KERRY MCKEEVER

How to Avoid Writing About God

Poststructuralist Philosophers and Biblical Hermeneutics

I would like to begin by relating a story about reading scripture and about readers of scripture that I envision will open the door to discussing the manner in which poststructuralist philosophy, and the subsequent theoretical positions which it has engendered, has already affected and continues to affect biblical hermeneutics. A few years ago Jacques Derrida and I sat on the lawn at the University of California, Irvine, where I was enrolled as a Ph. D. candidate. Derrida asked me about my current research projects, and I replied that I was investigating the Romantic poets' rewritings of biblical narrative. I then began to enumerate the difficulties of reading scripture. I cut my litany short by saying, „Well, you're aware of the problems; you've written on the Bible." Derrida simply smiled and said, „No, I have never written on the Bible." I was puzzled, convinced that he *had* written on the Bible. At the time, however, I was neither bold enough nor confident enough in my theoretical astuteness to question Derrida further.

Nevertheless, my conversation with him has lingered in memory. My readings of Derrida over the years have convinced me that any attempt to encapsulate his work is most probably a fool's errand; like William Blake, Derrida seems to caution us against such an enterprise relative to his writing or anyone else's. On the other hand, I take seriously his desire to wrest meaning from the clutch of institutions; I believe in the efficacy of his claim that we should recognize the degree to which our ideas are framed by and received from these institutions. Ironically, writing about Derrida or indeed any poststructuralist thinker runs the risk of replicating the errors of structural relation which he has struggled against so mightily for over two decades. I don't think that it is unfair to say that the writing industry which has been created out of the debate about deconstruction profoundly blurs the distinction between poststructuralist theory and its sometimes skewed interpretation and use. Certainly, the notion that deconstructive methodology is essentially negative and sends us careening down a path of infinite regression does not coincide with my experience. My awareness of the complications of writing on poststructuralist positions has made me especially cautious in my pondering of the philosophical positioning of these thinkers relative to the Bible specifically and theology in general.

Besides revealing the extent of my intellectual naiveté, my conversation with Derrida led me to consider how, if Derrida had not written on the Bible (and indeed he has not) I received the impression that he had. Perhaps even more important, this brief scholarly encounter steered me toward a more basic meditation, for it was through reading Derrida and the works of other poststructuralist thinkers that I had become interested in a study of biblical texts in the first place. Again, many theologians and literary critics alike might find Derrida's works a slightly more than eccentric route to

biblical study, especially in the wake of the severest critiques of his deconstructive method, which in certain domains is discerned as a menace to Western culture, and, more specifically for our purposes here, as a caveat to religious institutions and the sacred texts which individuals within these establishments interpret in the name of a particular spiritual, cultural, or political agenda.

The dimensions of this threat, which extend beyond academia to the popular media, have been discussed recently by Mario J. Valdes in his response to George Will's comment in a recent issue of *Newsweek* that deconstruction is an attack on the meaning of literary works by means of a denial of the authority of literature.[1] Will further contends that consequently deconstructive critics replace authors as the bestowers of meaning. Valdes responds to these charges by indicating that

> „... in deconstruction textual meaning is not attacked; rather, the notion of a fixed meaning is put into question, so that critical authority passes from the institutionalized received interpretations to the reader. Deconstructive criticism therefore does not substitute itself for the literary text but quite modestly takes up a supplementary role. Meaning is thus not the exclusive province of the critic who purportedly interpreted what the author „really had in mind." ... if we step back a bit from present-day polemics we will recognize that deconstruction derives from an ancient form of skepticism that questions all interpretations. ... I submit that the collective voice of today's literary scholars is a threat only to a complacent nostalgia for a cultural fantasy that never existed."[2]

The path of my readings – in the philosophy of deconstruction in particular and poststructuralist theory in general – toward a study of biblical interpretation was occasioned by a contemporary form of this ancient skepticism, not in theology or in interpretation in itself, but in what might be called the „hermeneutical fantasy", or the mode by which hermeneutics and the resultant interpretive gestures can become reified into doctrine. By means of extension, I was also interested in the ways that challenges to institutionalized doctrine frequently generate a deep and often desperate fear that such confrontations precipitate the collapse of religious faith rather than produce a more positive belief that such challenges can actually provide a healthy stimulus to faith.

The results of my meditations on these issues are, in part, presented in this essay. However, a thorough investigation into the effect of poststructuralist theory on biblical hermeneutics would necessarily involve discussing many elements of both writing and reading which loom too large for the space here: we would have to recall the manner in which poststructuralist theories have problematized the foundationalist elements of hermeneutical structures; we would again have to present these elements

---

[1] Will, G. April 1991, „Literary Politics." *Newsweek*, Vol. 22, 72.

[2] Valdes, M. J., Winter 1991, „Deconstruction and Debate," *MLA Newsletter*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 2–3.

for debate, since concepts such as representation, structure, writing, authority, discourse, narrative, figurative language, interpretation, intention, determinacy, value, influence, rhetoric, culture, canon, gender, race, ethnicity and ideology have undergone radical refigurings in the wake of poststructuralist thought.

Instead, I would like to present one example of the manner in which two poststructuralist thinkers, Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida, have responded in part to a problem posed throughout the history of biblical interpretation: the nature of the human relationship to the divine, what might otherwise be defined as God's „place" or „work" relative to humanity. I will further limit my discussion by locating these responses relative to the poststructuralist reception of this question as it was partially addressed by two pre-modern philosophers. The first is Descartes as described by Jacques Lacan, who views Descartes' non-atheistic repudiation of God's „work" as a denial of our ability to establish a non-theological relation with the divine.

> „In effect, Descartes inaugurates the initial bases of a science in which God has nothing to do. For the characteristic of our science, and its difference with the ancient sciences, is that nobody even dares, without incurring ridicule, to wonder whether God knows anything about it, whether God leafs through modern treatises on mathematics to keep up to date. (...) Can psychoanalysis be situated in our science, in so far as this science is considered as that in which God has nothing to do?"[3]

The second is Nietzsche, who opened the door to what has often been referred to as „the death of God" in his suggestion that the God configured by man is obsolete. These philosophical positions present poststructuralist philosophers with a rather intriguing problem. That is to say, once one has seemingly created unemployment and then death for God, has misplaced or displaced God, where does one go from there?

I mention this problem of God's „placement" here because how God is „placed" (in the sense of the *topos* of God) is one of the foundational issues for almost any biblical hermeneutic. The rhetorical resources which we commonly assume to be the foundation of hermeneutics are actually nothing more (or less) than resources for arguing any espoused positionality of God; they cannot function as guarantors of „correct" interpretation, although they are often presented as so. Instead, hermeneutics makes available to the disputants of biblical interpretation some additional rhetorical tactics for continuing the arguments over meaning. The rhetorical effectiveness of each hermeneutic depends upon the acceptability of the relevant hermeneutic theories that constitute these sources as guide for correct interpreting. Thus, the removal of God as speaking and, concomitantly, engaging subject sets the background for the current turn

---

[3] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth Press, 1977) 226-7.

towards the divine in critical theory. The effort is toward „re-placing" God in order to establish a hermeneutic appropriate to this „re-placement".

This turn, not surprisingly, has been accompanied by a resurgence of the fragmentary mode, which has been used by Maurice Blanchot as a mode of access to the question of the divine, or for Jean Francois Lyotard as a mark of the break with „a persistent piety of the Passion of and for truth in history" which inaugurates a postmodern epoch of „pagan narrativity". But perhaps the most intriguing use of the fragment and the most fruitful to discuss for our purposes is the work of Jean-Luc Nancy in „Noli me frangere", on which he collaborated with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthes, and his later essay, „Of divine places". In this later essay, Nancy describes the difficulty inherent in talking about God:

> „'God', the motif or theme of God, the question of God, no longer means anything to us. Or else – as is all too obvious to an unbiased eye – what the theme of 'God' might mean to us has already moved or been carried entirely outside of him. Is there any statement about the divine which can henceforth be distinguished, strictly speaking, from another about ... 'the subject' (or its 'absence'), 'desire', 'history', 'others' *[autrui]*, 'the Other', 'being', 'speech', *[la parole]* 'the sublime', 'community', and so on and so forth? It is as if 'God' were in fragments, an Osiris dismembered throughout all of our discourse ... as if the divine, God or the gods formed the common name or place – common and as such erasable, insignificant – of every question, every exigency of thought: wherever thought comes up against the furthest extreme, the limit, against truth, or ordeal *[l'epreuve']* in short, wherever it thinks, it encounters something which once bore, or seems to have borne, at one time or another, a divine name."[4]

Nancy continues by suggesting that in fact there is „no theology which does not turn out here to be either ontological or anthropological – saying *nothing about the god* which cannot immediately by said about 'event', about 'love', about 'poetry'." The point of thought in the current age, suggests Nancy, is wresting from theology the

> „prerogative of talking about the Other, the Infinitely-other, the Other-Infinite. It is taking away from theology the privilege of expressing the *absconditum* of experience and discourse. In so doing, perhaps the modern age secretly corresponds to the true destination of a *theology:* for it indicates to theology that, in order to speak of God, we have to speak of something other than the Other, the Abstruse and their infinite remoteness..." (7)

Here, Nancy clearly indicates that our efforts to „re-place" God must be essentially a resistance to placement, since any placement locates God within the realm of language,

---

[4] Nancy, J. 1986, „of divine places", *Paragraph*, Vol. 1, 1–52.

or within the realm of the proper noun. This, certainly, is not a new position: we have confronted it often enough in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, St. Albert the Great, Meister Eckhart, and Levinas, among many others. But what Nancy argues more specifically in his response to the Cartesian dilemma is the importance of the positionality of the speaking subject, the manner in which the speaker is dictated by the *noli me frangere,* is exhorted not to think actively at all, but to abdicate the position of the subject of discourse altogether so as not to permit a relation to the divine to take place.[5] In short, as Michael Holland suggests in his introduction to Nancy's essay, „fragmentation is not the result of active intervention in discourse by a subject alert to the divine: it is the mark of the abdication of that subject". Holland thus marks the manner in which the terrain of Nancy's position differs from that of negative theologians. And, as Holland subsequently suggests,

> „The substance of fragmentary discourse will not emanate from the nominal subject of such discourse. Nancy will say nothing original about the divine. Indeed, his discourse in one sense has no substance at all: it merely rewrites existing discourses on the divine according to its own dangerously fragile mode, and in so doing opens them out towards a post-theoretical epoch of relation. The text which follows is a tissue of other discourses on the divine, an immense exercise in restatement without stasis, which seeks to turn the practice of writing into the very event and advent of what discourse seemed condemned interminably to frustrate: inter-relation." (3)

The inter-relatedness that is at the heart of postrstructuralist discourse is also one of the keys for understanding how Derrida does *not* write about the Bible. Derrida, much in the manner described by Nancy, secedes his position as subject of discourse and further secedes his position as hermeneutical interpreter of biblical text. The result is a relationality that is not easily articulated; however, recalling some of Derrida's essential principles in order to comprehend how his views on writing have formulated the basis for his positioning relative to biblical texts is helpful.

In 1967 Derrida published three major texts devoted to the question of writing: *Writing and Difference, Of Grammatology,* and *Speech and Phenomena.* Derrida's project in these writings is to revaluate the structuring principles of Western metaphysics. Part of Derrida's undertaking has been his concern with the underlying assumptions of Western philosophy, which according to Derrida has analyzed the world in terms of binary oppositions: mind vs. body, good vs. evil, man vs. woman, presence vs. absence. Derrida demonstrates the hierarchical arrangement of these oppositions, indicating that the first term is privileged over the second. According to Derrida, the opposition

---

[5] Lacoue-Labarthes, P. and Nancy, J. 'Noli me frangere', *Revue des sciences humaine,* 185 (1982), 84–92.

between speech and writing has a similar structure: speech is seen as immediacy, presence, life, and identity, whereas writing is seen as deferment, absence, death and difference. This privileging of speech as self-present meaning is denoted by Derrida as „logocentrism".

However, as Derrida recognizes, paradoxically Western tradition is charged with writing that privileges speech. The Bible is no exception to this privileging, since it is constituted as the *word* of God dictated to and written down by God's agents. What his analyses reveal is that even when a text tries to privilege speech as immediacy, it cannot completely eliminate the fact that speech, like writing, is based on a *différance* between signifier and signified inherent in the sign. Speakers do not transmit meanings directly from one mind to another. Immediacy is illusory since traits commonly associated with writing inescapably creep into arguments designed to privilege speech.

One of the most prevalent and obvious examples of this principle in biblical text occurs in the giving of the commandments to Moses. God first the *writes* tablets with his finger; after the first set of commandments are destroyed, God then dictates the „law" to Moses, and the tablets were to contain the words that were on the first tables (*Exodus* 24: 12–14; cf. *Deuteronomy* 10: 1–5.) God then dictates the tablets to Moses, and it is these dictated tablets, preserved in man's writing, that formulate the basis of the law. Moreover, the representation of the law as original is further undercut by the difference between the first set of laws and the second, between the spiritual and cultic law. Thus, access to God's „speech" is obtained by observing the structure of writing. This emphasis on writing as a viable representation, indeed the only representation, of the „Word" is designed to counter the history of logocentrism and to track the functioning of *différance* in structures of signification.

Thus, the logic of writing is properly double: writing is called upon as a necessary panacea for *différance,* but at the same time it *is* the very *différance* for which a cure must be sought. In Derrida's analysis of writing, which is also an analysis of reading, this logic is called the logic of the *supplément,* in French, signifying both an „addition" and a „substitute". The Bible as such functions in a supplementary fashion in so far as it simultaneously bridges and widens the gap between God and the narrator of the text, between God and the interpreter of the text.

Derrida's epigraph to *Writing and Difference,* taken from Mallarmé, also helps us to comprehend his relationality to texts, in this case biblical texts: „Le tout sans nouveauté qu'un espacement de la lecture"("All without innovation except for a certain spacing-out of reading.") Derrida, like Mallarmé, gives a signifying function to the materiality of writing. This attention includes consideration of margins, typefaces, blank spaces, titular material, etc., as well as tracking syntactic and semantic ambiguities in such a way as to generate multiple, often conflicting, meanings out of a single utterance. For Derrida, this process does not lead to the infinite regression of meaning but,

instead, to a „fleshing out" of meaning, a revelation of the stunning manner in which multiple meanings respond to the variety of forms as they exist in human thought.

In Derrida's terms, biblical hermeneutics would involve following the „other" logics of structures of signification inscribed in writing as a means to a celebration of this variety. His reading involves taking seriously the elements that a standard reading disregards, overlooks, or edits out. Finally, and singularly important to our understanding of Derrida's position to biblical texts, is the fact that Derrida always writes *about* texts, *around,* them, as it were, rather than *on* them. This style is meticulously developed in all of his writing, but I would like to present two examples here. The first demonstrates how Derrida „places" God relative to man via Derrida's reading of Edmund Jabès; the second reveals how Derrida's reading of a biblical text serves as one of the foundations for what might be described as his approach to all texts.

In the first essay in *Writing and Difference* entitled „Force and Signification", Derrida positions God in a radical manner. He asks (or states):

> „Is not that which is called God, that which imprints every human course and recourse with its secondarity, the passageway of deferred reciprocity between reading and writing? or the absolute witness to the dialogue in which what one sets out to write has already been read, and what one sets out to say is already a response, the third party as the transparency of meaning? Simultaneously part of creation and the Father of Logos. The circularity and traditionality of Logos. The strange labor of conversion and adventure in which grace can only be that which is missing." (11)

Derrida continues by quoting a letter written by Mallarmé to Verlaine:

> „I will go even further and say: the Book, for I am convinced that there is only One, and that is has [unwittingly] been attempted by every writer, even by Geniuses. ... revealing that, in general, all books contain the amalgam of a certain number of age-old truths; that actually there is only one book on earth, that it is the law of the earth, the earth's true Bible. The difference between individual works is simply the difference between individual interpretation of one true and established text, which are proposed in a mighty gathering of the ages we call civilized or literary." (10)

If God is the „deferred reciprocity" of interpretation, and if all texts are attempts to rewrite the „One Book", then our efforts to interpret any writing become attempts to comprehend the Bible and our relationship with God. Derrida makes this clear in his essay on Edmund Jabès, and his esposual of Jabès' position that the book is always also an interrogation of God, of God's interrogation of Himself, since writing is always already His:

> „God separated himself from himself in order to let us speak, in order to astonish and to interrogate us. He did so not by speaking but by keeping still,

> by letting silence interrupt his voice and his signs, by letting the Tables be broken. In *Exodus* God repented and said so at least twice, before the first and before the new Table, between original speech and writing and, within Scripture, between the original and repetition (*Exodus* 32:14; 33:17). Writing is, thus, originally hermetic and secondary. Our writing, certainly, but already His, which starts with the stifling of his voice and the dissimulation of his Face. This difference, this negativity in God is our freedom, the transcendence and the verb which can relocate the purity of their negative origin only the possibility of the Question."[6] (67)

The relationship between the stifling of God's voice and man's writing – between originality and secondarity – presents itself here as the tension between pronouncement and negativity; Derrida's struggle in part is his attempt to move beyond this binary system. The problem is demonstrated effectively later in the same essay:

> „If absence is the heart of the question, if separation can emerge only in the rupture of God – with God – if the infinite distance of the Other is *respected* only within the sands of a book in which wandering and mirages are always possible, then *Le livre des questions* is simultaneously the interminable song of absence and a book on the book. Absence attempts to produce itself in the book and is lost in being pronunced; it knows itself as disappearing and lost, and to this extent it remains inaccessible and impenetrable. To gain access to it is to lose it; to show it is to hide it; to acknowledge it is to lie."[7]

For Derrida, the concern is very much one of *respect:* respect for the divine and the sacred. This deference requires an erasure of hermeneutics as we know it: to approach the Bible as our interrogation of God and His interrogation of Himself necessitates that the question forget itself „within the articulations of memory, the time of its interrogation, the time and tradition of its *sentence.* ..."[8]

Hermeneutics becomes heuristics and interpretation the means by which we establish an inter-relatedness with the divine, on the „broken line between lost and promised speech", in the furrow that we create when we must become people of vision, workers outside the garden and the immediacy of God's voice.[9] And the approach involves widening out the space of sacred literature; in fact, it is a sacralizing of all written words: a privileging of secondarity over originality, of the „other" texts of the

---

[6] Derrida, J., „Edmund Jabes and the Question of the Book", in *Writing and Difference;* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978) 64 – 78.

[7] Ibid., 69.

[8] Ibid., 78.

[9] Ibid., 68.

Bible in order to accomplish a secession of the hermeneutic self so that an encounter with the divine and the sacred may take place through the absence of confrontation.

Nowhere is this model for writing and its relationship to the divine demonstrated as superbly as it is in Derrida's essay „Shibboleth", where his reading of Judges 12:5–6. serves not only as the basis of his reading of Paul Celan but also as a means of understanding how Derrida applies his complex perception of heuristic practice.[10] For my purposes here, I would like to step back from Derrida's analysis of Celan and concentrate on the ways in which the essay serves as a demonstration of Derrida's practice of writing, especially as it concerns biblical texts.

Judges tells us that „Shibboleth" is the Hebrew word used by Jepthah by which he and his men distinguished the fleeing Ephraimites, who could not pronounce the *sh,* from his own men, the Gileadites. As such, „Shibboleth" is an application of a principle of inclusion and exclusion, a peculiarity or accent indicative of a person's origin or exclusion from origin. Derrida underscores the point that the failure of the Ephraimites was not in comprehending the *meaning* of the word, but in a bodily failure to respond to the diacritical difference between *Shibboleth* and *Sibboleth.* Derrida ties his reading of the „incommunicable secret of the Judaic idiom, the singularity of its „unpronounceable name" to the nature of the Judaic God, and to what it means to be a Jew":

> „The Jew's „unpronunceable name" says so many things: it says *Shibboleth,* the word which is unpronounceable – which *can* not be pronounced – by one who does not partake of the covenant or alliance; it says the name of God which *must* not be pronounced; and it says also the name of the Jew which the non-Jew has *trouble* pronouncing and which he scorns or destroys for that very reason, which he expels as foreign and uncouth, or which he replaces with a derisory name which is easier to pronounce. ... Its unpronounceability keeps and destroys the name; it keeps it, like the name of God, or dooms it to annihilation. And these two possibilities are not simply different or contradictory." (338)

For Derrida, if we follow the logic of his relation to all texts, language itself becomes the unpronounceable, a trace or „cinder" of the forgotten voice within the garden, an interiorization of death and the Fall in memory. The Bible as such can be construed as a sepulcher, a work of mourning in which is encrypted the lost origin of speech, „that which preserves in order no longer to preserve, dooming the remnant to dissolution."[11] And to read the Bible is also to circumcise it: Derrida translates „circumcision as a „reading-wound", as an act which signifies both

---

[10] Derrida, J., „Shibboleth", in *Midrash and Literature,* eds. G. Hartman and S. Budick, (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press) 307–347.

[11] Derrida, J., *Cinders* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1987) 35.

> „the surgical act of cutting, and the state, quality, or condition of being circumcised. In this second sense, one may speak of the circumcision of a word or utterance, as one also speaks of the concision of a discourse, its being-circumcised or circumscribed."[12]

The Bible is circumcised both in terms of its canonical history, which enacts in the manner of the *shibboleth* a pattern of exclusion or inclusion, and in terms of its interpretation, which enacts the „reading-wounding" of which Derrida speaks. The „shibboleth" marks the passageway of „deferred reciprocity" that is God and interpretation, and the guest or interpreter is an Elijah who must be present at all circumcisions, at all reading-wounds. In terms of his own text, Derrida's situating of „Shibboleth" as his title circumcises his own essay, marking the territory between the pronounceable and the unpronounceable in writing, inscribing in the margins the terrain of a passageway between his meditations on Celan, his readings of the Bible, his understanding of the problematic natur. of Jewish identity and the larger enigma of man's relationship to God.

Derrida's insistence that he does not write on the Bible is thus a silence enforced by the regulations of his philosophical stance. Silence and denial – a withdrawal or secession from the position of speaking subject relative to the divine – is exactly that which enables a negative attendance to the divine, just as his readings of Mallarmé, Verlaine, Jabès (indeed, every writer he has confronted) are the means by which he always *attends* toward the biblical text without attending it. Such deferral dislodges the boundaries of hermeneutical discourse so that they can include the non-canonical or all texts which must always speak to the „one Book".

The somewhat midrashic nature of poststructuralist discourse admits to an authority but also denies access to authority through its own discursive structures. Such discursive structures, when disseminated throughout a culture, threaten the plethora of institutions which rely on traditional hermeneutic strategies to enforce, regulate and perpetuate a variety of agendas. It is no surprise in light of this skepticism that the forceful impact of poststructuralism on culture has been received with such trepidation. Poststructuralist methodology, then, offers itself as a challenge to the community of biblical scholars, regardless of their affiliations with any given discipline or hermeneutic. This invitation is, first, an invocation to examine our political positions as speaking subjects relative to biblical interpretation; second, to resist the desire to retreat defensively behind hermeneutical walls which such analysis engenders; and, third, to engage in a discourse both hermeneutic and heuristic, both structured and playful, where meaning can reside not within a given discourse, but in the passageway of deferred reciprocity that is interpretation, where God resides and where He listens to us speak.

---

[12] "Shibboleth", 343.