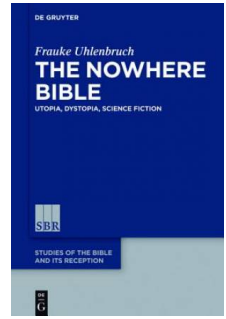
## *The Nowhere Bible: Utopia, Dystopia, Science Fiction*, by Frauke Uhlenbruch

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The following words appear near the end of Frauke Uhlenbruch's book, and they nicely summarize its contents:

> I started out most interested in what a utopian reading would tell us about an historical community of creators, but ended up being most interested in using utopia to show how method shapes result. On the way, I found that utopian readings say more about interpreting communities than about creating communities.... (192)

This is a divided book, torn between the longing for historical Truth that haunts the modernist ideology (and modernist biblical studies), and the longing for creativity, diversity, and plurality that draws the others of modernism, whether we call them post-colonialism, feminism, post-structuralism, queer theory, or some such.

The biblical text that is the central focus of this book is Numbers 13, the story of "spies" sent ahead of the Israelites to scout out the "promised land." Uhlenbruch's book itself seems to be a scouting foray into the prospects of a utopian reading of biblical texts, only not just one such foray, as in Numbers 13, but several of them, as though the spies went out many times and came back with various reports. After two introductory chapters, the next two chapters (3 and 4) deal with questions related to the value of thinking of a text as utopia for understanding of "an historical community of creators." In other words, can utopia studies say anything of interest to historical study of the Bible: its relation to historical reality, to the author's intention or how early readers would have understood it, the relevance of the genre of utopia, etc.? Uhlenbruch's conclusions tend to be negative, but she seems unable to drop these issues, and some of them recur later in the book. It is as though she can't break free from thinking of the Numbers text in historical terms.

For example, she recognizes that the category of "utopia" is anachronistic, at best a heuristic, but she returns to the matter later in the book (in regard to dystopia, which is basically the same category). However, genre categories are inevitably anachronistic, as all reading is inevitably anachronistic, even the most "objective" and scholarly. Does anyone use Aristotle's categories of tragedy and epic any more? Do we even know how he used those categories, except through our own (anachronistic) understanding of his writings today? There is an extensive and relevant literature on genre theory and the limits of genre categories, which Uhlenbruch unfortunately does not note.

The next three chapters are chiefly concerned with "how method shapes result." In chapter 5, Uhlenbruch examines ways that William Bradford and Cotton Mather drew upon and rewrote Numbers 13 in their accounts of early American colonial settlement. This in turn leads her to insightful considerations of maps and boundaries. In the next chapter, she examines the Numbers text in light of the complex and fluid relation between utopia considered as a good place ("eu-topia") and dystopia. This chapter concludes with an excursus on literary fantasy, with a helpful discussion of Rosemary Jackson and Eric Rabkin's views on the topic. However, Uhlenbruch's description of Tzvetan Todorov's distinctions between the uncanny and the marvelous and between the poetic and the allegorical seem deficient to me. In chapter 9, she explores the relation between utopia and science fiction using intertextual (although she does not use that word) readings of Numbers 13 with recent science-fiction novels and TV shows. Her comparison of the Nephilim with science-fiction cyborgs, drawing upon Donna Haraway, is especially intriguing.

The concluding chapter is very brief, but in it Uhlenbruch suggests an application of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of the rhizome (from *A Thousand Plateaus*) to questions of reception and transmission of culture. This suggests to me further thoughts about Numbers 13. As the Bible tells the story, there were just two reports brought back to the Israelites, but there were twelve spies. If this were a more realistic narrative, would there not be at least some disagreement between Joshua and Caleb? And would the ten others all speak as one, or would they also describe different versions of the land? Would this diversity of spies not lead to what Uhlenbruch calls the "hermeneutic free-for-all" that results outside of "academic debates about [the Bible's] historicity" (81–82). She uses these phrases to warn against careless use of the texts for narrow dogmatic purposes, but do they apply also to those scholars who have little use for debates about historicity? Then

the obscured diversity of the ten "slanderers" might correspond to those post-colonialist, feminist, post-structuralist, queer or other readers who treat Numbers 13 or other biblical texts without "proper" regard for historical discipline.

Yet as I noted above, later in her book Uhlenbruch seems to join this group. This is the division within the book that she mentions in the quote at the beginning of this review. Perhaps we have here a scholar who is herself migrating from one place to another, in hope that her new "home" will not be nowhere. If so, I wish her well.

This book is generally well-written, but excessive redundancies in the text and numerous repeated citations and even footnotes suggest hasty proofreading. In addition to the chapters that I have mentioned, there is a brief preface and a single index that includes terms, names, and other biblical references. A separate index of authors is unfortunately not included. I recommend the book to anyone with special interests in utopia studies of the Bible or the book of Numbers.

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