Biblical Curses and the Displacement of Tradition

Biblical Curses and the Displacement of Tradition

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For Lucy and Anna

Contents

ABBREVIATIONS

ANESSup	*Ancient Near Eastern Studies*, Supplement Series
ANET	James B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950).
BASORSup	*Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, Supplements
BibOr	Biblica et orientalia
BZ	*Biblische Zeitschrift*
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
ECC	*Eerdmans Critical Commentary*
GKC	*Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (ed. E. Kautzsch, revised and trans. A.E. Cowley; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910).
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
JAAR	*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Supplement Series
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
SJOT	*Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*
VT	*Vetus Testamentun*
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

INTRODUCTION

Curses today are usually considered illicit or vulgar, but in the Bible and pre-modern history, cursing was recognized as a legitimate form of religious expression. The early modern period saw a transformation of curses from powerful to profane words, while new forms of powerful words emerged. This book examines curses in ancient Israel, early modern Europe, and contemporary western culture as part of what I broadly conceive as biblical tradition. The use of words to do harm appears in various literary and cultural contexts, performing a variety of functions; some are explicitly 'religious' while others are not. How do contemporary curses differ from biblical curses, and what new types of discourse bear the traces of biblical curses? By charting varieties and transformations in powerful speech and writing, this study considers the place of the Bible in current debates on power, secularism, and tradition.

My preoccupation here is biblical tradition in three distinct contexts. I begin with the analysis of specific biblical curse texts, followed by studies of early modern and contemporary cursing. Biblical curses borrow from other ancient cultures and take many forms; they are theologically unstable, complicating the relationship of divine and human agency. Yet biblical curses *work*—they serve social and religious purposes in covenants, between and within groups. Biblical curses represent, in other words, a basic element of religious life in ancient Israel and biblical cultures down to the present. This study is cultural rather than metaphysical: it asks not *whether* curses have power (in a supernatural sense) but *how* they have power in particular historical and religious circumstances.

For Jewish and Christian traditions, which regard the books of ancient Israel as scripture, religious cursing is largely obsolete. Today, 'cursing' usually describes rude or superstitious speech, not a recognized part of ritual life. Blessing, on the other hand, remains a central part of religious practice and ordinary language use. It is very common to bless someone who sneezes or to hear 'God Bless America', but comparable uses of religious cursing are rare in popular culture. Why is this so? My initial answer is that curses do persist, but in disguised and displaced forms, and that blessing has survived the historical shift from the late seventeenth century in which cursing became socially unacceptable. But a more basic question demands consideration: What is a curse?

A curse is the use of words to threaten, invoke, or impose harm. Curses can be spoken or written, they can be accompanied by gestures, and they can be made in a variety of situations, but the defining feature of curses for this discussion is that curses threaten or impose harm by *words themselves*. Curses are words with the power to do harm. How do curses work? They work because people believe they work. Curses take effect in social contexts. Bruce Lincoln's *Authority* draws a close connection between power and speech: '[I]t is best understood in relational terms as the effect of a posited, perceived, or institutionally ascribed asymmetry between speaker and audience that permits certain speakers to command not just the attention but the confidence, respect, and trust of their audience, or—an important proviso—to make audiences act *as if* this were so'.[1] This last condition, 'to make audiences act *as if*' they respect and trust the speaker, applies to authority in general and to powerful speech in particular. What counts is how curses are perceived and what results they are capable of producing in the listener. Of course, to base authority and curses on the dynamics of speakers and listeners, on speech acts, is to accept the variability speech acts and their use. The power of words and those who use them comes and goes; as Paul Arden Keim shows, even biblical curses sometimes fail.[2]

Philosopher J.L. Austin's speech act theory gave analytical rigor to the idea that words can do things. Before Austin, the idea that words have power typically fell within the 'religious' or 'magical' domain, a phenomenon to be regarded skeptically from a secular vantage point. Austin did not challenge the secular-religious dichotomy, but his affirmation that words can perform actions has influenced discussions of language, religion, and the Bible ever since (see Chapter 9). In the case of biblical studies, Austin's category of speech acts, particularly performative illocutionary speech acts, received significant attention in discussions of the power of words in the Bible. But the idea that biblical words were powerful did not originate with Austin. As Chapter 1 shows, biblical scholars typically adopted the view that ancient words and actions were imbued with more religious or sacred power than modern ones.

Biblical curses take many forms, based on their terminology, purpose, and literary context. Like the Bible in general, biblical curses lack a consistent or coherent structure. As subsequent Chapters show, the power of curses sometimes stands in uneasy relationship to the power of the God of Israel. Far from a stable set of linguistic beliefs and practices, then, biblical

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1.   Bruce Lincoln, *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 4. See also Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (trans. J.E. Turner; New York: Harper & Row, 1963), II, pp. 408-409.

2.   Paul Arden Keim, 'When Sanctions Fail: The Social Function of Curse in Ancient Israel' (Dissertation, Harvard University, 1992).

curses pose a question that continues to be asked today: do words have power, and if so, how does this power relate to other forms of power (divine and human)? In the Bible, covenant curses represent a form of revelation, since they are ascribed to the God of Israel. What it means to incorporate curses into a notion of revelation is a concern in the first part of this book. But a larger question is whether the displaced, modern counterparts to biblical curses are also a kind of revelation. Biblical notions of revelation are intimately tied up with processes of writing, political power, and interpretation: the authority of the Bible as revelation comes in large part from these processes. The powerful influence of the Bible on theory, language, and literature includes the power of modern speech in that tradition. Biblical curses and their post-biblical afterlives cross the boundaries between 'sacred' revelation and 'secular' power.

Patterns in the Use of Curses

Several tensions inhere in curses. The first, of course, is whether and to what degree a curse if 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. By surveying several forms and uses of curses in the Bible, the first part of this study will provide a broad survey of biblical curses as they play out in biblical culture. I suggest that the subordination and displacement of biblical cursing traditions in ancient Israel, Christian tradition, and contemporary culture paradoxically betokens the cultural importance of curses, especially to notions of human autonomy and identity.

Across cultural and historical divides, there is a distinction between the *performance* of curses and the *mention* of curses. To *perform* a curse is to wish or invoke some harmful power to strike another. To *mention* a curse means to report, threaten, predict, or reflect on the *performance* of a curse. Of course, most cases blur the distinction, since to perform a curse is also to mention it in a way, and the mention of a curse entails a performance. And as J. Hillis Miller shows, literature blurs the boundary between mention and performance for all speech acts.[3] But despite their clear place among speech

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3. J. Hillis Miller, *Speech Acts in Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 37.

acts, studies of cursing rarely address the categories of performance and mention. Yet, as I hope to show, the *mention* of curses can be more frequent and significant than the *performance* of curses. The threat of curses can be used, for instance, to influence a rival's behavior. Before it is even performed, then, a curse can exercise power of a social and political kind. Curses can be efficacious in a social sense without direct resort to supernatural power.

The basic structure of a curse makes possible a whole series of regressions. For example, the mention of curses in the form of a threat (e.g., 'I might curse you') adds a step to the chain of actions leading from verbal expression to harmful outcome. At one extreme is the unconditional curse, which summons immediate harm, followed by the conditional curse or oath, which brings harm under certain circumstances; and at the other extreme would be the threat of a curse. As supernatural as they may be believed to be, curses are also fundamentally rhetorical, and they demand rhetorical analysis.

The mention of curses in reports, treatises, stories, and other accounts reveals the symbolic potency of cursing. More than their actual use, the mention of curses in a wide range of contexts reveals not the power of speech, but the *power of the power* of speech. In this way, cursing is very much like Richard Gordon's notion of Greek and Roman magic, which 'may be a practice, but more than anything else it is a shared construction, a child of the imagination, made possible by another, equally massive, effort of the human imagination, the enrulement of the world of experience'.[4] Through the process of what Jacques Derrida would call the deferral of signification itself, cursing becomes a topic, a category of language and culture through the *mention* of curses as much as through their *performance*.

The reality of curses thus lies in their presence to the imagination as a possibility, a limit-case of what speech can do, whether from the retrospective standpoint of an actual experience of harm or the proleptic standpoint of summoning or threatening injury. By emphasizing how the *mention* of curses, as well as their performance, can influence people, I stress the social function of curses as a means of regulating and enforcing norms.

The Power of the Curse: Honor and Weakness

The individual's act of defiant cursing, as in the case of Saul's kinsman Shimei against David in 2 Samuel 16, can represent what Jeff Anderson calls a 'last resort of the weak'.[5] Clearly a subaltern figure, Shimei defies

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4.   R. Gordon, 'Imagining Greek and Roman Magic', in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: Ancient Greece and Rome* (ed. B. Ankarloo and S. Clark; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 159-275 (168).

5.   J. Anderson, 'The Social Function of Curses in the Hebrew Bible', *ZAW* 110 (1998), pp. 223-37 (231).

all the rules of deference to the divinely chosen king, placing his own life in immediate danger. Shimei has no hope of overthrowing David, no organized opposition, not even a credible plan to harm David physically. Yet he acts out of regard for his family's honor. His only weapon is words, which have the surprising effect of persuading David to leave him alone (but see 2 Kings 3). As a 'last resort of the weak', biblical curses counteract the power differential so basic to ancient Israelite society. Particularly if they represent the values of divine justice, as in the case of the prophets Amos, Hosea, or Jeremiah, for instance, the critical words of politically weak people can be very powerful indeed.

Among the many social values defended by biblical curses is honor. In Genesis 9, the sin of dishonoring the father by gazing on his naked body, brings a severe curse on Ham. For nineteenth-century American slaveholders, the same text would be invoked in defense of Southern honor. Stephen Haynes's *Noah's Curse* is a telling examination of this biblical curse of Ham or Canaan as a defense of slavery and racist ideology.[6] Like other ethnic curses, such as the curse on the Gibeonites in Joshua 9, the curse of Ham/ Canaan serves to defend the honor of the Israelites at the expense of other groups, even those that are more powerful than they (see Chapter 2). Curses could also protect and defend the honor of individuals and families, such as the jealous husband in the ritual of the Sotah (Num. 5) or the house of Saul in the curse of Shimei against David. In these and many other cases, curses provide powerful social sanctions to protect honor, even if those who perform them are politically or socially weak.

The biblical exaltation of the weak prompted Friedrich Nietzsche to launch a fierce attack on Christian and Jewish ethics in *The Genealogy of Morals*. There Nietzsche identified what he regarded as a perverse form of morality, based on what he viewed as the legacy of Jewish and Christian slave morality. Stressing the psychological and cultural dimensions of this morality, Nietzsche overlooked (surprisingly, for a philologian) the degree to which *ressentiment* was centrally rooted in practices of speech, especially the oracles (including curses) of politically weak prophets. This oversight led Nietzsche to extrapolate from biblical texts and contexts to general psychological and cultural states. In his bid to challenge the Bible's grasp on the cultural imagination, Nietzsche ironically reinforced its canonical authority. Despite his own rhetorical use of curses and oracles, which are filled with biblical references, Nietzsche analyzed Christian and Jewish morality without recognizing how biblical morality belongs to a self-critical rhetorical tradition. Biblical curses thus stand in a dual relation to Nietzsche's work as rhetorical influence and adversary. Nietzsche's genealogical

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6. Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The American Biblical Justification of Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

method illuminates the psychology of biblical curses, but his own work reveals his own blindness to the robustness of biblical tradition.

As weapons of the weak, curses can express Nietzschean *ressentiment* against power. Understood as speech acts, curses can perform symbolic resistance, reinforce bonds among members of disenfranchised groups, and provide a domain of human autonomy and coping in the face of oppression. Cursing traditions among African-Americans, Latin American peasants, and ancient Israelites function to provide the kind of 'everyday resistance' theorized by anthropologist James Scott. Like the rhetorical forms of mimicry and parody, theorized by feminists Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler as strategies for resistance to power among women, curses operate to challenge power and affirm the agency of socially weak people (see Chapter 9).[7]

The Pleasure of the Curse: Poiesis

When Jean Delumeau coined the phrase 'civilization of blasphemy', he identified literary and cultural figures such as François Rabelais who take delight in the language of cursing. Certainly there is a long literary history of taking pleasure in curses. One origin of this pleasure, no doubt, lies in the satisfaction of resisting established authority. In other cases, the pleasurable uttering of curses might fall within the boundaries of sanctioned behavior. Curses can be a ludic form of expression, a primordial form of *poiesis* that will already be associated in early modernity (e.g., in Shakespeare and Milton) with the transgression of the individual. Without denying conventionalized uses of curses, this study attends specifically to how individuals make creative use of curses for a variety of purposes.

For Roland Barthes, the 'pleasure of the text' demands an 'anti-hero' who eliminates the law of 'logical contradiction'.[8] When this happens, our 'anti-

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7.   Irigary writes: 'One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it. Whereas a direct feminine challenge to this condition means demanding to speak as a (masculine) "subject", that is, it means to postulate a relation to the intelligible that would maintain sexual indifference… It means to resubmit herself…to "ideas", in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible", by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means "to unveil" the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. *They also remain elsewhere:* another case of the persistence of "matter", but also of "sexual pleasure"' (Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* [trans. Catherine Porter; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985], p. 76). See also Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 32.

8.   Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (trans. Richard Miller; New York: Noonday Press, 1988), p. 3.

hero' becomes a social outcast, but has also made possible the pleasure of the text and reversed the myth of Babel: 'Thus the Biblical myth is reversed, the confusion of tongues is no longer a punishment, the subject gains access to bliss by the cohabitation of languages *working side by side*: the text of pleasure is a sanctioned Babel'.[9] In its reversal of biblical tradition, Barthes's anti-hero performs a kind of curse; his 'pleasure of the text' is a kind of pleasure of the curse. Like cursing, the blissful signification of literature, for Barthes, has become unavailable, relegated either to an elite or to utopian ideals.[10] Cursing, in other words, is a perennial form of *poiesis*, a powerful form of verbal self-expression capable of bringing pleasure to the reader.

How do curses generate pleasure, and what kind of pleasure is it? In a study of curses in Spanish literature, Maureen Flynn asserts that '[B]lasphemy was essentially a form of play… This involved a sporting with language through inversion of normally pious verbal delivery, making use of the same imaginary constructs as prayer'.[11] In addition to this notion of play as sport, she also identifies its psychological role in limiting anxiety and reversing power relations.[12] The association of curses with competition appears also in Hellenistic culture. According to John Gager, curses were employed in ancient Greek sports and poetry competitions; '[T]he competitive nature of these occasions, which places both employment and status on the line, prompted the use of *defixiones* in order to hinder one's opponents and to enhance one's own chances of success'.[13] From these ancient written formulas to spontaneous execrations, the use of cursing as creative self-expression and self-assertion, usually against authority, is perennial. Even in ancient Israel, as when Shimei curses David (2 Sam. 16), an exhilarating defiance animates this challenge to authority.

9. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, pp. 3-4.

10. 'It is characteristic of our (historical) contradiction that significance (bliss) has taken refuge in an excessive alternative: either in a mandarin *praxis* (result of an *extenuation* of bourgeois culture), or else in an utopian idea (the idea of a future culture, resulting from a *radical, unheard-of, unpredictable* revolution about which anyone writing today knows only one thing: that, like Moses, he will not cross over into it)' (Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, pp. 38-39).

11. Flynn, 'Blasphemy and Anger in Sixteenth-Century Spain', *Past and Present* 149 (1995), pp. 29-56 (54-55).

12. 'By hurling insults at God, either by denying his existence altogether or by condemning the way in which he had managed the course of human events, men and women who were caught in anxious situations could strike back at the perceived source of their pain and assert mastery over their condition' (M. Flynn, 'Blasphemy and the Play of Anger in Sixteenth-Century Spain', pp. 54-55).

13. John Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 43. See also Don C. Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

As a kind of *poiesis*, cursing thus belongs to the category of the aesthetic, which Hans-Georg Gadamer characterizes as a form of play in which the activity of playing leads to a sense of the loss of self; the 'play itself contains its own, even sacred, seriousness'.[14] For the Romantics, aesthetics was often a matter of heroic, even Promethean self-expression; Schiller's portrait of Moses, Goethe's *Faust*, Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', and Byron's *Don Juan* are examples. A paradox of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature is that the weakness of religious institutions sometimes deprived Romantic authors of a formidable object of cursing and blasphemy.

Not only are curses ludic and Promethean, given in many times and places to elaborate displays of (usually male) bravado, but they are also dangerous, as perennial efforts to control them indicate. Whereas legislation against cursing is a primary mechanism of control in the premodern and early modern periods, I argue that modernity offered the alternative approach of displacing curses into a variety of other discourses, especially literature (see Chapters 4, 5, and 7).

From the Bible to Early Modernity and Enlightenment

In early modern England, the biblical tradition of curses would undergo a striking shift from efficacious speech to vulgar breach of decency. At the same time, early modern writers displaced the efficacy of curses onto new discourses of reason, the market, and the imagination. In the contemporary world, many of these new discourses themselves were transformed, while efficacious cursing returned to public discussions in new ways. In readings of Shakespeare, Bunyan, Defoe, and other early modern texts, I chart transformations of biblical debates (whether words have power), motifs (the wandering Jew), and forms (the genre of self-cursing), that continue to play out today (see Chapters 3, 4, and 5). This study then suggests some ways in which contemporary culture takes up strands of biblical tradition through a kind of return of the repressed culture of cursing. In modern literature, critical theory, literary theory, and debates on hate speech, for instance, I show how current ideas of powerful speech can have the same kind of power as biblical cursing (Chapters 7–9). One of the tasks of this book is to show how contemporary uses of powerful words represent latter-day displacements or transformations of biblical curses.

Modernity brought heightened ideas of individual freedom and, including freedom of religion. Far from the days when religious identity was

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14. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), pp. 91ff. See V.A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), pp. 124-44 and Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (trans. Hélène Iswolsky; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984).

determined primarily by birth, the early modern period saw European Christians faced with new levels of religious choice and freedom. According to Peter Berger, the phenomenon of religious choice, which he calls the *heretical imperative* (from the Greek word meaning 'choose'), is a basic element of modernity.[15] Like Berger, John Milton characterizes heresy as choice in his 1659 *Treatise of Civil Power*. Eager to diminish concerns over the subject, Milton asserts that heresy 'is no word of evil note; meaning only the choise or following of any opinion good or bad in religion or any other learning… In which sense Presbyterian or Independent may without reproach be calld a heresie'.[16] Milton claims that charges of heresy were rightly invoked in the early church, before the scriptures were formed. But once scripture is established, he claims, in good Protestant fashion, 'that no man, no synod, no session of men, though calld the church, can judge definitively the sense of scripture to another mans conscience'.[17]

Milton's defense of conscience anticipates later conceptions of justice for the individual, but the promises of freedom bring the danger of inflicting harm or misery on others through rationalized or secularized forms of cursing. Noting the violent origins of religious morality, Friedrich Nietzsche asks, 'And might one not add that, fundamentally, this world has never since lost a certain odor of blood and torture? (Not even in good old Kant: the categorical imperative smells of cruelty.)'[18] By the twentieth century, apparently 'secularist' values of the nation-state and Enlightenment notions of self, reason, and law become god-like authorities that one must invoke in oaths, imprecations, and even maledictions. With an increased focus on the individual, there is a shift in emphasis from curses against God to curses centered on the self, especially the sexualized female body.[19] Meanwhile, curses that retain the traditional structure of invoking a deity to bring harm or destruction will become a form of superstitious or occult behavior, a form of magic in other words. There are also contemporary forms of efficacious speech that I will argue bear the stamp of cursing traditions: these include a whole range of linguistic forms I associate with Romantic theories of language, speech-act theory, and, more recently, debates on political and 'hate' speech. All of these general shifts, I argue, are better described as displacements than signs of a master narrative of progress called secularization.

Of course, to challenge the myth of secularism is easier than to establish an alternative explanation for modern phenomena. Without denying the

15. Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (New York: Doubleday, 1979).

16. Milton, *A Treatise of Civil Power*, in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, VII (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 250.

17. Milton, *A Treatise of Civil Power*, pp. 250-51.

18. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale; New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 65.

19. See Hughes, *Swearing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), pp. 206-35.

important transformations of modern culture, I wish to emphasize the resistance of biblical tradition, ancient and modern, to the sacred/secular dichotomy. By correlating biblical curses with texts of modern culture, my aim is to describe the modern legacy of biblical curses and to engage in cultural criticism of modern cultural texts. Some of the chapters attempt new readings of biblical curse texts and traditions, often from the standpoint of modern cultural theory and criticism. Others make connections between biblical traditions of cursing and modern cultural texts. If certain practices of modern culture represent the displacement of premodern (even biblical) forms of cursing, then it becomes possible to ask about the cultural stakes in the transformation of biblical curses. What do different models of cursing represent for the religions of ancient Israel, Judaism, and Christianity? How do biblical curses relate to such religious categories as negative theology, sin, and covenant? And for modern cultural forms outside institutional religion, how and why are curses understood?

Tradition and Displacement

In contemporary Western speech and writing, the word 'curse' is everywhere, but everywhere it is drained of its power. The mention of curses, in other words, has nearly replaced their performance, and it has become a cliché or mere figure of speech. A 1948 book called *The Lost Art of Profanity* charts the modern decline of cursing with a mixture of playfulness and nostalgia.[20] An early modern shift, which I locate mainly in the seventeenth century, made curses more vulgar than powerful, at the same time displacing their power onto other forms of discourse. Among the factors that made this transformation possible are the development of the printing press, which eliminated the need to inscribe anathema curses on precious manuscripts. The Reformation diminished the Catholic monopoly on religious authority, including institutionalized curses. In the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, when religious affiliation became a matter of choice, religious cursing was the subject of controversy and danger. At the same time, the domains of philosophy, science, and political economy encroached on the authority of the Church.

My argument here is that rationalism and early modernity displaced cursing from sanctioned areas of daily practice because curses provided a necessary antithesis, a kind of cultural foil, to rational speech.[21] With this function, of course, goes the corollary: Curses are the domain of uncivilized, superstitious people, and therefore not to be countenanced by rational, civilized

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20. Burges Johnson, *The Lost Art of Profanity* (Indianapolis: Bobbs–Merrill, 1948).

21. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (trans. Tom Conley; New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

people. By resort to hermeneutics of suspicion (especially in Nietzsche and Freud), this study is able to show affinities between biblical curse traditions and their latter-day counterparts. By recovering the repressed and displaced contents of curse tradition in rationalism, aestheticism, and political struggle, this analysis points the way toward new understandings of the persistence of biblical tradition.

But I wish to go further—biblical curses are not simply a *case* of biblical tradition, they are also a key to its structure. The negation of curses in the Bible and their various transformations in post-biblical culture demonstrate the mechanisms of biblical culture and tradition. Neither a quasi-biological (Lamarckian) legacy, as Freud would have it in *Moses and Monotheism*, nor a history of discontinuity, biblical tradition depends on the power of speech to negate. From a rhetorical standpoint of function and structure, the difference between biblical and rationalistic speech can be minor. This study thus engages the larger debates on tradition and change. Terms in these debates include the meaning of 'religion' and 'culture'; understandings of memory and forgetting; the degree to which religious traditions are cognitive or available to consciousness; human agency in the face of tradition; and the power of narrative and rhetorical conventions to cross linguistic and historical boundaries.

I propose that the robustness of biblical curses demonstrates that they belong to a self-critical rhetorical tradition. As Michael Fishbane and others have shown, the Bible manifests elaborate systems of textual interpretation that guide post-biblical readers and critics, especially in rabbinic Judaism. What I wish to demonstrate are some of the thinner lines of continuity from biblical tradition to early modern and contemporary habits of cursing; so that in Chapter 8 on the metaphor of erasure in biblical curses and the work of Jacques Derrida, for example, I show how post-structuralist thinkers, when they write about the Christian tradition of negative theology, cannot avoid also participating in biblical traditions of rhetoric and reflection.

The conceptual inversion of curses around the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries, from powerful to vulgar words, could easily be misconstrued as the withering-away of religion, or secularization. In England, for example, references to curses as God's justice gave way to the idea of curses as profane and vulgar speech. Later, Enlightenment figures like Kant would relegate curses and related forms of speech to the margins of acceptable discourse, stripped of the authoritative role they had played in biblical religion. But while the power of 'curses' appeared to diminish, other kinds of language outside the domain of 'religion', such as political oaths and universal 'ethics' and 'rights', gained power. One of the first observers of these transformations was Friedrich Nietzsche, who denounced new kinds of power with the rhetoric of the old. In *The Antichrist* and other writings, Nietzsche attacked Christian Enlightenment morality with an

explicit curse: 'I call Christianity the *one* great curse, the *one* great intrinsic depravity, the *one* great instinct for revenge for which no expedient is sufficiently poisonous, secret, subterranean, *petty*—I call it the *one* immortal blemish of mankind…'.[22] By cursing Enlightenment morality, Nietzsche inverted the modern inversion of biblical tradition, retrieving cursing as a legitimate and effective form of speech. More critical than Romantic theorists, Nietzsche set a precedent for later attempts to retrieve powerful speech, making *cursing* its rhetorical symbol.

Nietzsche's work was a major influence on the psychoanalytic thought of Sigmund Freud, whose writings on religion and case studies offer alternatives to standard ideas of religious change as secularization. In his keen clinical and cultural observations, Freud noted a fascinating variety of ways in which beliefs and practices can be transformed. Through the category of the unconscious and shifts known as displacements, Freud made it possible to theorize tradition beyond the realm of consciously transmitted beliefs and practices. Through an adaptation of Freud's idea of displacement, which I develop in Chapter 6, I propose a model of biblical tradition that affords numerous historical and cultural shifts without resorting to the grand narratives of secularization or eternal recurrence.

Several recent theoretical perspectives support models of biblical tradition that incorporate discontinuity and forgetting. Building on Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, Jan Assmann has proposed a notion of 'mnemohistory', the history of memory, which allows him to see the Egyptian Moses, for instance, as a basic cultural *topos* of religious differentiation that takes many forms. In this way, Assmann is able to validate Freud's insight that Moses combines Hebrew and Egyptian tradition in an account of cultural transmission. Assmann carries this thinking further in his understanding of tradition as 'cultural memory', which is 'complex, pluralistic, and labyrinthine; it encompasses a quantity of bonding memories and group identities that differ in time and place and draws its dynamism from these tensions and contradictions'.[23] Applying the work of Derrida and Gadamer to Freud, Assmann shows how biblical tradition exceeds the boundaries of deliberate political and theological aims. Because of the dynamics of biblical tradition, canon and commentary, texts such as the ethnic curses of Genesis or Joshua (the focus of Chapter 2) play different roles at different times in history.

Curses play such an important role in biblical covenants, history, and prophetic discourse that their absence from contemporary religious discourse

22. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, in *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ* (trans. R.J. Hollingdale; New York: Penguin, 1990), p. 199.

23. Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory* (trans. Rodney Livingstone; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 29.

calls for explanation. I suggest that early modern transformations in cursing displaced their power onto other forms of discourse. In the writings of Bunyan and Defoe, for instance (Chapter 4), curses undergo a shift from powerful action to vulgar speech, while other forms of expression, notably satire, take on new significance.

Alasdair MacIntyre's notion of tradition, articulated in *After Virtue* and his Gifford lectures (*Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*), is summarized by the phrase 'historically extended, socially embodied argument'.[24] Responsible more than any other contemporary philosopher for identifying the importance of narratives and holistic understandings of philosophy in community contexts, MacIntyre nevertheless rejects the approach of what he calls 'genealogists' to tradition. Against Nietzsche, Foucault, de Man and others, MacIntyre asserts a robust version of Thomistic moral theory, one rooted in the historical and academic contexts of the Middle Ages. MacIntyre repeatedly points out the apparent self-contraction that genealogists, all too much in the spirit of Nietzsche's will to power, assert their critical standpoint that no such critical standpoint is possible.

Still, having shown at least in brief the extent to which Paul de Man and Nietzsche have no ground on which to stand, MacIntyre neglects to take up the more powerful challenge posed by Foucault, de Man, and others, that language, narrative, and discourse play a powerful role in shaping human thought and expression. It is not entirely clear whether MacIntyre's recognition of the importance of narrative entails or avoids a postmodern standpoint. In any case, MacIntyre's conception of tradition is too quick in his attack on genealogists to dismiss the role of language and discourse he appears elsewhere to acknowledge.

Like MacIntyre, Gershom Scholem articulates a notion of tradition as a 'struggle over great ideas': 'Our history is a mighty struggle over these demands [of Torah] and this struggle has many worthy manifestations, not all of which are on the side of the rabbinic tradition'.[25] But for Scholem, tradition (specifically Jewish tradition) falls within an explicitly theological framework. A self-described 'religious anarchist', Scholem articulates a complex notion of tradition with a teleological focus: 'In my opinion, Judaism includes utopian aspects that have not yet been discovered. It possesses a living force which I denote "utoptian aspects"'.[26] Scholem's notion of tradition has certain advantages over MacIntyre's, but where Scholem affirms a model of tradition limited to Jewish theology, I suggest a hermeneutical

24. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 222.

25. Scholem, 'On Education for Judaism', in *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time and Other Essays* (ed. Avraham Shapira, trans. Jonathan Chipman; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), pp. 80-92 (89).

26. Scholem, 'On Education for Judaism', pp. 82, 84.

model of biblical tradition that depends not on claims of divine agency but on human language and culture.

With Freud and Benjamin, I understand tradition to extend beyond theology, rationalism, and the limitations of particular maps of culture. At the same time, I do not conceive of tradition as a prison-house that radically limits moral and political agency. Moral debates on the proper response to offensive or obsolete elements of tradition, which are typical of modernity, reflect the tendencies of secularism typical of Enlightenment thought. An important example is *The Woman's Bible* (1895), edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others, and the debates that surrounded it. Should destructive tradition be erased? Can it? According to Mieke Bal, there can be value in deliberately preserving offensive traditions such as the racist Dutch figure of Zwarte Piet: 'What I suggest is that this painful, unacceptable tradition is needed just a bit longer, to allow a continued questioning of the psychological ideology that underlies its critical alternative'.[27] Bal seeks to develop critical ways of seeing and reimagining the past in order to avoid repressing or reiterating the past.[28] In the case of the Bible, I share Bal's conviction (against Stanton) that the past cannot be erased, but I also consider (with MacIntyre and others) counterreadings and critiques of the kind I attempt here to be *part* of tradition, rather than outside it.

The notions of tradition and displacement developed here bring together Freudian insights on the complexity of traditions with the Benjamin's resistance to simplistic narratives of progress, decline, and eternal recurrence. For Freud and Benjamin alike, biblical tradition and powerful language were abiding preoccupations, and it is the goal of the present study to bring the insights of Freud and Benjamin to bear on the study of biblical curses and biblical tradition. By developing models of biblical tradition informed by Freud, Benjamin, and hermeneutical engagement with particular texts, this study contributes to debates on religion and secularism. Though he developed it for the analysis of dreams and disorders, Freud's use of Nietzsche in explaining displacement, even in his early work on dreams, shows its cultural and social ramifications. The main contrast between secularization and displacement is that displacement describes shifts rather than disappearances; the discourse, institutions, and practices of religion do not simply go away but rather *go somewhere else*, in ways that are often unrecognized. By practicing what Paul Ricoeur called a 'hermeneutics of suspicion', Freud enables the reading of cultural phenomena for these unrecognized traces of religion, and in the hands of thinkers influenced by Freud but less committed

27. Mieke Bal, 'Tradition', in *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p. 223.
28. Bal, 'Tradition', p. 249.

to secularization, such as Benjamin, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Talal Asad, these traces can be seen in ethics, politics, economics, and mass culture.

Secularization

The widely held view that modernity is a process of secularization appears in most historical studies of cursing and blasphemy.[29] This view assumes a sharp dichotomy between religious and secular phases of history and culture that do not withstand the scrutiny of micro-level analysis of either pre-modern or modern culture. Secularization theory also assumes that historical and cultural changes take place together; for instance, that the American or French Revolution ended support for kings as well as the monarchy itself. Most difficult of all, secularization assumes that traditions, including religious traditions, are subject to radical discontinuity, that cultural practices can disappear suddenly, and that new cultural forms with no structural or causal relationship to the old arise to take their place.

Once taken for granted, secularization, the idea that religion and religious institutions will steadily decline, has now become questionable. Whether defined as the decline of 'religion', its separation from dominant public institutions, or the grand narrative of 'progress', secularization faces scrutiny on factual and conceptual grounds. Factual doubts emerge from the resurgence and increased political influence of religious groups in the past few decades, as well as the growing awareness that secularism is socially and geographically more limited than many once believed.[30] Does religious revival disprove secularization and 'progress'? Is secularism, which sometimes declares religion obsolete, itself obsolete? These questions lead from discussions of demograhic and historical facts to the examination of the terms 'religion' and 'secularism'.

There is widespread agreement that something is wrong with accounts of secularization, but as the number and variety of recent books on the subject show, there is no consensus on how to think about the problem.[31] One obvious alternative to the discontinuity of secularization is to affirm the continuity of modern culture with the religious past; Carl Schmitt and Karl Löwith, and to some extent Friedrich Nietzsche, take this position.[32] But the

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29. See Alain Cabantous, *Blasphemy* (trans. Eric Rauth; New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Geoffrey Hughes, *Swearing*; and Hughes, *An Encyclopedia of Swearing* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006).

30. Peter Berger, 'The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview', in Berger *et al.* (eds.), *The Desecularization of the World; Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 1-18.

31. Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 11.

32. Schmitt's continuity thesis appears in his well-known formulation that 'The

continuity thesis simply tends to say that modernity is religious, without questioning the binary categories of religion and secularity. This book proposes an alternative to secularization and continuity as displacement (see Chapters 1 and 6). Freud's idea of displacement emerges from careful 'readings' of individual case histories, and it combines manifest change with hidden continuity. In my adaptation of the concept, displacement describes 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. Displacement is thus a hermeneutical category that describes historically contingent patterns of persistence and change in biblical tradition.

Secularization, by most definitions and uses, refers to a process whereby religious institutions, beliefs, and practices diminish or disengage from other institutions. In his influential 1967 book *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter Berger defines secularization as 'the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols'.[33] The process sometimes fits into narratives of progress in which the decline of religion is salutary; in some cases, its loss represents an occasion for nostalgia. While this definition may still have value, many scholars, including Jeffrey Stout, William Connolly, Bruce Lincoln, Jose Casanova, Talal Asad, and Berger himself, have challenged secularization on empirical and conceptual grounds.[34] These disparate scholars tend to agree that secularization theories have failed, that religious institutions are not and/or should not be separate from social and cultural life, and that alternative accounts of religion in societies must be identified.

Much of the current debate turns on the reference of the term 'religion'. Some, like Casanova and Stout, concentrate on religious institutions, which has the advantage of clarity but overlooks some of the complicated cultural ways in which economic, political, scientific, and other cultural institutions and discourses may be 'religious'. On the other hand, if 'religion' can apply beyond explicitly religious institutions, then what are its limits?

most meaningful concepts of the modern doctrine of the State are secularized theological concepts'; *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (trans. George Schwab; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 118. A discussion of Löwith and Nietzsche appears in Chapter 6.

33. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Anchor, 1967), p. 107.

34. Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); William Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*; and Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

We thus find ourselves faced with a kind of apparently insoluble problem, or aporia. On the one hand, we know that secularization as a complete, clean break between a distant religious past and a non-religious present is simplistic; despite the popular efforts of current 'cultured despisers' of religion, including Sam Harris (*The End of Faith*), Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell*), and Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*),[35] this version of secularization remains factually wrong and conceptually flawed. On the other hand we know that simple traditionalism is also flawed; we can't recover an original state of traditional being, either because such a state never existed or because history has placed it out of reach. Both positions, anti-religious polemic and anti-modernist traditionalism, tend to react to modern realities rather than engage the complexity of debates and traditions; as Martin Riesebrodt suggests, the two also go hand in hand.[36]

Given this conceptual crisis, the questions become whether to repair or replace the category of secularization, and how to do so. Among those who seek to repair are Casanova, Stout, and Vincent Pecora; while those who would replace may include Lincoln, Asad, and Dipesh Chakrabarty. Such a distinction, between repairing and replacing, is debatable and less critical, though, than the question of *how* to do one or the other. While most such attempts come from the social sciences, Pecora's *Secularism and Cultural Criticism* draws from Matthew Arnold, Walter Benjamin, Ashis Nandy, and others to recommend a humanistic 'cultural criticism' focused especially on institutions of art and religion. Through this cultural criticism Pecora concludes that the standard secularization thesis on the gradual decline of religion must be adjusted 'in favor of a messier, more paradoxical, yet clearly ongoing process'.[37] I disagree with this conclusion, and I have quarrels with some of Pecora's readings (particularly of Benjamin as a simplistic opponent of progress).[38] In the end, Pecora's analysis of art and literature is far more nuanced than his analysis of religion. Still, Pecora helpfully manages to shift the secularization debate to the humanities, and to the domains of art and religion.

Asad's *Formations of the Secular* challenges secularization through genealogy. Instead of trying to decide whether secularization is somehow

35. Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004); Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion As a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006); Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006). Note Eagleton's scathing review of Dawkins: 'Lunging, Flailing, Punching', *London Review of Books* 28 (19 October 2006), pp. 32-34.

36. Martin Riesebrodt, 'Fundamentalism and the Resurgence of Religion', *Numen* 47 (2000), pp. 266-87.

37. Pecora, *Secularism and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 204.

38. Pecora, *Secularism and Cultural Criticism*, pp. 96-100.

empirically the case, Asad asks what we are doing when we impose the distinction between secular and religious, and in so doing shows how these categories enable certain discourses and institutions. One concern common to all these thinkers is the relationship between human agency and tradition. Asad's approach is to add the notion of practice to Alasdair MacIntyre's idea of tradition as embodied debate, noting that tradition is also 'about learning the point of a practice and performing it properly and making it a part of oneself'.[39] Richard Bernstein makes a similar point about tradition in the conclusion to his book on Freud: 'Freud's most distinctive (and controversial) contribution to understanding a religious tradition is to make us sensitive to the unconscious dimensions of this transmission'.[40] Bernstein borrows here from Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutical understanding of what Jan Assmann calls the 'linguistic embeddedness of human existence'.[41] The problem of the transmission of hidden memories, which Freud had sought to address on biological, Lamarckian grounds, can be addressed in cultural, hermeneutical terms, according to Bernstein. Like Bernstein's idea of tradition, Assmann's notion of 'cultural memory' 'encompasses the age-old, out-of-the-way, and discarded; and in contrast to collective, bonding memory, it includes the noninstrumentalizable, heretical, subversive, and disowned'.[42] And unlike Freud, Assmann sees the inheritance of repressed and hidden memories in the texts themselves: 'In order to uncover this network of meanings we have no need to practice the hermeneutics of distrust; nor need we read these texts against the grain. We need only listen to them attentively'.[43]

In an essay on Ashis Nandy and the practice of *sati*, Chakrabarty doubts the full visibility of tradition to contemporary eyes: 'But the past also comes to me in ways that I cannot see or figure out—or can see or figure out only retrospectively. It comes to me as taste, as embodied memories, as cultural training of the senses, and reflexes, often as things that I do not even know that I carry'. By this account, says Chakrabarty, 'I am to some extent a tool

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39. Asad, 'Responses', in *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and his Interlocutors* (ed. David Scott and Charles Hirschkind; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 206-41 (234); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 222.

40. Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 89.

41. Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, p. 26.

42. Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, 27. Assmann's 'cultural memory' also incorporates Freud's category of 'trauma' in ways that open it to the criticisms of trauma theory in general (59-62). See Wulf Kansteiner, 'Genealogy of a Category Mistake: A Critical Intellectual History of the Cultural Trauma Metaphor', *Rethinking History* 8 (2004), pp. 193-221.

43. Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, pp. 51-52.

in the hands of pasts and traditions'.[44] These views of agency and tradition inform my approach to secularization.

While most discussions of secularization affirm a conceptual map that sharply divides religion from secularity, my argument is that biblical tradition blurs the secular-religious distinction and can be described more accurately by the model of tradition and change I call displacement. Criticism of the secular-religious binary appears in the work of Walter Benjamin, Talal Asad, and several others, but it should not be confused with the claim of Carl Schmitt that 'All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts'.[45] Rather than reduce 'secular' culture to the category of religion, the task is to examine the meaning of both categories. Asad, for instance, shows how historical changes determine and change the meaning of 'religion', 'secular', and 'politics'; he considers the categories of religion and secularism to be so inextricable and this combination so politically charged that he questions the analytical value of the categories apart from particular historical contexts.[46] Like Walter Benjamin before him, Asad pays particular attention to modern uses and manifestations of tradition; in so doing, Asad observes how even the category of secularism, by distinguishing itself from 'religion', makes political use of it:

> In a sense what many would anachronistically call 'religion' was *always* involved in the world of power. If the secularization thesis no longer carries the conviction it once did, this is because the categories of 'politics' and 'religion' turn out to implicate each other more profoundly than we thought, a discovery that has accompanied our growing understanding of the powers of the modern nation-state.[47]

The trajectory of Asad's thinking on this problem, and the lively discussion it has already elicited, raises many issues, but my present purpose is to apply Asad's key insight to biblical tradition in general and biblical curses in particular.[48] Asad's method of genealogy, shaped by his reading of Foucault and training in anthropology, seeks to encompass large bodies of knowledge and culture. The methods of this project, rooted in literary and biblical studies, are more text-centered and hermeneutical than Asad's, and they yield a notion of biblical tradition parallel to but distinct from Asad's broad cultural analyses.

This study addresses current debates on religion and secularism by focusing on cursing and powerful speech in the Bible, early modern England, and

44. Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 46.
45. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p. 36.
46. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, p. 190.
47. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, p. 200.
48. See Scott and Hirschkind (eds.), *Powers of the Secular Modern*.

contemporary culture. The object of this study is *texts* and *traditions*. It does not attempt to provide a complete or even sketchy history or taxonomy of cursing; several good studies on this topic already exist.[49] Nor is its aim to retrieve and analyze oral practices of cursing. My method is rather to correlate biblical tradition with contemporary cultural texts in order to ask, for example, What is biblical about laws against swearing? What do cultural histories about cursing tell us about the political and cultural claims of speech? What are the contemporary equivalents to biblical cursing? How do biblical traditions of powerful speech inform contemporary debates on religion and secular society?

Biblical tradition includes reading, commentary, history, and transmission of the Bible, but it also extends to practices and beliefs about language, writing, self, and society. Biblical tradition encompasses the static canonical texts of the Bible, but it is also dynamic, just as ancient biblical tradition was dynamic.[50] Biblical tradition is sometimes explicit, but it can also be implicit and elusive, especially in such ostensibly secular institutions as law and business. As such, the present study goes beyond such narrow understandings of biblical tradition as one finds in the current debate on biblical literacy, which can best be understood as a symptom of the 'culture wars' following from the pervasiveness of the secular-religious distinction.[51] While such knowledge is valuable in all sorts of ways, it does not address the dynamics of persistence and change that puzzle and fascinate those who study the Bible and modernity. Only the broader notion of biblical tradition proposed here can present an alternative to the problematic binary opposition between secular and religious as characterizations of culture.

This study takes three statements to be axiomatic: first, religion is a category of analysis distinct from politics, economics, and others, with a distinct set of questions and approaches in the study of human history, behavior, and

49. Alain Cabantous, *Blasphemy: Impious Speech in the West from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century* (trans. Eric Rauth; Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2002; Geoffrey Hughes, *Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English* (London: Penguin, 1998); Ashley Montagu, *The Anatomy of Swearing* (New York: Macmillan, 1967); and Stephan Wyss, *Fluchen: Ohnmächtige und mächtige Rede der Ohnmacht* (Freiburg: Edition Exodus, 1984).

50. Michael Fishbane shows how biblical tradition, even within the Bible, is a dynamic process, a *traditio*, as well as a collection, or *traditum*; *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). Alasdair McIntyre's definition of tradition as embodied debate is similarly dynamic (*After Virtue*, p. 222).

51. Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know— And Doesn't* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007); Jacques Berlinerblau, *The Secular Bible: Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Criticism appears in Stanley Fish, 'Religion without Truth', *The New York Times*, March 31, 2007, and Mark Oppenheimer, 'Knowing Not', *The New York Times Book Review*, June 10, 2007.

culture. This is not to say that religion is a distinct, easily defined *phenomenon*, but rather that analysis and criticism of 'religious' discourses and institutions yields insights not available from other forms of analysis. Stated more fully, this axiom means that certain binaries, such as religion and secularism, operate powerfully in human actions and institutions, and they must therefore be part of cultural analysis. Second, the models of secularism and secularization that dominated scholarship in the social sciences and humanities at least since the nineteenth century are flawed and must be called into question on conceptual and empirical grounds, in ways that challenge the binary opposition between religion and secularism itself. Third, no grand narrative alternative to secularization is necessary or available to carry on the conversation about the Bible, religion, and secularism. Instead, a critical hermeneutical approach to specific 'texts' and contexts, one that appeals to careful reading and analysis, remains a necessary and often overlooked way of thinking through questions of religion, secularism, and tradition. Through examination of the biblical tradition of powerful speech, this study attempts to identify and provisionally address the problem of replacing the religion-secularism dichotomy.

The aim here is not to settle once and for all the problem of secularization but rather to reframe it by asking how biblical tradition complicates the dichotomy of secularity and religion. Rather than a specific method or system, displacement is a hermeneutical category of analysis that emerges from readings of biblical texts, early modern literature, and such thinkers as Nietzsche, Freud, Benjamin, and Asad. Through their variety and complexity, curses in biblical tradition demonstrate the inadequacy of secularization theories and indicate the need for a concept such as displacement. How?

Two examples of contemporary curses serve as illustrations. The first comes from a newspaper column called 'My Answer' by the Rev. Billy Graham.[52] In explaining what is wrong with all cursing and swearing, Graham claims that 'cursing and swearing show disrespect for God' and advises the reader to 'ask God to help you avoid all language that is crude or disrespectful, either of God or of others'. Disrespect, of course, is a non-biblical term. Graham's idea of respect means to display good etiquette and to affirm the modern value of the dignity of (divine and human) persons. True to his role as 'America's pastor', Graham translates the ancient biblical injunctions against cursing and swearing (Exodus 20.7, James 5.12, Ephesians 4.29) into modern categories that reflect the seventeenth-century shift from views of cursing and swearing as powerful to the view that they are bad manners and inconsistent with Enlightenment ethics (see Chapter 4). Graham's idea of curses is biblical and modern at the same time.

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52. Billy Graham, 'My Answer', *Roanoke Times*, 7 August, 2003, Extra Section, p. 3.

A second example comes from a stapler that once sat on the counter of the Harvard Divinity School Library. On the stapler was a note that read, 'To steal this stapler would be an antisocial act'. Like disrespect, antisocial behavior is a trademark of modern ethics and criminology. The term can even imply that one is not be responsible for a wrongful action: poverty or a troubled family can account for antisocial behavior. The humor of the message lies in its use of 'antisocial act' where a dire curse might stand: premodern curse inscriptions typically warned of painful, supernatural consequences for those who would destroy or efface a public object (such as a grave marker),[53] while here the library staff have warned that a mild and rather exculpatory epithet would haunt the potential thief. In an age 'after curses', the stapler curse dramatizes the displacement of curses in contemporary culture.

Method

The three sections of this study, on biblical, early modern, and contemporary texts and traditions, apply and develop the idea of biblical tradition sketched here. Each of these sections includes three chapters that address ideas of cursing and powerful speech as part of a dynamic tradition through the analysis of specific texts. The first three chapters consider covenant curses, ethnic curses, and self-curses in the Hebrew Bible. The next three chapters take on cursing in early modern England, particularly in texts by John Bunyan and Daniel Defoe; the role of biblical curses in broadside ballads and their appropriation by Samuel Taylor Coleridge; and in the writings of Nietzsche and Freud. The final section moves fully into the contemporary period, with chapters on the fiction of Zora Neale Hurston and Flannery O'Connor, the biblical dimensions of erasure in Jacques Derrida, and the place of biblical curse traditions in debates on hate speech.

It is an irony of modern history that efforts to minimize religious conflict during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reinforced cultural binaries—religion and secularism, faith and reason—that would later prove instrumental to projects and acts of unprecedented violence. The task of questioning these categories aims less to produce a better empirical or conceptual account of tradition than to think more carefully about them at a

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53. See Kevin J. Cathcart, 'The Curses in Old Aramaic Inscriptions', in K.J. Cathcart and Michael Maher (eds.), *Targumic and Cognate Studies* (JSOTSup, 230; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 140-52; Brenda Danet and Bryna Bogoch, '"Whoever Alters This, May God Turn his Face from Him on the Day of Judgment": Curses in Anglo-Saxon Legal Documents', *Journal of American Folklore* 105 (1992), pp. 132-65; and Marc Drogin, *Anathema! Medieval Scribes and the History of Book Curses* (Totowa, NJ: Allanheld & Schram, 1983).

time of danger.[54] More recently, Gayatri Spivak makes the point this way: 'I don't think the religious is our object of study or not our object of study. It is the object of intervention—that is what makes the religious political today'.[55] Of course, to speak of danger and intervention in this way carries the risk of confusing tradition with *traditionalism*, as an atavistic or nostalgic project of reclaiming the supposed lost integrity of an idealized past. The plainest examples of this impulse are religious revival movements, or 'fundamentalisms', which only reinscribe the secular-religious dichotomy by projecting a pure 'religious' ideology as the solution to 'secular' ills.

Through readings of particular texts, the idea of biblical tradition developed here attempts a modest intervention in thinking about the categories of 'secular' and 'religious', and such widely accepted counterparts as 'public' and 'private', 'reason' and 'faith', 'political' and 'personal'. The study does not attempt to account for oral or spoken forms of cursing, and its focus on texts means that it often deals not so much with the performance of curses as their mention, recording, and conceptualization. The readings presented here belong to a long history of readings that constitutes part of what I mean by biblical tradition, practices that combine text and commentary in diverse forms and contexts. It is important not to overstate the scope of this intervention, which is limited to specific texts and conversations among privileged scholars and students.

By its focus on the reading of texts, this study also makes a general point about reading and theory by reversing Paul de Man's well-known statement that 'Resistance to theory is in fact a resistance to reading'. I share this view and wish to argue as well that resistance to reading is a resistance to theory. What I mean is that theoretical writing too often overlooks texts as texts and thereby becomes, in fact, less theoretical. By calling displacement a hermeneutical category, I mean to underline this theoretical point—that textual nuance and context are crucial parts of theoretical work, even if they do not yield grand narratives and universal generalities. Reading particular texts through religious and literary studies contributes to discussions of secularization theory. The kind of theory practiced here, therefore, is always literary and hermeneutical.

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54. See Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', also called 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings* (ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott *et al.*; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 391.

55. Gayatri Spivak, 'Religion, Politics, Theology: A Conversation with Achille Mbembe', *boundary 2* 34.2 (2007) pp. 149-70 (162).

Part I

BIBLICAL CURSES

Chapter 1

Covenant Curses as Models of Displacement

The problem of accounting for religious change is ancient. It is certainly biblical, as widespread evidence of 'inner-biblical exegesis', whereby biblical texts were elaborated, imitated, and glossed by other biblical texts over the course of centuries, shows.[1] Comparisons of internal biblical sources is one of the most important ways of identifying change, but because such evidence is so skimpy and complex, little consensus on details of the process of religious change has been reached on these grounds. Conceptual discussion of change, moreover, is rare in biblical studies, with the result that most scholarship implies either a model of progressive secularization or, in the tradition of Nietzsche and Mircea Eliade, eternal recurrence.[2] Neither model adequately describes biblical texts and traditions. This chapter applies a third conceptual alternative, displacement, to the study of biblical covenant curses. While secularization neglects the persistence of earlier traditions, eternal recurrence tends to overlook the historical process; displacement is a hermeneutical category that asks how earlier texts and traditions relate to later ones without lapsing into absolute identity or absolute difference.[3]

Because of their number, variety, and history, biblical curses make an instructive case for the study of change in biblical religion. When a person pronounces a curse or malediction, a supernatural power, usually a deity, is invoked against another person. Statements of the form 'I curse X' or 'Cursed by X' will evil, but they do not imply the harm will be inflicted *directly*. To curse is not to hit, kick, or threaten any direct physical action. It is instead to *wish* or *invoke* harm to another person by means of another agent (such as a deity). Curses that do not specify the agent of harm are ambiguous not only about who or what will inflict the harm, but also *how certain* and *effective* the curse will be.

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1. Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*.
2. While Nietzsche's conception of eternal recurrence precedes and influences Eliade's, here I focus for the sake of clarity on Eliade's understanding of the term.
3. My argument is indebted to Asad's *Formations of the Secular*, which shows the historically and culturally conditioned uses of the category of 'secularism', as well as the difficulty of sustaining distinctions such as 'secular' and 'religious'.

   Curse formulas appear in many ancient non-biblical texts, including Mesopotamian inscriptions, lament texts, and grave sites, in Canaanite epics, and in Hittite treaties, and they serve a wide range of religious and cultural purposes.[4] Biblical literature contains an equally diverse range of curse texts, but the question is how, given Israelite theology, biblical curses relate to their non-biblical counterparts. What need would the universally powerful God of Israel or the people of Israel have for curses? If God is all-powerful, then in whose name would God utter a curse? The divine curse on the serpent in Gen. 3.14 does not make sense as a curse in the strict sense of God invoking harm on the serpent, but rather a judgment expressed as a curse. And if the people of Israel are truly subject to divine sovereignty, then on what grounds could they justify invoking God's power against others, in Exod. 20.7, for instance? The paradoxical survival of curses despite these theological obstacles illustrates the significance of curses as a case study of biblical tradition.

   At least three Hebrew verbs, אלה, ארר, and קלל, can be translated 'curse', though these terms cover a variety of oaths, imprecations, maledictions, and covenant formulas uttered by people and the God of Israel.[5] Depending on their purpose and context, biblical curses can be religiously sanctioned or condemned, conditional or binding, primarily social or theological. There is no systematic poetics of cursing in ancient Israel, and it is unclear whether or how biblical cursing is efficacious, what it implies about the doctrine of God, and what cursing implies about human agency. While there are several good studies of biblical curses, none of them has taken up these conceptual issues. A common assumption about biblical curses is that they reflect a magical or sacred worldview that can be contrasted to a secular worldview. This chapter challenges this view by exploring ideas, associations, and implications of biblical curses with respect to covenant texts and traditions. A particular focus here is what happens to curses when they take written form, especially when their performance requires physical gestures or actions. Far removed from particular speech acts, biblical curse texts may represent the *mention* of curses rather than their *use*, more part of an ongoing tradition rather than a source of tradition. I argue that biblical curses resist the categories of magic and rationalism, religion and secularity.

   Curses that combine words and gestures allow us to see how scholars understand the relationship between words and actions as well as speech and writing. Biblical cases include cutting an animal or making a cutting

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   4.   See, e.g., André Parrot, *Malédictions et Violations de Tombes* (Paris: Librairie Orientalise Paul Leroux, 1937); and Timothy G. Crawford, *Blessing and Curse in Syro-Palestinian Inscriptions of the Iron Age* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992).

   5.   See James K. Aitken, *The Semantics of Blessing and Cursing in Ancient Hebrew* (ANESSup, 23; Louvain: Peeters, 2007).

or choking gesture while saying, as David does, 'May God do so to me, and more also, if I taste bread or anything else before the sun goes down' (2 Sam. 3.35; see also 1 Sam. 14.44). Many regard writing to be a kind of secularization of speech and gesture, while others consider all curses, written and spoken, to be a kind of primitive religious practice. In most cases, though, ancient curses are regarded as religious, primitive, or non-rational. Gerardus Van der Leeuw contrasts modern and primitive notions of language:

> [T]he world of the primitive and of antiquity, and above all the religious world, knows nothing whatever of 'empty words'; it never says: 'more than enough words have been exchanged, now at last let me see deeds'; and the yearning no longer to have to 'rummage among words' is wholly foreign to it. But this is not at all because the primitive world has a blunter sense of reality than ours; rather the contrary: it is we who have artificially emptied the word, and degraded it to a thing. But as soon as we actually *live*, and do not simply make scientific abstractions, we know once more that a words has life and power, and indeed highly characteristic power.[6]

Powerful words take several forms for van der Leeuw, but among the most potent are formulas of 'consecration', which include curses, blessings, and oaths. Curses operate independently of divine beings: 'The reviler dedicates his opponent to those evil conditions about which he speaks'.[7]

Like speech, writing serves for van der Leeuw as a kind of magic in its earliest form, a charm that gives its holder a kind of enduring power. Writing, in fact, may represent greater power than speech alone, as in the case of the woman suspected of adultery in Numbers 5 who 'literally drank the curse, of course as an ordeal'.[8] Other cases given by van der Leeuw include an Egyptian book of magic soaked in beer and then drunk and practices around the Bible: '[W]e too still swear by the Gospel to-day; not, that is, by the Word of God, but on the holy book. Scripture, again, is an *oracle*; it is opened arbitrarily to obtain instructions'.[9]

Covenant curses are typically *conditional*; they invoke penalties on those who violate the terms of the covenant. These penalties loom in the indefinite future for those who accept the covenant in the present. The temporal distance between the conditional curse of the covenant and any future penalties for its violation is also a conceptual distance, between idea and application. Like law, a conditional curse stipulates conditions for penalties that require

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6. Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, II, p. 403.
7. Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, II, p. 409.
8. Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, II, p. 436, and Britt, 'Male Jealousy and the Suspected Sotah: Toward a Counter-Reading of Numbers 5.11-31', *The Bible and Critical Theory* 3 (2007), pp. 5.1-5.19.
9. Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, p. 436.

one to apply the rule to a particular case. Would such-and-such an action violate the covenant (or law)? The individual must resolve this question in order to choose certain courses of action. By applying the idea of the covenant to a particular choice, the individual responds to the covenant curse without a single supernatural occurrence. No divinely sanctioned plague, illness, injury, or death is needed in order for the curse to work!

Covenant curses thus have more in common with modern law than categories like magic and the sacred may suggest. For those subject to conditional curses and modern law alike, life is full of choices whether a given action violates the law/curse *and* whether a penalty is likely to ensue if it is a violation. According to George Mendenhall, the covenant at Sinai was in effect a 'promissory oath' that served to bind the people of ancient Israel together.[10] And as Paul Arden Keim shows in *When Sanctions Fail*, penalties for biblical curse violations may not be any more certain than traffic tickets for moving violations unseen by the police. My point is not that curses are more secular or rational than they are usually believed to be, but rather that such dichotomies as magical/rational and sacred/secular do not illuminate the phenomena of covenant curses. Whether ancient or modern, biblical tradition does not easily fit these categories; it is one of the larger goals of this project to develop ideas of biblical tradition and displacement as alternatives to secularization and the sacred/secular distinction.

The temporal distance between the conditional curse and its possible violation and penalty also means that a structure of deferral is inscribed in the covenant curse: 'cutting' the covenant, which may include cutting an animal and walking between its two halves, anticipates possible violations of the covenant and penalties for those violations; violations hearken back to the covenant and anticipate possible penalties. Most significantly for biblical tradition, penalties can hearken back to the covenant and its possible violations: in retrospect, a disaster like the Assyrian invasion or the Babylonian destruction and exile may indicate covenant violations.

Because it can link past warnings to present and future suffering, the deferral inscribed by covenant curses becomes a resource for theodicy, but this does not make curses any more superstitious or magical than other human searches for meaning, including some forms of history-writing.[11] All

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10. George E. Mendenhall, 'Ancient Oriental and Biblical Law', *Biblical Archaeologist* 17 (1954), pp. 25-46 (28).

11. Some forms of historiography, for instance, follow the same structure as the retrospective use of curses: an event is fully explained by events that preceded it as if it *could* not have happened otherwise. Although a curse is not the same as historical evidence, historical explanations sometimes serve to explain theodicy as curses do. For example, to say that Lincoln would have lived longer if he had not gone to Ford's Theater goes beyond the limits of historical evidence to speculate on a counterfactual. How do we know? There may have been another assassin waiting for Lincoln

searches for meaning occur within cultural contexts or traditions; covenant curses describe rituals that combine speech and action, but their written form conditions and transforms their meaning. This process, which I call displacement, can be illustrated by a passage of Jeremiah that relates the conditional curse and cutting of the covenant to the Babylonian exile:

> The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, after King Zedekiah had made a covenant (כרת ברית) with all the people in Jerusalem to make a proclamation of liberty to them, that all should set free their Hebrew slaves, male and female, so that no one should hold another Judean in slavery. And they obeyed, all the officials and all the people who had entered into the covenant that all would set free their slaves, male or female, so that they would not be enslaved again; they obeyed and set them free. But afterward they turned around and took back the male and female slaves they had set free, and brought them again into subjection as slaves. The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah from the LORD: Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I myself made a covenant (כרתי ברית) with your ancestors when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, saying, 'Every seventh year each of you must set free any Hebrews who have been sold to you and have served you six years; you must set them free from your service'. But your ancestors did not listen to me or incline their ears to me. You yourselves recently repented and did what was right in my sight by proclaiming liberty to one another, and you made a covenant (ותכרתו ברית) before me in the house that is called by my name; but then you turned around and profaned my name when each of you took back your male and female slaves, whom you had set free according to their desire, and you brought them again into subjection to be your slaves. Therefore, thus says the LORD: You have not obeyed me by granting a release to your neighbors and friends; I am going to grant a release to you, says the LORD—a release to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine. I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. And those who transgressed my covenant (העברים את־בריתי) and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made (הברית אשר כרתו) before me, I will make [like] the calf when they cut (כרתו) it in two and passed between its parts: the officials of Judah, the officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf shall be handed over to their enemies and to those who seek their lives. Their corpses shall become food for the birds of the air and the wild animals of the earth (Jer. 34.8-21, NRSV).

The persistence of the conditional curse of the cut animal suggests initially that the expression 'cut a covenant' was no dead metaphor in this relatively late text. In fact, the analogy made in v. 18 between the cutting of the covenant and the cutting of the calf, indicated by the bracketed term 'like', is

elsewhere that night, or a minor accident could have led to Lincoln's death. When history-writing engages in the counterfactual exercise of asking 'what if', it joins the literary forms of tragedy and fiction to consider the moral and metaphysical meaning of events. See Eric Hobsbawm, 'Could It Have Been Different?', *London Review of Books* 28 (16 November 2006), pp. 3-6. Thanks to Amy Nelson for this suggestion.

only supplied by editors; the text as we have it sets up something more like an apposition between the transgressors and the calf.[12] Zedekiah's failure to live up to a contemporary 'covenant' leads to drastic penalties (in the context of the Babylonian destruction) expressed in terms of the conditional curse cutting a covenant. The historical layers of this text number more than the two indicated by an past in which an animal was slaughtered in a covenant ritual and a present in which this curse appears poised to take force. A complete accounting of this text's layers would include (1) pre-biblical rituals; (2) biblical/Israelite adaptation of these rituals, along the lines of Genesis 15; (3) recording and incorporation of these rituals in Israelite tradition (orally, in ritual practice, and in writing); (4) the career of Jeremiah; (5) an account of Jeremiah's use of the tradition as above; and (6) the incorporation of that account into a redacted (Deuteronomistic) version of Jeremiah written from a post-exilic vantage point. What makes all these layers possible in the first place, I suggest, is the dynamic of ritual and writing, deferral and retrospection, inherent to the conditional curse itself.[13]

Covenant curses maintain a tension between divine and human agency, with a variety of outcomes. Jeremiah's curse on the day of his birth (Jeremiah 20) and Balaam's failed attempt to curse the Israelites in Numbers 22–24 display this tension in different ways. While Jeremiah's lament (like Job's in Job 3) seems to deflect anger at God back onto himself, Balaam experiences a different sort of deflection when he persists in blessing Israel even though he has been hired and commanded to curse them. The inherent ambiguity of curses, whether they represent mere imprecations or solemn invocations of supernatural harm, makes these deflections possible and adds to their complexity.

Like the use of treaties and ancient polytheistic cosmogonies in biblical tradition, biblical curses reflect a tension between familiar expression and novel theology. I propose to characterize this kind of change in terms of *displacement*, a change whereby a new idea or expression inhabits the context of an earlier idea or expression. Such change preserves continuity with the past by preserving familiar terms, structures, or discourses. Displacement can apply to large-scale change, as with Michel de Certeau's claim that ethics displaced religion in the early modern period, or it can be much more modest and local, as the apparent displacement of Saul by Samuel in 1 Samuel 1.20-28 suggests.[14] The model of displacement claims no particular narrative of improvement or decay, and it accounts for the sort of change

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12. The phrase translated in the NRSV as 'I will make' comes from a debated Greek variant on the text.

13. See Herbert Chanan Brichto's discussion of the passage and comparison to Gen. 15 in *The Names of God: Poetic Readings in Biblical Beginnings* (New York: Oxford, 1998), pp. 208-10.

14. P. Kyle McCarter, *I Samuel: A New Translation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), pp. 64-65.

that takes place within a tradition, where tradition refers to a whole range of beliefs, practices, and debates handed down through generations. Though the term displacement comes from Freud to describe psychic mechanisms, I apply the term hermeneutically to describe patterns of cultural persistence and change through interpretive engagements with texts and traditions.[15]

Several texts involving covenant and curses imply the use of physical gestures. Two in particular, to 'cut a covenant' and 'thus may God do to me', may even be said to *require* physical gestures in order to make sense and have meaning. What happens when curses involving physical gestures become part of a biblical text? While biblical writing can capture the words of speech, it has no consistent way of capturing the actions that go with speech. My pursuit of this question will not add up to any grand narrative about biblical history or tradition. Yet as part of a written canon handed down over centuries, biblical curses raise the question of how these written texts relate to the spoken utterances they represent. The transition from spoken practice to written tradition represents, I suggest, a kind of displacement.

Secularization and Agency

The question who can use powerful words and what can make them powerful is as biblical as it is modern. To see this problem we must recognize how non-biblical ideas and practices of powerful speech, the written word, the self, and biblical theology inform the ideas and practices of powerful speech in the Bible. The next chapters of this study, on ethnic curses (Genesis 9, Joshua 9, and Galatians 3) and cursing the self (Job 3 and Jeremiah 20), address the question of agency in particular texts. This chapter addresses the problem through the link between covenant language and curses, along with examples of powerful language that combine speech and gesture.

By reflecting dynamics of agency and speech alien to much of Israelite law theology, biblical curses can challenge or circumvent the divine sovereignty outlined in Pentateuch law and covenant texts. Thus circumscribed, curses and other forms of powerful speech have a tendency to deflect back onto oneself: rather than curse God (as his wife suggests), Job redirects his anger at the world against the day of his birth (Job 3). Yet the text signals a kind of backhanded curse on God, since Job and the other elements of his lament/curse are part of the divine creation. In fact, it has been suggested that Job's lament in ch. 3 is a systematic curse on the divine creation of Genesis 1.[16] With this shift, Job skirts the boundaries of acceptable expression

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15. The category of displacement is more fully set out in the introduction and Chapter 6.

16. Michael Fishbane, 'Jeremiah iv 23-26 and Job iii 3-13: A Recovered Use of the Creation Pattern', *VT* 21 (1971), pp. 151-67. See the discussion of Job 3 in Chapter 3.

by bringing the curse onto himself. The uneasy alliance between covenant with a supreme deity and forms of language that permit the speaker to invoke—by his or her discretion—supernatural forces against another person thus yields a set of dynamics inherent to biblical tradition (cf. Numbers 22–24). In 2 Samuel 16, for instance, David elides human abuse into divine curses, but only to be on the safe side. Are divine curses then anthropomorphic, insofar as God calls upon 'the gods' through these speech acts? Genesis 3 looks like such a case, but not Deuteronomy 27–28.

The Bible offers legitimate cases of cursing by God and by people, but each type of curse raises important questions. In curses uttered by God (e.g., against the serpent or the Amalekites), to whom does God appeal? If another deity is the addressee of the curse, then the sovereignty of the God of Israel is compromised, and if God is the addressee, then the expression would be pointless, since divine displeasure and punishment are expressed in many more direct ways in the Bible. When humans curse in the Bible, the question of whom they invoke also arises. Of all the commandments associated with the Torah, only one, the written curse of the water ordeal in Numbers 5, involves God instructing people to write and ingest curses. When people curse, then, they exercise some degree of discretion and power. What kind of discretion and power? What are the constraints on such power?

The New Testament introduces other forms of cursing. One case is the notion of the Jewish law as a curse in Galatians 3. With this maneuver, Paul appropriates the biblical tradition of cursing another group by making curses themselves the sign of division between groups. Instead of cursing Jewish upholders of the law, Paul's text defines the law itself as a curse, thereby distinguishing two groups primarily on the basis of doctrine rather than ethnicity. A second innovation appears in James 3.10, an instruction on the power and danger of human speech that recommends blessing and warns against cursing. The preference for blessing over cursing departs from biblical texts, such as Deuteronomy 27–28, in which the two appear side by side, and in which human discretion was minimal. James 3.10 is an early case of a long history of teachings against cursing in Christian tradition. Far from a sign of their decline, laws against cursing betray their lasting prevalence and potency. By the modern period, the shape of curses will have changed so dramatically—in the discourses of rationalism, patriotism, magic, and profanity—that it will be hard to recognize them, but their function and many of their elements will closely resemble biblical curses.

Yet the tradition of a covenant sealed with a ritual sacrifice, and hence a conditional curse, persists in the account of Jesus' death as the mark of a 'new covenant' in Hebrews: 'For when every commandment had been told to all the people by Moses in accordance with the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the scroll itself and all the people, saying, "This is the blood of the

covenant that God has ordained for you"' (9.19-20). How have scholars explained these disparate covenant texts?

The transformation of actions performed by speech and gesture into writing, and from non-biblical culture into biblical theology, calls for conceptual explanation. Some, such as nineteenth-century scholar Julius Wellhausen, Max Weber, and Peter Berger, would regard these changes as an ancient form of secularization, although they differ significantly from each other on details. Wellhausen, the most influential architect of the documentary hypothesis, which divides the Pentateuch into distinct sources, arranges these sources in a progression from superstitious myth to a more advanced 'moral and religious culture'.[17] The difference between anthropomorphic portrayals of God (as in the Garden of Eden) and more transcendent images (such as in Genesis 1), for instance, would be explained in terms of earlier and later sources (J and P). Though he shares Goethe's judgment that the later books and sources of the Pentateuch constitute a '"most melancholy, most incomprehensible, revision"', Wellhausen (in his 1885 *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*) considers these later changes as a secularizing process, replacing legend, myth, and superstition with law, chronology, and order.[18] This secularization corresponds also, for Wellhausen, with the shift from oral to written tradition: 'What is set before us in the Priestly Code is the quintessence not of the oral tradition, but of the tradition when already written down. And the written account of the primitive history which it employs is the Jehovistic narrative'.[19]

Weber's essays on ancient Judaism cite Wellhausen frequently and follow the outlines of his own sociology of religion. Like Wellhausen, Weber has significantly influenced the thinking of biblical scholars, particularly Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth.[20] The religion of ancient Israel represents the broad historical trend toward rationalization familiar in Weber's thought: magic is discouraged, divine anthropomorphism gradually diminished, miracles were kept to a minimum, and the god of Israel was a 'god of history', which 'differentiated him from all Asiatic deities and was due to his original relationship to Israel'.[21] For Weber, the hallmark of Israelite uniqueness was the covenant, understood as a promise of God that places specific obligations on the people, grounded in the story of the Exodus and

17. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), p. 337.

18. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, pp. 337-41.

19. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, p. 336.

20. A.D.H. Mayes, 'Max Weber and Historical Understanding', in *Covenant as Context: Essays in Honour of E.W. Nicholson* (ed. A.D.H. Mayes and R.B. Salters; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 285-310 (303-307).

21. Weber, *Ancient Judaism* (trans. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale; Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952), pp. 212, 214, 219-24.

'Moses' establishment of Yahwe worship'.[22] After the charismatic influence of Moses became more routinized, 'The "covenant" idea thus became, as with no other people, the specific dynamics informing the ethical conception of priestly teaching and prophecy'.[23]

According to Berger, a sociologist influenced by Weber, ancient Israel rejected the predominant 'cosmological' worldviews of the ancient world in favor of three secularizing principles: 'transcendentalization' of God, 'historization' of the divine–human relationship, and the 'rationalization of ethics'.[24] These Israelite departures from local tradition anticipate and initiate, for Berger, the 'disenchantment' usually associated with early modern Europe. While Berger offers his survey of biblical tradition only as a sketch to make a larger point about the gradual nature of secularization, and while his recent writings on the subject suggest he may disavow this position, the fact remains that Berger describes Israelite tradition as a secularization of pre-Israelite religion. The depiction of King David as a mere mortal capable of serious wrongdoing indicates, for Berger, a 'debunking motif' that humanizes an office widely considered divine or semi-divine.[25]

What makes Berger's analysis unsatisfying is not simply the use of the term 'secularizing'. It is rather his characterization of exceptions to this pattern. While he insists that his analysis of exceptions is value-neutral, two examples may suggest otherwise. The first is religious prostitution, a practice so frequently condemned in the Hebrew Bible that one can safely assume it enjoyed wide practice. Berger explains the phenomenon as nostalgia for a cosmic order that provided a sense of security and comfort (rather than sexual gratification).[26] A second example, Roman Catholicism, also reverses the process of secularization for Berger, and though he denies any value judgment, he says 'Catholicism arrested the process of ethical rationalization'.[27]

It is a paradox of Wellhausen, Weber, and Berger especially that the process of secularization is marked by a decline in individual agency and autonomy: For Wellhausen, the lively world of the Jahwistic narratives is replaced by the systematic controls of Priestly religion, while for Weber and Berger, Israelite history brings about what Berger calls 'ethical rationalization'.[28]

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22. Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, p. 118.

23. Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, p. 120. A.D.H. Mayes argues that Weber's account of ancient Israel follows the pattern of gradual routinization of the charisma of an original leader (Moses), but Mayes does point out that this routinization is not necessarily an accommodation to the world ('Max Weber and Historical Understanding', pp. 295-97 [296 n. 31]).

24. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, p. 115.

25. Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, p. 99.

26. Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, p. 114-15.

27. Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, p. 122.

28. Berger admits that these secularizing and rationalizing tendencies are frequently

My point is that such analysis regards any interruption of secularization to be anomalous.[29] Religious change, suggests Berger in *The Sacred Canopy*, is meant to be a one-way street. Studies of biblical tradition that regard the persistence of ancient beliefs and practices as typical and central, I suggest, cannot work easily within such a model of secularization.

Despite important differences in how they account for and understand Israelite innovation, Wellhausen, Weber, and Berger share the view that the distinctively Israelite doctrines of covenant, history, and God represent part of the process of secularization. Central to this shared view is a heightened emphasis on law and history and a diminished role for ritual and curses. It is in this intellectual paradigm that George Mendenhall, one of the first to identify the connections between non-Israelite treaties and Israelite covenants, characterized covenants primarily in legal and theological terms.[30] In fact, he characterizes the Sinai covenant explicitly as a secularizing force in Israelite religion and politics.[31] As Noel Weeks observes,

> However we may appreciate the brilliance of Mendenhall's original idea, the fact remains that it is deeply coloured by his theological musings on the role of law and the state, as will be obvious to all who read him. Similarly Wellhausen. . . was also deeply influenced by beliefs as to the connection of law and religion. The consequence is a reconstruction of biblical history in a quite speculative way.[32]

The model of religious change as eternal recurrence, in contrast to secularization, emphasizes the link between present and past, even at the

opposed by willful resurgences of traditionalism, such as counter-Reformation Catholicism (p. 122).

29. More recently, Berger has begun to doubt his entire theory of secularization: 'The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview', in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (ed. Peter Berger; Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans), pp. 1-18.

30. This goes not only for Mendenhall's groundbreaking essays, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh: Biblical Colloquium, 1955), but also for his later collection, *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), where Mendenhall argues that biblical covenant tradition was a revolutionary religion: 'The basis of this religion was the rejection of control of human beings by force, and the proclamation that only God was in control—through the voluntary subjection of all members of the community to those policies of the sovereign stipulated in the Decalogue-Covenant' (p. xiii).

31. Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation*, p. 199. A similar interpretation of ancient Israel appears in Henri Frankfort's work; see Henri and H.A. Frankfort, 'The Emancipation of Thought from Myth', in Henri and H.A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, and Thorkild Jacobsen, *Before Philosophy* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1961), pp. 237-63.

32. Noel Weeks, *Admonition and Curse: The Ancient Near Eastern Treaty/Covenant Form as a Problem in Inter-Cultural Relationships* (JSOTSup, 407; London: T. & T. Clark, 2004), p. 178.

expense of acknowledging historical change. Very few scholars of ancient Israel explicitly endorse this model; when a parallel such as the 'puppy and lettuce' and the Passover is observed, it is often simply noted as a parallel, with some effort to identify whether the one influenced the other or whether they share a common source or tradition. In his article on the subject, Mendenhall speculates a connection and offers this model of change: '[I]n the transmission of religious or magical ceremonies from one culture to another, or in the more frequent form of cultural borrowing—by one generation from another, the meaning of a rite is the least likely to be preserved. The most tenacious is form, and after that function…'[33] but its influence can be seen in Levenson's use of Mircea Eliade's work in *Sinai and Zion*, for example.

According to Eliade, religious traditions use myth and ritual to cross the divide of history to create the recurring experience of sacred time. This sacred time somehow reconstitutes primordial cosmological time, returning to events that took place *in illo tempore*. Myths and rituals of regeneration and the eternal return resist the flow of history: 'Like the mystic, like the religious man in general, the primitive lives in a continual present'.[34] As such, religious traditions contravene secularization by merging past with present; in a way similar to Goethe and Wellhausen, Eliade suggests that the 'traditional man' has a kind of freedom unavailable to 'modern man': '[T]he archaic and traditional societies granted freedom each year to begin a new, a "pure" existence, with virgin possibilities'.[35] The discovery of strong non-biblical parallels to biblical texts, including covenant curses, made Eliade's theory of religion more appealing than a straightforward model of secularization. If the covenant included ritual curses, then how could it sustain itself as a secularizing code of law? Studies such as Jon Levenson's *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* or Michael Fishbane's *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* have challenged the secularization model; Levenson employs Eliade's theory to describe the myth-ritual complex of the Temple, while Fishbane identifies striking cases of recurring myths across hundreds of years of tradition.[36]

33. George Mendenhall, 'Puppy and Lettuce in Northwest Semitic Covenant Making', *BASORSup* 133 (1954): pp. 26-30 (28). Robert Polzin, likewise, concentrates on the mere similarity between biblical and non-biblical cases., '*HWQY*ʿ and Covenantal Institutions in Early Israel', *HTR* 62 (1969), pp. 227-40 (238-39).

34. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or, Cosmos and History* (trans. Willard Trask; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 86.

35. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, pp. 157, 141. See also Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (trans. Willard Trask; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), pp. 201-13.

36. Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 307.

Of course, the deeper problem is that although secularization and eternal recurrence are opposites, both reflect modern anxieties about human agency and knowledge.[37] Secularization projects an idea of progress, but in Goethe, Weber, and Berger, there is a recognition that secularizing, institutionalizing trends in ancient Israel (and religion generally) can stifle human autonomy. Eliade's eternal recurrence, by contrast, points nostalgically toward a more 'primitive' world in which human experiences of the sacred offered a richer, more meaningful life than the secularized modern world.

Speech, Gesture, Writing

Several biblical texts combine spoken curses with physical gestures or allusions to physical gestures. One set are cases of the expression 'to cut a covenant' (כרת ברית), which are generally believed to involve the cutting of animals to warn what will happen if the covenant is violated. The other are the oaths sworn by Saul and David, saying 'Thus may God do to me'. If physical actions are an essential element of some biblical oaths and curses, then what is the consequence of committing them to writing? How can a combination speech act and gesture remain efficacious as text? The severed link between utterance and gesture produced by writing transforms them, threatening to deprive them of efficacy and even coherence.

Drawing on the influential work of Ray L. Birdwhistell, Mayer I. Gruber argues that the ambiguity of many ancient Near Eastern expressions results from their dependence on physical gestures. The term 'bend over' (השתחוה), for example, could 'connote worship, supplication, obeisance, greeting, or mourning'.[38] Like spoken and written words, gestures can operate linguistically, indicating various meanings based on slight differences of expression. But when these combinations of speech and gesture find their way into writing, a new problem arises: do they describe the literal use of these gestures, or do they rather work 'idiomatically, to convey the attitudes, ideas, and feelings which were communicated by gestures, postures, and facial expressions'?[39]

Linguist Adam Kendon shows how gestures contributes to speech in a variety of ways, including reference and meaning as well as modal, performative, parsing, and interactive functions.[40] In all of these ways, gesture

37. Compare Talal Asad's analysis of secularism in *Formations of the Secular*.
38. Mayer I. Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication in the Ancient Near East* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1980), p. 20. See also William A. Foley, *Anthropological Linguistics: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1977), pp. 373-78.
39. Gruber, *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication in the Ancient Near East*, p. 18.
40. Adam Kendon, *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 158-59.

modifies, contextualizes, and gives precision to speech. For example, a gesture can indicate reference either by representation (such as pantomime) or by pointing; a biblical illustration of both is the hypothesis that David mimes the act of strangulation in 2 Sam. 3.35 actually combines the two, since the mime presumably 'points' to David himself. Noting their complexity and range, Kendon argues that gestures 'supply components of meaning integral to the utterance of the moment'.[41] Conversely, words may add specificity to a gesture; Austin gives the example of a person bowing deeply: '[I]t might not be clear whether I am doing obeisance to you or, say stooping to observe the flora or to ease my indigestion'; but if the person also says 'Salam' while bowing, this spoken word gives the gesture a particular meaning.[42] Gesture and speech can thus coincide in a variety of communicative actions.

The referential function of gesture is typically deictic, that is, it can 'relate utterances to the circumstances of space and time in which they occur'.[43] It is tempting to conclude therefore that gesture and speech are inherently ephemeral and contextually specific, and that writing, by contrast, has greater longevity and less precision. But as the case of David's statement indicates, such is not the case. The text, in effect, 'gestures' toward the implied gesture of David's utterance, complicating the tidy contrast between speech and writing.

Gruber and Kendon resolve the question on a provisional level but leave open the deeper question of the *status* of these idiomatic, secondary references to speech acts and gesture in writing. The problem is not only the perennial issue of how writing and speech differ but of what happens when powerful physical actions—uttering certain words while performing certain gestures—are recorded in writing. Does the power of these time-bound performatives transfer into scripture? A secularist response would be to deny this unequivocally, to say that writing is the disenchanted trace of a supernatural action forever lost. The opposite position would include theories of writing as a kind of magic of equal potency as speech and gesture. A third position, which I prefer, is to speak of the displacement of efficacy from speech and gesture to writing, where this displacement describes a transformation of one kind of potency to another, as well as the embodiment of a *debate* in the tradition over whether these words can be powerful.

At first the question appears to be a version of the much-theorized distinction between speech and writing. In biblical tradition itself, the prestige of writing is well known from associations of writing with permanence,

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41. Kendon, *Gesture*, p. 198.

42. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 69-70.

43. Kendon, *Gesture*, p. 222.

great leaders, and divine authority (Exodus 17, 20, 34, Deuteronomy 31–32, Josh. 24.26-27, Ezekiel 3, Nehemiah 8ff., etc.). In Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah, the importance of writing is also associated with royal decrees. Yet the power of speech, in the familiar introduction to prophetic oracles ('thus says the Lord'), the spoken words of creation in Genesis 1, the call narratives of prophets, and numerous accounts of direct divine speech, cannot be denied, and the premium placed on writing should be no surprise coming from scribal authors of the Bible.

Biblical speech and writing are thus more interrelated than many believe. According to David Carr, practices of oral recitation combined with writing in the formation of biblical tradition.[44] Far from models that divide biblical tradition into an early, oral phase and a later phase of writing, Carr shows how ancient educational methods that combined writing with oral transmission can explain the shape of many biblical texts. Writing and speech, in biblical ideology and biblical transmission, went hand in hand.[45]

Rabbinic tradition continued the balance of writing and speech with the distinction between oral and written torah: '"Those who write the laws are as if they burn the Torah, and he who learns from them (the books) does not receive reward"'. A text from the same source strikes a similar balance: '"Words which are in writing you are not permitted to transmit orally, and words which are [transmitted] oral[ly], you may not transmit in writing"'.[46]

Augustine considers writing to be a means of recording spoken signs; as visual representations of spoken 'signs', they are thus signs of signs, twice removed from that which they signify.[47] For Augustine, moreover, language in general is made up of conventional rather than natural signs, and these conventions vary by language after Babel (Genesis 11), 'the sin of human dissension which arises when one people seizes the leadership for itself'.[48] For Augustine as for other exegetes, the Bible contains ambiguities

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44. David Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

45. The interrelation of speech and writing in religious traditions is not limited to the Bible. See, e.g., Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), which identifies forms of ritual speech that are abstract and depersonalized and therefore like a text (p. 261). While Keane does acknowledge the porosity of cultures, religious traditions, and texts, citing theorists of modernity from Max Weber to Talal Asad, his study reinforces traditional understandings of religion, secular modernity, and culture (see, e.g., pp. 46-51, 213-21).

46. Bab. Talmud Temurah 14b, in Lawrence Schiffman *Texts and Traditions* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1988), p. 522.

47. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* (trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr; Indianapolis: Bobbs–Merrill, 1978), p. 36.

48. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, p. 36.

and potential confusion inherent to the medium of writing which must be addressed through practices of interpretation that assume the Bible always to affirm two main principles: love of God and love of neighbor.

In modern thought, the speech-writing problem relates directly to the problem of secularity. Renaissance and Romantic poetics from Sir Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poesy* (1595) to Johann Gottfried Herder's *Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (1783) link the oral nature of poetry to its sacred status. In a more indirect way, the sacred associations of speech also infuse J.L. Austen's modern concept of speech acts. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962, based on lectures given in 1955), is one of the most influential modern works in the philosophy of language. Taking ordinary language as his object of study, Austin argues that many statements can be understood as actions, or 'speech acts', and thus evaluated in terms of what they accomplish (or fail to accomplish). One of Austin's most interesting categories of speech act is the performative, an utterance that, under certain conditions, performs a powerful action simply by being spoken. Austin gives the examples of weddings, naming ceremonies, and prophecy, but he does not explore the religious roots of performative speech acts.[49] Contrary to the familiar, and, I would argue, secularist, contrast between words and deeds, Austin shows how words *are* very often deeds, an insight that applies directly to curses, blessings, vows, and other biblical forms of speech. Austin's work pioneers the modern study of powerful words, but the role of religious tradition in speech acts, and the contrast between speech and writing, remains unexplored in his work.

For Derrida, speech shares the aporetic qualities of writing. The spoken utterance is 'graphematic in general' and subject to the same kinds of fluidity and play as writing. If Derrida's approach to the question of writing can be described as 'post-structuralist', another distinct approach would be the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Here the emphasis falls on the rich interpretive possibilities afforded by writing, which usually lacks the immediate context of utterance found in speech. A third distinct position on the significance of writing could be called cultural: in what Michel de Certeau, for example, calls the 'scriptural economy', a vast range of cultural practices share consciously and unconsciously in the tradition of authoritative writing. Walter Benjamin's claims to the central role of the Bible in culture make a similar claim.[50]

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49. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words*, pp. 5-6, 85.

50. Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', in *Reflections* (trans. Edmund Jephcott; New York: Schocken, 1986), pp. 314-32. In a discussion of ancient gesture that evokes contemporary literary theory, David P. Wright observes that 'hand placement is the signature on a letter delivered to the god by means of a cultic postman. When the god receives the letter, he recognizes that it is from the one

Without seeking to adjudicate these competing approaches to writing and speech, I wish to observe how all of them may contribute to an understanding of the dynamics of speech and writing in biblical texts. As Carr observes, the two media of speech and writing coexist in ancient Israel, and each is imbued with cultural prestige in different cases and different ways. Likewise, all of these approaches assume that speech and writing coexist in biblical tradition. If biblical texts constitute a displacement of speech acts, they nevertheless preserve a dynamic relationship between speech and writing, past and present, that does not reduce one to the other.

What about the covenant itself? One could consider the covenant text as a transcript to be performed or reactivated through ritual. The written oath, blessing or curse is brought back to reality through particular the performance of these rituals. Passover observances in Exodus 12–13 are an example of how a biblical text provides explicit instructions on how to perform ritual: 'You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance' (12.14). Another possibility is to see the text is a document of a past speech act, a narrative transcript of an event that took place in the past (but not beyond it). The text serves as a record or transcript of the event. An example of this phenomenon would be the ritual of exchange described in Ruth: 'Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging…' (4.7).

One model for biblical displacement would be Jewish and Christian perspectives on biblical texts that deal with sacrifice and the Temple. Once it has been destroyed, the fate of such sacrifices becomes uncertain. For Christians the sacrifice of Jesus Christ explicitly displaces or replaces Temple sacrifice. Jewish tradition has a range of responses to the crisis, one of which is to classify Torah study and moral conduct as forms of sacrifice.[51] A more ancient model of displacement would be the biblical use of pre-biblical myth. Such traces of more ancient tradition can be explained mainly as inadvertent retentions of tradition, but they may also reflect an intentional theological project. For Jon Levenson, the frequency of such texts shows that 'YHWH's mastery is often fragile, in continual need of reactivation and reassertion, and at times, as in the laments, painfully distant from ordinary experience, a memory and a hope rather than a current reality. It is, in short, a confession of faith'.[52] One can, finally, see biblical

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who signed the letter (i.e., the one who performed the gesture), not from the postman who delivered it' ('The Gesture of Hand Placement in the Hebrew Bible and in Hittite Literature', *JAOS* 106 [1986], pp. 433-46 [p. 443]).

51. Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 123-35.

52. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 47.

displacement as literary art that has some of the same qualities as speech. For J. Hillis Miller, the act of literary creation is akin to a performative speech act; works of the imagination offer the reader the possibilities Miller identifies with the phrase 'Open Sesame'.

All of these models preserve a notion of the power of speech in its displaced written form. Much more can be said about this problem (see Chapter 6), but my present suggestion is that the power of speech that includes gestures can be displaced onto writing, and that this displacement can be found in cases where the powerful speech is directed at the collective and the self. Displacement does not mean that performative speech and ritual simply give way to writing and text, but rather that there is a dynamic interplay between speech and writing, ritual and text. My three main examples are the 'cutting' of a covenant, the penalty of *karet*, and the oath 'So may God to do me'.

To Cut (Karat) *a Covenant*

The cutting of animals in ancient treaty ceremonies indicates a curse for violations of the treaty. When parties to the treaty witness the slaughter of the animal, it represents a symbolic warning, a conditional curse, as if to say 'Here is what will happen to you if you break this treaty'. For example, the Aramaic Sefire Treaty stipulates that 'just as this calf is cut in two, so may Mati`el be cut in two and may his nobles be cut in two'.[53] As Robert Polzin points out, ancient Near Eastern Texts from Mari and elsewhere refer to covenant making in terms of slaying an animal.[54] A contemporary version of this notion is the sacrifice of chickens in the Jewish ritual of *kapparot*, which signifies the transfer of sins from a person to a bird. According to Rabbi Shea Hecht of Brooklyn, 'The main part of the service…is handing the chicken to the slaughterer and watching the chicken being slaughtered. Because that is where you have an emotional moment, where you say, "Oops, you know what? That could have been me".'[55]

In *Treaty-Curses and the Old Testament Prophets*, Delbert Hillers considers whether the prophets of ancient Israel borrowed imagery from treaty-curses in their oracles against Israel for covenant violations. In a thorough survey of ancient Hittite, Assyrian, and other Near Eastern treaties, Hillers demonstrates close correspondences between the curses in these treaties and

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53. Cited in Robert Polzin, '*HWQY*ʿ in Early Israel', p. 235.

54. Polzin, pp. 233-35. Polzin's article suggests further that the slayings in Num. 25 and 2 Sam. 21 represent the death penalty for treaty violations.

55. Barbara Bradley Hagerty, 'Swinging Chicken Ritual Divides Orthodox Jews', September 26, 2009, NPR Weekend Edition Radio Broadcast, http.//www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=113179433.

in biblical prophecy. Among the types of curses in such treaties is what Dillers calls the 'simile curse', in which a ritual action functions as a symbol of what will happen to the party who violates the treaty: 'The slaughter of an animal, which figures in both Sefire I (a calf) and in the [eighth-century Assyrian] Ashurnirari treaty (a ram), was apparently the one ceremony most commonly connected with treaty-making. It provided a technical term "to cut a covenant", meaning "to conclude a covenant"'.[56] One example that makes the simile explicit appears in the Ashurnirari treaty: 'This head is not the head of the ram, it is the head of Mati'ilu… Just as the ram's head is [torn off]…so may the head of the aforesaid be torn off'.[57] In the Mari texts (c. 18th century), the expressions 'to kill an ass' and to 'offer puppy and lettuce' denote treaty-making.[58]

Of these ancient formulas, Robert Polzin remarks, '[A] specific acted-out ritual curse seems to have become the source for a technical phrase meaning "to conclude a pact or treaty"'.[59] Polzin adduces two close biblical parallels to these 'acted-out conditional curse' formulas: Gen. 15.10-18 and Jer. 34.18-19.[60] Not only does Polzin identify such conditional curses with the probable origin of the biblical phrase for making a covenant (כרת ברית, literally 'cut a covenant') but he also links them to two biblical narratives, the cutting of the Levite's concubine (Judg. 19.11–20.48), and Saul's cutting and distribution of oxen as a warning against disloyalty (1 Sam. 11.1-11). Combinations of כרת and ברית appear in many other texts. In two cases, Deut. 29.11 and 13, the term אלה ('curse') appears there as well. Other terms common to formulas of making a covenant are קום, often in the Hiphil form, הקים ('lift up', e.g., Genesis 17), and זכר, 'remember'.

If the cutting of a covenant is a 'simile curse' or 'ritual curse' that threatens those who break it, then how does it work in the Bible, that is, in an ancient religion that is increasingly text-centered? Does covenant-related animal sacrifice perform or display the curse on covenant violators? What is the nature and function of such rituals in Israelite covenant religion? What, in short, are the links between Covenant and Threat of Cutting? Most scholars simply avoid the question, often tending to write about the covenant as if it were a kind of ancient Constitution. The paradigm for this would be the work of Mendenhall itself, which precedes the research on 'cutting a covenant' and focuses on covenants as a kind of legal document (preamble,

56. Delbert Hillers, *Treaty-Curses and the Old Testament Prophets* (BibOr, 16; Rome: Pontifical Institute Press, 1964), p. 20. Hillers cites several other examples, including texts from Homer, Vergil, and Arabic literature.

57. AshN I 21-27, cited in Hillers, *Treaty-Curses*, p. 19.

58. Hillers, *Treaty-Curses*, p. 20 n. 27.

59. Polzin, '*HWQY*ʿ and Covenantal Institutions in Early Israel', p. 235.

60. Polzin, '*HWQY*ʿ and Covenantal Institutions in Early Israel', pp. 236-37.

historical prologue, stipulations, provision for recording and reading, list of gods as witnesses, curses and blessings) without specifying a ritual to go with them.[61] By concentrating on covenant as a kind of legal constitution, these scholars reinforce a model of progressive secularization assumed by Wellhausen and Berger (though Wellhausen, interestingly, regards the Priestly tradition as a ritualized secularization of the purportedly non-ritualistic Jahwistic tradition). They thereby neglect to consider the important role of ritual in biblical and non-biblical covenant traditions.[62] Though they disagree on important details, Mendenhall, Wellhausen, and Berger reflect the view that ancient Israel inherited the basic treaty form and developed it in ways that bring it closer to contemporary ideas of law and theology and more distant from ritual curses. Those who do address the question of the simile curse, like Polzin, tend to emphasize the similarity between the biblical and non-biblical texts, overlooking the wide range of literary uses of the 'ritual curse' motif in Genesis 15, Judges 19, and Jeremiah 34.[63] The challenge to articulate a conceptual model for these similarities remains.

The covenant between God and Abram in Genesis 15 certainly includes literal cutting, but it presents Abram with a divine promise rather than a threat. The command to bring the five animals, followed by Abram's cutting them and falling into a deep sleep, leads to a divine oracle and promise of the future for Abram and his descendents. Then, after a smoking fire pot

61. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, Part 2: *Covenant Forms in Israelite Traditions* (Pittsburgh: Biblical Colloquium, 1955), pp. 32-35, published originally in *The Biblical Archaeologist* 17 (1954), pp. 49-76. Mendenhall, writing before Hillers and Polzin noted the links between 'cutting a covenant' and other ancient texts, adds simply that there was 'some solemn ceremony which accompanied the oath, or perhaps was a symbolical oath' (p. 35). In spite of its central ritual dimension, many later scholars continue to focus on the covenant primarily as a kind of law; see G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (trans. D.M.G. Stalker; New York: Harper, 1962). Recent examples include the essays collected in Gary N. Knoppers and Bernard M. Levinson (eds.), *The Pentateuch as Torah: New Models for Understanding its Promulgation and Acceptance* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007). See also David P. Wright, *Inventing God's Law: How the Covenant Code of the Bible Used and Revised the Laws of Hammurabi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

62. Levenson's *Sinai and Zion* offers a corrective, suggesting that Joshua 24 may be a model for the covenant ritual latent in Exod. 19ff. ([San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985], pp. 32, 40). My additional suggestion is that the Passover too may represent such a model.

63. See also Charles Fensham, 'Malediction and Benediction in Ancient Near Eastern Vassal-Treaties and the Old Testament', *ZAW* 74 (1962), pp. 1-9. Hillers articulates the problem insightfully and calls for its further investigation (pp. 26, 82-89). In a technical note on the etymology of ברית and its supposed counterpart in Akkadian, J.A. Soggin suggests that some of the ancient Akkadian texts thought to include the cutting of animals may in fact have been simple oath ceremonies with no sacrifice: 'Akkadisch TAR *beriti* und hebräisch כרת ברית', *VT* 18 (1968), pp. 210-15.

and torch pass between the halved carcasses, the 'covenant' promise of land
is reiterated in greater detail:

> Then he said to him, 'I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the
> Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess'. But he said, 'O Lord GOD,
> how am I to know that I shall possess it?' He said to him, 'Bring me a heifer
> three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle-
> dove, and a young pigeon'. He brought him all these and cut them in two,
> laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.
> And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them
> away. As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a
> deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. Then the LORD said to
> Abram, 'Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land
> that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for
> four hundred years; but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve,
> and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself,
> you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old
> age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniq-
> uity of the Amorites is not yet complete'. When the sun had gone down and
> it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these
> pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To
> your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river,
> the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites,
> the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the
> Girgashites, and the Jebusites' (Gen. 15.7-21, NRSV).

Even though this text is closer in time and context to prebiblical covenant
curses such as those in the Mari texts, it appears to deviate from this norm
by replacing threat with promise and propitiation with theophany. It appears
that this text, though it describes a foundational instance of the covenant
cutting tradition, takes liberties with the conditional curse ritual as outlined
by Polzin and others. Herbert Chanan Brichto, citing the wordplay of 'pass-
ing' between the halves and 'transgressing' the covenant (both עבר), the
possible allusion to the pillars of cloud and fire with the torch and smok-
ing pot, regards the text as highly literary and symbolic: 'God binds him-
self by the covenant symbolism, invoking upon himself—metaphorically
speaking, how else?—the punishment invoked upon the violator of a treaty.
Bold symbolism indeed! And, on the literal level, nonsense. Is God's word
not enough?'[64] The facetious answer to Brichto's question, of course, is
'Apparently not'. What I mean is that the tradition of the conditional curse
and its attendant sacrifice matters more to the biblical text than the abstract
demands of theological consistency.

   The most extended biblical covenant ceremony concludes the book of
the covenant in Deuteronomy. With Deuteronomy 27–29, Moses and the

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64. Herbert Hanan Brichto, *The Names of God: Poetic Readings in Biblical Begin-
nings* (New York: Oxford, 1998), p. 209.

elders command the people to write the law on stones and to offer sacrifices to God when they cross the Jordan. He also commands the people to divide into two groups for a ceremony of the most florid, detailed blessings and curses in the Bible. The people respond to each of twelve curses by saying 'Amen' (ch. 27). Here, then, the conditional curse of cutting a covenant is preserved not only by animal sacrifice but by writing a book and by a ritual of spoken blessings and curses. The expression 'cut a covenant' persists, however, in a ceremony in which the people of Israel stand and affirm the words of the law given by Moses and written in a book: 'If you do not diligently observe all the words of this law that are written in this book, fearing this glorious and awesome name, the LORD your God' (28.58). In what may be an editorial gloss, the covenant of Deuteronomy is related to the covenant of Sinai/Horeb: 'These are the words of the covenant that the LORD commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in the land of Moab, in addition to the covenant that he had made with them at Horeb' (29.1). The ceremony continues its combination of spoken ritual and written law and curse:

> You stand assembled today, all of you, before the LORD your God—the leaders of your tribes, your elders, and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your women, and the aliens who are in your camp, both those who cut your wood and those who draw your water—to enter into the covenant of the LORD your God, sworn by an oath (בברית יהוה אלהיך ובאלתו), which the LORD your God is making (כרת) with you today; in order that he may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God, as he promised you and as he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I am making this covenant, sworn by an oath, not only with you who stand here with us today before the LORD our God, but also with those who are not here with us today… All who hear the words of this oath and bless themselves, thinking in their hearts, 'We are safe even though we go our own stubborn ways' (thus bringing disaster on moist and dry alike)—the LORD will be unwilling to pardon them, for the LORD's anger and passion will smoke against them. All the curses written in this book (כל־האלה הכתובה בספר הזה) will descend on them, and the LORD will blot out their names from under heaven. The LORD will single them out from all the tribes of Israel for calamity, in accordance with all the curses of the covenant written in this book of the law (הברית הכתובה בספר התורה הזה) (Deut. 29.10-21 [9-20 Heb.], NRSV).

With its reference to 'those who are not here with us today', the covenant extends to those who will inherit it in the future. Though there is no explicit instruction here for ritual re-enactment of the covenant ceremony, several points suggest its continued life in the tradition. First, the covenant of Deuteronomy is already a reiteration (and amplification) of the covenant of Sinai in Exodus (Exodus 19ff.); such recapitulation indicates the covenant as ongoing tradition in ancient Israel. Second, there is instruction

later in Deuteronomy (31.9-15) to recite the Torah every seven years at the Feast of Booths. Third, as Jon Levenson observes, texts such as Psalm 81 and Deuteronomy 5 suggest rituals of rededication to the covenant; what is more, the covenant narratives can be said to take place, in Mircea Eliade's terms, not in historical time but in 'sacred time', or *in illo tempore*.[65] Biblical covenant rituals do not stipulate their own reiteration in terms as clear as those of other ritual texts, including the feast of Passover and the ritual of Sotah. As such, the role of treaty curses in covenant ceremonies opens up a larger question of how ritual practices play a part in the formation of biblical tradition.

To the contemporary reader, the link between animal sacrifice and covenant may be surprising, but the suggestion that the cutting and distribution of the Levite's concubine is part of a treaty curse tradition may strike many as truly shocking. Studies of the curse-covenant tradition typically regard the curses of this tradition as a relic of the past, deliteralized by later, more enlightened notions of covenant. The possibility that sacrificial treaty curses could extend even as late as the period of Judges and 1 Samuel would mean that the Deuteronomistic covenant tradition retained a strong link between treaties and sacrificial curses, that כרת ברית had literal meaning. Recent studies of Judges 19–20 have understandably responded to the episode with horror, tending to characterize it as an aberration rather than a norm.[66] But if the story of the Levite's concubine represents a broad tradition of treaty curses, its horror borrows from familiar ideas of sacrifice and covenant.

George Mendenhall has suggested that the striking case of an ancient treaty ritual involving 'puppy and lettuce' may correspond to the combination of lamb and bitter herbs mandated for the Passover meal (Exod. 12.8, 21-23).[67] The resemblance between the 'puppy and lettuce' ritual and

65. Levinson, *Sinai and Zion*, pp. 80-81, 103, 127. Taking Eliade's approach by itself, of course, would tend toward a model of eternal recurrence can become unhistorical. Levenson's statement that the cosmic mountain (Zion in this case) is an Eliadean *axis mundi* characterized by sacred time approaches this view: 'In some manner, at the cosmic mountain, the axis of the world, the act of creation is shielded from the ravages of time and of the decay time measures' (p. 127). The tension between this mythical notion and history, or between eternal recurrence and secularization, is implicit in Levenson's book but not directly addressed. Insofar as he is responding to Mendenhall and others, and his study certainly acknowledges the historical origin of biblical traditions, it may be assumed that Levenson's use of Eliade seeks to counteract a secularization approach.

66. See Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, 1993), pp. 176-84.

67. Mendenhall, 'Puppy and Lettuce in Northwest-Semitic Covenant Making'. Mendenhall cites many examples, including from ancient Greece, of sacrifice texts

Passover tradition offers a rich case for reflecting on the nature of biblical tradition. If the Passover menu does in fact descend from ancient treaty ritual, then it evokes the conditional curse of death for covenant violation by analogy to the death of a sacrificial animal. Yet the story of Passover sacrifice does not so much threaten Israel as sentence the firstborn of Egypt to death. The sacrifice of the lamb appears in a stunning text that merges myth, ritual, and historical liberation (see, e.g., Exodus 15). From the standpoint of its theological and literary innovation, the decision to preserve the tradition of animal sacrifice/treaty curse is striking. What does it mean?

Biblical tradition was ancient when the Bible was written, and no innovation could be recognized or trusted without grounding in tradition. Contemporary ideals of progress and evolution are alien to ancient Israel, but there is no doubt that the Passover tradition of Exodus, which combines a number of distinct elements into historical narrative, was unique for its time. Given this innovation, the decision to retain a ritual of treaty curses may strike the modern reader as confusing.

Beside warning readers that the desire to read biblical history as an evolution toward rationalism and away from magic or sacrifice is typically modern, there are several issues to consider here. First, the texts of Genesis 15, Deuteronomy 28, Judges 19–20, and 1 Sam. 11.1-11, and Jer. 34.18-19 represent real actions rather than mere literary allusions. Insofar as the narrative of Passover in Exodus 12–13 is a set of ritual instructions for posterity, the killing of a lamb (along with the eating of bitter herbs) as a conditional treaty curse would have warned later generations that the danger faced by the Egyptians (and the lambs!) could also apply to Israelites who broke the covenant. At the same time, the Passover tradition supplemented a notion of sacrifice as a warning against transgression with a notion of sacrifice as a symbol of substitution (as in Genesis 22) and, indeed, liberation. Passover did indeed represent progress over the ancient 'puppy and lettuce' tradition, not in the modern sense of secularization, but as a theological transformation that deepened tradition by keeping it. Not to mention the improvement in the menu!

It must further be noted that the covenant ceremonies of the Bible (e.g., in Genesis 15 and Deuteronomy 28) can be analyzed both as ritual and as scripture. As rituals, the ceremonies involve actions and dispositions made vivid by detailed description. As scripture, the ceremonies appear in

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that combine young animals with magical or virtue-bringing plants. Dog lovers will also be sorry to learn that dog sacrifice also appears in Hittite texts: Billie Jean Collins, 'The Puppy in Hittite Ritual', *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 42 (1990), pp. 211-26. The combination of animal and vegetable also appears in an Akkadian ritual against the evil eye: 'In the garden he will slaughter it and flay its hide. He proceeds to fill it with pieces of…plant', in Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2005), p. 65.

authoritative texts that evoke a distant past through practices of recitation, commentary, and paraphrase. In different ways, ritual and scripture actualize the distant past in a kind of eternal present, what Eliade calls 'sacred time'. Yet for ritual and scripture both, the past is not the present. In scripture, when recitation, paraphrase, or commentary take the place of the ritual, then what has become of the ritual itself? The ritual, already mimetic of treaty ceremonies, now becomes the object of description within a narrative. To what extent is the conditional curse of animal sacrifice still retained in the ritual and scriptural traditions of the Israelite covenant? The question allows no definitive answer, but the concept of displacement, which balances tradition and innovation, helps explain the continuing significance of covenant curses beyond the ancient world of 'puppy and lettuce'.

The Curse of Karet

The same verbal root for cutting that appears in the phrase 'to make a covenant' (כרת ברית) describes a curse penalty, כרת, which denotes being 'cut off' for a range of violations in Priestly sources and other texts. There are nineteen explicit cases of *karet* in the Pentateuch (11 of them in Leviticus; the others in Priestly texts elsewhere in the Pentateuch), and they can be grouped into the following categories: violations of sacred time (Passover, Sabbath, Yom Kippur); violations of sacred substance (e.g., eating blood, misuse of sacrificial offerings); neglect of purification rituals (circumcision, cleansing after corpse contamination); illicit worship (outside the sanctuary, worshipping Moloch, idolatry); and illicit sex (e.g., incest, adultery).[68] What is this curse, and how (if at all) is it related to the expression to 'cut a covenant'?

Like 'cutting a covenant', the *karet* penalty is a kind of curse, a supernatural penalty for specific kinds of action. Also like cutting covenants, *karet* has to do with progeny. Jacob Milgrom, citing Ps. 109.13, Ruth 4.10, Mal. 2.12, argues that *karet* means extirpation, cutting off one's descendants. Milgrom also suggests that the term is synonymous with the term to blot out or erase, מחה (see Exodus 17, which curses Amalek by erasure). The link between cutting a covenant and *karet*, then, is that both center on curses (conditional curse and penalty/curse) that typically involve the worst thing that can happen to a person: loss of progeny, legacy, and thus memory. At least one text, the pact between David and Jonathan in 1 Sam. 20.14-16, links the two explicitly: 'If I am still alive, show me the faithful love of the Lord; but if I die, never cut off your faithful love from my house, even if

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68. Donald J. Wold, 'The *Karet* Penalty in P: Rationale and Cases', in *SBL Seminar Papers*, 1 (1979), pp. 1-45 (3-24); Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), pp. 405-408.

the Lord were to cut off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth' (vv. 14-15). With this, Jonathan asks David to preserve his legacy even if God imposes the penalty of *karet*; he invokes the formulaic term for covenant virtue, חסד, twice in this short statement, after which he and David 'cut' a covenant or agreement (this word is implied, v. 16).

Despite the striking parallels between cutting covenant and *karet*, no one has, as far as I can tell, written about them. There may be two reasons for this: one is that there is nothing so surprising about it, and the other is that most cases of *karet* appear in priestly texts, while, interestingly, the phrase 'cut a covenant' never appears in a priestly text.[69] To the first point: the use of the common word 'cut' may not be surprising, but for the fact that it suggests (literally or metaphorically) a physical gesture or action in the context of a curse. Just as the cutting of a covenant involves (and sometimes requires) a particular action, one could imagine a priestly gesture that goes with *karet*, like the common gesture of running a finger across the throat. To the second point, that 'cut a covenant' is absent from and *karet* is most common in the Priestly sources, raises interesting possibilities. Could *karet* be a displaced version of cutting a covenant, a written curse that implied or even stipulated oral performance with a gesture?

Donald J. Wold's study of *karet* as violations of holiness draws from Mary Douglas's analysis of priestly holiness in *Purity and Danger* to argue convincingly that the list of ritual violations bringing *karet* pose a danger to the integrity of the community, thus leading to the 'cutting off' of the individual from the community. While the concerns of the Priestly source with ritual matters differ from the texts (like Jeremiah 34) that speak of cutting a covenant, they nevertheless share much in common, especially their explicit dependence on conditional curses of 'cutting', understood in literal and figurative ways.

Note that several examples of the *karet* penalty pertain directly to sacrificial actions akin to cutting a covenant. Failure to observe Passover properly, the covenant-cutting tradition *par excellence*, brings the *karet* penalty (Num. 9.13, Exod. 12.15, 19). Another sacrificial feast, the Day of Atonement, also brings the *karet* penalty for violators (Lev. 23.29-30). Eating blood brings the *karet* penalty (Lev. 7.27, 17.10, 14). Slaughtering outside the temple precinct (Lev. 17.9) or worshipping Molech, which probably entails child sacrifice (Lev. 20.2-5), are also *karet* violations. By the same token, the

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69. John Day, 'Why Does God "Establish" Rather than "Cut" Covenants in the Priestly Source?', in *Covenant as Context: Essays in Honour of E.W. Nicholson* (ed. A.D.H. Mayes and R.B. Salters; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 91-109 (92). Day answers the question of his title by suggesting that P regards the covenants with Abram and Noah as the only major covenants (those that involve cutting an animal), but that sacrifice for P only exists after the law is given to Moses.

proper way to atone for *karet* violations is with blood sacrifice or a scape-goat (Leviticus 4).[70] In all these ways, the *karet* curse, like the cutting of a covenant, is directly linked to language and imagery of sacrifice. To para-phrase Mary Douglas's title, maintaining the purity of covenant requires the constant threat and reference to blood sacrifice. Just as these sacrifices entail actions, words, and gestures, it may be that the curse-penalty of *karet* was also accompanied by a gesture as well. However figurative the term *karet* was, there can be no doubt that it shares the same dynamics of writing and speech, text and gesture, that condition 'cutting a covenant'.

Gesture, Ritual, Text: 'So may God do to me' and Other Cases

The biblical texts examined thus far make various uses of the tradition of cutting a covenant and *karet* as curses. The scene of Abram and Yhwh in Genesis 15 seems to transform curse into a promise, whereas Jeremiah's oracle against Zedekiah holds him accountable for a violation of a covenant marked by the cutting of animals (Jeremiah 34). The cutting of animals is virtually absent from the covenant ceremonies of Exodus (ch. 20ff.) and Deuteronomy (chaps. 27–28), while the ritual of Passover, also a covenant tradition, preserves it.[71] What makes the Passover texts of Exodus distinc-tive for the Bible is its balance of historical narration and ritual instruction. Unlike most of the texts that involve cutting a covenant or the penalty of *karet*, Passover is clearly specified as a covenant ritual, rooted in history, to be repeated regularly. (There are other elaborate ritual texts in the Pen-tateuch, notably the sacrifice practices of Leviticus and the Sotah ritual in Numbers 5, but that is restricted to particular cases at any given time. Some other rituals, such as circumcision, are commanded in the Pentateuch with-out detailed provisions for their observance. The other festivals listed in Leviticus 23 and Deuteronomy 16, such as Shavuot, Yom Ha-Kippurim, and Sukkoth, offer less detail than the Passover instructions of Exodus 12 and 13, and they are also less clearly rooted in Israelite history.) The unique-ness of Passover in the Bible thus makes the question of gesture, and the persistence of the conditional curse of cutting, especially significant.

The Passover texts (Exodus 12–13) allude to the tradition of covenant cutting and conditional oath, but like Genesis 15, they have theologically and historically distinct purposes, emphasizing promises more than pun-ishments. But unlike Genesis 15, which recounts a unique foundational

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70. Wold, 'The *Karet* Penalty in P', p. 7.

71. The blood ritual in Exod. 24.3-8 may, however, be a conditional curse ritual. See Weeks, *Admonition and Curse*, pp. 145-49. Weeks's argument is that it is difficult to trace clear lines of influence from Hittite or Mesopotamian sources to Israelite cov-enant treaties, but that nevertheless some sort of 'common inheritance' can be found in these diverse ancient Near Eastern traditions (pp. 172-73).

event, the Passover texts intend to serve for generations as a ritual manual. Passover maintains the link between performative speech act and gesture by regarding the text partly as a ritual manual. I now revisit the question of how biblical tradition preserves and transforms the link between speech act and gesture, particularly in the category of conditional curses. While the status and centrality of writing increase during biblical history, the tradition never erases or completely resolves the tension between speech and writing.

For to allude to conditional curses is never the same as to perform them. Consider the Hittite Soldier's Oath, which most emphatically does link speech act and gesture:

> Then he places wax and mutton fat in their hands. He throws them *on a pan* and says: 'Just as this wax melts, and just as the mutton fat dissolves,— whoever breaks these oaths, [shows disrespect to the king] of the Hatti [land], let [him] melt like [wax], let him dissolve like [mutton fat]!' [The men] declare: 'So be it!' (*ANET*, p. 353).

This passage, together with similar passages involving yeast that rises, sinews that split in a pan, malt ground by stones, and others, illustrates plainly how intimately speech and gesture can be related in conditional curses. Why do so few biblical texts prescribe conditional curses in this manner?

The temptation is to answer as Berger would in *The Sacred Canopy* by saying that biblical tradition secularized the culture of the ancient Near East. As I have already made clear, I find that option problematic, and so I must propose a kind of alternative. A thorough alternative will lie beyond the scope of this chapter (and book), but let me reiterate first that biblical departures from the model of conditional curse discussed here are various and rooted in the complex political, textual, and theological histories that converge in the Bible. Second, as biblical historians and Derrida have argued (in different contexts), it is important not to assume that writing overtakes speech in any simple historical or hierarchical configuration, because that assigns a privileged status to speech, along with an idealized version of the speech act, that simply can not be found. As Carr shows in *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*, ancient Near Eastern practices of teaching and learning, from Egypt and Mesopotamia to Israel, combined speaking with writing; a similar dynamic runs through biblical texts and traditions.

The question still remains, though: What happens to the efficacy of speech acts and gestures when they are committed to writing? My answer, briefly, is to invoke the category of deferral discussed above: just as conditional curses inherently defer the present into the future and appeals to such curses (as in Jeremiah 34) defer the present back to the past, so there is also a kind of deferral of the efficacy of speech acts and gestures in two directions: from the speech act and gesture as deferred to and preserved in writing, and from writing back to speech act and gesture. As the following

examples of speech act and gesture combinations show, this deferral is a kind of displacement.

According to Paul Sanders, the biblical expression 'so may God do to me' (2 Sam. 3.35, 19.14, 1 Kgs 2.23; 2 Kgs 6.31) accompanies a gesture indicating harm to the self in case the oath is violated.[72] The expression is thus a conditional curse or a self-imprecation. Like the cutting of a covenant, this expression invokes personal harm as a guarantee of the speaker's commitment. Sanders suggests that Mesopotamian oaths that refer to the touching of the throat offer one possible interpretation of the biblical phrase. The Akkadian phrase 'to touch the throat' means to swear an oath, and the term for throat, *napistam* (cognate with Hebrew נפש), also means life. When one says 'so may God do to me', then, one touches the throat in a gesture implying death if the oath is broken.

Sanders goes on to observe that the saying may have lost its efficacy: in 1 Sam. 14.44 and 2 Kgs 6.31, the oath is broken with no effect.[73] Has the oath lost its meaning or become a mere figure of speech? Is the shift from speech to writing, or from Akkadian to Israelite religion, responsible for the change? Yet another text, 1 Sam. 25.22, shows David uttering a version of the oath that he will later fail to uphold. In an apparent desire to eliminate this problem, some pious copyists apparently altered the text to say 'to David's enemies' rather than the self-imprecatory 'to David'. The curse formula, then, did retain some of its potency in the post-biblical period. Even in written form, the curse formula retains its power.

Two other examples of gestures tied to powerful speech are the so-called oath of the thigh (Gen. 24.2, 47.31, and 31.42, 53), and Job's self-silencing after he is chastised by the voice of God (Job 40.3-4). The oath sworn while touching a man's 'thigh' involves his posterity, a gesture possibly suggesting the threat of arousing ancestral spirits or suffering sterility. Meir Malul identifies a possible counterpart to this gesture in an Akkadian letter, and on the strength of this comparison says 'Touching the procreative organ while promising to maintain the cohesion of the family must have entailed invoking the ancestral spirits of the family to witness and assure the fulfillment of the promise'.[74] Given the covenantal and biblical imperative to multiply, to have numerous descendants, not to mention the taboos on male nakedness

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72. Also in altered form in 1 Sam. 14.44, 20.13, 25.22; 2 Sam. 3.9; 1 Kgs 19.2; 20.10; Ruth 1.17; Paul Sanders, '"So May God Do to Me"', *Biblica* 85 (2004), pp. 91-98. See also discussion of 'touching the throat' in a Mari letter (D. Charpin *et al.*, *Archives épistolaires de Mari* [I/2, ARM 26; Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1988], #372, pp. 10-20, cited in Weeks, *Admonition and Curse*, p. 24 n. 34), Weeks, *Admonition and Curse*, pp. 24-26.

73. Cf. Keim, *When Sanctions Fail*.

74. Meir Malul, 'More on *pahad yishaq* (Genesis xxxi 42, 53) and the Oath by the Thigh', *VT* 35 (1985), pp. 192-200 (198).

indicated in Genesis 3 and 9, and the curse on woman for touching man's privates in fight (Deut. 25.11-12), such an interpretation seems sound. Certainly the oath's efficacy, its symbolic and physical power, would be diminished without this gesture.

There are two passages in Job that include the terms 'mouth' and the verb that means 'to curse' or 'to minimize' (קלל). The first introduces the long poetic complaints and debates of the book: 'After this Job opened his mouth and cursed (ויקלל) the day of his birth' (3.1), and the second is Job's first utterance after the divine voice from the whirlwind has begun chastising him: 'See, I am of small account (קלתי); what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but will proceed no further' (40.4-5). This gesture of self-silencing, linked to a self-curse, underlines what is distinctive about Job. The speech act combines with gesture here as in other cases, but with Job's extended curse on his birth and this gesture, Job seems to redirect anger at God back onto himself, cursing himself rather than God, despite the arguably capricious version of divine justice he faces. Job's gesture may be an act of pious self-humiliation and self-restraint (lest he curse or blaspheme God; cf. Leviticus 24), but it is also a text in which justice is carried out by Job himself (since he receives no punishment for his impatient words). Job may thus represent a displacement from a more outward-focused model of theodicy to a more inward one. Like Jeremiah 34, though, this displacement is not a secularization or clean break from the past; its incorporation of gesture indicates the enduring place of speech acts and gestures in biblical texts.

Conclusion

Strong evidence links the conditional curses of the Bible discussed here to pre-Israelite curses combining speech with action. The interpretive challenge is how to understand the relationship between non-Israelite curses performed through speech and action and Israelite curses preserved in writing (and, in the case of Passover, ritual). To the systematic theologian and secularization theorist alike, the biblical use of ancient curses raises problems for the divine monopoly on supernatural power. Like persistent allusions to rival deities and cosmogonic myths, biblical curses muddy the waters of biblical doctrine. The predominant models of change, secularization, and eternal recurrence fail to account for the complexity of biblical curse texts. The evidence indicates, I suggest, a preference for displacement over either replacement (secularization) or perennialism (Eliadean eternal recurrence). Displacement avoids the false dichotomy of stasis and progress enforced by these two models; and while it does not have the predictive power of categories like secularization, it represents an effective hermeneutical attempt to describe biblical texts and traditions.

It is true that some speech acts require physical actions in order to be complete. This is especially true in the case of oaths and curses, both in ancient Israel and in contemporary life (think of the swearing-in of the President of the United States, which must be done with one hand on the Bible [or, after United States Congressional Representative Keith Ellison, the Qur'an] and another in a raised-arm gesture). The question of what happens to these speech acts when they take written form is not just a question of speech and writing, it is also a question of the displacement of one kind of tradition to another. In the case of the possible roots of the Passover in a pre-biblical puppy and lettuce sacrifice, the significant transformation is not in the creature being offered but in the fact that an ancient tradition is appropriated in the context of a ritual within a specific narrative. To perform the puppy and lettuce ritual as part of a treaty may have been a familiar enough trope that it could be appropriated in an even richer fashion as part of the unique historical narrative of the Passover. Cutting this kind of covenant was not just a warning of dire consequences to those who might break it; it was a ritual within a narrative of deliverance and victory.

The ancient oath of self-imprecation, 'Thus may God to do me', also threatens dire outcomes to those who break their word. Although the oath is violated without consequence in some cases, the scribal emendation of 1 Sam. 25.22 suggests that its power persisted in the scriptural tradition of Israel. Despite its apparent origins in a pre-Israelite combination of speech and gesture, its power is displaced onto the biblical text. How exactly this works is difficult to determine with precision, but it suggests a model of biblical scripture and tradition in which the present is built on continuity with the past. In order for the power of speech and action to carry over into writing, several modes of displacement must coincide: the cultural displacement theorized by de Certeau, the sort of theological transformation discussed by Levenson, the dynamic interplay between writing and speech analyzed by Derrida, and the aesthetic or literary displacement proposed by Miller, in which literature is a kind of written speech act that behaves like powerful speech.

It will never be certain how biblical covenant texts were performed in ancient Israel; the history of conditional curse gestures is inherently elusive. The fact that some texts make these gestures explicit does not mean they were absent from others; this, together with the persistence of these gestures in a later text like Jeremiah 34, would make it very hard to explain conditional curses as a primitive or superstitious practice that gradually disappeared. Such arguments, though familiar in biblical scholarship, do not account for the dynamics of ritual and writing, divine and human agency, encoded in many covenant texts. The category of displacement, which I elaborate in Chapter 6, is an attempt to describe these

dynamics of persistence and change in biblical tradition and avoids the pitfalls of the sacred-secular distinction. Because they link past, present, and future through a mechanism of deferral, conditional curses illustrate displacement in biblical tradition.

Chapter 2

ETHNIC CURSES IN GENESIS 9.18-28 AND JOSHUA 9.22-27

Biblical curses appear in a wide range of biblical texts and contexts. Scholars have typically classified curses as a vestige of magical, pre-Israelite culture. A different approach is taken in recent studies by Jeff Anderson and Paul Keim, which attend to the social contexts and functions of biblical curses, including the enforcement of norms and social order, the ratification of treaties, and explanations for evil and suffering.[1] This chapter considers another social function of curses noted by Anderson: their use as a 'last resort of the weak'.[2] For people who are victimized or deprived of self-determination and sufficient means of material existence, power can still be exercised in symbolic form, through curses. Defined for present purposes as the use of words to invoke harm upon another through supernatural means, curses by weak parties upon stronger ones can counteract the imbalance of power in such relationships.

A theoretical context for this approach appears in Scott's characterization of certain speech acts and other symbolic expression as 'everyday resistance'. Even when the material life of one group is tightly controlled by another, Scott argues that in hundreds of subtle ways, oppressed people are able to resist the worldview of their oppressors even as they suffer great material hardships. Scott argues that oppressed people, following 'hidden transcripts' that affirm their identity and dignity, demonstrate the capacity to think and act independently of their oppressors, even when they are prevented from overthrowing them.[3] Known sometimes as the 'curse of the poor', which Max Weber believed to be a source of fear in the ancient world, curses by weak people against their stronger opponents may be socially effective in galvanizing weak groups and frightening their powerful

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1. Anderson, 'The Social Function of Curses in the Hebrew Bible'; Keim, *When Sanctions Fail*.
2. Anderson, 'The Social Function of Curses in the Hebrew Bible', p. 231.
3. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 14; James C. Scott, *Weapons of The Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

opponents.[4] The dynamics of power in these curses are typically expressed in terms of gender and ethnicity.

This chapter applies Scott's notion of 'everyday resistance' to biblical curses against opposing ethnic groups: the Canaanites and Gibeonites. The identity of each group remains a puzzle for scholarship, one that demands a reconsideration of the category of 'ethnicity' itself. Both of the texts I consider here—Genesis 9 and Joshua 9—provide the first biblical mention of the ethnic groups they curse; naming and cursing are thus simultaneous for the biblical canon. Cursing and naming turn out to be closely related, in the Bible and in other cultural contexts, to group identity and ethnicity. Kwame Anthony Appiah cites a study of two groups of eleven-year-old boys at summer camp who formed fierce group identities and loyalties after just four days: 'To the Rattlers (in their internal discussions), the Eagles were "sissies", "cowards", "little babies". To the Eagles, the Rattlers were a "bunch of cussers", "poor losers", and "bums". One group saw itself, and was seen, as prayerful, pious, and clean-living; the other as boisterous, tough, and scrappy'.[5] In the Bible, the separation of Lot from Abram leads to separate ethnic groups: the Ammonites and Moabites from Lot, and the Israelites from Abram (Genesis 13, 19), a division which Gershon Hepner identifies in terms of 'curse' (Lot) and 'blessing' (Abram).[6]

As neighbors and rivals, both Canaanites and Gibeonites represent a clear threat to Israelite power, particularly in terms of intermarriage, and the curses seek to justify the struggle against them and to express symbolic resistance in light of Israelite vulnerability. But power relationships change, and in canonical context, curses of the weak against the strong can become their opposite, justifying oppression by the strong against the weak. I will explore this problem by taking up Nietzsche's diagnosis of the Christian and Jewish *ressentiment*, the 'slave morality' that celebrates weakness, as the result of just such a reversal. Ethnic curses are thus highly volatile and socially efficacious: at one moment the 'last resort of the weak', at another instruments of social oppression. As such, biblical curses contain the hermeneutical flexibility to accommodate changing times and thus provide a model for biblical tradition without radical indeterminacy of meaning.

According to Jeff Anderson, curses can apply to cases where the legal system fails to ensure justice and as a deterrent to those who those who might wish to harm the poor and needy. In addition to such texts as Prov. 30.10 and Eccl. 7.21, Anderson cites the 'beggar's curse' of popular folklore;

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4.   Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, pp. 256-57.

5.   Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 63.

6.   Gershon Hepner, 'The Separation between Abram and Lot Reflects the Deuteronomic Law Prohibiting Ammonites and Moabites', *ZAW* 117 (2005), pp. 36-52.

Keith Thomas's study of early modern England; Ronald Reminick's study of the evil eye; and Max Weber's notion that the curse of the poor was 'the weapon of democracy'.[7] As an expression of symbolic power, writes Anderson, '[s]uch curses also served as a substitute for political action', as a way to seek revenge or even to avert war. Anderson cites Judges 9 and the curse of Shimei in 2 Samuel 16 as examples in which survivors of a defeated family seek to curse their oppressors.[8]

Two Ethnic Curses

Two biblical curses consign ethnic groups to servitude: the curse on Canaan (Gen. 9.26) and the curse on Gibeon (Josh. 9.23). The servitude of both groups is attested in Joshua (9.23 and 16.10, 17.12; cf. Judg. 1.29-30) but neither ethnic group plays a prominent role in the prophets or the books of Samuel and Kings. In the first case, a sexually charged failure of filial respect is loosely tied to the punishment of Ham, 'father of Canaan' (9.18, 22): Canaan is cursed as the 'servant of servants' to his brothers (v. 25). Ham's sin is ambiguous, but for later biblical tradition it was understood to be a sexual crime, thus linking ethnic difference with sexuality.[9] In the second case, a ruse of the Gibeonites leads Joshua to make a pact with them without seeking divine counsel (9.14). Both cases follow etiological form, explaining how the ethnic rivalries arose; in the first, the action of an individual (Ham) justifies the fate of his son and a people, Canaan; in the second, the deception behind the pact leads Joshua to curse the Gibeonites. Taken at face value, the curses suggest a direct link between ancient and contemporary realities. But such a correspondence is not easy to establish. The 'conquest' model of the Israelite settlement of Canaan depicted in Joshua does not reflect the findings of archaeologists and historians of the period; there is no consensus among historians on the emergence of Israel in Canaan and the relationship between this process and the biblical text.[10] As such, these curses may not so much describe undisputed reality as some etiological stories do ('how the tiger got its stripes', or 'why the sky is blue') as form part of a group history or mythology. In fact, the Deuteronomistic history

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7. Anderson, 'The Social Function of Curses in the Hebrew Bible', pp. 231-32.

8. Anderson, 'The Social Function of Curses', pp. 232-33. See also Jonathan Ben-Dov, 'The Poor's Curse: Exodus xxii 20-26 and Curse Literature in the Ancient World', *VT* 56 (2006), pp. 431-51.

9. Thus argues Jacob Milgrom for the sexual prohibitions of Leviticus 18 (*Leviticus 17–22* [New York: Doubleday, 2000], p. 1519).

10. See, e.g., Baruch Halpern, *The Emergence of Israel in Canaan* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), and Hershel Shanks, William G. Dever, Baruch Halpern, and P. Kyle McCarter, *The Rise of Ancient Israel* (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1992).

(e.g., Joshua 10, 2 Samuel 21) generally regards Gibeon as relatively pow-
erful, and closely tied to the cultic life of Israel (e.g., 2 Samuel 6, 1 Kings
3, 1 Chronicles 16), despite the assertion in Joshua 9 that the Gibeonites are
cursed to be servile water carriers and hewers of wood.

Joseph Blenkinsopp considers the treaty of Joshua 9 to be generally con-
sistent with historical accounts and literary traditions of the period, but he
notes the problems with any attempt to date the treaty.[11] More importantly,
Blenkinsopp observes that the prospect of one Israelite group prevailing
over a powerful adversary like Gibeon strains credibility, and that the treaty
oath customarily sworn by the weaker party is here sworn by Israel.[12] The
treaty, Blenkinsopp concludes, suggests an early attempt by a weak Israelite
party to align with a stronger local one, as part of a larger pattern of peaceful
settlement (as opposed to conquest). Whether the curse reflects the reverse
of historical reality, it is clear that the Gibeonites stand apart from other
conquered peoples in Joshua, that they are included in the covenant (Deut.
29.10), and that they are powerful enough to demand the death of Saul's
offspring when the treaty is violated (2 Samuel 21). The Gibeonites are an
ambiguous, problematic ethnic group.

The curse of Canaan in Genesis 9 is far less clear than the curse of
Gibeon. At the conclusion of the flood story, the actions of the three sons
of Noah predict their legacies to the major ethnic groups descending from
them. Long before the biblical narrative presents the Israelite settlement
of Canaan, an ambiguous sexual sin justifies the subjugation of Canaan
by the descendants of Shem. But like the case of Gibeon, the histori-
cal evidence for such domination is sketchy; the biblical accounts from
Judges to 1 Kings cast doubt on the bold hierarchy proposed in the curse
of Canaan.

Who were the Canaanites and Gibeonites? Easy answers are not forth-
coming. The Gibeonites are merely those who live in Gibeon, which we are
told is a 'great city' (Josh. 9.3, 10.2). Both terms refer to geographic areas
that are presumably the home of these peoples. Canaan, though, refers to
a relatively large area, ranging from the whole Transjordan (Josh. 14.1 and
Num. 13.2, Deut. 32.49) to a significant portion within it: 'all the regions
of the Philistines, and all those of the Geshurites (from the Shihor, which
is east of Egypt, northward to the boundary of Edron; it is reckoned as
Canaanite' (Josh. 13.2). 'Canaanite' would thus seem to describe a larger or
more generic group of people than 'Gibeonite', which though difficult to fix
with precision, refers to a particular city-state and its people (Joshua 10).

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11. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Gibeon and Israel: The Role of Gibeon and the Gibeonites
in the Politial and Religious History of Early Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univer-
sity Press, 1972), pp. 38-39.

12. Blenkinsopp, *Gibeon and Israel*, p. 40.

Neither group appears to be as distinct from Israel as the category of ethnicity might suggest. I return to the question of ethnicity later in this chapter.

The Social and Historical Context of Curses

In their earliest historical context, the curses against Gibeon and Canaan thus reflect the intention or wish of a weaker party to subdue a stronger one, if only in verbal and religious terms. Putting aside the problems of historicity, I approach the curses as literary and sociological phenomena, not as magical forces but as powerful uses of language nevertheless. With Paul Keim, I see biblical curses as a crucial indicator of group power and interactions.[13] As a curse by the weak on the strong, these curses fall into the larger category of 'weapons of the weak'. By wishing evil or subjugation on its enemies, Israel resorts to one of the few weapons available to the weak.

Ancient curses, and curses in general, can be highly ritualized or relatively spontaneous. Treaties and royal inscriptions conventionally include curses as a way to protect and seal the power of powerful authorities (see, e.g., Deuteronomy 28). Less ritualized curses can simply perform the role of imprecations and maledictions, spontaneously conveying the passion of an individual like Shimei in 2 Samuel 16. Ritualized curses are more typical of kings, priests, and other ruling authorities, while spontaneous curses tend to be the domain of common people.

The curses on Gibeon and Canaan are more spontaneous than ritualized. The question may illuminate whether they represent power or evidence of relative weakness. Both cases occur in the heat of the moment—Noah's nakedness and Joshua's anger toward Gibeon. Both curses follow unexpected loss, even humiliation; in the case of Noah, the humiliation has clear sexual overtones, while for Joshua the curse emerges from a ruse that replaces force with cunning in a way that is anomalous for warrior culture (9.4).[14]

The curses on Canaan and Gibeon may represent revised accounts of a time when Israel was threatened by these other groups and used 'weapons of the weak' against them. Any event related in the Primary History has at least two historical contexts: the time of the event and the time of its writing. Compressing the results of historical research, we can propose two phases: one in which Israel was too weak to challenge rival groups, and a second, later phase when Israel was able to gain sufficient power to exercise autonomy in a significant territorial area; such power might even include victory over Gibeon and Canaan, if not their complete subordination. By this

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13. Keim, *When Sanctions Fail*.
14. Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 106-22.

account, the curse of the powerless in the first phase would be seen as fulfilled in the second phase. At the point when this national story or history is created and circulated, the victory of the weak over the strong takes on ideological meaning: the facts of history confirm specific religious and political values. Gibeonites and Canaanites are named as distinct ethnic groups, and the curses on them are depicted as fulfilled. This process of canonization makes this biblical story authoritative and normative.

A third hypothetical phase, when the gains of monarchy and territory have been lost, can be added to the first two. Thus the initial phase of weakness, in which the curse may represent more of a wish than a reality, has counterparts in the third phase after Israel is exiled and once again subordinated by other groups. With the benefit of hindsight, biblical authors condense and explain traditions of the remembered past. The study of this process can usefully be called what Jan Assmann calls 'mnemohistory', the history of memory.[15] Unlike traditional history, concerned mainly with evaluating claims about historicity and evidence, mnemohistory proposes to examine the process whereby memory is recorded, changed, and handed down. In the case of ancient Israel, mnemohistory describes many operations of biblical authors, such as rearranging, condensing, and reversing traditions. In the case of ethnic curses, it may even incorporate the memory of the 'hidden transcripts' of resistance: the written declaration of Canaanite or Gibeonite servitude may echo a much earlier and less formal expression of resentment against strong rivals.

Mnemohistory would characterize the curses as the combination of a memory of past struggle with later victories and defeats. Later group differences are projected onto the past and hence justified by atavistic curses that create and enforce group boundaries. After the weakness of the early, settlement period, the Israelites begin to write their national history from the vantage point of victory and prosperity: rival peoples no longer threaten their existence. But the primary history is not only a celebration of Israelite triumph; it is also a sharp indictment of the repeated failures of Israelite kings and people to keep the covenant. Among their failings none is as profound as improper liaisons with foreigners and their gods.

Completed under the yoke of exile, the Deuteronomistic history combines the triumph of a successful monarchy with the crushing defeat of the Babylonian conquest. In this way, the formation of the national history contains moments of triumph and stability (most likely under Josiah) as well as moments of disaster, after the destruction of Jerusalem. This double focus gives two meanings to the curses, which, like curses in general, can redound upon those who utter them. The good fortune of conquering

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15. Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 14-20.

Canaan and the Gibeonites can swiftly be undone in case of Israelite faith-lessness. For Israel, ethnic curses contain a seed of self-criticism and poten-tial punishment.

Curses and Culture: Nietzsche

One of the first to analyze the layering of these 'phases' in biblical history was Friedrich Nietzsche. For Nietzsche, the Bible provides an unnatural rationalization of history from the standpoint of the priestly class. This his-tory follows a decline from the Kingdom, when 'Yahweh was the expres-sion of their consciousness of power, of their delight in themselves' to a period after the destruction of Israel in which the priesthood 'made of it a stupid salvation—mechanism of guilt towards Yahweh and punishment, piety towards Yaweh and reward'.[16] This priestly religion becomes the basis for what Nietzsche regards as the unnatural decadence and *ressentiment* of Christian morality. The doctrine of a transcendent god is, for Nietzsche, an act of 'revenge' on Israel's enemies: 'The *one* god and the *one* Son of God: both products of *ressentiment*…'.[17] At the heart of this transforma-tion, for Nietzsche, was scripture itself, in the form of the Deuterononomic code whose discovery is reported in 2 Kings 22: '[A] great literary forgery becomes necessary, a "sacred book" is discovered—it is made public with all hieratic pomp, with days of repentance and with lamentation over the long years of "sinfulness"'.[18]

   Nietzsche's characterization of Judaism and Christianity is highly prob-lematic, with its simplistic, flawed analysis and polemical rhetoric, but it recognizes that biblical tradition emerges from historical loss. The doctrines of sin, transcendent God, and the exaltation of the weak represent a brilliant but unnatural response to defeat. The subsequent rise of Christianity as a dominant power encodes this morality of weakness and *ressentiment* on a mass scale. A crucial dimension of this process is that symbolic elements of scripture and religious teaching constitute genuine power. Nietzsche's analysis of Christian and Jewish morality as a subtle form of aggression, a kind of power for the powerless, closely parallels the notion of curses as a weapon of the weak. In this sense, the religious worldviews of Christianity and Judaism function like massive curses. (In fact, Nietzsche concludes his entire analysis of Christianity and Judaism in *The Anti-Christ* with a curse:

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16. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, in *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ* (trans. R.J. Hollingdale; New York: Penguin, 1990), pp. 147, 149.

   17. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, p. 165.

   18. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, 150. Nietzsche read works by such biblical schol-ars as Julius Wellhausen; see Thomas H. Brobjer, 'Nietzsche's Reading and Private Library, 1885–1889', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58 (1997), pp. 663-80.

'I call Christianity the *one* great curse, the *one* great intrinsic depravity, the *one* great instinct for revenge for which no expedient is sufficiently poisonous, secret, subterranean, *petty*. I call it the *one* immortal blemish of mankind…'[19]). Words, including curses, express real power for Nietzsche; the driving force of this *ressentiment* culture is the Bible itself.[20]

These reflections take us far from the curses on Canaan and Gibeon, participating in the kind of 'genealogy' that often generates more confusion than insight. The line connecting biblical curses through biblical tradition does not, in my mind, lead inevitably to the state of affairs described by Nietzsche. What Nietzsche provides, however, is a serious attempt to establish continuity between ancient Israel and modern Europe; his is one of the few philosophical accounts to take religious tradition and religious speech seriously, so much so that he makes religion and religious speech (cursing) central to his work. Like Sigmund Freud and Jan Assmann after him, Nietzsche acknowledges symbolic representations along with 'history' *per se*; as a representation, a layered record of memory, the Bible becomes a primary source for analysis rather than a flawed account of history.[21] In addition, Nietzsche's application of *ressentiment* seeks to explain one of the most striking qualities of ancient Israel: the claim to covenant with a superior deity despite a history of only modest political and economic success.

The phase before Israel's ascent to a territorial power may in fact provide a kind of model and mirror for phase after which that power had been lost. To apply Assmann's notion of mnemohistory, we could say that the memory of early Israelite resentment toward the Canaanites and Gibeonites returns in subsequent periods when Israelite domination of these groups was either a reality or a norm to which they wished to return. Noted perhaps as victories from the time of conquest, the subordination of the Canaanites and Gibeonites likely provided reassurance of Israelite power in later times. By the time of the exile and return, the curses would constitute a kind of normative or ideological wish that embodied some of the characteristics Nietzsche meant by *ressentiment*.

In terms of biblical tradition, which elaborately intertwines historical strands, the initial Israelite hostility to foreigners could furnish later generations, in moments of victory as well as defeat, with the memory of curses. At times of Israelite prosperity and success, such curses, retrojected onto the past, would constitute a crucial element of a national

19. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, p. 199.

20. Chapter 6 continues the discussion of Nietzsche as a biblical thinker whose work informs Freud's understandings of biblical tradition.

21. See Tim Murphy, *Nietzsche, Metaphor, Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), and James C. O'Flaherty, Timothy F. Sellner, and Robert M. Helm (eds.), *Studies in Nietzsche and the Judaeo-Christian Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

history in which weak ancestors foretold success. Later, after bitter exile and loss, the curses against Canaan and Gibeon could redound on Israel as rash words uttered without consulting Yahweh (see 9.14), or as conditional curses that function when Israel follows the covenant. Curses against Gibeon and Canaan also anticipate the florid oracles against the nations in prophetic discourse: Israel may be defeated now, but the day will come when the nations are once again brought low.

Genesis 9

The curse of Ham is difficult to attach to specific historical events, but understanding its rhetorical and literary significance requires a general sense of its origins. As a story of second beginnings, the Flood narrative combines primordial myth with a concern to explain the status of the nations issuing from Noah. From the retrospective standpoint of conflict between Israel and Canaan, the story offers a chance to ground that conflict in mythical terms. The most obvious problem with the curse is why Canaan, one of Ham's four sons, is cursed when it is Ham who sins. The text appears to strain the ancient myth to justify a specifically anti-Canaanite position. What begins as a modest account of Noah as the father of local peoples takes on a much broader significance in light of the table of nations (usually attributed to the Priestly source) that follows in Genesis 10.

What are the details of the curse? 'And he (Noah) said, "Cursed be Canaan, slave of slaves will he be to his brothers". And he said, "Blessed be Yhwh, God of Shem, let Canaan be a slave to him. May God enlarge Japheth, may he sleep in the tents of Shem, and may Canaan be a slave to them"' (Gen. 9.25-26). Recent studies have emphasized the corrosive potential of this text, from its well-known use to justify the enslavement of Africans to the more general reinforcement of ethnic rivalries and violence.[22] Like the curse on the Gibeonites, the curse on Canaan comes from an angry Israelite leader. Whether it represents a position of strength or weakness is impossible to decide with certainty, since there are phases of both in the Primary History. There is very little in subsequent biblical texts to suggest that Canaan was understood to be destined to *perpetual* slavery, and as David Aaron shows, the early rabbis focused on the curse as punishment for a moral (sexual) transgression; modern conceptions of race have little to do with the text and its early exegesis.[23]

22. David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Haynes, *Noah's Curse*.

23. David H. Aaron, 'Early Rabbinic Exegesis on Noah's Son Ham and the So-Called "Hamitic Myth"', *JAAR* 53 (1995), pp. 721-59.

Still, the text sends a clear message that Canaan is the slave of Shem and Japheth, and subsequent conflicts with 'Canaanites', who may be a specific ethnic group or any inhabitants of the land of Canaan, clearly underlie the text. Ham's transgression of looking upon his father's nakedness may indicate a sexual offense or a more general failure of filial piety, but it strongly contrasts the behavior of his brothers, and it arouses the anger of his father Noah. With a single act of improper looking, Ham seals the fate of his son Canaan and the people after him. Crossing the boundary of sexual propriety within the family leads to exclusion from the family. There is a kind of poetic justice in the curse insofar as Shem and Japheth act as servants toward their father, covering his nakedness. Canaan, son of Ham, must now become a servant to these brothers because of the failure to behave as a servant.

According to Meir Sternberg, Genesis 9 marks a 'dividing line' in biblical history between ethnic groups. Ham's unfilial, sexually immoral behavior it anticipates the immorality of all Hamite peoples, including Egyptians as well as Canaanites.[24] The designation 'Canaanites', like 'Hebrews' in Sternberg's account, becomes a deliberate by-word rooted more in scriptural rivalries than in ethnographic taxonomies:

> To make the hated adversaries hateful, the Bible…overturns the name's standard group attribute (merchant class and/or Phoenician habitation) into ethnicity, so as to taint the archenemy with Noah's curse upon their putative eponymous ancestor, Canaan son of Ham, who violated his father's nakedness… No wonder he anticipates (or inspires) his offspring, the latter-day Sodomites.[25]

Translating a general description into an ethnic term, the biblical narrative mixes past and present, judgment with history. The in-family nature of the curse on Canaan may also be revealing in light of the linguistic and cultural similarities of Israelites and Canaanites. As I suggest in the discussion of ethnicity below, the curse of Canaan may betray a familiarity between the two peoples on a level more literal than is usually considered.

Joshua 9

The curse on the Gibeonites represents part of a treaty that assigns them the role of water-carriers and hewers of wood for the temple (v. 23). The judgment comes in the wake of the ruse with which the Gibeonites convince the Israelites that they were stronger than they really were. By securing an oath of protection from the Israelites, the Gibeonites avoid the annihilation meted out to

24. Meir Sternberg, *Hebrews between Cultures: Group Portraits and National Literature* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 109-12.
25. Sternberg, *Hebrews between Cultures,* p. 15.

other residents of Canaan. Thus one kind of powerful, binding speech (oath) leads Joshua to issue another (curse). The 'curse' here, as Herbert Brichto notes, is more of a 'decree' than an 'imprecation', since it enacts a ban on the Gibeonites rather than a wish or prayer for harm against them.[26] Like the rest of Joshua 1–12, the conquest of the Gibeonites depicts glorious victory for Israel over the inhabitants of Canaan, but in this case the usual annihilation under the rule of ritualized dedication for destruction (חרם) is avoided.

As Joseph Blenkinsopp notes, the treaty with Gibeon is puzzling in a number of ways. Gibeon, we are told in 10.2, is a 'great city' full of mighty men. The treaty oath, which is usually sworn by the weaker party, is sworn by the supposed victor, Israel. Comparing the episode to the treaty with Shechem in Genesis 34, Blenkinsopp suggests that early Israelite settlers sought the treaty with the more powerful Gibeon, whom they may later have conquered.[27] If Blenkinsopp is correct, then the curse assigned to Gibeon is part of a retrospective account of the Israelite settlement that reverses the power relationship from a strong Gibeon and weak Israel to a weak Gibeon and strong Israel. Such a curse is consistent with the idea of curses as a 'last resort of the weak'.

Gender plays as much a role in the curse on Gibeon as sexuality does in the curse on Canaan. According to Robert Gordon, to consign the Gibeonites to be hewers of wood and drawers of water is an example of an 'effeminacy curse'.[28] Citing numerous other ancient Near Eastern examples, Gordon argues that the Gibeonites' tasks are traditionally associated with women. He cites the Ugaritic *Legend of King Karet*, which specifically describes women in the roles of wood-cutters and drawers of water on the way to meet warriors returning from battle. Gordon associates Joshua 9 with a tradition of effeminacy curses used to taunt, threaten, or subordinate rival men, especially in the context of military conflict.

As an effeminacy curse, the curse on the Gibeonites performs the patriarchal maneuver of defining ethnic difference in terms of gender. Gender, in turn, becomes a trope to contrast the powerful (masculine) Israelites to the subordinate, feminized Gibeonites. The fact that the Gibeonites have served in this servile role 'until this day' (v. 27) offers the reader evidence that the effeminacy curse is binding. But there is something oddly unconvincing about this curse; if the biblical text inverts the reality of Gibeon's power

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26. Herbert Chanan Brichto, *The Problem of "Curse" in the Hebrew Bible* (Journal of Biblical Literature Monograph Series, 13; Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1968), p. 89. Brichto notes throughout his study that different terms and meanings for 'curse' appear in the Bible.

27. Blenkinsopp, *Gibeon and Israel*, pp. 39-40.

28. Robert Gordon, 'Gibeonite Ruse and Israelite Curse in Joshua 9', in *Covenant as Context: Essays in Honour of E.W. Nicholson* (ed. A.D.H. Mayes and R.B. Salters; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 163-90 (180).

over Israel, then the effeminacy curse may be a 'last resort of the weak', a verbal act of resistance against power. To depict the invincible Gibeonites as feminized servants would thus constitute an act of cultural resistance. In Joshua 9 as in Genesis 9, ethnic dominance is expressed through gender dominance, and the 'effeminacy curse' against the Gibeonites may have a distant counterpart in the curse on Ham/Canaan.

But how ethnically distinct were the Gibeonites? Gibeon is closely related to the family of Saul, a fact the Deuteronomistic history appears to minimize by avoiding any mention of Gibeon during the period of Judges and Saul.[29] Yet Saul and his family may have Gibeonite origins, and it is possible that he tried to establish Gibeon as a religious and political center.[30] If so, the distinction between Israelite and Gibeonite may have much more to do with political or religious differences than any genuinely distinct history of a people or 'ethnic' group. As Blenkinsopp indicates, Gibeon's importance involves cultic tradition as well as political and military strength. Frequent reference is made to Gibeon as a well-known place, even a place for sacrifice (e.g., 1 Kgs 3.4). The text of Joshua 9 itself appears to be composite: different terms describe the Israelite parties to the treaty, and there is evidence of Deuteronomistic editing; there is no consensus, however, on what this editing implies for biblical history.[31]

Peter Kearney observes some striking similarities between Genesis 3 and Joshua 9. Both stories report the ability of a clever (ערום) party to trick the central characters (Eve, Joshua) into unwise actions. In both stories, deception leads to a 'curse on the deceiver'.[32] According to Kearney, the curse of Joshua 9 reinforces the Deuteronomistic warning against treaties with foreign groups. Two Deuteronomistic texts, Deuteronomy 29 and 1 Kings 8, make direct allusions to the treaty with Gibeon as a dangerous infidelity.[33] In Deuteronomy 29, suggests Kearney, the treaty with Gibeon emerges as a paradigmatic case of unwarranted traffic with foreigners. Kearney finds further evidence of a 'deception motif' in stories of treaties with foreigners in the narrative of 2 Kings 20, where a Babylonian delegation arrives at the court of Hezekiah.[34] Kearney also links Joshua 9-10 and 2 Kings 20, which depict the danger of making treaties with foreigners, as the only two texts in the Bible describing sun miracles.

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29. Blenkinsopp, *Gibeon and Israel*, p. 2.

30. Blenkinsopp, *Gibeon and Israel*, pp. 60-68. If the family of Saul is associated with the Gibeonites, then the childlessness of Michal (2 Sam. 6.23) may reflect another anti-Gibeonite episode; thanks to Alex Cuffel for this observation.

31. Blenkinsopp, *Gibeon and Israel*, pp. 32-33.

32. Peter Kearney, 'The Role of the Gibeonites in the Deuteronomic History', *CBQ* 35 (1973), pp. 1-19 (12).

33. Kearney, 'The Role of the Gibeonites', pp. 1-19.

34. Kearney, 'The Role of the Gibeonites', p. 8.

Conflicts in and around Gibeon during the Babylonian and early Persian periods may help explain the anti-Gibeonite biases of the Deuteronomistic History. Synthesizing archaeological data from the area, Diana Edelman proposes that if Gibeon was closely tied to the house of Saul, the return of exiles during the Persian period could have revived hopes for the restoration of Gibeon as a religious and political capital. The prevailing returnees, who favored the house of David and Jerusalem over Saul and Gibeon, wove their anti-Gibeonite views into the history, minimizing pro-Gibeonite and pro-Saulide claims. By Edelman's account, then, much of what the Bible says about Gibeon may be traced to the polemics of the Persian period, though she admits that the evidence here is inconclusive.[35] Much more likely would be a scenario in which an ancient tradition of Israelite weakness *vis-à-vis* Gibeon has been revived to serve a latter-day situation. The complex rivalry between Israel and Gibeon has its roots in the shadowy period of the settlement, and, like the motif of the Egyptian Moses of Assmann's mnemohistory, it reappeared frequently throughout Israelite tradition.

Ethnicity, Gender, and Curses

What is ethnicity in the Bible? The question raises significant historical and conceptual difficulties. Biblical ways of naming groups rarely find exact corroboration in contemporary texts, and it is not always clear how such group designations are made. As Niels Peter Lemche observes in his study of the Canaanites, '[W]e today possess very definite ideas about the identity of peoples and nations which accord well with the division of our world into nation-states. In the ancient world…no such nation-states existed and no nationalistic ideology had yet arisen'.[36] Lemche's comment reflects one position in current debates among biblical scholars on the category of ethnicity. The debate concerns at least two separate questions: whether the modern category of ethnicity can apply to the ancient world, and whether group designations like 'Israel', 'Hebrews', and 'Canaanites' do in fact refer to historical groups. On the second question, Israel Finkelstein and others claim that the Israelites were originally Canaanites, and he points out that excavations show little difference between early Israelite and surrounding cultures, with the exception that Israelite sites have no pork bones.[37] Does

35. Diana Edelman, 'Gibeon and the Gibeonites Revisited', in *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* (ed. Oded Lipschits and Joseph Blenkinsopp; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns: 2003), pp. 153-67 (164-65).

36. Niels Peter Lemche, *The Canaanites and their Land* (JSOTSup, 110; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), p. 52.

37. Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Texts* (New York: Free Press, 2001), pp. 118-19.

this mean that Israel was not an ethnic group? It depends on what one means by ethnicity. In a paper disputing those who label Israelite culture a lifestyle rather than an ethnicity, William Dever argues that 'ethnicity *is* lifestyle'.[38]

What is certain is that ethnicity cannot be taken as a universal category or that particular group designations are self-evident. 'Gibeonite' and 'Canaanite' refer sometimes to people in particular places and at others to specific groups. The terms are even more sharply defined in the context of conflict, as in the case of Judg. 1.1 and Genesis 9 for the Canaanites and 2 Samuel 21 and Joshua 9 for the Gibeonites. The notions of group identity and election in Israelite religion produced contradictory views of other groups: envious admiration, unlikely self-confidence; simultaneous impulses (borne out in the mixture of attitudes in Joshua and Judges) toward annihilation, annexation, and coexistence. At the heart of such distinctions are gendered curses and prohibitions on marriage and procreation outside the group defined in terms of ethnicity. This mixture of attitudes reflects a religious ideology that claims unique access to a supreme deity who sometimes punishes Israel by means of more powerful enemies.

The curses on Canaan and Gibeon betray rivalries with formidable enemies. Neither curse reflects an unchanging state of affairs in which Israel is master and the Canaanites and Gibeonites are slaves. Within the context of a historically layered canon, the curses hold the balance of power in suspension. In this sense, the curses resemble the aporetic curse on the Amalekites (Exodus 17), in which Moses is commanded to write down the command to forget the Amalekites for all generations. The meaning of the curse depends on historical conditions. The curse on an enemy can reflect a position of weakness from which victory seems fanciful or a genuine rivalry in which the curse relates to a struggle for power.

The linguistic flexibility of ethnic terms and curses calls for new models of biblical ethnicity. In a study that combines archaeology with studies of cultural ideas of tradition and language, Elizabeth Bloch-Smith suggests new ways of understanding Israelite ethnicity. Taking the 'meaningful boundaries' and 'tell-tale' approaches to ethnicity together, she argues that 'collective memory' and biblical texts themselves should serve as guides to understanding Israelite ethnicity. Such an approach offers a new way of thinking about the relationship between biblical text and biblical archaeology: 'Biblical texts confer significance on archaeologically attested traits; archaeology supplies a date and a context for specific features preserved in redacted texts… Israel should be defined on its own

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38. William Dever, 'Ethnicity and Archaeology', paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Biblical Literature, Philadelphia, PA, 19 November, 2005. See also Dever's polemical essay, 'The Western Cultural Tradition Is at Risk', *Biblical Archaeology Review* (March/April 2006), pp. 26, 76.

terms (as filtered through later generations) rather than as a modern schol-arly construct'.[39]

Bloch-Smith thus shifts the formulation of ethnicity from contemporary to ancient sources. Setting aside whether it is possible to speak in any tran-scultural or neutral sense about ethnicity, this approach asks how ancient Israel defines and understands what we call ethnicity, and it permits Bloch-Smith to offer a solution to the puzzling difference between the Philistine and Canaanite archaeological records. While both ethnic groups are defined as rivals, archaeology has found no salient differences between 'Israelite' and 'Canaanite' or 'Gibeonite' discoveries in the area.[40]

In the case of the Philistines, writes Bloch-Smith, biblical texts match archaeology fairly closely; the differences between the groups marked in the Bible can be seen in the material record. In fact, Israelite ethnicity may have evolved through alliances made against the Philistines.[41] But biblical texts on Canaanites don't match archaeological records, either because the past was reconstructed or because the differences between Israelites and Canaanites concerned religion more than other practices or attributes.[42] If the latter is the case, then it becomes difficult to distinguish religion from ethnicity; ethnicity becomes a way of reifying religious differences between two groups who share most other cultural practices in common. By this account, the curse on Ham and Canaan may reflect the sense in which moral and religious difference can produce ethnic difference *within a family*. Eth-nic distinctions must then be understood primarily in terms of 'collective memory': 'The later biblical "collective memory", which regarded kin-ship, cult, and territory as primordial unifying factors, simplified, perhaps obscured, and may even have superseded the true unifying features of the Israelite *ethnos* in the twelfth to eleventh centuries BCE'.[43]

Bloch-Smith's notion of collective memory resembles Assmann's notion of 'mnemohistory'. For the Gibeonites and Canaanites, the ques-tion becomes how the biblical accounts reflect the context of its composi-tion and the context of the period to which it refers. The problem is also basic to Blenkinsopp's treatment of Gibeon, which, by its suggestive link between the house of Saul and Gibeon, complicates any attempt to distin-guish Gibeon from Israel in traditional 'ethnic' terms ordinarily construed. If it is the case that biblical ethnicity—at least in the case of Gibeon and

39. Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, 'Israelite Ethnicity in Iron I: Archaeology Preserves What Is Remembered and What Is Forgotten in Israel's History', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122 (2003), pp. 401-425 (412).

40. Bloch-Smith, 'Israelite Ethnicity in Iron I', pp. 410-11.

41. Bloch-Smith, 'Israelite Ethnicity in Iron I', p. 421.

42. Bloch-Smith, 'Israelite Ethnicity in Iron I', p. 425.

43. Bloch-Smith, 'Israelite Ethnicity in Iron I', p. 421.

Canaan—emerges more from political and religious conflict than from a prior sense of separate identities as people, then the curses against these groups reinforce or even help create ideas of group difference not clearly visible from archaeological data. Ethnic curses, in other words, become a means to distinguish one group from another, to define and maintain the boundaries between Israel and Canaanites or Gibeonites. As the biblical narratives and archaeological work about both groups attests, these boundaries were in fact difficult to maintain, because they had so much in common. This difficulty, I suggest, is attested by the emphatic curses on Gibeon and Canaan themselves.

Ethnic curses, then, produce and reproduce troubled boundaries between Israel and others. The relative strength and weakness of Israel and others cannot be known with certainty, but the inherent ambiguity of curses allows them to adopt to reversals of power relations. If the notion of group difference emerges less out of separate group history and practice than from disputes and rivalries within groups, it follows at least that such boundaries are not inevitable; the transformation of curses as a resort of the weak into a justification for subordination of these groups at moments of strength is not, therefore, justifiable.

In 'What is a People?', Giorgio Agamben suggests that 'the concept of people always already contains within itself the fundamental biopolitical fracture', a split between 'naked life (*people*) and political existence (*People*)'.[44] In terms of Bloch-Smith's suggestion, this split may refer to the development of *ethnic* difference out of *religious* difference. The tendency to *naturalize* differences between selves and others, which Agamben associates with Hellenistic influences on Western culture, may also exist in ancient Israel, whose collective memory increasingly reifies Canaanites and Gibeonites. While Agamben does not deal with biblical curses in particular, his observations about 'people' become particularly valuable in a context where the Bible becomes an authoritative text for powerful groups who engage in Hellenistic interpretation. The fluidity of group boundaries and power dynamics tends to harden under such conditions, leading to notions of ethnicity quite remote from the world of Genesis or Joshua.

For many different uses and contexts, curses represent a set of basic themes on which tradition or mnemohistory can perform variations. Early conditions in which strong rivals were defined and cursed by the weaker Israelites influenced later biblical expressions and attitudes toward Canaanites and Gibeonites. In the end, it is impossible to sift the layers of 'memory' and 'history' in either Genesis 9 or Joshua 9. But what can be said with

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44. Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 32.

confidence is that group *difference* becomes a problem that ethnic curses seem designed, retroactively, to solve.

As several studies of ancient Near Eastern curses show, some curses were used to reinforce the power of the sovereign in protecting an inscription or sealing a treaty, but in other cases there were simple maledictions.[45] Curses seem to be a perennial and protean phenomenon; they can be spontaneous or ritualized, useful for the weak and the powerful. What is compelling about biblical curses is how their protean nature follows the contours of history and post-biblical tradition.

Galatians 3

The problems of biblical curse and ethnicity converge in Paul's designation in Galatians of those who are under the law as a curse. Here Paul appropriates the biblical tradition of cursing another group by making curses themselves the sign of division between groups. Instead of cursing Jewish upholders of the law, Paul's text, citing Deut. 27.26, defines the law itself as a curse, thereby distinguishing two groups primarily on the basis of doctrine rather than ethnicity:

> Therefore, the men of faith are blessed together with Abraham the believer. By contrast, those who are men of works of [the] Law are under a curse. For it is writen, 'Cursed is everyone who does not stay with everything that is written in the book of the Law, to do it'. It is, then, obvious that nobody is justified before God by Law, because 'The righteous shall live by faith'. Also, the Law is not by faith, but 'he who does them shall live by them'. Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, 'cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree' (Gal. 3.9-13[46]).

Norman H. Young argues that Paul elaborates here on the biblical curse on those who fail to observe all of the law. In effect, Paul inverts the curse against group members who transgress into a curse against an entire group. For John Gager, the curse applies to Gentiles whose devotion to Christ Jesus leads them to observe Jewish law, not to Jews themselves.[47] The question of what implications the curse has for Jews remains open, but despite all attempts to temper it, the text plainly pronounces a curse on 'others' based on religion, and this curse takes the form of an ethnic curse, since in Galatians 3, religious difference takes the form of ethnic identity markers, even

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45. See Hillers, *Treaty-Curses*, p. 24; Jerrold S. Cooper, *The Curse of Agade* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), pp. 61-63; and Cathcart, 'The Curses in Old Aramaic Inscriptions'.

46. Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), p. 137.

47. Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 89.

in scholarly arguments to the contrary, such as the following: 'Paul agrees with the Judaizers that those who belong to the Sinai covenant are obliged to fulfill all its demands… Since those of faith are outside Sinai's jurisdictions, Paul's failure to circumcise his Gentile converts does not place them under the curse of the law'.[48]

Paul's text cannot fairly be judged an ethnic curse if 'ethnic' refers to one's group identity solely by birth. In context, it represents the voice of one subgroup against another, and it makes detailed use of Jewish texts to do so. Like the curses on Gibeon or Canaan, the curse of Galatians 3 may reflect the attempt to establish boundaries between groups that are hard to distinguish. But like ethnicity in ancient Israel, the notion of group identity may have more to do with religious orthodoxy than it does today. According to Denise Buell, early Christians made frequent use of ethnic distinctions in their self-identification, both 'because religious practices were already associated with ethnicity in the early Roman empire', and also 'because race was understood to be mutable, "becoming Christian" could be depicted in ethnic terms'.[49]

We know Paul is capable of issuing curses freely against his doctrinal adversaries (Gal. 1.8-9). And the text does clearly delineate two different groups, one of whom Paul characterized at times as Jews. Subsequent readings of the text also drew upon its potency for distinguishing among groups. Luther's commentary claims that 'the papacy is cursed' and '[T]hese [spiritual and temporal] blessings the justiciaries and law-workers of all ages, as the Jews, Papists, Sectaries, and such like, do confound and mingle together'.[50]

With Luther's reception of Paul's text, biblical interpretation transfers a curse *within* Judaism to a curse *on* Judaism, or to a widely known version of it. At least two reversals occur in the text, and they follow two passages from Deuteronomy on cursing and the law (27.15-26) and the curse on anyone hung on a tree (21.23). The first reversal shifts from a covenant curse admonishing the fulfillment of the law to a curse on those who regard the law as primary. The second reversal shifts from those who are cursed for hanging on a tree to the notion of the crucified Jesus as a curse. With Paul's text we have traveled far from the ancient Israelite curses as covenant/treaty elements or invective against enemies to curses as a byproduct of theological identity and sacrificial soteriology. With reversals that more closely approximate Nietzsche's *ressentiment* than anything in the Hebrew

    48. Norman H. Young, 'Who's Cursed—And Why', *JBL* 117 (1998), pp. 79-92 (92).
    49. Denise Buell, *Why This New Race* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 473.
    50. Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (London: James Clarke and Co, 1961), pp. 242-43.

Bible, the logic of ethnic cursing is now directed against the people of Israel themselves. It would appear that Paul makes makes an 'ethnic' curse out of a doctrinal dispute, but as the discussion of ethnicity in ancient Israel suggests, such may also have been the case for Canaanites and Gibeonites.

Current notions of ethnicity may, in the end, have little to offer our understanding of particular biblical texts and traditions. If group difference can be produced and mobilized out of religious controversy, Christianity may be as much or as little an ethnic designation as the distinction between Israelites and Canaanites, despite Paul's universalistic rhetoric. Such a view would support Jon Levenson's suggestion that Paul's ideology is less universalistic than that of the 'Judaizers' he opposes.[51]

Conclusion

Because they take so many forms and their meaning depends so much on context, the study of biblical curses frustrates attempts to be precise. Yet that does not make them indeterminate—indeed, the texts' interpretations have fallen within clear, sometimes deadly, parameters. This chapter has argued that ethnic curses against Canaan and Gibeon likely alternated between phases when they represented a resort of the weak to times when they reflected the subordination of others by a relatively strong Israel. In both of these phases and throughout the process of 'canonization', these ethnic curses reinforced group identity by defining and maintaining boundaries between groups. In light of the archaeological evidence, the biblical curses suggest the impulse to differentiate groups that were uncomfortably similar to each other. Sometimes weaker, sometimes stronger, the people of Israel resisted identification with their neighbors through curses. In doing so, these ethnic curses may have helped create and develop ancient notions of ethnicity in which differences were produced from religious disputes within groups.

As it turns out, the Gibeonites and Canaanites (as thus named) do not bedevil the Israelites after the formation of the monarchy nearly as much as the Assyrians, Babylonians, and others. Nor does their servitude figure prominently beyond the texts that announce it (with the exception of Josh. 16.10, 17.12, and Judg. 1.29-30 in the case of the Canaanites). Canaan and Gibeon are, however, important *places* in biblical history, and the people who live there must be identified *vis-à-vis* Israelite identity. The ethnic curses against the Canaanites and Gibeonites represent the first and defining appearance of these peoples in the Primary History. To curse was to name, and to name was to stake claims of identity and difference, especially for the

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51. Jon Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 215-18.

purpose of deciding questions about marriage and procreation. And while these curses put Gibeonites and Canaanites on the moral and religious map of ancient Israel, they displayed a remarkable capacity to change meaning from times when Israel had the power to subordinate them to times of weakness when they could only wish to do so.

On the basis of biblical texts alone, we can say little about the historical substrate of these ethnic curses. The archaeological and biblical evidence that the Gibeonites and Canaanites were culturally similar to Israel suggests that the curses helped create rather than simply reflect ethnic difference, particularly differences of religious practice. By the time the primary history (from Genesis to 2 Kings) took shape, these ethnic rivalries had apparently subsided, leaving a residue of conflict that now had more to do with Israelite identity than strife with these groups. The memory of ethnic rivalry could provide solace in defeat or vindication in the defeat of others, but in either case it reinforced the separation of 'us' from 'them'. After the Babylonian destruction and exile, ethnic curses would once again reflect the voice of the weak against the strong, finding echoes in prophetic oracles against the nations and, more indirectly, in attitudes toward powerful empires in the diaspora novels of Esther and Daniel. Later, when biblical tradition became normative for the Roman Empire and the West, this exaltation of the weak would lead Nietzsche to formulate the ethic of *ressentiment* in which the strong exert a kind of tyranny by wearing the mantle of the weak.

If contemporary ideas of morality exalt the pride of weak or defeated people, then they may have roots in such biblical texts as the ethnic curses against Canaan and Gibeon. Despite the clear difference between modern morality and ancient curses, the two share a common biblical tradition that includes the demarcation of ethnic groups through conflict and curse, a tradition that continues in the New Testament. What is more, these curses display a remarkable flexibility of meaning (within parameters—not in a radically relative sense) even in ancient Israel, and by accommodating reversals of power relations, these curses represent one model for the operations of biblical tradition itself. If biblical tradition is rich and subtle enough to contain the 'hidden transcripts' embedded in ethnic curses, then contemporary understandings of ethnicity and power may have more in common with the ancients than meets the eye. Unlike Freud, who argues that tradition involves the repression and return of particular events and contents, and unlike others who might argue that all interpretations of a text are equally valid and possible, this model of tradition suggests that the ethnic curses of Genesis 9 and Joshua 9, encoded in the kind of retrospective mnemohistory described by Assmann, provide a sufficiently coherent account of the past to support identity claims in times of strength and weakness alike.

Ethnic curses in the Bible have been understood to underscore boundaries between distinct groups, but the curses on Ham/Canaan and Gibeon appear rather to establish such boundaries between groups that may otherwise be hard to distinguish from each other. In this way, the category of ethnicity is something more like the category of 'religious affiliation' than 'race', which would help explain Buell's analysis of 'Christian' as an ethnic term. Drawing heavily from discourses of gender and inscribed symbolically on the bodies of others, ethnic curses may thus function mainly to create and remember identities and assert power (real or imagined). It may be impossible to unravel the social and historical uses of ethnic curses in the Bible, but the biblical text combines discourses of ethnicity, power, and gender in ways that scholars have only begun to analyze.

Chapter 3

CURSING THE DAY, CURSING THE SELF:
JOB 3 AND JEREMIAH 20

By cursing the days of their birth, Job and Jeremiah challenge core biblical values of procreation and divine creation. It has been argued convincingly that Job 3 follows a step-by-step curse on the creation story of Genesis 1.[1] Neither text is simple: each strains against literary conventions by merging genres and issuing surprises. This chapter attempts to show how literary innovation in Job 3 and Jer. 20.14-18 turn biblical curses into reflexive models of tradition that combine power with poetic expression (*poiesis*). In so doing, these texts displace ancient lament and curse traditions onto reflexive, elaborate literary artifacts. Because of its relative length and complexity, the primary focus of this discussion is Job 3 rather than Jer. 20.14-18.

Previous Studies of Job 3

Few biblical texts have been more compelling to modern scholars than Job 3. Most agree that the text artfully expresses the anguish of one who finds no justification for his suffering. Behind this agreement, however, there has been little consensus on how Job 3 fits into the literary context of biblical and ancient Near Eastern literature. Several studies have analyzed parallels between biblical laments and other ancient Near Eastern literature. Common literary elements, such as hymns of praise, appeals for deliverance, curses, and protestations of innocence, suggest the presence of widely shared literary (and perhaps cultural) conventions in ancient lament texts. What is less clear is how broadly defined the genre, especially across languages and cultures, can be.[2] If clearer lines of influence from Mesopotamia to Israel could be established, it would be possible to determine what was distinctive about the Israelite variations on familiar ancient themes. There

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1. Fishbane, 'Jeremiah iv 23-26 and Job iii 3-13: A Recovered Use of the Creation Pattern'.

2. Paul W. Ferris, *The Genre of Communal Lament in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (SBL Dissertation Series, 127; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), p. 174.

is, moreover, disagreement on whether Job 3 is best described as a lament, since it lacks many elements common to lament texts.[3]

   The question of the genre classification of Job 3 remains a problem and, I would suggest, a potential distraction. Some classify it as lament and deny it is a curse, despite the text's clear statement in 3.1 that Job cursed (קלל) his day. Classifying the genre of Job 3 presents two problems: first, the text is unusual and without any close parallel except Jer. 20.14-18. All attempts to sort out the question of genre for Job 3 thus require significant inference. For example, in classifying Job 3 as a lament, John E. Hartley lists Claus Westermann's five characteristics of lament ('address, personal lament, affirmation of trust, petition, and vow of praise') and notes that 'Job develops two of these elements, alters one, and omits two'.[4] What is more, there simply isn't a large enough body of comparable texts to allow the classification of Job 3 to reach a level of great precision. Second, the attempt to classify by genre sometimes takes on a rigidly logical distinction between genres, such that one rules out another. Fine distinctions sometimes take on large significance, even without direct support from the texts. Again as just one example, Hartley describes Job 3.3-13 as an 'incantation, not a curse, for a curse presupposes some type of divine order'.[5] Similarly, David J.A. Clines classifies the text as a hybrid of curse, lament, and monologue. Citing N.P. Bratsiotis, Clines identifies Job 3 as a possible 'lament monologue'; with its self-imprecations and doubts about whether to go on living, Job 3 may have parallels in Gen. 25.22, Ps. 42.3-6, 11-12; 1 Macc. 2.7-13, Jer. 15.10, and Mic. 7.1-6. Like many other studies, Clines's regards the text as a highly original literary work that combines genres and expresses an individual's personal feelings.[6] What makes such a claim possible, and how can it be evaluated? More to the point, how can the claim be evaluated in light of the overlooked tradition of curses on the day of birth in ancient Near Eastern literature?

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   3.   Ferris, *The Genre of Communal Lament*, pp. 91-93; S. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (2 vols.; trans. D.R. Ap-Thomas; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).
   4.   John E. Hartley, 'From Lament to Oath: A Study of Progression in the Speeches of Job', in W.A.M. Beuken, *The Book of Job* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1994), pp. 79-100 (89). Ferris lists the following elements common to communal laments: invocation; hymn of praise; expression of confidence/trust; lament proper; appeal and motive: deliverance; appeal and motive: cursing; protestation of innocence; expression of confidence/hope; and vow of praise (*The Genre of Communal Lament*, p. 93). Only three or four of these nine elements clearly appear in Job 3.
   5.   Hartley, 'From Lament to Oath', p. 81 n. 15. He continues: 'It is not a malediction because Job wants a past day to be blotted out, not to have it become a day of disrepute'.
   6.   Clines, *Job 1–20* (Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word Books, 1989), pp. 76-77, 100-105.

Theological and cultural considerations may color the genre debate. A lament is generally considered to be an expression of powerful feelings, while a curse is a powerful action designed to bring about a state of affairs. Those inclined to read the text as the expression of personal feeling may read it mainly as a lament. But why then is the text designated as a curse (3.2)? To acknowledge the text as a curse may undermine the image of a pious man unwilling to curse God (2.9). Another possibility is to regard Job 3 as a failed curse, since it doesn't actually annihilate Job. Since Job 3 doesn't match most of the attributes of laments, and since it is introduced as a curse (and uses three different terms for cursing—ארר, קלל, and קבב and even עבד in vv. 1, 8, and 3, respectively), I choose to focus on the element of the curse, but I resist making applying the term as a genre. Instead of assigning Job 3 to any one genre, I apply Carol Newsom's suggestion that the whole book mixes genres to this pericope.

Since several words for curse are used in Job 3, no precise or technical definition of 'curse' is possible. For present purposes, 'curse' in Job 3 will refer to speech acts that denounce and invoke supernatural harm. I address this question here by comparing cursing the day in Job 3 to ancient Sumerian literature. Through this analysis, together with a look at Job 3 as a dynamic literary composition (and with a comparison to Jer. 20.14-18), I characterize Job's curse as one that fails in supernatural terms but succeeds in rhetorical and literary terms. In other words, when Job curses the day of his birth, he fails to blot out its existence but succeeds in expressing a crisis of theodicy that juxtaposes self with world, and power with powerlessness.

How does the possible discovery that cursing the day is conventional affect prevailing views of Job 3? It has become a commonplace to regard Job 3 as unique or nearly unique for its expressive power and literary complexity. Clines ranks the text with such classics as Shakespeare but implies that cursing the day is anomalous in ancient literature: '[I]t is questionable whether we should recognize it as a curse proper…because it is directed against something that cannot be cursed, the past'.[7] At the same time, Clines, like others, associates Job 3 with a highly personal expression of feeling, a 'quintessential instance of the vitality of the human spirit when freed from the bounds of custom, decorum and prosaic reality'.

What is the relationship between cursing the day in the pre-biblical lament texts and in Job 3? By cursing the day of his birth, Job challenges core biblical values of procreation and divine creation. It has even been argued that Job 3 follows a step-by-step curse on the creation account of Genesis 1. Other commentators have observed how Job 3 strains against literary conventions

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7. Clines, *Job 1–20*, p. 77. He aptly relates Job 3 to Shakespeare's *King John* ('Nay, rather turn this day out of the week,/This day, of shame, oppression, perjury', 3.1.87-88) and *Macbeth*.

by merging genres and issuing surprises. This chapter argues that literary innovation in Job 3 turns the curse of the day into a reflexive model of tradition that includes but does not reduce to the powerful speech of lament and cursing. The intuition of Clines and others that Job 3 is unique and highly personal will remain, but the discovery of parallels with ancient texts of cursing the day situates the uniqueness of the text not so much in its originality (in the modern sense of poetic creativity) as in its shaping of traditional materials. This study will therefore urge caution in the theological search to categorize Job as new.[8] Cursing his day thus does not make Job into a person whose imagination produces 'sheer fantasy' and a unique kind of 'hypothetical thinking' as Hartley avers; rather it situates him in a long lament and curse tradition in which he operates in new ways.[9]

For modern readers who see Job as a timeless expression of subjective experience, any study of the text's ancient sources may seem quaint or beside the point. Readings of Job as a kind of existentialist hero, for example, tend anachronistically to project modern notions of the self onto the past. The reading I propose here does not immediately discount the book's interest in subjectivity, but I suggest that the innovation of Job 3 depends on its use of tradition, specifically in its use and transformation of the motif of cursing the day in ancient Mesopotamian laments into a dynamic, formally complex curse against the self.

By its allusion to ancient traditions of cursing the day and its use of parallelism, Job 3 projects a dynamic tension between self and world. Though it appears to be directed at himself, the curse of Job 3 immediately entails consequences for the world, even all of creation, around him. The text's dynamics capture this tension, shifting between self and world in striking ways (e.g., in v. 8, and in the references of many of the jussives in vv. 1-9). As Michael Fishbane and others have noted, these self-centered speech acts carry cosmological baggage. No curse is an island, and Job's self-curse would disturb, even reverse, the order of the cosmos.

In its *canonical* context, such literary features as parallelism, imagery, structural patterning, and the combination of genres in Job 3 constitute the

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8. See, for example, Willem A.M. Beuken's claim that 'The imprecation of Job is the cradle of a new discourse about human suffering in relation to God and world', in 'Job's Imprecation as the Cradle of a New Religious Discourse', in Beuken (ed.), *The Book of Job* (Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium, 114; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1994), pp. 41-78 (78). The study to which this sentence forms the conclusion is a very insightful analysis of the relationship between Job 3 and later chapters of Job.

9. Hartley, 'From Lament to Oath', p. 91. Job thus strikes a balance between tradition and innovation in the text, as Valerie Forstman Pettys argues in 'Let There Be Darkness: Continuity and Discontinuity in the "Curse" of Job 3', *JSOT* 98 (2002), pp. 89-104.

powerful speech of poetic composition. In this sense, the power of such a curse is displaced from the domain of metaphysics, where Job would actually cease to exist, to the domain of self-expression (as self-cursing). In other words, while the curse on his day fails, Job's poetic work of self-expression succeeds. Such a shift is striking, but in light of biblical and non-biblical parallels, not unique; while they may ostensibly aim to induce supernatural results, many curses seem designed rather to express frustration or anger (usually using קלל, see, e.g., 2 Samuel 16 and Psalm 109).[10] My analysis of the text benefits from Carol Newsom's recent study of literary complexities and their effects in Job, and my observations on the transmission of the motif of cursing the day are influenced by David Carr's book on scribal and educational traditions, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*.

Cursing the Day: Ancient Motif

The Sumerian texts Laments for Damu and the Lament for the city of Ur contain the element of cursing the day that also appears in Job 3. Together with other patterns of resemblance between biblical and non-biblical laments, this element suggests the possibility of widely shared literary and perhaps cultural conventions for curses and laments over death and defeat. If cursing the day was in fact a convention, it has escaped almost all previous scholarship on Job 3. My purpose here is not to establish an airtight line of transmission from ancient Sumer to ancient Israel but to sketch such a line and to discuss the implications for Job 3 and biblical cursing in general.

A new and helpful way of seeing Job appears in Carol Newsom's recent study of Job, which places genre at the center of her reading of the book. Drawing from Mikhail Bakhtin's study of the modern novel as a polyphonic text in which multiple genres are combines, Newsom argues that Job's radical shifts in genre raise certain expectations in the reader, only to replace them with different ones. According to Newsom, the book is deliberately arranged as a combination of genres with the possible purpose of drawing together competing perspectives on the questions of suffering, wisdom, and piety it addresses.[11] Drawing particular attention to his change of perspective in ch. 42, Newsom boldly suggests that the combination of genres in Job constitutes a 'kind of *Bildungsroman* for the reader's moral imagination'.[12]

While Newsom addresses genre diversity across Job as a whole, I wish to apply Newsom's insight *within* the monologue of Chapter 3. Monologue,

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10. See also Keim, *When Sanctions Fail*.

11. Carol Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 16-17.

12. Newsom, *The Book of Job*, p. 20.

lament, curse, and cosmological text at once, Job 3 can be seen as a min-iature version of the kind of genre diversity found in the book as a whole. Among the effects of this polyphonic mixture of genres, I suggest, is a sense of Job as a kind of scribal poet whose subjectivity is constituted in part by the combination of textual traditions. The application of Bakhtin's notion of polyphony to Job 3 addresses the problem of genre by recognizing the text's complexity. By cursing the day of his birth in the tradition of ancient Sum-erian laments, Job turns tradition against himself and draws the reader into a process of interpretation and reflection.

The element of 'cursing the day' appears in several texts. A Sumerian lament over the death of the god Damu (Tammuz) personifies the day on which he was born: 'The day destroyed him'. His mother cries, 'Woe to that day, that day! Woe to that night! The day that dawned for my provider, that dawned for the lad, my Damu! A day to be wiped out, that I would I could forget, You night […] that should [never] have let it go forth'.[13] This text combines day and night, light and dark with the fact of birth in a way that anticipates the more elaborate imagery of Job 3. The mother, characteriz-ing the day and night as beings, wishes she could forget them, that they had never taken place. As Jacobsen and Nielsen observe, this text represents the highly emotional expression of a suffering or grieving individual, hence an ancient parallel to the subjective focus of Job 3.

A second parallel comes from the Sumerian Lament over the Destruc-tion of Ur, from around 2000 BCE. After references to the 'day of storm' to account for death and mourning, this text, like the lament for Damu, wishes for the day's undoing: 'May that day of storm be destroyed, all of it. May, as with the great city gates at night, the doors be barred against it! May that day of storm not be put into the rosters, may its accounts be taken down from the peg in Enlil's Temple'.[14] While it lacks the focus on individual grief seen in the Damu lament, the parallel to Job 3 is very close, with the wish for the day's undoing, including a calendrical reference ('let it not come into the number of the months', v. 6). The wish to bar the city gates against the day of its own destruction, and to remove it from the temple record, poignantly pits the city's powers against its own destruction.

Citing parallels in Mandaic, Sumerian, and Akkadian texts, Scott B. Noegel argues that the day cursed by Job is a personified being and that the phrase כמרירי יום, usually translated more or less as 'blackness of the

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13. S. Langdon, *Babylonian Penitential Psalms* (Oxford Edition of Cuneiform Texts, 6; Paris: P. Geuthner, 1927), p. 15 (K 5208 rev. 3'-10'), cited in Thorkild Jacobsen and Kirsten Nielsen, 'Cursing the Day', *SJOT* 6 (1992), pp. 187-204 (188).

14. S.N. Kramer, *Lamentation over the Destructino of Ur* (Assyriological Studies, 12; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), pp. 38-40, cited in Jacobsen and Nielsen, 'Cursing the Day', p. 191.

day' (NRSV), should in fact be rendered as 'day-demons'.[15] If Noegel is correct, these 'demonized units of time' further demonstrate how Job 3 echoes and reshapes ancient traditions, richly embellishing the curse of the day by reference to the night, month, and year, as well as rich imagery of light and dark. Two further examples of cursing the day appear in the Atrahasis and Gilgamesh epics, in relation to divine regret over the human suffering caused by the Flood. Here, as in the other two cases, the curse on the day expresses sorrow over the human suffering and destruction that takes place on the given day. According to Jacobsen and Nielsen, these personified days are like servants on which the god might call, a motif they find also in Job 3, especially v. 6.[16] In all of these curses against the day, even these uttered in the name of gods, the curse fails to take effect but carries enormous expressive power nonetheless.

Jacobsen and Nielsen find a third important parallel between the rousing of Leviathan and an Akkadian text in which a child's cries are loud enough to rouse the sea god Ea (200). On the strength of this parallel, the standard interpretation of v. 8b referring to those 'skilled to rouse up Leviathan' simply refers to those who, like Job, curse so vociferously that they are 'prepared to rouse Leviathan'.[17] Paradoxically, this parallel has a demythologizing function: instead of positing, through textual amendment and inference, a group of sorcerers who can conjure Leviathan, the text simply extends the topos of those who curse the day with a hyperbole on their loudness.[18] Such a reading underscores the anguish of Job's situation without losing its cosmological dimension (and it may also have theological resonance with the later reference to divine sovereignty with respect to Leviathan in 41.1).

The motif of day and night often appears without the curse on the day, as in a personal lament in the Akkadian text, 'I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom': 'The day is sighing, the night is weeping; The month is silence, mourning is the year… I have arrived, I have passed beyond life's span. I look about me: evil upon evil! My affliction increases, right I cannot

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15. Scott B. Noegel, 'Job iii 5 in the Light of Mesopotamian Demons of Time', *VT* 57 (2007), pp. 556-62 (561-62).

16. Jacobsen and Nielsen, 'Cursing the Day', p. 195 n. 11.

17. Jacobsen and Nielsen, 'Cursing the Day', pp. 199-200 n. 17.

18. A complementary reading already appears in Edouard Dhorme's commentary. He argues that 'day cursers' simply refers back to the first and third verses; namely, people like Job who curse their day, rather than magicians (Dhorme, *A Commentary on the Book of Job* [trans. Harold Knight; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984], pp. 29-30 n. 8). Since he views Leviathan as a primordial chaos monster imprisoned in Sheol, 'arousing Leviathan' would mean 'the return to chaos and the end of the world. Such is exactly what those who curse the day desire… They would like to annihilate the existing order and to plunge into catastrophe' (*Job*, p. 31 n. 8).

find'.[19] A parallel that shares Job's motif of the dark day appears in a Sumerian text nicknamed 'The First Job': 'On the day shares were allotted to all my allotted share was suffering… My god, the day shines bright over the land, for me the day is black'.[20] While neither of these examples explicitly curses the day of birth, the second clearly laments the suffering speaker's day, and both of these texts draw upon the motifs of day in connection to lament.

From such evidence it is difficult to establish a sense of conventional patterns and with it, what might represent significant departures from such patterns. Put in this way, the question of genre becomes a subset of the larger question of transmission: if the parallels between the Sumerian texts and Job 3 are not simply coincidence, how were they handed down? Jacobsen and Nielsen attempt no explanation, and no attempt can go beyond mere speculation, but one promising approach is Carr's study of transmission, which suggests that the entire Hebrew Bible (not just wisdom sources), from early sources to final form, was shaped by educational and scribal institutions that shared much in common with Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and other ancient traditions. According to Carr, memorization and written reference copies created a dynamic balance of writing and oral transmission, allowing for significant innovation from place to place, time to time, and language to language. The master scribe-teachers of ancient Israel, like their counterparts in other cultures, would have learned a whole body of works by heart, along with a kind of secondary language of motifs, themes, and other materials. Thus, when they produced new written versions of traditional texts, or even new texts, these authors could take advantage of a memorized library of works and motifs. Transmission of texts, according to Carr, was rarely a matter of copying or editing written texts; it was a much more fluid balance of written and oral methods. An important result of Carr's model is that it can account for distant and close parallels alike; one need not find verbatim connections in order to establish a chain of transmission. In the case of Job 3, the ancient tradition of cursing the day could thus have been handed down across the temporal and linguistic divide between ancient Sumer and ancient Israel by means of these scribal-educational institutions that Israel borrowed from Mesopotamia.

Job 3 in Biblical Context

Job 3.1-2 links Job's lament to the narrative context of Job 1–2. Without these verses, there would be no way to know what motivates it. We would

19. *ANET*, p. 434.
20. S.N. Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer* (New York: Anchor, 1959), pp. 114-18, cited in Marvin H. Pope, *Job* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), p. lix.

simply hear an eloquent expression of the undoing the speaker's birth in response to some kind of 'trouble' (עמל, v. 10) and unrest (vv. 13, 17, and 26). The introductory verses alert us that Job is speaking after what took place in chaps. 1–2, and that he is cursing his day (קלל) in response to (ויען) some previous statement or event. Job's speech is followed, in ch. 4, by a speech of Eliphaz introduced in the same manner (ויען ויאמר), and as Beulen points out, the speech of Eliphaz parallels Job's closely, as if to answer him point by point.

In Job 3 there is an obvious shift by v. 14 from birth and day/night imagery to a social scale that includes kings, princes, and prisoners alike. As startling as that is, a similar shift appears in Amos 8.9-14:

> On that day, says the Lord God, I will make the sun go down at noon, and darken the earth in broad daylight… I will make it like the mourning for an only son, and the end of it like a bitter day (vv. 9-10)… They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east… In that day the beautiful young women and the young men shall faint for thirst (vv. 12-13).

Job belongs to the category of wisdom literature, Jeremiah to books of the prophets. Because of these genre differences, Job's curse on the day of his birth resonates differently from Jeremiah's. As a wisdom text, Job is expected to raise questions of the meaning and value of life, more specifically of the place of human wisdom in the scheme of divine power. The short narrative frame of Job provides context for the extensive discussions of theodicy contained in 3.3–42.6, but unlike Jeremiah, Job does not appear in other biblical texts, and he is not an Israelite. In literary terms, characterization and biography take a distant back seat to sapiential discourse in Job. The poignancy of his curse in ch. 3 come not from the portrait of an individual tied closely to the history and people of Israel but from the predicament of this everyman.

With Jeremiah the case is quite different. A prophet of Judah before, during, and after the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah can be identified closely with the experience of the people of Israel. By most accounts, the book of Jeremiah bears the strong imprint of the Deuteronomic school, which is responsible for the books from Deuteronomy through 2 Kings (not counting Ruth). In other words, Jeremiah is the prophet most closely associated with the dominant set of memories, traditions, and narratives about the end of the Davidic kingdom. As a prophet whose warnings of destruction frequently lead to his own suffering and suicidal musings, Jeremiah embodies the suffering and theodicy of Israel.

Each of the texts cursing the day is complex, mixing genres and alternating frames of reference. Job's curse initiates over thirty-nine chapters of verse discussion of theodicy. The abrupt shift from the folktale-like prologue to the body of the text has been described as a discordant combination of Job the patient with Job the impatient, the anguished figure

we first hear from in Job 3. The poem contains three distinct sections: the first, vv. 3-10, centered mostly on cosmological resonances of light and dark, the second, vv. 11-19, dealing more directly with birth imagery, and the third, vv. 20-26, a general lament containing broader socio-political imagery. The short curse on the day in Jer. 20.14-18, by contrast, comes after Jeremiah's curse on the priest Pashhur, a lament, and a brief expression of praise (v. 13). If cursing the day can be seen as a tradition, then we can say that Job 3 transforms the tradition to the question of theodicy, while Jer. 20.14-18 personalizes the curse of the day in a more concentrated biographical setting to address the suffering of the prophet. I turn now to these two passages, though my primary focus is Job 3.

Poetic Features of Job 3: Parallelism and Structure

The third chapter of Job, called Job's Complaint or Protest, begins a long series of debates in poetic form on the suffering of a just man. It stands apart as a unit in the book, preceded by the prose prologue and followed by a response from Job's friend Eliphaz. If the book of Job combines two stories, that of Job the patient and that of Job the impatient, then this speech begins the story of Job the impatient, a long series of disputations and complaints that approach blasphemy, if they do not commit it. In Job 3, harsh imagery of death and life, light and dark, dramatizes the emotional side of Job's philosophical problem. Its poetic form, best described as parallelism, supports and sustains the power of this speech, especially through semantic antonyms. This reading analyzes the poetic parallelism of Job 3 and relate that to a reading of the poem as a whole. Throughout I combine traditional biblical studies (e.g., philological and parallelistic analysis) with literary studies (e.g., rhetoric and imagery).

Although some scholars have argued for rearrangements and emendations in the text, I have chosen to leave it intact. Dhorme's placement of v. 16 after v. 12 is especially persuasive, but I find the somewhat disarming placement of v. 16 consistent with this section (see my discussion of this section). Literary approaches involve concepts such as character, genre (globally, e.g., poetry and narrative, and specifically, e.g., curse, psalmic praise, sapiential writing), tone, imagery, rhetorical tropes, and so on. Parallelism is the primary formal principle of Hebrew poetry. For my purposes, parallelism may be defined as some salient relationship (e.g., similarity, identity, opposition, membership in some set) of linguistic elements within a poem. This relationship may be repetitive, semantic, grammatical, or phonetic. The word 'salient' is key to this definition, and its use depends on the context of the poem: in some poems a given relationship will stand out, and in others it won't. In phonetic parallelism, for example, similarity of one consonant or vowel between two words is

usually not salient, but it may be, especially if the two words are parallel in some other way.

In a similar vein, Adele Berlin recognizes that parallelism must be 'perceptible' in order to 'serve the poetic function' and identifies four principles of perceptibility to serve as guidelines for identification of parallelism: proximity, similarity of surface structure, number of linguistic equivalences, and expectation of parallelism.[21] In Hebrew poetry, parallelism characteristically appears between or within line segments (also called cola), and this is where analysis of parallelism is usually concentrated. (I will refer to the basic unit of analysis, which can either be a bicolon or tricolon, as a line. Since the verses overlap with the lines here, I will use that term also.) This is the type of parallelism James Kugel refers to in his well known formulation, 'A is so, and what's more, B'.[22]

Parallelism may also occur between adjacent or even distant lines, but such cases can easily blur the distinction between poetic craft and coincidence. For example, if two parallel elements are separated by twenty lines, this may be a coincidence; this alone is not a salient relationship. For this reason, analysis of distant parallelism is best employed along with near and internal parallelism. Job 3 is typical of most biblical poetry in that the significant distant parallelism reflects the significant near and internal parallelism. This close fit between smaller and larger parallel structures is one of the defining characteristics of biblical poetry.

The most prominent parallel relationships in this poem are semantic, especially antonymic. For example, v. 3 opposes day (יום) and night (לילה); darkness (חשך) and shine (תופע) coincide in v. 4; two or three words for darkness (חשך, צלמות, and possibly כמרירי) oppose day in v. 5, and so on. Grammatical parallelism is less regular, although there is a great deal of chiastic structure within the verses (see grammatical analysis below). Counting only subjects, verbs, and objects, nine of the twenty-six lines exhibit chiastic grammatical structures (vv. 3, 4, 7, 8, 12, 17, 18, 23 and 24). Only three contain basic parallel structures (5, 9, and 10), and the remaining lines lack either type of parallelism.

Next to semantic parallelism, phonetic parallelism is an important feature of Job 3. Consonant patterns abound in the passage, from beginning with the yodh, beth and dalet in v. 3—יאבד יום אולד בו. Repetitions of words such as יום, which occurs five times from vv. 3-8, לילה, which occurs three times from vv. 3-7, and the semantically different but phonetically close אררי and ערר in v. 8, produce significant phonetic parallelism.

21. Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 130-35.

22. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 23.

Vowel repetitions, such as the long 'o' in vv. 1-3 and the seghhol in v. 11, also account for phonetic parallelism. Finally, the famously long string of jussive verbs in vv. 3-9, many of which begin words (and clauses) with yodh and a vowel, produce a clear phonetic pattern in the text.

Some scholars have pointed out that lines lacking internal parallelism often show close affinity with nearby lines. This is borne out in many of the verses that have little semantic and grammatical parallelism. For example, vv. 6-8 consist of a list of curses on the speaker's night of conception, and if analyzed as a unit, they would show considerable regularity. The same is true of vv. 14-15, which are two prepositional phrases modifying the second colon of v. 13: 'Then I would sleep and have rest'. Verses 17-19 also exhibit significant near parallelism.

Parallelism alone, however, does not distinguish poetic language in the Hebrew Bible. If this were the case, then the poetry/prose distinction would almost completely dissolve, as Kugel justifiably points out.[23] But there are other elements that characterize poetry. In the case of Job 3, the speaker in the poem addresses a highly personal concern in a highly stylized way, something that the narrators of biblical prose rarely do. The frequent occurrence of volitive verbs, references to the self, and rhetorical tropes such as paradox, hyperbole, and metaphor are all distinguishing features of Biblical poetry. One of my purposes here will be to argue that parallelism and these other elements interrelate in this poem to constitute its full poetic effect. Specifically, I will show that the dominant form of parallelism (antonymic) reflects an overall rhetorical antinomy in Job 3 between the general problem of human existence and suffering and the speaker's personal condition.

The poem falls into three main parts. Verses 3-9 exploit day/night and light/dark imagery to curse the speaker's own life. Structurally, the lines alternate between units of two line segments (bicola) and three line segments (tricola). Verses 10-22 enlarge on this suicidal meditation in a more concrete way, employing physical images of motherhood and a description of the afterworld as a place inhabited by all classes of men. The final section states the speaker's unhappiness. Both the second and third sections have an even structure of bicola throughout. All three sections exhibit high levels of grammatical and semantic parallelism, and phonetic parallelism is frequent. Other than parallelism, Job 3 exhibits qualities that suggest the existence of strict numbers of words, stresses, or syllables. Jan Fokkelman finds regular numbers of cola, verses, words, and even syllables in Job 3, which he calls a 'gold mine of numerical perfections'.[24] Similar results appear in earlier studies by Freedman and van der Lugt.[25]

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23. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, p. 70.

24. J.P. Fokkelman, *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible at the Interface of Hermeneutics and Structural Analysis*, I (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1998), pp. 152-57.

25. David Noel Freedman, 'Structure of Job 3', *Biblica* 49 (1968), pp. 503-508;

The three sections are bridged by two ambiguous, transitional verses. Verse 9 concludes a section that contrasts dark and night with light and day by referring to the times in between night and day, namely, twilight and dawn. This tricolon provides closure by sealing off the day from both ends: 'May its twilight stars grow dim… May it not see the eyelids of dawn'. The phrase בעפעפי־שחר has two meanings: its primary meaning is 'eyelids of dawn', but the Hebrew root עוף can mean 'dark' and שחר can mean 'black'. This verse is transitional in its completion of the first section and the introduction of the next with an anatomical reference.

Verse 23 provides a more problematic transition. The reference of 'man' (גבר) is ambiguous, although the context implies that it refers to the speaker. It is interesting that the only other use of גבר is in v. 1, where it also has a generic reference: 'a man is conceived'. In both cases a generic statement precedes a more personal discussion; the speaker applies the rule-like formula to his specific case. The first and last sections, then, mirror each other to create a circular structure in the poem: A B A'.

The poem begins with a metaphorical, paradoxical, and hyperbolic pronouncement: 'May the day I was born die'. Uttered in the form of a curse, this utterance has a certain disorienting shock value; what does it mean for a day to die? Even if it could, how can a day in the past die? This wish transcends suicidal sentiments: not only does Job want to die, but he even wishes he could wipe out his birth. It sets the tone for the poem and becomes its rhetorical premise. The phrase 'the day I was born' (יום אולד בו) dominates the whole first section, introducing the main motifs of birth/death, day/night, and light/dark. These antonymic and contrasting images contribute to the overall effect of the poem, giving it a sense of drama and vehemence. The heavy use of night/day, light/dark imagery elaborates the literal concept of a day dying with reference to removal from the calendar and perhaps eclipses. At the same time, this imagery creates an emotional tension: the speaker uses exaggeration and stark imagery to express himself. Thus the whole poem, especially vv. 3-9, is a meditation on the desirability of non-being. This desire is expressed by volitive verbs (primarily jussives) in vv. 3-9 and a series of Why-questions in vv. 11-21.

It is interesting that this section combines uneven line length with a high level of semantic and grammatical parallelism. It begins with a bicolon (v. 3), followed by three tricola (vv. 4-6), then two bicola (vv. 7-8), and ends with a tricolon in v. 9. This pattern is also borne out within the verses. Verse 6, for example, has a halting tricolonic structure because of uneven length (the syllable count is 11/7/9) and the fact that each colon contains a separate curse. Yet v. 6 exhibits strong grammatical and semantic parallelism.

Pieter van der Lugt, 'Stanza-Structure and Word-Repetition in Job 3–14', *JSOT* 40 (1988), pp. 3-38.

It begins with the subject of the sentence, הלילה ההוא ('that night'), which opposes the last word of v. 5, day (יום), and acts as subject for the following three volitive statements. The use of volitives (especially jussives) in the first section mirrors the curse in v. 1, thus adding a grammatical emphasis to the semantic parallelism of this section.

After the transition in v. 9, the poem shifts gears. Questions seem to overtake curses in this structurally more even (bicolonic) but semantically more diverse passage. The counterfactual wishes of the first section are followed by a factual statement of complaint in v. 10: 'For it did not shut the doors of the womb'. There is an interesting combination here of vivid birth and death imagery and a utopian depiction of a vague afterworld. Since Job's predicament isn't caused by social injustice, I don't think much significance attaches to the picture of the afterworld as a great equalizer. Rather, the point seems to be that if prisoners and wicked men are at peace there, then how much more would Job be happy there.

The rhetorical strategy here is as follows: the speaker asks, with rich detail, why he didn't die at birth; for, he continues, if he had he would now be at rest in an unnamed place where all social groups are equal and free of worldly trouble. The combination of these two elements—physical and socio-political—is striking. The poem interweaves these elements as follows: Verses 10-12 introduce the physical imagery, 13-15 discuss the socio-political, 16 returns to the physical, 17-19 return to the socio-political, and 20-21 integrate the section with a statement of the general problem.

The juxtaposition of the physical birth scene with the social groups has the effect of shifting back and forth between a very small, modest scale (knees, breasts, womb) to a very large—and grand—scale (kings, princes, ruins and houses). It also combines concrete, physical, and universal imagery (everyone must be born) with abstract constructs. This shift reflects the tension between the speaker's personal, emotional expression and his concern with the philosophical problem of the suffering of a just man: 'Why does He give light to the sufferer?/ And life to the bitter of soul?'. This is the same tension found in vv. 3 and 23, where the generic term גבר is applied to Job and his predicament.

The last section (vv. 23-26) states Job's feelings in the most personal way yet. Finding no satisfactory answer to his philosophical questions, he returns to his own condition. At the same time, this section functions to instantiate his problem: Job proves the general point made in v. 23 that God closes in the man whose path is hidden. Job is that man, but the term גבר raises him to a level of generality.[26] The two similes in v. 24 contrast Job's misery with common, nourishing food and drink; they return to the small

26. This is contrary to Dhorme's analysis; see *A Commentary on the Book of Job*, p. 39 n. 23.

scale of the earlier birth imagery, creating a similar sense that something has gone wrong where it shouldn't. Verse 25 states an early ancestor to Murphy's law, though its tone is grave rather than light, and v. 26 states Job's disquiet both at his own situation and at his unsolved problem of human suffering and existence.

Job 3 shifts back and forth between emotional outburst and reflective discourse. Its three parts create a vaguely circular structure, with the first and third parts beginning with the word גבר, meaning 'man' and connoting, ironically, strength. The first section elaborates a complicated, self-imposed curse; the second proceeds with a series of questions and arguments in favor of death, interweaving physical and socio-political imagery; and the third concludes with a three-part statement of the speaker's misery. The poem fails to resolve the problem on both personal and philosophical levels, but it succeeds in stating it in a powerful and convincing way. The most important formal features of the poem are semantic antonymic parallelism, the use of powerful birth/death and light/dark imagery, and such rhetorical figures as paradox, curses, and questions. These dramatic and antonymic elements, together with the text's overall structural patterns and symmetries, constitute what Kugel calls a 'complex of heightening effects' and they fit together to create an overall poetic effect.[27] This complex functions to communicate and illustrate the overall dynamic of the poem between the personal, emotional complaint and the generalized, more rational approach to despair. Form and content are inseparable.

Speech Acts, Curse, and Subjectivity

So far we have been examining the curse or lament of Job, noting its parallels to other texts, and analyzing its language, structure, and expressive qualities. In light of its weak connections to traditional lament form, along with explicit references to cursing (vv. 1, 3, 8), I apply Newsom's suggestion that the text is a polyphonic blend of genres that includes a non-efficacious but rhetorically effective curse. But what are we saying when we talk about the curse of Job? Who is Job? What do we mean when we say Job curses the day of his birth, since commentators widely agree that Job was never more than a fictional or legendary figure? How can a person who was never born curse the day of his birth? Even if we could point to an historical Job, our mention of his curse or lament would still pose problems, for according to Job 3.1-2, Job delivers his curse orally (פתח איוב את־פיהו), spoken in answer to someone or something, but in our hands, the curse of Job takes written form. What happens to powerful speech when it is written down?

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27. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, p. 94.

As I noted already, Job's curse lacks many of the attributes of bibli-cal laments (e.g., God's name, covenant, thanksgiving, and praise[28]). The immediate occasion of the curse is only clear from the context of chaps. 1–2. It is thus difficult to relate it to a cultic context or pious purpose as can be done with such laments as Psalms 31, 35, 51, or 89. Still, cultic traces appear in ch. 1, in which Job offers sacrifices, and perhaps in the first word of the lament: יֹאבַד. Here Job wishes for the effacement or destruc-tion of his day of birth. Where this term sometimes refers to the destruction of foreign gods and their names (Deut. 12.3; Isa. 26.14), here it operates against the lamenter himself. Could Job be wishing for a sort of self-sacri-fice? The curse on the day in Atrahasis and Gilgamesh, interestingly, comes from gods who regret the suffering caused by creation; Job's curse may thus be said to aim toward divine, or at least supernatural, power. For insofar as אבד can apply to the elimination of foreign gods, the perishing of Job's day recalls the sacrificial context of Job 1; could it be that Job's sacrifices there were motivated by a scrupulous desire to avoid suffering? Other possibili-ties include the idea of Job as a kind of deity to be blotted out, Job as a self-effacing ego, and the paradox of powerful speech that aims to disempower on a cosmic scale. This paradox of self and non-self reflects the poem's main dynamic of self and world, since to curse Job's day is to produce ripple effects in the entire world.

Inward and reflexive rather than outward and pious, this use of the term lament may suggest a subjectivity with affinities to modern ideas of self. While such a characterization would be mistaken to project contemporary psychology and existentialism onto the past, might it illuminate the distinc-tive quality of Job 3 in light of ancient and biblical parallels? Unlike Jere-miah, Job is free from the constraints of the Israelite covenant, which bind individuals to a larger group; a foreigner to Israel, Job's isolation as an indi-vidual may be unique in the Bible. While none of the ancient parallels cited here may be said to have the same subjective focus as Job, the Damu lament clearly curses the day as part of a personal expression of grief.

To view Job 3 as poetry in Western literary tradition is to consider it a creative act, or *poiesis*, of the individual imagination. How the categories of poetry and prose fail to match realities in the Bible has been addressed by James Kugel.[29] Nevertheless, the term 'poetic' can be applied with caution to what Kugel calls 'heightening effects', and it can also capture the clear literary innovation of a text like Job 3.[30] To view it as curse, by contrast, is to consider Job's ability to describe or harness supernatural power to curse his day and, in effect, annihilate himself. To speak of a poetic curse, then, is

28. Ferris, *The Genre of Communal Lament*, p. 91.
29. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, pp. 85-95.
30. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, p. 95.

highly paradoxical, because it *asserts* self-effacement—Job asserts his pres-
ence and exercises his power in order to bring about his absence and lament
his powerlessness! If Job's poem is a success as a curse, it would cease to be
a poem that makes him present and become a curse that makes him absent.
Of course, self-annihilation fails to occur, leaving open the question what
kind of curse Job 3 is.

Is a curse social or supernatural? My initial definition—speech acts that
denounce and invoke supernatural harm—would have it both ways, com-
bining human and supernatural elements, but I would now like to com-
plicate things further. A curse or lament is, in J.L. Austin's terms, a way
of doing something with words, or a performative speech act. In order to
'work', says Austin, speech acts must successfully take place between a
speaker and an audience who understands them. As is often the case when
writing appears to record speech, none of this is clear in Job 3. To call Job
3 a curse or lament thus seems to force a dilemma: if we classify it as a
speech act, we must confront its apparent failure to 'do things with words';
while if we do not classify it as a speech act, we can no longer call it a curse
or lament. For Job 3, I have suggested that 'curse' means a speech act that
deprecates and invokes supernatural harm. Job's curse is arguably effica-
cious as an act of deprecation, indeed self-deprecation, but it does not seem
to effect supernatural harm. But rather than declare Job 3 half success and
half failure, I suggest that Job's first word, יאבד, is a curse that aims not to
effect a supernatural outcome but to express a wish for such an outcome. As
a jussive, the term could 'express a more or less definite desire that some-
thing should or should not happen'; according to Kautzsch, it may express
a 'command, a wish (or a blessing), advice, or a request'.[31]

Does Job perform a curse or only, as a written text, mention one? The
distinction between mention and use from Austin can clarify some diffi-
culties of speech acts, but in the case of literature, as J. Hillis Miller points
out, mention and use become blurred because literary representation is
inherently ambiguous.[32] I suggest that the curse of Job 3 is neither a simple
speech act nor merely a *mention* of a speech act. As a finely wrought liter-
ary composition, rather, Job 3 could be said to effect a displacement of the
power of speech known to curses to the written domain of literature. The
only way out of this dilemma is to consider the writing of Job 3 as a kind
of secondary or meta-level 'speech act'; to write a speech act must be its
own kind of powerful 'speech', one that displaces or sublimates the power
of conventional speech acts. Such is the drift of J. Hillis Miller's *On Lit-
erature* and *Speech Acts in Literature*. Commenting on the disparate theo-
ries of Austin and Derrida, Miller proposes that literary works are a kind of

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31. GKC, p. 321.
32. Miller, *Speech Acts in Literature*, pp. 138-39.

speech act in which the author portrays an imaginary world for the reader; lines like 'Open Sesame' and 'Call me Ishmael' are not conventional speech but invitations to the reader to suspend disbelief and enter into a fictional world. My suggestion that the author of Job 3 is a kind of scribal poet who draws from several different sources and genres captures the sense in which Job 3 transforms speech acts into writing. The powerful speech of Job 3 is a blend of *poiesis* and curse; its application of cosmological curse language to Job's personal situation can also be described as mythopoiesis. In the cosmological imagery of Job 3, particularly the reference to Leviathan in v. 8, this mythopoesis displays an ironic element similar to one noted by Michael Fishbane in Job 7.12:

> On the one hand, by personalizing the old mythologem, Job is not asking for a literal answer…whereas, on the other hand, by thus posing an ironic identification with this monster, Job actually succeeds in suggesting a certain analogy between his own embattled plight and the subjugation of the ancient sea serpents at God's hand. Indeed, it is just this identification—at once absurd and real—that actualizes the ancient mythologem on the personal plane and gives Job's query its particular power.[33]

Unlike conventional speech acts, though, literary or written speech acts offer no stable or assured relationship between author and audience. We don't know the intentions or identity of Job's author any more than we can locate Job himself. The encounter of Job 3 as a literary speech act, a written lament or curse by a hidden author, invites the reader to imagine a person named Job, after the story told in chaps. 1–2, cursing his day (ויקלל את־יומו), but we do not know why we are asked to imagine such a thing. Like Job, the reader of Job's curse is confronted with uncertainties of genre, reference, and meaning, and challenged to sort it out through reflection. By itself, Job 3 thus demonstrates Carol Newsom's suggestion that Job constitutes a *Bildungsroman* for the reader.

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.

The subjectivity of Job 3 is thus nothing like the Romantic or existentialist subjectivity of modern literature. If anything, the subjectivity of Job 3 betokens the paradoxes of reflexivity and writing one finds in postmodern literature and theory. One could consider Job 3 to be a lament for the

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33. Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking*, p. 59.

self, a curse text that is written and not spoken, a self-authoring speech of self-effacement, a canonical text by an unknown author about the suffering of a self-consciously fictional figure; all of these 'postmodern' features of Job 3 follow, I suggest, from its displacement of the ancient lament tradition of cursing the day to a biblical wisdom text. The power of language assumed by cursing takes a new form as the powerful expression of a problem. Embodied in language and the misery of Job, this problem confronts the reader or listener to consider its meaning; in this sense displacement is not replacement.

Job's curse, grounded in lament literature cursing the day, goes to a new level of subjectivity by depicting a man who curses himself. But by making this expression public and poetically compelling (through the displaced power of the curse), it thus turns outward toward the silent friends and to the larger audience of the text. And the subjectivity of Job is built with fragments of existing lament traditions and other genres; just as it derives self-authorship out of self-cursing, it also creates innovation out of tradition. As a set of fictionalized speech acts put into writing and then integrated into a larger, canonical body of writings, Job 3 holds writing and speech, reader and text, in the kind of productive tension that has led many to regard it as a classic text. Job 3 veers between the personal and the universal, narrative and poetry. Like Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', Job 3 is a stable artifact that represents a dynamic process. As Carol Newsom argues, the text is designed to make this process part of the reader's experience.

Jeremiah 20.14-18 and Job 3

Jeremiah 20 contains four different genres that probably come from at least three different sources prior to redaction. The challenge this poses is explaining this pastiche of disjointed texts. Two interesting progressions suggest themselves: first, from prosaic narrative to highly conventionalized poetry (peaking in verse 13), and second, from external, public event to internal, personal reflection about the event. The reader, faced with apparent discontinuities of meaning and style in the flow of the text, must construct a reading that conforms to her expectations.

In Jeremiah 20, characterization of the prophet and his troubles seems to dominate the picture. While the narrative in vv. 1-3a is quite straightforward, Jeremiah's curse of Pashur and his subsequent self-doubts create parallels between the two characters, with the effect that the interaction with Pashur (Jeremiah's opposite) reflects rather than generates the discourse that follows. Verses 7-9 raise some serious self-doubts about the life of the prophet, but vv. 10-13 offer a surprisingly facile solution. Then in the shift from vv. 10-13 to vv. 14-18, there is almost a sense of revision, as if

a residue of doubt remains after the highly conventionalized conclusion in v. 13. While the chapter offers no resolution to Jeremiah's dilemma, perhaps literary features such as characterization, genre, and parallelism, as well as the process of constructing an interpretation from these disparate elements, indicate something better than a solution: a way to engage and negotiate the Jeremiah's question of human meaning in the face of suffering and injustice.

At first reading, the transition from praising YHWH in v. 13 to cursing his day of birth in v. 14 seems abrupt and confusing. Why is he cursing his birth immediately after reaffirming his trust in YHWH and the role of prophet? Assuming that the placement of this text is not random, the best explanation I can offer is to distinguish among social and psychological levels in the character of Jeremiah. While Jeremiah's complaint and reaffirmation of his role in vv. 7-13 may resolve his doubts on the level of his role as prophet, he still has a more personal, existential issue to face: Why must he suffer? More accurately, there is a revisionary quality this section, as if the affirmation in vv. 10-13 was too easy. It 'doesn't wash', in some sense, and vv. 14-18 undo the pious conclusion of v. 13. (Poetically, vv. 14-18 shows a considerable degree of semantic parallelism. It is as if the harmony and eloquence of literary form counteract the problem itself.)

In addition to obvious formal and semantic correspondences, this passage deals directly with the same general dilemma faced in Job 3: the suffering of a just man. In Job's case, a sort of wager between YHWH and Satan leaves him poor and afflicted with sores. For Jeremiah, the reluctant prophet, beatings and scorn are the only reward for speaking the word of YHWH. Both characters, however, address this philosophical problem in very emotional, personal terms. Jeremiah's curse completes the progression in Jeremiah 20 from event to ever more personalized reflection about the event. While the text ranks as one of the most personal utterances in the Hebrew Bible, its content more likely emerges from convention than from a completely spontaneous, deeply psychological composition. It would also be dangerous to attach too much significance to the curse's placement in Jeremiah, a book whose organization and editing history remain unclear.

Because there is no consensus on the date of Job, the relationship between Job 3 and Jer. 20.14-18 also remains a puzzle. William McKane rightly dismisses the question of which text is dependent on the other, suggesting instead that 'there are resemblances between the patterns of expression in the two passages which are sufficiently particular to suggest that certain conventions are being followed and that literary ingredients…are being used'. These conventions, found in quite different forms in both texts, are as follows: (1) a curse on the day of birth; (2) a birth announcement (3) the image of the womb as a grave; and (4) a question asking why the speaker

was born 'to encounter a life of suffering and woe'.[34] The parallels suggest not only interdependence but a larger tradition that extends back to the 'curse of the day' texts.

The lament in Job is longer and more fully embellished than in Jeremiah, but Jeremiah has a directness that may convey a greater emotional impact. In fact, if the point of the Jeremiah passage is to reject the conventionalized, 'pat' solution of verses 10-13, then such simplicity is called for. As McKane comments, 'the balance between convention and truth of expression, between tradition and spontaneity or freshness is a general literary problem…conventions may take control and a poem may degenerate into an exhibition of linguistic skill without vision or depth of sentiment'.[35] By its combination of genres and its forceful expression, Jer. 20.14-18 not only attests to the biblical reception of ancient lament tradition in a way similar to Job 3 but also contributes a distinctly personalized and powerful version of this tradition, marked especially by the dramatic shift from praise to curse in vv. 13-14. Set within the biographical account of a suffering Israelite prophet (in contrast to the non-Israelite Job), Jeremiah's curse dramatizes the problem of theodicy with particular literary and theological immediacy.

Biblical Lament Tradition Beyond the Bible

If David Carr's model of textual transmission is right, then educational and scribal institutions across centuries, languages, and cultures could explain how a motif such as cursing the day may appear in Job 3 and Jeremiah 20 as well as in Sumerian laments. Once the link between Bible and the ancient texts is established, the issue becomes what the biblical authors are doing with that motif, and my suggestion here, as I have said, is that Job 3 and Jeremiah 20 transform a motif of powerful speech into a reflection on self, self-expression, and theodicy. But it is the text's dynamic tension between powerful speech and a poetics of powerlessness that may account for its perennial fascination for readers. The text somehow frames certain questions in such a way that, as Newsom says, the reader can experience them *with* or *for* Job. These include the purpose and efficacy of Job's curse, his piety or lack of it, the power of poetic utterance in the face of powerlessness, and the place of curses and self-effacement in the task of self-authorship.

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34. W. McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, I (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), p. 484. Contrast Gisela Fuchs, 'Die Klage des Propheten: Beobachtungen zu den Konfessionen Jeremias im Vergleich mit den Klagen Hiobs (Erster Teil)', *BZ* 41 (1997), pp. 212-28.

35. McKane, *Jeremiah*, I, p. 485.

A brief look at the afterlife of Job 3, its history of interpretation, can draw the text's dynamics of poetry, power, and the place of the self into relief. In *The Rhetoric of Suffering: Reading the Book of Job in the Eighteenth Century*, Jonathan Lamb describes the biblical text and its later interpretations: 'Job refuses to be read as an example, or as a case with wider significance: he voices doubts about all the available forms of narrative. When Job is quoted or gestured at, he will not, therefore, behave as a positive instance; he will signpost a border dispute between the public and the private spheres in which he is already engaged'.[36] In the Bible's most vivid personal case of theodicy, Job resorts to poetic lament and curse not in order to resolve the problem but to struggle with it. Let me illustrate with one vivid case of the reception of Job 3.

'Saint Job' is the patron of a guild of musicians in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Antwerp. A chapel and nearby fresco in Saint James Church (Jakobskerk) commemorate this fact by depicting Job afflicted by skin disease and surrounded by musicians (see illustration). The motif builds on musical references in Job and the *Testament of Job* to characterize music as a solace for people who suffer. The fifteenth-century Middle English poem 'Holy Job' includes a remarkable episode of Job paying musicians with scabs that miraculously become gold coins:

> This sore syk man sytting on this foule Dongehill,
> There cam mynstrelles before hym, pleying meryly,
> Mony had ne none to reward aftyr his will,
> But gave theym the brode Scabbes of his sore body,
> Which turned unto pure golde, as sayth the story,
> The mynstrelles than shewid and tolde to Job is wife,
> That he so reward them where foe she gam to stryfe.[37]

A depiction of the same motif can be found in a Flemish painting of the life of Job from late in the fifteenth century.[38] A variant of this theme appears in the fifteenth-century mystery play, *La patience de Job*, which includes one scene in which Job's friends try to cheer him up with music, and another in which Satan, dressed as a beggar (a disguise he adopts in *Testament of Job* 6.4-6), asks Job for alms, and Job offers him worms from his wounds. The devil makes the worms look like gold and shows them to

36. Jonathan Lamb, *The Rhetoric of Suffering: Reading the Book of Job in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 3-4. See also Lawrence L. Besserman, *The Legend of Job in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

37. Henry N. MacCracken, 'Lydgatiana, the Life of Holy Job', *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 126 (1911), pp. 365-70 (368-69).

38. 'Scenes from the Life of Job' (unknown Flemish master, 1480–90); Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne. Online at http://www.wga.hu/art/m/master/zunk_fl/15_paint/2/04scenes.jpg (accessed 10 May 2010). (See the cover of this book.)

Sixteenth century fresco of St. Job, patron of musicians, Sint-Jakobskerk, Antwerp (photo by the author)

Job's wife, who scolds him for his generosity (in light of their poverty) as she does in 'Holy Job'.[39]

The traditions relating Job to musicians lead back to Job 21.12, in which Job says the wicked 'sing to the tambourine and the lyre, and rejoice to the sound of the pipe'; and 30.31, which Job laments that 'my lyre is turned to mourning, and my pipe to the voice of those who weep'. These motifs return in the later *Testament of Job* (first century BCE or CE), which features

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39. Kathi Meyer, 'St Job as a Patron of Music', *The Art Bulletin* 36 (1954), pp. 21-31 (24-25). See also Besserman, *The Legend of Job in the Middle Ages*.

Job before his losses as a rich and pious man who plays his lyre for widows after feeding them (14.1-5). After being struck by misfortune, Job gives his three daughters protective cords or sashes that lead them to sing angelic hymns. They continue this singing after Job falls ill and gives one of them his lyre, another a drum, and third a censer (chaps. 49–52).

The connection between the book of Job, the *Testament of Job*, and the late medieval tradition of Job is fairly clear, but there may be intermediate texts and traditions between them: the motifs of music and stories of disguise in the medieval tradition all come from the *Testament of Job*, but there is significant variation among these texts.[40] Nevertheless, by taking music as a close partner with poetry and self-expression, we can identify biblical dynamics from the biblical Job in the St Job tradition. Music, and by implication the poetry that goes with it, alleviates human suffering, but it can also (like biblical lament) further contribute to trouble. There is more than one kind of power in the Job tradition: the supernatural power of curses and the poetic power of self-expression; and these forms of power are not so much opposed as intertwined in the struggle with theodicy. The mythopoetic tradition of biblical lament thus survives in new ways in the idea of music in European Christianity.

The displacement of biblical Job onto 'Saint Job' is striking, but Job 3 is already part of an ongoing reception history. In an article on the subject, Esther Menn proposes a three-part history to the reception of biblical lament tradition: first, a ritual system in which lament texts were recited by groups; second, an identification of lament texts with specific biblical personae, such as David and Jeremiah; and third, a post-biblical phase in which biblical laments were read primarily as subjective expressions.[41] If this progression holds true for Job 3, Job may be seen as a figure (in wisdom tradition) who metonymically represents the problem of inscrutable theodicy on a collective level. His curse on the day of his birth, then, is cosmological both in its apparent undoing of the phases of creation and in its description of the human condition in general. Though we do not have conclusive evidence for the history of lament in Job 3, Menn's analysis suggests how the meaning of lament texts can change over time and how they apply to individual and group at once. Her work raises the question of how the history of interpretation serves as a 'palimpsest' for the history of subjectivity. An apparent crisis in understandings of theodicy is also expressed through an innovative, poetic use of a traditional form of powerful speech: the curse on the day. And while subsequent readings of the text as wholly subjective or personal certainly miss the collective

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40. Meyer, 'St Job as a Patron of Music', pp. 30-31.
41. Esther Menn, 'No Ordinary Lament: Relecture and the Identity of the Distressed in Psalm 22', *HTR* 93 (2000), pp. 301-41.

history and function of the text, they pay new and valuable attention to the text's innovative combination of previous motifs and genres—from specific, conventionalized lament to generalized, polyphonic text.[42]

Conclusion

There may never be a conclusive account of the motif of cursing the day common to Job 3, Jeremiah 20, and ancient Sumerian literature. David Carr's study of oral and written educational practices in the ancient world may go far to explain how such a motif was transmitted. Carr's model allows for a wide range of correspondences, from direct quotation to paraphrase, but it leaves the significance of variations to literary analysis. Judgments on nuance and innovation in Job's and Jeremiah's curses depend mainly on the reading of the texts themselves. In short, Carr presents a plausible mechanism whereby a motif like cursing the day could be passed down for centuries to the author of Job.

The recognition of Job 3 and Jer. 20.14-18 as variations on an ancient motif undermines readings of either text as a proto-modern expression of subjectivity with affinities to modern existentialism and psychological realism. The ancient parallels disallow this image of Job or Jeremiah as radically original, forcing scholars to consider how they relate to other texts and traditions. To put it succinctly, the authors of Job 3 and Jer. 20.14-18 may be poets, but they were also certainly scribes or scholars. Yet recognition of ancient sources does not annul all insights yielded by scholars who view the text through modern eyes. Indeed, it is possible that such readings are responsible for recognition of the formal and thematic dimensions of the text. Although modern ideas of poetry and art are clearly anachronistic for biblical scholarship, I believe one can still argue for the poetic and artful dimensions of the biblical texts.[43] By referring to the authors as 'scribal poets', I have tried to merge tradition with innovation, drawing from Carr's model of transmission as well as readings of the text that concentrate on its originality. What is more, modernist readings of Job 3 or Jeremiah 20 are only one phase in a long reception history that includes their inheritance and reinterpretation of previous texts. As Fishbane, Carr, and others have shown, biblical texts themselves are products of hermeneutical work, and there is no independent standpoint outside the hermeneutical circle—though that circle could hardly be larger!

In Job 3, Jeremiah 20, and their ancient counterparts, cursing the day doesn't succeed in eliminating the day; it is not a supernatural incantation

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42. See Newsom, *The Book of Job*.

43. In C.L. Seow's words, Job 3 is a 'sophisticated literary work' that resists easy classification, *Job* (*ECC*; forthcoming), pp. 608-61 (641).

but rather an expression of remarkable poetic power. And although the motif and its effects are not entirely unique, there is undoubtedly innovation in Job 3 and Jeremiah 20, as the difficulties identifying their genre attest. Job 3 and Jeremiah 20 inherit and rework motifs of cursing the day, creation, birth, and the social world to utter a curse that is effective on rhetorical but not supernatural grounds. The text may be said to give a new sense to the term mythopoesis: the incorporation of myth and powerful speech in a powerful text. Dynamics of self and world, power and powerlessness are balanced in such a way as to challenge the audience to reflect on theodicy, human agency, and selfhood.[44] The texts' combination of genres, what Newsom calls polyphony, thus contributes to the impression of subjectivity in the text. This scribal poetics projects an image of a self in crisis, an image that may just as well be understood as a reflection of the reader. What has looked to many modern scholars like a unique expression of individualism may be just that, but to an ancient audience these familiar motifs would have made the text a recognizable part of tradition as well. Much more deserves to be said on the question of how textual complexity relates to subjectivity, both in ancient and in contemporary works. (The idea of polyphony, after all, comes from Bakhtin's understanding of the modern novel, a genre credited with highly sophisticated representations of subjectivity.)

Turning tradition against themselves, Job and Jeremiah curse reflexively, combining genres and ancient motifs in carefully composed poetry. The power of cursing in Job 3 and Jeremiah 20 has become, at least in part, the power of rewriting tradition. As Jan Fokkelman says, Job transforms his 'existential impotence' into poetic power; he may be powerless to undo the day of his birth, but he is 'poetically omnipotent': unable to change his circumstances, the speaker/poet demonstrates tremendous powers of verbal expression.[45] But in light of ancient and biblical parallels, neither Job 3 nor Jeremiah 20 can be regarded as radically novel. Subjective anguish, metaphysical reflections on time, and dynamics of self and world, power and powerlessness, all emerge in Job 3 and Jeremiah 20 from the artful shaping of its literary inheritance. As subsequent chapters show, poetic lament and self-cursing continued in post-biblical literature well into the modern period, and like the medieval motif of Job as a patron saint of music, they would all share an implicit recognition of the value of poetic expression in the face of suffering.

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44. Hence the value of Newsom's idea of a *Bildungsroman* for the reader.
45. Fokkelman, *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible*, p. 177.

Part II

EARLY MODERN CURSING

Chapter 4

POWER AND PROFANITY:
CURSING IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

Laws and sermons against 'profane swearing and cursing' proliferated
in seventeenth-century England, after which they declined significantly.[1]
What accounts for the change? Since blessings, oaths, and other super-
natural expressions remained common in English usage, standard theo-
ries of secularization offer little help. Cursing, the power to invoke harm
through speech, was singled out by early moderns as a special kind of dan-
ger: witches, Ranters, and self-cursing 'damme boys' were scapegoated as
villains whose cursing endangered society. This chapter argues that curs-
ing did not so much diminish as undergo displacement and transformation:
displacement from religious discourse to such domains as politics and lit-
erature, and transformation from cursing as powerful speech to profane,
irreverent, and even creative (poetic) conduct. I relate the changing out-
look on curses to the multiplication of religious sects and to the vernacular
Bible. The Reformation that allowed many to derive powerful speech from
the Bible led also to crises of religious authority and debate on whether
such speech was in fact powerful. For English Protestants, the Bible was
the ultimate written authority, a guidebook to be consulted on all matters
of religious, moral, and political concern, yet this authority was broadly
applied and hotly contested. At the same time, the Bible stood as a *symbol*
of authority, an icon whose power could take effect merely by mention of
the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. Early modern debates on cursing and bibli-
cal authority illustrate, I suggest, the persistence and dynamics of biblical
tradition.

Secularization Theory, Displacement, and Early Modern Curses

Most accounts of secularization designate the seventeenth century as the
decisive period of secularization. As historical description of shifts in

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1.   British Acts against swearing and blasphemy were passed in 1623, 1627, 1640,
1645, 1649, and 1694. The trend is noted in Cabantous, *Blasphemy*, pp. 55-57; and in
Hughes, *Swearing*, pp. 102-104.

Western European institutions, such accounts can hardly be denied. Where many accounts of secularization go wrong, however, is by universalizing these developments beyond the historical and geographic boundaries of seventeenth-century western Europe. To say the separation of religion from ethics and church from state happened in a certain specific ways at specific times and places is one thing, but secularization very often became secularism, the doctrine that such separations are necessary, universal, and good. As I argued in the Introduction, this blurring of historical secularization and secularism leads me to agree with the many critics of secularization theory. The models of biblical tradition and displacement proposed in this study represent counter-narratives to secularization and secularism. The present chapter applies these counter-narratives to the early modern period itself. This approach considers not only broader conceptions of religion and the sacred, which acknowledge the presence of religious tradition, expression, and experience in domains not explicitly associated with religious traditions; it also searches for hidden and overlooked evidence of the persistence of biblical tradition in early modern accounts of cursing and powerful speech.[2]

Peter Berger's notion of secularization, defined as 'the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols', has the Protestant Reformation as its locus classicus, for Protestantism, he argues, accounts for an 'immense shrinkage in the scope of the sacred in reality'.[3] More recently, Berger has questioned secularization theory in light of the obvious resilience and resurgence of religious traditions today. The obvious error of secularization theories that predicted a steady and permanent decline in religion was the result, he suggests, of overestimating the influence of an educated subculture that inherited the Enlightenment's distrust of religion.[4] Jeffrey Stout affirms a more historically limited notion of secularization as the practical need, based on religious pluralism in early modern Europe, to find alternatives to religious justifications for political authority.[5] According to Stout, it was the reli-

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2.   In a classic survey of the topic, Larry Shiner distinguishes six definitions of secularization: 'decline of religion', 'conformity with this world', 'disengagement of society from religion', 'transposition of religious beliefs and institutions', 'desacralization of the world', and 'movement from a sacred to a secular society' ('The Concept of Secularization in Empirical Research', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 6 [1967], pp. 207-20).

3.   Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, pp. 107, 111.

4.   Peter Berger, 'The Desecularization of the World', pp. 1-18.

5.   Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 92-97. In general terms, Stout's account of modernity, like that of Löwith and Schmitt, emphasizes continuity, though Stout, like Casanova, prefers to repair rather than replace the idea of secularization (see Introduction and Chapter 6). A

gious turmoil and conflict in the period after the Protestant Reformation that accounts for the sudden escalation of secularization in early modern Europe. The religious pluralism of the post-Reformation period meant that citizens could no longer appeal to the Bible and other religious institutions as a source for public agreements. This does not mean, Stout insists, that the Bible was no longer taken seriously; it just means that it was no longer an effective tool for public debates.[6] It is this decline in effectiveness for public discourse that Stout describes as secularization. Stout, whose project attempts to reconcile religious and democratic traditions, affirms a limited version of secularization theory, rooted not in the inevitable withering away of religion but in a procedural need to solve disputes with means other than the Bible.

The early modern period is also central to Bruce Lincoln's understanding of secularization, but Lincoln, a historian of religions, argues that new 'secular' institutions would operate in very religious ways. While many consider the French and American revolutions as conflicts inspired by such secularist philosophers as Locke and Rousseau, Lincoln identifies them as a kind of displacement of one religion to another. Leaders of the revolutions were not unbelievers at all; they 'saw such doctrines as the rights of man, popular sovereignty, and the social contract as no less sacred—in fact, much more so—than the divine right of kings. For the vast majority of them, the struggle was not one of secular ideology against religion, but of true religion against superstition'.[7] Like Stout, Lincoln challenges the standard version of secularization as the mere decline of religion and situates it in the early modern period of Western history. But Lincoln suggests something even more dramatic than Stout: religion does not diminish at all but rather simply takes on new forms. This idea, which I call displacement, claims no particular narrative of improvement or decay, and it implies a significant level of continuity between phases of change. The advantage of displacement is that it can account for the ways in which purportedly secular institutions, such as post-Revolutionary France or the Soviet Union, made use of religious symbols, rituals, and beliefs even as they criticized them. In terms of contemporary debates, displacement would seem to avoid the problems faced by secularization theories that predicted a steady and marked decline in the power of religious institutions in the modern period. The challenge to the displacement model is that its claims are not always self-evident. How and whether a later institution follows from an earlier one is difficult

different version of the continuity approach, one that focuses on intellectual history, is Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

6.   Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, pp. 94-96.
7.   Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, p. 87.

to establish without a 'smoking gun' making such a connection. On a modest scale, this chapter attempts to address the methodological problem of the displacement model through textual and cultural analysis of biblical tradition. (A theoretical exposition of displacement appears in Chapter 6.)

No clear taxonomy of cursing serves biblical or English curses, since there are several terms for cursing in Hebrew and English, and they all lack semantic precision. The power of curses consists in the harm or threat of harm they are believed to carry. Curses and the threat of curses provide vital sanctions in a variety of ways.[8] Curses are multivalent. As Herbert Chanan Brichto notes, 'the noun 'curse' is semantically equivocal'—it can refer to imprecation, the evil that results from imprecation, the object of an imprecation, or simply a great misfortune.[9]

In the seventeenth century, curses represented religiously charged and diverse forms of powerful speech that could threaten the shaky authority of post-Reformation institutions. Songs, hymns, and newspapers from the period show how cursing, once an efficacious form of religious speech derived from the Bible, became less powerful and more vulgar. As the potency of cursing declined, other forms of powerful discourse, including oaths, satire, rationalism, mercantilism, and poetry, gained influence. These changes, part of what Jean Delumeau calls the 'civilization of blasphemy' known from figures like Sterne and Rabelais, thus marked a cultural shift in notions of authority.[10] Of course, cursing takes multiple forms before and after the early modern period: curses can be ritualized or spontaneous, divine or human, licit or illicit, powerful or ineffective. My observations on cursing emerge more from readings of significant texts than from systematic quantitative analysis; and they do not claim to identify a simple linear shift from old patterns to newly invented ones. Nevertheless, it is possible to mark significant changes in how curses and powerful speech were conceptualized in the early modern period.

In *The Writing of History*, Michel de Certeau identifies the seventeenth century as a period of significant religious and cultural change, marked by a broad displacement of religion to ethics.[11] In this work, de Certeau

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8. Anderson, 'The Social Function of Curses in the Hebrew Bible'; Keim, *When Sanctions Fail*.

9. Brichto, *The Problem of 'Curse' in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 1. This equivocal meaning also appears in the use of the main Hebrew terms translated as 'curse' (אלה, ארר, and קלל); cursing can refer to an action (Lev. 24.11), a condition resulting from a curse (Prov. 3.33), or an object that brings harm (Num. 5.19, Zech. 5.3).

10. Jean Delumeau, *La peur en Occident*, pp. 400-403. See the elaborate satire on cursing and swearing in Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1991), pp. 121-32.

11. Certeau, *The Writing of History*, pp. 148ff.

insists on everyday practices as a crucial object of historiographic atten-
tion, an approach that produces his perspective on seventeenth-century
culture. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau identifies the peri-
od's distinctiveness in its focus on the Bible: 'The myth of the reforma-
tion is that the Scriptures provide, in the midst of a corrupt society and
a decadent Church, a model one can use to re-form both society and the
Church'.[12] At the same time, a variant of this scriptural myth gained influ-
ence, one that activates Reason and writing in new ways: '[I]t is no longer
a matter of deciphering the secrets of on order or a hidden Author, but of
producing an order so that it can be *written* on the body of an uncivilized
or depraved society'.[13] What is the fate of religious language, curses in
particular, if and when this shift occurs?

With Enlightenment comes the view that religious institutions can no
longer be taken for granted but must submit to scrutiny (Hume, Locke) and
defend themselves against rationalistic skepticism. Critics of religion would
seek to dislodge the authority of organized religion, yet they would often
justify their views by reference to biblical texts; such maneuvers illustrate
biblical tradition, the broad cultural influence of and preoccupation with
the Bible. Not until the Kantian Enlightenment, which matched the dawn
of personal freedom with the absolute duty of the moral law, would insti-
tutions regain the upper hand over individuals in the control of powerful
language.[14] Friedrich Nietzsche's attacks on Kantian and Christian moral-
ity, which included curses of their own (the subtitle of *The Anti-Christ* is
A Curse on Christianity), suggest that modernity, less 'secular' than many
would admit, displaced the powerful speech of religious curses onto other
forms of discourse (see Chapter 6).

Under the cultural pressure of new discourses and institutions, conven-
tional views of cursing could not survive unchanged. They could not be
eradicated, either. Instead they would be variously displaced and reframed,
as illicit or vulgar behaviors, superstitious acts, satire, or as appeals to
authorities other than God, such as the state or the autonomous subject. The
sanctioned, ritualized cursing common in the Middle Ages would dimin-
ish in modernized religious institutions, though blessing and oath-taking
would not. Medieval monks, for instance, sometimes included the elabo-

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12. Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (trans. Steven Rendall; Berkeley: Uni-
versity of California Press, 1984), p. 144.

13. Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 145.

14. Critical assessments of the neglected influence of earlier tradition on the Enlight-
enment can be found in the work of Nietzsche, Foucault, and in such recent studies as
Pierre Saint-Amand's *The Laws of Hostility* (trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage; Minneapo-
lis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

rate curses called *clamor* or *malediction* in their liturgy.[15] Ritual cursing lost popularity among Protestants, but popular forms and ideas of cursing, especially as a means of power to the weakest members of society, continued.[16] This shift is better described as displacement than as secularization. In order to hold, most accounts of secularization demand a certain essentialization of sacred and profane as categories characteristic of modernity itself.[17] Such views also have a tendency to posit pre-moderns as uncomplicated believers in a holistic sacred world. 'Not enough justice has been done', observes Keith Thomas, 'to the volume of apathy, heterodoxy and agnosticism which existed long before the onset of industrialism'.[18] The decline in ritualized cursing and the shift from powerful to vulgar cursing had more to do with institutional power than secularization. The state increasingly replaced the Church as a focus of sacred power, while sectarianism and war left religious institutions considerably weakened. When François Bouchon desecrated the Eucharist in the anti-Christian fervor of the Revolution in 1793, he publicly invited the same divine vengeance that befell Korah and other biblical figures who challenged religious authority.[19] Biblical cursing had become a weapon against religion itself.

My claim that biblical tradition constitutes a model for early modern discussions of cursing demands clarification. It would be tempting, for example, to suggest strong homologies between biblical history and early modernity that correspond to similar ideas and practices of cursing. But that is not my ambition, and I do not think the problems of biblical historiography make it possible. Instead, I want to propose that the Bible represents a set of traditions (more *traditio* than *traditum*)[20] that can be identified not just in the explicit language of early modernity but more interestingly in patterns of discourse and writing. I want to explore whether and how robustly early modern discourse on cursing represents biblical tradition in this sense. This question goes beyond the early modern appropriation of specific biblical forms and contexts.[21] Rather, the kind of biblical tradition proposed by

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15. Lester Little, *Benedictine Maledictions* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 17-26, and 'Anger in Monastic Curses', in *Anger's Past* (ed. Barbara Rosenwein; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 9-35.

16. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), p. 507.

17. Talal Asad associates this process with the modern European encounter with non-Europeans: *Formations of the Secular*, p. 35.

18. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 173.

19. Cabantous, *Blasphemy*, p. 156.

20. This distinction between process (*traditio*) and product (*traditum*) comes from Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*.

21. Examples include clear injunctions against certain forms of swearing and cursing (Exodus 20 and Leviticus 24); the role of curses in covenant ceremonies (e.g.,

de Certeau means not a biblical ur-history but a culture of writing and written authority, a *traditio*, that flourished after the Reformation but proved too unstable to resolve sectarian and political struggles over authority. Only the supremacy of reason and law could calm these waters, but before that, it was necessary to use biblical means to displace the power of cursing and swearing.

Biblical covenant curses (e.g., Deuteronomy 27–28), long recognized to resemble the suzerainty treaties of the Hittites,[22] are already a displacement of an earlier cultural form. For an ancient audience, the use of familiar treaty language to enforce the covenant would link political power to curses. By allusion to kingly sovereignty, this power emerges from and reinforces divine sovereignty. As I argued in Chapter 1, biblical covenant curses borrowed from the 'secular' order of treaty curses and could best be understood in terms of political accountability rather than supernatural beliefs. But for treaty and covenant alike, the power and stability of curses depends on the concentration of this power in a small number of parties or institutions. Such was not the case in early modern England and Europe, where the dissemination of political and religious authority produced uncertainty, debate, and violence.

The power of curses depends not only on the words and the speaker but also on the listener's disposition. Curses are, so to speak, in the ear of the beholder. In 2 Samuel 16, an ostensibly non-supernatural imprecation is judged by David to be a divine curse. When a kinsman of Saul heaps insults upon David, David prevents his guard from killing Shimei, explaining, '"If he is cursing because he Lord has said to him, 'Curse David', who then shall say, 'Why have you done so?'… Let him alone, and let him curse; for the Lord has bidden him. It may be that the Lord will look on my distress, and the Lord will repay me with good for this cursing of me today"' (2 Sam. 16.7-8, 10-12). Though Shimei's curse is a spontaneous and vengeful expression of a weak party against a stronger one, David warily interprets it as a divine message.[23] In 2 Samuel 16, simple insults and profanity can be just as powerful as religiously marked curses. In this chapter, I discuss how similar anxieties in seventeenth-century England led to the displacement and redefinition of cursing and swearing.

Deuteronomy 28–30); spontaneous maledictions (2 Samuel 16, e.g.); ethnic curses (e.g., Genesis 9 and Joshua 9); and the ascription of special power to written curses (e.g., Numbers 5 and Zechariah 5).

22. Mendenhall, *Law And Covenant In Israel And The Ancient Near East*. The Hebrew phrase for making a covenant, literally 'cut a covenant' (כרת ברית), refers to the cutting of an animal as a conditional curse; see Chapter 1.

23. Early modern interpreters overlook the ambiguity of the curse, focusing selectively on Shimei's curse as an outrageous crime. See 'Curse Not the King: A Sermon' (London: J. Macock, 1660), p. 14, and Samuel Clarke, *A Mirror or Looking-Glass Both for Saints and Sinners* (London: R. Gaywood, 1671), p. 134.

Seventeenth-Century England

The religious wars of the seventeenth century made division and volun-
tarism a long-standing legacy of the Protestant Reformation. According
to Jonathan Israel, religious debate and war 'constituted Europe's prime
engine of cultural and educational change' during the period.[24] Never again
would religious identity be shared unquestioningly across most of Europe.
Luther's 'Freedom of a Christian', which authorized individual Christians to
be 'priests' independent of the Church, would symbolize a theological revo-
lution for many Christians in England and on the Continent.[25] The Catholic
Counter-Reformation would be required to take defensive positions on mat-
ters of practice and doctrine once taken for granted.

So many changes took place in the seventeenth century that innovation
and secularization are often associated with the term 'early modernism'
itself.[26] Descartes' *Meditations* (1641), Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), and
Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670) were all landmarks of new
thinking in this age. Yet even the later *Theodicy* of Leibniz (1710) begins
with the question of the 'conformity of faith with reason', and in answer-
ing in the affirmative (against Pierre Bayle), Leibniz, like Hobbes, makes
frequent, detailed reference to the Bible.[27] In the midst of all these changes
were fundamental shifts in the nature of authority, selfhood, and religion,
that would bring about changes in the nature of cursing, swearing, and other
kinds of powerful speech.[28]

The religious and cultural developments of the seventeenth century were
accompanied by mass distribution of tracts, treatises, laws, and academic
discussions of cursing and swearing, especially in England. Seventeenth-
century discourse on cursing was pivotal in the formation of contemporary
ideas of cursing and speech in general. If cursing could provide stability

24. Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Moder-
nity 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 23.

25. Luther, 'The Freedom of a Christian', in *Martin Luther: Selections from his
Writings* (ed. John Dillenberger; New York: Doubleday, 1961), p. 64.

26. These include the legal development of the private domain; the wide distribu-
tion of tobacco, cacao, firearms, and coffee; newspapers and other forms of cheap
print; technological transformations in sea navigation and manufacturing; and the
development of economic and educational systems.

27. Gottfried Leibniz, *Theodicy* (trans. E.M. Huggard; Indianapolis: Bobbs–Merrill,
1966), pp. 10, 133-43.

28. See André Holenstein, 'Seelenheil und Untertanenpflicht. Zur gesellschaftlichen
Funktion und theoretischen Begründung des Eides in der ständischen Gesellschaft',
in *Der Fluch und der Eid* (ed. Peter Blickle; Zeitschrift für historische Forschung,
Beiheft 15; Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1993), pp. 11-64; and Cabantous, *Blasphemy*,
pp. 62-79.

to religiously homogeneous societies, it threatened to destabilize seventeenth-century England, where new sects and doctrines undermined central authority. New understandings of religion, law, society, nature, and humanity emerged during this period, often through vigorous debate and even violent conflict. Cursing would undergo redefinition during the period, while new kinds of powerful speech emerged. At the heart of these changes, I suggest, was a process of articulating the cultural authority of the Bible, ranging from the Puritans who made it their primary text to the skepticism of Hobbes and the fictional utopia of Francis Lodwick, where the Bible was forbidden.[29] A cornerstone of Reformation doctrine, biblical authority was too vague and variously understood to perform the authoritative function of the papacy. Religious dissent in England led the Puritans to ban the doubt of scriptural authority in their 1648 Blasphemy Ordinance.[30]

The Puritan revolution of 1641 would accomplish two seemingly contradictory goals: the establishment of a deeply theocratic society grounded in the conviction that the divine order was real and present; and at the same time an erosion of the traditional monarchic identification of religious and political authority. This erosion, together with the overall Protestant limitations on religious authority, characterizes many theories of secularization (e.g., those of Max Weber and Peter Berger), insofar as it divides the political from the religious order. The Puritans' support for allowing the return of Jews to England, and their limited views on religious toleration, demonstrate the point emphatically. At the same time, however, the Puritans upheld the conviction that supernatural events and divine agency were parts of human life. Though the Protectorate of Cromwell would not last beyond 1658, the contradictory legacy of the Puritans as upholders of a divine order without the protection of a king, would extend through the Enlightenment well into the modern period.

The death of the king and the Reformation doctine of *sola scriptura* coincided in England, and the Puritans were compelled to address what it meant to affirm the political authority of the Bible *and* human liberty together. John Milton's *De Doctrina Christiana* attempts such a synthesis:

> It is not therefore within the province of any visible church, much less of the civil magistrate, to impose their own interpretations on us as laws, or as binding on the conscience; in other words, as matter of implicit faith. If however there be any difference among professed believers as to the sense of Scripture, it is their duty to tolerate such difference in each other, until God shall have revealed the truth to all.[31]

29. William Poole, 'A Baboon in the Garden of Eden', *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 December, 2002, pp. 10-11.

30. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 170.

31. John Milton, *De doctrina christiana,* in *The Works of John Milton,* XVI (ed. Frank Allen Patterson; New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), p. 267.

Milton recognizes that curses, oaths, and vows are powerful forms of speech available to anyone, but he fails to address the potential social disorder such freedom might bring to a society ruled by scripture: 'We are even commanded to call down curses publicly on the enemies of God and the church; as also on false brethren, and on such as are guilty of any grievous offence against God, or even against ourselves'.[32] Milton's failure to address this problem is an instance of the broader Puritan willingness to affirm human freedom in a world filled with contentious sacred as well as secular powers. For Milton, I suggest, these problems were overlooked or subordinated to a compelling theology, a narrative of human salvation that emerges not only in *Paradise Lost* but also in his doctrinal treatise.[33]

The religious sects that proliferated during the period often made religious dissent and difference part of religious identity. The so-called Ranters were not an organized group at all but a collection of diverse Protestant thinkers who were judged to be dangerous.[34] According to J.C. Davis, 'The image of the Ranter was a projection of deviance that had more to do with the reality of religious anxieties, a sense of dislocation, than with the reality of particular people or groups, their actions and beliefs'.[35] The case of the Ranters is analogous to other sects and group terms from the seventeenth century, including Dissenters, Puritans, Quakers, and Baptists. While some of these terms were embraced by those to whom they applied, the overall effect of such groupings was to set and harden boundaries within religious groups. The shifting boundaries of religious identity inspired many to ostracize and denounce other religious groups, while for others such as John Locke, they led to calls for greater toleration.

English Thought on Language, Religion, and Cursing

What did it mean to curse? The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists a range of uses deriving from the Old English *curs* (a term derived ultimately from Latin *cura*) that encompass legitimate and illicit expressions. Even before this term is attested, though, curses were a common element of Anglo-Saxon legal documents.[36] Like terms for cursing in the Bible, the English

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32. Milton, *De doctrina christiana*, in *The Works of John Milton*, XVII, p. 99.

33. See, for example, the vivid description of the final judgment, which includes the following: 'After the expiration of the thousand years Satan will rage again, and assail the church at the head of an immense confederacy of its enemies; but will be overthrown by fire form heaven, and condemned to everlasting punishment' (p. 363; the entire description runs from p. 355 to p. 375).

34. J.C. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 7-11.

35. Davis, *Fear, Myth and History*, p. 124.

36. Brenda Danet and Bryna Bogoch, '"Whoever Alters This, May God Turn his Face from Him on the Day of Judgment": Curses in Anglo-Saxon Legal Documents'.

term 'curse' covers a wide range of powerful speech acts. Curses could challenge institutions or defend them; they could be pious or playful, conditional or unconditional.

At the turn of the seventeenth century, Shakespeare's plays embody several contradictory views of curses and swearing: some are efficacious, such as the curses in *Richard III*, and others are profane and insulting, such as Caliban's bitter words to Prospero in *The Tempest*: 'You taught me language, and my profit on't/ Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/ For learning me your language!'[37] A dialogue from *King John*, in which the King of France must choose between his alliance with the king and the Church, plays on two senses of 'curse'. Philip's son Lewis tells his father that 'the difference/ Is purchase of a heavy curse from Rome,/ Or the light loss of England for a friend'. Blanch (John's niece) wittily follows, 'That's the curse of Rome' (3.1.204-208). Here 'curse' can refer to a powerful religious sanction or, metaphorically, an obstacle or nuisance.

Shakespeare thus dramatizes the question whether curses are efficacious. Some Shakespearean curses do wield power, in ways that drive his plots forward. *Henry VI Part I* features Joan Pucelle (Joan of Arc), a witch whose ability to summon demons enables her to influence the outcome of battles between the French and English. By the end of the play, however, her 'ancient incantations are too weak', and she is captured (5.2.27). In *Henry VI Part II*, the Queen worries that curses can rebound on the one who curses: 'Thou torment'st thyself;/ And these dread curses, like the sun 'gainst glass,/ Or like an overcharged gun, recoil/ And turn the force of them upon thyself' (3.2.329-332). At the same time, Shakespeare transforms religious categories into stagecraft, as Stephen Greenblatt has shown: '[T]he ghosts who are increasingly labeled as fictions of the mind—these do not altogether vanish in the later sixteenth century. Instead they turn up onstage'.[38] Through careful reading of the plays in the context of contemporary debates on religious issues, such as the reality of ghosts and Purgatory, Greenblatt demonstrates the degree to which Shakespeare's plays incorporate religion and religious controversy.[39]

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37. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (ed. Alfred Harbage; New York: Viking, 1984), act 1, scene 2, lines 363-65, p. 1378. Subsequent references to Shakespeare's plays in the text refer to this edition. See Frances A. Shirley, *Swearing and Perjury in Shakespeare's Plays* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979).

38. Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 151.

39. Greenblatt does not include a survey of curses in the plays, but he compares them to the use of dreams: 'If dreams in Shakespeare are not inevitably fulfilled, they are like curses always eerily powerful and disturbing' (*Hamlet in Purgatory*, p. 173).

Does speech have power? Hamlet equivocates, first berating himself for having only words to avenge his father: 'Why what an ass am I! This is most brave,/ That I, the son of a dear father murdered,/ Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,/Must like a whore unpack my heart with words/ And fall a-cursing lie a very drab…' (2.2.568-72). Where curses (maledictions) fail, he muses, plays have a way of making 'malefactions' 'speak': 'I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play/Have by the very cunning of the scene/Been struck so to the soul that presently/ They have proclaimed their malefactions./ For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak/ With most miraculous organ…' (2.2.574-78). The shift from speech without action to actions that 'speak' takes place by means of theater: 'The play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king' (2.2.591). Curses have been displaced by drama.

Or have they? The king ruminates later that his 'offence is ranke, it smells to heaven,/It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,/A brother's mur-der' (3.3.36-38). The allusion to the divine curse on Cain for the murder of his brother Abel (Gen. 4.11) accounts for the king's guilt as a divine curse. Unlike the ineffective curses of a 'drab' or whore, this curse takes effect by Claudius's own admission, preventing his prayers from reaching heaven. This curse is never spoken, however. It is rather internalized in his 'conscience', only to be activated by the play. Drawing brilliantly on a tradition that endows drama with power over human feelings and actions, Shakespeare has turned it into a tool of justice capable of drawing out hid-den motives, enforcing the genuine curse of divine judgment where human curses fail. In a pattern that will also appear in Milton, Bunyan, Defoe, Coleridge, and others, literary art records debates on powerful speech while becoming increasingly powerful in its own right.

A survey of seventeenth-century poetry shows that about fifty percent of selected poems from the Chadwyck–Healey database that include the term 'curse' and its derivations used the word in an explicitly religious context, while the other half used it in other ways, usually simply to indicate some-thing bad.[40] According to a 1630 sermon by the cleric Edward Brounker, 'Now both God and man are said to curse, Man curses when hee prayes or wishes for any ill to befall him with whom hee is offended, whose curses have no necessitating power of causing and induceing the evill which he wishes and prayes for, but may fall out to bee but as Arrowes shote against a stone wall which sends them back upon him that shott them'.[41] Divine cursing, on the other hand, is 'not a bare speaking ill of a man, though it

40. The source is the Chadwyck–Healey English Poetry Full-Text Database, avail-able online to members of VIVA (Virtual Library of Virginia).

41. Brounker, *The Curse of Sacriledge* (Oxford, 1630, *Early English Books Online* database, Chadwyck–Healey), p. 2.

sounds no more in grammar, but it is a true reall inflicting of something ill to flesh and bloud'.[42]

Sermons and laws of the period refer to 'prophane swearing and cursing'; one such law, enacted in 1650, applied a series of fines (based on social rank) for the first offenders and a three-year sentence of 'sureties to the good behavior' after the tenth offense; this law replaced an earlier, more lenient law enacted under James I.[43] Calls for more stringent enforcement and penalties rang through the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth, when Nathaniel Collier published a letter calling for higher fines and whipping.[44]

Early modern cursing and swearing did not only endanger individual souls; they also brought harm to the king and the entire state. 'To blaspheme', writes Cabantous, 'was to contest the hierarchy of fundamental, thus sacred, values, to dislodge the meaning of a subject's obligations of deference, to negate the virtue of obeisance and, at its limit, to question the very essence of the power that established them all. It was, finally, to throw society out of balance'.[45] Writing against the mandatory loyalty oaths of the Restoration, Samuel Fisher wrote that all such swearing was contrary to Christian teaching. Citing Jer. 23.10-12 and Hos. 4.2-3, he compared such oaths to pagan and Catholic superstitions, adding that such swearing was the 'reason of which this land now mourneth'.[46] In the same year, the spirit of the Restoration was marked by a sermon preached at St. Martin's called 'Curse not the King'.[47]

The many popular print genres that appeared in the seventeenth century reflect changes in how curses were understood. By the 1660s, enough almanacs were sold each year to stock forty percent of English households.[48] Another form of popular print was the broadside ballad, which performed the 'functions of the modern magazine of fiction and the tabloid newspaper'.[49] Most uses of the word 'curse' in these songs were decidedly

42. Brounker, *The Curse of Sacriledge*, p. 2.

43. *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum 1642–1660*, II (ed. C.H. Firth and R.S. Rait; Stationery Office: London, 1911), pp. 393-96.

44. Nathaniel Collier, *The Necessity of Providing Another and More Severe Law for the More Effectual Suppressing Profane Cursing and Swearing* (London, 1720), pp. 18-19.

45. Cabantous, *Blasphemy*, p. 62.

46. Samuel Fisher, *One Antidote More against that Provoking Sin of Swearing* (London, 1660), p. 1.

47. John Meriton, 'Curse Not the King: A Sermon' (London: J. Macock, 1660).

48. Wrightson, *English Society 1580–1680* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 205.

49. Douglas Bush, *English Literature in the Earlier Seventeenth Century 1600–1660* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 48. According to Keith Wrightson, '[O]ver 3000 separate ballad titles were entered with the stationers' company

profane, as in 'A Weminster Wedding, or a Whore-Master Buried Alive', which began with the line 'A curse on blind Cupid his name I do hate'.[50] Among them were ballads warning against swearing and cursing. In 'The Devils Conquest', a dispute between a maid and her mistress over eleven pence leads the maid to 'swear and curse, and wisht the devil fetch her', whereupon the maid dies suddenly.[51] Such lessons were also typical of contemporary judgment books, modeled on medieval *exempla* collections, such as Samuel Hammond's *God's Judgements upon Drunkards, Swearers, and Sabbath-Breakers* (1659).[52]

   Mass printing did not foreclose beliefs in supernatural phenomena, as Keith Thomas, Stephen Greenblatt, and others have shown. Trials for witchcraft numbered around 2,000 from 1560 to 1706, with about 300 executions.[53] Many of those accused were poor women who drew community scorn by their begging; such women were also feared for the power associated with the so-called 'curse of the poor'. With the eventual development of organized philanthropy in the seventeenth century, the poor could seek support from institutions, thus reducing the need for witchcraft as a scapegoating mechanism.[54] Though witchcraft trials declined significantly in early seventeenth-century England, it was still possible in 1617 to convict a woman like Mary Smith of witchcraft when illness followed her curses.[55]

between 1557 and 1709, most of them before 1675. They were sold by singers in the streets, by chapmen like the pedlar who called at Richard Baxter's home and at fairs and markets, and they sold in thousands' (Wrightson, *English Society*, p. 203).

   50. From the Broadside Ballad Index, online at http://web.archive.org/web/2003 1228231244/users.erols.com/olsonw/BRDNDRD.HTM (accessed 10 June 2010). A search of this database produced three 'hits' for 'curs', all of which were profane execrations. A similar search of the Bodleian Library's Allegro Catalogue of Ballads (http://bodley24.bodley.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/acwwweng/maske.pl?db=ballads, accessed 10 June 2010) produced seven hits.

   51. 'The Devil's Conquest, or, a Wish Obtained' (London: Sarah Tyus, 1665), English Short Title Catalogue 174539.

   52. Samuel Hammond, *God's Judgements upon Drunkards, Swearers, and Sabbath-Breakers* (London: E. Tyler, 1659). Judgment books provided a key source for John Bunyan's didactic lessons on swearing and cursing in *The Life and Death of Mr Badman* (1680) (see Chapter 6).

   53. Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 62, cited in Patricia Crawford, *Women and Religion in England 1500–1720* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 102.

   54. In Keith Thomas's words, '[T]he tensions and guilt which had produced the old allegations of witchcraft gradually withered away' (*Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 582).

   55. Wrightson, *English Society*, p. 211. See also Rosmarie Beir-de-Haan, Rita Voltmer, and Franz Irsigler (eds.), *Hexenwahn: Ängste der Neuzeit* (Berlin: Deutschen Historischen Museums, 2002), and Ian Bostridge, *Witchcraft and its Transformations c. 1650–1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). In Germany, a wide variety of

Historians continue to debate how far English Reformation doctrine extended into seventeenth century towns and parishes. By itself, no class of documents, whether popular print, literature, legal texts, or academic treatises, can settle these debates. While the extensive study of print media, diaries, and official records provide evidence of beliefs in supernatural events or providence, they hardly settle disagreements on the balance of continuity and change.[56] One promising approach to the problem of how to connect sources with social practice, however, is the category of anxiety. Drawing from the psychoanalytic insight that recurring narratives or other elements of discourse may betray a cultural preoccupation, this sort of analysis infers social practice from documentary evidence. In his study of cheap print accounts of violent crime, Peter Lake argues that stock figures such as the 'whore, the gallant/patriarch run amok, the usurer and the papist' were able 'to articulate, exploit and allay the anxieties felt by contemporaries in the face of political, religious and social change'.[57] Challenging historians who cast English culture into dichotomies of a popular culture still tinged with Catholicism and the 'perfect protestantism' of the divines, Lake depicts the period as a balance of continuity and change, as processes that were 'always contested and partial, subject to the input and influence of a large range of individuals and groups'.[58]

Hobbes, Locke, and Milton

While Puritans, Quakers, and other religious groups regarded cursing and swearing as potent, if illicit, actions, philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes described speech as a rational and conventional phenomenon distinct

curses and magical practices have been documented from the early modern period, and the frequency of witch trials peaked in several regions during the seventeenth century (Katrin Moeller, '"Es ist ein überaus gerechtes Gesetz, dass die Zauberinnen getötet werden": Hexenverfolgung im protestantischen Norddeutschland', in *Hexenwahn: Ängste der Neuzeit*, pp. 96-107). Two other sources on cursing in early modern Germany are Heinrich R. Schmidt, 'Die Ächtung des Fluchens durch reformierte Sittengerichte', in *Der Fluch und der Eid*, pp. 108-19, and Eva Labouvie, 'Verwünschen und Verfluchen: Formen der verbalen Konfliktregelung in der ländlichen Gesellschaft der Frühen Neuzeit', in *Der Fluch und der Eid*, pp. 127-31.

56. The category of Providence, for example, can be construed as a rationalized innovation or a continuation of medieval exempla tradition. See Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, pp. 78-81, 92-93, and Michael Witmore, *Culture of Accidents: Unexpected Knowledges in Early Modern England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

57. Peter Lake with Michael Questier, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat: Protestants, Papists and Players in Post-Reformation England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. xxv.

58. Lake, *The Antichrist's Lewd Hat*, p. 318.

from action. According to Hobbes, speech is used to 'register' causes and effects, to teach others, to 'make known to others our wills', and in recognition of poetry, 'to please and delight our selves, and others, by playing with our words, for pleasure or ornament, innocently'.[59] Speech is thus divided between serious and playful uses, but Hobbes omits the powerful forms of speech such as oaths, though he includes them in his discussion of laws and contracts. By themselves, words are 'too weak to hold men to the performance of their Covenants', so they must be fortified either by pride or fear, the latter being more useful through the use of oaths in the name of one's own religion.

Hobbes's philosophy of language moves in two directions with respect to religious tradition. On the one hand, the power of covenants, oaths, and other kinds of speech does not inhere in the words themselves; the 'force of words' is 'too weak to hold men to the performance of their covenants'.[60] Only if certain conditions obtain, such as the power of the parties to honor a covenant, and the presence of a sovereign to enforce it, does a covenant have power. When there is no civil power present, the parties can swear an oath, but it will only have force if the one swearing it: 'So is our Forme, *I shall do thus, and thus, so help me God.* And this, with the Rites and Ceremonies, which every on useth in his own Religion, that the feare of breaking faith might be the greater'.[61] Powerful speech binds because those using it believe it binds.[62] Writing during the Puritan Interregnum, Hobbes's *Leviathan* tacitly recognizes the religious diversity of his time.

Yet Hobbes's recognition of religious difference does not shake his confidence in biblical tradition; the 'dictates of Reason' covered in *Leviathan* are articulated and supported with innumerable biblical references and allusions, and they are entirely consistent with the 'word of God, that by right commandeth all things'.[63] His denunciation of swearing echoes the Puritan clergy of his time when he adds that 'Swearing unnecessarily by God, is but prophaning of his name: and Swearing by other things, as men do in common discourse, is not Swearing, but an impious Custome, gotten by too much vehemence of talking'.[64] Unlike the ritualized cursing and swearing associated with Church traditions of the Middle Ages, 'prophane' cursing and swearing were the consequence of too much passion.

59. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin, 1987), pp. 101-102.
60. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 200.
61. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 201.
62. See Victoria Kahn, *Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640–1674* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 154-62.
63. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 217.
64. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 201. Here Hobbes also acknowledges the absence of a king: '[M]en have sometimes used to swear by their Kings, for feare, or flattery'.

Hobbes's ambivalence toward the power of language stands out in the titular passage of his book, which specifies a covenant or oath formula for membership in a commonwealth: 'I Authorise and give up my Right of Governing my selfe, to this Man, or to this Assembly of men, on this condition, that thou [every other member of the commonwealth] give up thy Right to him, and Authorise all his Actions in like manner'.[65]

The traditional site of sovereignty was the body of the king, but with Hobbes's *Leviathan*, the idea of a sovereign commonwealth gained philosophical grounding. The famous frontispiece to his book shows a figure with the head of a king but a body made up of many subjects. The English Revolution and the regicide of 1649 had irreversibly shifted sacred power from the king to the commonwealth.[66] In this way, England differs from France, where vivid images of the king's body remained crucial to political and religious discourse through the Revolutionary period.[67] How did England accomplish this transition from the body of the king to the body politic? Though the question requires several answers, it would be difficult to overestimate Protestant doctrines of scriptural authority.

From the Puritan and Anglican divines to Locke, scarcely a single argument is made without appeal to Scripture. Divided bitterly on most questions of governance and worship, English Protestants faithfully observed the authoritative role of scripture. They also widely shared the converse of this doctrine, namely, a fierce contempt for Catholicism. Of course, there were as many views on the *nature* of scriptural authority as there were religious and political factions, but as a rhetorical form, the use of the Bible to justify statements is common to works of doctrine, politics, or philosophy in the period. Even Hobbes, who challenged the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch long before the historical critics, wove hundreds of scriptural citations into the *Leviathan*.[68] My point is not so much *what* the Bible said as the fact that its authority supported so many disparate forms of English discourse. Of course, no claim to authority went unquestioned in the seventeenth century, and the Bible, along with competing ideas of political

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65. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 227.

66. See Sergio Bertelli, *The King's Body* (trans. R. Burr Litchfield; University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), p. 264.

67. Antoine de Baecque, *The Body Politic: Corporal Metaphor in Revolutionary France, 1770–1800* (trans. Charlotte Mandell; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). Royal statutes against blasphemy in France corresponded to key crises, confirming 'antiblasphemy's lofty role in reestablishing, totally and spectacularly, the holy office of royalty'. See Cabantous, *Blasphemy*, pp. 76, 65. See also Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).

68. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 417.

and religious order, was the focus of intense theological and philosophical scrutiny. Symptomatic of these shifting notions of authority was the widespread concern with cursing and swearing.

While cursing and blessing would be domesticated and rationalized by the century's end, the swearing of oaths for ecclesiastical, judicial, and political purposes could not.[69] Neither reason nor faith could resolve the kinds of dispute that had spilled so much blood, even that of a king, so it would become necessary to develop a doctrine of the transcendence of civil society, according to which some authority, even if it were not common, could undergird social bonds. As Michael Walzer puts it, 'For both Hobbes and the Calvinists, the antidote to wickedness and disorder was arbitrary power'.[70] To put it even more bluntly, it didn't matter what you believed, as long as you believed in *something*.

Such an authority vacuum could not, of course, be sustained, and it would take another hundred years for Enlightenment thinkers like Kant to develop notions of human autonomy and dignity sufficiently robust to ward off the kind of religious and political chaos left in the wake of a weakened monarchy. Already with Hobbes and Locke, however, there were signs of such an order based neither on kings, popes, nor scripture but rather on theories of the self.

By the end of the seventeenth century, exhausted by religious conflict, several thinkers endorsed a more private, voluntary conception of religion. The Revolution of 1688 brought an end to the reign of the Catholic James II. In 1689, the Toleration Act lifted penalties on Protestant Dissenters, though as Andrew Murphy points out, this legislation was motivated more by political concerns than philosophical breakthroughs. The law notably preserved the Test Act, which required Protestant office holders to swear oaths (which, e.g., Quakers refused to do).[71] In the same year, John Locke published his Latin *Letter on Toleration*. Citing the numerous wars and conflicts waged (among Christians), the *Letter* articulates a principle of religious liberty based mainly on the spirit of Christian charity and the separation of Church and state. Like Defoe and other writers on religion in the late seventeenth century, Locke minimizes religious differences that create violent conflict, proposing a simple version of Christianity instead:

69. One indicator of the importance of oaths is the index of the *Thomason Tracts*, a catalogue of seventeenth-century pamphlets, which includes thirteen entries for 'oaths' and no entries for 'curse', 'blasphemy', or 'swearing'.

70. Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 159.

71. Andrew R. Murphy, *Conscience and Community: Revisiting Toleration and Religious Dissent in Early Modern England and America* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), p. 159.

> Why then does this burning zeal for God, for the church, and for the salva-
> tion of souls—actually burning at the stake—pass by, without any chastise-
> ment or censure, those wickednesses and moral vices which all men admit
> to be diametrically opposite to the profession of Christianity, and devote
> itself entirely and bend all its energies to the introduction of ceremonies, or
> the correction of opinions, which for the most part are about subtle matters
> that exceed the ordinary man's grasp? … For he is not a heretic who follows
> Christ and embraces his doctrine, and takes up his yoke, though he forsake
> father and mother, the public ceremonies and assemblies of his country, and
> indeed all other men.[72]

For Locke, the state magistrate has no business dictating religious affil-
iation or details of worship, since churches are voluntary organizations
concerned with the domain of the soul. Locke even extends toleration to
pagans, 'Mahometans', and Jews.[73] There are limits on this religious tolera-
tion, however, on any doctrine that would challenge the morals or political
authority of the state.[74] In addition, atheists cannot be tolerated in Locke's
commonwealth, because they are unable to swear an oath: 'Promises, cov-
enants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, have no hold upon
or sanctity for an atheist; for the taking away of God, even only in thought
dissolves all'.[75] Locke cannot imagine a Commonwealth without all of its
members affirming belief in a supernatural power that enables them to
swear an oath. In other words, political society depends on the commitment
to metaphysical realities and the ability to perform reliable (or to use J. L.
Austin's term, 'felicitous') speech acts.

The swearing of oaths was challenged on religious grounds during the
seventeenth century: in 1660, many Quakers and other non-Anglicans were
imprisoned for their refusal to swear an oath of allegiance to Charles I.
Writing from prison, Samuel Fisher denounced the oath, calling it 'Papist'
and arguing that oaths (like temple sacrifices) became obsolete with Christ,
who is the 'Oath of God'.[76] Oaths, like profane swearing and cursing, were
taken very seriously during the seventeenth century, especially by Chris-
tians who sought to expand and exercise the religious liberty promised by
the Reformation. Thus, while the separation of church and state for Locke

72. John Locke, *Epistola de tolerantia* (*A Letter on Toleration*) (trans. J.W. Gough;
Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), pp. 61-63.

73. Locke, *Letter on Toleration*, p. 145.

74. Locke's views on toleration did not, moreover, rule out his support for the
Church of England, and they differed in important ways from those of contemporary
dissenters and Latitudinarians. See John Marshall, *John Locke: Resistance, Religion
and Responsibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. xix, 50-68.

75. Locke, *Locke's Letter on Toleration*, p. 135.

76. Samuel Fisher, *One Antidote More, Against That Provoking Sin of Swearing*
(London, 1660), p. 6.

seems at first to be quite tidy, the oath seems to represent a residue of the church in the state.

Locke's version of Christianity sought to build consensus around core teachings. In *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), he anticipates Kant's view (in *Reason within the Limits of Reason Alone*) that (Christian) religion is consistent with natural law and provides a palatable vehicle for its instruction.[77] But the fine points of Christian doctrine that led so many of his contemporaries to war or calls for persecution are not Locke's focus. Writing out of a desire to harmonize religion with reason, Locke combines his general support for Christianity with a call for toleration.

Milton's *Treatise of Civil Power* (1659) anticipates Locke's argument. He defends religious liberty on Christian grounds, insisting that a life of faith must be freely chosen. From this it follows for Milton that the state magistrate has no place in the 'settlement of religion, by appointing either what we shall believe in divine things or practise in religious'.[78] '[I]n matters of religion', writes Milton, 'none can judge or determin here on earth'.[79] Milton does not rule out all forms of regulation in religious matters, but he argues that such discipline must take place within the religious community to which one belongs voluntarily.[80] Religion, for Milton, is a matter of 'conscience', not something that can be compelled by church or state authorities.[81]

Like Locke, Milton makes certain types of powerful speech an exception to the principle of religious freedom, endorsing, for example, the 1650 act against blasphemy, which provided for the banishment of guilty parties from England. For Milton, blasphemy is not a matter of conscience like heresy (the exercise of individual choice), but rather a profane and disorderly act.[82] Milton defends the Cromwellian vision that allowed diverse forms of worship while restricting blasphemous speech (even though he approves of religious cursing; see the reference to *De Doctrina Christiana* above).[83] Like the religiously skeptical Hobbes, Milton severs religious toleration from the practical demands of civil order.[84] Like later Enlightenment thinkers, Milton fails to reconcile religious toleration with conflicts over what constitutes legitimate curses, blasphemy, and other kinds of powerful speech.

77. John Locke, *John Locke: Writings on Religion* (ed. Victor Nuovo; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 194-99.

78. Milton, *A Treatise of Civil Power*, p. 271.

79. Milton, *A Treatise of Civil Power*, p. 248.

80. Milton, *A Treatise of Civil Power*, p. 249.

81. Milton, *A Treatise of Civil Power*, p. 249.

82. Milton, *A Treatise of Civil Power*, pp. 249-51.

83. Murphy, *Conscience and Community*, pp. 118-19.

84. Critics of toleration often accused their opponents of religious skepticism. See Murphy, *Conscience and Community*, pp. 106-107.

While he removed blasphemy from the domain of conscience in his political writings, Milton also produced one of the most influential bodies of imaginative literature in the English language that, like Shakespeare's drama, arguably displaced religious forms of powerful speech. *Paradise Lost* (1667) pursues the pious goal of justifying the 'ways of God to men' in the tradition of the great pagan and Catholic authors, vividly depicting Satan as one who prefers freedom in Hell over service in Heaven, and in which 'The Mind is its own place, and in itself/Can make a Heav'n of Hell, and Hell of Heav'n'.[85] One is more likely to think of Restoration comedy, Rabelais, or Shakespeare as figures of the 'civilization of blasphemy', but it was Milton, the fierce opponent of blasphemy, who achieved a blend of legitimate religious discourse with the powerful speech of poetry.[86]

Another form of displaced curses was satire. Along with the 'impartial' reports of 'Occurrences Foreign and Domestick' published in the first newspapers,[87] satires and parodies were among the period's most popular periodicals. *Poor Robins Intelligence* and *Poor Robins Prophesies* ridiculed astrology and other popular supernatural beliefs in the 1670s.[88] In *The Shortest Way With Dissenters*, discussed below, Daniel Defoe facetiously proposed the expulsion of religious dissenters, of whom he was one.

Bunyan and Defoe

Writing in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, John Bunyan and Daniel Defoe sought to carry the banner of Puritanism well after the Restoration of the English monarchy, at a time when religious controversies raged. It was also a time of significant literary upheaval, as Michael Boardman notes: 'Defoe wrote at a time when many literary conventions must have seemed exhausted'.[89] Even for Bunyan, whose narratives garner very

85. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 1, 254-55 (New York: Odyssey, 1962), p. 263.

86. Victoria Kahn relates Milton's literary production to his politics, reading *Paradise Lost* as an allegory of political contract and *Samson Agonistes* as a meditation on political life under an unwanted tyrant (Charles II) (*Wayward Contracts*, pp. 196-222, 252-78).

87. The phrases appear in various newspaper titles, such as *The Impartial Protestant Mercury or Occurrences Foreign and Domistick* (1681), and the *Current Intelligence*, which reports on 'foreign and domestick Affairs…without any reflections upon either persons or things, giving only the bare matter of fact' (1681), Burney Newspaper Collection, British Library.

88. Burney Newspaper Collection, British Library. See also James Sutherland, *English Literature of the Late Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 240-41.

89. Boardman, *Defoe and the Uses of Narrative* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983), p. 1.

little contemporary critical attention, there is significant variety and exper-
imentation. The well-known literary innovations of Puritan authors from
Milton to Defoe signal, among other things, significant shifts in cultural
understandings of religious and literary language, especially cursing and
swearing. Not only did cursing and swearing strike contemporary authors as
a growing social evil, but they also represented the convergence of a num-
ber of shifting conceptions of self, evil, language, and authority in the sev-
enteenth century. By the early eighteenth century, conceptions of cursing
and swearing would shift, and the tradition of negative efficacious speech
would be displaced onto new forms of expression.

  It is important to reiterate that these shifts do not betoken a wholesale
secularization of religious beliefs. Although it is true that, compared to
Defoe, Bunyan writes more openly devotional works that reflect traditional
understandings of divine punishments and rewards, I avoid casting them in
stark contrast to each other. Bunyan's religious moralism takes shape in a
literary context. And despite his reputation as a founder of modern fiction
and modern sensibilities, and his departure from Bunyan's view of curs-
ing and swearing as efficacious, Defoe continued to hold many traditional
views inconsistent with 'secularism', such as the belief in ghosts, the devil,
and witches.[90] While the religious classification of John Bunyan's writings
arouses little controversy, Daniel Defoe poses a challenge to contemporary
scholars who see an inconsistency between his affinities with secular moder-
nity and his belief in ghosts and the devil. In a review of Defoe's 1727 *Essay
on the History and Reality of Apparitions*, James Sharpe observes, 'Defoe,
the harbinger of modernity, was obviously very involved in a supernatu-
ral belief-system which, on many interpretations, was becoming intellec-
tually redundant by the end of the first quarter of the eighteenth century'.[91]
According to Sharpe, Defoe's belief in apparitions supported the idea of
divine providence and steered a middle path between deism and atheism. If
Defoe invented the modern novel, he did so within a biblical tradition that
included supernatural realities and powerful words.

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  90. See Baine, *Daniel Defoe and the Supernatural* [cited in Chapter 5]. On witches,
Defoe writes, citing Lev. 18.10, 'Would God have expressed His abhorrence and detes-
tation of such if there were not, or could not be, any such thing in the world? …[those
who doubt] must first, of course set aside all Scripture testimony; and this tends to
abundant atheism…it is enough that there is abundant testimony, both from Scripture
and from criminal process of the truth, of it: that there are and ever have been such
people in the world who converse familiarly with the Devil, enter into compact with
him, and receive powers from him, both to hurt and deceive, and these have been in all
ages called witches…' (Defoe, 'A Digression upon Witches', *Review* 8 [1711], in *The
Best of Defoe's Review: An Anthology* [ed. William L. Payne; New York: Columbia
University Press, 1951], pp. 202-205 [204-205]).
  91. James Sharpe, 'Home Helps', *TLS* (August 24 and 31, 2007), p. 13.

Cursing the Self: Bunyan's The Life and Death of Mr Badman

John Bunyan's *The Life and Death of Mr Badman* (1680), a didactic fiction cast in a more naturalistic vein that *A Pilgrim's Progress*, includes a lengthy discussion of swearing and cursing. The purpose of the book is to allow the reader to view, 'as in a Glass…the steps that take hold of hell'.[92] Like other religious treatments of the period, Bunyan's text preaches against the dangers of these vices, even invoking the possibility of miraculous punishments against the offenders. Bunyan wrote long after the dream of a Puritan society in England had been extinguished, during the Restoration that rolled back the strict religious mores of the Puritan Commonwealth, witnessed shockingly profane stage productions, and perpetuated religious and political confusion. It was a time when 'England shakes and totters already, by reason of the burden that Mr Badman and his Friends have wickedly laid upon it'.[93] Writing more as a pastor to his congregation than a public figure (or state official, as Milton was), Bunyan depicts Mr Badman as a recognizable figure of English society.

Mr Badman embraces swearing and cursing as a 'Badge of his Honour: He reckoned himself a mans Fellow when he had learnt to Swear and curse boldly'.[94] Mr Attentive corroborates this tendency as a general problem among men: 'I am perswaded that many do think…that to Swear, is a thing that does bravely become them, and that it is the best way for a man, when he would put authority, or terrour into his words, to stuff them full of the sin of Swearing'.[95] Swearing sometimes comes from that 'daring Boldness that biddeth defiance to the Law that forbids it'.[96] Mr Attentive also sees a poetic impulse in swearing, with which men try to 'beautifie their foolish talking'.[97]

What kind of authority or terror do these swearing men seek? What deficit leads them to swear and curse in order to seem 'Gentleman-like'? Bunyan supplies the stock explanations, such as the devil's prompting, greed, and rage, but his account points to two key issues that characterize early modern habits of cursing: authority of individuals to perform powerful speech acts, in the absence of monolithic church and state powers; and the related power to create and experience poetry—the domain that will later be called aesthetics. Perhaps both can be described by what Sennett calls the 'negative

92. Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr Badman* (ed. James F. Forrest and Roger Sharrock; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 1.
93. Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr Badman*, p. 2.
94. Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr Badman*, p. 27.
95. Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr Badman*, p. 27.
96. Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr Badman*, p. 29.
97. Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr Badman*, p. 28.

spirit' that animated the Puritan and French Revolutions, according to which 'people began to think that if you destroy legitimacy, you destroy the force of authority'.[98] In the case of profane cursing and swearing, the authorities in question extend from the state, which outlaws these practices, to the church and God, upon which these laws are based.

Listing the types of swearing and cursing of which Mr Badman is guilty, the narrator of the book, Mr Wiseman, follows a description of cursing others with cursing oneself:

> He would also as often wish a Curse to himself, saying, Would I might be hanged, or burned, or that the Devil might fetch me, if it be not so, or the like. We counte the *Damme* blades to be great Swearers; but when in their hellish fury they say, *God-damme me, God perish me,* or the like, they rather curse than swear; yea, curse themselves and that with a Wish that Damnation might light upon themselves; which wish and Curse of theirs, in a little time, they will see accomplished upon them, even in Hell-fire, if they repent them not of their sins.[99]

The expression 'God damn me' first appeared in Shakespeare's 1591 *Comedy of Errors*,[100] and it would be an object of scorn for Defoe (below). Robert Boyle, who published *A Free Discourse against Customary Swearing and a Dissuasive from Cursing* in 1695, warned that those who say 'The Devil take me' invite just that, and he wonders what will be 'strong enough to bridle' the corruption of anyone willing to say such things.[101] Another tract would declaim, '"God judge me, God Damn me": What amazing astonishing language is this?'[102] At a time of religious and political change, curses against the self defy Church and state authority.

And yet such curses could have biblical roots, particularly in Job and Jeremiah (see Chapter 3). In his 1621 *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Richard Burton cites these two self-curses in a long list of biblical and classical expressions of misery.[103] Before the passage in *Mister Badman* just cited, Bunyan cites Job as an opponent of cursing: 'I have not suffered (says he) my mouth to

98. Richard Sennett, *Authority* (New York: Knopf, 1980), p. 43. For Sennett, this spirit leads directly to a typically modern ambivalence toward authority, whereby individuals forge 'bonds of rejection' with people in power (pp. 27-28).

99. Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr Badman*, pp. 30-31.

100. Montagu, *The Anatomy of Swearing*, p. 162.

101. Robert Boyle, *A Free Discourse against Customary Swearing and a Dissuasive from Cursing* (London, 1695), p. 11. Boyle makes liberal use of judgment stories; he illustrates the danger of invoking the devil with a bizarre story of bestiality (pp. 11-14).

102. William Assheton, *A Discourse against 1. Drunkenness 2. Swearing and Cursing* (London, 1692), p. 41.

103. Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621, *Early English Books Online* database, Chadwick–Healey).

sin, by wishing a curse to his soul; or consequently, to Body or Estate'.[104] In *The Jew of Malta*, Marlowe's Barabas contends his situation is worse than Job's:

> So that not he, but I may curse the day,
> Thy fatall birth-day, forlorne *Barabas*;
> And henceforth wish for an eternall night,
> That clouds of darknesse may inclose my flesh,
> And hide these extreme sorrowes from mine eyes:
> For onely I haue toyl'd to inherit here
> The months of vanity and losse of time,
> And painefull nights haue bin appointed me.[105]

Terms like 'damme boys' appear in a variety of texts from the period. An anonymous ballad from 1679 declaims

> Another who would be distinguish'd from Cit
> And swearing God dam me, to shew him a wit,
> (Who for all his huffing one grain hath not got)
> Scoffs at all Religion, and the Popish plot.[106]

The designation also appears in William Congreve's 1695 *Love for Love: A Comedy*:

> And this our Audience, which did once resort
> To shining Theatres to see our Sport,
> Now find us toss'd into a Tennis-Court.
> These Walls but t'other Day were fill'd with Noise
> Of Roaring Gamesters, and your Damme Boys.[107]

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104. Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr Badman*, p. 30.

105. Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2003), p. 13.

106. 'A New Satyricall Ballad of the Licentiousness of the Times' (London 1679. British Library: Luttrell 2.116). The ballad concludes its long litany of foolish figures as follows: 'It very much helps a Wise Man's Melancholly,/To see and Observe and to Laugh at their Folly'. The term also appears in a 1667 English translation of Francisco de Quevedo's *Visions of Dom Francisco de Quevvedo Villegas*: '*Sweetheart*, would I say, *Pray'e what ha' we to do with these Frippery Fellows, and Damme Boyes, shake them off, I'd advise ye, and take this for a warning*' (Chadwyck–Healey, *Early English Books Online* database).

107. William Congreve, *Love for Love: A Comedy*, Epilogue (1695, Chadwyck–Healey, *Early English Books Online* database). Another instance of the term appears in a translation of Francisco de Quevedo's *The Visions of Dom Francisco de Quevedo Villegas, Knight of the Order Of St James* (1667): 'But when the *Rich Merchants* came; *Oh very good*, would I say, *This is as well, as well can be*. Sometime we had the hap to be visited by some *Pennyless Courtier*, or *Low-Country Officer* perchance; then should I take her aside, and Rattle her to some Tune: *Sweetheart*, would I say, *Pray'e what ha' we to do with these Frippery Fellows, and Damme Boyes, shake them off, I'd advise ye, and take this for a warning* (Chadwyck–Healey, *Early English Books Online* database).

Evidence of self-cursing continued well into the eighteenth century, when Defoe's attack on the practice, in 'A Tilt at Profanity' (1711), combined resignation with disdain:

> Now really to tell these men of affronting God Almighty, and of provoking their Maker, you had as good talk gospel to a kettle drum; but tell them they are fools, that they talk nonsense, desire them to put their speech into Latin, and shew you which is the principal verb; tell them they are not fit for common conversation, that in common language they cannot be understood. When a man salutes you with 'How do you do, G—d damme', and the like, desire him to take a pen and ink and write it down and see how it will read.[108]

Bunyan's objection to cursing is consistent with biblical theology: God alone has the power to curse: 'not to Curse wickedly, as *Mr Badman*, but justly, and righteously, giving by his Curse to those that are wicked, the due Reward of their deeds'.[109] Bunyan justifies his diatribe on scriptural grounds, citing not only the commandment against taking the name of God in vain (Exod. 20.7), but specifically condemning, following Jeremiah 5.2, such expressions as 'The Lord liveth', when they are uttered 'vainly, needlessly, and without a ground'.[110] Citing prooftexts from other prophets, as well as the curse of Shimei on David (2 Sam. 16) and discourses on cursing in Job, Bunyan establishes a case against cursing and swearing than any of these passages would sustain.

Citing James 3.9, which inveighs against cursing men while blessing God, Bunyan equates cursing people, who are made in the image of God, with cursing God directly. He illustrates by analogy to the king: 'Suppose that a man should say with his mouth, I wish that the Kings Picture was burned; would not this mans so saying, render him as an Enemy to the Person of the King?'[111] Here Bunyan reveals a clear anxiety of his times: does the person of the king, or paintings of him, demand reverence ?[112] Religious and political institutions were in tumult during the seventeenth century, and a key consequence of these conditions was anxiety about the very kind of authority that Bunyan claims men sought through cursing and swearing.

In another case reported by Mr Attentive, a father entertains his friends at the ale-house by provoking his 'half-fool' son to curse him, 'at which the

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108. Defoe, 'A Tilt at Profanity' (*Review* 8, 14 February 1711), in *The Best of Defoe's Review: An Anthology* (ed. William L. Payne; NY: Columbia University Press, 1951), pp. 258-622 (260).

109. Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr Badman,* p. 31.

110. Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr Badman*, p. 28.

111. Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr Badman*, p. 32.

112. De Baecque, *The Body Politic*; Sergio Bertelli, *The King's Body: The Sacred Rituals of Power in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (trans. R. Burr; Litchfield: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

old man would laugh, and so would the rest of the guests, as at that which pleased them best) still continuing to ask, that Ned still might be provoked to curse, that they might still be provoked to laugh'.[113] Cursing is dangerous stuff, not to be taken lightly. The very idea of cursing as a form of entertainment shocks Bunyan, who is convinced of the power of spoken words.[114]

Bunyan's description of self-cursing is vivid and consistent with other accounts from the period (e.g., Defoe; see below), but he is at a loss to explain it: 'But for a man to curse himself, must needs arise from desperate madness'.[115] More concerned with the clear danger posed by cursing than its cultural function, Bunyan demonstrates a clear lack of analytical imagination in the matter of widespread self-cursing. His failure to provide analysis of contemporary cursing makes his indictment seem shrill in the end. It also contributes to a degree of blindness toward his own standpoint. If the thrill of defiant action is a cause of self-cursing, then it is one with which Bunyan himself is familiar. In his Preface he notes that writing about Mr Badman is like hunting a 'Wild Boar':

> But I have adventured to do it, and to play at this time, a the hole of these Asps; if they bite, they bite… Well then, I have spoken what I have spoken, and now come on me what will. Job 13.13. True, the Text says, Rebuke a scorner and he will hate thee; and that, He that reproveth a wicked man, getteth himself a blot and shame; *but what then*? Open rebuke is better than secret love; *and he that receives it, shall find it so afterwards*.

This display of pride and bravado resembles the devil-may-care attitude of the 'damme blades' far more than standard Puritan piety: 'come on me what will'. Bunyan compares himself to Moses in the rebellion of Korah (Numbers 16). Even more striking is the quotation (from Prov. 9.7-8) that teaches against reproving a wicked man, because it brings on a blot and shame, i.e., a curse. Bunyan strikingly acknowledges the teaching here, but he then simply disregards it. His gloss on the text, which is to leap forward to Prov. 27.5 and a paraphrase on 28.23, challenges the teaching of Proverbs 9 but leaves the curse untouched. In other words, criticizing evil people is not only dangerous, it is also contrary to biblical teaching, and Bunyan makes no secret of his decision to proceed anyway!

In effect, Bunyan has stolen the thunder of the self-cursing Mr Badman by engaging in the same kind of high-risk speech act. Though done in the name of righteousness, Bunyan admits his task is dangerous, relishes it, and glosses over his own recognition of its questionable morality. If Mr

113. Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr Badman*, p. 35.
114. See Bunyan's 'Ebal and Gerizzim, or the Blessing and the Curse', a long didactic poem that makes extensive use of the covenant traditions of blessing and curse, in *One Thing Is Needful* (London, 1683).
115. Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr Badman*, p. 31.

Badman is 'mad' for cursing himself, so too is Bunyan. It could also be the case that Bunyan's literary cart is ahead of his moralistic horse. The realism of this book, despite its clumsy didacticism, plays oddly against a fictionalizing tendency that makes everything a bit unstable: combining allegorical names, dialogue form, naturalistic description, firsthand accounts, and exempla from Puritan 'judgment books'.

The most dramatic case concerns a washer-woman, Dorothy Mately, who denies stealing two pence by 'wishing, *That the ground might swallow her up if she had them*', whereupon she was swallowed up, and found later four yards underground with the money in her pocket.[116] The episode is marked off by Bunyan as one of which he has direct experience, but it clearly comes from the 1654 judgment book, *A Mirrour or Looking-Glass Both for Saints and Sinners*.[117] A strong parallel also appears in Samuel Hammond's *God's Judgements upon Drunkards, Swearers, and Sabbbath-Breakers* (1659).[118] Bunyan has thus either exaggerated the verisimilitude of his book or fictionalized the entire work, even his note to the reader. It is striking that such an immediate and fierce fate is reserved for a woman, despite the overwhelming emphasis on swearing and cursing as male vices. She is swallowed up by the earth, the domain to which women and peasants are best suited.

In other words, the moral ambivalence of *Mr Badman* is also a literary one. Bunyan seems eager to merge the tradition of the judgment book, which has roots in medieval *exempla* tales, with a socially accurate narrative. To indicate eye-witness or otherwise reliable judgments 'from the just and revenging hand of God', Bunyan placed a small, illustrated pointing hand in the margin of the book.[119] In addition to the traditional genres of the moral dialogue and the judgment story, Bunyan incorporated a rich description of his social world and elements of the picaresque, a genre that teaches by the negative example of the anti-hero.[120] In this mixture of literary genres, Bunyan, like Milton before and Defoe after him, accomplishes a range of effects that complicate the didactic purpose of denouncing the evils of Mr Badman.

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116. Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr Badman*, p. 33.

117. Cited in the introduction to Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr Badman*, pp. xx n. 31.

118. The woman in this case, Margret Wood, often says, 'I wish I may sink into the earth'. She and another woman sink into the a pile of lead ore where they are working 'where many horses laden with lead had passed the day before; the earth suddenly failed under them, and swallowed them both up'. While her friend is found upright, 'Margeret [*sic*] Wood was many yards deeper within ground, and her head direct downwards' (Samuel Hammond, *God's Judgements upon Drunkards, Swearers, and Sabbath-Breakers*, pp. 76-77).

119. Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr Badman*, pp. 3-4.

120. Forrest and Sharrock, 'Introduction', in Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr Badman*, pp. xv-xxxiii.

An ambivalence thus seeps into *Mr Badman*, as the aesthetic impulse of depicting evil overwhelms the need to defeat it. Bunyan's admission to the pleasure of the curse, in which men assert a kind of authority through speech, even to the point of inviting harm to themselves, appears in several ways: his preface, the judgment stories of Dorothy Mately and the 'half-fool' son who curses his father, and the particular emphasis on self-cursing, betray an aesthetic interest that exceeds the demands of moral instruction: even Bunyan, it seems, partakes richly, if inadvertently, of the pleasure of the curse.

Defoe: An Essay upon Projects *(1697),* The Shortest Way with Dissenters *(1702), and 'A Tilt at Profanity' (1711)*

Defoe echoes Bunyan's criticisms of cursing in *An Essay upon Projects*, but he elaborates more fully on the subject. His discussion of swearing appears in a proposal for the establishment of an English society for language and learning modeled on the Academy of France.[121] In addition to cultivating learning and rules of English style, the society would judge, based on the criteria of 'wit and religion', which plays could be staged.[122] The volume and variety of Defoe's writings also afford a chance to consider the development of new genres in light of his views of cursing. 'Familiar swearing', writes Defoe, is 'Scum and Excrement of the Mouth', the most foolish of all Vices, and it has become widespread and typically English.[123] Swearing is most common among men, so much so that many believe 'a man's Discourse is hardly agreeable without it'.[124] He illustrates at length: 'Jack, *God damn me* Jack, *How do'st do, thou little dear Son of a Whore? How has thou done this long time, by God?'*[125]

Unlike Bunyan, though, Defoe does not seem to fear immediate supernatural punishments for cursing and swearing. His criticism emphasizes the senseless, nonsensical character of swearing. The curses cited by Defoe offend more for their gratuitousness than for their sinfulness:

> 'Tis Words spoken which signify nothing; 'tis Folly acted for the sake of Folly, which is a thing even the Devil himself don't practice: the Devil does evil, we say but it is for some design, either to seduce others, or, as some Divines say, from a Principle of Enmity to his Maker: Men Steal for Gain, and Murther to gratify their Avarice or Revenge…but this, of all Vicious Practices, seems the most Nonsensical and Ridiculous; there is

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121. Defoe, *An Essay upon Projects* (New York: AMS Press, 1999), pp. 89-91.
122. Defoe, *An Essay upon Projects*, pp. 96-97.
123. Defoe, *An Essay upon Projects*, p. 93.
124. Defoe, *An Essay upon Projects*, p. 92.
125. Defoe, *An Essay upon Projects*, p. 93.

neither Pleasure nor Profit; no Design pursued, no Lust gratified, but is a mere Frenzy of the Tongue, a Vomit of the Brain, which works by putting a Contrary upon the course of Nature.[126]

The shift from Bunyan to Defoe is easy to miss but crucial: no longer a direct challenge to divine authority, everyday curses are simply pointless. They violate the dictates of sense and reason.[127] Curses, in other words, are no longer efficacious in themselves. Nor do they defy the understanding quite as completely as they do for Bunyan, who regards them simply as the result of madness. A writer whose breadth of genres far exceeded Bunyan's, Defoe evinces a more subtle awareness of the non-literal uses of language than Bunyan. And even though he denies there is any 'pleasure' in swearing, Defoe's description of the phenomenon suggests otherwise.

Defoe regards swearing as a breach of good manners, 'as if a man shou'd Fart before a Justice, or talk bawdy before the Queen'; as such, he argues that his proposed society for language would be a more effective remedy than the unenforced blasphemy laws: 'It must be Example, not Penalties, must sink this Crime'.[128] By shifting his censure of swearing from Church and state to the domain of manners, Defoe has domesticated the practice. A religious tract of the period echoes this move: 'If Religion hath no influence upon you; if the Laws of God shall not confine you; then let the Laws of Decency, and a just Reverence for Mankind in some measure restrain you'.[129]

The same argument is made in more colorful terms in 'A Tilt at Profanity' (1711):

> I have seen two beaux meet in a coffee house, that perhaps had not seen one another for a month or such a matter, who begins thus. 'Jack, G—d damme how dost do? Where has thou been all this while by G—d?' … And these are men of wit, gentlemen, men of quality, men of fashion. And what must a man say to them? Say to them! Why, say they are fools. They talk nonsense, and make men of true sense count them ridiculous fellows; in short,

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126. Defoe, *An Essay upon Projects*, p. 95.
127. Defoe, *An Essay upon Projects*, p. 94.
128. Defoe, *An Essay upon Projects*, p. 96.
129. William Assheton, *A Discourse against 1. Drunkenness 2. Swearing and Cursing* (London, 1692), pp. 37-38. The debate continued into the eighteenth century, with such tracts as Anon, *The Necessity of Providing Another and More Severe Law for the More Effectual Suppressing Profane Cursing and Swearing* (London, 1720). Not all vestiges of efficacious cursing had vanished by the end of the century: an anonymous tract called *Phineas: Or, the Commun Duty of All Men and the Special Duty of Magistrates to Be Active and Zealous in the Execution of Laws Against Scandalous Sins and Debauchery and of That in Particular, Against Prophane Cursing and Swearing* (London, 1695) describes the vice of cursing as 'one of these Impieties for which the Land Mourneth, Jer. 23.10' (p. 14).

> it is not wicked only, but senseless, foolish, and ridiculous, and men that
> pretend to wit ought to be kicked out of company when they swear thus, for
> talking nonsense.[130]

As in the seventeenth century, cursing in the eighteenth century remains typical among 'men of quality, men of fashion'. While their words are 'wicked', the main point here is that they are 'senseless' rather than powerful, and that those who swear should be socially ostracized. 'Nonsense' implies the opposite of efficacious speech, since nonsense fails, by definition, to have meaning, reference, or significance. Nevertheless, Defoe ascribes efforts to promote cursing to the devil.[131]

Defoe's account of cursing anticipates the category of the aesthetic: it is useless, gratuitous, words that 'signify nothing' and like the later idea of art for art's sake, strike him as folly for folly's sake. It is difficult to resist the comparison to later Romantic ideals of the aesthetic. But one can also detect the seeds of a poetic impulse toward curses in an earlier Puritan work, Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). In that work, Milton had transformed the biblical narrative of the Fall into a poetic masterpiece, one in which Satan prefers freedom in Hell over service in Heaven, and in which 'The Mind is its own place, and in itself/Can make a Heav'n of Hell, and Hell of Heav'n'.[132] With respect to cursing, the curse imposed on Adam after the Fall, in whom 'all Posterity stands curst', leads him, like Job, to utter curses of his own: 'Outstretched he lay, on the cold ground, and oft/Curs'd his Creation'.[133] Cursed, Adam curses; fallen, he (like the poet himself) retains the freedom to create meaning through speech. To what extent poetry and piety rival each other is not the question here. In any case, the Puritan hostility toward cursing and swearing did not prevent their greatest writers from partaking of the form and, ultimately, transforming it into a poetically ambitious, aesthetic form.

A passage from a 1710 ballad attributed to Defoe ('The Pacificator') sums up this transitional sensibility:

> Let all the little Fry of *Wit-Profaners*
> Rest as they are, with neither Sense, nor Manners,
> Forsaken of *Apollo*'s Influence,
> With want of *Language*, and with want of *Pence*
> What Fools Indite, let none but Blockheads Read,
> And may they write in vain, who write for Bread:
> No Banters on the Sacred Text admit,
> Nor *Bawdy Lines*, that *Blasphemy of Wit*.[134]

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130. Defoe, 'A Tilt at Profanity', p. 260.
131. Defoe, 'A Tilt at Profanity', p. 261.
132. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book I, pp. 254-55, 263.
133. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book X, pp. 817-18, 851-52.
134. 'The Pacificator: A Poem' (1700, Chadwyck–Healey, *Early English Books Online* database).

Itself a kind of mild curse on 'wit-profaners', Defoe's ballad argues that with without sense and sense without wit make not only for bad poetry but also bad politics: '*Wit without Sense in Verse* is all but *Farce,*/*Sense without Wit in Verse* is all *mine A—*'. Religious terms—profaner, sacred text, and blasphemy—are now mere metaphors, and the ballad itself resorts to the kind of vulgarity Defoe elsewhere denounces.

The shift from religious institutions to political ones is further underscored by another ballad attributed to Defoe. Paradoxes, curses, and oaths carry Defoe's sardonic message of political despair:

> The Pulpit thunders Death and War,
> To heal the bleeding Nation;
> And sends Dissenters to the Dev'l,
> To keep the Toleration…
> King William on our Knees we curse,
> And damn the revolution;
> And to preserve the Nations Peace,
> We study its Confusion.
> With Treacherous Heart and double Tongue,
> Both Parties we adhere to;
> Pray for the side we swear against,
> And curse the Side we swear to.
> To Heaven we for our Sov'reign pray,
> And take the Abjuration;
> But take it Hocus-Pucus way,
> With juggling Reservation'.[135]

Satire: The Shortest Way with Dissenters *(1702)*

Defoe achieved significant attention and notoriety for the publication of a satirical essay arguing for the expulsion of religious dissenters. In the essay, he invokes the biblical curse on Amalek (Exodus 17; see Chapter 8) as part of the diatribe against religious dissidents. Like Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, which was influenced by Defoe, the essay criticizes a point of view by depicting it in an extreme way. (Swearing actually forms the subject of a satire attributed to Swift, 'Swearers Bank' [1721], which calculates that thousands in government revenue could be raised by fining swearers.[136])

135. From 'The Age of Wonders: To the Tune of Chivy Chase', 1710, which the British Library catalogue speculates was written by Defoe, online at http.//www.bl.uk/ (accessed 10 May 2010).

136. See Claude Julien Rawson, *God, Gulliver, and Genocide: Barbarism and the European Imagination, 1492–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

> We have been huffed and bullied with your act of Toleration; you have told
> us that you are the Church established by law, as well as others; have set up
> your canting synagogues at our church doors, and the Church and members
> have been loaded with reproaches, with oaths, associations, abjurations,
> and what not.[137]

Arguing to remove the Dissenters, the oratory compares them to 'serpents,
toads', and 'vipers' that are 'noxious to the body' and anticipates future
reproaches from children who say '"You had an opportunity to root out this
cursed race form the world under the favour and protection of a true Eng-
lish queen; and out of your foolish pity you spared them…your sparing this
Amalekite race is our destruction, your mercy to them proves cruelty to your
poor posterity"'.[138] While the satire is clearly a distancing technique, it car-
ries the residue of efficacious speech, cursing in particular, by mentioning
them in the first place, and in addition by resorting to a form of expression
that operates more by aesthetic than ratiocinative means. For the viciousness
of cursing and violence invoked by Defoe's satire aims at some of the same
kinds of effects as direct cursing and violence, and they appeal likewise to
passions as much as to the intellect. Like fiction that purports to be fact, sat-
ire can invoke the most discredited views and passions while also keeping
them as a literary distance.

As Defoe certainly knew, those who wrote polemical satires and ballads
might receive the same treatment. The following is an excerpt from a ballad
called 'A Hue and Cry after Daniel De Foe, for Denying the Queen's Hered-
itary Right', by Robin-Hog (1711):

> Now Daniel De-Foe, now run for thy Life,
> For robin-Hog swears by's old grunting Wife,
> He'll end all your Government-Quarr'ls and Strife…
> But Daniel is now upon his last Legs,
> For Scribbling and Scandal, on his Knees begs,
> Some L—ds to protect him from rotten Eggs…
> 'Twill be Daniel's Fate to suffer in Print.[139]

137. Defoe, 'The Shortest Way with Dissenters', *Political and Economic Writings of
Daniel Defoe*, III: *Dissent* (ed. W.R. Owens; London: Pickering & Chatto, 2000), pp.
95-109 (98).

138. Defoe, 'The Shortest Way with Dissenters', pp. 104-105; Defoe makes compari-
son here to Moses: 'a merciful, meek man, and yet with what fury did he run through
the camp, and cut the throats of three-and-thirty thousand of his dear Israelites that
were fallen into idolatry' (p. 105).

139. Another ballad, introduced by a criticism of 'Shortest Way with Dissenters',
purports to reply point by point to a ballad by Defoe. Titled 'Daniel the Prophet no
Conjurer: or, His Scandal. Club's Scandalous Ballad, called The Tackers; Answer'd
Paragraph by Paragraph', the ballad includes a preface:

Robinson Crusoe

Defoe's most famous work, *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719), announces its religious purpose in the Preface as a story told 'to justify and honour the Wisdom of Providence in all the Variety of our Circumstances, let them happen how they will'.[140] The Preface also claims that the book is 'a just History of Fact; neither is there any Appearance of Fiction in it'.[141] Readers are thus compelled to weigh the religious seriousness of the book against its resort to the literary device of presenting fiction as fact. On account of *Crusoe*, James Joyce credited Defoe as the 'father of the English novel'.[142] The religiosity of the book, moreover, is relatively muted against the background of Crusoe's adventures and struggles to survive. While elements of adventure and description in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Mr Badman* are always subordinated to religious purposes, Defoe's fiction strikes a very different balance, placing far more emphasis on the inner life and outward experiences of characters like Crusoe.

Crusoe's experiences evoke new and strong religious feelings, as when the discovery of barley leads him to ears of gratitude for providence, but these feelings quickly give way to the efforts of a self-sufficient *homo economicus*: when he discovers the grain growing all over the island, his 'religious Thankfulness to God's Providence began to abate', and he saves and cultivates as much of it as he can.[143] Crusoe's experiences elicit a growing sense of piety in him, one that emerges out of sustained personal reflection, memories of his father's words, and doubts on how to interpret the hand of God in his ostensibly mundane experiences.[144] Later, by the time

[A]s Mr Dr Foe sometime since would have fix'd his *Shortest way with the Dissenters* upon the Church of England, so to tread in his own Steps, and shew he paid all imaginable Deference to his own Example, he takes the Liberty to charge this Sample of Inveteracy likewise upon the Members of the same Communion, and if he meets with the same Punishment, it's no more than he Deserves. The Design of his Writing is levell'd at the Establish'd Church, and tho' he is somewhat more Modest than the Observator in his Reviews…by different Approaches they meet together in the ame Angle at Last, and joyn in overthrowing the Foundation of the Government Ecclesiastical and Civil (p. 3).

140. Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (ed. Michael Shinagel; New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), p. 3.
141. Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p. 3.
142. Joyce, 'Daniel Defoe', in *Crusoe*, p. 321.
143. Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p. 58.
144. See, e.g., the account of his illness and 'first Prayer', *Robinson Crusoe*, pp. 65-68.

he instructs Friday in the religious doctrines of 'a "great first Cause" and "a secret directing Providence"', Crusoe projects little of this personal doubt, at least on the doctrine of God.

He struggles, however, in his attempts to communicate the nature of the devil and evil in the world, and Friday persistently challenges the reasons for the existence of evil in the world. Unable to answer Friday's questions, Crusoe seeks divine guidance through prayer and scripture, and when he returns to the conversation, he finds himself transformed by instructing Friday. Rather than answering Friday's questions about theodicy, it seems Crusoe has transcended them. The experience prompts an observation about religious controversy: 'As to all the Disputes, Wranglings, strife and Contention, which has happen'd in the World about Religion, whether Niceties in Doctrines, or Schemes of church government, they were all perfectly useless to us'. This sentiment resembles Locke's effort to look beyond sectarian differences in his 'Letter on Toleration' and 'On the Reasonableness of Christianity'.[145]

Defoe's answer to Friday's questions about the Devil, evil, and suffering leads to a two-part response: first, the resort to direct religious experiences (prayer, reading Scripture, teaching), experiences Crusoe describes in nearly ecstatic terms: he and Friday are 'perfectly and compleatly happy, *if any such Thing as compleat Happiness can be form'd in a sublunary State*'.[146] The second response is, without ever addressing Friday's concerns about theodicy, to minimize and trivialize the religious controversies of the day. An elision occurs, in other words, between the basic question of theodicy and the 'Niceties' of religion that preoccupy contemporary debate. Rather than engage the debates on religious matters so crucial to his Puritan community, Defoe simply denies their importance in favor of a blissful religious state. Problems of evil and suffering are repressed.

Robinson Crusoe has become a *locus classicus* of modern economic and literary discourse. In 'The Scriptural Economy', de Certeau identifies *Crusoe* as a 'romance of writing', a modern myth of the 'capitalist conquering task of writing'.[147] Other studies of Defoe's novel highlight the colonialist overtones of Crusoe's relationship with Friday.[148] *Crusoe* demonstrates the value of such categories as Providence and blessing for modern experience, but like much modern discourse, the novel euphemistically avoids evil, suffering, and cursing.

The implications of Defoe's fiction for religious worldviews are significant. Unlike the author of *Mr Badman*, who assumes great personal risk

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145. Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p. 160.
146. Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, p. 159.
147. Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 136.
148. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 172-97.

in order to compel his countrymen to see the failings of evil ways, Defoe suggests a retreat from religious controversy, a significant shift toward voluntarism and individualism in religious affairs. As Leopold Damrosch observes, Crusoe is the first of many outsider protagonists in Defoe's fiction: 'And by Defoe's time the attempt to create a counter-*nomos* in the Puritan small group—Bunyan's separated church—was increasingly a thing of the past'.[149] Instead of trying to reform the world, Damrosch argues, Defoe withdraws his character from it, placing him in a kind of Eden where there is no need to worry about corruption, religious controversy, or such social evils as cursing.

In short, Defoe's fiction replaces curses with blessings. Crusoe leaves his 'cursed' existence behind, only to reap enormous spiritual and material blessings at the hand of Providence.[150] Defoe accomplishes this shift through a contrary feat of worldly verisimilitude and world-rejection. The verisimilitude begins, of course, with the assertion in his Preface that *Crusoe* is a 'History of Fact', but it continues through the painstaking details of Crusoe's experiences, modelled chiefly on the growing literature of seafaring voyages. It is not that Defoe denies supernatural realities such as the devil and angels, but his fiction clearly mutes them in favor of the material and psychological realities of the narrator.[151] The experience of Providence, a concept more strongly associated with blessings than curses, is more indirect than the supernatural punishment meted out to the likes of Dorothy Mately. *Crusoe* contains only a fraction of the religious discourse one finds in *Mr Badman*, but readers of the book are asked to accept a story compelling and idyllic enough to rival the Celestial City.

In his fictionalized history of the 1665 London plague (published in 1722), Defoe describes the popular belief that comets sighted at the time foretold the plague. His narrator expresses an ambivalence toward supernatural beliefs:

> I saw both these stars, and, I must confess, had so much of the common notion of such things in my head, that I was apt to look upon them as the forerunners and warnings of God's judgements; and especially when, after the plague had followed the first, I yet saw another of the like kind, I could not but say God had not yet sufficiently scourged the city.
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> But I could not at the same time carry these things to the height that others did, knowing, too, that natural causes are assigned by the astronomers for such things, and that their motions and even their revolutions are calculated,

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149. 'Myth and Fiction in *Robinson Crusoe*', in *Robinson Crusoe*, p. 375.

150. Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, pp. 82, 205.

151. See Rodney M. Baine, *Daniel Defoe and the Supernatural* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1968), esp. the discussion of Defoe's *History of Apparitions*, pp. 20-27.

or pretended to be calculated, so that they cannot be so perfectly called the forerunners for foretellers, much less the procurers, of such events as pestilence, war, fire, and the like.[152]

For novelist J.M. Coetzee, Defoe's engagement with the supernatural relates directly to the creative act of authorship. In *Foe*, the character Susan Barton asks the author Foe whether she is an author, a character, or a phantom. Foe replies,

> Let us confront our worst fear, which is that we have all of us been called into the world from a different order (which we have now forgotten) by a conjurer unknown to us, as you say I have conjured up your daughter and her companion (I have not). Then I ask nevertheless: Have we thereby lost our freedom? … Do we of necessity become puppets in a story whose end is invisible to us, and towards which we are marched like condemned felons? You and I know, in our different ways, how rambling an occupation writing is; and conjuring is surely much the same.[153]

The question is not simply how Defoe combines religious tradition and secular modernity—clearly he can be marked as a 'transitional' figure—but whether the particular configuration of beliefs and attitudes expressed in his work belong to a grand narrative called 'secularization'. My preference for the term 'displacement' here avoids the grand narrative of secularization without ignoring the significant socio-religious change Defoe represents. This change combines novel religious ideas with novel literary expressions. As Coetzee's novel shows, the writing of fiction raises questions about the supernatural (conjuring, phantoms) and human freedom. Religion, in Defoe, mingles with literature, and if one can say that his literature displaces religion, the statement summarizes a complex set of combinations and changes that cannot be taken simply as secularization.

The Culture of Cursing

Debates on cursing and swearing are debates on sacred authority, and the Reformation had thrown Europe's political and cultural systems of authority into turmoil. The formation of new sects and denominations, along with the dispersal of political power in Europe, made religious affiliation a matter of choice on an unprecedented level. The wide distribution of such print media as newspapers created new avenues for self-expression, just as the vernacular Bible created new access to authoritative texts and commentary. Religious and literary innovation flourished during the period, and cursing was one of its benchmarks. For cursing and swearing are a kind of *poiesis*, a form of self-expression capable of resisting the authority of Church and state. It is

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152. Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (New York: Penguin, 1986), p. 41.
153. J.M. Coetzee, *Foe* (New York: Viking, 1987), p. 135.

no accident that ideas of autonomous art and literature flourished soon after this period in which cursing and swearing seemed to run out of control.

Like jokes, curses and debates on their power may reveal anxiety and other unconscious motives.[154] At their core, curses reflect a triangular relationship of power between the individual, the object of the curse, and the agent of the curse. By uttering a curse, the individual claims the power to invoke harm on another. In this case of self-cursing, where a usually male speaker's bravado dares God to damn him, a shocking assertion of power makes early modern anxieties of authority and selfhood acute and transparent.[155] And by some accounts, as religious cursing diminished, sexually charged curses increasingly took their place.[156] Why? The Puritan critics of cursing associate it with social interaction among males, especially soldiers. Cursing and swearing become hallmarks of a certain type of masculinity, a kind of boisterousness and bravado that defied convention and decorum.[157] It would be misleading to characterize early modern cursing merely as a populist defiance of Church and state, but cursing did, increasingly, challenge these institutional powers over individual action.

The domestication of religion brought about by the religious conflicts of early modernity gave women a more prominent role in religious education and practice. The ramifications of these developments for cursing were that the male scorn and defiance men had once directed at Church and state would increasingly focus on women as the new guardians of piety. According to Patricia Crawford, the Interregnum and Restoration periods witnessed sharper divisions between men and women: 'As elite men turned away from revealed religion, and adopted deism, or worse, the cultural gap between elite men and women widened'.[158] Partly in reaction against the perceived dangers of religious enthusiasm and the growing consensus that reason and religion corresponded to men and women respectively, the feminization of religion accelerated in the seventeenth century. Women, somewhat less powerfully than the Church and state, would become the new upholders of religion and opponents of cursing and swearing.

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154. Sigmund Freud, *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* (Leipzig: Franz Deuticke, 1921).

155. In France, swearing was commonly attributed to tradesmen, seafarers, and men in taverns, especially in cities such as Paris (Cabantous, *Blasphemy*, pp. 97-104).

156. Hughes, *Swearing*, pp. 227, 237.

157. Responding to the observation that Mr Badman 'reckoned himself a mans Fellow when he had learnt to Swear and Curse boldly', Bunyan's Mr Attentive comments: 'I am perswaded that many do think, as you have said, that to Swear…is the best way for a man, when he would put authority, or terrour into his words, to stuff them full of the sin of Swearing' (Bunyan, *Life and Death of Mr Badman*, p. 27).

158. Patricia Crawford, *Women and Religion in England: 1500–1720* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 185.

Protestant (especially Calvinist) notions of individual religious liberty and conscience, together with the Cartesian revolution in conceptions of the self, had enlarged the interior domain of the individual in the seventeenth century.[159] Thoughts, motivations, and reservations could all flourish in the early modern psyche, separate from the scrutiny of the outside world. This newly generated interiority threatened systems of power: how would allegiance to the authorities be gauged and monitored? Along with the proliferation of competing religious and political institutions, the privacy and liberty of the individual could undermine the fabric of civil society.

Harry Bracken notes that oaths would become a key political and social bulwark against the growing privacy and religious diversity of the seventeenth century. As Thomas Comber wrote in 1682, a solemn oath is an 'Appeal to a Higher Power…who sees if we deceive, and cannot be deceived', despite the fact that political authorities cannot 'discern the hearts and thoughts of others'.[160] As Locke and others observed, the desired elimination of superstition and religious conflict did not rule out the importance of oaths, a plainly religious speech act, as a binding political force.[161]

By the end of the seventeenth century, the decline in the notion of curses as an efficacious part of religious tradition rendered cursing profane or illicit. In its place were diatribes against profane cursing and swearing, which were regarded neither as religious nor (for Defoe if not for Bunyan) serious or efficacious. But efficacious speech itself did not disappear. The closest analogues to curses would be oaths and blessings. More distant forms of powerful speech included satire, rationalistic discourse, obscenity, aesthetics (romanticism), and hermeticism. How exactly were curses displaced? The question demands more than this study can provide, but I contend that Puritan thought and politics worked with early modern philosophy to displace curses in England, and that both operated within the broader framework of biblical tradition.

Conclusion

Jean Delumeau's 'civilization of blasphemy' highlights the satisfaction of resisting established authority. In this sense, the types of profanity denounced in Bunyan and celebrated in later writers like Sterne, are really

159. Harry Bracken, 'Minds and Oaths', *Dialogue* 17 (1978), pp. 209-27.
160. Thomas Comber, *Sermon* (1681), cited in Bracken, 'Minds and Oaths', p. 218.
161. Echoing Keith Thomas, Heinrich Schmidt writes, 'Der Kampf der Religion gegen die Magie schaltete den Glauben an das Wirkwort aus. Damit wurde aber auch das "staats- oder gerichtstechnisch" in Dienst genommene Fluchwort seiner selbstmächtigen Wirksamkeit beraubt. Der Eid verlor im 18. Jahrhundert im Zuge von Entsakralisierung und Säkularisierung seine staatstragende Funktion' ('Die Ächtung des Fluchens durch reformierte Sittengerichte', p. 119).

two sides of the same coin. On some level, the delight in curses is a species of the poetic act that would become increasingly associated in the modern period with individuality.

Aesthetics and authority are key words for developments on cursing in the seventeenth century. Even while they denounced cursing and swearing, the Puritans participated in the domestication of cursing, from a matter of efficacious speech to a form of rude and senseless behavior. At the same time, other forms of efficacious speech continued to hold importance: oaths in particular. Whether in the name of the king or of the post-revolutionary state, oaths formed a basic social bond to hold systems of law and society together. But while oaths could withstand the transition to post-Enlightenment culture by their appeal to rational commitments, the supernatural element of curses would require their displacement into other kinds of discourse. This displacement would coincide with enormous literary innovation and the birth of aesthetics. It would also coincide with the emergence of new attitudes and forms of authority. If what Sennett calls 'disobedient dependence' was to become typical of modern forms of authority, then the propensity to say 'God damn me' was surely an early case in point.[162]

The seventeenth century in England witnessed significant shifts in the boundaries of religious, political, and personal authority. One marker of these shifts is efficacious speech, especially oaths, curses, and swearing. Are such utterances genuinely efficacious? Who is charged with regulating such speech? Hammond's 1659 tract against Drunkards, Swearers, and Sabbath-Breakers begs magistrates to enforce laws against these violations,[163] but the very appeal suggests, in the twilight of the Interregnum, that cursing and swearing were destined to undergo major shifts by the end of the century. Indeed, by Defoe's time, cursing and swearing were domesticated and downgraded from efficacious religious speech to poor manners. It remained for new genres and types of discourse to carry the tradition of powerful negative speech.

When it came to cursing, Puritans like Bunyan and Defoe did protest too much; disheartened by their own weakening position by the end of the century, they incorporated self-assertion and even bravado into new literary forms. Their unacknowledged delight in curses is a species of the poetic act that would become increasingly associated in Romantic and modern writing

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162. Sennett, *Authority*, p. 28. The notion of 'disobedient dependence' has close affinities with Nietzsche's concept of *ressentiment*, which would form part of a critical appraisal, even a curse, on Christian post-Enlightenment morality; see the chapter on Nietzsche below.

163. Hammond, Epistle Dedicatory to *God's Judgements Upon Drunkards, Swearers, and Sabbath-Breakers*, n.p.

with individuality. And while they certainly rejected the signs of 'secularization', they nevertheless contributed to the gradual privatization and voluntarism of religion, what Peter Berger calls the 'heretical imperative', as they redefined and displaced the culture of cursing. Though not proto-romantics, Bunyan and Defoe contributed to ideas of literary authorship that would culminate in Coleridge and Wordsworth, as the next chapter tries to show. Long before Kant, seventeenth century England had carried out several cultural and institutional displacements, and if Kant receives credit for replacing religious authority with the individual, it is partly because he worked in continuity with the Protestant reformers and dissenters who preceded him. Thus Kant's replacement was really a displacement, one that had its own paradoxical orientations to cursing and powerful speech (see Chapter 6). Efficacious religious cursing may have passed out of fashion, but powerful speech, in the form of new literary and philosophical genres, lived on. Autonomy was theonomy in a new key.

Many scholars describe changes in institutional religion as secularization. Christopher Hill, for instance, ties the decline of church authority to a broad change in attitudes: '[B]y 1714 fairies, witches, astrology and alchemy were no longer taken seriously by educated men'.[164] Such a claim demands more consideration than this study can allow, but it would seem to disqualify Daniel Defoe at least from the ranks of educated men.[165] Over a century after Hamlet's ghost first appeared, Defoe's writings on ghosts and the history of the devil obviate a secularist worldview. At the same time, the concern for everyday social, economic, and political realities in his writing does reflect a shift in sensibility from the works of Bunyan or Milton.[166] Unlike Milton and Bunyan, Defoe regarded curses to be the a problem of manners rather than supernatural power, and he looked back to the English Reformation with nostalgia: 'Reformation of Manners has something of a Natural Consequence in it from Reformation in religioun… The reformation, begun in England in the Days of King Edward the Sixth, and afterwards gloriously finished by Queen Elizabeth, brought the English nation to such a degree of Humanity, and Sobriety of Conversation, as we have reason to doubt will hardly be seen again in our Age.'[167] The hope for a Christian

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164. Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution: 1603–1714* (London: Routledge, 1980), p. 4.

165. See Baine, *Daniel Defoe and the Supernatural*, esp. the discussion of Defoe's *History of Apparitions*, pp. 20-27.

166. The difference between Defoe and Milton has less to do with belief in the supernatural than how that belief is depicted. In *The History of the Devil*, Defoe writes, 'In a word, Mr Milton has indeed made a fine poem, but it is the devil of a history' (*The History of the Devil: Ancient and Modern* [East Ardsley, W. Yorks: EP Publishing, 1972], p. 83).

167. Defoe, 'The Poor Man's Plea in Relation to All the Proclamations, Declarations,

society, or even a well-mannered one, seems to have died for Defoe, but ghosts and devils remained.[168]

Neither simple progress nor eternal recurrence, the displacement of cursing is illustrated by Cabantous's notion of 'desacralized' blasphemy in seventeenth and eighteenth-century France, where the Revolution ushered in the 'sanctification of the political'.[169] But even as politics absorbed religious functions, other religious practices, such as oaths, persisted. The ambivalence of Hobbes and Locke toward powerful speech was reflected in the widespread uses of cursing and swearing in contemporary England. Could human speech, like the divine speech of the Bible, be genuinely powerful?

For England, the vernacular Bible only reached wide circulation in the seventeenth century, a time of great religious instability. If a cultural shift in the understanding of curses was necessary in the seventeenth century, then I suggest this displacement was related to the need to hold the Bible at a safe distance. No longer shielded from its audience by rare handwritten manuscripts and the Latin tongue, the Bible had become, by mid-century, a dangerously familiar and wide-circulating text. As sole authority for the Protestant body politic, the Bible must become an icon.

The revolutionary implications of the vernacular Bible may be a cliché, but it may be less trite to suggest that literary and philosophical trends usually described as early modern emerged not so much from the imperative of disenchantment as the imperative of displacement. To a world in which religious words had power—sacramental, magical, and otherwise—the prospect of a familiar Bible would have been shocking, just as a world without ghosts or purgatory was unthinkable to Shakespeare's audience. Literary strategies of displacement and transformation, such as metaphor, parody, quotation, irony, and paradox, could place the Bible at a distance from its readers, even though they could still view it 'up close', so to speak.

These strategies produced a kind of apotheosis of the Bible, like the elevation of the word to the Word achieved in the gospel of John (1.1ff.): the Bible and biblical speech could be displaced by doctrines of the Bible, a process assiduously undertaken already by the reformers themselves, and continued by such means as Milton's doctrine of two-fold scripture, 'one external, which is the written word, and the other internal, which is

Acts of Parliament, etc'. (1698), in *The Shortest Way with Dissenters and Other Pamphlets by Daniel Defoe* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1927), p. 2.

168. Defoe was not alone. See Jane Shaw, *Miracles in Enlightenment England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); thanks to Tom Laqueur for this reference; and Michel de Certeau, *The Possession at Loudun* (trans. Michael B. Smith; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

169. Cabantous, *Blasphemy*, pp. 149-55.

the Holy Spirit, written in the hearts of believers, according to the promise of God'.[170] Against the historical and hermeneutical challenges of deriving doctrine from the Bible, Milton offers the 'inward persuasion of the Spirit working in the hearts of individual believers'; the Spirit prevails, in the end, over the letter.[171] The Bible could thus retain its aura, its capacity to seem distant even up close, precisely by literary techniques of distancing.[172] Philosophical projects, such as Hobbes's skeptical assessment of Mosaic authorship and Locke's wish to harmonize reason with revelation, could function, in a different way, to place the Bible at a distance from the contemporary world. Hobbes's Bible opens up many layers of hidden textual history, a past that cannot be fully seen, while Locke encourages the paraphrasing of the Bible over reading and commentary on the text itself. The former anticipates historical-critical research on the Bible, while the latter reinforces religious tendencies not to examine the Bible too closely. The displacement of the Bible mirrors the displacement of curses: the seventeenth century witnessed changes to prevailing ideas of powerful text and powerful speech.

If we can see changes in thinking and practices of cursing as a process of displacement, then the myth of modern disenchantment or secularization itself may best be understood as part of biblical tradition. A canonical scripture and the manifold practices of recitation, translation, and interpretation accumulated over centuries may, I suggest, provide more insight into cultural change than such binaries as sacred and profane, natural and

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170. Milton, *De doctrina christiana*, in *The Works of John Milton,* XVI, p. 273. A fine study of how these issues played out in the eighteenth century is Jonathan Sheehan's *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). Sheehan tracks the development of the Bible in eighteenth-century England and Germany, particularly in light of emerging scholarship on the Bible, with keen insight and careful detail. With the emergence of what he calls the 'cultural Bible', Sheehan notes 'a different version of secularization, one that focuses less on the disappearance of religion than on its transformation and reconstruction' (p. xi). For reasons I have already outlined, I prefer to avoid the term secularization, though I share Sheehan's sense that transformations of biblical tradition challenge conventional notions of secularization.

171. Milton, *De doctrina christiana*, in *The Works of John Milton,* XVI, pp. 273-85.

172. I allude here to Walter Benjamin's idea of aura as the object's appearance of distance even when it is close: see Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations* (ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn; New York: Schocken, 1985), pp. 217-52; and 'Kleine Geschichte der Photographie', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, II (ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser; Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), pp. 368-85. See also David Ferris, 'Introduction: Aura, Resistance, and the Event of History', in *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 1-26.

supernatural.[173] In terms of biblical tradition, Puritan teachings on curses go hand in glove with the religious thought of Hobbes and Locke and lead eventually to Immanuel Kant. As Stout and others argue, the Protestant Reformation anticipated the Enlightenment concern for individual liberty, a process reflected in changing ideas and practices of cursing.[174] And as Nietzsche and Foucault point out, the autonomy promised by Kant's Enlightenment enabled the unprecedented affirmation of state political power.[175] Nor was there a diametrical opposition between religious authors of judgment books, which taught morals through examples of supernatural punishments: these stories, while certainly on their decline during the seventeenth century, represented only one end of the theological continuum on the doctrine of providence, and the tendency to document and collect them can even be considered part of the empiricist strain in English writing.[176] The aesthetic dimension of curses, latent in the early modern period, reemerged in Romantic thought and literature, which produced a new level of individual poetic expression animated by the idea that speech has power.

In a world shaped by the authority of the Bible, unprecedented readability and unconstrained interpretation brought the biblical text too close for comfort. Vernacular readers could directly encounter the complexities of biblical doubt and belief, piety and impiety, along with many varieties of cursing. The Reformation doctrine of *sola scriptura* had disrupted biblical tradition instead of reinforcing it, and it would take the combined efforts of poets, philosophers, clergy, and lay people to restore the Bible's auratic authority. Like earlier centuries of allegorical and midrashic interpretation, and the inner-biblical exegesis of the Bible itself, the seventeenth century balanced the authoritative *status* of the Bible against its complex and potent *contents*, displacing the power of biblically derived religious curses onto other forms of discourse.

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173. Thus Bostridge's analysis of the history of witchcraft, which has more to do with theological and political debates than any grand transition from sacred to secular worldviews (*Witchcraft and its Transformations*).

174. Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

175. Foucault, 'What Is Enlightenment?', in *Michel Foucault: Ethics, Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, I (ed. Paul Rabinow; trans. Robert Hurley *et al.*; New York: Penguin, 1997), p. 308.

176. James Forrest and Roger Sharrock, Introduction to Bunyan, *The Life and Death of Mr Badman*, p. xxiv.

Chapter 5

Broadside Ballads, Lyrical Ballads, and the Wandering Jew: On the Literary Displacement of Powerful Speech

> An orphan's curse would drag to hell
> A spirit from on high;
> But oh! More horrible than that
> Is the curse in a dead man's eye!
> Seven days, seven nights I saw that curse,
> And yet I could not die.[1]

This chapter examines the afterlives of biblical curses in one of the most popular forms of early modern English literature, the broadside ballad, and in the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth, two important figures in English Romanticism. The importance of popular ballads to Coleridge and Wordsworth is obvious from their writings and even from the title of their influential collaboration, *Lyrical Ballads*. In a fragment from around 1800 on a projected history of poetry, Coleridge devotes an entire section to ballads: '4. English Ballads, illustrated by our Translations of the Volkslieder of all countries.—Ossian.—Welsh Poets—. Series of true heroic Ballads from Ossian'.[2] As Scott McEathron observes, Wordsworth and Coleridge could hardly avoid peasant poetry and the ballad tradition, given their pervasive presence in English culture.[3] Instead, their challenge was to position their literary ambitions to originality in relation to the popular and broadside ballads as well as to the literary establishment of the eighteenth century.[4]

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1. Coleridge, 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner: A Handbook* (ed. Royal A. Gettmann; San Francisco: Wadsworth, 1966), p. 19.

2. Coleridge, *Shorter Works and Fragments*, I (ed. H.J. Jackson and J. R. de J. Jackson; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 107.

3. Scott McEathron, 'Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, and the Problem of Peasant Poetry', *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 54 (1999), pp. 1-26 (5).

4. A similar point is made, in terms of displacement, by Scott McEathron: 'Contrary to the claims of the "Preface", Wordsworth did not have to create a public taste for rural subjects and pseudo-humble diction. Instead he faced the more difficult task of creating a vial rustic verse that was distinct from peasant poetry. Wordsworth's response in the "Preface", I have suggested, is to subsume or displace the historical

Broadside ballads appeared in stunning quantity and variety from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. In this early form of mass media, pious devotions and heroic legends mixed with bawdy rhymes and topical political commentary. In a collection called the *Bagford Ballads*, for example, one can find well-known ballads such as 'Chevy-Chase' and 'The Wandering Jew' along with a political satire that that rhymes Magna Carta with 'Magna Farta', and 'The Gelding of the Devil', in which the main character castrates the devil through trickery.[5] For literate and non-literate consumers alike, these one-page ephemera, typically illustrated, spread widely across social and geographic boundaries in England. For elite religious and cultural leaders in England, there could be no ignoring this highly volatile and popular form of print expression. A law was passed in 1543 to restrict the publication of 'pestiferous and noisome' ballads, but it had little effect.[6] The broadside ballad only gained popularity in the sixteenth- to eighteenth-centuries, and its influence would extend to politics, religion, and early Romantic poetry.

There are at least two general critical approaches to the work of Coleridge and Wordsworth, one focusing more on literature as an autonomous aesthetic and cultural tradition, and another concerned more with the social and political implications of their work. The publication of *Lyrical Ballads* and other works by Wordsworth and Coleridge did not occur in a vacuum, but the two approaches concentrate on different contexts, and my interest is to think about how they might converge. While traditional literary criticism has concentrated mainly on the formal and aesthetic qualities of this literature, there is a large body of scholarship on the historical and political contexts of their work. While the difference between these approaches is obvious, there are also some ways in which these two sets of approaches converge. Let me illustrate briefly with two influential examples: M.H. Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism* and E.P. Thompson's *The Romantics*. Where Abrams concentrates on how Romantic literature reflects continuities with tradition, Thompson concentrates on how Coleridge, Wordsworth, and others finesse social and political transformations in troubling ways. Despite their professed interest in common people and universal values, these poets too often reflected elitist attitudes. Thompson quotes Coleridge as follows: '[B]etween the Parlour and the Kitchen, the Tap and the Coffee-room—there is a gulph not to

presence of peasant poetry' (McEathron, 'Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, and the Problem of Peasant Poetry', p. 6).

5.   The three-volume collection, housed at the British Library, was intended by John Bagford to be part of a history of early print.

6.   Leslie Shepard, *The Broadside Ballad: A Study in Origins and Meaning* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1962), p. 52.

be passed'.[7] Yet both Abrams and Thompson observe fundamental ambivalences in the cultural contribution and place of the Romantics. Abrams expresses it in terms of tradition:

> If we nonetheless remain unaware of the full extent to which characteristic concepts and patterns of Romantic philosophy and literature are a displaced and reconstituted theology, or else a secularized form of devotional experience, that is because we still live in what is essentially, although in derivative rather than direct manifestations, a biblical culture, and readily mistake our hereditary ways of organizing experience for the conditions of reality and the universal forms of thought.[8]

If Abrams regards the Romantics as displacing theology, Thompson sees them as displacing the popular to the elite:

> Wordsworth and Coleridge were caught in the vortex of contradictions which were both real and ideal. They were champions of the French Revolution and they were sickened by its course. They were isolated as Jacobins and they abominated Godwinian abstraction. They had broken out of the received culture and they were appalled by some features of the new. They wished to espouse the cause of the people, and they were afraid that the mob might turn first on men of their kind… The theme of this lecture is apostasy and disenchantment. There is a difference between the two. My argument is: the creative impulse came out of the heart of this conflict.[9]

Rather than choose between these two approaches, Abrams's focus on religious tradition and Thompson's concern for political analysis, I suggest they are more complementary than may be clear at first. While Abrams addresses the social and historical context of the poets, Thompson notes their engagement with religious tradition ('disenchantment' and 'apostasy'). What is more, both critics observe the paradoxical or contradictory nature of the Romantics' work. For Coleridge the political and theological tensions are both clear, and they may reflect an inherently dynamic quality

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7.   Edward P. Thompson, *The Romantics: England in a Revolutionary Age* (New York: New Press, 1997), p. 15. These elitist tendencies appear early in Coleridge; he referred in 1795 to 'the multitude, who ignorant and needy must necessarily act from the impulse of inflamed Passions' (*Conciones ad Populum*, cited in Don Herzog, *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998], p. 177). Herzog quotes the late, unpublished 'Of the Profanation of the Sacred Word "The People"' and compares it to Edmund Burke's use of the phrase 'swinish multitude': 'Every brutal mob, assembled on some drunken St Monday of faction, is "*the People*" forsooth, and now each leprous ragamuffin, like a circle in geometry, is at once and all, and calls his own brutal self "US the People"' (quoted in Herzog, p. 519).

8.   Meyer H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1973), pp. 65-66.

9.   Thompson, *The Romantics*, p. 37.

of his work. According to John Mee, Coleridge sought to balance Enlightenment and religious enthusiasm in tandem with radical and conservative politics. The originality of Coleridge's work, for Mee, emerges from this double dynamic: 'Thus Romanticism, in Coleridge's case at least, involved not only a counter to Enlightenment thinking but also a distancing from the spectre of enthusiasm, the disavowal of a popular tradition of public prophecy'.[10]

Did Coleridge and Wordsworth domesticate popular forms of expression and use them to legitimate their own work? Certainly, but they also engaged biblical and religious tradition in a similar way. In so doing, they produced politically and theologically ambivalent texts. And more than the intrinsic formal qualities of their work, the lasting influence of Coleridge and Wordsworth may relate more to the way their work captures these dynamics of tradition and social change.

My aim is thus not to decide the intentions or motives of Coleridge and Wordsworth, but instead to discuss their appropriation of popular ballad tradition in social, literary, and religious context. By concentrating on ideas of powerful speech, particularly the biblical tradition of cursing, I hope to show how these contexts converge in the displacement of powerful speech from popular ballads to prestigious literature.

Displacement of Popular Ballads

The early modern preoccupation with powerful speech—swearing and cursing in particular—features in many of the seventeenth-century ballads.[11] Supernatural phenomena, including curses, were common topics and *topoi* in the ballads. A 1679 ballad called 'A New Satyricall Ballad of the Licentiousness of the Times' begins as follows:

> The devil has left his puritanical dress,
> And now like an Hawker attends on the Press,
> That he might through the Town Sedition disperse,
> In Pamphlets, and Ballads, in prose and in verse.

A later verse echoes the controversial (and manly) practice of self-cursing:

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10. Jon Mee, 'Anxieties of Enthusiasm; Coleridge, Prophecy, and Popular Politics in the 1790s', *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 60 (1998), pp. 179-203 (202).

11. A pious example is 'the Sinners Care to Reend in due time':

> …Some will damn and swear, and curse and lye,
> And act their sins to very ghgh,
> They think there is no God in Heaven,
> How shall such sinners be forgiven.
> But that man that ha a conscience clear,
> When death does come he need not fear (*Bagford Ballads*, British Library, II).

Another who would be distinguish'd from Cit
And swearing God dam me, to shew him a wit,
(Who for all his huffing one grain hath not got)
Scoffs at all Religion, and the Popish plot.[12]

Were ballads a mirror of reality or projection of imagination? Lowry C. Wimberly believes the former: 'As repositories of superstitions and usages which are, or have been, actually held and practiced, the ballads are on a par with folktales and myths'.[13] Wimberly's book is one of several studies that made extensive use of Child's ballad collection (completed in 1898). His study includes extensive documentation of the presence of pagan and Christian beliefs in the afterlife, fairies, witches, ghosts, and magic. Beliefs that pertain especially to supernatural and powerful uses of language include name magic, magical and animated objects, curses, and oaths.[14]

Several works of criticism and literary history have explored the influence of the ballads on the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge. One line of inquiry has been to establish the specific influence of ballads and ballad tradition on their works.[15] Wordsworth's declared intention in his Preface to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* has become a familiar source for modern understandings of Romanticism. A particular strain within these reflections, familiar from Matthew Arnold and M.H. Abrams, has tied the history of literature to the history of religion, based partly on the poets' self-understanding, for example, when Coleridge ascribes a 'religious fervor' to the admirers of Wordsworth.[16] Abrams's *Natural Supernaturalism* argues, for example, that the Romantics adopted 'the overall pattern of Christian history', despite their tendency to minimize references to God and church.[17]

This chapter argues that the early work of Coleridge and Wordsworth, especially Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', represents the displacement of powerful speech from popular expression to aesthetically self-conscious poetry, and that this displacement involved the use of a biblical legend—the Wandering Jew—that already encoded the problem of

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12. *Luttrell Ballads*, British Library, II, p. 116.

13. Lowry C. Wimberly, *Folklore in the English and Scottish Ballads* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1928), p. 7.

14. Wimberly, *Folklore in the English and Scottish Ballads*, pp. 88ff., 224, 362, 378. One fascinating case of curses in ballads is the Scottish tradition of 'flyting': 'contrived literary invective like the Churchyard–Camel controversy of 1552 which produced over a dozen ballads, probably indecipherable to those outside a small London-centred coterie' (p. 80).

15. Charles Wharton Stork, 'The Influence of the Popular Ballad on Wordsworth and Coleridge', *PMLA* 29 (1914), pp. 299-326.

16. Coleridge, *Biographia literaria*, in *The Portable Coleridge* (ed. I.A. Richards; New York: Penguin, 1978), pp. 432-628 (519).

17. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, p. 91.

displacement. If the beginning of the seventeenth century can be seen as a moment of particular crisis with respect to the power of religious language, I have tried to show, in the previous chapter, that the power of religious speech shifted increasingly to the domains of law, politics, science, and commerce. At the same time, the terms 'cursing' and 'swearing' denoted less and less a kind of supernatural power and increasingly referred to socially disapproved uses of language, markers of socio-economic class. The use of curses and other forms of popular expression in Coleridge and Wordsworth serve to engage in projects of emerging national identity in the face of religious confusion and diversity. The *Lyrical Ballads*, claiming as they do to present 'incidents and situations from common life' and counteract the demographic trend of 'increasing accumulation of men in cities', depicts the poet as a 'man speaking to men', in solidarity with the ordinary people.[18] But the poet is not simply a common man; he is 'endowed with a more lively sensibility', and he has 'an ability of conjuring up in himself passions which are indeed far from being the same as those produced by real events'.[19]

Displacement describes the often-concealed kinds of persistence, balanced by obvious change, between earlier and later cultural forms. Here the elements of persistence include not only the visible religious elements of cursing and such motifs as the Wandering Jew and the curse of Cain but also powerful speech as the projection of popular, common, and monolithic tradition by an emerging literary elite. To put it differently, Coleridge and Wordsworth reflect a widespread sense that popular ballads and ordinary language, perhaps more than religious texts or even the elite literature of the day, were a source of powerful speech. Language from 'rural', 'rustic', and 'humble' people, 'being less under the influence of social vanity', is a 'more permanent and a far more philosophical language than that which is frequently substituted for it by poets, who think that they are conferring honor upon themselves and their art, in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men…'.[20] By rejecting elite poetic standards and embracing the language and forms of humble life, Wordsworth and Coleridge also tacitly embraced a contemporary trend, going back to the seventeenth century, of collecting and valorizing popular ballads.

But while Wordsworth's Preface honors the influence of humble people and their life, it fails to acknowledge the direct influence of peasant poetry and ballad traditions. As McEathron notes, 'Wordsworth's silence on the topic of actual peasant and laboring-class writers is striking on its own terms, but even more so in light of the incisive, *au courant* cultural

18. Wordsworth, 'Preface', in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, II (ed. M.H. Abrams; New York: W.W. Norton, 1968)*,* pp. 100-112 (102, 104, 107).

19. Wordsworth, 'Preface', in *Norton Anthology*, p. 107.

20. Wordsworth, 'Preface', in *Norton Anthology*, p. 102.

awareness that he claims for himself in the "Preface"'.[21] McEathron goes on to suggest that Wordsworth's Preface attempts to 'displace the historical presence of peasant poetry'.[22] In order to succeed, it would seem, the project of the *Lyrical Ballads* must steal the thunder of ballads and peasant poetry without full attribution.

Such a maneuver raises the suspicion that Wordsworth and Coleridge sought to capitalize on the success of popular ballads without sacrificing privileges of literary elitism or class. A more precise characterization of the situation would be to suggest that the Preface, by its denunciations of the vanity of 'frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse',[23] sought to revive literature and secure themselves a position in the literary establishment by endowing elite forms with the power of ordinary language. In terms of powerful speech, Wordsworth drew a contrast between the superstition of 'men of slow faculties and deep feelings' and those (poets like himself) who have possess 'fancy, power by which pleasure and surprize are excited by sudden varieties of situation'.[24]

By thus making common cause with peasant life and literature, Wordsworth and Coleridge also participate in processes of forging national identity. The displacement of powerful speech to literature also had political implications. Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner' and Wordsworth's 'Wandering Jew', for example, reiterate an ancient tradition and a popular ballad that served to reinforce the boundary between Christians and Jews, their perennial rivals. The *topos* of the Wandering Jew, which itself was indebted to the biblical story of Cain (Genesis 4), condemned for a crime to a life of wandering, continued to circulate in one of the most popular anthologies of the time, Percy's *Ancient Reliques*, which regarded itself as the custodian of English tradition, presenting 'our ancient English Bards and Minstrels, an order of men, who were once greatly respected by our ancestors'.[25]

This chapter reads Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' as part of a literary project whose aim and effect was to displace the powerful speech of popular ballads to the level of elite literary art. I will begin with a brief survey of eighteenth-century cheap print and ballads, continue with a discussion of the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* and the 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', proceed with analysis of the religious topoi of the Wandering

21. McEathron, 'Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, and the Problem of Peasant Poetry', p. 4.
22. McEathron, 'Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, and the Problem of Peasant Poetry', p. 5.
23. Wordsworth, 'Preface', p. 104.
24. From Wordsworth's notes on 'The Thorn', *Lyrical Ballads*, pp. 211-12.
25. Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (London, 1765), p. xiii.

Jew and the Curse of Cain, and conclude with a discussion of the literary text as a form of powerful speech.

Ballads, Cheap Print, and Poetry

From the earliest known instance, the thirteenth-century 'Judas', English ballads have been intertwined with religion. Yet as 'Judas' illustrates, the religion of ballads is not consistently orthodox. Some studies of ballads have approached them primarily as an oral form, yet they represent one of the most widely circulated and popular forms of early print. Ballads preserved traditional songs such as 'Chevy Chase' and 'The Blind Beggar's Daughter', but they also became a site for endless innovation and variety, capturing religious lessons, political debate and satire, tributes to public leaders, and narrating famous battles, shipwrecks, and amorous conquests. While some scholars draw a sharp distinction between oral tradition and print forms, others, including Tessa Watt, argue that distinctions between orality and writing and 'popular' and 'elite' do not hold for the printed broadside ballads.[26] According to Watt, 'ballads were hawked in the alehouses and markets, but in the same period they were sung by minstrels in the households of the nobility and gentry, who copied them carefully into manuscripts'.[27] Even illiterate people bought them, according to a Puritan named Nicholas Bownde.[28] By the end of the sixteenth century, there were about 3,000 distinct ballads in print, in up to four million copies total, and 'the printed broadside ballad was only the visible tip of an iceberg'.[29]

And this tip only grew. Circulation and production of ballads and other print media increased dramatically from the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries: 'Prior to 1700 up to about 1800 different printed titles were produced annually; by 1800 this had risen to over 6000'; the growth accelerated between 1780 and 1800.[30] Newspapers expanded at a similar rate:

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26. 'The broadsides were urban artifacts that aimed at permanence and proved ephemeral; the popular ballads were produced for the folk and possessed by them' (Alan Bold, *The Ballad* [London: Methuen, 1979], p. 13). See also Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 8.

27. Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety*, p. 1.

28. Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580–1680* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 203-204. Reading was taught before writing, but ability to sign one's name was at 52% among East Anglian tradesmen and 80% in London (Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety*, p. 7).

29. Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety*, pp. 11, 37.

30. James Raven, 'The Book Trades', in *Books and their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England: New Essays* (ed. Isabel Rivers; London: Continuum, 2001), pp. 1-34 (2).

total recorded sales went from 7.3 million in 1750 to 16 million in 1790.[31] One of the areas of growth was the genre of the poetic miscellany: well over 5,000 were published in the eighteenth century.[32] The impulse to collect ballads produced broadly shared understandings of the nature and history of ballads.

Despite evidence that ballads were widely circulated among social classes, the cultural image of ballads was, as George Puttenham wrote in his *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), a 'recreation of the common people at Christmasse diners and brideales and in taverns & alehouses, and such other places of base resort'.[33] The reputation of ballads as the common expression of ordinary people would continue down to the present, but it would depend as much on elite characterizations of ballads as realities of social life. Ballad collecting had become widespread by the seventeenth-century; as their popularity grew, so did their image as a reservoir of cultural and national identity.

As ballads became more popular, they became more incompatible with religious piety. Religious and moralizing ballads were common during Reformation and Elizabethan times, but their numbers declined steadily after that, partly because religious authorities rejected what Puttenham called the 'vulgar Poesie' of ballads, as well as the increasing association of ballads with dancing and immorality.[34] Despite their irreverence, ballads remained rich sources of religious tradition and supernatural phenomena, from the Wandering Jew and Faustus to testaments that included curses, as in 'The Cruel Brother', 'Lord Randal', and 'Edward'.[35] What do the supernatural elements of the ballads tell us about popular beliefs?

While Wimberly suggests the ballads are a window onto popular culture and beliefs, Watt argues that the ballads reveal complex interactions and patterns in religious and cultural history: 'We need to recognize how the culture could absorb new beliefs while retaining old ones, could modify doctrines, could accommodate words and icons, ambiguities and contradictions. There may have been Reformation and Civil War, riot and rebellion, but the basic mental décor did not change as suddenly or completely as historians would sometimes lead us to believe'.[36]

31. Raven, 'The Book Trades', p. 24.

32. Michael F. Suarez, SJ, 'The Production and Consumption of the Eighteenth-Century Poetic Miscellany', in *Books and their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England*, pp. 217-51 (217).

33. Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, cited in Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety*, p. 13.

34. Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety*, pp. 41-54, 64-69. Watt cites 'Monsieur Thomas', a 1639 satire by Beaumont and Fletcher that complains of the ill effects of religious ballads on a friend's love of taverns and dancing (pp. 70-71).

35. Child numbers 11A, 12A, 13B, cited in Bold, *The Ballad*, p. 32.

36. Wimberly, *Folklore in the English and Scottish Ballads*, p. 332.

Criticism, Collecting, and the Lyrical Ballads

Beginning in the sixteenth century, one find references to ballads in the writings of literary critics and collectors. Many of the critics, writing in the tradition of humanistic letters, depict ballads as a common, popular, and sometimes inferior form. In *The Scholemaster* (1570), Roger Ascham decries the superficiality of such writers: '[M]any dayly in setting out bookes and balettes [ballads] make great shew of blossomes and buddes, in whom is neither roote of learning nor frute of wisedome at all'.[37] William Webbe, in his *Discourse of English Poetrie* (1586), denounces ballad writers with even greater force:

> If I let passe the uncountable rabble of ryming Ballet makers and compilers of sencelesse sonnets, who be most busy to stuffe every stall full of grosese devises and unlearned Pamphlets, I trust I shall with the best sort be held excused. For though many such can frame an Alehouse song of five or seixe score verses, hobbling upon some tune of a Northen Iygge [jig], or Robyn hoode, or La lubber etc. …yet if these might be accounted Poets… surely we shall shortly have swhole swarmes of Poets: and every one that can frame a Booke in Ryme, though for want of matter it be but in commendations of Copper noses or Bottle Ale, wyll catch at the Garlande due to Poets.[38]

Other critics began to acknowledge ballads more favorably as part of daily life. George Puttenham describes wedding ballads as an important source of 'cherefull wordes' and meaningful expression of each part of the festivities.[39] By the seventeenth century, ballads were increasingly familiar part of English popular culture and print culture. A 1699 collection of ballads was called *Wit and Mirth: Or, Pills to Purge Melancholy, Being a Collection of the Best Old and New Ballads, and Songs*.[40]

While early modern critics reckoned in different ways with this new phenomenon, they also worked to establish the prestige and power of English letters. One of their strategies was to invoke the power of curses. The notion of poetry as a displacement of powerful speech, and curses in particular, was

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37. Roger Ascham, 'Of Imitation', in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, I (ed. George G. Smith; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), pp. 1-45 (31).

38. William Webbe, *A Discourse of English Poetrie*, in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, I, pp. 226-302 (246). A similar denunciation appears in Thomas Nash, *The Anatomy of Absurditie* (1589), which speaks of 'babbling Ballets' (*Elizabethan Critical Essays*, I, pp. 321-37 [326]).

39. George Puttenham, *Of Poets and Poesy*, in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, II, pp. 1-193 (54-55).

40. Henry Playford, *Wit and Mirth, Or, Pills to Purge Melancholy, Being a Collection of the Best Old and New Ballads, and Songs Early* (1699; Chadwyck–Healey, *Early English Books Online* database).

already well-established in English letters with Sir Philip Sidney's 'Apology': Sidney's *The Defense of Poesy* illustrates the complexity and blurring boundaries of literature and powerful language: 'I conjure you all that have had the evil luck to read this ink-wasting toy of mine, even in the name of the Nine Muses, no more to scorn the sacred mysteries of poesy, no more to laugh at the name of "poets", as though they were net inheritors to fools, nor more to jest at the reverent title of a "rimer"…'.[41] Having admonished his reader to endorse poetry, he then playfully warns the reader who fails to appreciate poetry, 'though I will not wish unto you the ass's ears of Midas, nor to be driven by a poet's verses (as Bubonax was) to hang himself, nor to be rhymed to death, as is said to be done in Ireland; yet thus much curse I must send you, in the behalf of all poets, that while you live, you live in love, and never get favor for lacking skill of a sonnet, and, when you die, your memory die from the earth for want of an epitaph'.[42]

Ballad collecting became widespread in the seventeenth century and continued until very recently. One early collector of ballads and other print ephemera, Narcissus Luttrell (1657–1732), began his collection when he was a student. His pastime was typical of young gentlemen; a catalogue for his collection of materials related to the 1678 Popish Plot promotes it as being 'very useful for Gent. That make Collections'.[43] Other collectors included John Bagford (1650–1716), whose main interest was the history of print, and the diarist Samuel Pepys (1633–1703). The title page of Pepys's five-volume collection reads, 'My collection of Ballads', and it is divided into the following categories of ballads:

- Devotion and Morality
- History True and Fabulous
- Tragedy viz. Murd., Execut. Judgm. of gods
- State and Times
- Love—Pleasant
- Love—Unfortunate
- Marriage, Cuckoldry &c.
- Sea—Love, Gallantry, & Actions
- Drinking and Good Fellowship
- Humor, Frollicks &c. mixt.[44]

41. Philip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesy*, in *Sir Philip Sidney: Selected Prose and Poetry* (ed. Robert Kimbrough; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), pp. 99-158 (156).

42. Sidney, *The Defense of Poesy*, pp. 157-58.

43. James M. Osborn, 'Reflections on Narcissus Luttrell (1657–1732)', *The Book Collector* 6 (1957), pp. 15-19 (17).

44. *The Pepys Ballads*, facsimile of 5 volumes (ed. W.G. Day, Master and Fellows of Magdalene College, Cambridge: Brewer, 1987).

Like his diaries, the ballad collection of Pepys captures quotidian culture and suggests the emergence of a kind of popular sensibility that anticipates the modernism of mass culture. Like the twentieth-century collector Edward Fuchs, the subject of a long essay by Walter Benjamin, Pepys and other collectors of his time contributed to new conceptions of beauty and history.[45] Whether their aim was to preserve ephemera, popular culture, or the history of print, these collections eventually became part of a self-conscious effort to maintain national traditions.

The proliferation of published ballad and verse anthologies in the eighteenth century carries the work of seventeenth-century collecting to its next logical stage. The *Roxburghe Ballads*, second in size only to Pepys's collection (over 1300 ballads), were published in 1774 as *Ancient Songs and Ballads: Written on Various Subjects, and Printed between the Year MDLX and MDCC*. Perhaps the most popular collection of the day was the 1794 fourth edition of Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry. Consisting of Old Heroic Ballads, Songs, and Other Pieces of our Earlier Poets, Together with Some Few of Later Date*, a three-volume work first published in 1765. Although he does not acknowledge its influence, Percy's collection was undoubtedly familiar to Coleridge.[46]

Percy's Preface to his anthology spells out the nature of ballads:

> [T]he reader is here presented with select remains of our ancient English Bards and Minstrels, an order of men, who were once greatly respected by our ancestors, and contributed to soften the roughness of a martial and unlettered people by their songs and by their music… In a polished age, like the present, I am sensible that many of these reliques of antiquity will require great allowances to be made for them. Yet have they, for the most part, a pleasing simplicity, and many artless graces, which in the opinion of no mean Critics have been thought to compensate for the want of higher beauties, and, if they do not dazzle the imagination, are frequently found to interest the heart.[47]

Percy associates the simplicity of these ancient ballads with their social class; he intersperses them with 'specimens of the composition of contemporary poets of a higher class; of those who had all the advantages of learning

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45. Walter Benjamin, 'Edward Fuchs, Collector and Historian', in Edward Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (eds.), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, III (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 260-302.

46. Coleridge refers to the ballad 'Babes in the Wood' from Percy's *Reliques* in his notebooks of 1799–1801 (*The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* [ed. Kathleen Coburn, I (New York: Bolligen, 1957)], p. 620 4.36]. According to the editor of the *Notebooks*, Kathleen Coburn, the reference suggests 'an example of the power of innocence and simplicity in poetry compared with the destructive power of men of action like Bonaparte'.

47. Percy, *Reliques*, xiii-ix.

in the times in which they lived, and who wrote for fame and for posterity. Yet perhaps the palm will be frequently due to the old strolling Minstrels, who composed their rhimes to be sung to their harps, and who looked no farther than for present applause, and present subsistence'.[48] By interspersing anonymous ballads with the works of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Walter Raleigh and othrs, he argued for the continuity and canonical status of the ballads. In an eighty-five page essay on ancient minstrels, Percy elaborates these ideas by depicting the glorious past of minstrelsy, contrasting early ballads to later 'insipid' ones. Written before Wordsworth's Preface, Percy's essay celebrates the simplicity and power of early English ballads as a shared cultural patrimony.[49] Percy's enduring influence would be clear not only for its many reprintings (as recently as 1996!) but also for the way later critics would cite him. J.O. Halliwell's 1856 collection of ballads, for instance, quotes Percy:

> There is a wide difference, noticed especially in sheet-ballads of the seventeenth century, between those which emanated from the more cultivated writers, and those which were the authentic productions either of or written for the street ballad-singer. The former are purer in their diction, usually more ambitious as to typography, and are either not embellished with woodcuts, or, if so, with illustrations superior to the rude designs that adorn the others. The latter are, however, by far more interesting, not merely on account of their greater rarity, but because they are exponents of feelings or manners that are not illustrated by any other sources of so early a period.. . . There is a remark upon such relics made by a distinguished prelate… Yet have they, for the most part, a pleasing simplicity, and many artless graces, which, in the opinion of no mean critics, have been thought to compensate for the want of higher beauties, and if they do not dazzle the imagination, are frequently found to interest the heart.[50]

Wordsworth's Preface to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* famously cites their basis in 'incidents and situations from common life', which allows

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48. Percy, *Reliques*, xiv-xv.

49. These attitudes continue to the present. See Robert Graves, *The English Ballad: A Short Critical Survey* (Folcroft, PA: Folcroft, 1970), p. 9. And Bold notes: 'They have the strength of solid workmanship about them… The local ballad-singer was not a full-time poet but an integral part of the community with a special gift for retaining and, in some cases, improving stories that were passed from generation to generation… The structural solidity of the ballads is a tribute to the staying power of the folk' (Bold, *The Ballad*, p. 64). For a study of the political implications of romanticized ballad study in the Appalachian region of the United States, see David E. Whisnant, *All That Is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983); thanks to Elizabeth Fine for this suggestion.

50. From Preface to *A Catalogue of an Unique Collection of Ancient English Broadside Ballads with Notes of the Tunes and Imprints, Compiled by J.O. Halliwell* (London: John Russell Smith, 1856), pp. v-vii.

them to address 'the primary laws of our nature'. This sets them apart from the work of poets who 'indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation'.[51] Twenty-four poems, five of them by Coleridge, make up this second edition of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, which is regarded as a landmark of English Romantic poetry. With his long Preface (41 pages in the original edition), Wordsworth articulated an 'experiment' in 'fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation'.[52] In addition to 'Ancient Mariner', the volume includes the following four poems by Coleridge, who is named only as a 'friend' in the text. In order, they are: 'The Foster-Mother's Tale', 'The Dungeon' (a term that also appears in the 'Ancient Mariner'), 'The Nightingale', and 'Love'.

In all five poems, the power of language is thematic. 'The Foster-Mother's Tale' narrates a family crisis triggered by 'heretical and lawless talk'.[53] In 'The Dungeon', Coleridge contrasts the power of Nature and the cruelty of dungeons to make wrongdoers 'relent'. 'The Nightingale' pits the poet against the 'night-wandering man' who 'first named these notes a melancholy strain'.[54] In 'Love', as in 'Ancient Mariner', the speaker wins the heart of Genevieve by taking her to a 'ruined tower' and singing her an 'old rude song, that suited well/That ruin wild and hoary'.[55] Whether stimulated mainly be the collaboration with Wordsworth or his own poetic program, the poems by Coleridge reflect a concern with how poetry and powerful speech are linked.

Coleridge on Christianity, Oaths, and the Bible

Coleridge regards the Bible as divine revelation mediated through human hands. Though he ascribes his most intense religious experiences to its study, he disputes those who endow the Bible with absolute consistency and holiness. This doctrine of scripture, which he calls superstition and 'Bibliolotry', comes, he claims, from the Jewish rabbis, 'who, in opposition to the Christian scheme, contended for a perfection in the Revelation by Moses, which neither required nor endured any addition, and who strained their fancies in expressing the transcendancy of the books of Moses in aid of their opinion'.[56] Making room for the incipient scholarship on the history

51. Wordsworth, 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*, pp. 102-103.
52. Wordsworth, 'Preface', p. 100.
53. Wordsworth (and Coleridge), *Lyrical Ballads: With Other Poems*, I (London: T.N. Longman & O. Rees, 1800), p. 27.
54. Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, I, p. 264.
55. Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, I, p. 332.
56. Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), pp. 30, 61.

of the Bible, and consistent with his Romantic affinities, Coleridge assigns sacred status to the Bible as a source of profound, typically affective religious reading. Reading Deborah's famous words from the book of Judges, 'Curse ye Meroz', a motif that appears frequently in early modern English political tracts and sermons, Coleridge claims to

> feel as if I were among the first ferments of the great affections—the proplastic waves of the microcosmic chaos, swelling up against—and yet towards—the outspread wings of the Dove that lies brooding on the troubled waters… In the fierce and inordinate I am made to know and be grateful for the clearer and purer radiance which shines on a Christian's paths, neither blunted by the preparatory veil, nor crimsoned in its struggle through the all-enwrapping mist of the world's ignorance: whilst in the self-oblivion of these heroes of the Old Testament, their elevation above all low and individual interests. . . I find a lesson of humility, a ground of humiliation, and a shaming, yet rousing, example of faith and fealty.[57]

Focused on affect aroused by reading, Coleridge transforms the idea that the Bible is inspired into private, literary, and somewhat idiosyncratic experience. In this way, the Bible retains its canonical status and power, but it does so in terms that reflect Coleridge's literary sensibility.[58]

Far from orthodox in any strict sense, Coleridge nevertheless expressed sustained and ardent Christian views, including the prohibition on oaths. Like the Quakers, he associated moral decline in the seventeenth century with the imposition of political oaths: 'It is an imposition on our own consciences (supposing it voluntary) which we are not authorized to put, and for which no Grace is promised in Scripture, since for matters of evident and permanent obligation no Oath is requisite…'.[59] Similarly, in *Lectures on Revealed Religion* (1795), Coleridge cites Mt. 5.28, 34, 37 as a 'Text which I conceive interdicts all oaths of every description. It is not required that a good man should swear, and to a bad man you are only offering a motive to additional Wickedness—Every feeling of anger, every impure Thought, every idle word are totally and with unsparing Sentence interdicted—He demanded from his Disciples a total annihilation of all the merely selfish Passions…'.[60]

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57. Coleridge, *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit*, p. 37.

58. See Britt, 'Coleridge', in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception* (Berlin: de Gruyter, in press).

59. Coleridge laments: 'The effect of successive Oaths not only in demoralizing the Active part of the Nation; but in gradually relaxing the moral strength & spoiling the Spring (Federkraft) of Hope.—The two sufficing arguments against the imposition of Oaths' ('Commentary on Books of Church History' [1823], in *Shorter Works and Fragments*, II, p. 1069).

60. Coleridge, *Lectures, 1795, On Politics and Religion* (ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann; *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*; London: Routledge: 1971), p. 165.

In his political views, Coleridge was critical of slavery and what he regarded as the repressive policies of the government under William Pitt, views some readers find in 'Ancient Mariner'.[61] In this innovative poet and thinker, the traditions of powerful speech, including biblical curses and oaths, remained very much alive, even as they were displaced into non-biblical texts.

'The Curse in a Dead Man's Eye':
 Biblical Curses in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'

'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' is much more than an example of English Romanticism. In it converge several literary and religious *topoi*: the curse of Cain and the related myth of the wandering Jew, stories (e.g., from *The Arabian Nights*) in which the telling of stories has power, gothic literature, and seafaring culture.[62] The poem thus displaces material from the Bible onto what Coleridge called a 'work of pure imagination'. Here I trace the influence of biblical tradition on the poem in terms not only of thematic content but also of the nature and possibility of powerful speech. Beyond its use of biblical themes and *topoi*, the poem deploys two kinds of powerful speech: curses and imaginative literature. These three mechanisms of relating to biblical tradition, biblical allusion, curses, and literary creation, illustrate the variety and complexity of literary reception of the Bible and biblical tradition in general.

'Ancient Mariner' began as a collaboration with Wordsworth on a project to be called 'The Wanderings of Cain'.[63] According to Humphrey House,

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61. One critic reads 'Ancient Mariner' as political allegory. Patrick J. Keane argues in *Coleridge's Submerged Politics: The Ancient Mariner and* Robinson Crusoe (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994) that the poem comments heavily on the repressive politics of England in the 1790s, that (following the parallel to the 'Authentic Narrative') the ship is a slave ship (p. 157), England is a dungeon (e.g., Pitt's tyrrany) and that the blessing of the snakes is a 'loving and/or fearful embrace of the previously despised, including, in the present reading, one's political enemies' (p. 336).

62. Humphry House, 'The Ancient Mariner', in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, A Handbook*, pp. 149-53.

63. Compare Byron's *Cain* (1821) to the 1828 publishing date of Colleridge's 'Wanderings' (though written in 1798, the same year as 'Ancient Mariner'):

> Lucifer: Dost thou curse thy father?
> Cain: Cursed he not me in giving me my birth?
> Cursed he not me before m birth, in daring
> To pluck the fruit forbidden?
> Lucifer: Thou say'st well.
> The curse is mutual 'twixt thy sire and thee.
> But for thy sons and brothers?

(Byron, *Lord Byron's Cain: Twelve Essays and a Text with Variants and Annotations* [ed. Truman Steffan; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968], p. 204)

the 'terrible guilt, suffering, expiation and wandering' of the biblical project carried over into the 'Rime'. The curse of Cain, then, is transformed into the curse of the Mariner; a biblical curse becomes a literary one with roots in tradition of ballads, seafaring literature, and *The Arabian Nights*:

> An orphan's curse would drag to hell
> A spirit from on high;
> But oh! More horrible than that
> Is the curse in a dead man's eye!
> Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse,
> And yet I could not die.[64]

There is another sense in which the poem relates to biblical tradition: it follows and fulfills a romantic ideal of poetry as a kind of powerful speech. J. Hillis Miller characterizes literature as performative speech act, 'a way of doing things with words'.[65] What actions do literary works perform? 'Every sentence in a literary work is part of a chain of performative utterances opening out more and more of an imaginary realm initiated in the first sentence. The words make that realm available to the reader'.[66] When Melville begins *Moby Dick* with the words 'Call me Ishmael', he begins the process of making an imaginary world available to the reader who accepts its terms.[67]

'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' displays the literary performative in the dialogue between the mariner and the wedding guest. As a dramatized stand-in for the reader, the wedding guest demonstrates the stakes of the process of reading: 'I fear thee, ancient mariner!' he cries during the recitation, and after he has gone, the guest appears 'stunned, and is of sense forlorn'. The literary performance of the Mariner leaves the wedding guest 'a sadder and a wiser man'.

Viewed as an account of the impact of a vivid tale, 'Ancient Mariner' becomes a reflection on the power of literature. In a way that evokes the category of trauma, the mariner feels compelled to tell a story that allows him some relief but leaves his hand-picked listeners profoundly changed. After he is rescued, the mariner experiences an agony

> Which forced me to begin my tale;
> And then it left me free.
> Since then, at an uncertain hour,
> That agony returns:
> And till my ghastly tale is told,

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64. Coleridge, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', in Gettmann, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner: A Handbook* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1966), p. 19.

65. J. Hillis Miller, *On Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 37.

66. Miller, *On Literature*, p. 38.

67. See also Miller, *Speech Acts in Literature*.

This heart within me burns.
I pass, like night, from land to land;
I have strange power of speech;
That moment that his fact I see,
I know the man that must hear me:
To him my tale I teach.[68]

The mariner's 'strange power of speech' yields the poem itself.

The source of Coleridge's imaginative project lay in particular under-standings of popular, traditional forms of expression, such as ballads, sea-faring literature, and folktales. In its first published form, the poem contains self-consciously antiquated terms and spellings, though Coleridge later mod-ernized them. Frequent repetition, rhyme and meter, and the straightforward telling of a compelling story are among the elements 'Ancient Mariner' shares with traditional ballads.[69] By imitating the ballad style, Coleridge appropriated a widely popular folk form for the purposes of imaginative literature. Of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* he wrote that their aim was 'to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural'.[70] The poet's task was to imbue objects of ordinary life with a supernatural quality of the imagination.

In 1762, a seafarer named John Newton wrote the *Authentic Narrative*, an account of his near-death experience at sea. Critic Bernard Martin and oth-ers have suggested that Coleridge modeled his poem on the *Authentic Nar-rative*, which provides an account of a sinner's repentance in the context of surviving a disaster at sea. The sin of which Newton is guilty (and which he denounces) is, interestingly, swearing and cursing.[71] Like the ancient mari-ner, Newton (a follower of John Wesley and author of the hymn 'Amazing Grace') spends much of his remaining life telling the inspirational tale of his survival and conversion. Another possible source for the poem is 'The Strange and Dangerous Voyage of Captain Thomas James' (1633), a long account of a shipwreck and survival in icy conditions.[72] Whether Coleridge borrowed directly from either of these sources remains the subject of debate, but what is more widely established is his debt to the combination of danger, survival, piety, and the urge to tell one's story in seafaring literature. A third real-life source may be indicated in a 1796 notebook entry by Coleridge:

68. Coleridge, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', p. 39.

69. Charles Wharton Stork, 'The Influence of the Popular Ballad on Wordsworth and Coleridge', *PMLA* 29 (1914), pp. 299-326 (323-26).

70. Coleridge, *Biographia literaria*, quoted in Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, p. 378.

71. Bernard Martin, *The Ancient Mariner and the Authentic Narrative* (Norwood, PA: Norwood Editions, 1976), p. 31.

72. Ivor James, *The Source of 'The Ancient Mariner'* (Norwood, PA: Norwood Editions, 1974, originally published 1890), p. 14.

'Adventures of Christian, the mutineer'.[73] Kathleen Coburn suggests, 'Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to see in the Ancient Mariner himself, not only the Wandering Jew but Fletcher Christian, rebelling against authority, in a complex relation to the ship's crew, bearing off the bread-fruit plants, and offending against the laws of humanity by setting Bligh adrift with inadequate food. Christian was quoted at the trial as having said to the Captain, "I am in Hell"'.[74]

Another point of reference for Coleridge was *The Arabian Nights*. Coleridge links the poem to *The Arabian Nights* in a passage of *Table Talk* (1830) where he laments the 'obstrusion of the moral sentiment' in a 'work of such pure imagination': 'It ought to have had no more moral then the Arabian Night's tale of the merchant's sitting down to eat dates by the side of a well, and throwing the shells aside, and lo! A genie starts up, and says he *must* kill the aforesaid merchant *because* one of the date shells had, it seems, put out the eye of the genie's son'.[75] The story's resemblance to 'Ancient Mariner' is suggestive: if the throwing of the date shells parallels the killing of the albatross, then the punishment brought on by these actions seems more capricious than just. While the mariner's admonition to love 'all things both great and small' appears to be a kind of moral, there is really no way he could know that his action would bring such a fierce outcome. He acts impetuously, not defiantly, and his suffering is more tragic than deserved.

Why didn't Coleridge write in such a manner? Was he restrained by his own piety? Or might it be that his text, because of the ballad tradition and

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73. Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, p. 174 G.169.

74. Coleridge, *Notebooks*, I, part 2, p. 174.

75. Coleridge, *Table Talk*, in Carl Woodring (ed.), II, p. 100 (*The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* [London: Routledge, 1990]). Wordsworth was also critical of the poem. In *Lyrical Ballads*, he takes credit for convincing his anonymous 'Friend' to allow its reprinting, despite author's wish not to: 'The wish had arisen from a consciousness of the defects of the Poem, and from a knowledge that many persons had been much displeased with it. The Poem of my Friend has indeed great defects; first, that the principal person has no distinct character, either in his profession of Mariner, or as a human being who having been long under the control of supernatural impressions might be supposed himself to partake of something supernatural: secondly, that he does not act, but is continually acted upon: thirdly, that the events having no necessary connection do not produce each other; and lastly, that the imagery is somewhat too laboriously accumulated. Yet the Poem contains many delicate touches of passion, and indeed the passion is every where true to nature; a great number of the stanzas present beautiful images, and are expressed with unusual felicity of language; and the versification, though the metre is itself unfit for long poems, is harmonious and artfully varied, exhibiting the utmost powers of that metre… It therefore appeared to me that these several merits (the first of which, namely that of the passion, is of the highest kind,) gave to the Poem a value which is not often possessed by better Poems' (pp. 214-15).

the biblical tradition before it, demands a moral conclusion: the wedding-guest must hear the lesson that 'He prayeth well, who loveth well/Both man and bird and beast', even though such a moral undercuts the uncanni-ness and ambiguity of the albatross incident. Whether this tension between didacticism and raw fate weakens the artistic achievement of the 'Rime' can be debated, but the tension may reflect the legacy of biblical tradi-tion itself, in which moral teaching sometimes coincide with an apparently inscrutable, sovereign Power (e.g., Job). One could argue that the Mariner's crime, which has left him with 'strange power of speech' and a terrifying moral authority over strangers, depicts the curse as a blessing in disguise. The Mariner is a kind of poet, after all, and his curse-driven poetry has the power to detain a wedding-guest against his will from the festivities, to ter-rify him, and to make him a 'sadder and wiser man'.

By extension to biblical curses and the story of Cain, 'Ancient Mariner' can also be seen as a kind of etiological myth: the disaster is retrospec-tively explained in terms of some event that set it in motion. In the face of profound suffering or trauma, the storyteller or poet produces a work that brings some level of understanding to the suffering. The traditional understandings of religion and literature overlap here: both offer meaning-ful responses to the most basic and mysterious elements of human experi-ence. Why does the Mariner suffer? Because of a curse. Why does he tell this story? To warn others, and to alleviate this suffering.

Curses torment the Mariner ('Seven days, seven nights I saw that curse,/ And yet I could not die') yet the mariner retains the 'strange power of speech'.[76] Framing the mariner's tale in dialogue with the wedding-guest, Coleridge sets supernatural forces at a distance and provides a reluctant lis-tener to stand in for the reader. The tragic necessity of the Mariner's narra-tion, like the Wandering Jew's, involves the listener as well: the Mariner *must* tell the story, and he knows at once whom he must tell it to. The wedding-guest's fate mirrors the Mariner's: though he may ask 'wherefore stopp'st thou me?', 'he cannot choose but hear', just as the message of the Wander-ing Jew, hateful though its source may be, demands respectful listening from the pious Christian. The religious displacement from past judgment to pres-ent warning is itself displaced into literary terms in the 'Ancient Mariner'.

Wandering Jew

Despite the fact that Jews had been expelled from England in 1290 and not officially re-admitted until 1665, the literary depiction of Jews was widespread during this period. The popularity of the Ballad of the Wan-dering Jew, which reached England through Dutch and German forms of

76. Coleridge, 'Rime', p. 39.

the legend[77] and was reprinted often in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is reflected in the fact that it was also appears in Percy's popular *Reliques*. By the eighteenth century, the tradition had found its way into drama and a fanciful travel narrative called *The History of Israel Jobson, the Wandering Jew. Giving a Description of his Pedigree, Travels in this Lower World, and his Assumption thro' the Starry Regions, Conducted by a Guardian Angel*. Persistent for centuries in several forms, the tradition of the Wandering Jew appears in displaced or mutated form in the figure of the Ancient Mariner. Some elements shared by the ballad and 'Ancient Mariner' are punishment for a crime in the form of wandering and narrating his story and the subject's role as a mantic voice of warning to the listener. In the 1620 printed version of the ballad, which matches closely the version in Percy, Jesus condemns the Jew for refusing him a place to rest: 'I sure will rest, but thou shalt walke,/And have no jouney staid./With that this cursed Shoemaker,/For offering Christ this wrong./Lest Wife and Children house and all,/And went from thence along'.[78] What characterizes the transformation from Wandering Jew to Ancient Mariner?

Percy's introduction to 'Wandering Jew', citing Matthew Paris, claims that 'He lives for ever, but at the end of every hundred years falls into an incurable illness, and at length into a fit or ecstasy, out of which when he recovers, he returns to the same state of youth he was in when Jesus suffered…".[79] The Wandering Jew, according to the ballad's subtitle, is 'appointed by Him [Christ] to live until his Coming again'. In the version collected in the *Bagford Ballads* at the British Library, the chorus makes clear the didactic purpose of the Jew's mission to England: 'Repent, therefore, O England!/Repent, whilst you have space,/ And do not (like this wicked Jew)/Despite God's proffered Grace'.

Whether the Mariner's condition alludes directly to this account of the Wandering Jew is unclear, but its similarity is noteworthy: 'Since then, at an uncertain hour,/That agony returns./And till my ghastly tale is told,/The heart within me burns'.[80] The Jew warns his listeners against blasphemy:

> If he heard any one blaspheme,
> And take God's Name in vaine,
> He tells them that they crucifie
> Their Maker Christ againe.
> If you had seen him dye, sayes he,
> As these mine eyes have done,
> Ten thousand times a day would ye

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77. See George K. Anderson, *The Legend of the Wandering Jew* (Hanover, NH: Brown University Press, 1991), pp. 42-67.

78. Chadwyck–Healey, *Early English Books Online* database.

79. Percy, *Reliques*, p. 302 (Percy cites Pepys's collection of ballads as a source).

80. Coleridge, 'Rime', p. 39.

His torments thinke upon,
And suffer for his sake all pains,
All torments, and all woes;
These are his words, and this his life,
Whereas he comes and goes.

Like the Ancient Mariner, the Wandering Jew is cursed to a life of narrating his own wrongs and a moral warning to others. More to the point, the Wandering Jew was a tradition that thematized displacement and powerful speech. From its prehistory in the story of Cain, a figure cursed to wander the earth as punishment, the Wandering Jew is understood somehow to traverse history as well as territory: he walks from the time of Jesus till the present. Like Jews in general, the Wandering Jew represents the uncanny, even nagging persistence of a tradition that refused to go away, despite the arrival (for Christians) of the Messiah. What is more, he embodies powerful speech in two senses: he is cursed, and he must convey a warning to those he meets on his journey.

Wordsworth and Shelley also contributed to the wandering Jew tradition. In Wordsworth's 1800 'Song for the Wandering Jew', the Jew soliloquizes: 'Day and night my toils redouble,/Never nearer to the goal;/Night and day, I feel the trouble/Of the Wanderer in my soul'.[81] In Shelley's version from 1812, the Wandering Jew is a bitter fiend who tempts God to destroy him as He destroyed Korah and others in the Bible. He taunts Destruction and Oblivion:

No—let me hie where dark Destruction dwells,
To rouse her from her deeply caverned lair,
And taunting her curst sluggishness to ire
Light long Oblivion's death torch at its flame
And calmly mount Annihilation's pyre.[82]

Why the Wandering Jew preoccupied Romantic poets is not my central question, though the cultural and political dimensions of the issue do pertain to powerful speech and curses. For Coleridge and perhaps Wordsworth and Shelley, the Wandering Jew furnishes a myth of the Other who is connected to religious tradition but not religious institutions. The Wandering Jew provides a theological and mythological missing link between the past (Judaism) and the present (Christianity): bearing guilt from the past, he haunts the present with the wisdom of experience. The Wandering Jew's powerful speech combines religion, cursing, and the quasi-demonic force of the poet hero.

81. Wordsworth, *Wordsworth's Poetical Works* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 132.
82. Shelley, 'The Wandering Jew's Soliloquy', in *The Collected Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (ed. Edward Woodberry, IV; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1892), p. 335.

Why Coleridge used the legend without directly mentioning it could hinge on several factors. The desire to make his ballad original, to distance it from the popular tradition widely circulated in Percy's *Reliques*, may have been one motive. He may also have wished to avoid the moralizing tradition of the Wandering Jew legend. His own views on Jews echoed familiar religious and moral denunciations:

> Among the many specialties of Providence inscribed on the Jews this is eminent—that the cruelties and oppressions, which they have suffered from the gentile Christians of all countries, & during a succession of ages, have been merited by them, without in the least softening or diminishing the guilt of their Oppressors. Their willful ignorance, neglect of the Sacred Scriptures, gross Superstition, Avarice, obstinacy, revengefulness, unlawful Usury, Receiving of Stolen goods &c.—with the exception of the two last offences against God… Thus the Prophecies which promise the severest Punishment on all who had made themselves the Scorpion rod of the divine Anger by mishandling the Children of the dispersion, are perfectly reconcileable with Divine Justice.[83]

Conclusion: Powerful Speech and Literature

This chapter has argued that Coleridge, along with Wordsworth, borrowed heavily from the tradition and sensibility of ballad-collecting and anthologizing one finds in such writers as Puttenham and such popular collections as Percy's *Reliques*. Whether the 'Wandering Jew' had a direct influence on Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' cannot be known with certainty, but Coleridge was familiar with Percy, and it is unlikely he was unaware of the congruence between this tradition and his original plan to write about the Curse of Cain. Beyond this point of influence, I am also sketching a picture of how curses play into Coleridge's part in the literary displacement from the Bible to religious institutions, from religious institutions to popular ballads, and from ballads to self-conscious poetry and literature.

There are several kinds of displacement at work in the relationship of the 'Ancient Mariner' to the biblical traditions of the Wandering Jew and the Curse of Cain. The first is the concealed influence of these earlier traditions on the 'Ancient Mariner'. The second is that Coleridge's ballad, like the myths of the Wandering Jew and Cain, *encode* problems of displacement and cursing in narrative form. The Wandering Jew is a displaced tradition and a tradition *about* displacement: displaced from the Bible to popular legend, it tells a Christian story about the vexed displacement from Judaism to Christianity. For all these texts, cursing is an inherited form, a kind of

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83. *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, V, July 1827, p. 5547 33.17. The context of this passage is Coleridge's commentary on the Gospels of Luke and Matthew.

powerful speech carried down by tradition by one who is cursed (and, by that curse, 'marked'). Cain, the Jew, and the Mariner are cursed to wander the earth, yet they receive divine protection, and this wandering becomes a form of preserving their stories and their curses: the curse thus becomes a self-perpetuating tradition.

A third, literary kind of displacement also occurs with Coleridge's poem. By transforming the popular ballad form into self-conscious, elite, and critically defined literary works, Coleridge and Wordsworth affirmed the potency and vitality of popular ballads. Neither Coleridge nor Wordsworth declared any intention of participating in biblical traditions of powerful speech, but their experiments with a new kind of verse were ambitious; *Lyrical Ballads*, defined by Coleridge as project of capturing natural and supernatural experiences, sought to stimulate the imagination to a 'willing suspension of disbelief' through supernatural poems like 'The Ancient Mariner'.[84] By making curses central to his text, Coleridge chose an inherently ambiguous form of powerful speech. For J. Hillis Miller, who understands literature to be a kind of powerful speech (performative speech act), this means that literature needed to 'steal the thunder' of popular ballads. As the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* makes clear, the songs and ballads of ordinary country folk were seen as an alternative to the contrived and inauthentic productions of the literary establishment.

But in order to steal the thunder of popular verse, Coleridge would also perform a paradoxical reversal: the religious motif of the Wandering Jew and Curse of Cain would be replaced with the secular motif of the seafaring Mariner. The displacement of the ballad to the literary work thus included the concealment of religious motifs. This shift suggests a double displacement: from the power of biblical words to popular ballads, and from popular ballads to Romantic literature. But since displacement never eliminates previous forms entirely, it would be more accurate to note the persistence and coexistence of all three forms, and the fact that all three share a preoccupation with curses and powerful speech. If the power of literature resides in what Miller (echoing Freud) calls its 'uncanniness', then I suggest that this power reflects a pattern of displacement that extends to the uncanniness of biblical texts and biblical curses.

84. Coleridge, *Biographia literaria*, p. 518.

Chapter 6

NIETZSCHE AND FREUD, CURSING MODERNS

The afterlives of biblical curses extend from the domains of institutional religion to literature, philosophy, and psychoanalysis. This chapter shows how biblical traditions of powerful words inform works by Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud, and how their work, in turn, enables the conceptual model of tradition—displacement—that informs this study. As scholars of many dispositions have shown, boundaries of discipline and genre do not exempt philosophical or scientific texts from literary analysis, nor can literary texts be severed from their conceptual moorings. My approach to texts by Nietzsche and Freud combines literary and theoretical analysis; their work accordingly illustrates and helps explain biblical tradition at the same time. Neither thinker articulates a complete theory of biblical tradition, but both engage biblical tradition seriously without resorting to simplistic notions of secularism and religion. By engaging Nietzsche and Freud in light of contemporary discussions of religion and secularity informed by Asad and especially Benjamin, it becomes possible to sketch a model of biblical tradition, based on Freud's concept of displacement, that confronts the paradoxes of tradition in modernity.

Nietzsche

> In the Jewish 'old Testament', the book of divine justice, there are human beings, things, and speeches in so grand a style that Greek and Indian literature have nothing to compare with it. With terror and reverence one stands before these tremendous remnants of what man once was, and will have sad thoughts about ancient Asia and its protruding little peninsula Europe, which wants by all means to signify as against Asia the 'progress of man'.[1]

Friedrich Nietzsche launches radical criticisms of Christianity and Kantian philosophy, and curses make up a crucial element of this critique. The attacks include substantive claims and methodological elements.

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1. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (trans. Walter Kaufmann; New York: Vintage, 1966), p. 65.

Nietzsche's writings express and embody criticism through formal and rhetorical means, by what they say and how they say it. To read Nietzsche in this way means to regard his works as the rhetorical engagement with tradition and the problems of tradition, especially biblical tradition. An index to Nietzsche's writings lists over 150 references to specific biblical passages and the Bible in general in Nietzsche's works.[2] The preponderance of aphorism, metaphor, narrative, and apodictic expressions in Nietzsche's work makes it highly performative and literary, making literary and rhetorical analysis essential to its interpretation.

Nietzsche's highly artificial and rhetorical works appear to denounce biblical tradition and religion very explicitly, but the florid use of biblical allusion in works like *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* suggests more than simple denunciation. It has been argued that Nietzsche's main target is not so much biblical religion as contemporary bad-faith appropriations of it, including Kant's ethics. As Weaver Santaniello notes, 'Several of the most prominent theologians and philosophers of the twentieth century have regarded Nietzsche as a "god-obsessed" thinker; a prophetic voice that positively and radically transformed the notion of divinity in a culture headed toward nihilism'.[3] Support for such a view can readily be found in the statements such as the following: 'The church is precisely that against which Jesus preached—and against which he taught his disciples to fight'; and 'The church is what is as much a symptom of the triumph of the anti-Christian as the modern state, modern nationalism—The church is the barbarization of Christianity'.[4] Such an interpretation would regard statements in Nietzsche's writings less as propositions or claims than as literary performances designed to produce particular effects. As such, a work such as *Zarathustra* or *The Anti-Christ* might emerge as a literary work, rather than the self-contradictory product of an overheated or even deranged temperament.

The trope of curses in Nietzsche's work, I suggest, calls attention to the peculiar absence of curses and powerful speech from contemporary philosophy and insists on the philosophical relevance of powerful speech and biblical tradition. What Nietzsche wishes to claim about biblical tradition is difficult to determine—neither simple denial nor affirmation, Nietzsche's engagement amounts to an abiding effort to assert the relevance of the tradition to modern thought. In works as diverse as his essay on David Strauss,

2. Karl Schlechta, *Nietzsche-Index zu den Werken in drei Bänden*, I (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1965), pp. 36-37.

3. Weaver Santiello, Preface to *Nietzsche and the Gods* (ed. Santiello; Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. xiii.

4. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (trans. Walter Kaufmann; New York: Random House, 1967), pp. 101, 125.

Genealogy of Morals, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche insists on the relevance of biblical tradition and discourse to modern thought and psychology. Quite independent of what he or anyone may think about biblical tradition, Nietzsche shows that it is *there*, that one cannot easily overlook or dismiss it.

An illustration from *Twilight of the Idols* shows the paradoxical effect of using tradition against itself: 'By saying "God sees into the heart" it [antinatural morality] denies the deepest and the highest desires of life and takes God for the *enemy of life*… If one has grasped the blasphemousness of such a rebellion against life as has, in Christian morality, become virtually sacrosanct, one has fortunately therewith grasped something else as well: the uselessness, illusoriness, absurdity, *falsity* of such a rebellion'.[5] Moralizing against morality, citing scripture (see Acts 15.8 and Mt. 6.4, 6, 18) against the Bible, Nietzsche levels a criticism not only at the tradition but also at those who would disregard its enduring grasp.

To read Nietzsche rhetorically challenges two familiar and understandable images of the philosopher as the absolute enemy of religious tradition and the proponent of an original, coherent alternative to religion and Enlightenment ethics, usually summarized under the categories of 'will to power' and 'eternal recurrence'. There is ample reason to doubt both prevailing interpretations of Nietzsche, not only because of important texts that challenge these views, such as the statement in *Daybreak* that laments the 'euthanasia' of Christianity (see below), but also because Nietzsche shows far less interest in the articulation of a systematic alternative to religious and Kantian ethics than many of his readers suggest. While the present discussion does not claim to settle the matter of Nietzsche interpretation, I argue that Nietzsche's use of biblical allusions and religious rhetoric neither affirms nor denies religious claims but rather aims to *disrupt* prevailing understandings of biblical tradition, morality, and religious language. This disruption is not simply a destructive act, moreover, but rather a serious attempt to understand the dynamic of tradition and change in biblical tradition. As he writes in *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche's taste 'in general dislikes saying Yes, it would rather say No, most of all it prefers to say nothing at all. . . . This applies to entire cultures, it applies to books,—it also applies to towns and countrysides'.[6] When it comes to modern philosophy, Nietzsche's 'No' applies especially to Kant.

Nietzsche depicts Kant as a kind of secular counterpart to the religious ideals of Christian culture; in an explicit claim to Kant's displacement of religion, *The Anti-Christ* ascribes a 'theologian instinct' to Kant.[7]

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5. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ* (trans. R.J. Hollingdale; New York: Penguin, 1990), p. 55.
6. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 116.
7. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, p. 134.

In *Genealogy of Morals* the violence he associates with religious notions of guilt and conscience is preserved in Kant: 'the categorical imperative [the basis of Kant's moral sense of duty] smells of cruelty'.[8] An earlier reference to the categorical imperative in *Daybreak* echoes this point on cruelty: 'To demand that duty must *always* be something of a burden—as Kant does—means to demand that it should never become habit and custom: in this demand there is concealed a remnant of ascetic cruelty'.[9] A second mention of Kant's ethics in the same work compares Luther's idea of trust in God to Kant, who 'made a detour around morality only in order in the end to arrive at *obedience to the person*: precisely this is the cult of the Germans, and increasingly so the less is left to them of the religious cult'.[10]

A different perspective on Kant appears in *Daybreak*, where a paragraph entitled 'At the Deathbed of Christianity' claims that 'Christianity has thus crossed over into a gentle *moralism*: it is not so much "God, freedom and immortality" that have remained, as benevolence and decency of disposition, and the belief that in the while universe too benevolence and decency of disposition will prevail: it is the *euthanasia* of Christianity'.[11] Here Nietzsche's target is not so much Kant as Romantic thinkers. For Kevin Hill, such a passage could reinforce the view of Nietzsche as a kind of reluctant Kantian.[12] Without going that far, I would group this comment with others in Nietzsche's early essay on David Strauss, which denounces sentimental thinkers as lacking the seriousness to understand Kant (see below). Nietzsche thus regards Kant as a more serious more serious thinker than Strauss, but one nevertheless who fails to acknowledge and incorporate religion and powerful speech in his own work.

The question here is not simply what influence the Bible has on Nietzsche but rather how Nietzsche uses the Bible and biblical tradition. One approach would be to prepare a catalogue of biblical allusions and quotations in Nietzsche's works.[13] Comparative analysis of style and substance,

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8. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, p. 63.

9. Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* (trans. R.J. Hollingdale; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 163.

10. Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, p. 129.

11. Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, pp. 53-54.

12. R. Kevin Hill, *Nietzsche's Critiques: The Kantian Foundations of his Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 231. My caution in agreeing with Hill comes from the more strident remarks about Kant, such as Nietzsche's claim that he is 'the most deformed conceptual cripple there has ever been' (*The Twilight of the Idols*, p. 77).

13. Two resources for such study are W. Wiley Richards, *The Bible and Christian Traditions: Keys to Understanding the Allegorical Subplot of Nietzsche's Zarathustra* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), and Karl Schlectha, *Nietzsche-Index zu den Werken in drei Bänden* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1965).

with wisdom and prophetic literature in particular, can also bring interesting results. Obvious references and allusions to biblical prophecy appear not only in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* but also in *Genealogy of Morals* and *The Antichrist*. In *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche says, 'I do not like the "New Testament"', yet he also writes biblically of a 'redeeming man of great love and contempt' who 'may bring home the redemption of this reality: its redemption from the curse that the hitherto reigning ideal has laid upon it'.[14] In *Zarathustra*, one can find traces of wisdom literature and prophecy. The following passage, for example, evokes the wisdom tradition of Ecclesiastes (esp. Eccl. 1.18): '[A]nd what the soothsayer said: "All is the same, nothing is worth while, knowledge chokes". A long twilight limped before me, a sadness, weary to death, drunken with death, speaking with a yawning mouth… "Alas, man recurs eternally! The small man recurs eternally"'![15] The influence of prophecy extends to elements commonly found in biblical prophecy, including a call narrative, a journey of ascent and descent, oracles of judgment, oracles against enemies, oracles of restoration, apocalyptic imagery, and narratives of prophetic agony.[16] The statements of Zarathustra follow the formula 'thus said' and sometimes echo such biblical texts as the so-called Beatitudes of Mt. 5.1-11.[17]

It would surely strike some readers of Nietzsche as ironic to say that his writings are more biblical than the work of many devout theologians, but that will be one of my contentions. By saying so I mean that Nietzsche demonstrates an intimate understanding of the complexity of biblical discourse and form, and that he reads the Bible as a sophisticated document. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Nietzsche did not respond to historical-critical research on the Bible (by Wellhausen or Strauss) with either a defense or a repudiation of the Bible. Instead, by analyzing and imitating biblical discourse, Nietzsche acknowledged the complexity and texture of the Bible while the main debate of the day was on the historicity of the Bible. In order to make this claim, I am aware that I must be selective in how I read and in what I read by Nietzsche. To designate Nietzsche's rhetoric in *Zarathustra* and other writings as prophetic, for example, I refer not only to his biblical allusion but also to a manner of writing that is more interested in criticism and agitation than in articulating a full-blown alternative to the *status quo*.

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14. Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, pp. 96, 144.

15. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (trans. Walter Kaufmann; New York: Penguin, 1978), p. 219.

16. Most of these elements appear in the first few pages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 9-14. A summary of these elements of biblical prophecy appears in Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967).

17. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 14-16.

Unlike most other modern thinkers, Nietzsche makes religious cursing an explicit topic of his work. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, for instance, he presents a curse against sentimental 'pure perceivers', those who wish to live in contemplation and without desire: 'you shall never give birth, even if you lie broad and pregnant on the horizon… But *my* words are small, despised, crooked words: gladly I pick up what falls under the table at your meals. I can still use it to tell hypocrites the truth'.[18] Nietzsche's curses, interesting in themselves, embody Nietzsche's dual critique of Enlightenment and religion.

Nietzsche's method of genealogy, according to which present values are scrutinized in relation to the past, contrasts Kant's critical philosophy and Hegel's philosophy of history. Nietzsche's preoccupation with the role of religion in producing contemporary morals directly challenges the idealism of Kant and Hegel, paradoxically demoting them below religion as influences to reckon with. Through paradox, aphorism, and surprising reversals, Nietzsche's genealogy aims to make the familiar seem strange. The technique of reversal, according to Heidegger, provides a 'critique of the highest values' so that new ideas can provisionally emerge through the provocations and strife produced by critical thinkers.[19] Several scholars have similarly observed that Nietzsche's bravado represents a kind of performance, through which he could accomplish, paradoxically, his complete self-annihilation. In 'Fatal Monologue', Roberto Calasso offers a reading of Nietzsche's last work, *Ecce Homo*, as the fulfillment his philosophy rather than an expression of madness. The great paradox of *Ecce Homo*, says Calasso, is that it dissolves the boundary between the self and the world. By placing himself '*completely* on the stage', Nietzsche uses the 'distraction of a masquerade' to conceal himself completely.[20] The apparent egomania of *Ecce Homo* is in fact a philosophical practice of the simulation and performance that appear in his first book *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) Nietzsche's earliest works, a practice that places the ego into the cycle of existence and the eternal return, affirming a 'plural destiny' instead of an individual one.[21]

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18. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 123.

19. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*. I. *The Will to Power as Art* (trans. David Krell; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 26-30. For Heidegger, this process of criticism and strife is the 'actual origin of truth' (p. 28).

20. Roberto Calasso, *The Forty-Nine Steps* (trans. John Shepley; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2001), p. 23. Compare Peter Sloterdijk's claim that Nietzsche invented a 'literary staging process' based on Wagner's notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (*Thinker on Stage: Nietzsche's Materialism* [trans. Jamie Owen Daniel; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989], p. 7).

21. Calasso, *The Forty-Nine Steps*, pp. 33-35.

While the mocking and ironic tone of much of Nietzsche's writing can be traced to the overwhelming role of artifice and simulation in his work, it must be taken seriously if not literally. Blasphemous and derisive expressions reveal a grudging respect for religious tradition, one that cannot be erased through secularism. As several recent studies have argued, Nietzsche was a serious religious thinker who used religious language to good effect. In *Nietzsche, Metaphor, Religion*, Tim Murphy shows how Nietzsche uses religious discourse to produce 'counternarratives' and ironic readings of history. By arguing that Nietzsche's use of religious language and curses is thus neither a simple affirmation nor a denial of religious tradition.[22] It is at least an affirmation of the robustness of the biblical tradition of powerful speech.

'New Faith' Denounced: 'David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer' (1873)

Nietzsche's essay on David Strauss lambastes the writing style of an intellectual opponent for sloppy thinking and sentimentality, accusing it of being 'Schleiermacherish', among other shortcomings.[23] Citing the postwar euphoria in Germany after the Franco-Prussian War, Nietzsche decries the error 'that German culture too was victorious in that struggle and must therefore now be loaded with garlands appropriate to such an extraordinary achievement'.[24]

In a series of swipes at a what is clearly a whole segment of German intellectual society, Nietzsche denounces Strauss as a 'cultural philistine': '[H]e fancies that he is himself a son of the muses and a man of culture; an incomprehensible delusion which reveals that he does not even know what a philistine, and the antithesis of a philistine, is. . he feels firmly convinced that his 'culture' is the complete expression of true German culture'.[25] Playing on the fact that Strauss's work is an autobiographical confession, Nietzsche

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22. Tim Murphy, *Nietzsche, Metaphor, Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001). Other books that reconsider Nietzsche's theory of religion are Giles Fraser, *Redeeming Nietzsche* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Tyler T. Roberts, *Contesting Spirit: Nietzsche, Affirmation, Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); and Stephen N. Williams, *The Shadow of Antichrist: Nietzsche's Critique of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006). Williams's study carefully situates Nietzsche in the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectual history and theology.

23. Nietzsche, 'David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer', in *Untimely Meditations* (ed. Daniel Breazeale; trans. R.J. Hollingdale; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 1-55 (51). See also the harsh criticism of Strauss in *The Anti-Christ*, written about sixteen years later (*The Anti-Christ*, p. 152).

24. Nietzsche, 'David Strauss', p. 3.

25. Nietzsche, 'David Strauss', p. 7.

persists, 'David Strauss makes a twofold confession regarding philistine culture: confession by word and concession by deed—*the word of the confessor and the deed of the writer*'.[26]

Nietzsche's chief substantive complaint against Strauss is the shallowness of his new religious faith: 'Confessing it [his "new faith"] in writing, he thinks he is inscribing the catechism "of modern ideas" and constructing the broad "universal highway of the future"'.[27] Though Strauss tries to recruit Kant's thought into this 'new faith', Nietzsche complains, 'The quite incredible fact that Strauss has no notion how to derive from Kant's critique of reason support for his testament of modern ideas, and that everywhere he flatters nothing but the crudest kind of realism, is among the most striking characteristics of this new gospel'.[28] Nietzsche also challenges Strauss on the subject for which Strauss is most famous: Jesus: 'Jesus may be described as a visionary who would in our day hardly escape the madhouse, the story of the resurrection may be called a "piece of world-historical humbug"'.[29]

Nietzsche's contempt for Strauss's treatment of Kant and Jesus reveals at least a measure of respect for both. As a 'Schleiermacherish' religious thinker, Nietzsche rejects Strauss's tendency toward a liberal theology that places personal confession and feeling in such a prominent place. Elsewhere Nietzsche's contempt takes a biblical form: '[H]ere and there the book has been received as a *sacred scripture for scholars*'.[30] Nietzsche attacks Strauss with the passion of one who once admired him. In *The Antichrist*, written about sixteen years after the Strauss essay, he writes: 'The time is far distant when I too, like every young scholar and with the clever dullness of a refined philologist, savoured the work of the incomparable Strauss. I was then twenty years old: now I am too serious for that. What do I care for the contradictions of "tradition"? How can legends of saints be called "tradition" at all? The stories of saints are the most ambiguous literature in existence: to apply to them scientific procedures *when no other records are extant* seems to me wrong in principle—mere learned idling…'.[31] Nietzsche's resounding denunciation of Strauss—on stylistic, philosophical, *and* religious grounds—may be seen as a kind of companion-piece to Kant's 'On a Newly-Arisen Superior Tone', but while Kant's essay came late and lacked the critical means to analyze tone and rhetoric, Nietzsche's essay marks an early phase of a long career dedicated to similar kinds of criticisms.

26. Nietzsche, 'David Strauss', p. 14.
27. Nietzsche, 'David Strauss', p. 15.
28. Nietzsche, 'David Strauss', p. 27.
29. Nietzsche, 'David Strauss', p. 29.
30. Nietzsche, 'David Strauss', p. 34.
31. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, p. 152.

Biblical Revenge: The Genealogy of Morals

In *The Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche identifies a perverse form of morality based on the legacy of Jewish and Christian slave morality.[32] Stressing the psychological and cultural dimensions of this morality, Nietzsche (surprisingly for a philologian) shows the degree to which *ressentiment* was centrally rooted in practices of speech, especially the oracles and curses of biblical prophets. This oversight leads Nietzsche from biblical texts and contexts to general psychological and cultural states. In his bid to challenge the Bible's grasp on the cultural imagination, Nietzsche ironically reinforced its canonical authority. Despite his own rhetorical use of curses and oracles, which are filled with biblical references, Nietzsche analyzed Christian and Jewish morality without acknowledging how biblical morality belongs to a self-critical rhetorical tradition. Biblical curses thus stand in a dual relation to Nietzsche's work as rhetorical influence and reified adversary. Nietzsche's genealogical method illuminates the psychology of biblical curses, but his own work overlooks the expressions of biblical tradition.

For Nietzsche, the Bible provides an unnatural rationalization of history from the standpoint of the priestly class. This history follows a decline from the kingdom, when 'Yahweh was the expression of their consciousness of power, of their delight in themselves' to a period after the destruction of Israel in which the priesthood 'made of it a stupid salvation –mechanism of guilt towards Yaweh and punishment, piety towards Yaweh and reward'.[33] This priestly religion becomes the basis for what Nietzsche regards as the unnatural decadence and *ressentiment* of Christian morality. The doctrine of a transcendent god is an act of 'revenge' on Israel's enemies: 'The *one* god and the *one* Son of God: both products of *ressentiment*…'.[34] At the heart of this transformation, for Nietzsche, was scripture itself, in the form of the Deuterononomic code whose discovery is reported in 2 Kings 22: '[A] great literary forgery becomes necessary, a "sacred book" is discovered— it is made public with all hieratic pomp, with days of repentance and with lamentation over the long years of "sinfulness"'.[35]

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32. Gillian Rose argues that Nietzsche's late work is animated by a resentful awareness that eternal recurrence may apply even to his own work: '[H]e knew that he could do nothing to prevent his teaching from becoming another Pauline peril of petty politics or from being pronounced holy' (*Judaism and Modernity: Philosophical Essays* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1993], p. 109).

33. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, pp. 147, 149.

34. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, p. 165. Thomas H. Brobjer has shown that Nietzsche owned and read Wellhausen and other works on biblical scholarship: 'Nietzsche's Reading and Private Library, 1885–1889', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58.4 (1997), pp. 663-80.

35. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, p. 150.

Thus Spoke Zarathustra: Curse and Christianity

> Once the sin against God was the greatest sin; but God died, and these sinners died with him. To sin against the earth is now the most dreadful thing, and to esteem the entrails of the unknowable higher than the meaning of the earth.—*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.[36]

Blasphemy against earth displaces blasphemy against God—thus says Zarathustra. In place of a narrative of secularization, in which philosophy overcomes religion, Nietzsche offers a fictionalized prophet whose oracles rail against Enlightenment as well as traditional Christianity. The irony and simulations of *Zarathustra* make its meaning unclear, however. What kind of philosophy is *Zarathustra*, if it is philosophy at all? Against people of conviction, Nietzsche praises Zarathustra for being a sceptic, which he associates with strength and freedom.[37] Zarathustra is thus a great thinker as well as a prophet, an antidote to Christian and philosophical weakness.

The observation of biblical allusions and their rhetorical use in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is nothing new; Karl Löwith calls it 'the most elaborate countergospel to the Christian gospel and its theological presuppositions'.[38] Nietzsche's most biblical work, *Zarathustra* takes the form of the life and teachings of a great prophet, complete with numerous quotations and allusions to the Bible. In his teachings Zarathustra sometimes curses his opponents, including preachers of 'renunciation of life'—'May they be lured from this life with the "eternal life"!'[39]—and the devil himself, who fails to deliver him from such supplicants as the last pope.[40]

The opposite of Balaam, Zarathustra reverses curses for blessings: 'For I prefer even noise and thunder and storm-curses to this deliberate, doubting cats' calm; and among men too I hate most of all the soft-treaders and those who are half-and-half and doubting, tottering drift clouds. And "whoever cannot bless should *learn* to curse"—this bright doctrine fell to me from a bright heaven; this star stands in my heaven even in black nights'.[41] Most of the biblical allusions in *Zarathustra* refer to New Testament teachings, such

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36. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 13.
37. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 184.
38. Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 219. See also W. Wiley Richards, *The Bible and Christian Traditions: Keys to Understanding the Allegorical Subplot of Nietzsche's Zarathustra* (New York: P. Lang, 1990). See also Rudolf E. Kuenzli, 'Nietzsche's Zerography: Thus Spoke Zarathustra', *boundary 2* 9 (1997), pp. 99-107; and Gary Shapiro, 'The Rhetoric of Nietzsche's Zarathustra', *boundary 2* 8 (1980), pp. 165-89.
39. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 44-45.
40. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 259.
41. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 165.

as the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5, in Zarathustra's first speech)[42] and the seven seals of the apocalypse (Revelation 6–8).[43] A long discourse on the Ten Commandments—the 'old and new tablets',[44] appears in the third part of *Zarathustra*: '"Thou shalt not rob! Thou shalt not kill!" Such words were once called holy; one bent the knee and head and took off one's shoes before them. But I ask you: where have there ever been better robbers and killers in this world than such holy words? …O my brothers, break, break the old tablets!'[45] What are the new tablets? One of them is a paraphrase of Eccl. 12.11-12: '"Wisdom makes weary; worth while is—nothing; thou shalt not desire!"'[46] Far from endorsing this 'new tablet', though, Nietzsche urges his followers to break it as well. The only new tablets Zarathustra leaves unbroken are highly ambiguous admonitions such as 'become hard!' and 'In your children you shall make up for being the children of your fathers'.[47]

Far from an alternative to the laws of the 'old tablets', *Zarathustra* disrupts the search for canonical dogma. What it offers instead is a reflexive meditation on the problem of biblical tradition, given in terms of the life of a fictionalized prophet. Seizing an element common to the lives of biblical prophets, Nietzsche magnifies the prophet's reluctance to lead and even face his followers: Zarathustra prefers solitude and wishes to be denounced by his followers.[48] Even the idea of 'eternal recurrence' or 'eternal return', which is often cited as the most important 'teaching' of Zarathustra, is bracketed by the prophet's reluctance to speak and his fear that the teaching will be swept up into popular tradition. When he awakens from a seven-day illness and announces the concept of eternal recurrence, Zarathustra chastises his followers: 'Must you immediately turn this too into a hurdy-gurdy song?'[49] The doctrine of eternal recurrence itself seems fated to recur in tradition.

Zarathustra's failure to escape his followers becomes a failure to transform them. Despite his teaching and their own admission to the death of God, several of Zarathustra's main interlocutors reconstitute their religion in worship of an ass: '"They have all become pious again, they are praying, they are mad!"' When he asks the old pope what he is doing, the pope

42. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 15-18.
43. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 228-31.
44. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 196-215.
45. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 202.
46. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 205. An even closer allusion to Ecclesiastes appears just before this passage, where Zarathustra denounces the saying 'All is vanity' (p. 204).
47. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 214, 204. According to T.K. Seung, there may be an allusion to Balaam in Zarathustra's Feast of the Asses. See Seung, *Nietzsche's Epic of the Soul: Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), p. 298.
48. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 9-19, 78.
49. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 220.

responds, '"Better to adore God in this form than in no form at all!"'[50] In his ostensible failure to demolish tradition, then, Zarathustra becomes a tragic figure.

The tragedy of Zarathustra points away from the flat rejection of religious tradition and the simple statement of philosophical doctrine. Like the other works by Nietzsche considered here, I suggest that *Zarathustra* seeks to destabilize understandings of biblical tradition and the moral teachings that derived from it. Nietzsche shows how even the harshest critic of tradition remains subject to the claims and dynamics of tradition. The notion of eternal recurrence gives form to this claim, warning against ambitious attempts to transcend tradition. Neither continuity nor discontinuity can describe the dynamics of tradition in *Zarathustra*; what remains is a set of questions on the conditions and possibilities for change within tradition. Even when he replaces blessings with curses, Zarathustra remains caught in the dynamic of displacement and eternal recurrence.

For Karl Löwith, the doctrine of eternal recurrence in *Zarathustra* represents the culmination of a lifelong engagement with biblical Christianity. Yet Löwith sees an irony in Nietzsche's resort to eternal recurrence: 'Nietzsche did not realize, however, that his own *contra Christianos* was an exact replica in reverse of the *contra gentiles* of the Church Fathers'.[51] Nietzsche's attacks on Christianity, Löwith observes, closely reiterate the pagan anti-Christian polemics of late antiquity. At the same time, he argues, *Zarathustra* is 'from cover to cover a counter*gospel* in style as well as in content… Nietzsche's neo-paganism is, like that of D.H. Lawrence, essentially Christian, by being anti-Christian'.[52]

Nietzsche was, for Löwith, too Christian and modern to achieve that '"transvaluation of all values" which Christianity had effected against paganism' and thus instantiates 'the most pious of the godless' mockingly described in *Zarathustra*.[53] Löwith's criticism depends, of course, on an account of what one thinks Nietzsche is trying to do. On my reading, *Zarathustra* does not reduce to the statements made by such characters as Zarathustra or the 'last pope'. Instead, I regard *Zarathustra* to be a literary text that distances itself from Nietzsche's own views. As such, *Zarathustra* confronts the challenge tradition poses to modernity.

Cursing Christianity: The Antichrist

In *The Antichrist*, Nietzsche attacks Christian Enlightenment morality with an explicit curse: 'I call Christianity the *one* great curse, the *one* great

50. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 312, 314.
51. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. 220.
52. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. 220.
53. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, pp. 221-22.

intrinsic depravity, the *one* great instinct for revenge for which no expedient is sufficiently poisonous, secret, subterranean, *petty*—I call it the *one* immortal blemish of mankind…'.[54] While a passage in *Will to Power* describes Christianity as cursing 'the well-constituted and dominant' in its characteristic *ressentiment*, here Nietzsche himself does the cursing. The book's subtitle, 'A Curse on Christianity', makes the point even more insistent. What do these curses mean, and what do they do? While some readers tend to disregard such exclamations as impassioned rants or rhetorical posturing, I prefer to assume that Nietzsche's stylistic self-consciousness is at work here as it is in most of his work. Are the curses then a form of ironic moralizing, a way of showing that even a criticism of Christianity must embrace its terminology? It is impossible to know, but the denunciation of Christianity here, as elsewhere, extends to the Reformation and Enlightenment thinkers without articulating any kind of systematic alternative to their work. The curses of *The Anti-Christ*, I suggest, fit into Nietzsche's long-term strategy of destabilizing contemporary ideas of religion and morality.

Contrary to the Kantian notion of Enlightenment as a liberation from the bonds of the Church, Nietzsche accuses German thinkers of claiming novelty for continuing and degrading Christianity: 'The Reformation; Leibniz; Kant and so-called German philosophy; the Wars of "Liberation"; the *Reich*—each time an in vain for something already in existence… For almost a millennium they have twisted and tangled everything they have laid their hands on'.[55] By cursing Enlightenment morality, Nietzsche subverts the narrative of modernity as the refutation of biblical tradition, retrieving cursing as a legitimate and effective form of speech. More critical than Romantic thinkers earlier in the nineteenth century, who also criticized Kant for his dismissal of religion, Nietzsche set a precedent for later attempts to retrieve powerful speech, making *cursing* its rhetorical symbol.

In a fragment from the posthumous collection *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche also characterizes Christianity as a curse:

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54. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, p. 199. When the book was first published, the subtitle ('A Curse upon Christianity') and this final curse were omitted (Murphy, *Nietzsche, Metaphor, Religion*, p. 8). Murphy's study includes a brief survey of recent literature on the possible coherence and integrity of Nietzsche's religious writings, including *The Antichrist*. Murphy's proposal is to read Nietzsche's writings as texts rich with metaphor, metalanguage, and 'agonistic interpretation' (Murphy, *Nietzsche, Metaphor, Religion*, pp. 8-17, 145-51). See also Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (trans. Hugh Tomlinson; New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); and the collection of essays *Studies in Nietzsche and the Judaeo-Christian Tradition* (ed. James C. O'Flaherty, Tomothy F. Sellner, and Robert M. Helm; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

55. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, p. 198.

> The Christian movement is a degeneracy movement composed of reject
> and refuse elements of every kind…it is founded on a rancor against every-
> thing well-constituted and dominant: it needs a symbol that represents a
> curse on the well-constituted and dominant—It also stand in opposition to
> every spiritual movement, to all philosophy: it takes the side of idiots and
> utters a curse on the spirit.[56]

Here cursing is an act of Christian *ressentiment* judged by Nietzsche to
be a sign of its degeneracy. The 'curse on the spirit', on 'everything well-
constituted and dominant', takes the traditional form of the curse as a
'last resort of the weak'. In an insult that would be regarded as blasphemy
against philosophy and theology alike, Nietzsche accuses Christianity of
being the opposite of what it claims to be: weak rather than strong, curse
rather than blessing, hostile to spirit and philosophy rather than friendly
to them.

Of course, Nietzsche's most vehement curse is reserved for the kind of
Christianity influenced by Kant: 'Nothing works more profound ruin than
any "impersonal" duty, any sacrifice to the Moloch of abstraction. Kant's
categorical imperative should have been felt as *mortally dangerous!* …The
theologian instinct alone took it under its protection!'[57] With this allusion to
the biblical tradition of a false god who demands human sacrifice (see, e.g.,
1 Kgs 11.7), Nietzsche condemns Kantian abstraction with biblical teach-
ings against idolatry, at once defending the relevance of biblical tradition
and unveiling Kant's philosophy and its Christian counterparts as a mere
recurrence of ancient superstition. Nietzsche's attack becomes prophetic
through biblical allusion as well as rhetoric.

Nietzsche's multiple uses of curse rhetoric—describing Christianity as
a curse, cursing Christianity directly in *The Antichrist*, and putting curses
in the mouth of Zarathustra—draw attention to the status of cursing itself
in Nietzsche's world. Are curses merely a forceful means of denouncing,
remnants of ancient worlds tragically lost, or are they a form of powerful,
supernatural speech? Nietzsche's enthusiastic use of cursing flaunts post-
Enlightenment efforts to domesticate tradition, but do Nietzsche's curses
overthrow the religion and philosophy he denounces, vindicating the eter-
nal recurrence of powerful speech, or do they instead mark a site of loss?
True to his own thinking, Nietzsche leaves these questions open to interpre-
tation. The indeterminacy of curses' efficacy underlines the seriousness of
Nietzsche's larger project of confronting the coincidence of displacement
and eternal recurrence.

The criticism Löwith levels at Nietzsche, that his attack on Christianity
fails to break out of the Christian worldview, assumes (wrongly, I think) that
Nietzsche's real aim was to construct a moral and cultural system to replace

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56. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 96.
57. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, p. 134.

Christianity. In my view, Nietzsche's work can better be understood as an attempt to show the difficulty of such an effort, particularly in the work of thinkers like Kant. In Wendy Brown's terms, Nietzsche is a 'diagnostician' who sees the 'near impossibility' of 'formulating oneself as a creator of the future and a bridge to the future in order to appease the otherwise inevitable rancor of the will against time, in order to redeem the past by lifting the weight of it, by reducing the scope of its determinations'.[58] Indebted to Nietzsche, Löwith's reflections on secularism offer a rich, hermeneutical challenge to the model of progress in historiography. Nevertheless, his analysis emphasizes the continuity of tradition and modernity: 'There would be no American, no French, and no Russian revolutions and constitutions without the idea of progress and no idea of secular progress toward fulfillment without the original faith in a Kingdom of God'.[59] How to balance this apparent continuity with discontinuity, of course, is the challenge faced by Nietzsche, Löwith, and anyone who thinks seriously about traditions. What often goes unnoticed in Nietzsche's contribution to the discussion is his insistence that tradition entails discourses that must be considered together in order to reckon with the philosophical, psychological, and cultural problems of the modern period.

Freud and Displacement

The idea of displacement assumes that when one cultural practice or discourse goes away another takes its place. Displacement claims no particular narrative of improvement or decay, and it implies a significant level of continuity between phases of change. The advantage of displacement is that it can account for the ways in which purportedly secular institutions, such as post-Revolutionary France or the Soviet Union, made use of religious symbols, rituals, and beliefs even as they criticized them.[60] In terms of contemporary debates, the model of displacement avoids the problems of secularization theories that predicted a steady and marked decline in the power of religious institutions in the modern period. The claims of displacement to persistence or continuity are not always self-evident; the challenge is to make them conceptually plausible and hermeneutically convincing. How

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58. Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 72, 74.

59. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. 212. Hans Blumenberg disagreed sharply with Löwith, arguing that secular institutions took over the role of religious ones (*Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988], p. 108). See Robert M. Wallace, 'Progress, Secularization and Modernity: The Löwith–Blumenberg Debate', *New German Critique* 22 (Winter, 1981), pp. 63-79.

60. Christel Lane, *The Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society—The Soviet Case* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

and whether a practice or institution follows from an earlier one is difficult to establish without a 'smoking gun' making such a connection. But Freud's suggestion that psychic and cultural phenomena may be partially hidden affords more complex analysis relating past to present than secularization allows.

   My approach to Freud is captured by Harold Bloom, who writes,

> Increasingly we have come to see that Freud has more in common with the moral essayist Michel de Montaigne than he does with the scientist Charles Darwin. To be, as Freud was, the Montaigne of the 20th century, was to be equal to the other major writers of that era: James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, just as Montaigne himself was the peer of Cervantes and of Shakespeare. I find the phrase, 'the literary Freud', to be a redundancy, just as it would sound odd to speak of 'the literary Joyce' or 'the literary Proust'.[61]

Freud's concern in the *Case Studies*, of course, is clinical and scientific: he addresses specific disorders and cases with specific diagnoses and treatments. But Bloom is nevertheless right: the *Case Studies* are also literary artifacts, compelling narratives rich with detail and analysis. What is more, Freudian analysis is arguably as religious as it is literary: several scholars have argued that his studies strongly resemble rabbinic biblical interpretation. According to Susan Handelman, 'Freud displaced Rabbinic hermeneutics from the text of the Holy Writ to the text of the dream, the speaking psyche of the person'.[62] While Handelman overstates the case for Freud's use of rabbinic tradition, one can see in the 'Rat Man' and other case studies how the patients and their disorders are texts on which Freud is writing commentary. And like the Torah of the rabbis, the text of the patient seems to hold almost infinite and sometimes competing meanings for Freud; the word *Ratten* (rats), for instance, evinces at least a dozen distinct meanings in Freud's study.[63] Viewing Freud in such literary and religious terms, as acts of narration and interpretation, makes his case studies, which receive comparatively little critical attention, just as important as his more systematic writings.

   Of course, Freud did not always see his own work in literary and religious terms. He was a secularist who appeared, in works like *Future of an Illusion*, to support some version of secularization. The ambivalence of this

   61. Harold Bloom, 'Why Freud Matters', *Wall Street Journal Online*, 5 May, 2006. See also Michel de Certeau, 'The Freudian Novel: History and Literature', in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (trans. Brian Massumi; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 17-34.

   62. Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), p. 132.

   63. Freud, *Three Case Histories* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), pp. 52-54.

'godless Jew' toward religion has been the subject of widespread scholarly discussion, but the position I adopt here, indebted to Yosef Yerushalmi and Eric Santner, is that Freud's analyses demonstrate, if reluctantly, the influence of religious tradition.[64] Such an approach 'puts Freud on the couch', so to speak, by suggesting that Freudian hermeneutics can reveal hidden religious elements and motives in Freud's writings. In the case of the Rat Man, for example, I will suggest that Freud and his patient betray complex attitudes toward religious tradition that Freud himself overlooked.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud identifies the category of displacement (*Verschiebung*) as a basic function of dream-work.[65] He introduces the concept in familiar terms as the displacement of affect:

> When a lonely old maid transfers her affection to animals, or a bachelor becomes an enthusiastic collector, when a soldier defends a scrap of coloured cloth—a flag—with his life's blood, when a few seconds' extra pressure in a handshake means bliss to a lover, or when, in *Othello*, a lost handkerchief precipitates an outburst of rage—all of these are instances of psychical displacements to which we raise no objection. But when we hear that a decision as to what shall reach our consciousness and what shall be kept out of it—what we shall *think*, in short—has been arrived at in the same manner and on the same principles, we have an impression of a pathological event and, if such things happen in waking life, we describe them as errors in thought.[66]

The process of displacement in waking life applies similarly to dreaming:

> [I]n the dream-work a psychical force is operating which on the one hand strips the elements which have a high psychical value of their intensity, and on the other hand, *by means of overdetermination*, creates from elements of low psychical value new values, which afterwards find their way into the dream-content. If that is so, *a transference* [Übertragung] *and displacement of psychical intensities* occurs in the process of dream-formation, and it is as a result of these that the difference between the text of the dream-content and that of the dream-thoughts comes about. The process which we are here presuming is nothing less than the essential portion of the dream-work.[67]

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64. Santner argues that for Freud 'the biblical traditions inaugurate a form of life structured precisely around an openness to the alterity, the uncanny starangeness, of the Other as the very locus of a universality-in-becoming' (*On the Psychopathology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001], p. 5).

65. Note that *Entstellung* (distortion) and *Übertragung* (transference), terms also used by Freud, are sometimes confused with *Verschiebung* (displacement).

66. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (trans. James Strachey; New York: Avon, 1965), p. 210.

67. Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, pp. 342-43; German version: Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*, II/III (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1968), p. 313.

The German term for displacement, *Verschiebung*, refers to a change in time, space, or, intriguingly, black market exchange.[68] All of these meanings, since they predate the twentieth century, would have been available to Freud. If he was familiar with the black market connotation, Freud chose a term that evoked hidden and illicit forms of conduct that nevertheless followed rules such as supply and demand.

Freud's idea of displacement may also bear the influence of Nietzsche. Against the German Idealist trend toward viewing history as a teleological progress toward rationality, Nietzsche fiercely attacked contemporary thought and institutions as either degenerations from the past or the 'eternal return' of past forms. Freud's sympathies with Nietzsche's thinking are clear even in his early work. In a discussion of displacement in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud explains, '[T]he fact is that a complete "transvaluation of all psychical values" [in Nietzsche's phrase] takes place between the material of the dream-thoughts and the dream'.[69] The influence of Nietzsche on Freud has been overlooked until recently; in addition to a common interest in dreams, they shared a passion to understand overlooked ways in which the past informs the present.[70] Nietzsche's genealogical method, which produced the theory of slave morality or *ressentiment* in *Genealogy of Morals*, demonstrates that Freud's idea of displacement was social and cultural from the very beginning.

Richard Lehrer's study of Nietzsche's influence on Freud cites this remark by Freud on the category of displacement: 'Nietzsche failed to recognize infantilism as well as the mechanism of displacement'.[71] Lehrer shows, however, that displacement is present in Nietzsche's thought and that it appears to have influenced Freud's 1894 essay, 'The Neuro-Psychoses of Defense', *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), his 1914 essay on narcissism, and many other works. The passages from Nietzsche cited by Lehrer come from primarily from *On the Genealogy of Morals*, *The Gay Science*, *Human, All Too Human*, and *Twilight of the Idols*. Among the passages from Nietzsche relevant to Freud's category of displacement is the following from *Twilight of the Idols*: 'The spiritualization of sensuality is called *love*: it is a great triumph over Christianity. A further triumph is our spiritualization of *enmity*. It consists in profoundly grasping the value of having enemies: in brief, in acting and thinking in the reverse of the

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68. The black market motif, which goes back to the nineteenth century in Berlin, denotes 'Wechsel, Hypotheken zum Schein in andere Hände bringen' (*Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Deutschen* [Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1997], p. 1196).

69. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 365.

70. Ronald Lehrer, *Nietzsche's Presence in Freud's Life and Thought: On the Origins of a Psychology of Dynamic Unconscious Mental Functioning* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994).

71. Lehrer, *Nietzsche's Presence in Freud's Life and Thought*, p. 105.

way in which one formerly acted and thought'.[72] What is striking about this passage is not only its resemblance to Freud's displacement but its part in an essay called 'Morality as Anti-Nature', a long series of condemnations of the Christian assault on 'life'. The climax of Nietzsche's attack appropriates the religious category of blasphemy against religion: 'If one has grasped the blasphemousness of such a rebellion against life as has, in Christian morality, become virtually sacrosanct, one has fortunately therewith grasped something else as well: the uselessness, illusoriness, absurdity, *falsity* of such a rebellion'.[73] Nietzsche's understanding of psychological reversals (or displacements) is closely tied to his critique of Christianity. Though the concept of displacement permeates Nietzsche's writings, the term *Verschiebung* rarely appears, but one exception is in the beginning of *Human, All Too Human*, where Nietzsche speaks of the need of the 'free spirit' to discern the 'displacement, distortion, and merely apparent teleology of horizons' in value judgments.[74]

Though he confesses not to understand the physiological mechanisms of dream-work, Freud resorts to various physical metaphors to explain his theory of dreams. Pressure, energy, and movement all combine in Freud's description of the process as 'a primitive psychical apparatus whose activities are regulated by an effort to avoid an accumulation of excitation and to maintain itself so far as possible without excitation'.[75] This 'reflex apparatus' first asserts a wish and then inhibits or represses it. By condensation and displacement, the dream-work renders a manifest wish latent. The initial expression of the wish is met with a 'damming-up' mechanism that Freud also describes as a screen between the unconscious and conscious states.[76]

The manifestations of displacement can thus be physiological and affective (as in *The Interpretation of Dreams*), cognitive (a 'diversion of the train of thought'[77]), or verbal, as Freud observes in 'The Forgetting of Proper Names' (1901): 'The process that should lead to the reproduction of the missing name has been so to speak *displaced* and has therefore led to an incorrect substitute. My hypothesis is that this displacement is not left to arbitrary psychical choice but follows paths which can be predicted

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72. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 53.

73. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 55.

74. *Human, All Too Human* (trans. R.J. Hollingdale; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 9. *Verschiebung* does not appear in *The Gay Science, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Beyond Good and Evil*, or *The Birth of Tragedy*.

75. Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 637.

76. Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, pp. 638, 653.

77. Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, VI (ed. Lytton Strachey; London: Hogarth, 1975), p. 51.

and which conform to laws'.[78] The 'mechanism of displacement', says Freud in 1907 (long before *Civilization and its Discontents*), is at the heart of obsessional neuroses and religion itself: 'In view of these similarities and analogies none might venture to regard obsessional neurosis as a pathological counterpart of the formation of a religion, and to describe that neurosis as an individual religiosity and religion as a universal obsessional neurosis'.[79] Freud identified no systematic laws of displacement, and he continued to view religion in reductionistic and secularist terms, but these failures are balanced by penetrating insights into human behavior and traditions.

Freud's notion of displacement involves at least three elements: (1) a manifest change based on the model of an object shifting in space or time, such as the forgetting of names or the shifting of frames of reference in a joke, the inversion or transformation of terms in a dream; (2) an underlying shift of affect—from one that is laden to one that is relatively neutral; and (3) social as well as psychological dimensions. While Freud's account of displacement falls short of rigorous empirical validation, it represents a conceptual model of human behavior powerful for its heuristic value.[80] Freud's deep insight is that puzzling and seemingly irrational behaviors somehow make sense. Like repression, denial, sublimation, and mourning, the category of displacement has become a commonplace way of understanding behavior not for its scientific validity but for its hermeneutical power. It is this hermeneutical dimension that makes displacement useful to the study of religious and cultural change. I will discuss the three elements of displacement in turn.

The first, most literal sense of displacement means a shifting in space or time. Along with this shifting goes the principle that like matter, psychic energy is conserved; it cannot simply disappear. The term is already metaphorical in the sense that Freud compares a subjective shift in affect to the physical or temporal shifting of objects. Of course, psychological displacement may accompany physical displacement around the Indian Partition, as it does in Chakrabarty's study of identity, trauma, and memory, 'Memories of Displacement: The Poetry and Prejudice of Dwelling'.[81] Historical and cultural displacements are often marked by dislocations; the whole set of displacements indicated by Freud in *Moses and Monotheism*, from

78. Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* in *Standard Edition*, VI, p. 2.

79. Freud, 'Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices', *Standard Edition*, IX, pp. 126-27.

80. See particularly the serious uses of Freud's ideas of religious tradition and memory in Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory* (trans. Rodney Livingstone; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), and Richard Bernstein, *Freud and the Legacy of Moses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

81. Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, pp. 115-37.

hostility toward the leader to worship of him in the form of a divine messiah, follows the geographic dislocation of the Hebrews from Egypt to the wilderness, promised land, exile, and return, as well as the emergence of Christianity in Palestine and its flourishing in Rome. Displacement in time presents equally rich associations for understandings of religious change; the layers of history in the formation and reception of the Bible, for instance, correspond to the spatial displacements just mentioned. The main implication of the spatial metaphor, of course, is the insight that religious discourse and institutions, like physical bodies, do not simply vanish but instead must go somewhere. Both for its metaphorical power as well as its associations with literal dislocations (and their attendant witnesses of trauma and transformation), literal displacement offers a meaningful alternative to secularization.

The manifest change that accompanies displacement for Freud assures that the conscious life of the patient will be protected against the dangerous contents of the unconscious. Such a change follows from apparent necessity or benefit of this change. For one reason or another, the conscious mind cannot endure direct knowledge of the content being displaced. In the process of this change, the unconscious conceals the process of transformation, often by way of a kind of censorship or coding. What application can this have for collective, cultural changes in religion? In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud attempts the bold step of transposing individual repression and displacement onto the collective experience of ancient Israel. The repressed murder of Moses becomes the source of Judaism and then returns in the central Passion narrative of Christianity. The question that continues to plague Freud, however, is how repression and displacement can take place on a collective level; as Yosef Yerushalmi notes, Freud's explanation of the transmission of unconscious material through generations is problematic.[82] By itself, displacement poses no such problem: the manifest change in religious expressions or institutions need not be understood as contents preserved within a collective psyche through generations. Manifest change, rather, can better be understood in terms of discourses, such as those that accompany shifts of legitimacy from the church to the state.

The shift of affect Freud ascribes to displacement can apply to a text like John Locke's 1689 *Letter Concerning Toleration*, in which one can discern deliberate efforts to reduce violent conflict in the name of religion. Arguing for a clear boundary between civil government and religion, Locke exhorts, 'If this be not done, there can be no end put to the controversies that will be always arising between those that have, or at least pretend to have, on the one side, a concernment for the interest of men's souls, and,

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82. Yosef Yerushalmi, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 87-89.

on the other side, a care of the commonwealth'.[83] The relegation of religion to the domain of private life by Locke, Kant, and many others serves to restrict its tendency to break out in conflict. Shifting the legitimacy of religion onto domains and discourses of science, statecraft, philosophy, and the market also has the consequence of consolidating power in alternative configurations. One of the primary ways of effecting displacement was thus to redefine existing terms: thus, as ancient Israel reworked mythologies and theologies of the ancient Near East, so early modern England transformed cursing and swearing from powerful action to vulgar speech.

For the Freud of Bloom and other humanistic scholars, there is no certainty about the mechanisms or methods of understanding displacement. Displacement is rather a hermeneutical category of analysis that points to manifold forms of the persistence of tradition in the face of change. In drawing this category from a reading of the case of the 'Rat Man', I underscore the interpretive and contextual nature of Freud's approach, as well as my conviction that biblical curses are a crucial indicator of displacements in biblical tradition. With the text of Balaam, Freud's text shares a preoccupation with binding speech (curses, blessings, vows) that suggests a model of biblical tradition more robust and complex than such binaries as sacred and secular suggest.

Committed neither to the master narrative of progress familiar in German Idealism nor to the narratives of decay and repetition handed down by Nietzsche, the idea of displacement represents an attempt to describe cultural and religious change on a case-by-case basis, as commentary on a text. Like a sacred text, Freud's patient emerges from this study as containing many simultaneous layers of meaning: 'In his normal state he was kind, cheerful, and sensible—an enlightened and superior kind of person, while in his third psychological organization he paid homage to superstition and asceticism. Thus he was able to have two different creeds and two different outlooks on life'.[84] If Freud's secularism compels him to overlook religious tradition, his case history nevertheless discloses what is biblical about the Rat Man, and what is modern about biblical curses.

Freud's 'Rat Man'

Freud's case history of the so-called 'Rat Man' directly concerns displacement, religion, and binding speech. The idea that displacement lies at the heart of obsessional neurosis and religion alike, which Freud spelled out two years earlier in his essay, 'Obsessive Actions and Religious Practice',

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83. Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, in *The Second Treatise of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Mineola, New York: Dover, 2002).
84. Freud, *Three Case Histories*, p. 81.

is key to Freud's analysis of the Rat Man.[85] Freud describes the central episode of the case, in which the Rat Man swears a vow to 'repay' someone to whom he is not indebted, along with his religious obsessions, as cases of 'displacement'. Still, Freud's narrative and analysis claim very little systematic or comprehensive grasp of the case. As if the complexity of even one person is too great for him to capture in writing, Freud prefaces and concludes his study with disclaimers describing his essay as fragmented, unsystematic, and inconclusive.[86] Yet from a literary standpoint of the sort indicated by Bloom, the study has a high level of narrative coherence and integrity. Freud shows himself here to be a careful observer of his patient's verbal expression as well as a master of expression himself. If I choose to look here for an elaboration of Freud's notion of displacement, it is because I consider this kind of writing and analysis, however limited, to be especially fruitful for questioning models of secularization.

Freud's patient develops an obsession after connecting two unrelated statements by a 'cruel captain' in the army—the first a description of a punishment in which rats burrow into a person's anus, and the second an incidental message that the patient should repay 'Lieutenant A'. for postage on the delivery of the patient's pince-nez.[87] Once he links these two statements, the patient is plagued by obsessive thoughts of rats penetrating the anus of his deceased father and a woman he knew, and he forms a 'vow' (*Eid*) to repay a colleague, 'Lieutenant A'. for postage due on the pince-nez he had ordered, lest this ordeal be inflicted upon his father and former beloved.[88] The emotionally charged image of violence toward loved ones is thus displaced onto the plan to repay a petty sum for postage. The vow persists even when he learns that it was not Lieutenant A. who paid the postage in the first place. In order to fulfill the vow, the patient develops elaborate plans to go to the post office with both Lieutenant A. and the person who actually paid for the postage, Lieutenant B., in order to hand the money to A., who would then hand it to a clerk, who would then hand it to B.

The patient associates his obsessions with a devout religious background, even though he had subsequently 'developed into the free-thinker that he was to-day'.[89] When the patient defends his obsessions on the grounds that we do not really know what happens after death, Freud remarks that '[t]his form of argument seemed unobjectionable to a man who was in other respects particularly clear-headed, and in this way he exploited the uncertainty of reason in the face of these questions to the benefit of the

85. Freud, *Three Case Histories*, pp. 15, 33, 39 and 75.
86. Freud, *Three Case Histories*, pp. 1-3, 80-81.
87. Freud, *Three Case Histories*, pp. 12-14.
88. Freud, *Three Case Histories*, pp. 13-14.
89. Freud, *Three Case Histories*, p. 15.

religious attitude which he had outgrown'.[90] In Freud's analysis, the obsessions reflect a persistent attachment to an outgrown 'religious attitude', one unbefitting a 'free-thinker'. The comparison of obsessive and religious behavior echoes, of course, Freud's 1907 essay, 'Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices'. But instead of lingering on the religious autobiography of his patient, Freud concentrates on childhood sexual experiences and allows himself to associate obsession with religion.

But there is another possibility: the patient's obsessive vow, a religiously charged form of powerful speech, suggests that the attempt to abandon the 'religious attitude' itself may have contributed to the obsession. To put it in another way, the imperative to secularize, which Freud himself supports (here and in works like *The Future of an Illusion*), could contribute to the severity of an obsession. A religious vow carries the moderating influences of social group and historical tradition, while there is no such check on a private, obsessional vow such as the rat man's determination to repay someone whom he doesn't even owe in order to prevent a totally unrelated violent event from occurring.

I am not suggesting that obsessive vows are a direct consequence of secularism or that religious practice is a remedy for mental illness. I make no claim at the level of individual clinical treatment, but I do suggest there is a blind spot in Freud's analysis emerging from his uncritical acceptance of secularism. As Freud himself argues in an analogy to the artifacts found at Pompeii, unconscious material can endure intact, while conscious materials tend to wear away.[91] In the confident view that religious traditions are irrational and illusory, modern subjects are prone to bury, or repress, them, where they may ultimately resurface intact. As I argue throughout this study, the repression of powerful speech in the name of secular modernism has tended to yield new linguistic conundrums and forms of powerful speech.

Even though religious forms of powerful speech belong in the category of discredited superstitions for Freud, they represent a recurrent theme in his analysis of the Rat Man. During a religious phase when the patient resumed the practice of private prayer, he discovered that he needed to pray for over an hour at a time because 'like an inverted Balaam (*ein umgekehrter Bileam*), that something always inserted itself into his pious phrases and turned them into their opposite. For instance, if he said, "May God protect him", an evil spirit would hurriedly insinuate a "not"'.[92] With this unwanted reversal, which parallels the biblical story of Balaam, a prophet who unwillingly blesses Israel when he tries to curse them, the patient considers trying to curse in order to see whether a blessing would follow. Freud

90. Freud, *Three Case Histories*, p. 15.
91. Freud, *Three Case Histories*, p. 21.
92. Freud, *Three Case Histories*, pp. 35, 76.

makes no comment on the biblical allusion, as if it comes naturally to a non-religious man of science.

Other examples of curses and supernatural uses of speech in the study include the patient's reading a passage of Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit* in which Goethe 'freed himself in a burst of tenderness from the effects of a curse which a jealous mistress had pronounced upon the next woman who should kiss his lips after her; he had long, almost superstitiously (*wie abergläubisch*), suffered the curse to hold him back, but now he broke his bonds and kissed his love joyfully again and again'.[93] This episode, which combines sexuality with liberation from a curse, gives the patient the urge to masturbate. It is as if it takes a person of Goethe's stature to allow him to overcome his inhibitions toward sex and powerful speech. Another mention of curses appears in Freud's long list of associations raised by the rat punishment, which includes 'certain [sexual] curses in use among the Southern Slavs'.[94] In Freud's analysis, the patient's use of words and neologisms served as apotropaic forms of magic, and he believed his words were so powerful that even his evil wishes were bound to come true.[95] In fact, the patient remarks that Freud's work on word associations reminded him of his own thought patterns and influenced his decision to enter analysis.[96]

The Rat Man's displacement shifts the powerful feelings of sexual desire and hatred toward his father to the two statements by the 'cruel captain' about the rat punishment and the small postage fee. Freud associates the patient's illness with superstition: 'Our patient was to a high degree superstitious (*abergläubisch*), and this although he was a highly educated and enlightened man of considerable acumen, and although he was able at times to assure me that he did not believe a word of all this rubbish. Thus he was superstitious and not superstitious; and there was a clear distinction between his attitude and the superstition of uneducated people who feel themselves at one with their belief'.[97] For Freud these superstitious and religious beliefs were evidence of illness but not the cause of it. The patient presents Freud with a history of fervent religious belief, rejection of that belief, and later the periodic return of that belief alternating with moments of rejecting it, as well as obsessions that include religious content. The patient is 'superstitious and not superstitious' during the treatment, but Freud overlooks this ambivalence in favor of his interest in linking the disorder to the patient's early childhood sexuality.

93. Freud, *Three Case Histories*, pp. 44-45.
94. Freud, *Three Case Histories*, p. 53.
95. Freud, *Three Case Histories*, pp. 61-62.
96. Freud, *Three Case Histories*, p. 6. The patient's interest in powerful speech also appears in his fear that he has spoken his sexual desires out loud without knowing it (pp. 8, 10).
97. Freud, *Three Case Histories*, p. 65.

Freud's explicit disregard for religious belief and practice even as he acknowledges its influence can be seen as a kind of repression of religion in his work. Yet the unselfconscious readiness with which Freud compares the Rat Man to Balaam shows his willingness and ability to use a biblical text to explain clinical data. As Handelman, Yerushalmi, and others have each suggested, Freud's work cannot be understood adequately without seeing the influence of religious categories and tradition. To observe this overlooked dimension in his own work is to pay Freud the highest possible compliment, by showing how his own methods reveal something Freud himself did not recognize. Such observations carry implications far beyond Freud's work because of how Freud embodies anti-religious prejudices of modernity and the tools with which to overcome such a prejudice. The very mechanism of displacement Freud observes in his patients operates also, in a different way, in the displacement of religion to illness and its interpretation. Like his patient, Freud is 'superstitious and not superstitious'!

A later case study, 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis' (1914–15), better known as the Wolf-Man case, raises some of the same issues that preoccupy Freud's study of the Rat Man. In order to calm him when he was four, his mother and nurse ('who was very pious and superstitious') told him Bible stories using an illustrated book.[98] This 'initiation into religion' 'led to the anxiety symptoms being replaced by obsessional symptoms' (*WM*, 204). Freud describes this transformation as 'sublimation' (Sublimierung) rather than displacement (Verschiebung), and he describes other changes with the verb 'deplacieren' and 'Verkehrung' (*WM*, 179, 233). In this study and the Rat Man, at least, Freud does not seem to have a rigorous technical vocabulary for processes of transformation; what is consistent, though, is the ambivalent role of religion as a symptomatic expression, through piety, cursing, and blasphemy, of neurosis. In this case, the patient's turn to religion shifts ambivalence toward his father onto God. As he made his way each night through a routine of praying and kissing several religious pictures around his room, he would 'recollect some blasphemous thoughts which used to come into his head like an inspiration from the devil. He was obliged to think "God–swine" or "God—shit" ("Gott–Schwein" oder "Gott–Kot")' (*WM*, 162). To atone for these compulsive blasphemies, the Wolf-Man would breathe out as he made the sign of the cross, in order to cast out his evil spirits (*WM*, 209-210).

As with the Rat Man, the Wolf-Man's 'religious sublimation' leads to cursing and blasphemy (*WM*, 208, 213). The case also bears affinities to

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98. Freud, 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis', in *The Wolf-Man by the Wolf-Man: The Double Story of Freud's Most Famous Case* (ed. Muriel Gardiner; New York: Basic Books, 1971), pp. 153-262 (204). German edition: Freud, 'Aus der Geschichte einer infantilen Neurose', in *Gesammelte Werke*, XII (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1966), pp. 27-157. Subsequent references to *WM* appear in the text.

Freud's study of Daniel Paul Schreber (1911); the Wolf-Man, born on Christmas, identifies with Christ in relation to his God-like father. Freud notes the combination of gender reversal and religiosity in the two cases (*WM*, 226). All three case studies certainly consider religious behaviors to be important indicators of their respective disorders, especially in light of Freud's 1907 essay on religion and obsession. But Freud preserves significant latitude on how precisely religion relates to his patients' disorders. Where religiosity strikes Freud as unexpected superstition in the highly educated Rat Man, the Wolf-Man's similar blend of pious and impious behavior is a 'sublimation' that protects him against an unconscious fantasy of sexual intercourse with his father (*WM*, 213). This transformation, which Freud identifies with the substitution of the god for the totem (from *Totem and Taboo*),takes place when the Wolf Man encounters the 'Bible story' ('biblische Geschichte') (*WM*, 204). But while religion gives his sexual impulses 'sublimation and a safe mooring', the substitution brings no resolution: 'These victories, however, were not won without struggles, of which his blasphemous thoughts were an indication, and of which the establishment of an obsessive exaggeration of religious ceremonial was the result' (*WM*, 255).

Freud's Wolf-Man study takes up questions of how personal experiences relate to inherited, 'phylogenetic' experiences: 'All that we find in the prehistory of neuroses is that a child catches hold of this phylogenetic experience where his own experience fails him. He fills in the gaps in individual truth with prehistoric truth; he replaces occurrences in his own life by occurrences in the life of his ancestors' (*WM*, 239). Here Freud is engaged in a debate with Jung over the relative importance of personal and 'phylogenetic' experience, with Freud preferring to give the former primacy over the latter. The details of that dispute concern me less here than the fact that the Wolf-Man case, like *Totem and Taboo* (1912–13), which preceded it, and *Moses and Monotheism* much later (1939), is preoccupied with how religiously and sexually charged experiences are transmitted without our full awareness. Like the 'Lamarckian' solution suggested in *Moses and Monotheism*, 'phylogenetic schemata' are inherited 'precipitates from the history of human civilization' (*WM*, 260). In a passage that reveals some of Freud's early thinking about the ego and the instincts, Freud compares these schemata to animal instincts, links these instincts to the unconscious, and describes neurosis as the conflict between instincts and 'higher mental processes' (*WM*, 261).

But Freud hesitates to draw definitive conclusions about instinct and phylogenesis. He concludes by restating his preference for individual experiences over phylogenetic schemata, sounding a note of caution that suggests he is aware of the problem of transmission. With the Wolf-Man study, Freud restates not only the link between religion and obsessive disorders found in the Rat Man case, but also the specific symptoms of alternating

piety with blasphemy and cursing. Written in the wake of *Totem and Taboo* and his debate with Jung on phylogenetic schemata, the Wolf-Man case relates biblical tradition to the broader problem of inheritance and tradition in general.

Freud and Balaam

The story of Balaam appears in Numbers 22–24; it includes several elements that come together in a coherent text: an overall narrative about the prophet, a folkloric tale about Balaam and his donkey (22.22-35), and four oracles delivered by Balaam (chaps. 23–24). While the donkey tale depicts Balaam as a somewhat foolish character, beating his donkey because he cannot see the angel on the road, the text overall depicts him as a pious man who 'could not go beyond the command of the Lord' (22.18). Nevertheless there is another tradition of Balaam as a villain, one who corrupts Israelites to intermarry and worship Baal (Numbers 25, 31.16).

The Balaam text contains traces of several biblical and extra-biblical traditions, including inscriptions found in the Transjordan (Deir 'Alla) that refer to 'Balaam son of Beor'. Taken together, the different biblical texts about Balaam suggest a variety of traditions about the foreign prophet, depicting him alternately as foolish, pious, and corrupt. What all of these texts share is a concern for the central biblical issue of Israel's relation to its neighbors. For example, Balaam's third oracle (Num. 24.9) and Num. 22.12 echo Gen. 12.3 and 27.29, which invoke blessings and curses on nations as they bless or curse Israel. A further complication in the tradition is whether Balaam *chooses* to bless Israel or whether he only does so by direct divine intervention. While the oracles in Numbers 23-24 suggest Balaam chooses to bless ('How can I curse whom God has not cursed?' 23.8), later passages suggest it was all God's doing: 'Yet the Lord your God refused to heed Balaam; the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loved you' (Deut. 23.5).

Freud's reference to his patient as an 'inverted Balaam' who cursed when he wished to bless suggests that Freud read the story as it was read elsewhere in the Bible (Deut. 23.6; Josh. 24.10; Neh. 13.2 and Num. 24.13); in Deut. 23.6, for instance, God turns the curse of Balaam into a blessing. This pious reading insists that Balaam had no choice in the matter, even though there is evidence in the text that Balaam acts freely, first to curse, and then, obediently but still freely, to bless (Num. 22.22, 34 and 22.18, 23.12). Freud reflects another feature of biblical tradition by noting the intimate, almost inseparable relationship between blessing and cursing, whether in the covenant texts of Genesis and Deuteronomy, hymns such as Psalm 109, or the pious scribal tradition that replaces 'bless' for 'curse' in Job 1.5, 2.9.

Freud's use of Balaam suggests he depends more on conventional knowledge than a close study of the text. There is some evidence, however, that he did know the text in Hebrew. Freud's father quoted a passage from Balaam's oracle in Num. 24.4 (along with quotes from 21.17-18) along with five or six others, in a Hebrew dedication (melitzah, which is biblical quotations stitched together) written to Sigmund in the family Bible in 1891. The Bible in question was the richly illustrated Hebrew and German Philippson Bible read by Freud as a child and then rebound and returned to him by his father when Sigmund was thirty-five. Scholars continue to debate the role of the Bible and Jewish tradition in Freud's life, and whether Freud could even read the inscription, but Yerushalmi and others have argued convincingly, I think, that Freud's engagement with Judaism and the Bible was deeper than many believe.[99] By his own admission, Freud read the Bible from an early age, and it had an 'enduring effect on the direction of [his] interest'.[100]

Freud's reading of the Balaam story through the pious lens of tradition, as a story primarily about one who cursed when he wished to bless, sets up an analogy between the God of Israel and the patient's unconscious: just as the prophet's binding words are controlled by God, so the patient's words are controlled by the unconscious. That this reading of Balaam is simplistic can be shown by the fact that his portrayal in Numbers and subsequent traditions can't decide, in Jacob Milgrom's words, whether Balaam is a saint or sinner.[101] Post-biblical literature ranges from depicting Balaam as a villain to honoring him as a prophet of Christianity.[102] One of the rare biblical prophets attested in pre-biblical, biblical, and post-biblical sources, Balaam becomes a lightning rod for the perennial question of whether and how human beings can bless and curse. The complexity of the text and its later glosses confirm the quality of tradition MacIntyre describes as 'historically extended, socially embodied argument'.[103]

There are arguably more Freudian ways of reading the Balaam text than Freud himself uses. The complexities of the Balaam text and other biblical references to him suggest more than the pious reading of divine power over a foreign prophet. By replacing a foreign diviner with a puppet of a God of Israel who acts in history, and by preserving contrary images of Balaam as

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99. Théo Pfrimmer notes, for example, the dream Freud reports from his seventh or eighth year featuring images he knew from the illustrations in the family's Phillipson Bible, the same Bible inscribed to Freud by his father many years later (Théo Pfrimmer, *Freud lecteur de la Bible* [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982], pp. 14-16).

100.   Freud, 'An Autobiographical Study', *Standard Edition,* XX, 1925, pp. 3-70 (8).

101. Milgrom, *Numbers*, pp. 469-71.

102. Edward Jones and Brian Britt, 'Balaam', *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception* (de Gruyter, forthcoming).

103. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 222.

obedient servant and idolatrous villain, the text demonstrates the process of displacement. One can also imagine a rich Freudian account of Balaam as a kind of inverted Moses, who is oddly absent from the 'Book of Balaam'. Like Moses, Balaam is a focus for biblical ambivalence toward human agency and divine power, particularly in the power to bless and curse. Freud's Balaam, like his difficulty understanding the Rat Man's religiosity, remains conventional, however; both suggest a resistance to reading that becomes a resistance to theory. A secularist committed to a general idea of secularization, Freud has difficulty reading the persistence of religious tradition in his patient and in his own analytical vocabulary. The Rat Man's failure to jettison religious thinking and the immediacy of Balaam as an interpretive reference point in Freud's analysis suggest there is something uncritical about Freud's version of secularization theory; at certain moments, Freud resists theory *and* reading.

Freud's attention to the problem of agency in biblical cursing and blessing makes his citation more than a clever allusion for readers who, like him, knew the Bible as educated people (there are 488 biblical references in Freud's work, according to Théo Pfrimmer[104]), but also for being a conceptually engaged use of the Bible, one that struggled *in nuce*, as his later writings on Moses would do at length, with the problems of human agency and tradition. But with Freud's insight there was no doubt a kind of blindness toward religious tradition rooted in secularization theory. One irony of this blindness is that his reading of Balaam was not close enough to see beyond the gloss it was given in Deuteronomy and elsewhere in tradition. He didn't read the inherent ambiguities of agency and identity in the biblical text. Freud's reading would thus appear to encourage only the simple displacement of God by the unconscious: the Rat Man was not a prophet, after all. My point is not simply the grumpy complaint made by Jacques Berlinerblau in *The Secular Bible* that secularists need to study the Bible more carefully. It is rather that Freud's secularism led him to overlook more complex operations of displacement already encoded in biblical texts and traditions which debated and never resolved a number of fascinating questions about powerful speech, human agency, identity, and tradition. To apply insights from Asad and Berger, the Bible is not so religious and biblical tradition not so secular as Freud would have them. *Traditio* as well as *traditum*, the Bible resists placement on either side of the binary of sacred and secular. In other words, Freud is biblical and not biblical!

From Freud and Balaam to Theory of Religion

Since my concern is how Freud's studies bear on the cultural problem of religious tradition and secularism, I wish to show the analytical power of his notion of displacement and, using Freudian suspicion against Freud

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104.   Pfrimmer, *Freud lecteur de la Bible*, pp. 379-80.

himself, argue that Freud's anti-religious bias prevents him from seeing the religious dimensions of psychological disorders. Handelman, for example, argues that Freud's category of displacement 'may be taken as a key term for Jewish hermeneutics in general'.[105] Seen in this light, my attempt to borrow Freud's idea of displacement for the study of religious tradition is really an act of 'borrowing back' an idea which Freud himself took from Jewish tradition and thinkers like Nietzsche.

For the sake of clarity, let me exaggerate how the case of the Rat Man relates to the theory of religion: the underlying assumption of Freud's treatment is that a sick individual is one who has trouble functioning in society and so the goal of such treatment is to enable that person to return to a high level of functioning within society. But what if society itself is sick, as Freud certainly suggested in much of his later work, especially in *Civilization and its Discontents*? What if, moreover, part of this 'sickness' is the abrupt set of cultural and epistemological shifts brought about in the name of modernity, including especially the elimination of centuries-old traditions such as religion? While Freud never brings this possibility fully to light, he nevertheless acknowledges the power of religious and superstitious beliefs, myths, and practices over himself and his patients.

By many accounts, such a 'sickness' afflicts contemporary societies committed to the kind of secular liberalism rooted in the anti-religious passions of early modern Europe. These passions have not only failed to produce the states of affairs announced by standard-bearers of the French and American revolutions; they have also ushered in a modern period marked by horrific inhumanity and barbaric destruction in the name of secular civilization, and they have failed so far to account for the emergence of new political movements enacted in the name of religion. The failure of secularization warrants a rethinking of religious change, and Freud's thought, which is 'superstitious and not superstitious', represents one set of possibilities. This work, which Handelman and others have acutely observed to be hermeneutical and even rabbinic, raises new questions: Why reveal what is so carefully concealed? What evidence confirms that it is concealed in the first place?

No brief discussion can do justice to these questions, but my chief claim is that the category of displacement can furnish religious and cultural criticism with tools for understanding cultural changes and crises at least since the early modern period. Critics of modernity as various as Michel de Certeau, Chakrabarty, and Benjamin have shown how modernist discourses of secularization, progress, rationalization, and revolution have failed and even been implicated in the disastrous projects of modernity. These thinkers invoke religious tradition as an underestimated dimension and motivating force of modern culture.

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105. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, p. 137.

It is important not to confuse the cultural-religious application of displacement with psychoanalysis. Such a criticism has been made of the widespread application of the category of trauma to social realities. With displacement as with trauma, it is important not to suggest there is a one-to-one relationship between individual and group experiences, or that therapeutic methods of helping individuals can apply to groups. Freud's own attempts to bridge self and society in such works as *Civilization and its Discontents* and *Moses and Monotheism* have drawn major criticism. Nevertheless, analogies between society and self are basic to how each is understood: secular society corresponds to the rational self as communal religion corresponds to personal faith. These widely used analogies link society and self inextricably and make the socio-cultural application of displacement conceivable if not plausible.

Here is where the 'literary' Freud takes on his full significance, for the cultural use of Freud's idea of displacement is 'literary' in the sense of *imaginative literature*, which implies narrative, symbol, and creativity, and in the more general sense of *written language*, since displacement in Freud and in biblical tradition will always pertain to texts and textual traditions. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the case histories, and the psychoanalytic method in general, narrative and words are the language of the psyche and thus the primary data for interpretation. Religion preoccupies Freud even more than narrative, from the early writings like 'Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices' (1907) and *Totem and Taboo* (1913) to his last work, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). The case of Balaam in the 'Rat Man' illustrates how this literary Freud offers a conceptual framework for understanding religious change in terms of displacement. The study of biblical tradition, and biblical curses in particular, attempts to trace this model of displacement through selected biblical, early modern, and contemporary texts and contexts.

Benjamin

My adaptation of Freud's notion of displacement follows from Walter Benjamin's conception of tradition, which rejects the notion of historical progress, seeking instead unseen forms of continuity within change. For Benjamin, it was a mistake to regard religious texts and institutions as the primary locus of modern religiosity. Where others saw radical novelty in film, surrealism, and urban spaces, Benjamin consistently saw retentions and reiterations of religious tradition. Though he wrote it at the end of his life, Benjamin's well-known statement about theology could be applied to his work overall: 'My thinking relates itself to theology as blotting-paper to ink: it is completely soaked through with it. But if the blotting-paper had its way, nothing that was written would remain'.[106]

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106. 'Mein Denken verhält sich zur Theologie wie das Löschblatt zur Tinte. Es ist

Unlike the ambivalent secularist Freud, Benjamin consistently recognizes the flaws of secularization theory and provides a theoretical framework—drawn from eclectic sources—for the category of displacement. Content neither with the grand narrative of progress or with the Nietzschean conception of eternal recurrence, Benjamin nevertheless observes the persistence and mutation of tradition, particularly biblical tradition, in ostensibly secular forms.

Benjamin's religious thought, like Freud's, extends beyond institutional religion to mass culture and the inner life of modern people. With Sigfried Kracauer and against Martin Buber, Benjamin saw more religiosity in the profane mass culture of his time than in institutional religion. In essays like 'Capitalism as Religion', 'On the Coming Philosophy', and his last, unpublished *Theses on the Philosophy of History* and *Arcades Project*, Benjamin demonstrated a keen sensitivity to questions of religion and modern society.

Benjamin did not write about Freud's study of the Rat Man or about the Balaam narrative, but he did read Freud's study of Schreber, and his engagement with biblical tradition is deep and abiding.[107] His concern with agency and binding speech is obvious not only from his interests in law, messianism, divine violence, allegory, and pure language, but also from the style and composition of his writing. For instance, Benjamin often places surprising reversals and supernatural elements at the end of his writings, in his 'The Storyteller', 'On the Concept of History', 'The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility', 'Karl Kraus', 'The Task of the Translator', and many other texts.) The figures of the chess-playing automaton and the angel of history in the *Theses* both embody the problem of agency in tradition. The automaton wins every time, but only because the dwarf called theology plays hidden from view. Likewise, Angelus Novus, named after a picture by Paul Klee owned by Benjamin, is blown helplessly into the future by the winds of progress; yet the *Theses* and other of Benjamin's writings suggest such catastrophic modernity bespeaks tradition and even the category of the messiah.

In the *Arcades Project*, Benjamin articulates a vision of historiography directly opposed to the ideology of progress. The novelty of modernity, he

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ganz von ihr vollsogen. Ginge es aber nach dem Löschblatt, so würde nichts, was geschrieben ist, übrig bleiben' (Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, p. 1235, in the notes to 'On the Concept of History').

107. Of a university seminar on Freud attended by Benjamin, Scholem writes, 'Among the books he read in connection with this seminar was Daniel Paul Schreber's *Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken*, which appealed to him far more than Freud's essay on it' (*Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* [trans. Harry Zohn; New York: Schocken, 1981, p. 57).

argues, belongs unwittingly to tradition.[108] Yet Benjamin rejects simplistic accounts of continuity and narratives of decline: 'Overcoming the concept of "progress" and overcoming the concept of "period of decline" are two sides of one and the same thing'.[109] In another section of the manuscript, Benjamin relates Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence to the category of progress:

> The belief in progress—in an infinite perfectibility understood as an infinite ethical task—and the representation of eternal return are complementary. They are the indissoluble antinomies in the face of which the dialectical conception of historical time must be developed. In this conception, the idea of eternal return appears precisely as that 'shallow rationalism' which the belief in progress is accused of being, while faith in progress seems no less to belong to the mythic mode of thought than does the idea of eternal return.[110]

The search for historiographic alternatives to the models of progress and eternal return informs Benjamin's aesthetics. In 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility' and his essay on photography, Benjamin demonstrates that new art forms not only observe the conventions of older ones but can also perform similar functions. While critics commonly observe Benjamin's claim that technically reproducible artworks lack the 'aura' of pre-modern originals, they often miss the fact that Benjamin warns against the return of this lost or repressed aura in politically motivated films: 'The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values'.[111] Tradition haunts the newest of forms, sometimes in dangerous ways. For Benjamin, then, modernity is fundamentally ironic: the very ideologies of progress that drive modernity—including fascism and historical materialism—are displaced forms of religious theology, just as the hidden dwarf named 'Theology' drives the puppet of historical materialism. The myth of secularization embraced by 'historical materialism' and other modern ideologies drives religion into hiding, but it also increases its power.

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108. There, in the 1939 *exposé* to the project, Benjamin identifies the model thinker for this kind of thinking in August Blanqui, a political thinker from the Paris Commune. Written before Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* and its doctrine of the eternal return, Blanqui's *Eternity via the Stars* depicts revolutionary hope transforming into an image of phantasmagorias and damnation. In Benjamin's reading of Blanqui, modernity is, in fact, 'the world dominated by its phantasmagorias' (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* [trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003], p. 26).

109. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 460.

110. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 119.

111. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, pp. 217-52 (241).

Citing neglected texts and notes to his late works, John McCole, in *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, shows 'how aware Benjamin had become of the inextricable entwinement of elements of continuity and discontinuity in his conceptions of tradition and history'.[112] McCole finds confirmation in a manuscript note to Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: 'The idea of discontinuity is the foundation of genuine tradition. The connection between the feeling of beginning anew and tradition must be pointed out'.[113] Challenging widespread interpretations of Benjamin as a modernist or a messianic theologian, McCole claims that this tension between continuity and discontinuity in tradition unites all of Benjamin's work. (McCole observes that many of Benjamin's most famous writings, including his last major work, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, were unpublished during his life and may not have been intended for publication in their present form.[114])

The analysis of modernity that Benjamin recommends is one that acknowledges the power of tradition. At the same time, the continuity of tradition remains elusive: 'It may be that the continuity of tradition is mere semblance. But then precisely the semblance of persistence provides it with continuity'.[115] In his *Theses*, Benjamin suggests the possibility that a 'weak messianic power' follows from bringing these patterns to light. But there is very little in Benjamin's work to show what kind of power that might be, apart from a critical awareness of the tragic circumstances of modernity.

Already in 'Capitalism as Religion' (1921), Benjamin argues forcefully against the secular-religious binary. On the one hand, he argues that religion originally was practical rather than driven by a '"higher", "moral" interest', while capitalism was a transformed version of Christianity: 'Capitalism has developed as a parasite of Christianity in the West…until it reached the point where Christianity's history is essentially that of its parasite—that is to say, of capitalism'.[116] Though only a sketch, these observations on capitalism reflect a sustained concern to avoid the secularization as a model for change.

Clear in some places and inscrutable in others, Benjamin's writings engage in what I have called the 'rhetoric of the task'; without resolving the problems of history and tradition, he provides critical insight into the

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112. John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 295.

113. Benjamin, *Gesammmelte Schriften*, I, p. 1242, cited in McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 296.

114. McCole, *Antinomies of Tradition*, p. 106 n. 48.

115. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 486.

116. Benjamin, 'Capitalism as Religion', in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, I (ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings; trans. Rodney Livingstone; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 288-91 (289-90).

limitations of such prevailing models as 'progress', 'decline', and 'eternal return'.[117] Religious language and scriptural tradition, from his early essays on language and Kant to his last writings on history and modernity, play a crucial role in Benjamin's thought. Religious tradition may be displaced, but modernity cannot be understood without it. The tradition of biblical curses not only illustrates the notion of displacement taken from Freud and Benjamin; it also seeks to show how a nuanced understanding of biblical tradition moves beyond theoretical stalemates concerning secularism and religion. Philosophy, psychoanalysis, and literature all bear traces of a biblical tradition in which curses are already subject to citation and debate.

117. Britt, *Walter Benjamin and the Bible* (New York: Continuum, 1996), pp. 51-64.

Part III

THE CONTEMPORARY LEGACY OF BIBLICAL CURSES

BIBLICAL CURSES IN AMERICAN FICTION:
HURSTON AND O'CONNOR

'What's that wire around you for? It's not natural', she repeated.
After a second he began to button the shirt. 'It's natural', he said.
'Well, it's not normal. It's like one of them gory stories, it's something that
people have quit doing—like boiling in oil or being a saint or walling up
cats', she said. 'There's no reason for it. People have quit doing it'.
'They ain't quit doing it as long as I'm doing it', he said.
(Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood*)[1]

Well before theorists of religion began to write about the decline of secularism and the modern revival of religion, Zora Neale Hurston and Flannery O'Connor engaged the issue through fiction about the American South. Hurston's training as an anthropologist and O'Connor's ardent reading of contemporary theology ensured that their writing would not simply reflect the realities of religion and modernity but rather reflect upon them. This reflection would not be 'merely' literary or theoretical, however. Both authors would challenge their readers to see the persistence of religious practices and traditions in a purportedly secularized world, all through the experience of literary fiction. In this way Hurston and O'Connor continue a tradition of literary engagements with debates on powerful speech that includes Shakespeare, Milton, Bunyan, Defoe, Coleridge, and many others. What is distinctive about Hurston and O'Connor is their self-conscious engagement with the problem of powerful religious speech in modern literature.

   Both Hurston and O'Connor were masterful essayists, and they both engaged questions of powerful speech and biblical tradition in non-fiction as well as fiction. While I acknowledge their non-fictional expressions, my focus here is the literary expressions of the problems in two short stories that engage biblical tradition and powerful speech: Hurston's 'Sweat' (1926) and O'Connor's 'Revelation' (1963). Unlike authors and critics who regard literature to be a substitute or replacement for religion, Hurston and O'Connor acknowledge religious tradition in its own right, even as they

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   1.   Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, in *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works* (New York: The Library of America, 1988), pp. 1-132 (127).

assert their distinctive authorial voices. The texts of Hurston and O'Connor thus stage a confrontation between literature, religion, and cultural theory that refuse either secularization or traditionalism.

Neither text could be possible without some knowledge of the debates on powerful speech, religion, and secularization that animate the literary and philosophical texts of Kant, Nietzsche, Coleridge, and the seventeenth-century writers discussed in previous chapters. Like Nietzsche and Coleridge and unlike Kant, Hurston and O'Connor convey seriousness about religious ideas through literary form. In that sense, they contribute to a larger blurring of boundaries between literature and critical writing, fiction and non-fiction, that has become widespread in contemporary literary studies influenced by Stanley Fish, Harold Bloom, Stephen Greenblatt, Jacques Derrida, and others. Nevertheless, disciplinary and genre differences have often prevented comparison between literary figures and theorists. The present discussion of Hurston and O'Connor thus adds to the series of literary texts presented in earlier chapters, but it also seeks to engage Kant, Nietzsche, and other thinkers on the legacy of powerful speech and biblical tradition.

Zora Neale Hurston's 'Sweat' and Flannery O'Connor's 'Revelation' suggest supernatural causes for events that occur in stories that appear to be naturalistic. Both stories relate a violent upheaval in the life of a central female character. In both stories, a violent episode, accompanied by the use of powerful speech, interrupts the flow of routine life. Both stories have an uncanny quality that merges vivid descriptions of characters and setting with dramatic events. In both cases, the reader must consider whether the story's action is driven by powerful, even supernatural, speech. Debates on whether speech can be powerful in modern America, or at least in modern American literature, become explicit, organizing features of these texts. Like Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', Hurston's and O'Connor's stories dramatize supernatural power and powerful speech in ordinary, vernacular, settings. These juxtapositions of supernatural and natural phenomena place literature and religion in a dialectical relationship: literature becomes the vehicle for reflection on religion, and, conversely, religion becomes the vehicle for literary power. Taking all these elements together, the stories illustrate the concept of displacement, which I have defined as a hermeneutical category of analysis that points to manifold forms of the persistence of tradition in the face of change. Literary, critical, and theological at once, the stories of Hurston and O'Connor offer a kind of reader-response experience of debates on powerful speech and biblical tradition.

In what follows I offer close readings of the stories that concentrate on the role powerful speech plays in them. I will suggest that both stories test the boundaries of naturalistic fiction by suggesting the action is driven by powerful, supernatural speech. The speech in 'Sweat' comes from African-American religious tradition, while 'Revelation' turns on a curse that I will

argue alludes to the biblical story of cursing in 2 Samuel 16. The juxtaposition of naturalistic stories (about a poor African-American couple in Florida and a middle-class white woman in Georgia) with religiously charged curses makes the stories quite uncanny.

J. Hillis Miller's conception of literature as performative speech act describes the creative act of imagining a world for the reader through words: 'Those words at once invent and at the same time discover (in the sense of "reveal") that world, in a constantly repeated and extended verbal gesture'.[2] Miller's argument that literary creation is a kind of performative is compelling, but Miller leaves the idea of powerful speech, particularly its origins in religious forms of powerful speech, undertheorized. Here too one may look beyond critics and theorists to literary authors for further insight. By insisting on the place of religious tradition in their fiction without reducing one to the other, Hurston and O'Connor suggest a dialectical relationship between literature and religion.

Hurston

As a fiction writer, critic, and anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston combines several roles that have been the subject of debates about power, authority, and standpoint. From what position does Hurston write in each of these roles? How, for example, does the power or authority claimed by Hurston's fictional characters relate to Hurston's authority as a writer? I address these questions by relating the use of powerful religious speech in Hurston's story 'Sweat' to the use and discussion of powerful speech in her critical and anthropological writings. In her fiction and non-fiction alike, Hurston stakes a variety of claims to authority and self-fashioning. By techniques of 'signifying' that include powerful religious speech (such as cursing), paradox, and the mixing of distinct idioms, Hurston claims literary powers that challenge norms of race, class, and gender. In so doing, I suggest, Hurston's writing also represents what I wish to call biblical tradition.

Zora Neale Hurston's 'Sweat' (1926) is a deceptively simply short story of poetic justice: the abusive, philandering husband Sykes is killed by the snake he uses to frighten his wife. The only steady income they have comes from the laundry taken in by Delia; this labor, along with the oppressive Florida heat, makes her sweat. Delia is also a devout Christian, and attending a 'love feast' worship gives her the feeling of calm that allows her to withstand her trials. Hurston builds tension in the story by escalating the hot weather and mean actions by Sykes against Delia. When the snake bites Sykes, Delia stays away, allowing him to die.

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2. J. Hillis Miller, *On Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 38.

The story resembles the sort of folktales, replete with the magic of 'hoodoo' and 'voodoo', collected by Hurston in her ethnographic research through the American South and Haiti. The death of Sykes would seem to illustrate the proverb she recites to herself at night: 'Sometime or ruther, Sykes, like everybody else, is gointer reap his sowing', with the same kind of supernatural justice she attributes to the ability of hoodoo doctors to 'throw it back on the one that done it'.[3] But the terms of the story's justice are far from simple: does the snake represent a supernatural agent? Is Delia's choice not to help Sykes a form of murder? Does she magically influence the snake?

Hurston leaves these questions to her readers. *Mules and Men* (1935), her collection of African American folktales and Hoodoo traditions, is filled with accounts of supernatural forces and powers. Detailed formulae of hoodoo and root doctors specify how to kill an enemy, catch a murderer, rent a house, make a man come home, and cure all kinds of illness.[4] Animal tricksters and the Devil feature in many of these stories as well. But Hurston carefully avoids any overtly supernatural elements in 'Sweat'. She places Delia's Christian piety in the place where many of her folktales and ethnographic reports might place magic. She builds a 'spiritual earthworks' against Sykes that gives her a 'triumphant indifference to all that he was or did'.[5] It is my suggestion that Hurston's story engages biblical tradition in two distinct ways: first by direct reference to the biblical religious tradition of Christianity, which empowers Delia to resist if not to combat her violent husband; and second by challenging widely held views of religious tradition by 'conjuring' or 'signifying' with powerful words.

Hurston explicitly blurs the boundary between religion and magic throughout her writings, as in the following comment on biblical creation: 'The way we tell it, hoodoo started way back there before everything. Six days of magic spells and mighty words and the world with its elements above and below was made. And now, God is leaning back taking a seventh day rest'.[6] In the same vein, Hurston describes Moses as the greatest hoodoo man ever to live; he 'talked with the snake that lives in a hole right under God's foot-rest. Moses had a fire in his head and a cloud in his mouth. The snake had told him God's making words'.[7] The magic snake

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3.   Zora Neale Hurston, *Sweat* (edited and with an introduction by Cheryl A. Wall; New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), p. 29; *Dust Tracks on the Road*, in *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (ed. Cheryl A. Wall; New York: Library of America, 1995), pp. 557-808 (613).

4.   Hurston, *Of Mules and Men*, in *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, pp. 1-268 (256-67).

5.   Hurston, *Sweat*.

6.   Hurston, *Of Mules and Men*, p. 176.

7.   Hurston, *Of Mules and Men*, p. 177.

of Moses illustrates the widespread place of serpent imagery in African-American culture.[8] Just as she imbues religion with magical power, Hurston also demystifies magic, noting that hoodoo is a secret religion, and 'these voodoo ritualistic orgies of Broadway and popular fiction are so laughable. The profound silence of the initiated remains what it is. Hoodoo is not drum beating and dancing'.[9]

The turning point in 'Sweat' is the Christian love feast: after Sykes has brought the snake and their fighting has become more bitter than ever, she takes solace in the ritual: 'In the emotional winds her domestic trials were borne far and wide so that she sang as she drove homeward, 'Jurden water, black an' col'/Chills de body, not de soul/An' Ah wantah cross Jurden in uh calm time'.[10] Hurston explains the love feast in *Mules and Men*:

> There is a meeting called a 'love-feast' in the Methodist Church and an 'experience meeting' with the Baptists. It is held once a month, either on a week-night or a Sunday morning preceding the Communion service. It is a Protestant Confessional. No one is supposed to take communion unless he is on good terms with all of the other church members and is free from sin otherwise. The love-feast gives opportunity for public expression of good-will to the world. [The one who testifies expresses] (a) love for everybody, (b) joy at being present, (c) tells of the determination to stay in the field to the end.[11]

Derived from the ancient Christian tradition of the *agape* feast, the African American love feast reinforces community, reconciliation, and perseverance. It enables her to endure life with Sykes, and it also seems to empower her to watch him die.

Delia feels an enhanced sense of power after the love feast. When she calms down from finding the snake, she experiences a 'cold, bloody rage', introspection, and then 'an awful calm'.[12] By borrowing the terms 'cold' and 'calm' from the hymn she has sung, Hurston makes a direct connection between Delia's piety and her resolve (presumably to take revenge on her husband). Sykes's death in the next scene raises the possibility that Delia somehow wills it: 'Well, Ah done de bes' Ah could. If things aint right, Gawd knows taint mah fault'.[13]

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8. Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 38-43. See also the song lyrics quoted by Wall in *Sweat* linking snakes to mysterious power and the Jordan River (pp. 107, 110).
9. Hurston, *Of Mules and Men*, p. 178.
10. Hurston, *Sweat*, p. 36.
11. Hurston, *Of Mules and Men*, p. 229.
12. Hurston, *Sweat*, p. 38.
13. Hurston, *Sweat*, p. 38.

Did she will his death? Is Delia's use of the hymn a case of powerful speech? By raising the question, Hurston makes the question of women's power and agency a central concern. Delia's power, like Janie's in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is used to kill her husband. In both cases, this violent reversal of the conventional gender hierarchy is justified by sympathetically portrayed characters in dire circumstances. The cruelty of Sykes—beating Delia, openly seeing other women, criticizing her for the work that supports him—is the stuff of melodrama, counterbalanced by an equal extreme of patience and virtue in Delia.

All of this gives his death scene the feeling of just revenge. Hurston artfully links Delia's worship to the scene of Sykes's death. When she returns from the 'love-feast' ritual, she discovers the six-foot rattlesnake in her laundry hamper, and she runs away in terror. Sykes returns later in the dark, the snake bites him, and Delia ignores his pleading as he begins to die. His cries to God and Delia, his crawling, his 'one open eye shining with hope' evoke her pity but not his rescue: 'She could scarcely reach the Chinaberry tree, where she waited in the growing heat while inside she knew the cold river was creeping up and up to extinguish that eye which must know by now that she knew'.[14]

The 'cold river', of course, refers back to the hymn about the Jordan which she sang at the love feast, as well as the 'cold, bloody rage' she feels after finding the snake in the basket. In contrast to the growing heat of the day (and of the season), this cold river offers justice as well as relief. The waters of the Jordan, which represent freedom and the promised land in many Negro spirituals, bring Delia personal freedom from Sykes.[15]

One of Hurston's main anthropological insights is that folk tradition crosses the boundaries between 'orthodox' religion and magic. Moses is

14. Hurston, *Sweat*, p. 40.

15. Two traditional spirituals cited by Wall combine the images of the cold Jordan and the gospel feast:

Deep river, my home is over Jordan,
Deep river, Lord; I want to cross over into camp ground.
O, don't you want to go to that gospel feast
That promised land, where all is peace?
('Deep River', cited in *Sweat*, p. 108).

Jordan river,
Jordan river,
Jordan river,
Is chilly and cold
It will chill-a my body,
It will chilla-a my body,
It will chill-a my body,
But not my soul ('Stan' Still Jordan', cited in *Sweat*, p. 109).

a 'hoodoo man', and the paraphernalia of magic come largely from Christian tradition. 'In fact', she writes in 'The Sanctified Church', 'the Negro has not been Christianized as extensively as is generally believed. The great masses are still standing before their pagan altars and calling old gods by a new name'.[16] The question whether the love feast functions as a magical curse against Sykes is thus a valid one. Even though Delia utters no explicit curse or intention to kill Sykes, she has already warded him off with a frying pan, and her statement that he 'is gointer reap his sowing' is followed, in the third-person narrative, with a ritualistic formula: 'His shells could no longer reach her. Amen'.[17] Whether 'shells' alludes to a kind of magical practice is difficult to know, but it is clear that they represent his power, now blocked, to harm her. Delia's own words remain within the boundaries of Christian piety, but the narrator goes further to bind Sykes's fate with powerful words.

Hurston gives Delia the best of both worlds: she lives a blamelessly pious life, and she also wields a power that brings the sweetest kind of revenge. An overtly supernatural or vengeful resolution to the story would have been consistent with Hurston's folkloric style, but the hesitation to venture in that direction preserves the more naturalistic social world the story presents. It also compels the reader to reflect on the causes and agents of these events. Did Delia *effect* her revenge by means of hoodoo or Christian prayer? Ambiguities of how events happen and who controls them may displace powerful speech *within* the story to a literary level of powerful speech *as* the story.

In other words, reflection on actions in the story leads to reflection about the story itself as a kind of action. Here I borrow from Miller's idea that 'literature is performative utterance'.[18] By creating an imaginative world that calls for a reader's participation, suggests Miller, the literary author performs a speech act akin to the phrase 'Open Sesame'. By this reading, the powerful speech *in* 'Sweat' brings attention to the powerful speech *of* 'Sweat'. The supernatural forces in the story reflect, in a figurative sense, the supernatural act of literary creation. Hurston does not disclose very much about her self-understanding as a fiction writer, but in her essay 'Folklore and Music' she defines art as 'a series of discoveries, perhaps intended in he first instance to stave off boredom. In a long range view, art is the setting up of monuments to the ordinary things about us, in a moment and in time'.[19] In reference to her own fiction, Hurston credits herself with creating characters

16. Hurston, 'The Sanctified Church', in *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, p. 901.
17. Hurston, *Sweat*, p. 29.
18. Miller, *On Literature*, p. 37.
19. Hurston, 'Folklore and Music', in *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, pp. 875-94 (876).

who 'live and move', and who are 'seen in relation to themselves and not in relation to the whites'. She also takes credit for the use of idiomatic speech in her fiction: 'It gave verisimilitude to the narrative by stewing the subject in its own juice'.[20] The cooking metaphor reflects Hurston's idea that art turns 'ordinary things' into monuments, a quasi-magical kind of tranformation akin to Miller's idea of literature not only as performative utterance but as 'secular magic'.[21] In 'Sweat', I suggest, Hurston stews her subject in its own juice in a way that merges powerful speech with poetics.

For Miller, and Hurston as well, the metaphor of magic can also apply to the reception of literature: according to Miller, literary criticism can have an apotropaic purpose: 'People have a healthy fear of the power literary works have to instill what may be dangerous or unjust assumptions… By the time a rhetorical reading or a "slow reading", has shown the mechanism by which literary magic works, that magic no longer works'.[22] The idea that literature is something to be afraid of, and that criticism can be an attempt to ward off its magic, seems highly original to me and worth developing further. For Miller, models of demystifying reading appear in Milton's Satan and Nietzsche's cultural criticism, and they contribute to what he calls the 'death of literature': 'We no longer so much want, or are willing, to be bamboozled by literature'.[23]

How does Hurston's 'Sweat' fare in the face of critical reading as apotropaic demystification? In the story, supernatural forces are only implicit; like the secrecy she ascribes to hoodoo practice, the story performs its magic without a trace of the 'ritualistic orgies of Broadway'. At the same time, Hurston's use of the love feast, hymns, river water imagery, and snake imbue the story with the kind of 'surplus of meaning' Paul Ricoeur attributes to great symbols. We know that Hurston takes seriously the idea that literary art—folklore and imaginative fiction alike—can be powerful.[24] Her nonfiction studies of magic and hoodoo provide material for her fiction, most notably in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. In the Preface to that novel, Hurston criticizes de-mystified versions of Moses: 'Moses was an old man with a beard. He was the great law-giver. He had some trouble with Pharaoh about some plagues and led the Children of Israel out of Egypt and on to the Promised Land… But there are other concepts of Moses abroad in the

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20. Hurston, 'Art and Such', in *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, pp. 905-11 (910).

21. Miller, *On Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 21.

22. Miller, *On Literature*, p. 125.

23. Miller, *On Literature*, p. 126.

24. See especially 'How It Feels to Be Colored Me' (pp. 826-29), 'Folklore and Music' (pp. 875-94), and 'Art and Such' (pp. 905-12), in *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*.

world'.[25] What makes Moses special, claims Hurston, is his direct link to God, a fact that makes him the 'fountain of mystic powers'.[26] But Hurston's novel is far from a romantic attempt to re-enchant the supposedly secular world. Instead, her fiction challenges common conceptions of magic and naturalism by means of a highly modern kind of magic (a phrase I prefer to Miller's notion of 'secular magic'). Her project, in concealing the magic in 'Sweat' and in challenging racial stereotypes of African American writing, is the kind of cultural criticism Miller identifies in Milton and Nietzsche. Put simply, Hurston's literary magic puts a spell on the critics who would neutralize the power of folk tales and literary art.

Such a project requires massive and agile labor. Beyond 'Sweat', Hurston mobilizes multiple genres, including criticism, journalism, autobiography, and ethnography, and in most cases, her writing subverts conventional expectations, inserting personal asides in unexpected places, shifting voices and styles. Hurston clearly regards her own work as a corrective to prevailing attitudes and trends in African American literature. When it succeeds, Hurston's work, as I believe is the case with 'Sweat', performs both the kind of magic Miller ascribes to literature and the apotropaic work of criticism. Where I disagree with Miller is his suggestion that criticism of this kind entails disenchantment; by his own term—'apotropaic'—it would be more consistent to regard criticism as a kind of magic in itself—a counter-spell to the spell of literature, which is exactly what Hurston felt was warranted in the case of the literature of the 'Race Leaders' who 'call spirituals "Our Sorrow Songs" and other such tomfoolery in an effort to get into the spotlight if possible without having eern done anything to improve education, industry, invention, anrt an dnever having uttered a quotable line'.[27]

The work of criticism merges with the work of creation for Hurston. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr argues that Hurston and other African American writers draw from a shared black tradition, rooted in Africa and summarized by the concept of 'Signifying', that was highly figurative and self-conscious.[28] Gates describes Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a 'speakerly text' that epitomizes 'Signifying', the use of elaborate 'rhetorical games' of African-American tradition: '*Their Eyes* draws upon the trope of Signifyin(g) both as thematic matter and as a rhetorical strategy'.[29] For Gates, the novel establishes a rich new form of narration

25. Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1984), p. xxi.

26. Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, p. xxii.

27. Hurston, 'Art and Such', p. 908.

28. Henry Louis Gates, Jr, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. xxvii.

29. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, pp. 48, 193.

that brilliantly merges spoken and written forms. The 'double-voiced' narrative of Janey's self-knowledge and survival in Hurston's novel suggests to Gates a model of criticism as well.[30]

Hurston's blurring of boundaries between fiction and criticism, character and author, speech and writing, is thus part of African American tradition. By making this use of tradition, Hurston is able to associate the power of storytelling with the power of writing, and the power of her characters (especially female characters) with the power of the author and critic. According to Marjorie Pryse, Janey's power of storytelling in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* contributes to her power to love, to kill, and to memorialize Tea Cake. In telling her story to Pheoby, writes Pryse, Hurston associates magical power with literary power: 'Hurston makes artistic self-consciousness an integral part of the black woman's novel'.[31] In the Glossary entry for 'Testimony' in *Mules and Men*, Hurston observes that the devil is a 'powerful trickster who often competes successfully with God. There is a strong suspicion that the devil is an extension of the story-makers while God is the supposedly impregnable white masters, who are nevertheless defeated by the Negroes'.[32]

Years before the publication of *Mules and Men*, Hurston positions 'Sweat' at the intersection of fiction and folklore. To call the story fiction is to regard it as a literary creation, a work of Hurston's imagination. To call it folklore puts Hurston in the position of ethnographer and collector. If folklore tends to be more fanciful and magical than fiction, Hurston's story, by linking Delia's religious desires and Sykes's death, straddles the boundary. The Jordan water that 'chills the body' could represent the snake's venom, perhaps brought on by the prayers of Delia.

By techniques of 'signifying' that merge speech and writing, folklore and literature, religion and magic, Hurston claims literary and critical powers that challenge prevailing ideas of religion and literature as well as race, class, and gender. 'Sweat' links Delia's religious devotion to an uncanny death that suggests but never discloses the traces of conjure. Delia's speech, like all 'Signifying', is thus double-voiced: at once pious religion *and* efficacious curse. This signifying also links the world of the story to the telling of the story, since it is not Delia but the narrator who makes the link between the hymn about the river and the 'cold river' of poison that kills Sykes. When Delia's power is revealed or conjured by Hurston's narrator, a folktale character meets the literary artist in a two-way exchange of linguistic power. Hurston's story is far more than an artfully told revenge tale: it is a model of how powerful speech relates to powerful storywriting, and how that connection produces a rethinking of religion and magic. If my analysis

30. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, p. 215.
31. Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, p. 14.
32. Hurston, *Of Mules and Men*, p. 230.

of biblical tradition and powerful speech in this story can be applied to many of Hurston's later works, such as *Moses, Man of the Mountain* and *Dust Tracks on the Road*, then these critical interests may play a larger role in her work than others have observed . 'Sweat' claims its position in biblical tradition by challenging prevailing ideas of biblical religion and magic; in this way, Hurston's writing 'signifies on' biblical tradition.

Divine Curses in O'Connor's 'Revelation' and 2 Samuel 16

On the role of the Bible in writing fiction, Flannery O'Connor writes: 'It takes a story to make a story. It takes a story of mythic dimensions; one which belongs to everybody; one in which everybody is able to recognize the hand of God and imagine its descent upon himself'.[33] As others have observed, biblical allusions in O'Connor's 'Revelation' include Jacob's dream of a ladder to heaven and the book of Job. There is another biblical parallel to the story, however, that resonates with O'Connor's literary vision and raises new interpretive possibilities: 2 Samuel 16. This episode, the curse of Shimei against David, strikingly parallels 'Revelation'.[34]

In 2 Samuel 16 and 'Revelation', a privileged person is cursed by a less powerful person, and the curse is interpreted to be a revelation from God: '"What you got to say to me?" she asked hoarsely and held her breath, waiting, as for a revelation'.[35] With this question, Mrs Turpin makes the surprising decision (also made by David in 2 Samuel 16), to interpret the curse as revelation. The idea of curse as revelation, though not noticed in other studies of 'Revelation', illustrates the broader literary and religious vision of O'Connor's work. 'Revelation', like much of the fiction, manifests a literary *ascesis* (religious discipline) laced with social humor and religious critique.

While the religious basis of her work is unquestionable, O'Connor's seriousness as a religious thinker, as shown by her familiarity with contemporary thinkers such as Paul Tillich, is not always recognized. In a letter to Cecil Dawkins about her work, she writes,

> Your freshman who said there was something religious here was correct. I take the Dogmas of the Church literally… The only concern, so far as I see it, is what Tillich calls the 'ultimate concern'. It is what makes the stories spare and what gives them any permanent quality they may have.[36]

33. O'Connor, 'The Catholic Novelist in the South', in *Flannery O'Connor* (ed. Sally Fitzgerald; New York: Library of America, 1988), pp. 858-59.

34. Diane Tolomeo, 'Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation" and the Book of Job', in *Renascence* 30 (1978), pp. 78-90 (78).

35. Flannery O'Connor, 'Revelation', in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986), pp. 191-218 (207).

36. Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters* (ed. Sally Fitzgerald; New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1979), p. 221.

For a writer who prefers to avoid the appearance of self-conscious intellectualism, this ready citation of Tillich in reference to the core of her own work is revealing.

My point is not to demonstrate that Tillich is the great unnoticed thread in the work of O'Connor, but to remind readers that O'Connor is a serious religious thinker as well as a fiction writer. I wish to demonstrate that 'Revelation' constitutes a serious encounter with traditional ideas of revelation, particularly biblical curses, and thus represents a distinctive form of modern and literary asceticism. O'Connor's snapshot of Southern society may seem overwhelmingly worldly, negative, and distorted, but it becomes the setting for an epiphany; her text thus embodies a discipline of renunciation for religious (as well as aesthetic and social) purposes. O'Connor stands at the intersection of aesthetics and ontology to ask: Is revelation possible in modern culture? Her responses to this question lead her to depict social realities of race and class in shocking detail.

O'Connor explains the grotesque dimension of her writing as follows: '[T]o the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures'.[37] The hard of hearing and the blind, for O'Connor, are not the Southern 'prophet-freaks' of her fiction but those who deny the seriousness of religious commitment. O'Connor's fictional advice columnist in *Wise Blood*, Mary Brittle, says, 'Perhaps you ought to re-examine your religious values to see if they meet your needs in Life. A religious experience can be a beautiful addition to living if you put it in the proper perspective and do not let it warp you'.[38] The stark contrast between religion as beautiful ornament and religion as a warping influence captures the problem of religion and modernity for O'Connor, and it also describes the transformation of Mrs Turpin in 'Revelation'.

In his introduction to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, Robert Fitzgerald ascribes the term *ascesis* to O'Connor's fiction:

> She [O'Connor] would be sardonic over the word *ascesis*, but it seems to me a good one for the peculiar discipline of the O'Connor style. How much has been refrained from, and how much else has been cut out and thrown away, in order that the bald narrative sentences should present just what they present and in just this order![39]

One of the stories in the collection thus introduced by Fitzgerald, 'Revelation' is a late work, finished just a year before O'Connor's death at the age of thirty-nine. The story combines the ordinary world of a southern farm town

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37. O'Connor, 'The Fiction Writer and his Country', in *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*, pp. 801-06 (806).

38. O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, p. 67.

39. Robert Fitzgerald, Introduction to O'Connor, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, p. xxxii.

with grotesque details and an extraordinary vision. O'Connor's protagonist, Ruby Turpin, runs a dairy farm with her husband, Claud. The first and longest scene in the story presents Mrs Turpin's conversation and thoughts as she waits with Claud in a doctor's office. Claud, who is remarkably passive and reticent throughout the story, has developed a leg ulcer after being kicked by a cow. Mrs Turpin makes small talk and ruminates over her social position until a college student named Mary Grace throws a textbook at her. A melee and verbal assault ensue, and the rest of the story follows Mrs Turpin home in her anguished attempt to understand Mary Grace's words ('Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog'), which she had waited to hear 'as for a revelation'.[40] When Claud and her 'Negro' employees fail to offer comfort or insight, Mrs Turpin appeals directly to God, asking finally, 'Who do you think you are?'[41] At that moment, she experiences the vision of souls rising to heaven.

O'Connor's story has two settings: the doctor's office waiting room and the pig parlor, with eight people and eight pigs respectively.[42] Ruby Turpin suffers humiliation in the first and encounters the divine in the second. Both are enclosed places, places of confinement where the occupants wait to be served. Mrs Turpin weighs the factors of race and class in the waiting room: colored people, white-trash, home-owners, home-and-land owners. But she also recognizes that some rich people are 'common' and some with 'good blood had lost their money', and some colored people are wealthy. [43] As she thinks through this puzzling mixture of groupings, part of a game she plays before going to sleep, she evokes the Holocaust: 'Usually by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head, and she would dream they were crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven'.[44] This scene demonstrates that race and class are sources of violent inner turmoil for Mrs Turpin. Although she believes she should 'help anybody out that needed it […] whether they were white or black, trash or decent', she most emphatically despises people below her social class.[45] The attack in the doctor's office and its aftermath trigger a personal identity crisis, forcing Mrs Turpin to confront her obsession with social status.

The dream anticipates its ecstatic alternate, the concluding vision of souls processing to heaven. The 'moiling and roiling' of the social classes corresponds to the pigs as well, who are forever 'a-gruntin and a-rootin and

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40. O'Connor, 'Revelation', p. 207.
41. O'Connor, 'Revelation', p. 216.
42. My thanks to Richard Rosengarten for this insight.
43. O'Connor, 'Revelation', p. 196.
44. O'Connor, 'Revelation', p. 196.
45. O'Connor, 'Revelation', p. 202.

a-groanin'.[46] Unexpected symmetries—waiting room and pig parlor, social reality and mystical transcendence—thus structure the story. At the center of the story's two parts is the antagonist, the Wellesley girl, Mary Grace (Mary was O'Connor's first name, and Mary Grace is linked by Sally Fitzgerald to O'Connor's friend Maryat Lee[47]) whose burning eyes and attack on Ruby lead to the eventual epiphany at the end of the story: 'Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog'.[48] The attack, which begins when Mary Grace throws the textbook entitled *Human Development* at Mrs Turpin, happens just when Ruby is thanking Jesus for making her the way she is. Soon she is seeing things differently, asking 'What do you send me a message like that for? […] How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?'[49] As one who obeys the rules of social and religious order, Mrs Turpin sees the attack by the ugly daughter of a 'stylish' and 'pleasant' lady as a complete and undeserved humiliation.

Images of vision and light suffuse the story, detailing appearances and subtle exchanges among the characters. As Larue Sloan has demonstrated, this persistent motif evokes the story's titular concern, since revelation is, after all, a matter of seeing.[50] Mrs Turpin exchanges knowing glances with Mary Grace's mother, the 'pleasant lady', in complicit disdain for the white-trash woman. But Mary Grace stares angrily at Mrs Turpin. As she ratchets up the tension in the waiting-room, O'Connor describes Mary Grace's eyes as almost supernatural: 'The girl's eyes seemed lit all of a sudden with a peculiar light, an unnatural light like night road signs give'.[51] Later, in the scene at sunset in the pig parlor, Mrs Turpin has a similar experience: 'A visionary light settled in her eyes'.[52]

Another religiously charged detail of the story is the gospel music on the radio. When Mrs Turpin mentally sings the line, 'And wona these days I know I'll we-eara crown', she reveals confidence in her own redemption as well as her wandering mind.[53] The second intrusion of lyrics comes in the silence that follows laughter at the racist joke (about 'white niggers') made by Claud Turpin. Though Mrs Turpin knows only some of the words, the general message of social harmony ('We'll hep each other out/Smile-ling in any kind of Weather!') intrudes like a judgment on the group's blatant race

46. O'Connor, 'Revelation', p. 215.
47. O'Connor, *Habit of Being*, p. 194.
48. O'Connor, 'Revelation', p. 207.
49. O'Connor, 'Revelation', p. 215.
50. Larue Love Sloan, 'The Rhetoric of the Seer: Eye Imagery in Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation"', *Studies in Short Fiction* 25 (1988), pp. 135-45.
51. O'Connor, 'Revelation', p. 197.
52. O'Connor, 'Revelation', p. 217.
53. O'Connor, 'Revelation', p. 194.

hatred.[54] Both sets of lyrics also anticipate the story's final vision of vertical travel to heaven in which the travelers are singing, though only the people like Mrs Turpin sing on key. The shocking image of all types and classes of people on the way to heaven quickly dissipates, but the sound of their voices 'shouting hallelujah' continues at the story's end.[55]

Thus cursing—especially abusive cursing—can itself be revelation. Mary Grace is named not ironically but symbolically, since her curse becomes a divine message for Mrs Turpin, one that leads to an ecstatic vision from the pig parlor. O'Connor, who loves this sort of inversion, the kind, for example, in which a drowning inadvertently becomes a baptism in *The Violent Bear it Away*, has tapped into an ancient but sometimes-forgotten form of religious, even revelatory speech: the curse.

The biblical parallels to O'Connor's narrative are not difficult to see: the vision of souls ascending recalls Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28). In fact, O'Connor once described Mrs Turpin as a 'country female Jacob'.[56] Mrs Turpin's complaint and situation are also Job-like, as Diane Tolomeo has demonstrated.[57] A more subtle biblical parallel that has escaped critical attention is the episode of Saul's kinsman cursing King David in 2 Samuel 16. This attack, like Mary Grace's curse in 'Revelation', is one in which heavy objects (stones) as well as words are hurled; moreover, this attack is also taken to be a message from God. When his servant offers to kill the violent heckler, David says, 'So let him curse, because the Lord has said to him, "Curse David". Who then shall say, "Why have you done so?" […] It may be that the Lord will look on my affliction, and that the Lord will repay me with good for cursing this day' (2 Sam. 16.10-12). The curse is a form of revelation, thinks David, because it must come from God; he further calculates (characteristically, one might say) that the curse he allows may one day lead to a blessing or divine favor.

Both stories involve a symbolic washing: Mrs Turpin hoses down the pigs, and David bathes in the Jordan after leaving the cursing Shimei. Although both washings offer relief, they do not provide resolution. David's bath takes place on his escape from the promised land he once ruled. The waters of the Jordan, which Joshua triumphantly crossed generations earlier, are here a sign of his humiliation. The bath also evokes the scene that started all his trouble: Bathsheba's bath in 2 Samuel 11.2. Mrs Turpin is washing the pigs because Claud is still injured and cannot do so himself. The very act recalls the white-trash woman, whose disdainful words, set off in a separate paragraph, return to haunt Mrs Turpin: 'A-gruntin and a-rootin

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54. O'Connor, 'Revelation', p. 202.
55. O'Connor, 'Revelation', p. 218.
56. O'Connor, *Habit of Being*, p. 577.
57. Tolomeo, '"Revelation" and the Book of Job', pp. 79-90.

and a groanin'.[58] If Mary Grace's words are divinely given, as Mrs Turpin seems to think, then the pig parlor stands for her damnation (wart hog from hell) as well as her social humiliation. Usually a sign of blessing, water accompanies curses in both stories.

Biblical curses from God appear often as violations of covenant; the most extensive cases are Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 20. In the case of David, the cursing is allowed to continue, 'for the Lord has bidden him' (16.11). The reason for the cursing is not given, but when David mentions that his own son seeks to kill him, he alludes to Nathan's judgment on him that 'the sword shall never depart from your house' because of his actions toward Uriah and Bathsheba (12.10). David acknowledges the simple hatred that any kinsman of Saul would rightly harbor for him, but he also discerns divine intention in the cursing. Even though he ultimately eliminates Shimei, he treats the curses with great care, as much more than simple insults.

Of course, cursing in the Bible is often divinely sanctioned—for example, in the curse on Amalek in Exodus 17, the blessings and curses in Deuteronomy 28–30, and the famous story of Balaam, the foreign prophet who blesses Israel and curses his own people despite the king's orders to the contrary (Numbers 22–24). What makes the case of 2 Samuel 16 pertinent to 'Revelation' is that David *interprets* the malediction to be a divine curse. The story takes place while David is a fugitive king during Absalom's attempt to usurp the throne. King David, like Mrs Turpin, hears a vicious and ostensibly unjustified insult hurled (along with stones) *as* a divine curse. In contrast to other stories of cursing in the Bible, here there is no overt sign to David that this insult comes from God. In fact, as Kyle McCarter points out, the message of Shimei's curse could not reflect divine anger, since the overthrow of Saul's house is sanctioned by God.[59] David's tolerance of the insults indicates pious resignation in the belief that he is under divine sanction; in a story that once again demonstrates the pious wisdom of David, he 'humbles himself and hopes for "something good" to come of it in the end'.[60]

For David, that 'something good' comes very soon after this scene when Absalom dies and David regains the throne. At that point David pardons Shimei when he begs for the king's mercy (2 Sam. 19.16-23). Nevertheless, at the end of his life, David tells Solomon to do away with him (1 Kgs 2.8-9). No such retribution appears in 'Revelation', but the brilliant vision at the end of the story clearly represents 'something good' (or at least potentially good) for Mrs Turpin.

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58. O'Connor, 'Revelation', p. 215.

59. P. Kyle McCarter, Jr, *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), p. 376.

60. McCarter, *II Samuel*, p. 376.

There are several terms for 'curse' in the Hebrew Bible; in Shimei's curse, the term קלל indicates a denunciation rather than an imprecation. In other words, Shimei's 'curse' is not automatically effective; it does not impose sanction or misfortune on David as a divine curse would (ארר, for example in Deuteronomy 27–28). Like Mary Grace's outburst, Shimei's curse is more precisely a form of abuse motivated by revenge and malice. Neither story endorses these attackers who hurl epithets and objects. Instead, their meanness makes the responses of David and Mrs Turpin—to interpret abusive curses as revelation—only more remarkable.

Shimei's curse is justified as long as David is a fugitive, but when David is restored it becomes sinful: In 'Revelation', the meaning and morality of Mary Grace's attack on Mrs Turpin is also relative, insofar as the reader is left to consider it independently. Despite the ambiguity of the curses, however, David and Mrs Turpin take the unusual step of interpreting these attacks as divinely motivated. In both stories, the curse includes a mixed message: the hurled textbook called *Human Development* evokes knowledge and perhaps hope for improvement, while 'wart hog from hell' denies Mrs Turpin's self-image as a saved woman. Shimei's hurled stones and curse against David pose no real threat, since Saul's house was justly vanquished, but the attack still reveals David's vulnerable and accursed condition.

Curses are commonly considered to be efficacious speech acts, words charged with an almost magical power that by their very utterance can induce certain outcomes. Another view is that curses are socially constructed: they maintain social boundaries, impose sanctions, and redress imbalances in a cultural system. This second, constructionist position is advocated by Paul A. Keim. According to Keim, curses are 'socially-determined'; his analyses of Judges 19–21 and 1 Samuel 14 seek to demonstrate how curses can be overturned for social and political reasons. In this view, curses become a way to reinforce social and religious systems, a kind of 'self-policing'.[61]

Keim sees his project as a corrective to accounts of curses that define them as early, magical forms of speech in an evolutionary scheme. Yet in denying these models of curse in favor of social function, he minimizes the fact that curses require some efficacious notion of language in order to work in the first place. The debate on curses—simply stated, social functionalism against efficacy—describes two complementary qualities of biblical curses, which perform a social function because they are considered to be efficacious.

This dual nature of curses, as efficacious speech acts that also perform a social function, applies to the Bible and to O'Connor's story. For David and Mrs Turpin, curses are powerful within specific social and personal contexts; their common thread is a *decision* to interpret maledictions as divine

61. Keim, *When Sanctions Fail*, p. 138.

revelation. Like David's interpretation of Shimei's curses, Mrs Turpin's response to Mary Grace's insults is to consider them to be a message from God. Though David and Mrs Turpin may benefit from interpreting the curses as revelation, their decisions are not merely strategic, but rather an almost necessary last resort, akin to Kenneth Burke's notion of literature as 'equipment for living'.[62]

The reader leaves Mrs Turpin in a post-hieratic reverie, without learning whether her vision has transformed her heart. As for David, the decision to interpret the curse as revelation appears to come more from caution (or fastidiousness) than contrition: he never shows regret for supplanting Saul, and though he later vows personally not to harm Shimei (2 Samuel 19), one of David's dying acts is to arrange for Shimei's execution (1 Kings 2). For the Deuteronomistic History, of which 2 Samuel is part, religious ideals and political realities run parallel to one another: David's piety may thus be seen as sincere or calculating. The curses hurled by Shimei may come from simple human vengeance, but they may also form part of a divine plan of punishment against David in the affair with Bathsheba. Both O'Connor and the biblical author separate their characters' intentions from the fact that curses from enemies may be revelations from God.

For modern theorists like Walter Benjamin, the category of revelation provides a means to criticize contemporary culture. Yet Benjamin has no illusions about returning to a pre-Enlightenment world. O'Connor is no more naively atavistic than Benjamin is, and she shares his skepticism toward prevailing intellectual trends. With similar critical purposes, both O'Connor and Benjamin evoke biblical traditions of cursing from within an avowedly secular tradition. Such cursing may not be efficacious, but insofar as modern culture defines cursing as a primitive and efficacious speech act, the curses of O'Connor challenge prevailing uses of language.

But the modern curse is a different beast from the ancient one: its associations are demonic and anti-religious ('wart hog from hell'). In a world no longer vibrant with the presence of God, cursing eventually passes from blasphemy to ordinary 'cussing'. That is just what we might expect in the doctor's office where chit-chat, illness, race, and class predominate. O'Connor's challenge, however, is to see a connection between this mundane world and the vision at the story's end. Mrs Turpin seems ready for an ecstatic vision before Mary Grace curses her, as the genocidal vision of boxcars and gassing attests. The pressure of Mrs Turpin's desire to make sense of the social world builds until perhaps only a vision can relieve it. When it comes, the vision replaces the genocidal image with a more redemptive

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62. Kenneth Burke, 'Literature as Equipment for Living', in *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1941), pp. 293-304.

one: among the 'vast horde of souls […] rumbling toward heaven' are all the classes of people together: white-trash, niggers, freaks and lunatics, as well as people like herself, blending in together so that 'even their virtues were being burned away'.[63]

By insisting on the juxtaposition of hierophany and ordinary life, O'Connor forces the reader to consider that a curse can be a revelation, even in a doctor's office or a pig parlor. But by presenting this revelation in the context of a racist, classist, petty, and mundane world, O'Connor also practices the kind of modernist *ascesis* that uses symmetry to juxtapose people and pigs, profane and sacred, genocide and apotheosis, naturalism and supernaturalism.

Unintended and even perverse avenues to insight, especially at the hands of adversaries and strangers, are common to O'Connor's fiction and a recurring subject of her essays. The curse in 'Revelation' fits this larger pattern, and it closely parallels a number of other scenes. Mr Guizac, the 'displaced person' of the story by that name, never curses Mrs McIntyre overtly, but his presence haunts her with annoyance, sleeplessness, and a moral crisis that leads to death and illness. Like Mrs Turpin, Mrs McIntyre ruminates over images of the Holocaust ('a small room piled high with bodies of dead naked people') and experiences, in an echo of Ezekiel 1–2, a prophetic vision.[64] In *Wise Blood*, Asa Hawks and his daughter Sabbath—unintentionally and through curses of a sort—induce extreme behaviors and self-examination in Hazel Motes, who in turn has similar effects on Enoch Emery and his landlady. 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find', 'Greenleaf', 'Good Country People', and 'Everything That Rises Must Converge' are stories in which confrontation with a stranger or employee leads not only to destruction but also to religious introspection and even insight.

I suggest that techniques of contrast in O'Connor illustrate what Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno calls the dialectic of Enlightenment, in which myth and rationality, revelation and reason, are perpetually intertwined.[65] This view insists that literature is neither mere entertainment nor simple moral instruction; indeed, O'Connor refused to see her work as 'simply a problem to be solved, something which you evaporate to get Instant Enlightenment'.[66] For O'Connor's curse is also critique, one that depicts the most unspoken social beliefs of Southern culture in plain words as part of a literary *ascesis* with aspirations to redemptive insight.

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63. O'Connor, 'Revelation', p. 218.

64. O'Connor, 'The Displaced Person', in *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*, pp. 287, 301-302.

65. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (trans. John Cumming; New York: Continuum, 1982).

66. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald; New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), p. 108.

The abusive curses of Mary Grace illustrate this literary *ascesis*. Like Augustine, who endows language with semiotic usefulness but not intrinsic value, O'Connor creates disciplined literary expressions to transcend ordinary meanings. For O'Connor, true freedom is possible only through the grace of God. Yet in 'Revelation', she contests complacent religiosity, racism, and class by literary means.[67] O'Connor exercises her literary *ascesis* out of deep convictions about how things are and how they could be; 'Revelation' is not the product of sanguine humanism, atheism, or shallow fideism. Whether the story succeeds thus becomes a conceptual as well as an aesthetic question. O'Connor's story may wallow in the grotesque, but such a characterization might well arise from the discomfort she creates, not to mention our failure to recognize the biblical tradition of curses behind 'Revelation'.

Conclusion

Hurston's story insists on a cultural exception to the rule of secularism in a way that challenges secularism itself. Her reader faces a choice between a naturalistic reading of the story, in which Sykes dies by chance, and a more satisfying, supernatural revenge scenario. Delia's Christian piety shields her from any charge of overt cursing or sorcery; yet informed readers, aware of the presence of 'magical' beliefs and practices in African-American tradition, can recognize the power and supernatural undercurrents of the love feast and hymns. And in contrast to Delia's concealed religious power, Hurston wields considerable authorial, literary power in order to guide the reader to the conclusion that Sykes's death is justly deserved, supernaturally driven, and artistically satisfying.

O'Connor's criticism is more theological than cultural; the target of her criticism, in 'Revelation' as in *Wise Blood* (1952) and many of her stories, is the shallow, self-righteous piety of American popular religion. Mrs Turpin's 'revelation', like Sykes's death, can be explained supernaturally or naturalistically. It is O'Connor's literary artistry, particularly in rendering the vision, that makes the supernatural reading attractive. The blend of religion, literature, and theory in both stories serves to criticize prevalent understandings of all three in modernity. Each writer challenges the idea that religion fades away without resorting to traditionalism or denying the power of literary art. The religious dimension of the stories is no

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67. Note, however, that 'Revelation' does not appear to confront sexism as clearly as racism and classism. See Sarah Gordon, *Flannery O'Connor: The Obedient Imagination* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press), esp. pp. 196-97. On the question of race, see Alice Walker, 'Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor', in *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, 1984).

mere gesture, I have argued, but a serious and self-conscious engagement with the problem of tradition and modernity. By linking religious 'curses' to dramatic action, Hurston and O'Connor challenge their readers to consider whether and how traditions of powerful speech persist in modern life and literature.

Chapter 8

ERASING AMALEK: REMEMBERING TO FORGET
WITH DERRIDA AND BIBLICAL TRADITION

אבל אנשל הרי מת אצל הנאצים ימח שמם וזכרם
[B]ut didn't Anshel die by the Nazis, may-their-name-be-blotted-out…[1]

'I will place you *sous rature*, Professor Humboldt', said Kraljevic, his face
flushed, his eyes dark behind the pince-nez trembling on the bridge of his
nose. 'If my beloved Lorraine Alsace, my sweet contested territory, does
not receive tenure by the end of the term… I shall erase you, and you will
vanish forever, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea'.[2]

The two epigraphs to this chapter, both from contemporary novels, invoke
the metaphor of erasure to curse a specific enemy. In the first case, from
David Grossman's *See Under: Love*, a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust
curses the Nazis. The erasure of their name is linked here, as it is in the
Bible, to memory. The second curse, from James Hynes's *The Lecturer's
Tale*, is uttered by a postmodern literary critic whose curse invokes specific
academic discussions of writing indebted above all to the work of Jacques
Derrida. Both curses appear in magical realist novels in which cursing can
be genuinely efficacious.

By what line of transmission, and through what traditions, do these
curses come to the two novelists? Grossman quotes verbatim the biblical
curse analyzed in this chapter—a millennia-old biblical (and Jewish) tradi-
tion, traceable back to Exod. 17.14-16, which has passed into common par-
lance in modern Israeli Hebrew.[3] In order to understand the full implications
of the curse, one must recognize the idioms of this tradition. And though the

number of people who understand it may be small, the tradition is significantly long and robust to afford complex associations—between the Nazis and the Amalekites for instance.

Hynes draws on a much different 'tradition' in his curse. When the ultra-hip literary theorist Kraljevic places the novel's protagonist 'under erasure' (*sous rature*), he alludes to a small number of recent theoretical texts familiar only to a small group of scholars. The meaning and allusion of the phrase *sous rature* are obscure to most of the novel's characters. For these mocked acolytes of high academic fashion, the ability to cite a text unknown to the adversary is seen as an advantage. In the exaggerated world of the novel, obscurity and obscurantism quickly blur. Nevertheless, like Grossman's curse, this poststructuralist curse must be sufficiently recognizable to make sense to the informed reader; in other words, even poststructuralist theory has enough conventional metaphors to subject it to the sort of parody executed by Hynes.[4] But is poststructuralism, by itself, a tradition?

This chapter examines the metaphor of erasure in biblical tradition and in the poststructuralist theory of Derrida; in addition to observing a number of striking homologies and differences, I imagine the interpretative possibilities and dangers of reading the Bible with Derrida and reading Derrida with the Bible. Such an approach explores some of the mixed disciplinary allegiances of those who work at the intersection between biblical, religious, theological and cultural studies. Along the way, I will also have occasion to reflect on what is meant by biblical tradition and ontology—questions on which I will have recourse to the work of Derrida and Emmanuel Lévinas.

The theme of erasure is one of concern to Derrida, especially in his writings on negative or apophatic theology, a tradition usually traced to the sixth-century Pseudo-Dionysius as well as the later figures Meister Eckhart and Angelus Silesius. Affinities between poststructuralism and negative theology have been richly explored in the works of Mark C. Taylor, Mikel Dufrenne, Jean-Luc Marion, John Caputo, Hent de Vries, and Jacques Derrida. But in all this contemporary theological and philosophical work there is relatively little discussion of the Hebrew Bible. This chapter draws biblical cursing into the discussion, particularly around the categories of writing and erasure, and asks how cursing traditions in ancient Israel relate to these contemporary discussions of negative theology. To answer this question,

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4.   A much more potent use of the literary-theoretical 'tradition' of erasure appears in a sardonic essay about the site of the World Trade Center. In 'Groundzeroland', Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe admonish the reader to 'Walk up the ramp to the platform without filter and, for a golden fifteen minutes, see the erasure—see what isn't there—and see what cannot be erased: the meeting ground for the producers and consumers of popular culture' (*South Atlantic Quarterly* 101 [2002], pp. 349-59 [359]).

I concentrate primarily on the curse against Amalek (Exod. 17.14-16 and Deut. 25.19) and the work of Jacques Derrida.

The command to write Amalek's erasure is the first of a series of narratives in which Moses writes (Exod. 17.14, 24.4, and 34.27, and Deuteronomy 31). These acts of writing connect stories *in* the Torah with the inscription and promulgation *of* the Torah, thus blurring the lines between speech and text, past and present. Moreover, several biblical texts identify religious well-being and even existence itself with writing. In Psalm 40, for example, the psalmist declares, '*Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me.* I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart' (vv. 7-8), as if being present (הנה באתי) were somehow equivalent being written (of) (כתוב). In Deuteronomy, Moses exhorts the children of Israel to 'Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart… Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates' (Deut. 6.6-9), and later in the book, Moses proclaims the Torah to be the very life of the people (Deut. 32.47). By contrast, to be erased or blotted out of the book is the worst fate that can befall a person: when Moses intercedes for Israel after the golden calf episode, he says 'But now, if you will only forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book you have written' (32.33).[5] The image of erasure appears also in Deuteronomy after the long list of covenant curses: 'All the curses written in this book will descend on them, and the Lord will blot out their names from under heaven' (Deut. 29.19-20). Written curses play a role in a range of episodes, from the trial by bitter waters inflicted by the jealous husband in Numbers 5 to the curse on the foreign enemy Amalek in Exodus 17 (see also Pss. 9.5-6, 69.28 and 109.13). The object of the curse may be the enemy as in Exod. 17.14-16, Deut. 12.3, Ps. 69.28, 109.14; or it may be Israel, whose blotting out or contemplated blotting out is related to the breaking of covenant regulations (see Exod. 32.32-33, Deut. 9.14, 29.19, and 2 Kgs 14.27).

Do these biblical images of writing and erasure operate on the level of metaphysics (referring to absolute reality) or ontology (relating to questions of being)? I affirm both alternatives cautiously, without reducing or translating the texts of ancient Israel into philosophical discourses in which questions, narratives, and paradoxes seek paraphrase and resolution. Instead, Exodus 17 represents a process of tradition and interpretation according to which ancient curse practices are taken through new contexts and meanings. What I propose is that biblical texts have philosophical (ontological and metaphysical) implications though they belong to a tradition (or language game) other than philosophy.

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5.   Cf. the variant in Deut. 9.14; cf. also Deut. 25.6, which invokes the law of levirate marriage as a way to prevent the erasure of a deceased man's name. A similar use of the term appears in 1 Sam. 24.21.

Remembering to Forget

In Exodus 17 there is a paradoxical inscription of erasure, in which *the command to erase is written down*:

> Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Write this as a reminder (זכרן) in a book and recite it in the hearing of Joshua: I will utterly blot out (כי־מחה אמחה) the remembrance (זכר) of Amalek from under heaven'. And Moses built an altar and called it, The Lord is my banner [term obscure]. He said, 'A hand upon the banner of the Lord. The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation' (Exod. 17.14-16; note the concise variant in Deut. 25.19: '[I]n the land that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; do not forget').

Why is the erasure of Amalek written and recited, and how can someone remember to forget? To paraphrase Derrida in *The Postcard*, by what force of amnesia can we aim not simply to transform, deform, or confound, but to forget; how can we forget without knowing and how can we know how to forget?[6] Like Derrida, these biblical texts seem to relate the category of writing to questions of being (ontology) and absolute reality (metaphysics), but, like the acts of excision invoked by other ancient inscriptions, they also play a *performative* role—a role that invokes the efficacious power of language in certain situations, and overlaps with recent discussions of hate speech.[7] By reading the biblical texts with help from Derrida, my analysis will suggest some overlooked continuities between biblical tradition and current discussions of negative theology.

The Threat of Erasure

Erasure always presupposes presence: a word must be inscribed before it can be effaced. By the same token, no act of inscription can occur without an acknowledgement, even an anxiety, that it *could* be erased. A similar duality applies to cursing in general: as Derrida observes in one of his many allusions to the Bible: 'When Jeremiah curses the day he was born, he must yet—or *already*—affirm'.[8] For Derrida, negation and affirmation

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6. Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (trans. Alan Bass; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 77.

7. In *Excitable Speech*, for instance, Judith Butler binds language to physical existence, arguing that 'If language can sustain the body, it can also threaten its existence' (Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* [New York: Routledge, 1997], p. 5).

8. Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking', in *Derrida and Negative Theology* (ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay; trans. Ken Frieden; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 73-142 (99).

are always interconnected, suggesting the possibility that cursing and erasure demand a central position in any theoretical discussion of writing and speech. (Derrida's attention to the connection between curse and affirmation is a far cry from the minimal attention bestowed by biblical scholars on the phenomena of erasure and cursing.)

The subject of erasure arises in Derrida's most extended reflection on apophatic or negative theology: 'How to Avoid Speaking'. Here, Derrida insists that any apophatic religious discourse must begin with prayer or an address to God that 'recognizes, assigns, or insures its destination',[9] but in order to avoid making any such claim to the signification or destination of his own writing, he is at pains to distinguish himself from negative theology. Yet a spirit of playfulness infuses the essay, particularly on the question whether it will be *possible* for Derrida to dissociate himself from negative theology: 'I knew, then, that I could not avoid speaking of negative theology. But how and under what heading would I do it?'[10] Derrida never resolves this question, but a number of references to Jewish tradition open up suggestive interpretative directions.

Derrida observes that the expressions of negative theology are usually addressed to God, and that mere statements of absence or the inadequacy of language do not make negative theology radically distinct from other kinds of expression, since they are directed *somewhere*, as a prayer is directed to God. The name of God here indicates the 'trace of the singular event that will have rendered speech possible' and in this sense, negative theology inscribes the same ontological and linguistic claims as other theologies. In a more general way, this act of naming God applies to 'every reading, every interpretation, every poetics, every literary criticism…the "already-there" (*déjà-là*) of a phrase, the trace of a phrase…'.[11] Derrida shows that negative theology shares the same desire for 'meaning, the referent, truth' as other kinds of discourse, and that all such discourse is subject to the economy of 'différance' and the trace.[12] This trace is inherent to writing and productive of the kind of dissemination and 'différance' so thoroughly theorized by Derrida: 'Even if the idiomatic quality must necessarily be lost itself or allow itself to be contaminated by the repetition which confers on it a code and an intelligibility, even if it *occurs only to efface itself*, if it arises only in

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9. Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking', p. 98. See also the discussion of negative theology in the 'Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices', in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, pp. 283-324, also in '*Sauf le nom*', in *On the Name* (ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 35-88 (60-65).

10. Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking', p. 85.

11. Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking', p. 98.

12. Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking', p. 98.

effacing itself, the effacement will have taken place, even if its place is only in the ashes. *Il y a là cendre*'.[13]

In Derrida's hands, apophatic theology becomes a means of reflecting on all reading and interpretation, and the sense in which texts hark back to an original singular event immediately raises the specter of erasure. Effacement of the singular event, the naming of God or the 'already-there' of a phrase, becomes a necessary part of linguistic economy for apophatic theology and all other kinds of discourse alike. In this sense, negative theology and erasure are just like all other kinds of writing and they are also *symbolic* or *emblematic* of all other kinds of writing.

Derrida links this paradox of erasure, of presence in absence and absence in presence, to the ontological and theological projects of Plato's *Timaeus*, Meister Eckhart, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Luc Marion, and what he admits is a self-defeating attempt to dissociate his own work from negative theology. His problem with negative theology will be that it is in some sense *not negative enough*: every disavowal of language and meaning will be undercut by its address to God. In fact, theologians often resort to apophatic forms of expression in order to raise their religious claims to a level of absolutism or 'hyperessentiality'.[14] So is Derrida a negative theologian? Derrida himself remains non-committal on the question, but others, such as Hent De Vries, rush to deny the possibility. Concurring with Derrida and criticizing Mikel Dufrenne's appropriation of Derrida's 'différance' as 'the unconceptualizable concept in the name of which every positivity is put under erasure (*sous rature*)', De Vries denies the suggestion that Derrida's work reduces to a negative theology of 'productive absence'.[15] Readers of Derrida struggle to define what his recent 'turn to religion' means (see De Vries and Caputo), in an academic tug-of-war not dissimilar to the struggle over Walter Benjamin's debt to, and invocation of, theology.

Uncertain as to whether his disavowal of negative theology can succeed, Derrida refers the question back to Heidegger, who expressed an unfulfilled desire to write a theology without using the word 'being'. Is Heidegger's text a form of negative theology, since it lacks the address to God that Derrida considers basic to negative theology? The answer to the question is left open. Derrida's essay is itself full of the kind of addresses and apostrophes that he associates with negative theology, so that without saying so, in fact despite saying the opposite, Derrida appears to concede failure in the attempt to dissociate himself from negative theology.[16] What does this

13. Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking', p. 98.
14. Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking', p. 78-79.
15. Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 46-47.
16. Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking', pp. 75, 83, 85, and n. 13.

contradictory affirmation and denial mean for Derrida? Derrida's affirmation-denial performs the impossibility of fulfilling certain desires in writing; it thus has implications not just for negative theology, but for writing and affirmation (promise) in general, just as biblical curses of erasure perform a paradox that has larger implications for how biblical writing is understood. Thus Derrida's statement resonates with biblical tradition, even though the biblical and the Jewish are but a 'trace' in a meditation in which the core texts are German, Greek and primarily Christian.

In his work on negative theology, Derrida avoids speaking about biblical texts of erasure such as Exodus 17, says nothing about Jewish texts about writing/invoking God, and instead focuses on Heidegger's attempts 'to write *Being*, the word *being*, under erasure, an erasure in the form of a crossing out'.[17] This focus on the German philosopher who wrote about the 'inner truth and greatness' of National Socialism places Derrida in a strange position relative to his own Jewish identity, a problem he also explores at length in his autobiographical work, 'Circumfession'.[18] In 'How to Avoid Speaking', Derrida comments with a tone of near-embarrassment:

> In other words, what of Jewish and Islamic thought in this regard? By example, and in everything that I will say, a certain void, the place of an internal desert, will perhaps allow this question to resonate. The three paradigms that I will quickly have to situate (for a paradigm is often an architectural model) will surround a resonant space of which nothing, almost nothing, will ever be said.[19]

The question Derrida begs but avoids here is of course, 'Why?'[20] Highlighting the bracketing out of Judaism and Islam, Derrida observes that his essay concerns Plato, Christian theology, and Heidegger, all of which stand apart from, or even against, the Jewish and the biblical. The absent center of Jewish tradition is made even more pronounced in Derrida's reference to the fact that his essay was delivered in Jerusalem, where, ambivalent about his promise to speak about negative theology, he quoted from the

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17. Derrida 'How to Avoid Speaking', p. 125.

18. Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (trans. Ralph Manheim; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 199.

19. Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking', p. 100.

20. The 'internal desert' also refers to the experience of being a 'little black and very Arab Jew' (a *pied noir*) who grew up in a colonial situation in Algeria where his very understanding of Judaism was subject to a 'Christian contamination' (Derrida, 'Circumfession', in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* [trans. Geoffrey Bennington; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992], p. 58; *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin* [trans. Patrick Mensah; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998], p. 54. See also 'Hostipitality', in Derrida, *Acts of Religion* (ed. and with an Introduction by Gil Anidjar; New York: Routledge 2002), pp. 358-420. Thanks to Yvonne Sherwood for these references.

Jewish Passover Haggadah: 'Next year in Jerusalem! I told myself, in order to defer, perhaps indefinitely, the fulfillment of this promise'.[21]

What to make of this aporia? According to Eliot Wolfson, 'This comment must give pause to all those involved in the effort to discern Derrida's relationship to Jewish mysticism, not to mention Judaism more generally'.[22] I concur with Wolfson, particularly on the point that Derrida does not offer a specialized analysis of Jewish texts, but I would risk a bolder connection between Derrida and Jewish tradition precisely on the grounds of Derrida's disavowal. This connection, I suggest, draws upon Derrida's acknowledged debt to Lévinas (which Wolfson overlooks) and involves the practices as well as the content of a reading.

One could see Derrida's invocation of Jewish tradition in his 'Next year in Jerusalem' either as joke or dismissal of Jewish tradition or, in a more indirect way, as a kind of affirmation by negation, as if the whole Christian and Hellenistic preoccupation with negative theology were beneath or outside the 'resonant space' of Judaism. If this were to be understood as Derrida's position, he would then be well-positioned to disavow the negative theology of which he speaks. He also would have done so with rhetorical flourish, by means of a certain kind of 'productive silence'. I will suspend these two possibilities for the moment and return to them below in the discussion of Derrida and Lévinas.

Blotting out the Name in Exodus 17 and Deuteronomy 25

What significance attaches to the use of 'erase' in the curse on Amalek and other parties in the Hebrew Bible; and what relation, if any, is there between negative theology which does not speak the name of God, and the placing '*sous rature*' of the name—and existence (being?) of the enemy? Expressions of erasure are common in curse traditions in the ancient Near East, where public inscriptions, a sign of status, success, and prestige, were often protected by curses.[23] Biblical tradition also has the expressions 'to be written in the book' (Exod. 32.32-33) and to be blotted out 'from under heaven' (Deut. 9.14, 29.19, 2 Kgs 14.27), both of which associate writing with existence and erasure with non-existence. What do curses of erasure suggest about ideas of writing and revelation in ancient Israel? For an ancient

21. Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking', p. 83.

22. Eliot Wolfson, 'Assaulting the Border: Kabbalistic Traces in the Margins of Derrida', *JAAR* 70 (2002), pp. 475-514 (488).

23. Crawford, *Blessing and Curse in Syro-Palestinian Inscriptions of the Iron Age*; John G. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Stanley Gevirtz, 'West-Semitic Curses and the Problem of the Origins of Hebrew Law'. *VT* 11 (1983), pp. 137-58.

culture in which literacy was limited, the prominence of writing metaphors suggests an emerging religion of the book, in which recitation, preservation, and commentary on scripture begin to constitute central practices.

'Write this as a reminder (זכרן) in a book and recite it in the hearing of Joshua: I will utterly blot out (כי־מחה אמחה) the remembrance (זכר) of Amalek from under heaven'. What is the purpose of this curse? What idea of writing does it intimate? There is no single answer to either question, though drawing in what Derrida calls the 'guardrail of context' may help to clarify them both. The erasure or effacement of names is a common preoccupation of ancient curse inscriptions.[24] The curse on Amalek comes immediately after a victory in a holy war, a war of self-defense in which the Amalekites attack Israel just as they complete their exodus from Egypt at the Red Sea. The passage combines two main aporiae: a command to write with a command to recite the erasure of the Amalekites, and a command to remember to forget them. What could be more aporetic than a written and recited declaration of erasure in the preserved canonical text of Exodus, in which the name Amalek is preserved—albeit as ~~Amalek~~—for evermore? Yosef Yerushalmi's *Zakhor* famously tells us that the verb 'zakhor' in various forms occurs one hundred sixty-nine times in the Hebrew Bible along with its obverse—the adjuration not to forget.[25] Remembering seems difficult enough (certainly the Israelites keep forgetting to remember, and keep having to be reminded to remember) but this difficulty is nothing compared with the logical impossibility actively to forget. From the standpoint of contemporary logic and literalism, the passage seems to represent a moment where the Bible, unexpectedly, sounds logically self-defeating, or Derridean. Like the use of the double negative in English, the curse on Amalek is crystal clear but logically flawed; it represents an emphatic curse against Amalek undermined by the very language of writing, recitation and memory with which it reinforces—and underwrites—that emphasis.

But is the text Derridean? Though the ontological, cultural, and linguistic context of Derrida's reflections on silence and erasure lie beyond the ancient world of this curse text, Derrida's interrogation of writing, being, and erasure shares, I suggest, some 'biblical tradition' common to him and Exodus. A juxtaposition of Exodus 17 and Derrida shows, unexpectedly, that both are 'biblical' *and* 'philosophical' in meaningful ways—that the biblical is Derridean, and that Derrida is biblical, in a certain sense. Certainly the biblical and Derridean corpuses share several features: the interdependence of

24. Parrot, *Malédictions et violations de tombes*; Cathcart, 'The Curses in Old Aramaic Inscriptions'; Crawford, *Blessing and Curse in Syro-Palestinian Inscriptions of the Iron Age*.

25. Yosef Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1996).

canonical text and commentary, an understanding of writing and speech as authorized discourse; an understanding of textual coherence that includes fragmentation—though in order to imagine Derrida and Exodus as sharing a biblical tradition, 'tradition' would have to mean not only conscious and ratiocinative projects (such as 'Shakespearean tradition' or Alasdair MacIntyre's idea of tradition as 'embodied argument') but also many unexpected, and following Freud, even unconscious forms of continuity: it would have to come closer to what Derrida calls the 'archive'.[26] Reading Exodus 17 alongside, and with a little help from, Derrida, we would have to note there is nothing of willful obscurantism about the curse, and indeed it warrants scrutiny for this very reason: how can we speak of a willful forgetting and how can such a paradoxical expression make sense?

The problem applies equally to a common (but very different) expression in English: 'Let's forget it',[27] where the emphasis is in the opposite direction of the eradication of pain/crime (forgiveness) rather than the eradication of the perpetrator of the crime (vengeance). But what can it mean to forget (a crime, or a name) *deliberately?* Freud and (in a certain Freudian 'tradition') Derrida can account for *inadvertent* forgetting and erasure through the death drive, that which destroys the cumulated archive/tradition with *le mal d'archive*, or 'archive fever', but it is a much harder task to articulate a forgetting that is fully conscious and deliberate.[28] Logic and history both undermine such forgetting, since, of course, Israel and its literature do *not* forget Amalek. This might lead us question whether this forgetting is possible, and if not, whether the imperative to forget is really something else—something that will return again and again in destructive ways (see Exodus 17, Num. 14.45, 1 Samuel 15, 27, 30). One can imagine a psychoanalytic view of Amalek as a signifier of evil to which tradition irrevocably and compulsively returns. But from the retrospective standpoint of the writing of Exodus, the inscription of Amalek as perennial enemy is a historical and hermeneutical necessity; the curse of erasure will *inscribe* Amalek as an enemy whose threat is ultimately unimportant; over time, through the unfolding of political *and interpretive* history, Amalek will be 'erased'.

Every solution that we generate for the text is unsatisfactory, in some sense. If we 'solve' the logical conundrum by claiming that no rule of logical contradiction applies in the Hebrew Bible, such a solution condemns biblical culture to irrationalism. If we claim that some of the terms in the passage are not literal—that 'Erase' and 'Write in the book' refer to the public

26. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 222.

27. My thanks to my colleague, Ananda Abeysekara, for this insight.

28. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever* (trans. Eric Prenowitz; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 10.

record rather than individual memory; or that the two forms of זכר ('remember') refer to public, ritual expression rather than mental states, as claimed in Yerushalmi's *Zakhor*—we still need (in the absence of an ancient biblical poetics) evidence that these terms are non-literal, and that tradition could easily distinguish public record and ritual from mental states.[29] And if we point out, as William Propp does, that זכר (like the Akkadian *zakaru*) can simply mean name or posterity, the resolution of the problem still relies on insisting that the memory and the ongoing existence of the Amalekites are two different things: 'The point, therefore, is that Amalek will never be forgotten, but will survive *only* as a memory, not as a people'.[30] (In a related vein, Manes Kogan suggests that memory in this verse applies only to the death and destruction carried out by Amalek, and that, in other words, the memory of Amalek is nothing other than death and destruction, so that Amalek 'is' not.[31] The fourth century midrash the *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael* suggests also that Amalek exists *only* in the memory of the future generations.[32]

The reiteration of the curse in Deuteronomy (25.17-19) complicates matters further: here, at the culmination of the law code just preceding its ceremonial ratification, with the people of Israel gathered on the plains of Moab, we have an emphatic reiteration of the Exodus curse: 'Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt' (v. 17). Lest they forget, the people are reminded to blot out the remembrance of what Amalek did. The erasure of Amalek is commanded again, in a book full of reiterated laws (Deuteronomy as 'second law'), to take place after Israel has settled the land and defeated its enemies (v. 19). Such a period of stability is usually associated with the writing of chronicles that memorialize the past, but here memory serves to *un*-write the name and remembrance of Amalek. Set off by the commands 'remember' and 'do not forget', the emphatically remembered curse of erasure and forgetting poses no barrier to rewriting.

It seems that the curse of erasure, a familiar trope in ancient Near Eastern culture, appears in Exodus and Deuteronomy in a new key, transposed as it were into a tradition that prizes writing as memory and memory as a set of actions that make it possible to speak of 'Israel' or 'Amalek' and be understood. Biblical curses of erasure, in other words, take familiar customs to a new level by incorporating them in a growing biblical tradition constituted largely by recitation, ritual, and commentary. The question is how such speech and writing are understood: is the curse on Amalek an efficacious

29. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, pp. 5-15.

30. William H.C. Propp, *Exodus 1–18* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1999), p. 619.

31. Manes Kogan, *Megillat Ester* (Jerusalem: L.B. Publishing, 2001), p. 143.

32. *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael*, Amalek 2 (ed. H.S. Horovitz; Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1970), p. 186.

speech act that somehow *performs* the erasure of this people, and if so, what are its ontological implications? In the context of an ongoing hermeneutical tradition, the curse's proleptic or future orientation will become a basis for subsequent reference and commentary.

With or beyond the Aporia in Exodus 17

In the biblical passage and the *Mekhilta*, the acts of writing and reciting conclude a story of battle and indicate a future of wars with Amalek. Already marked in Genesis as a rival people descended from Esau (Gen. 25.23, 36.12), the Amalekites will challenge Israel on a perennial basis.

What bearing do past and future rivalries have on the writing of the curse *in* the text and the writing *of* the text, and what is the bearing of the altar, with its own obscure name: 'The Lord is my banner'. Without lapsing into complete chaos/incoherence, these ambiguities drive an ongoing process of interpretation: the parts of Exod. 17.14-16 are discrete but clearly interrelated, and the contrasts and repetitions allow more than one interpretation. The question becomes: Given the clear patterning and paradoxical expression, what would account for a *conclusive* interpretation—some kind of dissipation of the tensions of the passage, at the level of physical enmity, and actual sense? With respect to rivalries and time, the problem of interpretation becomes critical. Though most scholars attribute the passage to the early 'E' strand of the Pentateuch,[33] the passage is proleptic with respect to future conflicts with the Amalekites, such as 2 Samuel 1 and the book of Esther. The conflict with Amalek unfolds through time in biblical history.

Exodus 17 demands to be read, then, in the context of a biblical history that extends back to Genesis and forward to Esther. For the Bible, the rabbis, and Emmanuel Lévinas, revelation takes place over the course of history. In an early rabbinic text, the proleptic nature of the passage plays out over the course of the canon as well as the course of time: reading verse 14 lemmatically, the midrash interprets as follows: *'Write this as a memorial in a book'*: '"This": what is written in *this* book; "Memorial": what is written in the prophets. "In the book": what is written in the scroll'.[34] Later, the midrash divides the two forms of 'erase' into 'this world' (for מחה) and the 'world to come' (for אמחה).[35] What the midrash means by spreading out the terms of the passage into divisions of the canon and phases of history is not exactly clear, but what is clear is that the midrash seems expands the scope of the writing to include this book, the Mekhilta, and that book, the Torah, in that one is always implicit within the other, and stretches the meaning of

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33. Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, p. 615.
34. *Mekhilta*, Amalek 2, p. 182.
35. *Mekhilta*, Amalek 2, p. 185.

the text across all worlds and all time, including the world to come. What we could call the 'dissemination' of erasure betokens an act of making the memory of forgetting Amalek, the inscription of erasure, a cornerstone of Israelite tradition. The notion of erasure and memory as a matter of temporal process suggests that the narrative *requires* subsequent interpretations. But if the Amalekites stand for the perennial enemy against which Israel must forever do battle, if the Amalekites are fratricidal enemies, then there is danger in reading the passage ontologically, since that would elevate fratricidal (and in Esther, genocidal) ethnic conflict to a level of ontology.[36]

The unfolding revelation under discussion here is a biblical history of violent ethnic conflict underscored by an emphatic curse of erasure. In this case, we might say that the curse works *too well*, that biblical tradition works *too well*, insofar as it perpetuates a bitter hatred between peoples. Elevated to the level of ontology, as the curse of Canaan in Genesis 9 was in the antebellum South, the curse can remain lethal for millennia. 'Amalekite' may not have been a common slur in the Middle Ages, but the term for Amalek's ancestor, 'Edom', was, and there is significant evidence for what Elliott Horowitz calls a 'violent undertone' in medieval Purim celebrations.[37] How, then, can the ontological reading of fratricidal violence be avoided within the tradition? One strategy is to read the biblical text *very* closely against the grain, as one Hasidic reading does in the case of the curse of Deut. 25.17, which includes the words (in order), 'to you Amalek' (לך עמלק).[38] In context, of course, 'Amalek' is the subject of the clause that reads 'what Amalek did to you'; but for these readers it also suggests that 'you' and 'Amalek' are the same, that Amalek, in other words, is also *within* Israel, and the struggle described in Exodus 17 and Deuteronomy 25 is partly a struggle against evil within the self and/or community.[39]

Another hermeneutical or midrashic approach to Amalek is to deliteralize the narrative—to call attention to its literary and symbolic character, its status as a story. Consider the fate of the Amalekite rivalry in the book of Esther. Written in a fictionalized form, the *Diasporanovelle*, Esther presents a wildly exaggerated kind of victory that readers (and Purim revelers)

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36. Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 6-11.

37. Eliott Horowitz, 'The Rite to Be Reckless: On the Perpetuation and Interpretation of Purim Violence', *Poetics Today* 15 (1994), pp. 9-54 (38). Thanks to Alexandra Cuffel for the observation about Edom.

38. Jonathan Wittenberg, *The Eternal Journey* (London: Temple Fortune 2001), p. 128.

39. A similar reading appears in the contemporary rabbinic collection *Torah Gems*, II (ed. Aharon Yaakov Greenberg; trans. Rabbi Shmuel Himelstein; Israel: Yavneh, 1988), p. 123, in which the author refers to Amalek as the evil inclination within us (the Yetzer Hara, or simply the Yetzer). Thanks to Manes Kogan for this reference.

know all too well to be unrealistic.[40] The book also parodies patterns of Jewish vulnerability and victory: in the only biblical book that never mentions God, Esther proclaims a victory so improbable that its satisfaction must always be mixed with a bitter realization that it is far-fetched. Esther clearly alludes to Exodus 17 and 1 Samuel 15, where Saul (Mordechai's ancestor) mishandles the conquest of Agag, the Amalekite ancestor of Haman,[41] but at the same time, the book's victory falls short of typical biblical aspirations: Esther's success amounts to little more than the survival of the Jews and revenge on their (Amalekite/Agagite) enemies. And at the end of the book none of the three cornerstones of biblical covenant tradition—homeland, king, or temple—is available to the victors.

Esther engages the interpretive tradition of Amalek—the fratricidal struggle between two nations—and raises it to a parodic, bittersweet, and even ludic level.[42] Exodus 17.14-16 seems universal, uncompromising, and steeped in cycles of animosity, and yet tradition proves supple enough to yield another biblical text, Esther, that transforms the conflict by weaving it into a highly stylized narrative in a very different idiom. Though it may not eliminate the danger of universalized conflict, Esther calls attention to its fictional status by fabulous turns of events that defy historical plausibility. While enemies were familiar to Jewish history, their massive defeat through intermarriage and courtly intrigue was unheard of.

In the festival of Purim, at which the Esther scroll is read aloud, the name of the Amalekite villain, Haman, is drowned out by noisemakers called 'groggers'. In this ritual, the paradox of erasure and memory is brilliantly expressed through carnivalesque action. Tradition also requires celebrants to drink wine until they can no longer distinguish the name 'Mordechai' from 'Haman'.[43] Purim thus performs the erasure of Amalek through an oral reading of Esther that is compromised (but not eliminated) by noise and alcohol. Spoken but not heard, the Amalekite name is auditorily erased through ritual recitation. Purim remembers to forget.

Of course, no interpretive clues are 'foolproof', contrary to what Meir Sternberg has argued, and there are no guarantees that Esther can contain the danger of violence by its parodic engagement with the curse of Amalek.[44] The boundaries between writing and erasure, memory and forgetting, remain fluid in tradition, and so too do those of fantasy and reality. Certainly

40. Edward Greenstein, 'A Jewish Reading of Esther', in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* (ed. Jacob Neusner *et al.*; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 233.

41. Adele Berlin, *Esther* (The JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), p. xxxviii.

42. Berlin, *Esther*, p. xxii.

43. *B. Megillah* 7b.

44. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 50.

the story slipped into literality for the right wing Orthodox Jew who gunned down Arabs at the tomb of the patriarchs in Hebron on Purim.[45] And as Susannah Heschel observes, '[I]n Israel and elsewhere we also hear about Palestinians as *Amalek*—the incorrigible enemy whom we ore obligated to wipe off the face of the earth'.[46]

By sheer coincidence, Esther invokes the erasure of Amalek and also, alone among books of the Bible, fails to mention the name of God. Absence, erasure, and an emphasis on written decrees and chronicles (3.9-15, 6.1-8), would seem to make Esther an ideal illustration of negative theology. But the sort of metaphysical and mystical terms that animate negative theology do not preoccupy Esther. A diaspora story that appropriates the biblical motif of Amalek, Esther seems to be written for an audience more familiar with the exigencies of chance (cf. 'lot', גורל , Esther 3.7, 9.24) than direct divine intervention. Against the dangers of history Esther affirms biblical tradition and group identity by linking an unlikely victory story to popular ritual (9.17-32). The absence of God, which Georg Lukacs regards as definitive of the novel, serves to make the story's danger, and the imperative to erase Amalek, particularly intense.[47]

Perhaps Esther indirectly elucidates Derrida's hesitation to embrace negative theology. In 'How to Avoid Speaking', Derrida repeatedly insists on the importance of specific place in reading, writing, and addressing. His concern about the 'hyperessentiality' of negative theology suggests a discomfort with universalism in a reader who always attends to the particular. To a reductive reading of Esther as negative theology in which the erasure of Amalek mirrors devout silence toward the name of God, a Derridean reading would reply that such a universalism ignores too much literary texture, and, moreover, could reproduce the danger against it warns. Esther does indeed perform the erasure of Amalek and silence toward the name of God, but this performance, like Derrida's performance of hesitation toward negative theology, demands sensitive reading of the text *as* performance.

Lévinas and Derrida

What does it mean to speak of erasure on the ontological level? For Derrida and Heidegger, the question of ontology and erasure can be imagined on

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45. See Alastair G. Hunter, '(De)nominating Amalek: Racist Stereotyping in the Bible and the Justification of Discrimination', in Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Yvonne Sherwood (eds.), *Sanctified Aggression: Violent Legacies of Biblical Vocabularies* (New York: Continuum, 2003), pp. 92-108.

46. Heschel, 'Whither the Zionist Dream?: A Response to Joel Kovel', *Tikkun* 18 (May/June 2003), pp. 58-59 (59).

47. Georg Lukacs, *The Theory of the Novel* (trans. Anna Bostock; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), p. 88.

an abstract and universal level (i.e., Being and its erasure or crossing-out); for Emmanuel Lévinas, the name of God, like the biblical conceptions of erasure, memory, and the idea of revelation, assumes a particular history. A brief discussion of the work of Lévinas on the questions of erasure and biblical tradition will provide context for the question of how to relate biblical and poststructuralist erasure.

For Lévinas, the study of Torah embodies the historical process of revelation. His readings of Torah and Talmud are not incidental ephemera in his work but rather the linchpin of his ethics and philosophy of religion. In his essay on the name of God, Lévinas carefully dissociates Jewish teachings about the name of God from philosophical abstraction.[48] The point here is not simply to reinforce the clichéd difference between Athens and Jerusalem, or to say that the Jewish or biblical way of talking about the divine is not the same as the Greek or scholastic philosophical tradition.[49] Lévinas, rather, seems to be urging a uniqueness in Jewish tradition that *matters* to philosophy: 'But revelation of the Name itself is not uniquely the corollary of the unity of a being; it leads us even further. Perhaps even beyond being'.[50] For Lévinas, revelation requires a kind of transcendence that is irreducible to any abstract concept such as being.

In the essay on the name of God, Lévinas cites and builds upon three biblical texts that underlie his talmudic and philosophical analysis: Deut. 12.3-4, Deut. 6.13, and 1 Kgs 8.27.[51] The notion of erasure appears only in the first case, while all three texts insist on the unique transcendence of the God of Israel in terms of the divine name. The name of God here is ineffable: it exceeds the boundaries of ordinary space, time, and human comprehension. Lévinas follows a specific halakhic discussion of which names of God may and may not be erased, but his own philosophical reflections on revelation and tradition emerge from this rabbinic and biblical commentary.

For Lévinas, it is midrash, the ongoing process of interpretation, that constitutes revelation. In this conception of revelation, the complexities and even inconsistencies of biblical and rabbinic texts are not problems to be resolved but basic elements of a tradition that includes future interpretations. According to such a view, questions, perhaps more than answers, constitute the very subject of revelation and 'the slightest question put to the

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48. Lévinas *L'au-delà du verset: lectures et discours talmudiques* (Paris: Editions du Minuit, 1982), pp. 147-48.

49. In this way, I wish to avoid the image of Judaism as 'an exotic transgressive Other to the edifice of a "Greek" western rationalism' against which Yvonne Sherwood warns (*A Biblical Text and its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], p. 101 n. 34).

50. Lévinas, *L'au-delà du verset*, p. 148.

51. Lévinas, *L'au-delà du verset*, pp. 146 n. 3, 149.

schoolmaster by a novice constitutes an ineluctable articulation of the revelation which was heard at Sinai'.[52]

The influence of Lévinas on Derrida is a subject too elaborate to be addressed here, but both make use of the concepts of trace and erasure in ways that inform the subject of biblical erasure. For Lévinas, the trace is an extraordinary sort of sign that 'disturbs the order of the world': 'To be in the image of God does not mean to be an icon of God, but to find oneself in his trace... He shows himself only by his trace, as is said in Exodus 33'.[53] For Derrida, as we have seen, the trace is a kind of absolute difference that precedes signification: 'The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace'.[54] In *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas*, Derrida frequently cites Lévinas's understanding of Torah as justice and revelation, yet at the same time, asserts his commitment to a less stable conception of language and text: 'Dare I say that I never forego...the right to this analysis, indeed, to the discussion of some proposition or other in a text that cannot be homogeneous because it knows how to interrupt itself?'[55] For Derrida, the challenge to affirm the historicity of revelation, the model of interpretation-as-ethics beyond Heideggerian ontology, will merge with a generalized theory of reading and text, one not based on the canons and practices of Judaism, one that goes further, we could say, from the level of historical texts to the level of language itself.

From this one may be tempted to regard Derrida as inherently more universalistic than Lévinas, whose writings on Talmud may be understood as particularistic, perhaps even narrowly Jewish. I resist this temptation. Biblical tradition is, by Lévinas's account, inherently universalizing. And according to philosophers like Peter Ochs, biblical tradition offers important resources for contemporary metaphysics. For those traditions that involve a pattern of text and commentary, there is much to be gained from a direct encounter with such texts—the first element of which is the openness to the tradition itself. To behave, for example, as if the academic institutions of literary criticism and canon have no connection to claims of transcendence, to reject

52. Emmanuel Lévinas, 'Revelation in Jewish Tradition', in *The Levinas Reader* (trans. Sarah Richmond; Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1989), pp. 190-210 (195).

53. Emmanuel Lévinas, 'Meaning and Sense', in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (trans. Alphonso Lingis; Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1998) pp. 75-108 (104, 106-107).

54. Jacques Derrida, 'Differance', in *Speech and Phenomena* (trans. David Allison; Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 129-60 (156). Susan Handelman notes Derrida's dependence on Levinas as well as his tendency to go further in the direction of 'pure difference'. For Handelman, Derrida's resistance to clear signification is a kind of 'mystification' and a 'species of via negativa': *The Slayers of Moses* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), p. 173.

55. Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas* (trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 118, 66-67, 109, 123.

institutional religion as obsolete superstition, are the marks of a narrow, not a universalistic worldview. The notion of Torah as a model for an ethical life in which reading, teaching and learning are constitutive elements of an ever-expanding tradition indicates a practical, historical universalism.

   Lévinas embraces the particular world from which the first epigraph (above, from David Grossman's *See Under: Love*) comes—and participates directly and non-ironically in its tradition of Torah and commentary. Derrida is sometimes cast as the evil Demiurge who creates the world of the second epigraph (in which the erudite literati place one another *sous rature*, together, of course, with that other poststructuralist bogeyman Foucault, whose metaphor of a man vanishing like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea appears in *The Order of Things*).[56] Yet Derrida's relationship to Jewish and biblical traditions remains close and highly complex: the question that John Caputo and others have posed, 'Is deconstruction a Jewish science?' is problematic and interesting in much the same way as the original version of the question asked about the psychoanalysis of Freud, the self-described 'godless Jew'.[57] Outside the pre-established conventions and canons of rabbinic Judaism, Derrida implements a series of brilliant, strategic interventions in established intellectual discourses and debates. His innovative and scrupulously close readings of texts from the intellectual canon are, as Susan Handelman recognized over twenty years ago, recognizably indebted to rabbinic tradition.[58]

Conclusion

The epigraphs to this chapter come from two distinct interpretive 'traditions': a Jewish and biblical tradition that finds its way, through various detours, into an Israeli novel invoking the cursing and erasure of the Nazis, and a poststructuralist school of 'literary theory' grounded primarily in the work of Derrida. One belongs to a centuries-old human community of families, to scriptures and to rituals that perform those scriptures, whereas the Derridean 'canon' and 'tradition' are relatively recent, and only available via the readings of an intellectual elite (as well as a more publicly consumable caricature). Yet for both of these texts—and meditations on textuality—erasure is a paradoxical phenomenon, an absence that always assumes a presence, an effacement that always implies something already written.

   56. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 387. My thanks to Yvonne Sherwood for the Foucault reference.
   57. John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1997), pp. 263-73.
   58. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, pp. 163-78.

In Exodus 17, Esther, the Mekhilta, and *See Under: Love*, the curse of Amalek seems to function as a *symbolic* expression that points toward suffering, evil, and conflict without imposing strict boundaries on the horizons of interpretation: the curse on Amalek takes on meanings that range from the improbable victory over enemies in exile to the generalized expression of the encounter with evil. And on the surface, it seems that no metaphysical or ontological anxiety haunts the use and interpretation of the biblical curse. But reading the injunction to blot out, and to remember-to-forget, alongside Lévinas and Derrida (as well as the rabbis) enables us to see how the biblical aporia of written erasure is conceptually, and philosophically, rich. With Exodus 17 and other biblical references to erasure, we see an ancient, widespread form of cursing come into an ongoing hermeneutical tradition that performs variations on a theme. The same paradox of writing and erasure arises in the case of the literary scholar who places his rival *sous rature*, and so invokes a more recent 'tradition' that already seems robust enough for a popular novel to invoke it playfully.

What does all of this suggest for biblical scholarship? The two epigraphs testify, first of all, to the cultural availability of two conceptually distinct 'traditions' of erasure; seeing the differences, similarities, interactions, and implications of each 'tradition' is important for future analysis. Poststructuralist theory highlights the conceptual implications of biblical tradition, while, conversely, biblical tradition provides cultural and historical context often neglected by poststructuralist thought. If poststructuralism struggles with ontological and metaphysical anxieties, biblical tradition offers a range of practices and readings supple enough to embrace or negotiate the aporiae of Exodus 17 without suffering a crisis of meaning or endorsing a cycle of violence. Both forms of 'tradition', and the text of Exodus 17 itself, display the dynamics of displacement, suggesting that even erasure and forgetting have histories. The hermeneutical imperative, implicit in the text-and-commentary structure of biblical tradition, lends itself to a convergence of the poststructuralist and biblical traditions: both return to the text with full acceptance of its power and *poiesis*, open to new readings.

Chapter 9

CURSES LEFT AND RIGHT:
HATE SPEECH AND BIBLICAL TRADITION

This chapter attempts to show that contemporary ideas of hate speech incorporate debates on powerful speech inherited from biblical tradition. Should harmful words be restricted by law? Why have debates on these issues gained a high profile in recent years? While 'hate speech' has become a commonplace in contemporary discourse, legal efforts to control it in the United States have been largely unsuccessful, because for modern jurisprudence and secularism in general, words by themselves have no power. Meanwhile, some religious groups have begun to test the limits of modern secularism by pronouncing provocative religious curses. In the United States, a church group has picketed the funerals of soldiers with claims that their deaths are God's punishment for a culture of homosexuality. In Israel, Jewish zealots have pronounced a death curse, the 'pulsa denura', on political leaders with whom they disagree. Such political forms of religion test the limits of secular politics and understandings of language. In arguing that such words can do real harm, opponents and proponents of such actions assert what secular thinkers have often denied: that words have power. What follows is an analysis of hate speech as part of the tradition of religious, particularly biblical, curses.

Hate speech can be defined briefly by the title of a book on the subject: *Words That Wound*, a collection of essays that helped launch 'critical legal studies'.[1] The category evades precise definition because it depends on the intention of the speaker and the disposition of the addressee. In the United States, words that wound—insulting and humiliating statements—are not illegal unless they incite or threaten violent or other criminal action. The 1942 U.S. Supreme Court case *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire* singled out obscenity, libel, and 'fighting words' as forms of speech not protected by the First Amendment.[2] In a 1992 case (*R.A.V. v. City of St. Paul*), the Court ruled that an ordinance restricting speech that 'itself inflicts injury' was

1. Mari J. Matsuda *et al.*, *Words That Wound* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993).
2. Kent Greenawalt, *Fighting Words: Individuals, Communities, and Liberties of Speech* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 50-51.

unconstitutional under the freedom of speech clause of the First Amendment.[3] Most forms of speech, even 'hate speech', are protected by the Constitution unless, as in cases of incitement, they are clearly linked to other kinds of criminal action or injury. While the details of the law are complex, the distinction between protected and unprotected speech appears to turn on whether the injury is attributed to the speech itself or to actions other than speech (such as physical attack). By this standard, abusing another person simply by using a racial epithet, humiliating tirade, or vicious insult is not unconstitutional unless it is judged to be the cause of unlawful actions, as in cases of incitement and 'fighting words'.

By claiming that words have power, opponents of hate speech assume the existence of a power that resists easy explanation. For the claim that the use of particular words in particular situations *in itself* can do harm is not as easy to evaluate as the claim that using particular weapons can do harm; hence the expression 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me'. Nor does the power of hate speech reduce to that of threats, incitement, or fraud, because each of these verbal actions can be tied to specific and observable material dangers to the victim. One could imagine a rigorous account of hate speech that demonstrates specific and observable outcomes to the victim(s), but it is hard to imagine such an account ever overcoming the subjective and contextual variables that allow 'names' to do harm in some cases and not in others.[4]

What is more, arguments against hate speech depend less on empirical studies of measurable harm than on theoretical criticisms of law and language. The 'critical race theory' of *Words That Wound* denies the purported 'neutrality' and 'objectivity' of law and language. This account of the systematic racism of society, borne out in the 'lived experience' of people of color, and supported by the denial of 'neutrality', undergirds the argument that words can wound.[5] This denial of neutrality is shared by criticisms of secularism in contemporary religious studies, and it thus represents an overlooked point of common ground between arguments against hate speech and criticisms of 'secularism'.[6] Both perspectives question the purported neutrality and instrumentality of words and instead allow the possibility that words can be powerful.

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3. Greenawalt, *Fighting Words*, p. 56.
4. See Tirza Leader *et al.*, 'Complexity and Valence in Ethnophaulisms and Exclusion of Ethnic Out-Groups: What Puts the "Hate" into Hate Speech?', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96 (2009), pp. 170-82.
5. Matsuda *et al.*, *Fighting Words*, pp. 6-7.
6. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*; John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge 2001); Hent de Vries and Lawrence Sullivan (eds.), *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

The efficacy of hate speech thus depends on the prior belief that words can in fact wound. This belief, like the belief in the power of curses, can be self-fulfilling: whether 'secular' or 'religious', words can be powerful insofar as people believe they are powerful. Claims about the power of hate speech thus resemble the claim that curses are 'supernatural' and support the analogy between curses and hate speech. My aim here is to explore the analogy between curses and hate speech in order to suggest their belonging to a common tradition that cannot be reduced to the labels 'religious' or 'secular'. Central to this tradition are debates on whether words have power.

Hate Speech and Cursing

Discussions of hate speech confront secular ideas of language as a tool to be controlled by intelligent, free human beings with ideas of language as something powerful *in itself*. The record of modernity on this question is quite uneven. While obscenity, oaths, and apologies retain full recognition as powerful speech in secularized society, 'hate speech' does not. My interest here is not to explain modern speech acts merely as extensions of religious tradition. To do so would reinforce simple distinctions between a sacred past and a secular present. Arguments for continuity or discontinuity with a 'sacred' past will always come down to a weighing of evidence one way or the other. While one may argue that resemblance to past forms of speech demonstrate the sacred nature of contemporary speech acts, another might explain the power of such speech in purely 'secular' terms, as psychological illusions or threats. Instead of arguing simply whether powerful speech today is 'sacred' or 'secular', I attend to an apparent contradiction between the idea that some speech has power and ideas of language as a mere tool for humans to convey ideas and information.

Cursing here means the use of words to cause or invoke harm to someone through supernatural means, or the mention or threat of such a use. The covenant curses of Deuteronomy 28, for instance, stipulate divine sanctions against Israel in the event of their disobedience: 'But if you will not obey the Lord your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you' (v. 15). Like many curses, this text is less the performance of a curse than the mention or threat of curses (cf., e.g., Gen. 27.12 and Zech. 5.3-4). By threatening to impose curses, it 'works' insofar as people believe curses work. The power of curses is thus social and cultural—it consists in the harm or threat of harm they are believed to carry. For 'religious' cursing as for 'secular' hate speech, the mention or threat of powerful words is often as significant as their actual use; both depend on social and cultural norms.

My claim is not that 'religion' somehow lies hidden unchanged within the practices of ostensibly 'secular' law and culture. Rituals of popular culture, civil religion, and market economies certainly deserve scrutiny as 'religious' institutions, but each of these has a complex history that resists simple identification of past and present, religion and secularity. Likewise, contemporary debates on whether words have power have a complex history that goes far beyond the scope of this chapter. Without exhausting these histories or settling their attendant conceptual issues, I wish to situate hate speech within a tradition that includes biblical cursing and resists a map of contemporary culture that divides neatly into 'religious' and 'secular' terrain.

Debates on hate speech resemble perennial debates on powerful speech, including those found in biblical texts and in early modern European debates on cursing, swearing, and blasphemy.[7] Whereas traditional curses may have been directed against God, Church, or king, 'hate speech' usually targets the race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religion of the individual. These objects of verbal attack reflect the modern valorization of the human subject and the nation-state. Yet curses and hate speech alike belong, I suggest, to biblical tradition, which is characterized not only by a long history of reading and commentary on the Bible, but also by what Michel de Certeau more broadly calls a 'scriptural economy', a deep cultural habit, one that is both 'secular' and 'religious', of placing high value on writing, powerful words, and interpretation that did not disappear with the arrival of modernity.[8] Though the changes brought about by modernity are unmistakable, so too are the continuities with the past. For this reason, 'secular' culture does not describe either a rupture of present from the past or an easily marked divide within modern culture. On the contrary, the dichotomy of sacred and secular only tends to reinforce particularly modern ways of seeing religious tradition in the first place, creating models of history and culture as divided neatly into opposing ideal types. On such a view, the pre-modern or primitive way of being is guided mainly by a cosmos as brimming with numinous forces. In the 'sacred' world no motivations or practices rank higher than supernatural ones. Though scholarly views of the 'sacred' were usually non-pejorative, they nevertheless projected an idealized and therefore unrealistic picture of pre-modern life. The opposite claim would be true for the 'secular', or what Mircea Eliade calls the 'profane' or 'nonreligious' person: 'First of all, the nonreligious man refuses transcendence, accepts the relativity of 'reality', and may even come to doubt the meaning of existence… Modern nonreligious man assumes a new

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7. Cabantaous, *Blasphemy*; Hughes, *Swearing*.

8. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (trans. Tom Conley; New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 136-41.

existential situation; he regards himself solely as the subject and agent of history, and he refuses all appeal to transcendence'.[9]

Not only does such a sharp dichotomy defy the realities of modern religious history; it also tends to overlook political, economic, and strategic motivations and actions of pre-modern and cultures. Biblical narratives about Israelite kings and judges may be presented from a pious perspective, but it is hard to imagine an explanation of these narratives without ascribing some rudimentary political and practical motivations to such main characters as David and Solomon. Even in the case of biblical curses, as Paul Keim has shown, powerful religious speech can be used in a strategic manner and even recanted, despite the tendency to think of such utterances as irreversible.[10] In short, the pre-modern world wasn't all that sacred, and the modern world isn't all that secular.

In a way, this claim merely echoes the contributions of thinkers like Talal Asad and Walter Benjamin to debates on religion and secularism. But the kind of continuity I suggest here is very modest, one that claims it would be impossible to imagine a practice or disposition without the influence of biblical tradition. A direct and obvious example would be the use and availability of the biblical curses on Amalek (Exodus 17, Deuteronomy 25, and elsewhere) to Israeli militants Meir Kahane and Baruch Goldstein.[11] But along with obvious cases like this there are more indirect forms of biblical inheritance, including concepts and uses of words that do harm. My concern is not only the doctrines and human institutions of religion rather than on the multiple, pervasive, and often little-understood mechanisms and layers of religious tradition. In an essay on Indian cultural studies, Dipesh Chakrabarty offers such an account of tradition: 'But the past also comes to me in ways that I cannot see or figure out—or can see or figure out only retrospectively. It comes to me as taste, as embodied memories, as cultural training of the senses, and reflexes, often as things that I do not even know that I carry'. By this account, says Chakrabarty, 'I am to some extent a tool in the hands of pasts and traditions'.[12] The idea that words can do harm—hate speech—thus poses a challenge to secular ideas of language as the tool of autonomous persons, persons who are wholly self-determining.

9. Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 202-203.
10. Keim, *When Sanctions Fail*.
11. Yael Tamir, 'Remember Amalek: Religious Hate Speech', in *Obligations of Citizenship and Demands of Faith* (ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 321-34; and Alastair G. Hunter, '(De)Nominating Amalek: Racist Stereotyping in the Bible and the Justification of Discrimination', in *Sanctified Aggression: Legacies of Biblical and Post-Biblical Vocabularies of Violence* (ed. Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Yvonne Sherwood; London: T. & T. Clark, 2003), pp. 92-108.
12. Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, p. 46.

   Let me illustrate with an influential theorist who attributes the power of speech primarily to social structures of power: Pierre Bourdieu. In *Language and Symbolic Power*, Bourdieu argues that the power of words comes not from words themselves but from 'belief in the legitimacy of words and of those who utter them'.[13] For Bourdieu, the power of language depends solely on the social configurations of power, yet he resorts repeatedly to religious metaphors to make this point. In a chapter on political speech called 'Description and Prescription', Bourdieu refers to subversive language as 'heretical discourse'. Later in the essay he speaks of the power of language to act as 'self-fulfilling prophecy' and 'exorcism'.[14] Other kinds of linguistic power described by Bourdieu include the 'oracle effect' and the 'self-consecration of the apparatus'.[15]

   Despite his extensive use of religious metaphors, religion is apparently a kind of epiphenomenon for Bourdieu, as it is for Marx and even Weber; apart from the systems of power and authority set up in its name, religion has no explanatory value. On this view, social science encompasses and surpasses religion. His chapter on 'Authorized Language' applies the idea of performative utterances (from J.L. Austin's speech act theory) to a study of Catholics' criticisms of their own rituals. For Bourdieu, these criticisms reveal a religious crisis: 'The performative magic of ritual functions fully only as long as the religious official who is responsible for carrying it out in the name of the group acts as a kind of *medium* between the group and itself: it is the group which, through its intermediary, exercises on itself the magical efficacy contained in the performative utterance'.[16] Disenchanted and secularized, words lose their magical power.

   Bourdieu's analysis of symbolic power pleads convincingly for the role of social systems rather than the symbols themselves as the source of power. But he reduces religious traditions to systems of oppression; the emergence of priestly classes, for example, leads to 'members of the laity being *dispossesed* of the instruments of symbolic production.[17] What Bourdieu overlooks are the inherent ambiguity of symbols, the ability of religious traditions to subvert as well as to reinforce structures of authority, and the question of why people engage in 'performative magic' in the first place. (A similar criticism of Bourdieu is made by Judith Butler in *Excitable Speech*; see below.) The point of discussing Bourdieu here is to illustrate a secularist disregard or even blindness to the influence and appeal of tradition.

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   13. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 170.
   14. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, p. 134.
   15. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, pp. 211, 219.
   16. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, p. 116.
   17. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, pp. 168-69.

Bourdieu's approach forecloses analysis of the multiple, pervasive, and lit-tle-understood displacements of religious tradition and thus cannot fully account for the power of words.

'Hate speech' is not only a description; it is also a term of opprobrium that blurs the boundary between the mention and use of powerful words. Most who use the term are typically *opponents* of the abusive, typically big-oted expressions it describes; advocating 'hate speech' would be like advo-cating dishonesty. Designating certain speech acts as powerful may make them punishable, but doing so may also make them seem even more pow-erful. While it is usually defined as expressions of racism, sexism, or bias against ethnic, class, or religious identity, hate speech may apply to any harmful speech act. Hate speech assumes a context in which derogatory speech acts are *not* ordinarily powerful, though; in other words, it doesn't include traditions and contexts in which powerful speech is institutionally the norm; the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie, for example, is certainly pow-erful speech, but since it arose from a traditionalist religious context that understands words to be powerful, it was not hate speech. (There were, however, several 'secular' condemnations of Rushdie's novel at the time, including statements by Jimmy Carter and Roald Dahl.[18])

Though it was coined by critics on the left of the political spectrum, the term hate speech is now widely used by critics on the right as well. A Republican official described 2004 political ads associating President Bush with Hitler as 'political hate speech'.[19] Because 'Americans hate hate', the term can be used as a political weapon.[20] To accuse someone of hate speech has itself become a kind of insult, if not another form of hate speech. Most discussions of hate speech are political or legal: how it is used and whether free speech provisions block its regulations. Rarely does anyone ask, how-ever, what makes the concept of hate speech possible. What does it mean to say that words can wound?

Secular thinking about language, especially since the Enlightenment, often regards speech as a mere tool of communication or vehicle of state-ments and information that can be evaluated and manipulated by free human agents. The familiar contrast between words and deeds suggests that words are inconsequential rather than effective, and expressions like 'just words' and 'empty promises' can imply insincerity or dishonesty. At the same time,

18. Rachel Donadio, 'Fighting Words on Sir Salman', *New York Times Book Review*, 15 July 2007.

19. Robert Smith, 'Web Contest Picks Best Anti-Bush Ad'. From National Public Radio *Morning Edition*, 13 January 2004. Online at http.//www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1594898 (accessed 8 April 2010).

20. Mike Pesca, 'Hate Speech Can Become a Political Tool', broadcast of *Day to Day*, National Public Radio, 4 December, 2003.

particularly under the domains of hate speech, social needs for certain kinds of powerful speech rooted in religious tradition have emerged, so that a disjunction exists between the lingering paradigm of language as secularist and the return of (repressed) powerful speech that can only be understood in terms of religious tradition, especially biblical traditions of cursing.

Most advocates of policies and laws against hate speech would deny the place of religion in this debate. Current discussions conceive hate speech in entirely 'secular' terms as a matter of civil rights and liberties, usually in terms of race, class, and gender. But what conditions make it possible to believe, contrary to the maxim about sticks and stones, that names can in fact hurt me? My suggestion is that debates on hate speech come down to the question of whether words have power, a question that cannot be fully understood without recourse to religious history and traditions of cursing. To demonstrate this point, I consider hate speech as it merges humanist notions of the self with religious traditions of powerful speech, curses in particular.

Like the promotion of human rights and international law, theories about hate speech speak the language of justice and reason from the western Enlightenment, in which the individual person, usually the thinking person, is the primary unit of analysis. Thomas Hobbes, for instance, considers language a tool for converting thoughts into speech and to name or signify reality.[21] Words, he notes, are not powerful enough to bind one's actions without some additional consequence.[22] But, he warns, language and names can easily be abused, such as when people use words 'to grieve one another. . . unless it be one whom we are obliged to govern'.[23] In a way that would elude Immanuel Kant much later, Hobbes recognized the potential power of words and sought, through conceptualization and political regulation, to control that power. Curses, whether grounded in magic or organized religion, appear to have little place in the enlightened world of reason and law.

To claim that words can wound, then, is to say that a mere utterance, apart from physical or legal action, is capable in itself of damaging another person or persons. Few public figures, from Jesse Jackson, who once referred to New York as 'Hymietown' to Trent Lott, who in 2002 averred that Strom Thurmond's 1948 segregationist politics would have prevented 'all these problems over all these years', can completely undo the perceived harm of their hate speech.[24] An act of hate speech is not linked to an observable con-

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21. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin, 1987), p. 101.
22. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 200.
23. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 102.
24. Sam Zagoria, 'What Jesse Jackson Said', *The Washington Post*, 22 February, 1984, A20; Thomas B. Edsall, 'Lott Decried for Part of Salute to Thurmond'. In *Washington Post*, 7 December, 2002, A06.

sequence, as a judge's statement 'I hereby sentence you to life in prison' is. Hate speech is, in fact, much more like a curse, derogating or consigning the target to a stigmatized condition. Insofar as speech alone can do this kind of harm, such speech has a symbolic, non-physical power, one that would be inconceivable without magical or religious traditions.

What makes hate speech seem 'supernatural'—I use the term to draw the analogy with curses—is the idea that the use of symbols (words), as with curses, is efficacious. For those who define language primarily as a tool for communicating information and a system of mere signs or symbols, the suggestion that words can do harm would sound like magic. If hate speech is 'words that wound', then it is the *use of the words by itself* that does the wounding, and if these words go so far beyond criticism or insults that they demand legal remedy, such words exceed 'naturalistic' language, and are in this sense 'supernatural'.

The 'supernatural' dimension of hate speech also derives from its object, human individuals, who, according to the Declaration of Independence, are equal and 'endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness'. In fact, the 'Declaration' itself incorporates elements of a cursing tradition known as 'flyting'.[25] Insofar as human beings are created and given rights by a deity, the Declaration appears to derive justification from a sacred source. If hate speech and its victims thus imply or require supernatural, religious categories in order to make sense, then any remedy for hate speech must likewise be conceptualized in religious terms. Protections against curses and hate speech would need to declare people themselves *sacrosanct* or off-limits to actions that are believed capable of inflicting real (if not physical) harm. Insofar as hate speech is construed in a purely secularist framework, overlooking the religious categories and tradition, then attempts to eliminate it, I argue, proceed in vain. The paradox of debates on hate speech, I suggest, is that it is a problem that grows from but ignores its religious roots.

The category of hate speech cannot easily be accounted for unless it belongs to a tradition of concepts and debates on such forms of powerful speech as curses, oaths, and other supernaturally charged uses of words. For Alasdair MacIntyre, traditions are 'historically extended, socially embodied argument', not simply contents handed down.[26] My notion of tradition also benefits from Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, which argues that 'forgotten'

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25. The 'Declaration', with its long denunciations of King George III, exhibits features of the Scottish curse tradition known as 'flyting'. See Jonathan Gross, 'Flyting in the *Declaration of Independence* and *The Vision of Judgment*', *The Byron Journal* 35 (2007), pp. 41-51.

26. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 222.

and 'repressed' memories (captured in the chapter above on Exodus 17 and Derrida) can be handed down and return even when they are repressed, so to speak.[27] Religious categories were repressed and subordinated by philosophers like Kant, for example.[28] With debates on hate speech, the resort to powerful speech demonstrates the 'return of the repressed' religious and biblical tradition of powerful speech, especially cursing.

Hate Speech and Speech Acts

The 1967 volume of philosophical essays called *The Linguistic Turn* announced a heightened academic awareness of the degree to which important questions are questions of language.[29] The speech act theory of J.L. Austin had already extended the philosophy of language to the possibility that words could have power. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*, based on lectures given at Harvard in 1955, has been one of the most influential modern works in the philosophy of language. Not only did Austin's work create a new mode of linguistic philosophy, speech-act theory, that would evaluate statements not as true and false but as felicitious and non-felicitous, but this book would also revive the idea that words can have power. Describing his category of the 'performative' utterance, whereby an action is performed by its utterance in certain circumstances, Austin cites cases from religious tradition, from marriage and naming ceremonies to binding statements descended from oaths, yet Austin does not offer a genealogy of linguistic power or an account of how his theory challenges prevailing notions of language.

Austin's theory challenges modern analytic ideas of language as a set of statements that can be true or false. In an elaboration of his notion of performatives, Austin notes that close examination of language use breaks down the distinction between performative and statement:

> We see then that stating something is performing an act just as much as is giving an order or giving a warning; and we see, on the other hand, that, when we give an order or a warning or a piece of advice, there is a question about how this is related to fact which is not perhaps so very different

27. Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (trans. Katherine Jones; New York: Vintage, 1939), p. 120.

28. Kant invokes a number of religious categories while he denies their central or normative role in his work: Narrative (Genesis); the mysterious nature of evil people and actions; the Sublime in relation to moral duty; religious phenomena such as Miracles, grace, and mysteries, relegated to the role of Parerga; and prayer (Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* [trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson; New York: Harper & Row, 1960], pp. 37, 15-16, 19, 47, 183).

29. Richard Rorty, *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

from the kind of question that arises when we discuss how a statement is related to fact.[30]

If statements can be performatives, then mentioning a curse can be like performing one.

Austin's idea that the force of speech acts depends on their context also undercuts the idea that speakers retain full control of their words, what Beatrice Hanssen calls the 'instrumental, referential, and freedom-producing understanding of language'.[31] In fact, as Hanssen and Giorgio Agamben both suggest, the performative is rooted in religious tradition; the performative is a 'residue in language of a magical-juridical state of human existence'.[32]

In *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler argues for the possibility of speech to subvert and create a break with tradition.[33] She destabilizes Pierre Bourdieu's notions of *habitus* and power in order to suggest that speech acts can assert and subvert systematic power in various ways, so that 'the word that wounds becomes an instrument of resistance in the redeployment that destroys the prior territory of its operation'.[34] This move recalls James Scott's anthropological account of subversive speech as *Weapons of the Weak* and even folk traditions of the 'curse of the poor', in which even the most disempowered members of society can wield power through speech (see Chapter 2). What can account for such power?

What Butler argues, against Bourdieu, is that the socially authorized power of speech can, by its very structure, be subverted and expropriated. Butler offers expropriations of such terms as 'black' and 'queer', but this sort of practice is familiar to every child who has ever repeated the words of an adult in a mocking tone; it is the mere act of disrespectful repetition that emboldens and even empowers the rebellious child.[35] Referring to some

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30. J.L. Austin, 'Performative Utterances', in *Philosophical Papers* (ed. J.O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock; Oxford: Oxford University Press 1970), pp. 233-52 (251).

31. Beatrice Hanssen, *Critique of Violence: Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 161.

32. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (trans. Patricia Dailey; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 132. Austin's theory also raises the issue of comparing 'real' speech acts and literary ones, as Miller shows in *Speech Acts in Literature*. See also Shoshana Felman, *The Literary Speech Act* (trans. Catherine Porter; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983). From the Muses to the *Harry Potter* series, the long history of literature is filled with instances in which the power of language is derived, despite protestations of literature's autonomy, from religious tradition.

33. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 142ff.

34. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 163.

35. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, pp. 157-58; Robin Lakoff, *The Language War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

speech acts as 'ritual' and 'rite', Butler argues that their very structure as per-
formatives allows others to appropriate them to new uses.[36] Butler regards
ritual as public, part of authoritative tradition, and subject to change; and
she places powerful speech, performative utterances, at the center of these
traditional rituals.

The linguistic turn has in some ways been expanded and supplemented
by post-structuralism, cultural studies, and new historicism. Beginning
with Austin's insight that words can *do* things, poststructuralists and crit-
ics of institutionalized racism and sexism also became critics of the lib-
eral theory of language as the 'organ of transparency, political power,
and, in the final analysis, the advancement of universal freedom'.[37] In
different ways, theorists of the last three decades have expanded the lin-
guistic turn and raised the stakes in the debates about the power and role
of language in human life. Legal debates on hate speech became intense
in the 1990s with the publication of a number of books on the power of
speech to inflict social and political damage, the most influential of which
is *Words That Wound.* But despite hopes that critical legal studies gener-
ate judicial victories against hate speech, the courts have been reluctant
to accept the claim that hate speech is harmful action not protected by the
First Amendment.[38]

These developments on the theory and law of powerful words pose no
challenge to the Enlightenment view that religion (however defined) is an
obsolete or marginalized category. Despite clear evidence that seculariza-
tion theories are seriously misguided, authors of works on speech acts and
hate speech typically operate within a secularist framework of law or litera-
ture. The project of identifying the religious features of contemporary forms
of powerful speech is not just a scholarly exercise; it exposes the limitations
of secularist approaches to thinking about powerful speech. What I suggest
is that recent theoretical debates on the force of language are missing the
crucial category of religious traditions.

Sexual, Racial, and Ethnic Hate Speech

One of the strongest cases for legal controls on degrading sexual speech
appeals not to the 'community standards' of moral decency inherited from
religious tradition but to the idea that pornography *in itself* is unjust. Femi-
nist Catherine MacKinnon challenges the view that pornography and other
kinds of speech pose no threat and deserve protection: 'You learn that

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36. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 161.
37. Hanssen, *Critique of Violence*, p. 160.
38. Stephen Carter, *Civility* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), p. 162.

speech is not what you say but what your abusers do to you'.[39] Together with Andrea Dworkin, MacKinnon has drafted legislation restricting pornography on the grounds that it subordinates women and enforces sex discrimination. 'Discrimination', she writes, 'does not divide into acts on one side and speech on the other'.[40] Although MacKinnon and other critics of pornography direct their arguments against systems of legal discourse, they also voice a clear objection to modern views of language as the mere conveyance of true or false statements (logical positivism) or a system of signs devoid of specific or immediate context and consequence (New Criticism, structuralism and some forms of postmodernism). MacKinnon argues strongly that pornography represents the same kind of ideologically dangerous and potent content as photographs of lynchings and other racist incitements. If pornography enforces inequality, argues MacKinnon, then legal (and moral) imperatives for equality require limiting pornography.

Mari Matsuda and the other authors of *Words That Wound*, also published in 1993, define their work as a 'pragmatic response to the urgent needs of students of color and other victims of hate speech who are daily silenced, intimidated, and subjected to severe psychological and physical trauma by racist assailants who employ words and symbols as part of an integrated arsenal of weapons of oppression and subordination'.[41] Like MacKinnon, the authors of *Words That Wound* concentrate on the American legal context. The concepts and methods of their work, however, draw from a broad range of fields, including liberation pedagogy, narrative studies, sociology, and political philosophy. Through these channels, the authors argue that words, stories, and symbols have power, that selves are in fact constructed through symbolic exchanges, and that therefore the distinction between word and action does not mean that speech is incapable of inflicting harm. In fact, they argue, the Supreme Court ruling against segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education* was ultimately a case about the 'injury of hate speech'.[42]

In opposition to laws regulating hate speech, Richard L. Abel argues that '[a]ll representations elevate the status of some at the expense of others'.[43] The remedy for such subordination is, he argues, the cultivation of mutual respect in different communities. Instead of punishing harmful

39. Catherine MacKinnon, *Only Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 6.
40. MacKinnon, *Only Words*, pp. 22, 30.
41. Matsuda *et al.*, *Words That Wound*, p. 7.
42. Matsuda *et al.*, *Words That Wound*, p. 9.
43. Richard L. Abel, *Speaking Respect/Respecting Speech* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 281.

speech, communities should elicit apologies and demand other forms of public recognition and respect from those who seek to subordinate through speech. Similar objections come from Henry Louis Gates, Jr, who asks: 'Why would you entrust authority with enlarged powers of regulating the speech of unpopular minorities unless you were confident the unpopular minorities would be racists, not blacks?'[44] Gates argues that the critical race theorists have taken their use of speech act theory too far, that the emphasis on text and language serves as a 'labor-saving device': '[R]acist speech must prove to be the real content of racial subordination: banish it, and you banish subordination. The perverse result is a see-no-evil, hear-no-evil approach toward racial inequality'.[45] Gates raises important practical concerns about the ability of traditionally unfair institutions providing effective remedy to 'hate speech', but he and Abel overlook the degree to which powerful political speech was overlooked for so long. As Gates himself shows in *The Signifying Monkey*, literary and popular forms of expression can and do have transformative potential, even within a structure as overwhelmingly oppressive as African slavery and racism in the United States.

Secular Law, Hate Speech, and Obscenity

The remedies for hate speech are changes in laws and policies of governments and other institutions such as higher education. The legal challenge facing most such policies in the United States concerns their implications for the free speech provisions of the Constitution. Such laws and policies, when implemented, depend mainly upon mechanisms of enforcement rather than prevention, and they typically take place within the parameters of secular institutions and discourses. Limits on hate speech have made some inroads in American law, including a case in which the U.S. Supreme Court allowed a case prohibiting the use of racial epithets by car rental employees to stand, but campaigns against hate speech have very little to show for their efforts.[46] Very little, that is, except for the creation of the term hate speech itself, which can now be used to shame political opponents on the left or right. What has happened with hate speech, I suggest, echoes failed attempts to control 'prophane cursing and swearing' in early modern England: the legal

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44. Henry Louis Gates, Jr, 'War of Words: Critical Race Theory and the First Amendment', in Gates *et al.*, *Speaking of Race, Speaking of Sex* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), pp. 17-58 (42).

45. Gates, 'War of Words', pp. 56-57.

46. *Federal Human Resources Week*, 'High Court Upholds California "Hate Speech" Ruling', 12 June, 2000; and Greg Mitchell, 'Court Upholds Hate Speech Gag', *The Recorder*, 3 August, 1999.

remedy fails because the claim that hate speech has real power fails. Without a more open recognition of the legacy of religious tradition, the ambition to define and limit hate speech can only produce the kind of demagogic use the term has today.

Current hate speech policies, I argue, share the legacy and some of the assumptions of religious traditions of curses, oaths, and other kinds of powerful speech. A secular view of speech as a mere tool of communication or vehicle of information that can be evaluated and manipulated by free human agents now confronts an account of language (or certain uses of it) as inherently powerful, so powerful that it can *by itself* injure a person. In this sense, the remedy does not fit the rule, since the religious roots of powerful speech can be uncovered by digging down to the early modern history of cursing, where the power of religious curses was displaced onto such supposedly secular forms of discourse as law and civil customs.

In the end, American law and institutions seem unable to accept the idea that hate speech breaks down the dichotomy of words and action, much less that it is a kind of powerful language which the state has a compelling interest to control. The case of hate speech is thus very different from another kind of powerful speech still regulated by government: obscenity, a form of expression believed to be harmful (because sinful or immoral) in itself.[47] The contrast is instructive for ideas of powerful speech and the influence of religion on 'secular' government. In justifying the injunction against racial epithets in the car rental case, the California Supreme Court ruled that

> A remedial injunction prohibiting the continued use of racial epithets in the workplace does not violate the right of freedom of speech if there has been a judicial determination that the use of such epithets will contribute to the continuation of a hostile or abusive work environment and therefore will constitute employment discrimination.[48]

The secularist distinction between words and actions is skillfully bridged here: words themselves don't have power, but they can contribute somehow (in ways that remain totally unclear) to *effects* that do.

The attempt to convince American jurists that hateful words can do harm *in themselves* seems to have collapsed. In its place are occasional policies that only reinforce the Supreme Court's limits on incitement and 'fighting words', which do not consider the use of words in themselves to be powerful but only control words that seem intended to cause or encourage criminal actions (such as assault or murder). Far from a widely accepted legal concept, hate speech has become a rhetorical term that can be exploited

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47. Thanks to Michael Meltsner for this observation.
48. *Federal Human Resources Week*, 'High Court Upholds California "Hate Speech" Ruling'.

in political speeches. The apparently rapid collapse of attempts to define and control hate speech has ironically produced an effect common to many curse traditions: reversal. Instead of enacting laws to limit speech deemed harmful to members of oppressed and underrepresented groups, the concept of hate speech has deteriorated into a term to shame and silence one's opponents.

Unlike hate speech, which is defined in secular terms, obscenity laws have a publicly recognized religious pedigree; most defer to so-called 'community standards' and assume obscene expressions to be harmful *in themselves*, not so much as 'words that wound' (despite Dworkin's attempts) as 'words that offend'. In the 1978 Supreme Court case regulating George Carlin's 'filthy words' routine, obscenity was characterized as the same kind of nuisance as a 'pig in the parlor'.[49] But obscenity law also appears to be in its death throes: The Federal Communications Commission received 240,000 complaints in 2003 and issued only three fines. While the Janet Jackson breast-baring episode during the Super Bowl half-time show raised calls for stronger enforcement, many found it difficult to take the whole affair seriously, even though then-F.C.C. Chairman Michael Powell referred to the sporting event as a 'sacred period of time'.[50] As such phenomena internet pornography illustrate, obscenity law, while still on the books and rooted in religion, seems just as ineffective as efforts to limit hate speech. I turn now to two cases of religious curses that flaunt the secular denial of powerful speech: a curse used against Israeli politicians by their Jewish opponents, and a Baptist group in the United States that disrupts military funerals with taunts proclaiming divine wrath over public acceptance of homosexuality.

The Return of Religious Cursing: The Pulsa Denura (Israel) and the Westboro Baptist Church (United States)

As if to defy the prevailing abandonment of religious curses, two forms of religious cursing have sprung up in the Israel and the United States. In Israel, Jewish radicals have pronounced an elaborate curse, the *pulsa denura* (Aramaic for 'lash of fire'), on three prime ministers, Yitzhak Rabin, Ariel Sharon, and Ehud Olmert, for their supposed betrayals of the Jewish people. In the United States, Pastor Fred Phelps of the Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas has organized thousands of protests at the funerals of soldiers, celebrities, and victims of the September 11, 2001 attacks, celebrating their deaths as divine punishment for a national culture that accepts

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49. *FCC v. Pacifica Foundation* 438 U.S. 726 (1978).

50. Alessandra Stanley, 'Ideas and Trends; L'Affaire Bodice: Why We Are Shocked, Shocked', *The New York Times*, 8 February, 2004, WK 16.

homosexuality.[51] Both the pulsa denura and the funeral protests claim a public role for religious cursing unusual in modern western culture.

In 1995, a month before Yitzchak Rabin was assassinated, a group of right-wing Jews pronounced the *pulsa denura* curse on the Prime Minister.[52] After the killing, Avigdor Eskin boasted that the curse had been effective and that he was glad about Rabin's death. Two years later, he was convicted in an Israeli court on violations of the Prevention of Terrorism Act. According to the judge in the case, 'Eskin's statements, given their timing and context, were liable to have inspired acts of violence, or even have caused injury or death'.[53]

While Israel is a Jewish state, its culture and laws are secular insofar as they do not consider supernatural beliefs (and actions associated with them) to be subject to legal action (a striking exception is the law against 'witchcraft' fortunetelling practices[54]). Eskin could not be prosecuted for causing Rabin's death with a curse alone, but his curse could be construed as an incitement to real harm, if not against Rabin, who was already dead, then presumably against others like him. The secular counterpart to religious authority, the law of the nation state, was brought to bear on the older authority of religious curses. But like the American courts, the Israeli judge seemed ambivalent on the basic question of whether the curse had power.

51. The Westboro Baptist Church website declares:

> WBC engages in daily peaceful sidewalk demonstrations opposing the homosexual lifestyle of soul-damning, nation-destroying filth. We display large, colorful signs containing Bible words and sentiments, including: GOD HATES FAGS, FAGS HATE GOD, AIDS CURES FAGS, THANK GOD FOR AIDS, FAGS BURN IN HELL, GOD IS NOT MOCKED, FAGS ARE NATURE FREAKS, GOD GAVE FAGS UP, NO SPECIAL LAWS FOR FAGS, FAGS DOOM NATIONS, THANK GOD FOR DEAD SOLDIERS, FAG TROOPS, GOD BLEW UP THE TROOPS, GOD HATES AMERICA, AMERICA IS DOOMED, THE WORLD IS DOOMED, etc.

(Online at http.//www.godhatesfags.com/main/aboutwbc.html [accessed 15 July, 2007]).

52. Thanks to Esti Sheinberg for suggesting this example.

53. *Jerusalem Post*, 29 May, 1997, online at http.//www.jpost.com (accessed 15 July, 2007).

54. The Penal Code of Israel prohibits 'witchcraft' (כישוף), which includes 'magic' (מעשה קוסם) and 'fortune telling' (הגדת עתידות) 'with intent to obtain anything'. The law does not prohibit entertainment, even when admission is charged. The intent of the law is undoubtedly to prohibit fraud, but by prohibiting supernatural practices, the law implies their existence or at least possibility. The cherished ideas of secularism and state neutrality toward religion collapse here, in a law that uses virtually the same terminology for magic and witchcraft as the Bible; see, e.g., Deut. 18.10, 2 Chron. 33.6, and Num. 22.7; *Penal Law [of Israel] 5737–1977*, Section 417 (a) and (b), 4th Edition, Part Two (Aryeh Greenfield, 2001), p. 117. See also Dion Nissenbaum, 'Coffee Grounds Brewed Trouble for Israeli Fortuneteller', McClatchy Newspapers, 20 July, 2007.

Israel's anti-terror law proscribes some forms of speech; it applies to anyone who

  (a) publishes, in writing or orally, words of praise, sympathy or encouragement for acts of violence calculated to cause death or injury to a person or for threats of such acts of violence; or

  (b) publishes, in writing or orally, words of praise or sympathy for or an appeal for aid or support of a terrorist organisation; or

  (c) has propaganda material in his possession on behalf of a terrorist organization.[55]

The curse was pronounced by far-right-wing Jewish Israelis. Though the phrase 'pulsei denura' appears in the Talmud and the kabbalistic book, the Zohar, the curse was created in 1905 to oppose the creation of secular schools using Hebrew in Palestine: 'The proceedings were based on the traditional herem or excommunication ceremony and included many of its elements, such as the snuffing out of candles, the blowing of the shofar and so on, the main difference being that the herem, though it cursed the excommunicated man, did not explicitly call for his death'.[56] Close analysis of media and scholarly reports of the pulsa denura reveal that there is no standard text of the ceremony, that it has no clear connection to kabbalistic sources, and that widespread reports about the ceremony's mystique and history are simply false.[57] Citing sociologist Menachem Friedman, Zion Zohar explains the curse ritual in terms familiar from James Scott and Nietzsche, that the pulsa denura offers a way to give power to the powerless.[58] Jonathan Rosenblum attributes the exaggerated meaning of the curse ritual to secular Israeli culture:

> This fascination with the pulsa d'nura reflects the infantilization of religion in Israel. Secular Israelis have no trouble believing that three guys in sandals can go down to the neighborhood Kabbalist for incantations so they can rub out their enemies list… Obsession with the pulsa d'nura is the Israeli counterpart of Hollywood 'Kabbalah' study groups, with deep thinkers such as Madonna gathering weekly to ponder Jewish mysticism.[59]

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55. Israel Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance, online at http.//www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/1900_1949/Prevention+of+Terrorism+Ordinance+No+33+of+5708-19.htm?DisplayMode=print (accessed 10 April, 2010).

56. Philologos, 'Cracking the Whip', *Jewish Daily Forward*, 24 September, 2004, online at http.//www.forward.com/articles/5379/ (accessed 10 April, 2010).

57. Zion Zohar, '*Pulsa De-Nura:* The Innovation of Modern Magic and Ritual', *Modern Judaism* 27 (2007), pp. 72-99 (86-87).

58. Zohar, '*Pulsa De-Nura*', p. 87.

59. Rosenblum, 'Pick and Choose your Civil Liberties', *Jerusalem Post*, 25 July 1997, online at http.//www.jpost.com (accessed 10 August, 2007).

The curse has also been pronounced against Prime Ministers Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert.[60] The government Justice Ministry declined to file charges against those who cursed Sharon, arguing that the pulsa denura was an appeal to God rather than incitement to people to violent action.[61] Unlike Avigdor Eskin, whose conviction under anti-terror law may have been tied more to a boast that the curse had worked, those who cursed Sharon were not investigated for actions other than the curse itself.[62] What is more, while Rabin was assassinated by a right-wing religious zealot with views similar to Eskin's, Sharon suffered a stroke.

While the ritual performance of curses remains very rare in the public life of secularized societies, the *mention* of curses is slightly more common. American televangelist Pat Robertson faintly echoed the Israeli curse when he suggested that Ariel Sharon's stroke was a divine punishment for dividing the land of Israel.[63] Robertson's statement is one of several statements suggesting divine retribution for views he disagrees with, including his agreement with Jerry Falwell that the attacks of September 11, 2001 were divine punishment for homosexuality and other offenses.[64] Neither Falwell nor Robertson actually *performed* or pronounced curses with these statements; instead, they *mentioned* divine curses as explanations for catastrophic events.

Of course, the mention of curses may be just as powerful as the use of curses, especially when it confronts grief-stricken mourners with the claim that their loved one died because of God's curse. The Westboro Baptist funeral protests began in 1998 at the funeral of Matthew Shepherd, a gay man who was tortured and killed by anti-gay men in Wyoming. The protests express an intense Christian opposition to homosexuality, explaining the deaths observed at the funerals as divine punishment. The Church's website, godhatesfags.com, includes over 2,000 mentions of 'curse', including a songs called 'America, Cursed of God'.[65] Debate on the protests' legality falls under the domain of American law on Free Speech. Laws against

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60. Yaakov Katz, 'Extremists Boast They Cursed Sharon', *The Jerusalem Post*, 6 January, 2006, online at http.//www.jpost.com/Home/Article.aspx?id=9412 (accessed 10 April, 2010). Efrat Weiss, 'Extremists Curse Olmert with Pulsa Denura', 27 June, 2006 online at http.//Ynetnews.com (accessed 10 August, 2007).

61. Etgar Lefkovits, 'No Charges over Sharon Death Wish', *Jerusalem Post*, 31 August, 2005, online at http.//www.jpost.com (accessed 10 August, 2007).

62. 'Curse You!' (Reuters), online at http.//www.codoh.com/newsdest/970528.html (accessed 15 January, 2004).

63. 'Robertson Suggests Stroke Is Divine Rebuke', *The New York Times*, 6 January, 2006.

64. Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*; Daniela Dean, 'White House Denounces Robertson's Remarks on Sharon', *The Washington Post*, 6 January, 2006.

65. Online at http.//www.godhatesfags.com (accessed 15 July, 2007).

picketing funerals have been passed in twenty-eight states and, under a federal law signed by President Bush, at national cemeteries (Hudson). The statute in Illinois is quite broad, since it restricts

> displays, with knowledge of the existence of a funeral site and within 200 feet of any ingress or egress of that funeral site, any visual images that convey fighting words or actual or veiled threats against any other person; (3) with knowledge of the existence of a funeral site, knowingly obstructs, hinders, impedes, or blocks another person's entry to or exit from that funeral site or a facility containing that funeral site, except that the owner or occupant of property may take lawful actions to exclude others from that property; or (4) with knowledge of the existence of a funeral site, knowingly engages in a march or picket at the funeral site at any public location located within 200 feet of any ingress or egress of that funeral site.[66]

Without going so far as to suggest that words themselves can be powerful, the statute appeals not only to familiar restrictions of speech ('fighting words' and 'threats') but also creates a kind of protected space for funerals in which certain kinds of speech ('displays' and 'images'). The funeral becomes, paradoxically enough, a kind of 'sacred' space in which some kinds of speech (including religious speech of the sort associated with funeral protests) are prohibited.

Other measures taken against the funeral protests include counterdemonstrations by the Patriot Guard Riders, a group begun by war veterans in motorcycle clubs who attempt to shield funeral mourners from viewing or hearing the protests from Westboro Baptist Church members; and a radio show host, who exchanged broadcast air time with the group in return for a promise not to protest the funerals of the April 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech.[67] More recently, a federal jury in Maryland awarded $10.9 million in damages to the family of a Marine whose funeral was protested by members of the church.[68] The punitive and compensatory damages were awarded

66. Online at http.//www.ilga.gov/legislation/94/SB/09400SB1144sam001.htm (accessed 10 April, 2010).

67. Gordon Block, 'Students Vote on Westboro Protest Response', *Collegiate Times*, 29 March, 2010, online at http.//www.collegiatetimes.com/stories/15285/students-vote-on-westboro-protest-response/print (accessed 8 April, 2010). 'Westboro Baptist Church to Picket Va Tech Tragedy', 25 March, 2010, online at http.//www.ireport.com/docs/DOC-424812 (accessed 8 April, 2010). The Patriot Guard Riders group started in 2005 specifically to counteract the funeral protests of the Westboro Baptist Church, online at http.//www.patriotguard.org (accessed 8 April, 2010).

68. Matthew Dolan and Julie Bykowicz, 'Man Wins Case against Funeral Protesters', *Baltimore Sun*, 31 October, 2007, online at http.//www.baltimoresun.com/news/local/bal-westboro1031,0,7191706.story (accessed on Nobember 7, 2007). See also 'Kansas Church Liable in Marine Funeral Protest', *Reuters Online News*, Wednesday 31 October, 2007, online at http.//www.reuters.com/article/domesticNews/idUSN313 4225120071031?pageNumber=1. (accessed 7 November, 2007).

for the protest's violation of the family's privacy and for emotional distress. This decision was then overturned by the Fourth Circuit Court in Virginia, and in March, 2010, the Supreme Court agreed to hear the case, *Snyder v. Phelps*, once again to address whether the group's protests are protected by the First Amendment against claims of emotional distress.[69] The outcome of this case is unknown, but its success so far appears to endorse the idea that the speech acts of the Westboro Baptist Church can be powerful (though not necessarily supernatural).

In both cases (pulsa denura and the funeral protests), religious cursing has become a political weapon that enjoys the protection of secularist understandings of law. As long as their curses avoid violation of laws against incitement or 'fighting words', they are immune from prosecution not simply on technical grounds but for the more general reason that modern law denies the possibility that words have supernatural power. Israeli and American laws also give religious groups wide berth in the name of protecting religious freedom. But as Yael Tamir points out, the exceptional status granted to religious institutions can be dangerous, as in the cases of Jewish militant groups like Kahane Chai or Islamist militant groups like Hamas.[70]

Funeral protests and Jewish curses against Israeli leaders flaunt the 'curse loophole' in secular jurisprudence in order to indict the secularist worldviews of those whom they curse. With the pulsa denura and Westboro Baptist protests, there is an implicit criticism of secularism itself: if religious cursing is ineffective, as their laws and ideology suggest, then why does it arouse such outrage? Is the religious cursing a sign that secularism is incomplete?

If the secular nation-state has displaced the explicitly sacred power of divinely chosen kings and established churches, then religious curses against the secular state and its leaders bring this displacement into focus. For the pulsa denura and the funeral protests can both be understood as a kind of sacred blasphemy against the very existence of the sacred-secular state. In Israel, the power of the religious curses is counteracted by a secular majority that ultimately dismisses them, while in the United States, a number of legal measures, as well as voluntary efforts, have been mobilized to stop the protests.

Both curses, the pulsa denura and the funeral protests, take advantage of mass media politics. Members of both groups have sought opportunities to make outrageous and inflammatory statements in the media, blurring

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69. Adam Liptak, 'Justices to Hear Case of Protest at Marine Funeral', *The New York Times,* 9 March, 2010. Available at http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/09/us/09scotus. html?pagewanted=print. (accessed 8 April, 2010).

70. Tamir, 'Remember Amalek', pp. 327-32.

the line between the mention and use of curses. Whereas the pulsa denura involves a formal religious ritual, the Westboro Baptist protests blend religious statements with insults (imprecations), such as that seem designed to shock. Homosexuals are described as 'fags', the soldiers whose funerals they protest are 'lazy idiots', and even Jerry Falwell, whose funeral they attempted to protest, is described as a 'corpulent false prophet'.[71] It would be misleading, however, to suggest that the pulsa denura is more religious and the Westboro Baptist protests more political. Both intervene in debates about the place of religion in public life, invoking elements of widely held religious traditions (Judaism in Israel, Baptist Christianity in the United States) to challenge the secularism of public law and culture.

Conclusion

Debates on hate speech rage on, with parties on all sides attending more to political and legal considerations than the hidden dimension of religious tradition, which I contend can best address the basic issue of whether and to what extent speech can have genuine power. From Austin to Bourdieu, Butler, and the critics of racism and sexism, most parties in the debates gloss over the religious terminology ('ritual', 'baptism') and ancestry of their positions. Postmodern scholars deny the power of the Enlightenment subject to challenge institutions in a vacuum; others cite the destabilizing force of language itself.[72] But these three terms—self, society, and language—all neglect the degree to which religious categories and claims underlie speech acts, from the performative 'I curse' to the more secularized 'I swear', or 'I disempower you by means of racist or sexist speech'.

Attempts to theorize hate speech solely on secularist grounds appear to fail, I suggest, because of the view that says that language is just a medium or tool, the opposite of action that can do real harm. I further suggest that debates on the power of religious, literary, and political speech represent displacements of a biblical tradition that has debated the power of words for centuries. Most of the debate on hate speech in the United States concerns the First Amendment protection of free speech. But the deeper issue here is whether a purely secularist idea of powerful speech is possible. The apparent collapse of attempts to define hate speech as

71. 'Falwell warmly praised Christ-rejecting Jews, pedophile-condoning Catholics, money-grubbing compromisers, practicing fags like Mel White, and backsliders like Billy Graham and Robert Schuler, etc. All for lucre—making him guilty of their sins. Falwell is in Hell, Praise God!!' (online at http.//www.godhatesfags.com [accessed 15 July, 2007]).

72. The recent 'religious turn' among postmodern theorists such as Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Derrida, and Giorgio Agamben represents a fascinating development in the history of cultural theory; it remains to be seen what its results will be.

legally controlled powerful speech reveals the conflict between the secularist respect for the individual and the equally powerful secular denial of the idea that speech can have power. The problem also illustrates the general question of whether or how a secular government can remain neutral toward religious institutions.[73]

Like religious and literary speech, even the most degrading sort of political speech is, in itself, powerless in the eyes of some forms secularism. Meanwhile, contemporary religious curses like the Israeli *pulsa denura* and the Westboro Baptist anti-gay tirades, confirm the blurring of boundaries between religion and politics. Yet like those who peer at the shadowy images on the wall of Plato's cave, secularists have a sense that words can and often do have power, but secular ideas of language, law, and humanity make it almost impossible to identify *how* words have power. The solution is not simply to affirm an idea of words as inherently magical or religious; ideas of magic and religion are the artificially constructed product of secularism itself. Nor can the effects of secularism simply be reversed by affirming traditionalism. Instead, the first step is to examine the development of secular theories of language as a part, not the end, of religious tradition. It would be absurd to suggest that religion and religious conflict had nothing to do with Hobbes's and Kant's thinking, even if they opposed traditional 'religious' thought. A second step is to consider how the categories of 'religion' and 'secularity' developed and have been understood. A third step is to observe how ideas of powerful speech develop and operate. What are curses for, and how do they work?

Curses, like hate speech, have been the object of perennial debate and anxiety. Are they 'real' or not? The question itself is part of biblical tradition; as MacIntyre argues, debate lies at the heart of tradition, but Chakrabarty and others suggest that tradition involves much more than secular thinkers may realize. Hate speech represents a kind of return of the repressed religious tradition on curses and powerful speech. This approach challenges the absolute division between sacred and secular phases of history, examining how questions like 'Does speech have power?' are asked in different ways at different times. To debate such questions publicly is to wager that new understandings and arrangements may emerge from such discussion to shift the debate in a way most parties prefer to the status quo. With what William Connolly calls 'agonistic respect' in public discussion of religion and secularity, along with more public religious expression (which, according to Noah Feldman, should be permitted but not funded by the government),

73. Jason Bivins, *The Fracture of Good Order: Christian Antiliberalism and the Challenge to American Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

the debate on hate speech and powerful words stands the chance of moving beyond the polarized positions of 'secularism' and 'religiosity'.[74]

The recognition that hate speech has religious dimensions does not promise resolution to public debate, but it does provide the basis for a debate that overcomes the simplistic division of the world into religious and secular domains. The secular legitimation of hate speech as a matter of public concern provides empirical support for the idea that symbols can have power. As fields based on this assumption, literary and religious studies have much to offer to such discussions. Comparative analysis of texts, informed by considerations of how one kind of institutional discourse can displace another, can help trace lines of tradition on issues such as powerful speech. Conceptual analysis of the categories 'secularity' and 'religion', currently practiced by Talal Asad and his interlocutors, is also crucial to this inquiry.[75] The demand for public controls on hate speech suggests the need for such analysis, a religious turn beyond the linguistic turn announced in the 1960s. If Austin was the herald of this movement, perhaps the linguistic turn was already a religious turn.

74. William Connolly, *Why I am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 8-9; Noah Feldman, *Divided by God: America's Church–State Problem—And What We Should Do about It* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005), pp. 242-44.

75. Asad, *Formations of the Secular*; 'Reflections on Blasphemy and Secular Criticism', in *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (ed. Hent de Vries; New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), pp. 580-609; and *Powers of the Secular Modern*.

Conclusion

The goal of this study has been to disrupt the conceptual distinction between 'religious' and 'secular' by reading ancient, early modern, and contemporary curses as part of biblical tradition. If they succeed, these readings reveal limitations of categorizing texts simply as 'religious' or 'secular' in favor of a notion of biblical tradition that reaches from biblical text and commentary to a wide range of dispositions and practices de Certeau calls the 'scriptural economy'. Dynamic and resistant to the grand narratives of progress, eternal recurrence, and secularization, this notion of tradition, I have argued, can be approached hermeneutically through the category of displacement derived from Freud. Displacement recognizes that traditions change more through substitutions and rearrangements than by mere replacement; that cultural forms and practices often outlive their original purpose; and that analysis of texts in contexts is the primary method of discerning patterns of displacement. Beyond Freud, the idea of displacement developed here regards religious tradition neither as superstition nor illusion and questions scholarly claims to moral or epistemological superiority. Displacement, in this sense, is a term of caution and intellectual modesty, a hermeneutical category for thinking about texts and traditions beyond the problematic narratives perpetuated in the name of 'secularism' and 'religion'.

The idea of biblical tradition discussed here must be distinguished from traditionalism, the idea that historical and conceptual problems of 'religion' and 'secularism' can simply be solved by appealing to the restoration of religious tradition; such atavistic and nostalgic projects only reinforce the secular-religious binary. While this project may resemble traditionalism by its insistence that biblical tradition (and other traditions) have always accommodated a large range of perspectives and many groups of people, its aim is not to defend or enlarge the scope of religious institutions, as in John Henry Newman's *The Idea of a University* (1852) or Stephen Carter's *The Culture of Disbelief* (1994). Nor is my point that secularism is merely religion in disguise, a strand of thought with roots in Nietzsche and Schmitt. Neither eternal recurrence nor secularizing progress, this model of tradition traces a large hermeneutical circle that includes phenomena typically called 'secular' and 'religious' and thus avoids many of the problems (social and political as well as conceptual) created by the rigid religious–secular distinction.

To call a statement or text 'religious' is to reinforce a specifically modern way of structuring the world, one that is no more native to the Bible (and biblical tradition) than it is to non-Western traditions. Since traditions change, and 'secularism' is a recent invention that inevitably conditions the meaning of 'religion', there is nothing historically or empirically better about these terms than others; their legitimacy among scholars is, to be ironic, 'religious'![1] My purpose has not been to disclose a better empirical account of reality but to question the implications and tally some of the risks of subordinating texts, traditions, and individuals to these modern categories. For individuals, the religious-secular divide is typically internalized in a split between faith and reason, with the result that one is challenged either to live a double life or choose between one or the other. For Freud, failure to choose between secular and religious worldviews indicates a disorder: the Rat Man is 'superstitious and not superstitious'. On a social and political level, the split between secular and religious creates similar dilemmas, with religious and secular institutions suffering from and exploiting their unique positions. In the United States, religious institutions became more political precisely because of their non-secular status, while many secular institutions and practices became more 'religious' as a way to compensate for the emptiness of the 'public square' and religious institutions themselves. These apparent inversions are only the latest in a long and complex series of displacements and transformations in the history of biblical tradition.

Curses appear in so many historical and cultural contexts that it is tempting to consider them to be universal. Scholars like Stephen Pinker even argue that curses bring shock and pleasure because of how they activate the brain.[2] The content and use of curses, however, vary by context and culture. While curses may typically be imagined as speech acts, biblical tradition records this speech in writing and, what is more, gives it canonical status and submits it to centuries of commentary. If spoken curses claim to wield power, then what happens when they are committed to writing? For curses preserved in writing, the question of efficacy concerns not the transition from speech to writing but from a distant past in which the ritual was prescribed and later historical periods—after the exile in the sixth century BCE or even in the rabbinic period. In some biblical curses, such as the curse on the day in Job 3 and Jeremiah 20, a biblical text appears to be an already belated reworking of a pre-biblical, non-Israelite literary tradition.

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1. J.Z. Smith relates the study of religion to its practice, since both engage in making sense of the world, especially when they construct markers of difference and otherness (*Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004], pp. 245-47).

2. Stephen Pinker, 'What the F***? Why We Curse', *The New Republic*, 8 October, 2007, pp. 24-29.

Such cases call into question any assumption that biblical curses are secondary written forms of a primary oral expression.

The complexity of biblical texts and traditions begins with the difference between some 'original' or early tradition and the succession of later standpoints from which the tradition was remembered and recorded. But these texts, whether they purport to record speech, ritual, or events in narrative form, never disavow the power of words associated with curses. How this power survives centuries of transformation is a matter of subtle displacements as well as overt actions. Displacements in biblical tradition feature the dynamics of speech and writing. A text may purport to record a curse spoken once in the past, such as Shimei's curse on David in 2 Samuel 16, but it may also record a ritual that could be recited and rewritten, as in Deuteronomy 28. A curse text may include the mention of a curse as a kind of warning, as in Jeremiah 34. And some curses require not only speech but symbolic actions, like cutting an animal or placing hands on one's throat. From the standpoint of biblical tradition, the paradox of curses is that a form of expression that typically depends for its power on oral expression is preserved in written form. What happens to the power of spoken curses when they take written form?

No single answer settles this question, because biblical texts themselves embody a dynamic tradition for which no primordial model, no Ur-text, is available. Several kinds of displacement, from speech to writing, from pre-Israelite to Israelite, from human imprecation to divine curse, and from divine curse to human self-curse, emerge in the biblical texts I have examined. What I have offered here is a set of readings that sketch a model of biblical tradition in which many displacements succeed each other without giving up the forms of power ascribed to curses. Theologically problematic, biblical curses may nevertheless be indispensable to biblical tradition from the beginning as instances and ideas of powerful words.

Built from canon and commentary, the displacements of biblical tradition are literary, and they require literary analysis of the aesthetic and rhetorical qualities, the *poiesis*, of these texts. With literary analysis of the text goes historical and cultural analysis of the context. These hermeneutics of displacement acknowledge the survival of traditions in the spirit of Benjamin's critical thought, without inscribing grand narratives of decline or progress. Taken together, these forms of analysis reveal dynamics of power and the pleasure in the tradition of biblical cursing. Speech, recitation, commentary, philosophy, and creative writing all belong to this tradition, and while J. Hillis Miller is right to regard modern literature as a kind of displaced speech act in which human creativity predominates, it would be wrong to overlook the human agency inherent to ancient texts and speech acts, or the ways in which modern literature, as powerful 'speech', harnesses power, just as biblical curses do.

If literature is a kind of displaced curse, what happens when the legitimacy of literature itself is shaken? J.M. Coetzee's novel in eight 'lessons', *Elizabeth Costello*, narrates a crisis in literature. The crisis culminates in the final lesson, 'At the Gate', where Costello, the novelist and main character, faces the situation presented in Kafka's 'Before the Law'; she stands as a petitioner outside a gate, waiting and hoping to be allowed in. What she learns, by the end of the episode, is that she is not likely to be allowed through the gate, that her identity as a writer, a 'secretary to the invisible', may prevent her from passing.[3] When she tries to write her 'confession', Costello struggles to decide on a statement of her beliefs. Her first appearance before the court that will decide whether she passes through the gate is to doubt the value of belief, but in her second appearance, she attests to the power of belief in a memory of frogs from her childhood. The judge questions her: '"Have you changed the basis of your plea from the first hearing to the present one? Are you giving up the secretary story and presenting a new one, based on the firmness of your belief in the creation?"'[4]

Trapped in her absurd, Kafkaesque situation (which she also compares to *Alice in Wonderland*), Costello has a vision of what lies beyond the gate: 'At the foot of the gate, blocking whe way, lies stretched out a dog, an old dog, his lion-coloured hide scarred from innumerable manglings. His eyes are closed, he is resting, snoozing. Beyond him is nothing but a desert of sand and stone, to infinity. It is her first vision in a long while, and she does not trust it, does not trust in particular the anagram GOD-DOG. *Too literary*, she thinks again. A curse on literature!'[5]

With this, Elizabeth Costello confronts the central aporia of *Elizabeth Costello*: literature (as literature) fails in any court of law, but no system of justice, no statement of belief or confession, can do without it. The problem of realism is that after the 'word-mirror is broken', the identity of the author, who is also a character in Coetzee's novel, is shattered as well. As in his other novels, particularly *Foe*, Coetzee links the problem of the author to modernity itself (see Chapter 4). In the least 'realistic' lesson, the Kafkaesque 'At the Gate', the author's allegiance to fiction prevents her from writing a truthful confession. The reality of the lesson condemns the author never to pass through the gate. The dilemma of literature in *Elizabeth Costello* more generally is that there is a trade-off between reality and the writer's work as 'secretary to the invisible'.

If literature is conceived to be a kind of secularized religion, *Elizabeth Costello* narrates a crisis in the religion of literature. She would like to invoke the categories of tradition and the power of religious speech, but she

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3. J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* (New York: Penguin, 2003), p. 220.
4. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, p. 220.
5. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, pp. 224-25.

is prevented from doing so by her secularism. In 'The Problem of Evil', Costello struggles for terms to condemn the cruelty depicted in a novel about the execution of plotters against Hitler. 'Absolute evil. His blessing and his curse, I would say. Through reading him that touch of evil was passed on to me. Like a shock. Like electricity'.[6] The motif of blessing returns in a letter to her sister defending secularism: she refers to her act of self-exposure to an older man as a blessing.[7] Then, at the end of the novel, blessing leads to curse. The crisis of literature's power, as a kind of secularized religion, brings the main character full circle to religion, in a curse on literature. This curse represents a passionate exasperation with the familiar narrative of literature as a new, secular religion, while traditional religion, according to Costello's sister (a nun), suffers a decline that diminishes literature: 'Have the grand Lucifers of Dante and Milton been retired for good…?'[8] By cursing literature, Costello denies the secularist understanding of literature and, like Nietzsche, exposes modernity's hidden debts to biblical tradition. But neither Nietzsche nor Coetzee considers traditionalism a serious option. The 'disenchantment' of literature only indicates the ongoing process of displacements, to such cultural forms as television, online media, and youth culture, in biblical tradition. These new forms are far less novel than their futuristic marketing and trappings would suggest. Even today many films are adaptations of novels, suggesting that literature, though in some ways obsolete, remains a powerful rival to traditional religion. But, to elaborate Asad's insight, 'literature' is no more the binary opposite of 'religion' than 'secularism' is. Certainly both have their claims to powerful language. Literature is religious, but only because religion, at least in biblical tradition, was always literary.

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6. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, p. 176.
7. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, pp. 148-49.
8. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, p. 176.

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INDEX OF REFERENCES

OLD TESTAMENT

Index of Authors