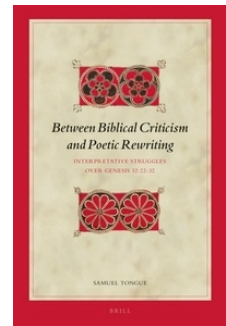


*Between Biblical Criticism and Poetic Rewriting:
Interpretative Struggles Over Genesis 32:22–32,*
by Samuel Tongue

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Tongue opens with the statement, “[t]his work is haunted by religion.” But what is religion? A quote from Timothy Beal takes this further: is it “a kind of *binding* (from the Latin, *religare*) or “a *process of reading again... (relegere)*.” Tongue follows this with “I argue that biblical interpretation proceeds by culturally constructed and critically legitimized retellings” (1). Tongue then sets out to make a strong case for including and critically legitimizing poetic retellings or rewritings as a vital means of interpretation. This entails not only engaging with the critical biblical tradition, but equally with the work of scholars in the wider literary and philosophical fields. To the “Big Three,”



writer, text, and reader, Tongue wishes to add a fourth: “the rewriter that produces more texts that participate in the meaning-making processes” (109). Interpretation by poetic retelling is to be understood as “paragesis,” combining “exegetical, eisegetical and intergetical performances” (2). Tongue is well aware of the current biblical academic context, where the historical-critical and the literary, with all its sub-branches, are so often at odds with each other. He is arguing that paragetical poetic retellings go beyond this tension that “labels one imaginative production as art and performative artifice and another as critically realist and thus more epistemologically legitimate” (146).

There is, however, a background that needs to be explored. So in chapter one, Tongue traces the origin(s) of modern biblical interpretation to the intellectual movements of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, with the Enlightenment-Romantic divide being particularly significant, as was Robert Lowth’s and Johann Gottfried Herder’s moves to include the poetic in their interpretation. Authority and the demand for “authoritative” scholarship was key, leading to the tension between literary aesthetic and historical textual excavation. The question is raised, is there a religious Bible-as-Document and another Bible-as-Poetry and aesthetic object? Tongue’s view: “I am not arguing for separate ideal Bibles that then exist in isolation from one another: ideal Bibles inform and create one another through their readers’ different emphases and disciplinary identities” (36).

The title of chapter 2, “Biblical Studies and Postmodern Poetics; or, ‘Gentlemanly’ Readers Meet ‘Uncouth Hydra Readers’” offers a sense of Tongue’s lively and engaging style, which makes reading this work such a pleasure. It is not only a matter of careful detailed argument but engagement with a wide range of scholars brought into the conversation. Stephen Moore and Yvonne Sherwood are here with their *Critical Manifesto*.¹ Derrida, too, as Tongue draws upon his concept of the *pharmakon*, with its “anguish of writing” that “causes creative tensions in consigning sense and reference to biblical texts” (7). Michel de Certeau and Roland Boer are partners in discussing the concept of “realism” or the “fantasies of realism” (110), which Tongue sees lying behind much biblical criticism. This leads to the next sub-heading *Elephants in the Many Rooms of Historical Criticism* (113). Where does the

¹ Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), noting that this was read in its earlier *Biblical Interpretation* publications.

literary fit in? Can it be overlooked? If, on the one hand, much critical realist work “attempts to side step (or, more simply, ignore) postmodern difficulties around linguistic representation” (121), the historical and the literary, “always struggling to be autonomous from the authority of one another,” are, in fact, “intimately bound together” (114). The chapter closes with the image of reader/text communication “always already run across with bindings and ligatures that hum like telegraph wires, murmuring with assent and dissent.” Poetic retellings are a way of “trying to make some sense from the murmur and babble thrumming from different lines of communication” (119–20).

Chapter 3 then takes a detour to consider how writers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Philip Sidney, echoed in turn by later critics, understood poetry, before the move to “Disciplining the Imagination in Biblical Studies” (130). Imagination and the critic as a *bricoleur*! In biblical studies! We need reminding of the “noises (and silences)” that murmur and disrupt the flow of reading, “the angels that pass as we are trying to read or to hear the ‘un-coded’ messages” (155). It is a matter of the semiotic realities of language where “words as signifiers relate to one another” (156). Derrida, Serres, Ricoeur, and J. Hollis Miller join the “noisy” conversation as the knotty questions of language and literature are raised. How is meaning gained and what constitutes meaning?

Having set out the theoretical complexities in the first three chapters, Tongue now introduces the text announced in the book’s subtitle (Gen 32:22–32), under the heading *Enacting Canonicity: Parageses in the Anatomy of Angels*. He gives warning of “thicken[ing]” the analysis, and indeed proceeds to do so. “We shall also continue to question the ‘hospitality’ of parageitcal approaches to a Bible that is both host and guest of the literary and is, perhaps, hostile to being retold in certain ways” (168). But is it the Bible or the Academy that shows such hostility? Texts and scholars again jostle for space: George Aichele, John Barton, Philip Davies, and then Hosea (12:2–6). Calvin and Luther follow, and a stream of others, wrestling in turn with concepts of canon as well as the textual wrestler of Gen 32. The matter of “canon” and the nature of the Bible (which Tongue consistently capitalizes) seems inescapable. Tongue writes of the poet “renting a room” (187). What does this mean? For Tongue, “the Bible’s open and shifting canonicity... invites retelling, a rearranging of the furniture, a new coat of colourful gloss, to remain hospitable to the present” (193). But might the retelling be “a parasitic guest”? And in this “intertextual hospitality” how are the “arrangements between guest and host (to) be constituted?” (194).

The way is now open for the poetic retellings. Here I encountered a difficulty: the poems were not included in full. The apposite lines were quoted but I needed to see them in context so had to resort to google and the local university library (one poem remained inaccessible). Perhaps a matter of copyright? Alden Nowlan, Yehuda Amichai, Jamie Wasserman, Michael Symmons Roberts, Michael Schmidt, and David Kinloch were the poets engaging with the wrestling Jacob, in this and the following chapter, each rewriting differently, seeing the characters differently, in different settings, to different effect. As Tongue writes, “the undecideability of what is happening at the Jabbok river is fundamental to its interpretative otherlives” (259). But is this biblical criticism? A quote from Miller, introduced for the second time, set me straight: “Criticism is the production of more threads to embroider the texture or textile already there.” As Tongue writes, “the biblical critic and the poet choose to write... different filaments” (220–21). Both are biblical interpreters. The poets, in their rented rooms, are not only displaying the richness of the Genesis text, both in what it displays and what it does not, but highlighting the complexities. How to understand Jacob’s wound, with its matter of “Reading ‘Below the Belt’ in the Critical Wrestle” as the subheading words it. And the nature of the wrestler? If divine, how is divinity to be understood? David Kinloch plays on the question: “Tryin tae get the shot. In focus like.... Hit the button. Jeezus! Naw! It wasny him. But somewun, something.”² “Focalization on the spectacle of the struggle” (243) leads to the matter of the “male gaze.” Is this a sight/site of male power or male vulnerability? Male? While Nowlan’s wrestler is an angel with “sturdy calves, moist heavy armpits.... She wore a cobra like a girdle.”³

Chapter 5 ends with the challenge: “Might a turn to the ‘space of literature’ offer more nuance to the work currently being done in ‘Reception History,’ recasting the traditional modes of biblical criticism as part of the cultural history of a given biblical text rather than the final word on the subject?” (260) While many reception studies do include references to poetic retellings, these are usually set within the more traditional critical genre rather than providing its body. The Conclusion both summarises and adds. To choose one final quote: “the paragesis, with its roots in the literary even as it feeds from the work produced in biblical criticism, keeps a foot in the door that allows for other aesthetic-ethical readings to enter” (265). Bibli-

² David Kinloch, “Jacob and the Angel,” *Un Tour d’Ecosse* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2001).

³ Alden Nowlan, “The Anatomy of Angels,” *Under the Ice* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1961).

cal afterlives in music, film, art and popular culture are increasingly being explored. Poetic paragesis adds a further enrichment. We surely need all of these.

A review cannot do justice to the richness of the argument with its many facets, as it provokes and excites with possibility. Tongue's own poetic language is a bonus.

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