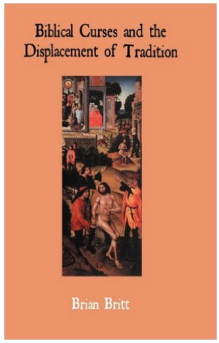
Biblical Curses and the Displacement of Tradition, by Brian Britt



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Virginia Tech professor Brian Britt presents this far-reaching study on biblical curses and their reception history. Britt's introduction clearly sets out his goals for the book, especially the importance of distinguishing between the general power of curses in the ancient world and the general profanity of curses in early modern Europe and beyond. From the beginning, Britt provides his readers with the ambiguity and complexity of defining *curses*:

> The first [tension], of course, is whether and to what degree a curse i[s] efficacious. Is it a wish, a promise, or is the curse in itself the performance of actual harm? Sorting this out requires attention to the rhetorical patterns of the curse in their literary and cultural contexts. A second tension of curses concerns agency: who pronounces the curse, who (or what) carries it out, and how are the two related? Third, it is not always clear whether a curse is conditional or irrevocable. Certain oaths and curses appear to bind the swearer to certain actions; others appear unconditional, bringing harm no matter what one does. No system of classification based on rhetoric or semantics alone resolves these basic tensions. (3)

Britt elucidates that these ambiguities emerge from the cultural conditionality of curses—that is, from the dependence of curses upon their believability by the involved parties. This conditional potency is a foundational concept for Britt's larger argument on biblical curses. Equally as important is Britt's emphasis on *Biblical Curses* as a cultural study, since—as he notes—the mention of curses is far more prominent than the actual performance of curses throughout our literary sources. As an essential point of contact, *Biblical Curses* studies both the "power of speech" as well as the "power of the power of speech" in the potentiality/mention of curses. Britt expands upon James Scott's groundbreaking work on domination and hidden transcripts in order to suggest that curses often come from the politically disinherited, as Britt convincingly presents throughout this book.

Alongside these core definitions and nuanced presuppositions for his study, Britt also vigorously critiques post-Enlightenment convictions concerning a sacred/secular dichotomy. He meticulously traces the dynamics of cursing in the modern era through the works of Kant, Nietzsche, MacIntyre, Freud, Foucault, and Benjamin. Chief among his critiques at this point is the supposed sharp divide between the primitive "religious" epoch and the scientific, rational "secular" epoch. Instead of perpetuating this historically problematic and uncritical division, Britt suggests that we use Freud's concept of "displacement" in order to describe "manifest shifts and hidden continuities from one set of texts and discourses [such as 'religion'] to others [such as 'secular' law, commerce, and science], but unlike secularization, which sees 'religion' simplistically, displacement recognizes the complexities of tradition" (16). As is evident from the book's title, this concept of displacement is essential to Britt's analysis of biblical curses in Western thought. Britt persuasively argues that curses have not simply been relegated to a primitive and religious past, but are still relevant for modern discourse concerning the relationship between speech and power.

In the first section of *Biblical Curses*, Britt focuses primarily on the mention of curses in the Hebrew Bible and their social-historical contexts. He begins by, again, emphasizing the ambiguity of cursing even within scripture, since three words (אלה, קלל, ארר) have typically been translated as "curse." Just as was mentioned in the introduction, most of the references to curses involve actually the *mention* of curses rather than the actual *performance*, revealing to Britt's readers that the mere mention of the power of speech can be potentially efficacious (although it is difficult to tell when curses in the Hebrew Bible are actually efficacious). Britt's caution concerning the defini-

tion and the usefulness of curses in the Hebrew Bible is much needed—he is careful not to assume that the mention of curses means that their consequences occurred, nor that the Israelite scribes had a systematic conception of curses. Britt also questions the source of power for these ancient curses. Must one always invoke a god/God? As he wrestles with in a later chapter, how would Job's self-curse fit into such invocations, since Job seemingly challenges divine sovereignty and perhaps indirectly curses God?

In his dealing with covenant curses, Britt avoids the uncritical assumption of Christian progression over primitive Judaism (cf. Wellhausen, Weber, Berger) that still assume a post-Enlightenment rationalism within covenant theology—nor does Britt yield to the concept of "eternal recurrence" that claims rituals break one free of history in order to participate in sacred time (cf. Eliade, Levenson). Instead, Britt utilizes James Scott's "hidden transcripts" and John Austin's "speech acts" for the purpose of interpreting the effectiveness of curses and revitalization of covenant. As an example, Britt examines Exod 12–13 and notes that the cutting of animals in sacrifice is (perhaps ironically) reversed as a curse, such that the cutting will happen those involved in the covenant if they fail to uphold their part. Through this approach, Britt urges readers of the Hebrew Bible to appreciate the ritual aspects of covenant as much as (if not more than) the legal aspects of covenant. This imperative is much needed, since the typical "legal" approach to covenant often assumes early modern or modern conceptions of legality that simply do not fit into an Israelite context.

Britt deals directly with the role of ethnicity in Israelite curses through examination of Gen 9 and Josh 9. In the case of Genesis and Joshua, he finds that Israelite identity is apophatic, thereby distinguishing itself from the surrounding Canaanites and Gibeonites through curses—such a curse gives an etiological explanation and a retrojected backstory for the Levantine rivalries. Following Scott, Britt notes that the curses seem to be "weapons of the weak" and are given in an ad hoc (not ritualized) manner. In addition to emphasizing identity boundaries, Britt also reveals that the consequences of the curse upon the Gibeonites are effeminate, as they are threatened with the role of water-carrier and hewer of food. These Torah curses utilize ethnic and gendered language as part of the spontaneous (not ritualized) Israelite cursing. Most importantly in this section, Britt argues that "ethnicity" is neither universal nor self-evident—rather, ancient ethnicity appears to concern cultural-religious differences and the reification of such differences in collective-social memory. This critique urges readers to reexamine the use of

curses in identity formation as well as often-uncritical perceptions of ancient ethnicity.

The first section concludes with a fascinating examination of Job 3 and Jer 20 due to their uses of self-cursing. Britt exhaustively details the parallels between Job 3 and other Near Eastern texts concerning "cursing the day" and the role of divinities in such curses, as well as examining the poetic structure of Job 3 through the work of Adele Berlin and James Kugel. The most intriguing discovery concerning Job is the apparent paradox of his self-cursing: Job creatively asserts his selfhood and his own power in order to curse himself, yet his curse is wishing his own absence and powerlessness. Britt gives a powerful description of this self-contradiction and its nearly-postmodern implications:

> Job's curse is doubly paradoxical: by defying expectations of a pious individual in cursing the day of his birth, he performs a radical kind of self-assertion through an explicit wish for self-annihilation. But as a fictional being, Job can neither assert himself nor wish for his own non-existence. In order for the words of Job 3 to have meaning or power, the reader must suspend disbelief and imagine they have meaning or power. A figure of gossamer inscribed in a text, Job is nevertheless a figure rich with emotional expression and subjective reflection. (97)

Job's (meta-)speech act reveals the complexity of such self-cursing and the amount of knowledge concerning self-cursing that modern readers might still tease out after Britt's compelling examination of Job 3. To touch upon reception history, Britt presents how this self-curse finds its way into post-biblical laments among the Saint Job guild of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as well as the late antique *Testament of Job*. As Britt notes, Job became a figure of music and poetry, perhaps due to those arts' self-expressive possibilities.

The second section of *Biblical Curses* examines early modern expressions of cursing and the ideological "displacements" that occurred in the post-Enlightenment era. As a starting point, Britt meticulously critiques the traditional viewpoint of Enlightenment accounts that place early modern Europe in a "period of secularization." As a contrast, Britt distinguishes secularization (the process of removing sectors of society from religious authority) from secularism (a tangible decline in religion)—as he notes, the Bible is still taken

seriously in the seventeenth century, although it was not a primary factor in public discourse anymore. Following Bruce Lincoln, Britt suggests that religion does not diminish during this time period, but rather takes on new forms, as secular institutions still made use of religious symbols or rituals. In this time period, Britt sees the curse as being displaced into the realm of "profanity"—still retaining its religious context to an extent, yet while the potency of such curses declined. Britt helps his readers distinguish between the ancient and early modern contexts through the changing perception of speech and power. Through the writings of Hobbes, Locke, and Milton, Britt discovers that Enlightenment rationalization separates speech from action, thereby weakening the aforementioned "power of the power of speech" in biblical curses. Other figures like Daniel Defoe, author of *Robinson Crusoe*, directly question the effectiveness of curses as a worthless breach of manners and instead suggest the benefits of blessing. When cursing was used in the early modern era, Britt notes that it became a "hallmark of masculinity" for its challenge to institutionalization, much like the Reformation critique of the Catholic Church (146). As the first chapter of this section, Britt's most important contributions include the critique of secular society's effects upon the displacement and continuation of curses, as well as the growing conception of individuality that accompanied this evolving culture of cursing.

The second section also deals with ballads of the early modern era, primarily by Samuel Coleridge and William Wordsworth. Britt notes how Romantic writing displaced theology as well as displacing the people from the elite. In this context, Britt suggests that cursing became less of a supernatural power and more of a marker of socioeconomic success—as makes sense due to the rationalization of the Enlightenment era. Rustic language was usurped by elite classes, as well as the ability and effectiveness of cursing. Britt's contribution at this point reveals how the "words of the weak" utilized through the power of cursing is displaced to higher classes, yet cursing is still identified with those who are deemed "weak."

Britt also examines cursing in the writings of Nietzsche and Freud as a conclusion to his modern analysis of cursing's "displacement." While sifting through biblical allusion and cursing in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Genealogy of Morals*, and *The Antichrist*, Britt finds that Nietzsche views the Israelite God as an über-speech act, whose existence would act as "revenge" against the stronger opponents of Israel. Also, Britt's reading of Nietzsche reveals the necessity of disrupting tradition and dogma—rather than simply "breaking the tablets" and starting religion over, Nietzsche suggests that we disrupt our

search for canon. In Britt's reading of this claim from *Zarathustra*, paired with Nietzsche's negative portrayal of Christianity in *The Antichrist*, he suggests that Christianity (and religious language in general) has become a latent tool for Nietzsche—one that he cannot avoid even in his attempts at disruption. Although Nietzsche believes that Christianity now relies on curses in its "weakness," religious symbolism and ritual has been displaced and transformed within Nietzsche's own method of discourse. Similarly with Freud, Britt critiques his inability to recognize that anti-religious bias makes him blind to religious dimensions of psychological disorders (cf. "Rat Man" in *Case Studies*; *Interpretation of Dreams*). Consistently with the rest of his book, Britt reminds his reader that "displacement" tears down the grand narratives of progress and/or decline that both Nietzsche and Freud often assumed in their studies. Britt's complication of these boundaries, as well as the modern boundaries between secular and religious, should compel his readers to reconsider the guised impact of religious symbolism and thought in the early modern era.

Finally, section 3 concerns the contemporary usage of curses, especially in relation to fiction, erasure, and hate speech. Britt begins this section by discussing curses in American fiction (e.g. Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat" and Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation"), within which the authors explain seemingly natural events with supernatural causes as well as debate the efficacy of speech. While examining curses and speech in "Sweat," Britt finds that literature seems to take on a life of its own, so that literature should be feared and the "magic of literature" is questioned by the apotropaic literary criticism. "Revelation" similarly uses religious symbolism in O'Connor's depiction of divinely motivated, conditional curses. In both narratives, Britt notes that cursing is displaced from early modern "blasphemy" to "cussing," perhaps due to the lack of God in the narratives.

Britt then moves on to examine the curse category of "erasure" through the texts of Derrida and Exod 17. Similarly to the paradox of self-affirmation and self-effacement in Job 3, erasure relies upon the presence of a word before it can be erased—negation and affirmation are intertwined. The paradox, in Britt's reading, becomes even more complex when one recognized that the command of erasure (cf. Exod 17) is *written down*. How does one forget what is written down and read aloud often? Perhaps Britt's most important interpretation in this section is that the ability to "erase" a name or "write" a name in the book is part of public/collective memory for early readers-hearers of Exodus, such that remembrance becomes a communal act. Britt gives an

example of this communal paradox of erasure in the Festival of Purim, where the Amalekite Haman's name was yelled and yet was drowned out with the shouting of other names—erasure thereby brings out remembrance and forgottenness. Britt's examination of this second paradoxical use of cursing and speech should again encourage readers to dig deeper into the complexities of the power of speech for communal destruction.

Britt's final chapter of section 3 concerns the growing questions of hate speech and political (re)action to such speech in the twenty-first century. Most importantly, Britt notes that opponents of hate speech advocate for a definition of hate speech that recognizes the *power of words*—power that the Enlightenment tried to detach from action (cf. Hobbes). Britt convincingly urges modern readers to join him in questioning the ever-present secular/sacred divide, especially in discussions of hate speech and political action that would be benefited by his concept of "displacement." Expanding upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Britt claims that the power of speech is related to social structures, yet speech is ambiguous per se—speech can be oppressive or subversive depending on their contexts. Britt gives the example of Salman Rushdie's *fatwa*, a form of speech that held power because traditional interpretations of Islam give credence to its power. Again, Britt reminds his readers that curses (and many other forms of speech) rely upon both parties recognizing the efficacy of the speech and the consequences thereof. Since secular society often discredits the "power of words" and rather sees words as a vehicle of communication and meaning, Western society fails to see the "religious" aspects of the supposed "secular" fight against hate speech. In Britt's own words, "the remedy doesn't fit the rule" (269). Western culture generally understands obscenity and its religious overtones and has thereby established obscenity laws—yet, the same cultures fail to view curses/cursing with religious implications and enforce cursing laws. Britt points to the radical Israeli group Pulsa Denura and the Westboro Baptist Church as examples of modern extreme groups who use curses (either performatively or through mere mention). In both cases, Britt makes clear that curses can be a political weapon because secular laws fail to take the efficacy of their claims (and curses) seriously—secular societies, from Britt's perspective, need to learn how to deal with speech in so-called "religious" contexts.

Overall, *Biblical Curses and the Displacement of Tradition* provides readers with a powerful study that attempts to disrupt the early modern secular/sacred divide with Britt's concept of "displacement." This book should encourage scholars and readers to reexamine these Enlightenment-era bina-

ries and instead look for the evolution and afterlives of biblical concepts such as cursing. Britt urges us toward future analyses of the paradoxical speech acts involved in Job 3 and biblical erasure, as well as reconsideration of the modern activism for abolishment of hate speech.

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