

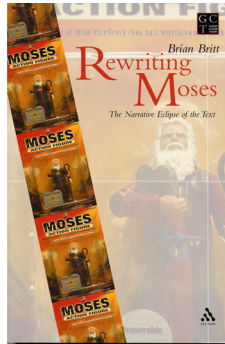
○ REVIEW OF BRIAN BRITT, *REWRITING MOSES*

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Mark Sneed reviews Brian Britt's *Rewriting Moses: The Narrative Eclipse of the Text* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 402; Gender, Culture, Theory 14; London: T & T Clark, 2004).



Brian Britt has written a fascinating book on the relationship between the Moses traditions, writing (used in the broader, Derridian sense of ‘textuality’ that would include novels, paintings, and films), and revelation. As cultural critic, he traces the development of biblical and post-biblical traditions about Moses. Interestingly, he does it backwards: from modern to ancient interpreters. Following Freud and Fredric Jameson, Britt maintains that traditions, ‘anxious to address crises but loathe to confront them’ (17), repress them instead. But what is repressed, of course, is never completely forgotten and has a way of returning in interesting ways.

The title of the book echoes *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* by Hans Frei, who argues that modern historical research has eclipsed attention to biblical narrative. Of course, today, biblical scholars question earlier interpreters’ fragmentation of the text and, instead, emphasise its narrative artistry. Britt takes a middle position here, integrating literary criticism with historical criticism effectively. He is a careful, close reader of the text. The book’s title is a reconstruction of Frei’s that emphasises how later traditions of the biblical Moses ‘rewrite’ him to serve contemporary needs. These rewritings, in a sense, both transcend, and yet preserve, the ambiguous, uncanny figure of the biblical Moses.

The book is divided into three sections: part 1: ‘Contemporary Images of Moses’; an interlude: ‘Biblical Text, Biblical Tradition’; part 2: ‘Uncanny Biblical Texts’. In the brief, introductory chapter, Britt discerns the ambiguities in the portrayal of Moses in the Pentateuch. Moses is a somewhat passive character, and there are large gaps in his story. This highlights the ‘textuality’ and ‘writtleness’ of the texts and mitigates modern attempts to recast Moses as charismatic hero.

In chapter one, ‘Subverting the Great Man: Violence and Magic in Moses Fiction’, Britt shows how modern novelists have largely developed the standard biographical model that ultimately goes back to Josephus and Philo. These two found themselves in the polemical context of anti-semiticism. In response, they rewrote Moses as charismatic hero. Modern authors have taken up this model and integrated it with humanist and Romantic ideals. Moses then becomes a great

lawgiver and heroic liberator. Originally, the ambiguity of the biblical Moses is due to the text's tendency 'to minimize the risk of deifying Moses or upstaging divine authority' (19). One of the main exceptions to the biography model is *Moses, Man of the Mountain* by Nora Neale Hurston, who paints a complex portrait of Moses as 'African-American "hoodoo man"' (35). In her book, Moses eventually kills Aaron when he gets in the way of his nation-building. Thus, Hurston's Moses combines humanistic, rationalistic features with magical, violent ones. By countering the great-man tradition, Hurston was postmodern before its time.

In chapter two, 'Double-Moses and the Sacred in Moses Films', Britt concludes that because the biblical Moses is never described physically and his life story is fragmentary, the text manifests absence. Modern films, however, make up for this by creating flesh-and-blood presence. For many movie-goers, Charlton Heston is Moses! Also, Moses gets split into doubles along ethnic and gender lines (45). For example, in the early part of the film *The Ten Commandments*, DeMille creates a red-blooded, masculine hero. But after the theophany, Moses appears as an asexual holy man: he no longer takes initiative, is robotic, and without passion. Moses has three doubles in the film: himself (holy man), Nefertiri, his love interest, and Rameses. Nefertiri represents a female and exotic version of Moses which is expendable: Moses must become masculine and Christian! Rameses is Moses' male, exotic (Yule Brenner as un-American), and passionate double. They resemble because both want the same things: Nefertiri and the Hebrews.

In chapter three, 'Legend and History in Modern Scholarly Portraits of Moses', Britt examines the reconstruction of Moses by earlier biblical scholars (Wellhausen, Gressmann, Noth, von Rad, and Buber), who were primarily interested in the historicity of Moses. Though not historical, the legend of Moses could still function authoritatively for these scholars. Behind their reconstructions, stood Moses as charismatic hero. For example, Julius Wellhausen saw earlier, pentateuchal sources as somehow more authentic, spontaneous, and natural (as in J), whereas P is legalistic and dull. Thus, 'Wellhausen seeks to recover the 'Jehovistic Moses, a great leader and founder of Torah, from the lifeless abstraction of Priestly codes' (68).

In chapter four, 'Concealment, Revelation, and Gender: The Veil of Moses in the Bible and in Christian Art', Britt begins by interpreting the story of Moses' veiling in Exod 34:29-35 in a new way. He argues that the veil is actually part of the revelatory process and not extrinsic to it. The purpose of the veil is to mitigate the fear Israelites had when Moses was not revealing God's words; it mitigates that fear only some of the time (when Moses is off-duty as a prophet). Paul, of course, started the tradition of viewing the veil negatively and the supersessionist notion that only Christ can remove it. Britt includes many black-and-white photos of artworks that depict how this scene has been interpreted. It is curious that in none of the works, is Moses' face completely covered, suggesting that the veil is threatening. This goes along with a feminisation of Moses via the veil. Before such vulnerability, these pictures represent the metaphysics of presence, which resists the absence of the veil. But the silence and absence in this episode are, paradoxically, part of revelation.

In chapter five, 'Moses' Heavy Mouth: Discourse and Revelation in Exodus 4:10-17', Britt takes an interesting approach. He argues that Moses' speech impediment signifies a switch, in priority, from speech to writing, which is atypical for a prophet. Moses' role as a writing prophet supersedes his role as a speaking prophet. The limitations of spoken revelation are thereby revealed. Thus, Moses' handicap is 'necessary to the process of revelation and salvation' (124) and 'underscores the divine source of his oracles' (125). Writing is necessary in that it enables

memory and the canonisation of events. This text is also self-referential: it portrays Moses as both author and character in the narrative. In Derridian terms, Moses is as much a 'writing being' as he is a 'being written'. All of this accentuates the text's 'textuality'.

In chapter six, 'The Torah of Moses: Deuteronomy 31-32 as a Textual Memorial', Britt demonstrates how this text, though composite, achieves coherency as a textual memorial that serves 'to focus attention on Moses' acts of writing and the directions for how to treat these writings' (137). It is 'a text about texts, even more than it is about human leaders' (135-36). And also 'it is a self-conscious text that is self-consciously assembled' (138). All of this contributes to the text's 'writtenness'.

In chapter seven, 'The Song and the Blessing: Poetic Discourse in Deuteronomy 32-33', Britt argues that these poetic 'texts summarise the divine-human relationship while making reference to themselves as texts' (144). 'The Song of Moses is a canonical *mise en abyme*' (149), a text that contains a summary of the broader canonical context (Pentateuch) in which it functions. The Blessing's canonical function is revealed by its echoing of Jacob's blessing in Gen 49. Thus, like the Song, 'the Blessing of Moses is a sacred text that is in part *about* sacred texts' (162). They represent 'a sacred text that is at once a fixed document, a *tradium*, and the manifestation of an interpretive process, or *tradio*' (144).

In the last chapter, 'The Birth, Death, and Writing of Moses', Britt argues that even in the birth and death narratives, the focus is on the people and covenant, not Moses. From these narratives, Britt concludes that Moses is both a body ('being written') and a text ('writing being'). The gaps in these narratives, which demonstrate its 'writtenness', are filled in by the attempt to recover the body of Moses. Britt includes two photos of paintings of both Moses' birth and death. In the latter, emerges the tradition of angels and the devil fighting over the body of Moses. But the 'struggle over Moses' body misses the point of biblical gaps and ambiguity: the body of Moses, so easily misplaced in the stories and traditions, resides safely in the pages of the Bible' (183). Next follows the conclusion.

This is a gem of a book! Britt is a superb reader of Scripture. He keeps the reader interested and engaged. Be warned, however: chapters six and seven are not easy reading. The book is not a text for undergraduates. For biblical scholars who are interested in postmodern approaches (especially Derridian) to the Bible, this is a must read; it will probably become a classic.

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