the full force of its weighty relation to the present for contemporary readers who live in an age of disastrous entanglements between religion and politics. Specifically, in relation to Judaism and the old/new state of the Jews, it bears recalling Walter Brueggemann's sense that the Mosaic tradition born in the desert experience "tends to be a movement of *protest* . . . situated among the disinherited and which articulates its theological vision in terms of a God who decisively intrudes, even against seemingly impenetrable institutions." In sharp contrast, he says, "the Davidic tradition tends to be a movement of hegemonic *consolidation* . . . situated among the established and secure, and which articulates its theological vision in terms of a God who faithfully abides and sustains on behalf of the present order."[43] By now, it should be clear that, throughout Zelitch's novel, the ancient tension between these clashing paradigms, the Mosaic and the Davidic, reverberates quite insistently.

* * *

For B. Jill Carroll, a religion for adults would affirm that "God has . . . loosed us to sojourn on a speckled earth that holds within it the possibility for death as much as life, horror as much as beauty, and pain as much as comfort." Perversely, she seems to find solace in Dillard's "daredevil spirituality," the latter's steely insistence that a lonely humankind blinks in the darkness toward a mysterious "'God less lovable than a grasshead, who treats us less well than we treat our lawns. . . . God is a brute and traitor, abandoning us to time, to necessity and the engines of matter unhinged,'" commenting that the naturalist's God seems aligned "in both design and behavior" with "predatory animals."[44] Acutely aware of the need for an honest theology that would assert the true terms of reality, Carroll's advocacy that we "retain a sense of otherness in reference to God and to nature so that both are at times experienced as hostile or alien to humanity" (65) can be usefully applied to the stark vision of Zelitch's horrifying and beautiful novel: "When the world in which we live and the deity that is imminent in it seems hostile and alien, there is no room for fancying that the world or God is aligned in the least with human political or social concern. The otherness of God and the natural world appears most alarmingly in these instances, and serves as a critique of those models of God that are reductionistic and self-serving, focusing as they do only upon the aspects of deity that are comforting and helpful."[45]

Zelitch's vision of the desert, like Carroll's assertion that genuine freedom follows only when the random, indifferent, and terrifying aspects of the world are recognized, affirms a spiritual sensibility that need not succumb to a docile and benevolent God of childhood. Interestingly, Lane, also a theologian drawn to desert spaces, declares that, "I really don't want a God who is solicitous of my every need, fawning for my attention, eager for nothing in the world so much as the fulfillment of my self-potential. One of the scourges of our age is that all our deities are house-broken and eminently companionable. Far from demanding anything, they ask only how they can more meaningfully enhance the lives of those they serve."[46] It is as if the God of rough terrain who also haunts Zelitch's narrative makes the best case for becoming more deeply attuned to the fragility of human beings. And this renewed attention would mark the difference between complacency and trust in the present order, and sharp, destabilizing questioning.

Here it may be illuminating to briefly consider a dynamic astutely addressed by Michael Rosenak, a professor of Jewish Education. Remarking on the danger of any notion of transcendence not firmly anchored in humanism, he observes that "clearly each historical faith community has its own language that points to the beyond . . . while

differing approaches to transcendence can guide their communities to the heights of profound insight and understanding, they can also lead them into perverse idolatries. What criteria have we to distinguish between holy and abominable approaches to transcendence?" Rosenak proposes that "when humanism is understood as having its source in transcendence, 'humanistic' life constitutes a universal religious imperative, standing guard against idolatry while bringing transcendence down to earth."[47] As I have argued, for that very reason, Zelitch's interest in the young Korah's initial attraction to and subsequent grave disappointment in the Israelite priestly hierarchy must be understood most of all as an anxiety over repetition, a fear that the priest clan whose power grows day by day in the desert will reproduce the masters and slaves dialectic of Egypt.

As for Moses, the anonymous destiny that greets Zelitch's leader—who has persistently protested "I am not a leader" throughout the novel—bears a compelling logic that is both poetic and scripturally steadfast. Abandoned by the Israelites on Mount Nebo, Moses is addressed by voices in the wilderness, though he remains uncertain whether it is God's or Korah's speech that dogs him at the end. He departs the novel by taking hold of the carcass of a newly sacrificed ox. Turning back slowly to the desert, "he would carry the ox so far into the Sinai that nobody could follow, or separate their mingled bones or know their names."[48] In the enigma of the novel's final rueful words Zelitch preserves the strange mystery of Moses's unknown burial place and makes the reader ache for a palpable human loss and perhaps shudder not a little in the wake of the unknowable, seemingly estranged deity.

In the end, this abandonment seems most apt for our own remorseless age; in the haunted aftermath of the Holocaust, the Jewish conception of God is no longer that of a loving, healing deity, at least not exclusively. More than ever before, the Jewish imagination has had to expand to accommodate the terrifying consciousness (or absence) that enables deadly force at inexplicable moments in the quotidian world. It is as if for the first time we can fully recognize the nihilism of the book of Job's portrayal of inexplicable suffering. Yet in some ways our most daunting visions of the alienating deity of the post-Auschwitz world are anticipated by the severely punitive divinity of the foundational desert story. Often envisioned as the material and deliberate Being who guides their destiny, for most of their forty years of wandering this hostile land of struggle, death, and exile, God vacates himself from the Israelites' story. This withdrawal allows, indeed requires, the urgent potentiality of human conscience and human community to speak in the reverberating silence of the deity's absence.

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Notes

1. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (New York: Doubleday: 2001).
2. Ilana Pardes, *The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible* (Los Angeles: U of California P, 2000), 104.
3. Significantly, Zelitch traces her novel's origins to her own adolescent resistance to a rigid figure of authority: "I started thinking about the novel back in high school—a Jewish high school by the way—when a rabbi warned us not to be like the infamous Korah who led a rebellion against Moses and was swallowed alive. Being an alienated 17 year old, I immediately read and reread Korah's story, as well as rabbinic commentary, and fifteen years later, I finally figured out how to make that story a central part of a novel." From "Talking With Simone Zelitch: An Interview by John Coyne." 7 May, 2008. http://www.peacecorpswriters.org/pages/2000/0001/001talkzelitch.html
4. In Douglas Rushkoff, *Nothing Sacred: The Truth About Judaism* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2003), 28.
5. See William Kluback's *Edmond Jabès: The Poetry of the Nomad* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1998), 21.
6. Simone Zelitch, *Moses in Sinai* (Seattle: Black Heron Press, 2002), 10.
7. Zelitch, 11.
8. Ibid., 10.
9. Ibid., 10.
10. Ibid., 79.
11. My analysis of Zelitch's indifferent desert is much informed by theologian B. Jill Carroll's argument in *The Savage Side* based on her reading of the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas as well as the Pulitzer Prize winning author, Annie Dillard, against "the models of God that have emerged from a dominant strand of contemporary religious thought" which she decries as "reductionist, utilitarian, and domesticate the concept of 'God.'" See B. Jill Carroll, *The Savage Side: Reclaiming Violent Models of God*.
12. Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 45.
13. Quoted in Carroll 9.
14. Zelitch, 185.

15. See Northrop Frye's classic study *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1947), 207–35.
16. Zelitch, 83.
17. Ibid., 84.
18. Ibid., 84.
19. Ibid., 87.
20. Ibid., 88.
21. Ibid., 99.
22. Ibid., 100.
23. Ibid., 108.
24. See Yaira Amit, *Hidden Polemics in Biblical Narrative.* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 1998).
25. Zelitch, 116.
26. Ibid., 146.
27. Ibid., 38.
28. Ibid., 38.
29. Ibid., 39.
30. Ibid., 84.
31. Ibid., 101.
32. Ibid., 110.
33. Ibid., 113.
34. Ibid., 161–62.
35. Ibid., 163.
36. Ibid., 216.
37. Ibid., 216.
38. Ibid., 239.
39. Ibid., 240.
40. David C. Jacobson, *Modern Midrash: The Retelling of Traditional Jewish Narratives by Twentieth-Century Hebrew Writers* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1987), 154.
41. Harry Berger Jr., "The Lie of the Land: Text Beyond Canaan," *Representations* 25. (Winter 1989), 134.
42. Berger, 134.
43. See "Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel," in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, eds. Norman K Gottwald and Richard A Horsley (Maryknoll. NY: Orbis, 1993), 202.
44. Carroll, 43.
45. Carroll, 65–66.
46. Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 53.
47. Michael Rosenak, "Paths to Holiness," *The Jerusalem Report.* May 3, 2004: 25.
48. Zelitch, 267.

Chapter 10

The Modern-day Followers of the Lamb

The Rhetoric of Suffering and the Politics of Identity in the *Left Behind* Series

W. David Hall

In 2004, *Glorious Appearing*, the final installment of the wildly successful *Left Behind* series, authored by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, sold nearly two million copies before it was even released. All together, series sales have exceeded the 62 million mark. The books have spawned three feature films, a children's series, and several spin-offs. There seems to be little debate among those who have paid attention to the series' success that its popularity reflects less its literary merit than its appeal to a need for meaning among evangelical Christian readers or a puzzled curiosity among nonevangelical readers.

The books in the *Left Behind* series present a fictional retelling of the events of the end times as they are purportedly described in the biblical book of Revelation. David T. Morgan indicates the importance of authors' turn to fiction as a means of addressing apocalyptic motifs. Comparing their work to that of Hal Lindsey, author of *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Morgan explains, "Whereas Lindsey wrote as a commentator and prognosticator, LaHaye and Jenkins have chosen fiction as their vehicle to promote premillennial dispensationalism . . . Fiction provides a shield against criticism. If anyone questions the details of their work, they can say that, after all, it is fiction that alludes to what the Bible teaches."[1] Lindsey has become somewhat marginalized because his prognostications proved false, despite his

arguments to the contrary. LaHaye and Jenkins, on the other hand, have chosen to lay out their version of the scenario in a hazy future of fictitious characters and events. However, given that both LaHaye and Jenkins have professed in interviews and exclaim throughout the *Left Behind* series that prophecy—and by "prophecy" they mean principally the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation read in conjunction with a number of other isolated Old and New Testament passages—is "history in advance," one might suppose that they intend their audience to read the books as historical fiction in advance. Thus, while the series is *fiction*, it aims at that ambiguous contemporary quality that Stephen Colbert has called "truthiness."

Amy Johnson Frykholm, among others, has shown that, despite its surprising success, *Left Behind* should not be looked upon as an aberration but as a member of a significantly large genre of Christian "rapture fiction."[2] Rapture narratives reflect the theological attitudes of what has become conservative evangelical Protestant Christianity and its frequent partner, premillennial dispensationalist eschatology. Premillennial dispensationalism is of fairly recent origin, though the basis for its understanding of history, "chiliasm"—or the belief in a coming thousand-year reign of Christ followed by a final judgment—extends at least as far back as the medieval period. "Premillennialism," the idea that this thousand-year reign will be preceded by an apocalyptic battle between Christ and Satan, often dubbed the "tribulation," flourished in early Protestant thought, though such ideas were in circulation long before. The name most associated with the origins of the *dispensationalist* version of this premillennial viewpoint is John Nelson Darby (1800–1882).[3] The innovations that Darby introduced to the existing premillennial scenario were twofold: (1) the postulation of a pretribulation "rapture" whereby faithful Christians will be "taken up" and spared the trials leading up to the final battle and (2) the refinement of a dispensational view of history, present in Christian thought since the time of Augustine of Hippo, as divided into seven God ordained "dispensations." Those dispensations are (1) the prefall innocence of Edenic existence, (2) the genesis of guilt after the fall and expulsion from Eden, (3) the beginnings of human government after the flood, (4) the promise that extends from the Abrahamic covenant, (5) the establishment of law through the Moses, (6) the announcement of grace through Christ's incarnation and sacrifice, and (7) the establishment of the New Jerusalem after Christ's second coming and final judgment. According to the dispensationalist scheme, we are currently living in the sixth dispensation—seemingly perpetually near the end of it—and awaiting the dawn of the seventh.

Darby argued that a literal reading of the Bible clearly establishes the existence of both the rapture and the system of seven dispensations. Rapture narratives assume this dispensationalist background and take up the story "postrapture," that ambiguous period of violent transition at the end of the dispensation of grace and its fulfillment in the second coming. The narratives seek to reveal the cost of putting off committing one's life to Christ. Because they have put off such commitment, the protagonists of such narratives are left behind to face the tribulation—the rise of the forces of the Antichrist to take over the world, the judgments of God against a world turned to evil, the final battle between Christ and the Antichrist, and the final judgment of Satan, the Antichrist, and their loyalists. The twelve books of the *Left Behind* series are a drawn out version of this postrapture scenario: the first book opening at the hour of the rapture; the final book concluding with Christ's judgment of the Antichrist, Satan, and the souls of the damned; and the reunion of the "tribulation saints" with their raptured and martyred loved ones. However, while the series bears the basic hallmarks of the genre, it plays with and, in many ways, transforms the genre. This factor will become important when we begin to talk about the way that *Left Behind* articulates a certain vision of Christian identity.

Many biblical scholars and theologians who have cast their attention toward *Left Behind* have tried to show how the series, and fundamentalist readings in general, deform the biblical message. For instance, Barbara Rossing accuses LaHaye and Jenkins of "hijacking" Revelation's message of suffering love and passive resistance in the face of imperial oppression and turning it into a sanction for wrath, warfare, and complacency in the face of injustice: "The slain Lamb's victory through suffering love is the heart of the Revelation story . . . Needless to say, dispensationalist Christians tell the story of the Lamb very differently—as a vengeful war story, not a story of suffering love." In essence, what critics like Rossing seek to do is protect the Bible from fundamentalist misinterpretations. The problem with this kind of criticism is twofold: First, it is not clear that Revelation, or any of the rest of the Bible for that matter, is simply a story about suffering love and nonviolent resistance. This may be part of the story, but there is more going on. The imagery of Revelation is violent; there is no explaining it away. Additionally, there are clear indications of internecine conflict between Christian communities in Revelation—that is, arguments about the true nature of Christianity, a concern that is at the forefront of dispensationalists' public discourse. The contemporary battle between Christian conservatives and liberals of all stripes may actually

tell us more about the situation of the author of Revelation (hereafter referred to, by convention, as John) than many critics would like. Second, and more important, criticisms like Rossing's do not address why the dispensationalist message continues to appeal; showing that the dispensationalists misuse and misrepresent biblical texts, and there is no doubt that dispensationalists do so, has not convinced their followers to turn away from their premillennialist hopes.

This chapter seeks to provide insight into the rhetorical appeal of dispensationalist premillennialism as it is presented in the *Left Behind* series. Leaving aside for the moment the problematic understanding of prophecy that LaHaye and Jenkins employ, I would suggest that their presentation of the situation has more in common with John's than either they or many of their critics would like to admit. Dispensationalist discourse is appealing because it imposes a symbolic structure upon disorienting social situations—for example, shifts in cultural norms and mores, breakdown of sociocultural hegemony, confrontation with sociocultural difference, and so on. In doing so, it first creates a sense of dire circumstance, and second, it fashions a fitting response, an appropriate style of existence, given the situation. Here, the picture that LaHaye and Jenkins offer is similar to the one that John offers: both pictures employ eschatological discourse in order to exhort their respective audiences to some kind of action given a particular set of circumstances. Perhaps more importantly, however, the authors seek to shape their audiences' understandings of the circumstances. In other words, in the hands of both John and LaHaye and Jenkins apocalyptic eschatology functions not only to shape action but also the perception of the surrounding reality—that is, the circumstances to which the action serves as a response. *For both, the Christian life is one lived in steadfast opposition to hostile surroundings. The book of Revelation and the* Left Behind *series both articulate a certain version of Christian identity, a version that puts the Christian actively at odds with his or her contemporary surroundings.*

John clearly viewed his contemporary situation as inimical to Christianity; indeed, Christians represented for him a persecuted minority in a hostile environment. Thus, to maintain one's identity as a Christian meant to stand firm in the face of inevitable persecution. As we will see shortly, there is some question as to whether John was responding to a situation of widespread persecution, or he rhetorically fashioned the situation as such. For dispensationalists, however, there can be no doubt that persecution was John's reality. On the surface, however it would seem that, in appropriating Revelation, among other texts, they care little about John's situation. For them, Revelation does not

speak of the past, but of the future; Revelation is prophecy, or "history in advance." That John wrote in a time of persecution is not insignificant—LaHaye and Jenkins would almost certainly argue that all times have been times of persecution for Christians (though some less than others)—but this is of secondary importance to the notion that John indicates what is to come.

Contemporary rapture narratives like *Left Behind* seek to convince their readers that the cultural surroundings are, and to some extent always have been, hostile to Christianity. In addition, contemporary civilization is in a state of rapid decline and this continuing fall into decadence signals the beginning of the end. The Antichrist is, or soon will be, amassing his forces; individuals are faced with a monumental choice: commit yourself to Christ now or suffer the consequences of the tribulation.

In adopting such a rhetorical strategy, LaHaye and Jenkins employ a theme that has a long history in Christianity: *that of suffering as the true nature of the Christian self*. The current flourishing of dispensationalist premillennialism in popular culture, not to mention conservative evangelical Protestantism in general, has played this account of selfhood to great effect; the agents of oppressions perpetrated on the elect are of course legion—the United Nations, the European Union, forces of global disarmament, feminists, gays and lesbians, the Teletubbies—but in all cases, they are represented as political and cultural forces that seek to thwart God's plan, forces that LaHaye has collectively labeled "secular humanism" in his nonfiction writings.[4] It is unimportant whether or not the consumers of these discourses visibly suffer; that they come to see themselves as sufferers is what matters.

However, this adaptation of the rhetoric of the suffering self is aimed toward very different goals in the contemporary situation than it was in the early Christian context of its formation. Early Christian thinkers adopted the image of the suffering self to shape an identity radically at odds with the surrounding Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural context. The goal, given this ideal was a radical withdrawal from and refusal to participate in the social realities of the Roman Empire. Contemporary adaptations, while continuing to define Christian identity in opposition to many, if not most, cultural trends, have a more activist purpose in mind: the goal is not to withdraw from social interaction but to transform society, to remake it in the image of conservative, evangelical Christian principles through political action informed by the rhetoric of suffering. As we will see, this move undoubtedly reflects a more politically activist side of conservative evangelical Protestantism that has emerged in recent decades. But it also causes terrible problems for a coherent picture of dispensational premillennialism.

In this chapter, I explore the rhetoric of suffering both in its historical manifestations and its reflection in the *Left Behind* books. I will also address the perplexities of the type of political identity that contemporary uses of the rhetoric of suffering idealize. Before proceeding, however, I want to pause and talk about the *Left Behind* books themselves.

Reading *Left Behind*

I begin this analysis of the *Left Behind* series, appropriately perhaps, with a confessional tone. I approached the series with the critical mindset of a scholar of Christianity. I expected to find no engagement with critical biblical scholarship by the authors. I expected to be troubled by the ideological perspectives that the books presented. I expected to have my capacities for suspension of disbelief taxed. I expected to be amused by the narrative presentation of characters and events. I was not disappointed. But it was with some consternation that I discovered I was enjoying the books, that I began to care about the characters, that I was genuinely moved by the final scenes of the series where characters meet Christ face to face and are reunited with their dead loved ones. The volumes close with cliffhangers that made me want to go on to the next volume. This was a surprise, and I think it speaks to the power of the books. I think it points to the deep need to critically engage *Left Behind*, too.

Before I proceed, I need to make several points of clarification. First, by no means do I intend to suggest that all Christians who identify themselves as evangelicals are dispensationalists or premillennialists.[5] In my use of the term evangelical, I have tried to be clear that I mean dispensationalist, premillennial, Protestant evangelicalism, unless otherwise indicated. Given the "clunky" nature of this designation, I have frequently used various shorthand versions. Second, in the interest of readability, I have frequently referred to the series simply as *Left Behind*, the title of the first volume. I intend my readers to understand that by *Left Behind* I designate the entire series, not just the first volume, unless otherwise indicated. Finally, I have avoided providing an overall synopsis of the series, primarily for purposes of saving space for detailed analyses of specific aspects of the novels. Also, other commentators have provided critical synopses elsewhere.[6] Perhaps more importantly, however, I think it is important that critical readers actually engage the books. Though it might mean putting more resources in the coffers of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, the series deserves the attention of critics.

Confession and clarification aside, then, the books are problematic on a number of fronts. There is no engagement with biblical scholarship, even of the evangelical Christian type. LaHaye and Jenkins claim to take the book of Revelation, and to a lesser extent the book of Daniel, at face value, but in fact their reading partakes liberally of the strategy of proof-texting—that is, taking widely scattered verses from other books of the Bible out of their own contexts and using them as clarification for problematic or ambiguous passages in other books. They argue throughout the books for a literal interpretation of scriptural passages wherever possible. They make this argument most pointedly through the figure of Tsion Ben-Judah. In one scene, when questioned whether he expected the "second judgment" of God on the world, a rain of fire on the earth, to happen literally, Tsion explains that, "when the Bible is figurative, it sounds figurative. When it says all the grass and one third of the trees will be scorched, I cannot imagine what that might be symbolic for."[7] Leaving aside whether or not the statement that "*all* of the grass and *one third* of the trees" of the entire planet sounds symbolic—one might suggest that it sounds hyperbolic at the very least—there seems to be no ultimate standard for when something "sounds" literal and when something else "sounds" figurative. The authors do not present a literal reading of the Lamb's slaying the armies of Satan with "the sword of his mouth" in the final volume of the series and offer no explanation for why this should be read figuratively and not literally. Thus, their biblical interpretive strategies are arbitrary and highly problematic from the perspective of Biblical scholarship.

The books advance a heavy-handed theological agenda. Ecumenist sensibilities and interfaith interests are stereotyped as a sort of lukewarm "new-ageiness," and eventually all faiths except Orthodox Judaism and what is left of Protestantism are combined into Enigma Babylon One World Faith, the global religion that precedes and is ultimately replaced by open worship of the Antichrist, personified by Nicolae Jetty Carpathia.

Of special focus in the books is Catholicism; we are told in the second volume of the chaos that affects the Catholic Church in the advent of the rapture: "A lot of Catholics were confused, because while many remained, some had disappeared—including the new pope, who had been installed just a few months before the vanishings. He had stirred up controversy in the church with a new doctrine that seemed to coincide more with the 'heresy' of Martin Luther than with the historic orthodoxy they were used to. When the pope had disappeared, some Catholic scholars had concluded that this was indeed an act of God."[8] Indeed, the man who would eventually ascend to the papacy,

Peter Cardinal Matthews, interprets the rapture completely backwards as God's "winnowing the chaff from the wheat"; those left behind represent the faithful remnant. Matthews' stint as pope is short-lived as he is almost immediately installed as Pontifex Maximus, head of Enigma Babylon One World Faith, the religion that will eventually usher in the religion of the Antichrist. (Matthews never ultimately sees the coming worship of the Antichrist because he is assassinated in a bizarre scene that resembles the regicide of Julius Caesar.)

Jews also have a complicated and ambiguous role to play in the series: a stiff-necked people who refuse to recognize that their messiah has already come (and will come again in the near future) in the form of Jesus Christ. LaHaye and Jenkins argue that prophecy indicates that the Jerusalem temple must be rebuilt before the Antichrist can take his throne and Christ comes to defeat him in the final battle, thus the orthodox community must hold out against Enigma Babylon. Likewise, Christ's second coming cannot happen before 144,000 Jewish evangelists begin their witness. Thus, Judaism is spared the condemnation that all other non-Christian faith traditions suffer, even if the authors co-opt Judaism for their own purposes.[9]

LaHaye and Jenkins treatment of gender is complicated and becomes more subtle as the books progress. In the first volume, those who are raptured are generally caricatures: men who are good Christians who uphold traditional (conservative evangelical Protestant) values and good Christian women who are devoted housewives. Those left behind have to steer a more circuitous route in defining their genders. For instance, Rayford Steele, senior pilot for Pan Continental Airlines, the principal protagonist of the novels, begins as "the strong, silent type," proud and self-assured, who plays a limited role in the lives of his wife and children. As he settles into his newfound postrapture faith, however, he comes to recognize the value and the pleasure of taking on domestic roles and involved fatherhood to his nineteen-year-old daughter, Chloe, also left behind. Chloe's journey is equally complex; she, like her father, is strong-willed and self-assured (one gets the feeling that this, along with the fact that she is seeking an education at Stanford University, may have been what got her into her postrapture predicament in the first place). Like Rayford, however, her viewpoint changes with her postrapture faith; she decides not to return to Stanford. She eventually marries Cameron "Buck" Williams, with whom she conceives a child, and discovers the value and the pleasure of being a work at home mom, even if her job is the rather daunting one of organizing the Global Commodities Cooperative, a sort of Christian underground economy. Chloe's character is more complex

than meets the eye, however. While she professes to Buck a willingness "to obey you even when you're wrong," she rarely in fact does obey, even when Buck is right.[10] I will return to this complex and perhaps contradictory portrayal of gender, particularly female gender, below. These complexities are offset by the authors' treatment of homosexuality, however. Verna Zee, the one acknowledged lesbian in the series, is portrayed as being a bit too manly, constantly attempting to usurp male power. (She is typically "put in her place" by one or another male character in the novels.) Guy Blod, the one acknowledged gay man in the novels, is ridiculously effeminate. These characters function as a foil to reinstill more traditional understandings of gender; complexities of newfound gender identity aside, men must be men and women must be women still.

In a similar manner, the novels espouse a subtle ideology of white American male superiority and display a marked xenophobia. The two main protagonists of the novels, Rayford and Buck, are white men and undisputed leaders of the Tribulation Force. While all characters in the novels ultimately recognize their authority, the authors frequently draw attention to nonwhite male characters' *submission* to authority. In addition, suspicion is constantly cast on the loyalty of some characters within the Tribulation Force, particularly those of Arab descent. Likewise, the United States takes center stage in the series. While the Tribulation Force is touted as a worldwide underground, the base of operations remains in the United States until operations are moved to Petra on the eve of the final battle, and all leadership positions are held by white American men—except, of course, for Chloe Steele Williams, who serves as the CEO for the commodities coop.

This American exceptionalism is most bizarrely played out near the end of the second volume, *Tribulation Force*. The Antichrist, Nicolae Carpathia, General Secretary of the United Nations, now dubbed the One World Community, is at this point consolidating his power. He has convinced the nations of the world to adopt a single currency and to place their military might under the control of the One World Community. The U.S. president, Gerald Fitzhugh, however, has become disillusioned with Carpathia and, while declaring his loyalty publicly, has privately joined forces with separatist militias. The militias have refused to surrender their arms and have begun stockpiling munitions. In a clandestine conversation with Buck Williams,

> Fitzhugh confided to Buck that Egypt, England, and patriotic militia forces in the U.S. were determined to take action "before it was too late" . . .

> Buck desperately wanted to tell Fitzhugh that he was merely playing into Carpathia's hands. This was all part of the foretold future. The uprising against Antichrist would be crushed and would initiate World War III, from which would come worldwide famine, plagues, and the death of a quarter of the earth's population.[11]

Lo and behold, the second volume ends with a rebellion initiated by the United States and assisted by England (constant ally of the United States in international policy) and Egypt (the United States' closest ally in the Middle East at the time of the novel's publication). Carpathia responds by unleashing conventional and nuclear weapons, initiating World War III. Why could Buck not explain this to Fitzhugh? Because it was foreordained. Pay attention to what is being articulated here; the failed plot does not ultimately play into the hands of the Antichrist, but into the hands of God. The United States and the separatist militias become unwitting heroes, agents of God himself, in the events that signal the eventual second coming of Christ. This should cause all readers, regardless of their ideological persuasions, to pause and consider the dangers of what is being presented.

As I indicated, I enjoyed reading the *Left Behind* books, though frequently not in the manner that the authors likely intended. The novels are filled with cliffhangers that keep the reader moving through the series, but the narrative is utterly predictable. The characters are for the most part flat and the series stretches the bounds of credulity as it progresses; events get so fantastical by the end of the series that the initial, inexplicable disappearance of millions that opens the first volume seems almost believable. Portions of the novels graphically narrate the carnage of plagues and persecutions. Despite this, there are myriad scenes that must cause many readers to chuckle: scenes of prophets who call each other Eli and Moishe (we are assured that they are Moses and Elijah returned) and who incinerate those who threaten them with flames that shoot from their mouths, leaving behind blackened skeletons; scenes of Christian witnesses being struck by bolts of fire that descend from the sky, leaving behind piles of ashes; and scenes of the Antichrist's troops being struck by plagues that melt the flesh from their bones (and from the bones of their horses, as the battle of Armageddon is fought primarily on horseback), leaving behind fully clothed skeletons that remain standing for a moment before they fall in a heap. These scenes are cartoonish. Indeed, they remind the reader of old Warner Brothers and Tom & Jerry cartoons. To be fair, I must confess again that I was genuinely touched by the final scenes of the series. The portrayals of the developing romance between Chloe

Steele and Buck Williams are sweet, if a bit adolescent. And, I must admit that I was sad to see some of the more interesting characters go as they were martyred by the forces of evil.

For their part, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins would likely either not see these criticisms as criticisms, or argue that they are beside the point. Jenkins is a novelist, biographer, and writer of Christian self-help books, not a biblical scholar. LaHaye has never claimed to be a biblical scholar, and none of the characters in the novels claim to biblical scholars. LaHaye characterizes himself as a "prophecy scholar." He has spent decades studying the Bible and writings about the Bible, but he would likely view the historical-critical method that has become synonymous with biblical scholarship—even credible evangelical Christian biblical scholarship—as inimical to his project of providing as literal an interpretation of biblical prophecy as possible. They would certainly see my ideological criticisms as beside the point (though they might dispute my claim that the novels are tacitly racist). LaHaye is unapologetic about his ideological stances both in public pronouncements and in his nonfiction works; the criticisms expressed above are simply a reflection of secular humanism, under whose influence I have obviously come. As for my characterization of the narrative itself, Jenkins has never claimed that he is trying to write great fiction, at least as judged by the canons of literary criticism. (Truth be told, the series is not appreciably worse than many of the offerings in fantasy/science fiction, the mainstream genre with which the series is most reasonably compared.) The characters are meant to teach a lesson, not be overly complex. The series is meant to lead its readership to a conclusion, not spring a surprise ending.

That LaHaye and Jenkins would dismiss the criticisms offered above does not release us of the responsibility of delving deeper into what the novels attempt to provide. In what follows, I will approach the *Left Behind* series from the perspective of what I will call the rhetoric of suffering, attempting to show the kind of Christian identity with which the novels seek to confront their readers. For the authors, Christianity is an all or nothing venture. It is time to turn to an exploration of what for them Christianity means and the stakes that are involved.

The Rhetoric of Suffering

Contemporary Christian dispensationalist rhetoric is rife with images of suffering, persecution, and martyrdom. Whether in the form of public statements from televangelists like Pat Robertson or Jerry Falwell, or nonfiction tracts from writers like LaHaye or Hal Lindsey, or in the vast array of rapture fiction, of which *Left Behind* is a part,

the progenitors of this rhetoric portray the surrounding cultural reality in a similar way as the author of Revelation did: Christians are a hated minority, persecuted and ridiculed by their neighbors and society at large. The agent of oppression is no longer the Roman imperial authorities (though LaHaye and Jenkins indicate that Nicolae Carpathia is a Romanian "of Roman descent"), but the dark forces of cultural pluralism, secular humanism, and global homogenization—that is, leftist elites, Hollywood, international financiers, and, most especially, the United Nations.

In her important study, *The Suffering Self*, Judith Perkins traces the development of a distinctly Christian representation of selfhood centered on the empowering effects of suffering for the faith in the post-biblical period—roughly the second through the fifth centuries of the Common Era. Perkins focuses her attention on the representations of the suffering self that emerged in various martyr *Acts* that developed against the cultural background of Greek romance plays and Stoic philosophy. Like romance and Stoic philosophy, these Christian texts present suffering as an unavoidable aspect of life, and like Stoicism, those who suffer are *witness* to the character of divine providence. But unlike the others, the Christian narratives present suffering not as something that must be overcome, conquered, or impassively endured, but rather as having paramount salvific importance in and of itself. In this, early Christianity institutes what Perkins designates a "reversed rhetoric" where suffering means glorification and the martyr's death means eternal life. This reversed rhetoric is not just a means for coping with suffering and persecution; it represents a discursive deployment of power and resistance to existing power structures.

Christopher Frilingos has shown how public persecution and execution operated in the Roman Empire as a visual representation, a spectacle of Roman power.[12] Public persecutions of Christians were Rome's attempt to graphically portray the power it exerted over them. By refusing to be a part of the spectacle, by refusing to bow to Roman power, Christian martyrs defied that power. By refusing to become the spectacle, martyrs represented an alternative ideal of selfhood.[13]

But, this paints the picture in too easy terms. The martyr *Acts* are not simply expressions of defiance to an oppressive imperial authority. For the first three centuries of the Common Era, Christians suffered little persecution from Roman officials. Indeed, there was no systematic official persecution of Christians under Roman rule until 249, and the largest and most sustained persecution, begun by Diocletian in 303, was short lived. More often, violence against Christians was sporadic, localized, and vigilante in nature; most persecution came

from non-Christian neighbors who mistrusted Christians because of their tendency toward social exclusivism. That is to say, early Christian communities often adopted a stance that courted the suspicion and ire of their neighbors. Given this situation, the martyr *Acts* were not simply responses to an oppressive situation; rather, they openly advanced a social agenda. They were not merely reactive, but were even more proactive. Perkins concludes, "The martyr *Acts* are seminal documents in a struggle between two competing systems for investigating meaning in human action. And like all such world-constructing documents, they suppress in their narrative the justification for the other side just as they mask, to a certain extent, their own interest."[14]

While Perkins' studies do not deal directly with apocalyptic eschatology or the book of Revelation, her studies are germane to this analysis. They bring us to the important rhetorical function of the discourse of persecution both in the biblical period and in the contemporary context. Though biblical scholars generally agree that it is written prior to the period that Perkins studies, the book of Revelation employs the rhetoric of suffering for righteousness sake extensively. The followers of the Lamb suffer the persecutions of the minions of the beast until the final battle when all are judged and the martyrs receive their just deserts, entrance into the New Jerusalem.

Many have taken John to be referring to persecution and marginalization suffered by the early Christian communities at the hands of the Roman Empire. But again, historical evidence of systematic and widespread persecution before about 249 is scant. Emerging scholarship on the Revelation suggests that the author deploys images of persecution rhetorically in order to advance a socially radical, separatist agenda that became influential in certain branches of early Christianity. Adela Yarbro Collins, among others, has offered this second explanation for the rhetoric of suffering in Revelation. On this reading, the author of Revelation and the community from which he writes *experience* their surroundings as oppressive even though there is little historical evidence that they were so. Yarbro Collins argues, "the crucial element is not so much whether one is actually oppressed as whether one *feels* oppressed."[15] In response to experiences of "relative" or "perceived" persecution, Revelation offers up a message of social radicalism that calls for withdrawal from the surrounding society. In other words, Yarbro Collins argues, John calls for radical Christian exclusivity: "No accommodation to polytheistic culture was allowed. Christians could not join any of the widespread unofficial societies for mutual benefit . . . Most of all, thoroughgoing opposition to Roman government was expected, a very radical stance indeed."[16]

That John offers a socially radical stance seems without question, but it can be argued whether the thesis of experienced deprivation in instances of trauma or crisis is the *cause* of that message. Leonard Thompson suggests that John does not simply react to a perceived set of circumstances; he helps to *create* the perception of those circumstances. John casts the situation in terms of oppression and persecution; he *remakes* the situation into one of oppression and persecution.[17] Thompson also concludes that the symbolics of Revelation are "misrepresented if they are seen as an alternative order situated at the periphery of the 'real social world' . . . Rather than imagining John's symbolics as a separate circle, they are better understood as a grid or an overlay that orders all experience."[18] If this portrayal is accurate, then Revelation is not simply a *response* to social power, it is a *deployment* of rhetorical-discursive power. The author of Revelation actively calls his audience to a style of Christian identity that bids them abandon a world that hates and persecutes them.

A similar deployment is at work in *Left Behind*; the persecution that Christians face takes at least two forms in the novels: mockery and marginalization for their beliefs, and open, violent persecution. The first, though less extreme, is no less noxious than the second. This first aspect rises to the surface in the postrapture reality of the first volume. Contemplating his past life with his wife, Irene—who along with their son, Raymie, ranks among the raptured—Rayford comes to recognize what a poor spouse he has been. He had contemplated infidelity at times in their marriage, but had never been able to "pull it off." Perhaps worse, he had simply been unavailable to Irene. Rayford remembers his response to Irene when she first found Christ and began preaching to him:

> He was so unworthy of Irene. Somehow he knew now, though he had never allowed himself to consider it before, that she couldn't in any way have been as naive or stupid as he had hoped and imagined. She had to have known how vapid he was, how shallow, and yes, cheap. And yet she stayed with him, loved him, fought to keep the marriage together. He couldn't argue that she became a different person after she switched churches and got serious about her faith. She preached at him at first, sure. She was excited and wanted him to discover what she had found. He ran.[19]

Not only, the reader knows by now, did he run, but he had also begun to contemplate "defiling his marriage" again with one of the flight attendants, Hattie Durham, who served frequently on his flights for

PanCon airlines and about whom more will be said shortly. Though wracked by guilt for even considering the possibility, Rayford is grateful that this never came to pass. Indeed, his desire to become worthy of Irene's love seems to be part of what drives him to learn about her faith. When Rayford does finally accept Jesus, he comes headlong against the kind of attitudes that he served out to Irene. In the second volume, we learn that Rayford has been told explicitly by his flight director to cease and desist evangelizing on the job. Indeed, he has had a complaint filed against him by his copilot. Later, Rayford is offered a job serving Carpathia, the Antichrist himself. Inexplicably, Rayford serves as the personal pilot to the Antichrist for two full volumes, even as a believer and as he becomes more openly antagonistic to everything that Nicolae does. Eventually, Rayford's faith places him under suspicion and becomes a threat to his life.

Thus, the path from cultural marginalization of the faith to open persecution of the faithful is a slippery slope. This is perhaps the central message of contemporary dispensationalist rhetoric. The image that captures this message most graphically is the guillotine, the principal method that Carpathia eventually adopts to dispose of those who refuse to take the (literal, physical) mark of loyalty to him. Euphemistically dubbed "loyal enhancement facilitators," guillotines seem an odd and somewhat cumbersome method to employ (and there is certainly no mention of them anywhere in the Bible). So why this embellishment? It is difficult not to read Tim LaHaye's condemnation of secular humanism into this symbol. There are, of course, undeniable connections between the rise of Enlightenment ideas, the primary source of modern secular humanism for LaHaye, and the French Revolution. Though LaHaye displays no love for Catholicism, the rampant anticlericalism, and even more so, the institution of the Cult of Reason in the revolutionary Republic signal for him and many others the real beginning of modern persecutions of Christianity. Thus, the guillotine and its deployment against the church during the Reign of Terror becomes a sort of model for the final persecution of Christian witnesses by the Antichrist. Many witness to their deaths in *Left Behind*, including Chloe Steele in the penultimate volume.

Believers are offered two paths in the *Left Behind* series: martyrdom as faithful witnesses or guerrilla warfare against the forces of evil. But merely in offering the option, LaHaye and Jenkins are doing something different than either the author of Revelation or the vast body of rapture fiction that precedes their work. *Left Behind* still rides on an understanding of righteous suffering, but the response to that suffering is different. Unlike Revelation, LaHaye and Jenkins do not argue for a

withdrawal from engagement, but active, physical confrontation. Unlike the rapture narratives that precede them, and from which they gain so much inspiration, the *Left Behind* books give their protagonists—and by extension, their readers—options. As many commentators have shown, most rapture fiction presents a bleak picture with no options for those contending with the postrapture situation.[20] Those left behind must ride out their fates, passively awaiting their ends whatever they may be. This would seem to be the only appropriate response given that the dispensationalist system canonizes the idea of predestination; everything *must* happen as prophecy has foretold and God has determined from the beginning of time. LaHaye and Jenkins do not shirk this requirement, but call attention to it constantly in the novels.

But if the die has been cast, does human action achieve anything? If everything depends on God's anointed time and will, what good does it do to fight? This move is perplexing, but it seems to reflect the emergence of political activism among evangelical Protestants, dispensationalists and others, in recent decades. As such, *Left Behind* does more than lay out a fictional account of the end times. It also articulates a certain type of Christian political identity, one that is shot through with fissures and contradictions, but a powerfully active one, nonetheless. In the final section of this chapter, I will try to shed some light on this aspect of the *Left Behind* books.

The Politics of Identity

The principle players in the creation of this drama are by no means persecuted in any real sense, despite their claims to the contrary. LaHaye and Jenkins, now bestselling authors, are hardly deprived of material means or public voice. LaHaye has even spoken on National Public Radio (the great Babylon of secular humanism). Figures like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson could hardly be considered politically, economically, or socially marginalized. Before his recent death, Falwell established an accredited university, Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia (whose new LaHaye Ice Center was built through a generous gift of its namesake), and was busily completing construction on a new worship center that seats six thousand congregants. Robertson has established his own institution of higher education, Regent University, to which LaHaye has contributed generously. Robertson runs his own cable television network, CBN (Christian Broadcasting Network) and made a bid for the republican nomination for the presidency in 1986, a bid that failed, but he was able to amass an admirable war chest in the campaign. Given the 2004 presidential election and the number of

"Jesus fish" on the back of SUVs, one might even question whether the "true faithful" are either persecuted or a minority. There is every indication that the millenarian wing of the religious right has the ear of the centers of U.S. political power (and are shaping political discourse if not policy). Indeed, it now appears possible to be both the persecuted saint and the bejewelled power-broker at the same time.

All this suggests that the vision of the Christian life as one of suffering and martyrdom no longer easily applies, if it ever did, and this has introduced problems for the dispensationalist cause. Glenn W. Shuck argues that there exists a fundamental tension at the heart of contemporary evangelicalism of the dispensationalist type. Addressing this tension and the way that the *Left Behind* series tries to speak to it, Shuck explains,

> The recent resurgence of conservative American evangelicalism, whether in real-life or as depicted in the *Left Behind* novels, has allowed believers to enter the Forum . . . and their networks and institutions, whether megachurches, television ministries, relief agencies, political action committees, or even publishing houses, now rival those of their secular opponents. Prophecy believers, however, stand on the precipice of overaccommodation, incorporating many of the values of the secular (Beast) culture they ostensibly resist. Their dilemma stems not so much from excessive otherworldliness—neglecting the here and now for a promise of "pie in the sky, by and by"—but from what historian Wouter Hanegraaff terms "weak-this-worldliness," a tepid recognition of the importance of this-worldly existence with a desire to remake it in a form more amenable to conservative evangelicalism.

With their newfound success, dispensationalists are struggling with the question of how to be "in the world, but not of the world." If this is accurate, then it is possible to say in a meaningful way that dispensationalists readers of *Left Behind* do experience suffering, though the source of that suffering is not cultural forces of persecution, but an *internal, existential suffering* over the nature of evangelical identity. Shuck continues, "The otherworldly language of miraculous deliverance one finds in the *Left Behind* novels emerges in part, I suspect, from an impulse among evangelical leaders such as LaHaye and Jenkins to reclaim a sense of marginalization, to get back the spiritual edge lost as evangelicals reentered the public arena and achieved a measure of worldly success."[21] In other words, *Left Behind* attempts precisely to carve out a space upon which to be *in*, but not *of* the world.

In this case, the series is as much, if not more, a morality play about the present as a fictional laying out of end-time events. When the

authors divide the fictional, postrapture world into loyalists of Christ and Antichrist, they present a picture of the present as much as they offer forebodings for the future. Literal marks of the Beast and of Christ in *Left Behind* designate existential marks of identity in the contemporary situation; accommodation to modern secular humanist culture means placing oneself in leagues with the devil.

Devoting his attention to the rhetorical appeal of contemporary apocalyptic viewpoints, Barry Brummett argues that the situation to which premillennial apocalypticism most often responds is not political and economic marginality, but perceived social and cultural *disorder*. While contemporary apocalyptic rhetoric frequently adopts the motif of oppression and marginality, it is frequently the case that the members of the group that comes under the sway of dispensationalist thinking do not factually suffer from political, economic, or any other kind of oppression. This seems largely to be the case with the readership of the *Left Behind* series; the books are being read primarily by white suburbanites with enough disposable income to afford twelve novels and countless spin-offs. Apocalyptic rhetoric presents the contemporary social order as disorienting, bewildering, and *anomic*, either in part or *in toto*. Anomie is, of course, in the eye of the beholder. While many would argue that acceptance of pluralism, limitation of interference of the religious in the public realm, and increased emphasis on global citizenship are positive developments, contemporary apocalyptic prophets see them as clear signs of moral and cultural degradation. As I have indicated several times, Tim LaHaye has continually allied these developments with the movement of secular humanism, and he has labeled this movement the greatest contemporary enemy of Christian morals and values.

While it might seem the opposite, the premillennial dispensationalist message is a tremendously empowering message for those, like LaHaye, who find the current order not to their liking. Brummett points out that "it both acknowledges the audience's pain and promises quick relief."[22] The apocalyptic prophet appeals to his or her audience by offering an interpretive key, a system of knowledge that explains the hidden aspects of the present situation; the result is a general sense of empowerment. This empowerment has two principle dimensions: (1) apocalypticism meaningfully frames feelings of disorientation in terms of marginality and (2) apocalypticism assures that relief will come in the form of a defeat of the forces of disorder. Dispensationalist rhetoric offers comfort because it asserts that history is ordered and teleologically oriented, despite the current dire

circumstances, and that there are signs that portend a coming order that will wipe away the current disorder.

What the interpretive key reveals are shadowy figures that work in secret to pull the sociocultural strings. These figures are, beknownst or unbeknownst to themselves, in leagues with forces of chaos and evil that threaten the fabric of existence. The surface effects of the actions of these shadowy forces are a breakdown of social morality, national and economic boundaries, and concern for true religion. But apocalypticism offers deeper insight precisely into this anomic set of circumstances: "An important and recurring strategy of empowerment lies in revealing the workings of forces and groups beneath the surface appearance of everyday reality . . . At another, deeper level, however, even shadowy conspirators are controlled by God's master plan that has determined where the cosmos is headed . . . Order and fruitfulness will shortly replace disorder and woe—this is the knowledge that apocalyptic discourse reveals to its audience."[23] Once knowledge of the secret forces, both good and evil, controlling the unfolding of events is revealed, the second aspect of empowerment comes to light. The coming forces of good that will restore order lie right over the horizon; the lucky few will see the restoration of propriety and, even better, will witness the punishment of their oppressors. Referring to the work of Hal Lindsey, Brummett explains that knowledge of the mechanisms undergirding reality is also knowledge of coming retribution: "The empowerment Lindsey promises his audience is an empowerment of knowledge, but also an empowerment of revenge. An audience that has been beaten up too often by life's bullies is encouraged to bide their time and expect the imminent, physical, and violent wrath of God to strike their oppressors."[24]

Like Lindsey, LaHaye and Jenkins seek to lay out predictors of the coming tribulation and the forces at work behind them. However, by adopting the genre of fiction, they are able to go beyond mere prediction to manifest for their readers the carnage that awaits those who refuse to turn to Jesus. The tribulation saints in the final volume of the series seem to take particular delight in witnessing the graphic destruction of the Antichrist's forces at the hands of Christ's angelic army. Indeed, Rayford bemoans the fact that he will be unable to see it firsthand because of injuries he has suffered during the battle of Armageddon. (Happily, Rayford's wounds are miraculously healed prior to the final battle, and he is able to mount an ATV and ride out to watch the final defeat of the Antichrist.)[25] And, unlike Lindsey, LaHaye and Jenkins do anything but encourage their readers to "bide their time."

Left Behind is a clarion call to action as much as it is a framing of reality and an offering of comfort. In this, LaHaye and Jenkins and other contemporary dispensationalists adopt the rhetoric of suffering to radically different ends than has typically been the case.

The call for resistance to contemporary culture with which LaHaye and Jenkins confront their readers is an activist on a number of levels. They call for more than a passive resistance to the forces of secularism; not only is the reader urged to refrain from engagement in secular economy, cultural production—music, entertainment, and so on—and social mores, but he or she is exhorted to an active engagement in contemporary cultural warfare. One place where this exhortation becomes particularly manifest is the manner in which LaHaye and Jenkins encode feminine identity. As I indicated above, the authors clearly promote domesticity and submission as the feminine ideal; again, most women who are raptured and spared the horrors of the tribulation are devoted housewives. In the contemporary situation, however, this is simply not an option for many American families, including many evangelical Christian families. How, then does one articulate a vision of appropriate modern Christian womanhood?

LaHaye and Jenkins do not explicitly offer such vision, but the reader can trace the subtle contours of such an identity in the pairing of Chloe Steele and Hattie Durham. For most of the series, Chloe and Hattie are antitypes to each other. Chloe and Hattie both begin as nonbelievers; Chloe becomes a member of the fold in the first volume, Hattie not until the ninth volume, and she is dispatched shortly thereafter. Chloe is smart, earnest, and pious; Hattie is foolish, flippant, and sarcastic. Chloe is pure (we learn that, despite having boyfriends at Stanford, she has never gone "all the way"), remaining abstinent until her marriage to Buck (who, it turns out, is also a virgin before his marriage to Chloe); Hattie is "experienced," ultimately becoming pregnant out of wedlock by the Antichrist himself. Chloe is steadfast and loyal, professing obedience and submission to her husband, even if she frequently does not act out of obedience and submission; she becomes the CEO of the Global Commodities Cooperative, which she runs from home so that she can care for her son, Kenny. Hattie maintains the rogue's spirit throughout, and her behavior frequently brings great peril to the Tribulation Force. Even after Hattie's acceptance of Christ (it seems God's mercy extends even to the whore of Babylon), she displays a rebellious will, eventually dying the martyr's death as she declares the blasphemies of the Antichrist. Unlike Chloe, whose turn to Christ seems remarkably easy and without anxiety, Hattie suffers great existential trauma and engages in nearly unbearable (for the reader) self-loathing over her past iniquities

before she is able to come to Jesus, a process that all the women with "questionable" backgrounds in the series endure.

One could offer similar oppositional pairings to articulate a vision of appropriate Christian manhood, for example, Rayford Steele, Christ's right-hand man, versus Leon Fortunato, the Antichrist's second in command; appropriate religious piety, for example, Bruce Barnes/Tsion Ben-Judah versus Pontifex Maximus Peter Matthews; and appropriate commercial activity, for example, the Global Commodities Cooperative versus the One World Community. The picture that LaHaye and Jenkins paint contains neither subtle shades of gray nor a glorious rainbow of diversity, but stark blacks and whites. The black characters are portrayed in unyieldingly negative tones, the white characters in unmistakably positive ones. One cannot help but feel that the readers are intended not just to admire the good guys (and gals) and to hate the bad guys (and gals), but to emulate the good and locate the contemporary versions of the bad.

But the portrait that LaHaye and Jenkins offer is activist in a more profound, political sense, too. To emulate the good and resist the evil means to participate politically as a member of a voting block and as a supporter of concerted political action campaigns. The series is sprinkled throughout with references to pet political projects of the religious right, most especially abortion. In the series, abortion becomes not just a matter of personal choice, but of governmental policy as the One World Community institutes systematic abortion as a means of population control. Here again, LaHaye and Jenkins try to show the progression that leads from the rise of secularism to the guillotine; even the unborn are not protected from the onslaught of evil. And the authors are remarkably consistent in their pursuit of this agenda; they try to protect even the progeny of the Antichrist from this fate. (Happily for the readers, the child Hattie conceives with the Antichrist is stillborn and, as one might expect, horribly deformed.)

Modern evangelical identity requires more than passive waiting for the rapture, more than a withdrawal from participation in secular culture. God may be in charge of the "whole shebang," but on this side of the tribulation, Christians are responsible for actively resisting the encroachment of big government through support of policies that promote parochial education and the right to bear arms and inhibit increased taxation to support the further advance of secularism; for actively promoting public morality through sponsorship of legislation that prohibits abortion, gay marriage, removal of the Bible from public education, and the teaching of evolution as a scientific fact, as opposed to one theory among others; and for actively protecting the

cause of God through pro-Zionist and anti-U.N. lobbying efforts. At the very least, this activity secures a space for bringing more souls to God. Perhaps more importantly, it preserves evangelical identity itself from the constant threat of overaccommodation. One's political stances can mark one as different, even as one acquires the fruits of material success associated with suburban American existence, even as one begins to look more and more like one's secular neighbors. One is given space to be *in* the world (i.e., to enjoy the God-given fruits of one's labor) while not being *of* the world (i.e., without defining oneself by those fruits).

Epilogue

Many commentators have indicated that contemporary dispensationalism may ultimately not be able to support its own ideological weight, that the tensions internal to dispensationalist evangelical Christianity may ultimately cause it to implode. Glenn Shuck hints that there are indications of this fragmentation of identity within the *Left Behind* books themselves. "The *Left Behind* series depicts protagonists who want it all: the trappings of material success and nice suburban churches with ample intensity of belief. They want the best of both worlds, in other words—this one and the next—yet the balance that believers seek, that is, an 'in but not of the world' existence, remains precarious."[26] Shuck suggests, correctly in my assessment, that as the series progresses, the initiative to which LaHaye and Jenkins initially call their readers begins to evaporate. Characters become mere placeholders in a drama that is under the complete control of an utterly Calvinist God. In the end, even the initiative for turning to God is taken from the characters. Those who wish to come to Jesus are simply unable, no matter how sincere their desire.

Given the precarious nature of this attempt to preserve evangelical identity, how does the concerned critic approach *Left Behind*, its authors, and its devoted readership? I suggest first that demonizing dispensationalist Christians as dangerous fanatics who are busy building their own shadow empire in the interest of overturning what Americans have fought for two centuries to establish may not be a very useful strategy. For one thing, it is simply a reverse version of the dispensationalist demonization of secularism. At the same time, dismissing phenomena like *Left Behind* as an aberration of fundamentalist lunacy that cannot possibly successfully sway public opinion would be dangerous. Sales figures for the series and voting patterns in the Bible belt suggest that the books resonate somewhere.

The best approach, I suggest, is to recognize that dispensationalist Christians are more like the normal run of American citizen than some might like to admit. They worry about paying their bills, about what their kids are being exposed to, what the immediate future of American foreign policy promises. No one should ignore their political agenda, and I think there is every reason to vigorously fight this agenda. But no one should demonize them either.

As for voicing opposition to the ideologies in the *Left Behind* series or other dispensationalist tracts, it is unlikely that biblical scholars, critical scholars of religion, or literary critics will have much traction here. One hopes that nondispensationalist evangelicals and Christians of a more progressive mindset will continue to speak out against these viewpoints *as Christians*, where they will have more pull than scholars. In the meantime, it would be imprudent not to remain vigilant; any novel that makes anarchist separatist militias the unwitting heroes in God's cosmic plan is dangerous and deserves concerted attention.

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Chapter 11

Subversion as Return

Scripture, Dissent, Renewal, and the Future of Judaism

Shaul Magid

> *To put it crudely, I find existential substance in many of the narratives of the biblical scriptures as interpreted by streams in the Christian heritage; and I see political relevance in the biblical focus on the plight of the wretched of the earth. Needless to say, however, without the addition of modern interpretation of racial and gender equality, tolerance and democracy, much of the tradition warrants rejection. Yet the Christian epic, stripped of static dogmas and decrepit doctrines, remains a rich source of existential empowerment and political engagement when viewed through modern lenses (indeed the only ones we moderns have!).*
>
> —Cornell West, "On Prophetic Pragmatism"

Few things seem as constant in western civilization as the seemingly insatiable fascination with the Bible, both Hebrew and Christian. It is safe to say that the Bible, or Bibles, serves as a major template (or templates) for the history of western civilization. Its famous defenders (from Augustine and Aquinas, Philo and Maimonides, to Barth and Niebuhr, Rosenzweig, and Buber) and critics (Spinoza, Hobbes, Nietzsche, and Freud to name a few) keep the Bible alive in the minds of western intellectuals; pietists, heretics, and atheists. In this chapter I briefly examine—and question—our fascination with the Bible and how its tentacles, now in their third millennium of maturation, both contribute to and impede our ability to rethink Judaism in the next century.

It is inaccurate to say, as some do, that the Bible is not a primary source of the rise of religious radicalism in our world; that such violence is primarily the by-product of the Islamist interpretation of the Qur'an.[1] While Islamism certainly bases its radical doctrines on the Qur'an and its interpretative tradition, the specter of the Bible also contributes to global violence. The history of the medieval and modern slave trade; America's doctrine of Manifest Destiny against Native Americans; the Salem witch trials against women; the "purification" of Europe of the Muslim Moors (and later the "oriental" Jews); colonialism in Africa, South America, and the Middle East (including the quasi-colonialism of Zionism); and American imperialism are all born from, or at least in part influenced by, readings of the Bible, both in its Christian and Jewish form.[2] It is also the case that the Bible had a major role to play in the Enlightenment and was used to support toleration, pluralism, and multiculturalism.[3] That is, religious humanism and liberalism in Judaism and Christianity from the Renaissance to the present is partially rooted in what early twentieth century liberal theologians called "ethical monotheism" an idea born from their reading of the Bible, specifically the Hebrew Prophets. But if the Bibles in question indeed contain the contradictory messages of exclusivity and tolerance, violence and pacifism, what appear to be seemingly incompatible constructions of human society, that is, if the Bible seems to be implicated in everything in the west, is the Bible saying anything at all? Is there, in fact, *a* Bible from which many anchor their identity and ideology?[4]

I would like to briefly examine the Bible (or *The* Bible, or the Bibles) as a text born of dissent and subversion and suggest how this dissenting document (it does not begin as a "book") can be used in a constructive manner in a contemporary Judaism both threatened by and infected with religious radicalism. I begin with a brief genealogy of what we today call the Bible. Whether one accepts or rejects the theological claim of the Bible's divine origin,[5] what we mean when we say "the Bible" today is a series of texts quilted together to form a particular canon.[6] The Hebrew Bible is thus not a book in the conventional sense but a collection of various documents, written over a number of centuries and woven together into what appears to be (or claims to be) a seamless whole. This position can be maintained whether one believes these documents (or some of them) were given by God or conceived, written, or redacted by human beings.[7] The rabbinic sages, while maintaining a strong belief in the divinity of the Torah, were quite open about their role in "creating," through the vexing process of canonization, what we now know as the Hebrew Bible.[8]

On this reading, the Hebrew Bible is not, in fact, "biblical" but "rabbinic." One might also say that the Synoptic Gospels, even John, are not "Christian" texts but products of "*Jewish* Christian" communities before Christianity became a distinct "religion." Much of the New Testament comprises an Israelite/Jewish struggle to come to terms with the vexing internal debate about messianism and salvation.[9] That internal struggle, and one solution to it, fairly quickly expanded beyond Jews and Judaism and became another religion. The disparate documents that are woven together in the Hebrew Bible *are* biblical (meaning only that they originate in what scholars loosely call the "biblical period" extending from the tenth to second centuries BCE) but *the* Bible is something different. That is, the (proto) rabbinic sages in the last centuries before the Common Era perhaps even stretching into the Common Era constructed what we know as the Bible through a complex and often contentious process of selection. Through this process called canonization they essentially *invented* a sacred document.[10] Viewed as such, the Hebrew Bible is a book of dissent from its very inception as there were many texts circulating in Ancient Israel that were excluded from the rabbinic construction of the Hebrew Bible for a myriad of reasons. Some of these texts expressed ideas the sages felt were not in concert with *their* view of the covenant and what the Bible *should* be saying and some were excluded because they were only extant at that time in languages other than Hebrew or Aramaic, languages the sages determined were the exclusive language of the Hebrew Bible.[11] Others claim the rabbis may have excluded some Ancient Israelite material because they resembled nascent Christianity or other marginal movements within Israelite society. In any case, once chosen, the canon was duly fashioned to tell a very particular story, a "rabbinic" story, of the prehistory and subsequent early history of Israel.[12]

The order itself—the very construction of the canon—tells us a great deal about the rabbinic and early Christian view of history and, by extension, the rabbinic and early Christian view about divine will. For example, while both Bibles begin with creation in Genesis, the "rabbinic" (Hebrew) Bible ends with Second Chronicles, culminating with these words: "This said the King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and has charged me with building Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Any one of you of all His people, the LORD his God be with him and let him go up" (2 Chron. 36:23). This passage is actually a truncated repetition of Ezra 1:1–3. The crucial difference is that while Ezra 1:1–3 ends with "let him go up to Jerusalem that is in Judah and

build the House of the Lord God of Israel . . .” in 2 Chronicles the redactor ends with “let him go up.” The historical context of Ezra, the Jerusalem Temple, is supplanted by the more general notion of a covenantal promise of “going up” to be fulfilled in the future. In the words of Michael Carasik, “The truncation of the beginning of Ezra at the end of Chronicles, then, points to a return from exile that is the focus of this passage . . . The same beginning, that is, that marks the end of the ‘biblical period’ from the standpoint of the Second Temple historiography also marks the inception—if as yet only in embryo—of the rabbinic period.”[13] In an era when the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem seemed inevitable (we don’t know exactly when this last sentence of Second Chronicles was constructed), the rabbis in question made sure that future readers of this sacred text, *their* text, would know that the promise of return would be fulfilled—that Judaism is a religion in waiting, that the promise of the covenant remains alive even, or precisely, in exile. The Christian canonizers had something quite different in mind when they concluded the Hebrew Bible, their “Old Testament,” with the prophetic words of the prophet Malachi: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.” (Mal. 4:6). The Christian Old Testament concludes with a refrain common to Christian ears—the arrival of a prophet who will bring about the conditions of peace, redemption, and the fulfillment of the covenental promise. This verse is thus a bridge to the “Good News” of the New Testament. For the Christian, the prophet Malachi has indeed come to fulfill the message prophesized in approximately the fifth century BCE. The conclusion of the Christian Old Testament is thus the affirmation of the *Christian* message by subverting the *Jewish* claims against it.[14] For Christians, The Old Testament now gives “biblical” proof of the new.

I suggest that there are at least two points to make here: First, that the Bibles as we know them are products of a collective imagination in need of divine verification. Second, that the Bibles are themselves dissenting documents subverting one divine history (*heilesgeschichte*) in favor of another, either internal to their own nascent traditions or in response to external competition. What makes them sacred is their inalterability founded on the claim that they are divine in substance, divinely inspired in construction, and that only they convey the true will of God. The violence of exclusion lies at the very heart of the sacred.

Until the Enlightenment, these claims were largely, albeit not unequivocally, maintained and Christian and Jewish civilization by and

large used these canonical templates, and their underlying claims, to construct their respective and collective identities. The Enlightenment produced a critical fissure in this trajectory, giving us what Mark Lilla recently called "The Great Separation" that, among other things, subverted the traditional claims about the Bible while not necessarily subverting the Bible itself.[15] Lead by Thomas Hobbes and Benedicto (Baruch) Spinoza (among other lesser known figures and followed by the rise of biblical criticism), this Great Separation gave us a *new* Bible via a *new* subversion, in some sense a subversion of the Bible's own subversion. At this time, one might say the Bible was "outed." The great iconoclasts Hobbes and Spinoza had very different plans for this newly revealed Bible and all that it represented.[16] While Hobbes sought to slay the dragon by limiting religion (it is noteworthy and ironic that the title of his book *The Leviathan* is taken from a biblical character that the rabbinic sages claimed will be consumed in the celebratory meal of the righteous following redemption),[17] the gentler and more sophisticated Spinoza wanted to subvert the false claims about the Bible (starting with its ostensible genealogy) in order to unapologetically highlight its (sacred) value. It is only when the Bible is desacralized in the conventional sense—that is, when one posits that it contains both truth and falsity—that its sacrality, and truth, emerges. Spinoza invited us to become critical readers of what was once a text only swallowed whole in order to unearth the truth and sacred value of the text in question.

The desire to unearth the text's sanctity was also, in a different way, a central part of the rabbinic project. The art of Midrash is founded in part on close attention to the cracks, fissures, and ostensible inconsistencies of the Bible. Through strong reading (or Bloomean misreadings) the rabbis sought to repair the textual fissures and fill in the gaps in order to present a more nuanced and subtle Bible, a Bible whose rich texture is partly (or largely) the product of the rabbinic imagination. Spinoza challenges the rabbis attempt to maintain the sanctity of the Bible by (mis)reading it as seamless and suggests that by acknowledging its composite—and thus its sometimes contradictory—nature we can better ascertain the Bible's own truth (and untruth) when liberated from the rabbinic lens.[18] Given this, we can understand the rabbinic edict of excommunication against Spinoza—itself an act of legislative violence—even as Spinoza, like the rabbis, also sought to unearth the truth of the sacred text.

The Enlightenment's Great Separation described by Lilla, both its success and failure, contributed to the fierce intellectual battles of modernity that have led us, among other things, to an evangelical U.S. president, the rise of a neo-Biblicism in Settler Zionism that

pledges absolute fidelity to the soil of God's promise, and an Islamism that has exploded with anger, resentment, jealousy, and a seemingly insatiable desire for revenge against, among other things, those who still pledge their allegiance to these Bibles.

Somewhere amid the smoke and the fumes, body parts and burned-out buses, in-between the noise of political rhetoric and the lyrics of popular songs, stands the Bible, never too far but never too near (or perhaps not near enough), the age-old subversive dissenting quilt of disparate ancient wisdom that simply will not disappear. Liberals and conservatives, traditionalists and heretics, claim it as their mantel, as a weapon to bludgeon the unbeliever or other-believer, as a tool to liberate the oppressed or to advocate toleration and even pacifism.

Lilla's description of the Great Separation is not merely academic. He also advocates for a revival of this Enlightenment project, this time avoiding the pitfalls that were in part due to the pietistic inclinations and naïve optimism of some of its early architects. But has Lilla's call for a new Great Separation simply come too late? Perhaps the challenge today is not about keeping religion and the state at a safe distance from one another (to protect one or to protect both). One of the flaws of Lilla's neo-Great Separation argument is that it seems to be founded on a very medieval (or perhaps early modern) vision of religion precisely to frighten us into pushing the rock against the cave door as securely as we can. But perhaps the cave (or grave) is already empty. In other words, instead of limiting religion we may actually have to confront it as a permanent part of our society. Lilla has an answer to this; in fact, it is the central thesis of his book. He argues that so-called liberal religion that benevolently undermined the Hobbesean attempt to keep religion out of the political sphere created a religious sensibility that concealed the very religious elements it sought to undermine. Liberal religion unwittingly dressed the dragon in western clothes and now it has emerged to devour its tailors.[19] By liberal religion I take Lilla to mean (1) religious ideologies and communities that minimized their scope and influence to make room for the realm of the secular in the public sphere and (2) religious groups that reread canonical texts to better conform to the sensibilities of modernity, tolerance, and pluralism. In Lilla's book, it is liberal religion that is the demon that needs extirpation, and it is the benevolent pastor who swallowed the dragon alive—and alive he remains. But why remain wed to a construction of a liberal religion that has not born enough fruit to sustain its own ideology? And why should the failure of liberal religion so quickly bring us back to Hobbes who taught us long ago that, given the chance, religion would destroy the

state? Perhaps the failure of liberal religion has to yield something new, something different than reaching back to a Great Separation that has failed.

I suggest that one foundation for a new approach to the Bible—the first step toward of a reconsideration of all religious bound to it—would be to (re)turn to the Bible before Judaism and Christianity made it seamless (and much of religious liberalism accepted this principle)—that is, to return to the Bible before it became *the* Bible in order to revive its subversive and dissenting nature and to rethink, pace Cornell West (cited in the epigraph), what, in fact, the Bible has to offer. What we have lost through so many centuries, even after the so-called Great Separation, is the very subversive nature of the Bible itself; that the Bible (and here I have in mind its creators) is a text of dissent, born in a revolutionary spirit against pagan society and against detractors in its own community. The bloody act of canonization was not only directed outside—toward the non-Israelite or non-Christian, but also toward itself, to those who rejected or questioned the redactor's authority or sincerity. Canonization is one of the great violent—and necessary—tools of any orthodoxy. Perhaps today we must confront the literary foundation of what made these texts the Bible—the very act of the canonicity of sacred scripture.[20]

Moderns are not, as mentioned above, the first to see the fissures and cracks endemic to this so-called book; most of these were isolated by Jews and Christians long ago.[21] Yet in those centuries before the sacralization of history and reason and before the time when the rabbinic sages and Church fathers stood behind the great curtain and threw their mighty shadows on the walls of our ancestor's imagination (precisely to prevent any Great Separation), these cracks were neatly (and sometimes not so neatly) mended through interpretation.[22] The traditional biblical exegete added his salve to the wounds of the Bible's inconsistencies or offensive doctrines, allowing the subversive nature of the text to go largely undetected or, at least, remain nonthreatening. The premodern (and even modern) weapon to deflect schism and heresy was often interpretation (and this was also wielded *against* the heretic's use of interpretation to affirm his allegiance to the Bible).[23] Thus the battle was not about the Bible (that seemed pretty secure until at least Spinoza) but about the human struggle to convince us what the Bible really meant (and what it simply could not mean). To the believing Jew and the Christian (premodern and modern), the Bible as a whole tells a true story. The question has always been, "what or whose story does it tell?" While there are numerous examples, by way of illustration we may point to the genocidal dictates

(including women, children, and livestock) that sprinkle the Hebrew Bible—from the commandment to eradicate the Amalikites (Exod. 17:14, Deut. 25:17–19, 1 Sam. 15:3), to Moses's directive to attack and utterly destroy the men *and women* of Midian in Numbers 31 (Moses is angry when the Israelites leave the women alive!),[24] to the prohibition of showing any mercy to the seven nations that Israel will confront when they enter the land (Deut. 7:1–2). One could surely contextualize these dictates as expressions of the ancient art of warfare but that does not resolve how these commandments survive as part of an eternal and ahistorical body of Scripture. The rabbis can, and do, strip these commandments of their relevance but their continued presence as eternal law can, and does, come back to haunt those who tried to solve the moral dilemma therein through interpretation. Thus part of the violent radicalism we find, for example, in the writings of Meir Kahane and his supporters in the settlement community in contemporary Israel is rooted in the very same scripture that gives us the "ethical monotheism" based on humans being created "in the image of God." [25] In the present Bible, both are correct.

We must also consider the social environment of the two civilizations that gave us these Bibles. The Jews were largely disempowered (even before 70 CE) and later exiled, a diasporic community in search of a Bible that would affirm their exilic status as meaningful and relevant. The Christians, at least after the middle of the fourth century, were the victors of history. For the Christian, the Old Testament was needed largely to confirm Christianity's fulfillment in the new. Battles were waged in Christendom to excise the old completely but to no avail—even those who put their lives at stake to claim the new Bible was true could not bring themselves to abandon the old. As much as Christianity tried, and it did try, it could not abandon the Hebrew Bible, even a Bible that had been superseded. To bring them together, Christians used what scholars called typological exegesis, a method deployed to illustrate how the new fulfilled covenant of Christianity is presaged in the old.[26] Brilliantly subversive, for the Christian, the (Hebrew) Bible of the Jews, refracted through Christian redaction and interpretation, became the ostensible proof of its obsolescence.[27] Or, using Paul's language, if the Hebrew Bible does not foretell the coming of Jesus it could be nothing more than a veil to conceal the truth (2 Cor. 3:14–18). The question of "who is Israel" (Rom. 9–11) is one crucial question for Christians who want to maintain the sanctity of the Hebrew Bible. But the question "who is Jesus" looms just as large. How can Christianity maintain the sacred status of the Hebrew Bible if the biblical prophet's notion of a savior who redeems Israel

and the world does not imply Jesus? Some of this comes into play in the Jewish and Christian interpretations of the suffering servant in Isaiah 51–53 (Jews define him as a metaphor for the People of Israel; Christians define him as Jesus) or the accuracy of the Greek rendering of the Hebrew '*alma* in Isaiah 7:14 (it could be young woman or virgin) as *parthenos* or virgin in the King James translation and throughout subsequent Christian history.[28] In short, just as the rabbis provide the definitive lens through which the Hebrew Bible can be read and understood, the New Testament is a lens toward the same end, albeit with different conclusions.[29]

The rabbis had another quandary. What do they do with a Bible whose promise remains unfulfilled, a promise confined to a territory no longer in their possession? What does territory or holy geography mean in a diasporic religion?[30] Answers were forthcoming from all corners of the Jewish world. Rabbinic Judaism largely became a lens through which to reread the Bible shifting the focus from territory to the book.[31] And, in light of Israel's diasporic fate, Judaism arguably survived because of the success of this rabbinic project. But this project also had an ostensibly subversive agenda, one that caused some Israelites, and later Jews, to cry "foul!" The priestly clan known as the Zaddokites in late antiquity and the Karaites in the Middle Ages argued that the rabbis (Pharisees and later the Rabbanites) corrupted or even *destroyed* the Bible by subversively creating it in their own image![32] As David Stern argues, "The biblical narrative thus became for the rabbis a giant screen upon which they projected the story of their own existence."[33] One can construe their arguments to be saying that one cannot simultaneously be the text and the lens through which the text is read. This battle waged intermittently from late antiquity through the Middle Ages but eventually history silenced the rabbinic detractors (and now we call *them* heretics!). But their point, right or wrong, should be taken seriously. In a world where prophecy has ceased (the cessation of prophecy was decided by nonprophets, there was no prophetic proclamation ending prophecy) the rabbis took the mantel of authority upon themselves and, in doing so, gave us a revised Bible honed through the lens of their own reading.[34] And more than that, they then forbade Jews to read the sacred text without reading it through them.[35] Reading the uninterpreted (i.e., unrabbinized) Bible was forbidden. Why? Because the unrabbinized Bible is not *the* Bible. I make no value judgment here about the rabbinic project. I only suggest we look anew at this process in light of the present struggle to rethink the relationship between contemporary religion and its sacred literature.

Rabbinic and postrabbinic Judaism gave us a Bible (and subsequently a Judaism) that simultaneously maintained fidelity to its ultimate promise of territory through redemption while affirming Israel's exilic station. Verses such as Jeremiah's call to settle in the cities of the Diaspora (Jer. 29:4–7) and the rabbis injunction not to "force the end" by prematurely immigrating *en masse* to the Holy Land[36] served as bulwarks against what has now become for some in Israel the subversive act of trying to fulfill the biblical promise, that is, to dissolve the healthy tension introduced in the (rabbinic) Bible and the rabbinic corpus.[37] In some sense, becoming a "biblical Jew" after the rabbis was considered a subversion of the (or their) Bible. They successfully transformed the Bible to reflect their own historical station and serve as the anchor for their rendering of the covenant. Much of this emerges in what Jacob Neusner calls the "Dual Torah" theory—the rabbinic notion that Sinai produced two distinct yet interlocking Torot—the written law and the oral law.[38] In this way, the rabbis deflected the criticism that their interpretation was merely a lens through which they were able to dictate their specific agenda. Their "interpretation" was no interpretation at all—it was an expression of an accompanying Torah bequeathed to the Israelites, via Moses, at Sinai and inherited by them through oral transmission.[39] The authority of that assertion rests solely on their authority.

Israeli Judaism is engaged in its own fierce ideological battle concerning the complex relationship between Torah and territory (*'Am ha-Sefer* [People of the Book] and *'Am ha-Aretz* [People of the Land]).[40] In some sense, at least, these are also battles about a "new" Israeli Bible, that is, a strong rereading of the Bible through a complex variety of Zionist lenses, from the early secular Zionist humanists such as Martin Buber to the militaristic Zionism of Meir Kahane, Zvi Yehuda Kook, and their followers in present day Israel.[41] Biblical support for militaristic Zionism is quite easy to muster in the Pentateuch capped, perhaps, in the Book of Joshua's dictates to conquer the land, obliterate its indigenous culture and destroy (or banish) its inhabitants.

In the United States, the challenges for Jews and Judaism are quite different. Living in a pluralistic or multicultural society all but void of anti-Semitism, American Jews understandably want and need to respond to the (rabbinic) Bible differently. American Jewry's main challenge may be the Bible's ostensible call for cultural and spiritual separation. If we say that the Bible advocates a separation between Israel and surrounding cultures (and this is largely codified in rabbinic law), what if separation is no longer desired and, in fact, what if it is a determent to collective flourishing? What if American acculturation

is not in danger of sliding into assimilation and the erasure of Jewish identity?[42] How can such communities reread and rewrite their Bible to reflect and respond to its historical station (this is, after all, the very history of the reception of the Bible)? Do we need a diasporic Bible not focused on separation from the other nations (or, in modern parlance, anti-Semitism) but on the ways in which the Bible can guide Jews to most constructively contribute to their host culture and global well-being more generally?[43] Can the time-tested method of exegesis that resolves contradictions via creative reading (i.e., the rabbinic lens through which their Bible is read) suffice in a postmodern world where the very coherence of a "text" has been questioned?[44] Can (or should) divine election—another founding principle of the Hebrew Bible—survive in an increasingly globalized world that is trying to undermine ideologies of exclusion?[45] These are some of the questions that the Diaspora Jew might ask herself, questions somewhat different than the contemporary Israeli Jew.[46] And so, in an era that may be descriptively—and no longer prescriptively—"post-Zionist" (leaving aside the polemical implications of this troublesome and troubling phrase) are two new Bibles required to meet the needs of two related yet different emerging Jewish civilizations?[47]

The biblical world is largely a world of Israel and its enemies—a world where survival often requires a zero-sum game. The very structure of the Bible is arguably "us against them" even as the prophets imagine a more integrated world of tolerance. But even this prophetic vision, often relegated to some imagined future, is founded on the exclusive truth of Torah as divine will and the ultimate recognition of that truth by the nations.[48] While the world we live in all too often descends into a dangerous game of "us against them" and contains absolutist ideologies that generate conflict, the remnant of the Enlightenment and its progeny has softened the edges of this worldview (perhaps we can call it "diplomacy") and created, at least, conditions for a new vision of tolerance that in its best suit produces various kinds of pluralism. This is not to say the Enlightenment, by definition, produces tolerance. Post-Enlightenment modernity has produced some of the most intolerant and absolutist ideologies in the history of human civilization. Rather, it is to say the consequences of the Enlightenment have given rise to rubrics that can be used to produce civilizations more conducive to humanistic sentiments. This is true of biblical religion as well although, as Lilla describes it, this is not often the case. My question is, then, if the Bible is to survive and contribute to a new global vision, what new lenses must we grind in order to reread it for our purposes? By "our purposes" I do not imply

a simplistic notion of creating the Bible in our image. Rather, I mean a serious and rigorous assessment, not of what the Bible means, but what we want the Bible to do (this again reflects Cornell West's neo-pragmatism cited in the epigraph).

One possibility is to begin to address these crucial issues by reexamining the subversive nature of the Bible itself. That is, to take the scholarly work of biblical criticism that shows us many disparate sources as a template for renewing the Bible as a dissident text, to remove the thread from the biblical quilt exposing the seams and fissures that exegesis—traditional and liberal—long concealed.[49] This would then give us the ability—and perhaps incentive—to make hard choices. Are there dimensions of this text, newly unbound, that should be excised (as Cornel West ponders in the epigraph to this essay), not because they are false (they may or may not be) as much as because they are no longer productive or edifying?

This is not as unrabbinic as it sounds. On numerous occasions the rabbis severed certain biblical injunctions from reality either by making them impossible to fulfill (e.g., destroying the seven nations in Canaan because of the absence of reliable genealogy) or difficult to verify (e.g., the injunction of the courts to kill the rebellious son [Deut. 21:18–21]).[50] The difference between us and them is, at least, two-fold. First the rabbinic sages created the (biblical) text and the lens through which one reads it. Thus they have the authority to make such unverifiable judgments (so goes the traditional argument). Second, the rabbis chose to retain the inapplicable doctrine, e.g. the rebellious son, in the body of the text (according to some in order to be revived in a messianic future when its true meaning will be disclosed). Regarding the courts stoning to death the rebellious son, the Talmud states, "The episode of (stoning) the religious son never was and never will be in the future. If so, why was it written (in the Torah). Study it [*darush*] and receive reward." (b. Talmud Sanhedrin 71a). That is, even though such an egregious act will never occur, can never occur, it remains in the text as an object of study. We can ask, Is this the procedure we want to follow, to retain such a blatantly problematic biblical episode for the sake of reward? Can we simultaneously de-historicize a text and maintain its divine status?[51] And if so, what is the price? Moreover, do we want our "sacred" texts to refer to male-male sex as an "abomination" (Lev. 18:22, 20:13)? Do we want to retain the attitude that the non-Israelite is somehow less a member of the Adamic family than the Israelite?[52] Do we want our sacred texts to teach that the Sabbath desecrator should be stoned to death or one who eats leaven on Passover forever cut off from the Jewish people?

Do we want to maintain that the Jews' right to the land is exclusive even if it requires forcibly removing (or even eradicating) indigenous inhabitants, even via ethnic cleansing? If contemporary Jews want to retain their Bible, these are serious questions and they deserve honest and serious consideration, whatever the outcome. The tools of apologetic exegesis that long served Jews as they read their (rabbinic) Bible exclusively through the rabbinic lens may no longer be sufficient.

What I suggest here regarding the Hebrew Bible is no less relevant to the New Testament or the Qur'an. Both have valuable and edifying components coupled with problematic (from our standpoint) and troubling episodes. The Sermon on the Mount is indeed a valuable text but it is part of a much less tolerant attitude toward those who reject Jesus. Paul's ostensible message of inclusivity veils a much more rigid and uncompromising attitude toward the Jews who defy his call. The book of John's negative appraisal of "the Jew" (even though it may have been authored by Jewish-Christians) and the book of Revelations' Gnostic world of absolutes hardly meshes with a mindset of compromise, pluralism, and diplomacy. While the Qur'an's devotional commitment and focus on charity and social justice is valuable, its use of violence as a tool of domination is hardly what we want to promote in an increasingly globalized world. My point is simply that the scripture of Judaism (the focus of this chapter) is no less problematic on these counts than those of other religions. In part this is a natural consequence of sanctifying historically conditioned documents. To enable these sacred scriptures to help us promote an agenda we find truthful (here again the Enlightenment raises its head) rather than unequivocally dictate what, in fact, we *should* think, they must fall under the critical, and constructive, scalpel of the serious modern reader.

What I am suggesting differs from the modern Jewish project more generally in that much of modern Judaism, even its more progressive instantiations, worked with the biblical canon as constructed by the rabbis (even though they contested the rabbinic claims of divine origin). In that sense, as much as they ostensibly fought *against* the rabbinic project, they remained inextricably *bound* to it. By unbinding the Bible and exploring it both as a divisive and dissenting document (including a reconsideration of "excluded books" for constructive purposes) we open new avenues of exploration for rebuilding Judaism in the twenty-first century. Thus what I am suggesting is a theological innovation generated by a literary revolution.

One could ask, Why do we need books (or these books) at all? We don't, by definition, *need* these books. Rather I believe, with Cornell West, that these books contain enough wisdom and a deep

understanding of the human condition that they remain valuable. In addition, they are useful because communities have longstanding and deeply invested relationships with them. Thus I think any attempt to marginalize them, *pace* Lilla, will be futile, not only because of their intrinsic value but also because of their social value. Given that, I ask here how we can take these documents called the Hebrew Bible, sewn together to promote a socially specific agenda, and rethink what they mean beginning with a structural assessment of the Bible as a text of dissent and protest.

More generally, what would happen if Jews, Christians, and Muslims would be willing to view their respective scriptures as dissident texts containing conflicting worldviews constructed at a certain time and for certain distinct purposes and then use that observation to (re)construct their own religious world-views? Could this "subversive Biblicism" counter the more offensive dimensions of various Bibles ("Old," "New," rabbinic, postrabbinic) without liberal apologies? If we accept for the moment Mark Lilla's claim that liberal religion has failed to slay the Hobbesean dragon (in fact it has given it new life) and we submit that the Bible simply isn't going away anytime soon, perhaps we should consider another approach by rethinking the very construction of the Bible rather than rejecting it or reflexively defending it. Perhaps we must invert the rabbinic project by unbinding what the sages bound together (would this act be any less subversive than theirs?) and to do so as a constructive rather than a critical project. In one sense, this is what biblical criticism has already done in principle although many Bible critics are reluctant to draw theological conclusions from their important work.[53]

Instead of binding together disparate traditions to form an artificial—albeit compelling—whole, we can cautiously unbind the Bible to discover at least two things: (1) an array of new possibilities once these traditions do not need to cohere and (2) reconsider material the rabbis or early Christian redactors excluded from their respective Bibles for reasons that may have served their specific historical needs. Many, or at least some, of these materials; Gnostic, Hellenistic, too sympathetic to one, not sympathetic enough to the other, may have been excluded for reasons that made sense in their time. But if the paradigm has indeed changed, if the world has presented us with radical new challenges, if a new Bible is in the making (weren't new Bibles always in the making?), some of these excised sources may prove useful. And even if these external sources (what Rabbinic Judaism calls "outside books") must remain in the dustbin of history, the exercise itself holds the potential to create a new Bible according to a more

broadly conceived understanding of the ancestral world from which our present Bibles emerged. In some sense, this is both an American tradition, reaching back to Thomas Jefferson's *Jefferson Bible*, and an Israeli tradition, harking back to David Ben Gurion's proposal to revise the Bible in order to make it a secular history of Israel.[54] If we submit that the Bible simply will not go away and if we determine there is enough there for us that it shouldn't (*pace* Cornel West), perhaps we have to make sure it sufficiently reflects our humanistic aspirations, not simply through interpretation (which often leaves alive the very thing it tries to eradicate), but through an honest appraisal of the Bible's own subversive origins.

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Notes

1. See Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after 9/11* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003), 33–61; and Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Is Religion Killing Us? Violence in the Bible and the Quran* (Harrison, London, New York: Trinity Press International, 2003) esp. 27–94.
2. On Jewish Orientalism and "internal colonialism" among Ashkenazi Zionists, see Gil Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of Separatist Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007), 20–43, 94–115. Cf. Gil Anidjar, *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the*

Enemy (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003) and idem. *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007).

3. See Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005); Jim Wallis, *The Soul of Politics: Beyond "Religious Right" and "Secular Left"* (New York: Harvest Books, 1995) esp. 3–17, 37–58; idem. *The Great Awakening: Reviving Faith and Politics in a Post-Religious Right America* (New York: Harper One, 2008); Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007) esp. 17–106.
4. On some justifications of these violent interpretations of scripture in the words of extremists, see Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley and los Angeles, U of California P, 2000) esp. 19–84.
5. The divine origin of the Bible is canonized as doctrine in Maimonides "Thirteen Principles of Faith" that first appears in his commentary to Mishna Sanhedrin, chapter 10. It first appears in rabbinic literature in Mishna Sanhedrin 10:1. Maimonides' makes his position quite clear in his *Mishne Torah*, "Laws of Repentance," 3:8. See also Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 90b.
6. See Robert Alter, "The Double Canonicity of the Hebrew Bible," *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, ed. D. Biale, M. Galinsky, and S. Heschel (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1998), 131–49.
7. For a traditionalist position that accepts certain elements of biblical criticism, see David Weiss-Halivni, *Revelation Restored: Divine Writ and Critical Responses* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997) esp. 11–46.
8. See Sid Leiman and Harry Orlinksy, *Canon and Mesorah of the Hebrew Bible: An Introductory Reader* (New York: Ktav Books, 1974); and Sid Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scriptures: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1971). Cf. Philip R. Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Lousiville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 4–14, and 37–58.
9. See, Frank Talmage, "Keep Your Sons from Scripture: The Bible in Medieval Jewish Scholarship and Spirituality," *Understanding Scripture*, ed. C. Thoma and M. Wyschogrod (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987), 81–101.
10. See David Stern, introduction, *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature*, ed. D. Stern, M. J. Mirsky (Philadelphia, PA: JPS, 1990), 6.
11. There are other Hebrew books that were excluded as well, e.g. *Sefer Yashar* (the Book of Yashar) and the Book of the Battles of YHVH.
12. See James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, two vols. (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1983) and Edgar Goodspeed, *The Apocrypha* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). See also Fishbane,

"The Notion of a Sacred Text," *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1989), 124.

13. Michael Carasik, "Three Biblical Beginnings," *Beginning/Again: Toward a Hermeneutic of Jewish Texts*, ed. A Cohen, S. Magid (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2002), 14–19. The citation is on p. 18.
14. See Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 193–97.
15. Lilla, 55–106.
16. See Nancy Levene, *Spinoza's Revelation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2004) esp. 77–135; and Brayton Polka, *Between Philosophy and Religion: Spinoza, The Bible, and Modernity*, vol. 1 (Lexington, KY; Lexington Books, 2006). For Levene's assessment of Lilla's *The Stillborn God*, see Levene, "The Stillborn God: The Forces Unleashed," *The Immanent Frame* http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent_frame/2008/01/01/the-forces-unleashed
17. See Leviticus Raba 22:10 and Pirkei de-Rebbe Eliezer, 9.
18. See Susan Handelman, *Slayers of Moses* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1983), 27–50; and Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextaulity and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1994), 1–27.
19. Lilla, 91–102. See also Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005) esp. 63–91 and 118–39; David Novak, *Covenental Rights* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000).
20. See Marc Hirschman, "The Core of Contention—They are Not Israel . . . We Are Israel," *A Rivalry of Genius: Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation in Late Antiquity*, trans. Batya Stein (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), 13–22.
21. In general, see Ezra Zion Melammed, *Bible Commentaries*, 2 vols. [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Ha Mikra ha-Reshit, 1975); Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (South Bend, IN: U of Notre Dame P, 1964); and Frank Talmage, "Apples of Gold: The Inner Meaning of Sacred Texts in Medieval Judaism," *Jewish Spirituality I*, ed. A. Green (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 313–55.
22. See Nahum Sarna, "The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture in Jewish Tradition," *Understanding Scripture*, eds. C. Thoma and M. Wyschogrod (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987), 9–20; James Kugel, "Early Interpretation," *Early Biblical Interpretation*, eds. Kugel and Greer (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 11–102.
23. See, Simon Rawidowicz, "On Interpretation," *Studies in Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia, PA: JPS, 1974), 45–80. See also David Berger, *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of Nezahon Vetus with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979); Daniel Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics against Christians in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007).

24. The rabbinic tradition connects the commandment to destroy Midian in Numbers 31 to Genesis 37:36, *The Midianites, meanwhile, sold him [Joseph] to Potiphar, a courier of Joseph and his chief steward.* Midrash Tanhuma understands this sale of Joseph to mean that the Midianites sold him as a child prostitute to Egypt. See Tanhuma to Genesis 86:3. The point of this midrash is that the Midianites were not only guilty of this one act of seduction to idolatry (in Numbers) but had a history of abuse of Israel. Thus Moses's call for "revenge" killing here has a long history. Perhaps the rabbinic assessment of Moses's reasons for rebuking Israel for keeping the Midiante women alive is captured by Yaakov Moshe Harlap (d. 1951) the student of Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook (d. 1935), the first chief rabbi of Mandate Palestine. In his *Mei Marom* to Numbers (Jerusalem, 1998), 208, Harlap writes, "Moses' reasons (for having all the Midinite women killed) was that a person should not enter into a doubtful situation (*safek*) even if the intention is for the sake of heaven." I cite this not to defend this position but to illustrate the way in which the tradition, even to the twentieth century, defends this genocidal edict.
25. See, for example, the continued use of "Amalek" as a trope throughout Jewish history in Elliot Horowitz, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 107–46.
26. See Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*, trans. D. H. Madvig (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1982); and G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woollcombe, *Essays on Typology* (Naperville, Ill: Alec R. Allenson Inc., 1957).
27. See rabbi Emile Hirsch's sermon, "The Doctrine of Jesus," *Defending the Faith: Nineteenth-Century American Jewish Writings on Christianity and Jesus*, ed. George L. Bern (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), 129–41. The citations are from pp. 130, 131.
28. See, for example, "The Book of Alma" 7:10. "The Book of Alma" is the longest part of the Book of Mormon. The contemporary English Jewish translation *Tanakh* translates '*alma* as "young woman" following Jewish tradition. On *partheos* in Jewish interpretation see Peodair Leihy, "You Say *Parthenos* I say *Pendera*: A Jewish and Christian Exegetical Interplay," *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies* 17 (2003): 80–87.
29. See Michael Signer, "Searching the Scriptures: Jews, Christian, and the Book," *Judaism in Christian Terms*, 85–98.
30. [1] See the essays collected in *The Land of Israel: Jewish Perspectives*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman (Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame P, 1986).
31. See James Kugel, *The Bible as it Was* (New York, Belknap, 1999) and idem. *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007).
32. What we know of the Zaddokites is largely through rabbinic literature and thus the historicity of their claims must include that caveat. On the Karaites in the Middle Ages, see Daniel Lasker, "Rabbanism and Karaism:

The Contest for Supremacy," in *Great Schisms in Jewish History*, ed. R. Jospe (New York: Ktav Press, 1980), 47–72.

33. David Stern, introduction, *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature*, eds. 5.
34. See Ephraim Urbach, "When Prophecy Ceased?" [Hebrew] *Tarbiz* 17 (1946): 1–11; Frederick Greenspan, "Why Prophecy Ceased?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108 (1989): 37–49; and, most recently, Benjamin D. Sommer, "Did Prophecy Cease: Evaluating a Reevaluation," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115.1 (1996): 31–37.
35. See, Frank Talmage, "Keep Your Sons from Scripture: The Bible in Medieval Jewish Scholarship and Spirituality," *Understanding Scripture.*
36. Babylonian Talmud Ketubot, 111a/b.
37. See Aviezer Ravitzky, "' Forcing the End': Radical Anti-Zionism," *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, trans. M. Swirsky and J. Chipman (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996), 40–78.
38. See, for example, Avot de-Rebbe Natan 15, Sifra to Bekhukotei 8; Midrash Raba to Numbers 14:9.
39. See David Weiss-Halivni, *Revelation Restored: Divine Writ and Critical Responses* (Boulder, CO; Westview Press, 1997), 47–74.
40. See Zali Gurevitch, "The Double Site of Israel," *Grasping the Land: Space and Place in Contemporary Israeli Discourse and Experience*, eds. E. Ben-Ari and Y. Bilu (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997), 203–16.
41. On Buber, Martin Buber's "Hebrew Humanism," and "Biblical Leadership," *Israel and the World: Essays in a Time of Crisis* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1997), 119–36, and 240–52 and idem. *A Land of Two Peoples: Martin Buber on Arabs and Jews* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983). On Kook and his disciples, including *Gush Emunim* (the Block of the Faithful) and popularity of Meir Kahane in Israel, see Aviezer Ravitzky, *The Roots of Kahanism: Consciousness and Political Reality* (Jerusalem: The Institute of Contemporary Jewry, 1986) and Dov Schwartz, *Challenge and Crisis in Rav Kook's Circle* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2001), 23–136.
42. See Jonathan Sarna, "Jewish Identity in the Changing World of American Religion," in *Jewish Identity in America*, eds. D. Gordis and Y. Ben-Horin. (Los Angeles: The University of Judaism, 1991), 91–104; Irving Louis Horowitz, "Minimalism or Maximalism: Jewish Survival at the Millenium," *Jewish Survival: The Identity Problem at the Close of the Twentieth Century*, eds. E. Krausz and G. Tulea (New Brunswick, NJ, and London, Transaction Publishers, 1998), 1–20.
43. This is very much a part of the Jewish Renewal movement founded by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. See his *Paradigm Shift* (New Jersey: Jason Aronson Books, 1993).
44. The challenge of post-modernity (however construed) to the construction of Jewish identity and history has recently attracted the attention of Jewish Studies scholars. See, for example, Moshe Rosman, *How Jewish is*

Jewish History? (London and Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007) esp. 56–110. Theories and methods of post-modernism, from reader response theory to deconstruction and new historicism, have been richly explored by scholars of rabbinics. My point is not to criticize this important work but only to suggest that perhaps this can be augmented by rethinking the very notion of the biblical canon as a way to open us new avenues of exploration.

45. See David Novak, *The Election of Israel*: *An Idea of the Chosen People* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2007), 108–62. In the American context see, Arnold Eisen, *The Chosen People in America* (Bloomington, IN: U of Indiana P, 1983).
46. In one sense this is because the secular Israeli Jew does not need Judaism as much as the Diaspora Jew in order to affirm her identity and the Israel religious Jew is not confronted by a host culture challenging its basic religious value system.
47. See D. Biale, M. Galinsky, and S. Heschel, eds., *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1998) esp. 17–33, 88–100, 131–49, 231–53.
48. See Maimonides, *Mishne Torah*, "Laws of Kings" 8:11.
49. See Steven Weitzman, "Before and After the Art of Biblical Narrative," *Prooftexts* 27.2 (Spring, 2007): 200.
50. Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 71a. See, David Weiss-HaLivni, "Can a Religious Law be Immoral," *Perspectives on Jews and Judaism: Essays in Honor of Wolf Kellman*, ed. Arthur Chiel (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 1978), 165–70.
51. See Tucker, "*Drush ve Kabel Sekhar*: Halakhic and Metahalakhic Arguments Concerning Judaism and Homosexuality," submitted to the Committee on Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement, 2006.
52. Babylonian Talmud Yebamot 61a. The Talmud uses the term "idolater" ('*ovedi kokhavim*—star worshippers) here but it is not uncommon for the Talmud to use that term when describing gentiles in general.
53. Two important exceptions to this rule in Jewish Bible scholarship are Michael Fishbane, and Benjamin Sommer. See Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008); idem. *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington, IN: U of Indiana P, 1989); and Benjamim Sommer, "Revelation at Sinai in the Hebrew Bible and in Jewish Theology," *Journal of Religion* 73.9 (1999): 421–51.
54. See Thomas Jefferson, *The Jefferson Bible: The Life and Morals of Jesus* (Applewood Books, 2006). Cf. Richard Wightman Fox, *Jesus in America* (New York: HarperSan Francisco, 2004), 160–72 and Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible*, 93–222. In American Bibles more generally, see Steven J. Stein, "America's Bibles: Canon, Commentary, and Community," *Church History* 64–62 (1995): 169–84.

Contributors

Jay Twomey is Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Cincinnati, where he teaches courses in the Bible and literature. He studies the literary and theoretical reception of the Bible, especially the Pauline corpus. He has written on exegesis in the work of such disparate figures as Jonathan Edwards and Jacques Derrida, and his articles have appeared in *Religion and Literature*; *Religion and the Arts*; *Biblical Interpretation*; and other journals. His reception commentary, *The Pastoral Epistles Through the Centuries*, has just been published by Blackwell.

Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg is Associate Professor of Religion and Jewish Studies at Colgate University. She earned her PhD in Religion and Literature from the Division of Religious and Theological Studies at Boston University. Her research centers on the intersection of the Hebrew Bible and contemporary culture. She has written articles about the use of the Bible by contemporary Jewish authors, the Ten Commandments in America, same-sex marriage and the Bible, and literal and literary biblical interpretation. She is the author of *Sustaining Fictions: Midrash, Intertextuality, Translation, and the Literary Afterlife of the Bible* (T & T Clark, 2008) and coeditor, with Peter Hawkins, of *Scrolls of Love: Ruth and the Song of Songs* (Fordham UP, 2006) and *From the Margins: Women of the Hebrew Bible and their Afterlives* (Sheffield Phoenix, 2009).

John K. Roth served as the 2007–2008 Robert and Carolyn Frederick Distinguished Visiting Professor of Ethics at DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana. He is also the Edward J. Sexton Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and the founding director of the Center for the Study of the Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights at Claremont McKenna College, where he taught from 1966 through 2006. In addition to service on the United States Holocaust Memorial Council and on the editorial board for *Holocaust and Genocide*

Studies, he has published hundreds of articles and reviews and has authored, coauthored, or edited more than forty books, including, most recently, *Genocide and Human Rights: A Philosophical Guide*; *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*; and *Ethics During and After the Holocaust: In the Shadow of Birkenau*. Roth has been Visiting Professor of Holocaust studies at the University of Haifa, Israel, and his Holocaust-related research appointments have included a 2001 Koerner Visiting Fellowship at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies in England as well as a 2004–2005 appointment as the Ina Levine Invitational Scholar at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC. In 1988, Roth was named U.S. National Professor of the Year by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

John Felstiner has taught at Stanford since 1965 in English and Jewish Studies. He wrote *Translating Neruda: The Way to Macchu Picchu*; *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*; and *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, and he coedited *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology*. From 1974 to 1975 John taught at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. His work has won MLA, PEN, American Translators Association, and Commonwealth Club prizes and the Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Qiuyi Tan graduated with a BA in English Literature from the National University of Singapore in 2005. She is Project Executive at the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF), where she coordinates the Dialogue of Cultures and Civilizations program, focusing on dialogue approaches to cultural and religious conflict. Her chapter in this collection was reworked from her senior-year research project conducted under the direction of John Whalen-Bridge, to whom she owes much gratitude.

Anna Hartnell is Lecturer in American Literature and Culture at the University of Birmingham. Her research interests focus on representations of race and religion in American literature and culture and the ways in which the United States might be viewed in a postcolonial context. This has led to a wider interest in the crosscurrents between the black and Jewish diasporas. She is currently writing a book titled *Imagining Exodus: Race, Religion, and the Narratives of Black America* (Pluto Press).

Ellin Sterne Jimmerson is a freelance historian, theologian, writer, filmmaker, and ordained Baptist minister. She has a PhD in history with a specialization in twentieth-century U.S. cultural and intellectual history from the University of Houston and a master's degree in Theological Studies with a concentration in Latin American liberation theology from Vanderbilt Divinity School. She is anticipating the spring 2009 release of *Desconocida*, an immigrant justice documentary she wrote and directed and for which actor Martin Sheen donated the narration. The documentary's Web site is http://www.desconocida-documentary.com.

Beth Hawkins Benedix is Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Literature at DePauw University. She is the author of *Reluctant Theologians: Franz Kafka, Paul Celan, Edmond Jabès* (Fordham University Press, 2003) and has contributed chapters to collections such as *Chasing Esther: Jewish Expressions of Cultural Difference*; *Toni Morrison and the Bible: Contested Intertextualities*; *The Double Bind of Ethics after the Holocaust*; and *Tension, Testimony and Tikkun: Teaching the Holocaust in Colleges and Universities.* Her articles and reviews have appeared in journals such as *Shofar*; *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*; *Jewish Quarterly Review*; *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*; and *Journal of the Kafka Society of America*. She is currently working on the biography of a Holocaust survivor.

Ranen Omer-Sherman was a founding member of a desert kibbutz and is currently Associate Professor of English at the University of Miami, where he teaches courses in Israeli and other Jewish literatures. His essays on literature have appeared in journals such as *Prooftexts*; *Middle Eastern Literatures*; *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*; *Journal of Jewish Identities*; *Religion & Literature*; *Shofar*; and *Modernism/Modernity.* His books include *Diaspora and Zionism in Jewish American Literature: Lazarus, Syrkin, Reznikoff, Roth* (Brandeis UP 2002) and *Jewish Writing and the Desert: Israel in Exile* (University of Illinois Press, 2006), and he has also coedited a collection of essays titled *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches* (Rutgers UP, 2008).

W. David Hall is an Associate Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Centre College. He received his PhD from the University of Chicago and taught for two years at DePaul University before joining the faculty at Centre College in 2002. Hall is coeditor of and contributor to *Paul Ricoeur and Contemporary Moral Thought* (Routledge, 2002). He is author of *Paul Ricoeur and the Poetic Imperative: The Creative Tension*

Between Love and Justice (SUNY, 2007). Hall has authored numerous articles and papers on various aspects of religion and culture. He resides in Danville, Kentucky, with wife Sarah and daughter Lillian.

Shaul Magid is the Jay and Jeannie Schottenstein Professor of Jewish Studies in the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University in Bloomington. His most recent book, *From Metaphysics to Midrash: Myth, History, and the Interpretation of Scripture in Lurianic Kabbalah*, was published with Indiana University Press in 2008. He is presently working on a book titled *Judaism on the Cusp of Post-Ethnic America: Becoming an American Religion* with Indiana University Press.

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