

Review of Alison Jack, *The Bible and Literature*. London: SCM Press, 2012.

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In *The Bible and Literature*, Alison Jack attempts to acquaint readers with the “massive” research area covered by the umbrella term, “the Bible and literature” (p. vii). Focusing on the interplay between literary criticism, literary theory, and biblical studies, her aim is to “bring texts and reader into conversation with each other” (p. vii). While she admits that some readers may find her theoretical discussions “overly simplified”, her intended audience is broad and interdisciplinary, and she makes no assumptions about their knowledge of either biblical studies or literary theory (p. vii). The book is therefore intended to give readers a general introduction to literary theory and literary critical methodologies in biblical interpretation, so that they can begin to engage meaningfully with these subjects.

Jack begins this endeavour in Chapter 1 by discussing the Bible in literature, considering the use of biblical references specifically in English language novels, short stories, and poetry from the past two centuries. The “literature” she chooses to examine in this book therefore lies within a narrow definitional band; there is no further discussion of the possible breadth and depth of meaning that the term “literature” can incorporate. This is a pity, as the question of what “literature” is remains a highly contested focus of debate within literary studies; it would therefore have been helpful for readers to understand some of the issues and questions surrounding this debate. If we are interested in exploring “the Bible in/and literature,” we ought to have a sense of what this term “literature” might include (and, by default, exclude). Should we consider as literature only written works traditionally included in the “canon” of English literary classics? Or, might we also include contemporary works, such as Stephanie Meyers’ Twilight series, which, although recognized as having numerous biblical allusions, might be excluded from consideration by more sensitive literati? What about graphic novels and comic books, song lyrics and dub poetry, film scripts and political speeches? While Jack’s decision to focus her attentions on English language fiction and poetry from the last few centuries may be valid, an acknowledgement that the term “literature” covers a much vaster landscape than this could have opened up new possibilities within her discussion by encouraging readers to consider additional avenues of exploration within this field of study.

Jack’s particular literary choices also inform her decision to focus on the King James Version of the Bible (hereafter, KJV), which she describes as “the most significant Bible in literary terms”, given its vast creative impact on British and American literature (p. 1). Anticipating the potential critiques of this methodological focus, Jack concedes that her interest in the KJV’s literary influence may well “remove” her study from “the accepted genre of Bible criticism” (p. 1), because her main concern is not with the “original” meaning of the biblical traditions. Her caveat here tips a hat to the reactionary predisposition of some parties within the biblical studies “guild” (particularly of Western Europe and North America), which still look askance at any interpretive approach other than the strictly historical-critical. So, while Jack’s work, to my mind, stands comfortably within the long established tradition of reception history, her disclaimer here suggests that the “acceptability” of these traditions remains disputed in some scholarly circles. Jack’s gentle reassurances about the value and legitimacy of her methodology therefore echo throughout this book, perhaps seeking to pacify and encourage those whose interpretive predilections usually prevent them straying beyond more so-called “orthodox” epistemological frameworks.

Jack continues Chapter 1 with a potted history of the KJV Bible, tracing the development of its authoritative status within North America and Britain. She then considers more fully the KJV’s influence in literature, offering as illustration concise reflections on biblical allusions in selected poems by T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and Dylan Thomas. Jack’s enthusiasm here is contagious; by demonstrating different modes of engagement between the Bible and poetry, she offers readers an appetising glimpse of the fruitful potentialities and possibilities of studying the Bible in literature.

Chapter 2 then turns attention to the origins and implications of reading the Bible as literature. Tracing the social and religious developments that took place between the 18th and early 20th centuries in Britain and North America, she notes the impact and influence that these developments had upon traditional biblical interpretation. In particular, Jack focuses on the contribution that these socio-religious changes made towards “lifting the Bible out of the realm of faith and into the world of literature”, thereby rendering more acceptable a literary approach to the sacred texts (p. 21). For the remainder of the chapter, Jack reviews various literary readings of John’s Gospel, while considering some objections raised by those who regard such literary approaches as a threat to the Bible’s hallowed origins and theological purpose. For Jack, however, reading the Bible as literature is a worthy exercise in that it “puts it in meaningful dialogue with other texts, such as novels and poetry” (p. 33). While such a dialogue indubitably carries literary, historical, and theological implications that some biblical readers may find unpalatable, Jack hopes that it will prove to be an exercise that is ultimately “worthwhile” (p. 33).

In chapters 3 and 9, Jack leaves these wider issues concerning the Bible and literature and focuses in depth upon two particular themes that are explored within multiple biblical and literary texts: creation and apocalypse. In chapter 3, Jack focuses on creation, first outlining the Genesis 1-2 creation narratives before noting the inner-biblical thematic and linguistic relationships between these and the opening chapter of John’s Gospel. She then considers allusions to the creation accounts given voice in two modern poems, “Adam’s Curse” by W.B. Yeats and Edwin Muir’s “Adam’s Dream”. This conversation is continued in chapter 9, where Jack considers apocalyptic references in further poems by Yeats and Muir, tracing their intertextual allusions to the book of Revelation within their contemporary poetic explorations of war. In both chapters, Jack emphasizes the dialectical relationship between the biblical texts and those contemporary poetic works which allude to them; while the biblical traditions undoubtedly influence our understanding of the poems’ language and thematic content, these poems likewise produce an intertextual dynamic, which offers fresh ways to read and re-read these ancient traditions within diverse contemporary contexts.

For the remaining chapters, Jack considers various methods and theories of both literary criticism and biblical interpretation. In Chapter 4, the focus is on the theory of intertextuality. After providing a concise overview of intertextuality’s theoretical underpinnings, Jack demonstrates its use through an intertextual reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story “Young Goodman Brown” alongside the New Testament epistle, 1 John. While she admits there is no explicit or definite dependence of Hawthorne’s story on the biblical text, she still argues persuasively that both texts share certain forms, themes, and symbols, which, when read together, offer a fascinating dialectic that sheds new contextual light on both literary works.

In chapters 5-6, Jack attends to narrative criticism and reader response criticism, offering a brief history and definition of these literary approaches before providing further examples of how each approach can be utilized within biblical scholarship. Chapter 5 includes a study of the parable of the prodigal son read alongside Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, which Jack uses effectively to expound the aims and intentions of narratological criticism. Then, in chapter 6, attention is directed to reader response criticism and the role of the reader in the process of making meaning. After discussing reader response approaches to Robert Louis Stevenson’s novella, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Jack demonstrates the potentialities of applying this literary methodology to Mark’s Gospel, illustrating the ways that reading communities’ and readers’ expectations about a given text might affect subsequent readings and interpretations of that text.

Chapter 7 then turns to discuss feminist interpretation as another theoretical approach to exploring the Bible in literature. First, Jack illustrates some key features of feminist biblical interpretation using assorted (and often conflicting) feminist readings of the book of Ruth and the parables of Jesus. Acknowledging that such conflicting approaches do sit together under the umbrella of feminist and womanist interpretation, she then considers another example of feminist biblical interpretation, which draws upon the literary novel as a source of feminist critique. Using Margaret Atwood’s “speculative fiction” novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (p. 122) as an example, Jack considers this novel’s usefulness as a means of deconstructing and critiquing the biblical traditions it references, and, in particular, as a tool for reading these traditions from a feminist

hermeneutical perspective. This discussion offers us yet another facet of the relationship between the Bible and literature. Not only does the contemporary novel invite discourse on the Bible in literature (through its explicit allusions to some characters and themes within the biblical material), it also serves as a method of interpretation itself, providing a commentary on the Bible that “brings modern concerns to a reading of the biblical text” (p. 125) and inviting further insights from the readers of both textual traditions. While this chapter was a welcome addition to the book, it would have been enriched by an overview at the start of other common hermeneutical strategies – such as postcolonial, ecological, and queer – which would have helped to locate Jack’s discussion within the broader framework of “contextual” approaches to the Bible and literature.

Finally, in chapter 8, Jack contemplates the literary tradition of midrash, considering its significance within both early rabbinic traditions and contemporary secular literature. She notes that contemporary midrashic interpretations of the biblical material may be at “some remove from classical rabbinic midrash in all its complexity” (p. 134). Nevertheless, she seems to concur with literary critics such as Stephen Marx and David Curzon,¹ who argue that situating modern midrash within the context of literary criticism can ultimately be fruitful, in that it provides a language with which to explore creative and purposeful interpretation of biblical traditions within poetry and literature. As an illustration of modern midrash, Jack considers the Genesis tradition of Jacob wrestling with an angel (Gen. 32:22-32) as recounted in poems by Emily Dickinson and Gerard Manley Hopkins, noting how these poetic retellings offer new significances to the biblical text in question. In their recounting of the biblical material, the poems become “endlessly creative expressions” of the theological possibilities in the biblical material, inviting consideration of both readers’ and poets’ subjectivities and the multi-vocal nature of the scriptural traditions.

In sum, Jack’s book offers a useful introduction for students, scholars, and other interested readers to the multifaceted study of the Bible in literature. Jack expresses the hope that her book will encourage people to read literary and biblical texts “fruitfully alongside one another” (p. 69). In my opinion, *The Bible and Literature* succeeds in this aim. One of its main strengths lies in Jack’s use of examples from biblical and literary texts, which illustrate her theoretical discussions and effectively demonstrate literary theories in action. Each chapter provides the reader with the rudimentary tools with which they can begin to explore the centuries-old engagement between the Bible and literature, as well as serving as an introduction to the wider, and increasingly prolific, research area of the Bible in/culture. With this in mind, a useful addition to the book would have been a list of further reading suggestions, including literature from a variety of genres, geographical locations, and historical periods, which could likewise be read fruitfully alongside the Bible.

Endnotes

¹ See Marx (2000); Curzon (1994: 70-71).

References

- Curzon, D. 1994. “A Hidden Genre: Twentieth-Century Midrashic Poetry.” *Tikkun* 9: 70-71.
- Marx, S. 2000. *Shakespeare and the Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



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