

○ WHAT IS *THE BIBLE AND CRITICAL THEORY*?

The title has probably alerted you to the fact that this editorial is a little different from the usual whimsical-comment-plus-introduction-to-articles that characterises most editorials (at least those that Roland has written up until this point). There are three or four reasons why we ask: what is *The Bible and Critical Theory*? First, this is Roland's last issue as managing editor of the journal. Second, from the beginning of next year with issue 4.1, Julie Kelso takes her place behind the managing editor controls. Third, with an increasing number of readers of the journal, including the many members of the Society of Biblical Literature who access our book reviews, we feel it is a good time to say precisely what marks *The Bible and Critical Theory* off from other journals in biblical studies and critical theory. Finally, our reflections have also been triggered by a letter, whose author and recipient will remain anonymous, but which also raised the question as to what we are on about.

Perhaps it is stating the obvious, but it is worth saying: the journal is concerned with the intersections between biblical studies and critical theory. What this means is that we publish articles and book reviews by scholars who work in both areas. Our concern is not merely to publish material by biblical critics who make use of critical theory to enliven interpretations of the Bible (as the old *Semeia* used to do). We also publish work by those who come from disciplines such as cultural studies, literary studies, history, architecture, philosophy, psychoanalysis, anthropology and so on. In fact, the list we have just given covers some of the fields from which past contributors come. In other words, the journal is an interdisciplinary journal. We believe this situation makes for a much more interesting range of articles and book reviews. The only determining feature is that the material we publish brings the Bible and critical theory together, often in refreshing ways.

Yet, the previous point still begs the question: what is critical theory? The older and strict definition is that it marks the legacy of the work of the 'Frankfurt School', or the Institute for Social Research (Institut für Sozialforschung). Set up in the 1920s under the auspices of Felix Weil with the express purpose of being cross-disciplinary, the Frankfurt School pioneered a whole range of approaches in analysing capitalist culture, history and society that remain profoundly influential. Its base was Marxist, but the mention of Theodor Adorno, Eric Fromm, Jürgen Habermas and in our own day Axel Honneth indicates the range of the Frankfurt School. However, by now 'critical theory' (or 'theory' for short) has come to designate a whole range of approaches that cut across traditional academic disciplines. It includes feminism, post-structuralism, queer theory, postcolonial criticism, Marxist and post-Marxist thought, narrative criticism, reader response approaches, psychoanalysis and so on. Sometimes we find them mistakenly gathered under the heading of 'postmodern' approaches, but we prefer to avoid that term since it is rather misleading. Feminism, for example, predates postmodernism by a good stretch. It is this second, broader sense of critical theory that we adopt for the journal.

A feature of this collection of approaches known as critical theory is that they are not restricted to any one discipline. One or two may have arisen from within a discipline, such as narrative theory in literature or deconstruction in philosophy, but they have influenced and generated debates within all manner of disciplines from architecture to zoology. And biblical studies is no exception. What this means, however, is that we publish articles from people coming from a

range of disciplinary backgrounds, people who share the focus of the Bible and critical theory. In any one issue, then, you will find an article by someone from, say, cultural studies and from biblical studies. Or an article that focuses on specific theoretical questions that arise from engagement with the Bible, as well as an article that brings a perspective from critical theory to a biblical text. So also with the book reviews, which include books from biblical studies along with those in film theory, or philosophy, or... It is precisely this range that makes our journal appealing to people across various fields. And we feel that such an interchange enriches all sides in the interchange. Needless to say we also feel that this is what makes our journal unique from others that our readers may be familiar with.

So, what do we have on offer in our last issue for 2007? Julie Kelso, our new managing editor from February 2008, offers a reading of Maacah's deposition in 2 Chronicles 15. She argues that Maacah's act undermines the dominant (unconscious) phantasy at work in Chronicles: that of masculine, monosexual (re)production. Todd Penner and Lilian Cates turn to the story of Dinah in Genesis 34 in light of literary aesthetics, postcolonial theory and Roland Barthes's unique analysis of texts that seduce and beguile. They ask why interpreters want to tie down and limit such a text time and again. Rose Lucas comes at Psalm 137 through a lyrical and complex analysis of the intersections of desire, ambivalence and place. Derek Woodward-Lehman immerses himself in the debates concerning Paul within philosophy – with the likes of Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, Daniel Boyarin and others – to offer a reading of Paul's letter to the Galatians, especially the texts in chapters 2 and 3. Matthew Sharpe reconsiders Leo Strauss' earliest works on the 'political theology' of Benedict de Spinoza. He argues against a popular depiction of Strauss as an esoteric Nietzschean hiding behind a 'noble' classical or theological veneer. Rather, Strauss' early work shows his proximity, via Jacobi, to the Heideggerian disclosure of the groundless grounds of philosophical reason, given which one must extra-rationally choose reason over faith. Lastly, to mark his 'retirement', there is Roland Boer's critical engagement with that old and genteel Marxist, Karl Kautsky, who, among a number of works on the Bible and the history of revolutionary Christian groups, was the first one to popularise the idea of Christian communism.

In light of our earlier comments, you may wish to look more closely at the range of books for review in this issue. We have our maximum complement of twelve, but the books include those on the use of the Bible by modern novelists, a personal and philosophical diary on the death of Jacques Derrida, the influence of postcolonialism and feminism on religious discourse and biblical studies, apostasy and sexual slander in early Christianity, as well as political theology, and the questions raised for biblical studies from historiography, feminism, and the publication of *The Contemporary Torah*.

Roland Boer &
Julie Kelso