# FROM PLATO TO ADAM

## THE BIBLICAL EXEGESIS OF WALTER BENJAMIN

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Walter Benjamin finds the Bible a slippery text. For all his interest over a number of writings, especially 'The Task of the Translator', 'On Language as Such and the Language of Man' and *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, and for all the efforts to develop a theory of history deeply indebted to the Bible, the biblical text trips him up, refusing to provide what he wishes to find. This article traces those difficulties.

My concern is with the practice and problems of biblical exegesis in the hands of Walter Benjamin. For all the attention given to Benjamin's thought, relatively little has engaged with his reflections on the Bible, and hardly anything focuses on his exegesis of biblical texts.[1] I find this somewhat strange, since Benjamin obsesses over the first few chapters of Genesis and then the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11: 1-9. Time and again he returns to them, pursuing the implications of the Fall and the moment before, the notion of origin, Adam's naming of the animals, and then the dispersal of language in the Babel narrative. In what follows I draw upon three key texts by Benjamin: the 'Prologue' to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (Benjamin 1998; 1974–89 vol 1), 'On Language as Such and the Language of Man' (Benjamin 1996: 62–74; 1974–89 vol 2: 140–57) and 'The Task of the Translator' (Benjamin 1996: 253–63; 1974–89 vol 4: 9–21).

Rather than convenient vehicles for developing his thoughts on origin, language and history, the biblical texts are troublesome sites for Benjamin, for they will not yield up the reading he wants. He resorts to the Bible in order to answer distinct problems in the philosophies of language and translation and their pernicious manifestations in the everyday life of burgeoning capitalism. However, he soon faces problems of his own, ones that emerge from his struggle with the biblical texts: those texts refuse to give him what he wants and continue to reject his schemas for reading them. In response, he bounces off them into the theological ether, but not before he has pinpointed some crucial questions.

## THE FATHER OF PHILOSOPHY

The prologue to the *Trauerspiel* book initiates a comprehensive criticism of the prevailing tradition of the philosophy of history in Germany, as well as art history and literary history, particularly those elements working from subject philosophy (see Hanssen 1998: 25). Benjamin had two particular elements in the philosophy of history in mind: historicism, specifically the inductivism of empiricist forms of historicism in the humanities as that was found in art history and literary studies; and the neo-Kantian distinction between the historical and natural sciences as part of a transcendental philosophy. The prologue itself falls into three sections: an answer to epistemology and transcendental philosophy by means of an interpretation of Platonic Forms and of the biblical notion of the divine Word; a response to art and literary history and the philosophy of history itself in terms of 'origin' (*Ursprung*); and a focus on the history of the *Trauerspiel* itself, as well as Baroque, whose precursor is the medieval mystery play while the successor is expressionism.

I am, however, interested in Adam, so let me bring the crucial quotation to the fore:

> Ultimately, however, this is not the attitude of Plato, but the attitude of Adam, the father of the human race and the father of philosophy. Adam's action of naming things is so far removed from play or caprice that it actually confirms the state of paradise as a state in which there is as yet no need to struggle with the communicative significance of words (Benjamin 1996: 37; 1974–89 vol 1: 217).

Key biblical motifs appear in Benjamin's text – Adam's naming, his role as father of the human race, and the state of paradise. The focus here is Genesis 2, the narrative of the second creation story (in contrast to the first one in Genesis 1) before the Fall in Genesis 3. More specifically, Benjamin is fascinated with Gen 2: 18-23, where Adam names the animals and then the woman, all in search of a 'helper'. One after another, all the birds of the air and the animals of the field are brought before Adam, in short, 'every living creature' (Gen 2: 19). All of them Yahweh Elohim, the god of this passage, brings before Adam to see if they are fit for him as a helper. None is suitable, until the last in the series, the woman from his side.

I have a couple of problems with Benjamin's brief reading of Genesis. Firstly, in his invocation of Adam he isolates the first man. To be sure, God is present, but where are Eve and the serpent? Indeed, if we look closely at the story of Genesis 3 – the narrative of the Fall – it turns out that the only one who speaks truthfully in the story is the serpent. Is the serpent perhaps the first philosopher, whose interlocutor is none other than Eve? Secondly, as far as Benjamin is concerned, Adam is more interesting for what he does not do: his action is neither play nor caprice, and the words-as-names do not provide a struggle for communicative significance. What is going on here? To begin with, language that is playful, capricious, communicative and intentional is none other than the language of the 'Fall', a language we will see emerge with the Tower of Babel story. Neither playful nor capricious? In his all too serious metaphysical search, Benjamin misses the play and humour of the passage. Here we find a rather bumbling god, one who is not quite sure what this new creature, the 'Adam' made from the Adamah, the ground, requires. So he produces an endless stream of animals, brings them before the man, who woefully shakes his head and names the animal in question before it walks, flies or crawls off. In light of the cry of relief by Adam when he wakes to find the woman created beside him – 'This finally is bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman (ishah), for out of Man (ish) this one was taken' (Gen 2:23) – the implication is that his efforts at copulating with the animals proved to be futile and somewhat unsatisfying.

Let us return to Benjamin's troubled reading. This is not the only time he takes on capricious and communicative language, for we will come across it again in his essay 'On Language as Such and the Language of Man'. However, in the prologue to the *Trauerspiel* book he has another target: the question of truth and the legacy of Plato's Forms. Over against the tension between contingency and the transcendental realm of the Forms, in which our everyday reality is but an imperfect copy of the truth of the Forms, Benjamin argues that truth is linguistic: 'Truth is not an intent which realises itself in empirical reality. The state of being, beyond all phenomenality, to which alone this power belongs, is that of the name' (Benjamin 1998: 36; 1974–89 vol 1: 216). It is not just that Plato's forms are trumped by Adam's naming; Benjamin plays with his reader here, recasting one Platonic category after another in Adamic terms. Thus, the Forms themselves should be understood as 'deified words' and 'verbal concepts'. Further, since the

philosopher cannot speak in the terms of revelation, like the theologian, recourse must be made to remembering. But this suggestion echoes Plato's anamnesis, the process of recalling the Forms that had been forgotten at the moment of birth. For Benjamin, who continues to tease, memory is none other than the memory of Adam, through whom the Form regains 'its name-giving rights' (Benjamin 1998: 37; 1974–89 vol 1: 217). In other words, Plato's ideal Forms should really be understood in terms of Adam's act of naming in paradise: the eidos becomes the divine dabar.

At this point a whole theory of the nature of language has entered the text of the Prologue, in the context of which truth takes on a linguistic form and the task of philosophy is the remembrance and renewal of the primordial, that is Adamic, nature of language. Yet, Benjamin's theory of language appears only in the barest outline here, as bare as his commentary on Genesis, but he alludes to another work that forms the larger backdrop to this one, bustling on as it does to another point.

## LINEAMENTS OF THE FALL

That other work is the early essay, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' (Benjamin 1996: 62–74; 1974–89 vol 2: 140–157), which has, along with the translation essay, become central for Benjamin criticism. Here he lays out a linguistic theory that turns on the Fall, dividing what comes before – the pure language of naming – from what comes after – the bourgeois language of 'prattle'. This text is, among other things, a sustained exegesis of the first chapters of Genesis. Let me begin by outlining his argument and then move on to the way he deals with the text.

### ARGUMENT

However, rather than allowing the narrative sequence in these chapters of Genesis, or even the logic of Benjamin's argument that follows a similar trail, to influence my own reading, I begin with the Fall. The catch is that the Fall includes the Tower of Babel (Gen 11: 1-9), although he notes in passing that it comes somewhat later than the story of Eve, the serpent, the fruit and Adam in Genesis 3 (Benjamin 1996: 70; 1974–89 vol 2: 151–152). As for the consequences of such a Fall, Benjamin focuses on its linguistic features. It leads, he argues, to a multiplicity of human languages and thereby of translations, as well as of human knowledge. Further, the Fall produces the human word, 'in which name no longer lives intact and which has stepped out of name-language' (Benjamin 1996: 71; 1974–89 vol 2: 153). And what is the nature of that new human word? 'The word must communicate *something* (other than itself). In that fact lies the true Fall of the spirit of language' (Benjamin 1996: 71; 1974–89 vol 2: 153). This fallen language is none other than the bourgeois conception of language, in which *language intentionally communicates factual subject matter*.

What Benjamin does here is set up his theory of language over against a series of opponents. These ideological opponents enable Benjamin to construct his response, collectively appearing under the empty and invalid 'bourgeois conception of language' (Benjamin 1996: 65; 1974–89 vol 2: 144). Such language communicates a message, passed intentionally from speaker to addressee: 'It holds that the means of communication is the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being' (Benjamin 1996: 65; 1974–89 vol 2: 144). Further, bourgeois linguistic theory argues that there is an accidental relation between word and object, agreed to by some explicit

or implied convention. Or, to use the words from the Prologue to the *Trauerspiel* book, it is capricious and playful. Language becomes nothing other than a system of '*mere* signs' (Benjamin 1996: 69; 1974–89 vol 2: 150, italics in text). However, Benjamin does not respond to such a position with another; he prefers to account for it within the alternative theory that he proposes.

Let us stay with this bourgeois language for a moment: this 'externally communicating word' is of the same ilk as the knowledge of Good and Evil – a promise delivered by the serpent (Gen 3:5, 22). Such language is for Benjamin 'prattle' (*Geschwätz*), which designates both the word itself outside judgement and decision (Fenves 1996: 91) and empty and communicative language. This intriguing word, 'prattle', recurs at other points. A few lines later Benjamin aligns 'the abyss of prattle' with 'the empty word', 'the word as means', 'the abyss of the mediateness of all communication' (Benjamin 1996: 72; 1974–89 vol 2: 154). Not only does he thereby characterise the language of the law – as the prattle that emerged after eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil – but this 'prattle' also marks that same bourgeois language that has already appeared, especially the word as empty and as a means of communication. Finally, he connects prattle with the Babel story, where the decline of language into prattle relates directly to confusion, a consequence of the multiplicity of language. The argument in relation to Babel is subtle: it is not that language itself is confused, but that the signs themselves are confused because of the entanglement of things. 'Prattle' marks the law, communicative language and the confusion of signs. It is in direct contrast to language before the Fall: the contemplation of things that marks the purity of the name. Over against the Edenic essential connection between the name and a thing, after the Fall the relation between sign and thing goes awry. In other words, we have 'prattle'. But what is Benjamin's target with this discussion of 'prattle'? It is his way of criticising the assumption that names have an entirely arbitrary relation to things. While such a criticism of 'bourgeois language' has only hints of the Marxist analyses that would follow, in his essay on Karl Kraus (Benjamin 1999: 433–458; 1974–89 vol 2: 334–367), he explicitly argues that capitalism is the post-lapsarian world in which Kraus resists the base 'prattle' (*Geschwätz)* of journalism, relevance and inauthentic language. Kraus is for Benjamin the one who holds onto to the ideal language of creation, a latter day Adam for whom the language of naming is still an option.

By now the mist of my argument should be clearing, but there is one further step, namely a summary of the three consequences of the Fall.

> For the essential composition of language, the Fall has a threefold significance (in addition to its other meanings). In stepping outside the purer language of name, man makes language a means (that is, a knowledge inappropriate to him), and therefore also, in one part at any rate, a *mere* sign; and this later results in the plurality of languages. The second meaning is that from the Fall, in exchange for the immediacy of name that was damaged by it, a new immediacy arises: the magic of judgement, which no longer rests blissfully in itself. The third meaning that can perhaps be tentatively ventured is that the origin of abstraction, too, as a faculty of the spirit of language, is to be sought in the Fall. For good and evil, being unnameable and nameless, stand outside the language of names, which man leaves behind precisely in the abyss opened by this question (Benjamin 1996: 71–72; 1974–89 vol 2: 153–154, italics in text).

In the Fall, then, the name becomes a mere sign, language a means, judgement an external magic, and abstraction itself emerges – marked by 'good' and 'evil'. Each of these features is part of the bourgeois linguistic theory that Benjamin takes on in this text. But what he attempts here is a way of dealing with the emergence of such a theory in the first place and his choice is the biblical myth of the Fall.

But what is this pre-lapsarian theory of language that is so important for Benjamin, underlying as it does the prologue to the *Trauerspiel* book, as also the translation essay? Benjamin argues that in opposition to the bourgeois theory of language such a pure language 'knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication. It means: *in the name, the mental being of man communicates itself to God*' (Benjamin 1996: 65; 1974–89 vol 2: 144). This argument relies on the isolation of what Benjamin calls 'mental being', which I take, somewhat crudely, as a contemplative inner process that does not rely on any external being. It is, in short, the self-sufficiency of God and of the first man who is made in the image of God. The ideal, pre-lapsarian language, then, focuses on this mental being. Such mental being communicates not *through* language (which is the bourgeois theory of language), but *in* language. In other words, language is internally communicative rather than a means for communication. That internal communication is directed not to other people, but to God. The reason: the only 'addressee' for Adam when he names the animals is God. There is no other human being to whom he can speak. And what is the nature of that language? It is the name, which is 'the innermost nature of language itself' (Benjamin 1996: 65; 1974–89 vol 2: 144). What we have here is an extraordinary theory for the auto-generational purity of language itself: the fertility of language can only be retained when man and God communicate with each other in language (see further Geulen 1996).

Over against the multiplicity of languages that result from the Fall, specifically through the Babel story of Genesis 11, pure language is unitary, primordial and harmonious.[2] You would be forgiven for thinking that the whole argument is somewhat esoteric, even mystical. Indeed, many have had recourse to Benjamin's supposed fascination with the Jewish mystical texts, the Kabbalah. It was Gershom Scholem who mounted a wholesale argument for the inherent Jewishness of Benjamin's thought – Benjamin's long discussions with him over Zionism, the Talmud, Kabbalism, Hebrew language and the Hebrew Bible (Scholem 1981: 10–11, 14–15, 28–30). A whole stream of scholars have sought to back up Scholem's arguments (Rabinbach 1985; Ullmann 1992; Pizer 1995), most notably Susan Buck-Morss, who draws on Scholem's work on Jewish mysticism to argue on the basis of the slenderest of suggestions by Benjamin that his philosophical method and theory of history depended on Kabbalism as a distinct theological alternative to Christianity (Buck-Morss 1989: 229–240).[3] Yet, it seems to me that Scholem and Buck-Morss work a little too hard to claim Benjamin as a mystical Jewish thinker, for as John McCole has convincingly argued, this is based on an anachronism (McCole 1993: 65–66; see also Jennings 1987: 94–96). Scholem himself was almost single-handedly responsible for the recovery of Jewish mysticism and the study of the Kabbalah in the twentieth century, but he did this only after his move to Palestine in 1923 and after Benjamin wrote these texts. Not only was Benjamin extremely cagey about his references to Jewish mysticism, having available only limited nineteenth century sources, but McCole also suggests it may well have been Benjamin who set Scholem on the path to the recovery of Jewish mysticism itself. If anything, Wohlfarth's argument (1997) is more persuasive, pointing out that Benjamin played with the theme of German-Jewish secrecy rather

than the Kabbalah. In fact, Wohlfarth argues that Benjamin's use of theology is by no means necessarily Jewish, drawing attention to various Christian motifs throughout his works. Benjamin's patterns are more of the nature of a thinker comfortable with Christian theology, an assimilated Jew recovering alternative ways of exegesis.

The target of Benjamin's criticism of empty, communicative language is the abuse to which language was put in Nazi propaganda, as Susan Buck-Morss (1989) brings out so brilliantly in her study. Here language becomes a means for producing a certain result; it becomes the 'big lie' for the sake of reactionary political gain. But once he delves into such a form of language, he espies a far deeper problem in the nature of linguistic theory itself. Rather than give up language to such a theory, he wants to reclaim it in a radical fashion.

Thus far, I have concerned myself more with explicating Benjamin's argument in the 'On Language' essay. There is always some guesswork in such a venture, and many critics are content when they have reached limited clarity in such an exposition. The situation is not helped by the fact that it is not always clear that Benjamin himself knew what he meant. However, I want to go a step further, so now I turn to the way he deals explicitly with the biblical text of Genesis 1-3.

## TEXT

Benjamin makes use of both accounts of creation, Gen 1:1-2:3 and Gen 2:3-25. Indeed, these texts come into their own as comprehensive arguments for the nature of language as naming, or rather, of man as name-giver, who is ultimately modelled on God as name-giver. Let me summarise Benjamin's points before considering his use of the biblical text in more detail. The two accounts of creation emphasise, according to Benjamin, a special relation between language and man through the act of creation. In the second account this relation emerges with the man who is created from earth and endowed with the gift of language, whereas in the first it is the creative act of God that establishes a deep relation between creation and naming through the repeated pattern of 'Let there be…', 'he made' and 'he named'. This relation produces the theological point that only with God are word and name one: 'God made things knowable in their names. Man, however, names them according to knowledge' (Benjamin 1996: 68; 1974–89 vol 2: 148). However, a third feature of Genesis appears with the creation of human beings in Gen 1:26-31. Here the threefold use of 'he created…' in Gen 1:27 rather than the earlier pattern of 'Let there be…', 'he made' and 'he named' signals for Benjamin that language itself is set free in 'man'. To be made in God's image means to 'know' in the same language as God. There is, finally, a fourth point: the connection between human and divine languages is strongest with the name, for both God and man name things. For the man, the language of naming comes forth firstly in the act of naming the animals and then the second human being, the woman. The difference between the two types of naming lies with the proper name, Eve: 'The proper name is the communion of man with the *creative* word of God. (Not the only one, however; man knows a further linguistic communion with God's word)' (Benjamin 1996: 69; 1974–89 vol 2: 150, italics in text). So we have four main points that Benjamin draws from the text: through creation, man and language are intimately related; only with God are word and name one; as the image of God, man is endowed with a similar connection to naming; this connection appears most strongly with the use of the proper name.

Benjamin can not be accused of being unoriginal in his exegesis. The catch is that his reading of Genesis 1-3 is somewhat problematic. Let us look at Genesis 1, which Benjamin all too readily systematises in a way characteristic of theologically dominated exegesis. Although he promised on a number of occasions to Gershom Scholem that he would learn Hebrew, the lack of Hebrew shows forth here. He would like to find a threefold rhythm of 'Let there be', 'he made (created[4])' and 'he named' in order to show that creation and naming are inextricably entwined. The text, however, is not quite so regular. Of the six days of creation, the pattern Benjamin identifies appears only in Gen 1: 6-8 (the creation of the firmament named 'heaven' on the second day). Benjamin does admit that in Gen 1:3 and 1:11 only 'let there be' appears, but even this point misses something, for in 1:11 it is 'Let the earth make grass sprout'. In the end he settles for the relation between 'let there be' and 'he named', but this combination appears only in Gen 1:3. Throughout Genesis 1 the pattern varies: let there be… God *called* (*qr'*; Gen 1:3-5); let there be… God made… and it was so… God *called* (Gen 1:6-8); let the waters be gathered… and it was so… God *called* (Gen 1:9-10); let the earth make sprout… and it was so… the earth brought forth (Gen 1:11-13); let there be… and it was so… God made (Gen 1:14-19); let the sea swarm with… God created… God blessed them (Gen 1:20-3); let the earth bring forth… and it was so… God created (Gen 1:24-5); let us make… God created… he created… he created… God blessed them… and it was so (Gen 1:26-31). The weight of Benjamin's argument falls on the first three days of creation, when God does name or 'call' what he creates. After this moment, the naming ceases when the creative power is passed on to various elements of creation itself: the earth that sprouts vegetation (Gen 1:11), the waters that swarm (1:20), and the earth, again, that brings forth living creatures (1:24).[5] It is not that, as Benjamin argues, 'God rested when he had left his creative power to itself in man' (Benjamin 1996: 68; 1974–89 vol 2: 148), for this creative power has already been divested in the earth and the waters, which is the moment when God's act of naming ceases. It will be a while, and only in the second creation account that the man begins to name.

Another signal of Benjamin's troubled reading is the conjunction of the Tower of Babel story (Gen 11: 1-9) with the first three chapters, since he neglects the intervening chapters, particularly the profound tension with Genesis 10. In the full-scale genealogy of this chapter we find a threefold variation that distinguishes according to land, language, family and people: 'in their lands, each with his own language, by their families, in their peoples' (Gen 10:5), 'by their families, by their languages, in their lands, in their peoples' (Gen 10:20), 'by their families, by their languages, in their lands, by their peoples' (Gen 10: 31; translations mine). The first verse of Genesis 11 – 'Now the whole land had one language and few words' – sets up a tension with Genesis 10, not merely in narrative sequence but for Benjamin's argument. In other words, he must excise Genesis 4-10 in order to bring Genesis 11 into contact with Genesis 1-3. Now, Benjamin is perfectly entitled to do this, should he wish, but the text won't grant him his conclusions without some selective and creative exegesis on his part.

Benjamin's troubles continue. 'Man' is indeed endowed with language and it is he who speaks with God (Gen 2:16, 9-19), but they are not the only ones who speak with each other, for the woman and the serpent engage in a far more fascinating conversation in Gen 3:1-5 concerning knowledge, pleasure, good and evil and so on. The man is the one who names, first the animals (Gen 2:19-20) and then the 'woman' (Gen 2:23) who is later 'Eve' (Gen 3:20). Drawn in by the act of naming, Benjamin focuses on Adam, neglecting Eve and the serpent, so much so that he

slips up: 'Of all beings, man is the only one who names his own kind, as he is the only one whom God did not name' (SW1: 69; GS2: 149). But, as I pointed out above, God names only day, night, heaven, earth and seas: the rest he does not name – vegetation, heavenly bodies, animals, sea creatures and woman. Adam will later name the animals and woman in the second creation account, but the rest fall to the narrator to name, as well as the serpent. Indeed, if we look more closely at the second creation account, the purpose of Adam's naming is to find a 'helper', and when she appears a name is forthcoming – 'woman' (Gen 2:22-3). It is nothing other than an act of dominion, possession and domestication, a somewhat more sinister aspect of the act of naming. It reminds me a little too much of the possessive act of naming the newly discovered peaks and valleys and rivers of Australia by the first European 'explorers', usually after some British aristocrat, thereby divesting them of the Aboriginal names they had had for tens of thousands of years beforehand.

Benjamin's exegetical skills are not quite what they could be, especially for such an astute reader. Yet, he does try to forestall possible objections at the beginning of his reading of Genesis 1-3:

> If in what follows the nature of biblical language is considered on the basis of the first chapter of Genesis, the object is neither biblical interpretation nor subjection of the Bible to objective consideration as revealed truth [*offenbarte Wahrheit*], but the discovery of what emerges of itself from the biblical text with regard to the nature of language; and the Bible is only *initially* indispensable for this purpose, because the present argument broadly follows it in presupposing language as an ultimate reality, perceptible only in its manifestation, inexplicable and mystical. The Bible, in regarding itself as a revelation, must necessarily evolve the fundamental linguistic facts (Benjamin 1996: 67; 1974–89 vol 2: 147, italics in text).

The assertion that he is discovering 'what emerges of itself from the biblical text' is just special pleading. Benjamin's reading is of course selective, the interest in the metaphysics of language, particularly as an ultimate (theological) reality that connects God and man (see De Vries 1992). However, there is a curious twist that takes place in this passage from Benjamin. Although it begins with an effort to follow the Bible on the question of language, to mine it for linguistic insights, by the end a small inversion takes place. The Bible neither speaks *about* language, nor can one *follow* the Bible in order to construct a linguistic theory: the Bible itself *is* a language, the language of a revelation. But note what happens: at the moment when Benjamin appears to dispense with the Bible – it is only 'initially indispensable' – he turns again to claim its continuing relevance: 'The Bible, in regarding itself as a revelation [*Offenbarung*], must necessarily evolve the fundamental linguistic facts' (Benjamin 1996: 67; 1974–89 vol 2: 147). In other words, as a language, indeed the ultimate language, the Bible provides Benjamin with the linguistic – and ultimately the philosophical and literary – theory that he needs in order to develop a critique of contemporary schools of thought.

If most of the 'On Language' essay is concerned with the creation of language, his theory is one that has a distinctly eschatological note as well, for in the closing lines of the essay Benjamin picks up the notion of the muteness of nature that, were it able to speak, would lament and cry

out for redemption. Pre-lapsarian language is but an image of language restored at the end of history, since the secret of redemption is encoded in language: 'All higher language is a translation of lower ones, until in ultimate clarity the word of God unfolds, which is the unity of this movement made up of language' (Benjamin 1996: 74; 1974–89 vol 2: 157).

## THE INTERLINEAR BIBLE

The mention of translation with an eschatological dimension directs us to the other end of Benjamin's philosophy of history, which comes out clearly in the essay that is always read alongside the 'On Language' essay, namely 'The Task of the Translator' (Benjamin 1996: 253–263; 1974–89 vol 4: 9–21). In this later essay (written in 1921, whereas the 'On Language' essay was written in 1916), some of the same concerns appear, such as the polemic against language as a means of communication and the notion of pure language, which is now developed on the basis of the 'On Language' essay.

Although Benjamin begins with the Fall in the translation essay and looks for the eschatological restoration of Adamic language, let me begin in reverse, with the last sentence: 'The interlinear version of the Scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translation' (Benjamin 1996: 263; 1974–89 vol 4: 21). In this light all of the preceding discussion of translatability, the dialectical relation between literalness and free translation, the question of language(s), the relation between original and translation, and the eschatological view of the task of translation take on a distinctly biblical sense. However, this evocation of the interlinear Bible is the point where critics cease to follow Benjamin. As far as translation itself is concerned, neither literal nor liberal translation techniques are anywhere near adequate as Benjamin seeks to supersede them both in a dialectical *Aufhebung*. His proposal follows Pannwitz: a translation should hug the shoreline of the original, absorbing its syntax so as to show the original. Such translation produces a new language and a new work in which the original may live again. Many critics and translators have been willing to go this far – for instance, Fredric Jameson in his Adorno book (1990: ix), or Samuel Weber's 'Introduction' to the translation of Adorno's *Prisms* (1981) – but they fall away from the model that inspires Benjamin's own theory of translation, the interlinear Bible. I remember first reading these lines of Benjamin with perplexity and embarrassment, for my Hebrew students used interlinear translations in the early stages of translation work, or perhaps if they ran short of time, were lazy or found Hebrew a perpetual battle. But the interlinear Bible, as old as translation work on the Bible itself, dating back at least to Origen's *Hexapla*, offers us that model of a translation in whose contours the original shows through, for the Hebrew unavoidably and radically shapes the language(s) that run between the lines of Hebrew text. It is in the end a poor, or perhaps modest, translator who has recourse to an interlinear Bible.

Yet for Benjamin, bad translators are the opposite, those who seek to communicate the meaning of the original in free or liberal translation, what has become known at least in biblical translation as 'dynamic equivalence'. Even here Benjamin is not happy with the simple opposition between literal and liberal translation, arguing that only the translation that is as literal as possible enables freedom. For in the interlinear translation one word matches another, producing sentences that mirror the syntax of the 'original'. The result is an almost unreadable translation, which therefore qualifies as free, language released from the bounds of its own syntax in subservience to the original. Yet what he means in this case is not the freedom of meaning, but the freedom

to glimpse pure language: 'Rather, freedom proves its worth in the interest of the pure language by its effect on its own language. It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work' (Benjamin 1996: 261; 1974–89 vol 4: 19).

But how might this pure language be understood? Both transcendentally and historically, it seems to me. Rather than write of the pure language of naming that one finds in Genesis, Benjamin explores this language with respect both to the relationship between an original and its translation, and the relation between languages as such. As for the first, a range of mythical, sexualised and birthing metaphors appear that attempt to circumvent the notion of an original and its copy: the afterlife of a text, the creation of a new language, the translatability (fertility?) of the original, the play between fidelity and license – all of which are indebted to mythical biblical motifs. Yet what brings this home is that the task of translation enables pure language to emerge: the 'problem of ripening the seed of pure language in a translation' (Benjamin 1996: 259; 1974–89 vol 4: 17). Fraught with difficulty, insoluble, threatening the very possibility of translation, it is only the interlinear translation that begins to do so when it abandons the communication of meaning.

However, when it appears that translation becomes impossible (Paul de Man's argument (1985)), Benjamin invokes at the last moment the Bible, which is 'unconditionally translatable' (Benjamin 1996: 262; 1974–89: 21). This point follows the penultimate example of the extraordinary literalness of Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles, in which meaning 'threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language' (Benjamin 1996: 262; 1974–89: 21). By contrast, the Bible is the point where meaning ceases to determine language, where, in a deeply theological assessment of the nature of the Bible, 'the literal quality of the text takes part directly… in true language, in the Truth, or in doctrine' (Benjamin 1996: 262; 1974–89: 21). The argument is the same as that in the 'On Language' essay, where pure language is that in which the communication of mental being takes place through naming. However, the purpose of the translation of the unconditionally translatable text is not the text, nor meaning, but language and languages as such.

Note that Benjamin does not write that the Bible itself, specifically Hebrew, is the pure language per se, but rather that it provides the model for such a relationship. For pure language is beyond both original and translation, as he writes a little earlier: 'A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully' (Benjamin 1996: 260; 1974–89: 18). Again Benjamin's own language is biblical and mythological, but his point here is that the relationship between languages, shown most clearly in translation, also gives a glimpse of pure language, for a true translation makes 'both the original and the translation recognisable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel' (Benjamin 1996: 260; 1974–89: 18).

Not only does he replicate the autogenerational argument of the 'On Language' essay, in which God and man exist in a pure linguistic circle of creation and naming, but he also makes translation an eschatological device:

> If, however, these languages continue to grow in this way until the messianic
> end of their history, it is translation that catches fire from the eternal life of the
> works and the perpetually renewed life of language; for it is translation that

> keeps putting the hallowed growth of languages to the test: How far removed
> is their hidden meaning from revelation? How close can it be brought by the
> knowledge of this remoteness? (Benjamin 1996: 257; 1974–89: 14).

At this point we stumble directly upon an underlying theory of history that shows its head every now and then in Benjamin's work. Here we look directly at the eschaton, at least as far as Benjamin is concerned, in what is nothing other than a sacred history: the 'hallowed growth of languages' (Benjamin 1996: 257; 1974–89: 14) contained in profane translations would last until the messianic end, until revelation. Until that moment translations measure the time until this end. But this means that pure language is not just a pre-lapsarian form of language, but ultimately geared towards the messianic future.[6]

What in the world, one might want to ask, is going on here? Did Benjamin imbibe just a little too much of the hashish of which he was fond? Perhaps, but there is also a more systematic effort to produce an alternative theory of history, on par with his efforts at theories of language and translation. Benjamin set himself against what he saw as mechanical (or natural) time, one that is concerned with empirical events. Such time is measurable and spatial, concerned with magnitude and regularity, and it produces the baleful faith in progress, as something boundless, irresistible and for all 'mankind'. Over against such a theory of time, Benjamin invokes variously historical (*Die Zeit der Geschichte, historischen Zeit*), messianic and divinely fulfilled time (*der erfüllten Zeit*). As he put it: 'The idea of fulfilled time is the dominant historical idea of the Bible: it is the idea of messianic time' (Benjamin 1996: 55–56; 1974–89 vol 2: 134). For Benjamin it is none other than a narrative of a beginning and end to history, specifically understood in terms of the Fall and then an eschatological completion of history (see Hanssen 1998: 99; Mosès 1996; Gilloch 2002: 60–62). In other words, he embraces a biblical notion of history as historical or fulfilled time, a history of salvation – *heilsgeschichte* – that had its own tradition in German theology and is much more extensive than a messianic theory of history or even the simple notion of creation, Fall and redemption. Rather, *heilsgeschichte* is God's history, which touches that of the world only tangentially and at significant redemptive moments, running at cross-purposes to human history. Yet, this divine history is the truth that can be glimpsed only partially, awaiting the eschaton.[7] It is this notion of *heilsgeschichte* upon which Benjamin draws, giving it his own twist.

## CONCLUSION

What I like about Benjamin – even when we can't quite make sense of his writing – is that he goes the whole hog. Or, to shift the metaphor to one that Annie Sprinkle invokes with regard to the difference between erotica and pornography: instead of using a feather, Benjamin uses the whole chicken. Indeed, he goes where few will follow him, even his most ardent disciples. So it is more instructive, it seems to me, to look instead at what he opposes. Thus, his theory of language, developed in a problematic engagement with the early chapters of Genesis, takes its stand against the instrumental language we find everywhere under capitalism, from advertising through military language to propaganda. His translation essay anticipates the dominant model of biblical translation, namely dynamic equivalence as it has been championed by the conservative Summer Institute of Linguistics and has since swamped translation projects everywhere. With the funda-

mental idea that the language in question is the vessel for the essential message, Benjamin's theory attacks this theory and practice by means of the very same text, the Bible. If we don't always like his conclusions, then it is the questions he raises that are crucial.[8]

## ENDNOTES

[1] Britt's interesting study (1996) seeks to universalise the notion of 'sacred text' or the 'scriptural function' of texts as a whole in Benjamin's work rather than engage in a consideration of his exegesis of the Bible. Ebach's essay (1982), while a welcome consideration of Benjamin's treatment of the Hebrew Bible, goes too far in suggesting the influence of the book of Job. Unfortunately he understands biblical criticism purely in terms of a now outmoded historical critical method.

[2] Elsewhere, in the brief essay 'Language and Logic' Benjamin writes: 'If we interpret this in the spirit of the mystics as pointing to a revealed unity of a linguistic kind, it will mean not just that this primordial language is the one originally spoken, but that the harmony originally created by those spoken languages was of incomparably greater power than any of the individual languages would possibly possess' (Benjamin 1996: 273; 1974–89 vol 6: 24–5). This becomes a crucial dimension of his famous translation essay, to which I turn below.

[3] Buck-Morss's argument is guilty of some howlers: redemption is for Christianity private and spiritual, whereas in Judaism it is public and historical (this from Scholem); Marxism's universal coherence was more attractive than the sectarian differences in Christianity or Judaism.

[4] Benjamin notes here the variation between 'he created' (*br'* 1:1, 21, 27 – three times) and 'he made' (*`sh* 1:7, 16, 25).

[5] Note here however that only in 1:12 does the earth itself take part. After the other two jussives relating to waters and earth (Gen 1:20 and 24), the text reverts to 'God created/made' (1:21, 25).

[6] In the 'Announcement of the Journal Angelus Novus' Benjamin makes a similar comment: 'In the present instance, however, the translations of the journal wish to be understood not just as providing models to be emulated, as was the case in earlier times, but also as the strict and irreplaceable school of language-in-the-making' (Benjamin 1996: 294; 1974–89 vol 2: 243).

[7] Buck-Morss unwittingly provides an excellent description of such a notion of salvation history in her discussion of the revolutionary break via the dialectical image that moves between empirical history and messianic time (Buck-Morss 1989: 242–243).

[8] Many thanks are due to Matt Chrulew, a research assistant and PhD student at Monash University, for his indispensable work on this essay.

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