

○ EDITORIAL

What do prostitutes, a literary critic who committed suicide in World War 2, some curious rituals from the Bible and later religious practice, and a queer Paul Ricoeur have in common? This might well be the opening line for a television programme, although not one where the participants are hastily made-up contestants in some desperate effort to sing and become famous, or even seeking some elusive prize that consists of an entirely useless kiwi-fruit knife, glow-in-the-dark condoms and a car the manufacturer cannot sell. Rather, I ask you to imagine an unimaginable or maybe even utopian programme, a panel that involves that strange species known as academics and in some cases that even stranger breed, biblical scholars. In this utopian television programme, these are the sorts of things we would discuss (it might even get me to watch television again).

To begin with, there is Avaron Ipsen's reading of the story of Solomon and the Two Prostitutes in 1 Kings 3:16-28 from the perspective of prostitutes themselves. Ipsen has worked for many years among prostitute collectives and her interpretation comes out of reading biblical stories with the insights provided by one of those groups, namely the Sex Worker Outreach Project (SWOP). She makes use of standpoint theory, a materialist feminist reading strategy that seeks to move beyond the androcentric tendencies in Marxism. And the standpoint Ipsen draws upon is that of prostitute activists who seek to counter the systematic marginalisation and injustice they experience at the hands of the legal system. From this perspective, the story of the two prostitutes is just that, a story of prostitutes. Rather than mothers coming face to face with the extraordinary wisdom of the legendary Solomon, it turns out that these prostitutes actually face another typical example of rough justice before an uncaring and cruel judge. This is but the tip of the iceberg, so you will need to read further to find out what such a reading of 1 Kings 3:16-28 produces.

Our second essay by Tamara Prosic focuses on what is perhaps the strangest and most enigmatic of all vows – Kol Nidre. Recited at the most sacred and solemn of all Jewish festivals, Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement, Kol Nidre is nothing less than the cancellation of all solemn vows; it is, in other words, the vow to end all vows. A deeply moving ceremony at the beginning of the Day of Atonement, the vow's origins are unknown; it has been condemned and banned by the most revered rabbinic authorities and yet it continues, as popular as ever. Prosic brings together a number of theoretical perspectives in order to understand Kol Nidre, including psychoanalysis and social anthropology. Thus, she suggests that the vow is a sublimated way of breaking a pact with the deity as well as a mechanism for dealing with trauma. That trauma is none other than the difficult process of conversion; not so much a conversion from one religion to another or one god to another, but from polytheism to monotheism. The biblical texts that provide narrative attempts to deal with such a conversion are the stories of the Golden Calf and the 'fierce god', Azazel, the god of death. Kol Nidre, then, marks the unresolved trauma whereby the god of death was banished from but never fully incorporated into the new religion,

In the third essay we shift gear to bring together two very unlikely bedfellows – Paul Ricoeur and queer theory. Not merely queer theory and the Bible, Ibrahim Abraham also brings into his discussion queer theory and the Qur'an, especially from organizations such as Queer Jihad that work outside the scholarly circle but within activist circles. While Ricoeur in his usual fashion was more interested in a methodologically (and theologically) correct approach, Abraham argues

that his key idea of ‘distanciation’ – the distancing of a text from its author and thus authority – actually opens up the possibility for a multiplicity of readings of the Bible and Qur’an. Indeed, he suggests that Ricoeur’s at times staid hermeneutics becomes far more interesting when queer approaches are brought into play, approaches that may also benefit from Ricoeur himself.

From Ricoeur and queer theory we move back, in the fourth essay by Brian Britt, to another curious ritual in the Hebrew Bible, the *Sotah* in Numbers 5. It is the ritual for a husband who suspects his wife of infidelity but has no proof. Usually called the law of the ‘wandering wife’, Britt shifts focus to its real concern, namely the jealous husband. In the midst of bitter potions, magical formulae and occult acts, Britt argues firstly that it is a ritual (never practiced apparently) that seeks to subordinate women to the whims of men’s fantasies. Secondly, once the ritual comes face to face with the work of Irigaray and Butler, it becomes possible to turn the interrogating light on the jealous husband (reversal), and show just how strange it all is (parody). The key is that the text in all its uncertainty enables such counter-readings.

The final essay is Roland’s Boer ‘From Plato to Adam’, a close look at Walter Benjamin’s practice of biblical interpretation. Benjamin was fascinated by the early chapters of the Bible, especially Genesis 1-3 (creation and fall) and Genesis 10 (Tower of Babel). Out of those texts he tried to develop alternative theories of translation, language and history. In each case, the Bible trips him up, for it refuses to yield to his schemas. Those problems do not prevent him from trying all the same. Boer argues what Benjamin was opposing – theories of history, language and translation in his own day – provide a sense of his often obtuse arguments.

This issue, then, is business as usual for *The Bible and Critical Theory*, a heady and engaging intersection of critical theory and biblical texts. There is also a good collection of book reviews, all the way from Brian Britt’s *Rewriting Moses* to Brent Plate’s *Walter Benjamin, Religion and Aesthetics*. As usual, Society of Biblical Literature members are able to access these book reviews by contacting Sarah Cannon at Monash University ePress (Sarah.Cannon@lib.monash.edu.au).

Roland Boer, Editor, November 2006