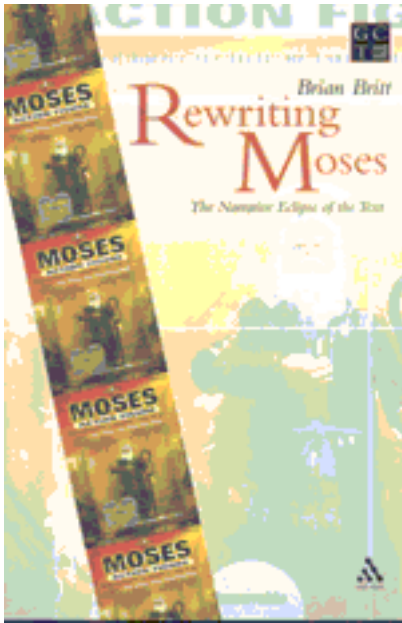


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Britt, Brian

Rewriting Moses: The Narrative Eclipse of the Text

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Brian Britt's study of postbiblical traditions surrounding the figure of Moses is well situated within T&T Clark's GTC series (Gender, Culture, Theory). Britt is primarily concerned with the middle element in this trilogy, but in the course of his discussion he touches on gender and theory as well. The choice of Moses as the focus of his study is not simply a reflection of his interest in a single character; as he argues in his chapter on Moses' veil, "how Moses is read can determine nothing less than how the Bible is read" (115). The notion of rewriting addressed by the book is twofold: on the one hand it refers to the ways in which the Bible is rewritten in biblical traditions and modern adaptations, but at the same time Britt is interested in exploring how the spoken Moses becomes a written (and a writing) character. In Derrida's terms, Moses is both a "writing being" and a "being written" (7). The "written" Moses is the character described in the narrative; sometimes portrayed as hero, elsewhere as divine agent, he is always ambiguous. The "writing" Moses is the author of Torah, the being whose life is overshadowed by his work and who cannot be separated from it. Rather than offer an exhaustive study of these rewritings, Britt presents selective readings of a number of topics and texts. The first half of the book ranges widely across time and media, exploring the figure of Moses in modern fiction, the portrayal of Moses in film, as well as the approaches of major figures in biblical criticism of the past 150 years. The second half explores some specific biblical

texts/themes in greater detail, offering original readings that highlight Britt's emphasis on the ambiguous nature of Moses' character.

Britt's first chapter discusses the depiction of Moses in novels of the last hundred years or so. After surveying themes that abound in some thirty-four works of fiction, he focuses on a number of central themes: "the great man seen up close and depicted as everyman" (16); the polemical use of the character for ideological purposes; the appropriation of religious tradition "to repress and naturalize a range of cultural conflict" (17). Beyond these general ideas Britt is particularly interested in three novels that confront religious traditions rather than repress them. Lincoln Steffens's *Moses in Red*, Thomas Mann's *The Tables of the Law*, and Zora Neal Hurston's *Moses, Man of the Mountain* all offer more radical impressions of Moses. In contrast to Moses the heroic lawgiver, we find in Mann a satiric portrayal of Moses as a critique of Hitler. In place of the leader who establishes a just and enduring society, Steffens gives us a violent figure who destabilizes society for revolutionary ends. Instead of the rational lawgiver who leads the Israelites by means of established doctrine, Hurston presents Moses as a "fountain of mystic powers," a practitioner of magic, an African American "hoodoo man" who fights racism for the sake of all humanity. All three rewritings of Moses undercut the normative "great man" tradition of Moses and return us to the more complex and ambiguous biblical figure. This tension between what the Bible actually claims for Moses and how later interpreters have refashioned him is a central theme in Britt's study. He demonstrates quite convincingly how the need to make Moses a normative figure is counterbalanced by a tendency to subvert these images. While I was eager for more discussion of this tendency, Britt's agenda extends beyond the close analysis of these few works.

This agenda is brought out in a different way in chapters 2 and 4, where Britt addresses the visual portrayal of Moses, first in film and then in Christian art. The discussion of cinematic representations of Moses focuses on DeMille's two productions of *The Ten Commandments* (1923 and 1956), as well as *Moon of Israel* (1924) and the more contemporary animated retelling, *Prince of Israel* (1998). Perhaps the most striking difference between the text and the visual image is that "the biblical Moses is ... defined ... by his absence, while the Moses of film must necessarily be a figure of presence" (42). Britt brings out the significance of this insight for the depiction of Moses in his treatment of the phenomenon of doubling in film in order to offer a more complex portrait of the character. Thus Moses' ethnic ambiguity—Egyptian or Israelite—is developed extensively in all four films. A related form of doubling entails the casting of Moses in different gender stereotypes. DeMille, for instance, feminizes Moses in the early part of his career by his extensive contact with women, but after the revelation at the burning bush he becomes a very masculine hero. Britt is also sensitive to the tension between piety and entertainment in these films, especially in his discussion of *Prince of Egypt*, with its pop-

star soundtrack and computer-generated imagery. While these filmed “rewritings” tend to overshadow the biblical traditions more fully than novelistic depictions of Moses, Britt argues that techniques of visual representation such as doubling attempt to lend a more ambivalent nature to the character of Moses.

The discussion of Moses in Christian art focuses upon depictions of Moses’ veil, or mask, as described briefly in Exod 34:29–35. While the precise function of the mask in the biblical narrative remains unclear, it seems to denote a separation between Moses’ public and private roles. By contrast, Christian artistic representations tended to use Paul’s comment in 2 Cor 3 as their point of departure, where the law of Moses is described as veiled, in contrast to the true power of the divine that is revealed through Jesus. Britt points to a certain typological connection with the depiction of Synagogue whose eyes are covered by a similar veil, but he is careful not to equate the two. Rather, he draws out a more nuanced reading in which the veil is a reflection of “the dynamics of silence and speech, revelation and concealment, that are so central to Exod. 34.29–35” (110). Most suggestive is the depiction of the veil in the Farfa Bible from Catalan (eleventh–twelfth century), in which the illustration depicts both the face of Moses *and* the veil; the double perspective of the image reflects once again the ambivalence of the biblical text itself. Moses is thus not reducible to “the law” or to Judaism per se but remains a figure of great complexity even in the highly symbolic world of Christian art. After each foray into the world of art and literature Britt returns us to the biblical text, and this insistence upon the complexity of the text itself makes his postmodern interpretive enterprise most enjoyable and stimulating. This careful balancing act between the biblical text and its rewritings (or rescreenings) brings out the importance of careful attention to the text, even when the meaning seems obvious and straightforward.

Britt’s third chapter departs from the rest of the book and discusses five figures of nineteenth- and twentieth-century biblical scholarship—Wellhausen, Gressman, Noth, von Rad and Buber—and the type of Moses that each sought to reconstruct. The chapter is instructive in bringing out the tension between legend and history and between fragmentary readings and holistic ones. While it is important to Britt’s enterprise to explain the extent to which biblical scholarship has been unable to reach a consensus about the nature of Moses, the connection to the other chapters is less clear. It would perhaps have been more useful had these themes of legend and history been tied more closely to the concerns of the other chapters.

The last four chapters focus closely on issues in the biblical text itself: Moses’ complaint that he is “slow of speech” in Exod 4:10–17, the idea of the Torah of Moses in Deut 31–32, the coupling of song and blessing in Deut 32–33, and the stories of Moses’ birth and death. His readings of these biblical texts are original and highly nuanced, and they direct

the reader toward some of the issues that are addressed in the first part of the book. For example, in the chapter entitled “Moses’ Heavy Mouth,” Britt concludes that Moses’ speech impediment is best understood as a means of calling attention to Moses as a writing figure who gradually replaces a speaking one, just as writing overtakes the original spoken word and succeeds it as Torah. Not only is the spoken Decalogue transformed into written tablets, but, as this is inscribed in ever-larger circles of interpretation, the Bible moves from spoken to written prophecy and from an oral canon to a written one. Britt also invokes Buber’s notion of a tragic element in Moses and in revelation itself. Moses’ tragic flaw is in his “heaviness of mouth,” and, as Buber puts it, “it is laid upon the stammering to bring the voice of Heaven to Earth” (125). This chapter is a lovely example of what is most compelling about this part of Britt’s book: close textual reading leading to novel interpretation, which itself is pregnant with wider theological (and literary) ramifications.

In the final chapter, which focuses on the accounts of the birth and death of Moses, the concern with the written Moses (biography) and the writing Moses (Torah) is developed more fully. The entire section addresses different aspects of the body of Moses but examines them from a perspective different from that taken up in earlier chapters. On the one hand, Moses is unlike any other prophetic figure (Deut 34:7), yet he at the same time is the model for all other prophetic figures (Deut 18:18). How can Moses be both exemplary and completely unique? It is precisely this tension that Britt seeks to elucidate through art, midrash, film, and fiction, and most centrally through the biblical text itself. This mosaic of images is meant to reflect the Bible’s own collage of traditions about Moses, a figure who cannot be “assembled” once and for all but only reassembled, not simply written but essentially rewritten, over and over again.