

○ US VERSUS THEM

ON BIBLICAL (STUDIES) IDENTITY PRODUCTION

There are many challenging and innovative approaches to reading biblical literature, and this journal has from its inception sought to highlight, foster and promote them. Yet, our interest is quite specific.¹ Roland Boer (whose work on this journal has effected something more important than he would probably willingly acknowledge as an outcome of his scholastic dedication) made sure that *The Bible and Critical Theory* be established so that those of us with so-called unconventional modes of reading this thing called ‘The Bible’ might have another outlet that welcomed such conversations, particularly after the cessation of *Semeia*. The main source of contributing authors continues to be biblical scholars interested in twentieth and twenty-first century theory and philosophy. However, there is also strong interest in the work we do from non-biblical scholars in the Humanities. And I would ask that more scholars in the Humanities, scholars whose primary interest might not be biblical literature but other material that engages, even if tangentially, with biblical literature, consider submitting their research.

Having said that, and given the common theme in this issue concerning identity formation and its discontents, it is perhaps necessary to admit to a certain amount of ‘us-versus-them’ when it comes to journals such as *The Bible and Critical Theory*. In the broader context of international biblical studies, including the SBL (Society for Biblical Literature), there is still a sense that those of us interested in the connections between biblical texts and, say, Continental philosophy, cultural studies, literary theory, postcolonial theory, feminist theory and political theory, are still in the great minority. There is, of course, a handful of sophisticated journals out there with a similar focus (journals like *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts and Contemporary Worlds*, *Biblical Interpretation*, *The Journal of Philosophy and Scripture* and *The Journal of Biblical Literature*, along with the now defunct *Semeia* and the short-lived *Biblicon*), all providing the necessary space, past and present, in which to allow scholars with such interests to have their research read and critically engaged with in the process, productively changing the discipline (*albeit* slowly). However, like many other major disciplinary meetings, there is still a factional split evident at SBL and there is no doubt that in specific countries there is still an ‘us-versus-them’ feeling amongst biblical scholarship when it comes to the study of the Bible.

For example, in his recent forum essay published on the SBL website (2007), Hector Avalos caused quite a stir when he claimed that the SBL was an elite society that merely promoted the study of the Bible to maintain the privileged existence of mainly *religious* biblical scholars. He stated: ‘One thing is clear to me: If biblical studies is to survive in academia, it must move beyond its still religionist, Euroamerican, and bibliolatrous orientation and offer us a more convincing rationale for how it will benefit our broader world and not just faith communities.’² Reactions to Avalos’ piece ranged from the childish ‘If you don’t like us, then terminate your membership’ response, to the wounded scholar angered by Avalos because she understands her role as a biblical scholar to be a (faith-based) vocational calling that benefits others:

Unlike Dr. Avalos, *most of us* experience our vocation as a calling by God, and one for which [...] most of us have made considerable sacrifices. We make these sacrifices and follow this calling not just for our ‘own enjoyment’ — though

that is a delightful and wholly proper collateral benefit — but because we believe this vocation benefits our students, our colleagues, our readers, and our communities. We should proclaim and celebrate our nobler motives and deny Dr. Avalos his crass, spiteful belittling of us (*italics mine*).³

I don't think any of us pursuing biblical studies, whether for reasons that are religious or literary or political or whatever, do so for reasons that don't also include the benefit of 'our students, our colleagues, our readers, and our communities.' Well, I would hope not. However, despite the somewhat conspiratorial tone of Avalos' claims regarding the SBL, I think he is right to challenge the domination of religious or spiritual purchase on the academic study of the Bible. This literature has far-reaching socio-cultural interests and implications, especially for the Humanities and its contributions to knowledge.

Yet, in establishing a specific space for those of us engaging with the biblical texts and the afterlives of those texts (in film, painting, literature, music and so forth) from a contemporary theoretical or philosophical perspective, as 'opposed' to say an historical-critical or faith-based mode of engagement, do we not also participate in the production of an identity that is based on distinction, separation, schism, even antagonism? To be sure, this identity formation is understandable not only from an academic perspective but also from an economic one (I believe it is called 'Marketing'). However, by doing so, do we not in some way perpetuate the model of identity formation found in the biblical texts, as shown by the contributors to this issue, a model that is undergirded by what we might say is an unethical, distancing, indeed often violent relation to the other? Many theorists, notably Freud, Girard and Lacan (to name three with whom I am familiar) argue that violence and identity formation are unavoidably intertwined. But I prefer the more utopian theorists and philosophers (Luce Irigaray, for instance) who acknowledge this theory as intellectually on the money, so to speak, but yet push us to try and think the impossible: in this instance, of identity without the annihilation of the other. I recognise (clearly, given my acceptance of the position of managing editor for this journal) the important need for the type of work that we do in biblical studies here, work that the majority of biblical scholars still consider marginal (I agree with Avalos there). For me, the research undertaken by scholars publishing with *The Bible and Critical Theory* – past, present and future – enriches not only our understanding of biblical texts, but also our critical understanding and proactive change of Bible-based societies. We need this space and we need to set ourselves apart for the benefit of those with similar interests, whether they be writers or readers. And yet, I am still made quite uneasy about this homology when I ponder the analyses of our contributors here concerning identity formation in the biblical texts...

First, Regina Schwartz considers the biblical nature of contemporary religious violence, arguing that monotheistic idolatries, especially narrative idolatries, underwrite the justifications of violence that we provide for ourselves. When the 'Other' (here, the God of monotheistic Judaism, Islam and Christianity) is given human qualities and desires, be they iconographically or verbally based, He (and the gendering of this Other is not incidental) is required to bear allegiance to and service our own hatred and vigilance against the 'other.' Schwartz argues that such an idolatrous construction of the Other (the transcendental-ised, so-called cause of our subjectivity) effects an unethical, often inhumane relation with the other (the immanent other; other humans). Second, George Aichele (who is also our hard-working Reviews Editor) argues that while there are four

distinct Jesus simulacra provided by the gospels and other sources, it is the Jesuses of Luke and John that are crucial to the unified construction of 'The Gospel' and, especially, to the canonical simulation of Jesus as Christ and Lord. Aichele engages with the theories of Deleuze and of Barthes to conclude that the Books of Luke and John, in combination with Acts, effect a version of Christ that has come to displace any important divergences that may appear in the other gospels. This in turn plays a large part in defining the Christian 'Gospel' as a theological/ideological construct. In other words, difference must be repressed to enable a theological and ideological hegemony. Third is Johnny Miles, who brings an important aspect of postcolonial theory – ethnocentric humour – to Judges 3, showing how humour (puns, stock characterisations, feminising strategies and scatology) establishes Israelite boundaries and a sense of superiority over the 'stupid' other (the Moabites).

The final two papers also deal with strategies for identity production in the Hebrew Bible. J. Coleman Baker provides a Social-Scientific reading of Jeremiah 31:31-34, seeking to understand the New Covenant passage in terms of its role in forming group identity. In other words, the New Covenant demonstrates Jeremiah's attempts to address the needs of the post-exilic community, to bring about a social coherence and stability in times of social unrest and dis-ease. Jeremiah Cataldo also utilises a Social-Scientific methodology to refine the definition of the *golah* in Ezra-Nehemiah through a comparison with the *ummah* under Muhammad in Medina. He finds that both the *ummah* in Yathrib/Medina and the *golah* in Yehud are social units that emerge 'in response to an "other" controlling social, economic, and/or political power' (p. 4), with their identity derived from religious allegiance. In both of these essays, one of the principal strengths of this biblical model of identity production is placed in relief: social disarray and oppression can be reduced by group cohesion. However, it is doubtful that this strength is sustainable or even desirable. As Baker points out, social cohesion is not characteristic of the Second Temple Period, and this leads him to suggest further study regarding the question of whether 'the New Covenant as a common in-group identity was an idealistic hope that ultimately failed' (p. 9). And we should remember the casualties of the *golah* in Yehud, namely all those 'foreign wives' and their children expelled from the community.

And so I wonder, in setting ourselves up against the still prevailing faith-based and historical-critical models of biblical research, do we in some way perpetuate the idolatry of some big-O 'Other', in this case Theory or Philosophy? Do we use these great abstracts to justify our schism or unwillingness to countenance those whom we find to be 'behind the times' in the larger discipline of the (capital-H) Humanities? We do – after all, do we not – consider ourselves more progressive, dare I say more 'reasonable' in our own approaches to biblical literature. In doing so, in believing this, do we not build a perhaps impenetrable boundary around this (currently) little city that is regarded as alternative biblical studies? Can the ancient biblical texts offer us new, critical, even ethical modes of engaging with the other/Other?

Finally, I would like to draw your attention to the latest issue of *Hecate: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Women's Liberation* (33.2, 2007). There is a focus section on 'Feminism and Biblical Studies' (which I guest-edited) that includes new essays by Mieke Bal ('Loving Yusef: A Story of Taboos'), Judith McKinlay ('Eve and the Bad Girls Club'), Toni Tidswell ('A Clever Queen Learns the Wisdom of God: The Queen of Sheba in the Hebrew Scriptures and the Qur'an') and Gillian Townsley ('Wittig's Lesbian and the Corinthian Men: Problematising Categories of Sex in 1 Cor 11.2-16'). Readers of *BCT* may purchase a copy of this issue for AUD \$20 (including postage)

or may subscribe as individuals for AUD \$35 (2 issues). Institutional subscriptions are AUD \$154. See <http://www.emsah.uq.edu.au/awsr>

Julie Kelso, Editor

Julie Kelso is an Honorary Research Advisor in the School of English, Media Studies and Art History at the University of Queensland. She is also a Teaching Fellow in Philosophy (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences) at Bond University. Her monograph, *O Mother Where Art Thou?: An Irigarayan Reading of the Book of Chronicles*, is currently in press with Equinox, London.

julianne.kelso@uq.edu.au

ENDNOTES

- ¹ See the editorial in the previous issue of *BCT*: Boer, Roland; Kelso, Julie. 2007. 'What is *The Bible and Critical Theory*?'. *The Bible and Critical Theory*, 3 (3): 35.1–35.2. DOI:10.2104/bc070035
- ² Hector Avalos, 'The Ideology of the Society of Biblical Literature and the Demise of an Academic Profession', <http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?articleId=520>
- ³ Kim Paffenroth, 'Reply to Dr. Avalos', <http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?articleId=530>