READING DERRIDA'S NEW TESTAMENT: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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A great deal has been written on Derrida as a philosopher within or on the margins of Judaism.[1] In fact, the impetus to read Derrida religiously (in all senses of the word) has been so intensely felt by certain critics that some of this material verges on hagiography,[2] while much of it seriously considers Derrida as a theologian of sorts.[3] As Yvonne Sherwood indicates, Derrida is "one of a whole group of contemporary Jewish writers … who suggest tangled links between Jewish and postmodern conceptions of Torah/text, and he is prone to take the vocabulary of biblical studies … and give [it] back to the biblical scholar/theologian in provocatively distorted forms."[4] Because in this article I am especially interested in Derrida as a reader of the New Testament, it is also worth not-

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I would like to offer my special thanks to Stephen D. Moore, who read and very generously commented upon an earlier draft of this essay. I am also grateful for critical comments in the reader reports I received, as they helped me both to clarify the general thrust of this essay, and to think about how it might be developed as part of a larger, future, project.

[1] See the excellent bibliography in Gil Anidjar (ed.), *Acts of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

[2] A good example is John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

[3] See for example Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Ilse N. Bulhof, "Being Open as a Form of Negative Theology: On Nominalism, Negative Theology, And Derrida's Performative Interpretation of 'Khôra," in Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate (eds.), *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), pp. 195-222; Kevin Hart, *Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology, and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000); and Mark C. Taylor, "nO Not nO," in Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (eds.), *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 167-98. According to Rodolphe Gasché, however, it is only by "overlooking the contextual frames in which reference to theological issues is made in Derrida's texts" that one can make the mistake of thinking his work belongs "in style and content to negative theology"; Rodolphe Gasché, *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 150.

[4] Yvonne Sherwood, "Derrida," in A. K. M. Adam (ed.), *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), pp. 69-75 (73).

ing that another strand of critical appreciation recognizes Derrida's significance for New Testament studies in particular. Stephen Moore, for instance, one of the most intriguing of contemporary New Testament scholars, argues that a Derridean reading has much in common with early literary-critical approaches to the Bible, and to the New Testament in particular, in that both seek out tensions and inexplicable complexities in a text's logical structure.[5] David Seeley argues that there is "a surprising kinship between Derrida's work and historical-critical study of the Bible."[6] Derrida's work, he continues, "can tell us about many of the same sorts of things biblical scholars have long been investigating, only with a new sharpness and clarity."[7] Alison Jack turns to Derrida to see how the methods and insights of deconstruction can enrich her readings of the Book of Revelation.[8] Richard Griffiths consults Derrida to promote, and provide some balance for, a liberationist biblical criticism by indicating how the linking of the New Testament to contemporary ideological programs is "deeply problematical because closure of interpretation is perpetually deferred and subverted by the text itself."[9] And the list could go on. Derrida is clearly a rich source of inspiration for many scholars in biblical studies and related fields.

Given this fact, it is surprising to note that comparatively little attention has been focused upon Derrida's own readings of various New Testament texts.[10] One of the reasons for this, perhaps,

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[5] Stephen D. Moore, *Poststructuralism and the New Testament: Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), pp. 66-74.

[6] David Seeley, *Deconstructing the New Testament* (New York: Brill, 1994), p. 1.

[7] Seeley, *Deconstructing the New Testament*, p. l.

[8] Alison Jack, *Texts Reading Texts, Sacred and Secular* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

[9] Richard Griffiths, "Mrs. Thatcher's Bible," *Semeia* 82 (1998), pp. 99-125 (112).

[10] I will refer to Derrida's "deconstructive readings," or just "readings," as a perhaps not very innovative way of acknowledging the difference some have noted in Derrida's work between deconstruction as a mode of philosophical analysis, on the one hand, and what Gregory Ulmer calls grammatology—a mimetic approach to literature and art, on the other; Gregory Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology: Post(e)-Pedagogy from Jacques Derrida to Joseph Beuys* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. x. At issue is whether or not Derrida deconstructs (or reads) *literary* texts in the same way he deconstructs philosophical ones. It seems to me that Derrida's approach to the New Testament literature mentioned in this essay, even the material drawn from *Glas*, does not easily match the kind of grammatological "Writing" Ulmer has in mind, that creative, playful, emphasis on "connotation and allegory," reflexivity, etc.,—i.e., discursive practices which ordinarily function in, but are nevertheless undervalued by, literary-critical writ-

is that while Derrida has reflected on Christianity in general in many of his works, he has only devoted minimal attention to the New Testament. However, the relative lack of attention accorded to Derrida's New Testament criticism, if one can call it that, may also be due to the fact that Derrida's work on the early Christian texts simply does not approach those texts deconstructively, or if it does the result is less effective as deconstruction than one might expect. Certainly it is true that the texts in question are often not so germane to the object of his inquiry that they cannot be dispensed with quickly. Indeed, some might argue that the very marginality of the New Testament to Derrida's work renders his comments on the New Testament relatively uninteresting or unimportant. And yet, is not the marginal, the fleeting reflection, the odd word, often a central zone of inquiry for deconstruction? I do think one could at least initiate a productively deconstructive reading of Derrida's theology, or atheology, by focusing on such selections as I have chosen here. My aim in this essay, however, is not so large-scale. In fact, the readings of Derrida's work which follow have been motivated less by Derrida's own take on given New Testament texts, than by the fact that New Testament scholars inspired by Derrida seem reluctant to recognize the inadequacy of his work. In spite of the fact that Derrida seems to have opened up New Testament scholarship to notions of difference, of play and openness, of endlessly creative interpretive interventions, of reading strategies which demonstrate how texts, or the interpretations produced by the scholarly "guild" with the privileged authority to read them, strive to maintain "the illusion of … [their] completeness"[11]—in spite of this, the New Testament itself can sometimes assume a strange and unnecessary inviolability in Derrida's own writings, and I would argue that critics who take a Derridean approach to the New Testament can only enhance the viability of their projects by taking this problem into account.

So why is it that Derrida, eminently capable himself of brilliantly reading so many other texts, tends to flounder when it comes to

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ing; Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology*, p. 99. Moreover, since in each case Derrida draws upon the New Testament in support of a philosophical and hence more or less deconstructive project (writing in response to Kant, Hegel, Nancy, Kristeva and so on), I will not be making much of this distinction in what follows.

[11] The Bible and Culture Collective, "Poststructuralist Criticism," in Aichele et al., *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 119-148 (120).

his studies of passages from the New Testament? Before attempting to answer this question, in ways that I hope will be suggestive for scholars working in a Derridean vein, perhaps we should simply read through several of Derrida's New Testament interventions—starting with the most, and ending with what I consider the least, effective—in order to discover more precisely where these readings go wrong and how a more integrated deconstructive effort on Derrida's part might have produced a reading more fully in line with his own aims.

The Sermon on the Mount

One of the most useful of Derrida's studies of the New Testament is his examination of the Sermon on the Mount in his book *The Gift of Death*. His comments arise within the context of his critical examination of what amounts to "the economy of heaven" or, of salvation, in Christianity.[12] Derrida explores the idea of an invisible economy of sacrifice and repayment, an economy which, he suggests, is also an interiority, a subjectivity:

> In its essential instability [this] … economy seems sometimes faithful to and sometimes accusing or ironic with respect to the role of Christian sacrifice. It begins by denouncing an offering that appears to be calculating still; one that would renounce earthly, finite, accountable, exterior, visible wages (*merces*), one that would exceed an economy of retribution and exchange (the *re-merciement*) only to capitalize on it by gaining a profit or surplus value that was infinite, heavenly, incalculable, interior and secret. This would be a sort of secret calculation that would continue to wager on the gaze of God who sees the invisible and sees in my heart what I decline to have seen by my fellow humans.[13]

While the basics of this reading of passages from Matthew (including most importantly 6:1-4 and 6:19-21) do not seem especially innovative—in its basic form, after all, it derives from Nietzsche, whom Derrida cites frequently in the next few pages—Derrida's running commentary on vision and secrecy, the eye and its light, the internal and the external, helps him to make his point brilliantly. Often speaking simply of what "Jesus teaches" in his sermon, Derrida's reading of citations from the Sermon on the Mount is nevertheless fully aware of the Sermon's location within

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[12] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (trans. David Wills; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 98.

[13] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 109.

a particular Gospel and, moreover, of certain moments of variance in the translations he consults, Chouraqui's and the Pléiade version by Grosjean and Léturmy.[14] Ultimately, this discussion of the dubious justice of Jesus' soteriological economy as articulated in Matthew's Sermon is yet one part of the book's overall "internal critique of Christianity."[15] Perhaps this is one of the reasons it works so well—it simply foregrounds certain issues common to the variety of other texts Derrida tackles in the book's discussion of core concepts of the Christian tradition within the context of European religio-political identity.[16] In any event, this reading of elements drawn from the Sermon on the Mount in *The Gift of Death* is insightful, creative, and consonant with the general framework of that book's critique.

Derridean Apocalyptic

Just as interesting, but somewhat less consistent with his own project is Derrida's reading of the book of Revelation in the essay "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy." The history of the New Testament is a history of textual emendation, interpretation, confusion and, above all, of reading. There is no reading of these texts, in other words, which does not at some level involve (in addition, certainly, to innovation, creativity, striking nuance) a rereading of rereadings of rereadings. And who should know this better, and be more willing to exploit such a textual situation, than Derrida? In fact, his reading of Revelation is precisely about this, about how texts are absolutely without "origin, or a verifiable, decidable, presentable, appropriable iden-

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[14] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 106; *La Bible: Nouveau Testament* (trans. Jean Grosjean and Michelle Léturmy; Bibliothèque de La Pléiade; Paris: Gallimard, 1971); The text of André Chouraqui's translation, *Un pacte neuf*, is online at http://members.fortunecity.com/chouraqui/id90.htm. Derrida seems regularly to rely on these two translations. Chouraqui's version is particularly interesting in that it tries to retain the flavor of the original Greek, but with a Hebrew twist. Still, as I will point out from time to time below, both translations have their problems. Why Derrida prefers these versions to a more widely respected translation, such as the Segond, is not really clear. The text of the Louis Segond Bible, to which I will refer later, is online at http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/ARTFL/public/bibles/lsb.search.html.

[15] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 109.

[16] *The Gift of Death* reflects on the thought of Jan Patočka; and the chapter which features the above comments on the Sermon on the Mount also incorporates texts from Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Carl Schmidt, and the book of Leviticus.

tity."[17] The book of Revelation, given the multiplicity of its voices, the multiplication of its *envois*, defies the need for a clear sense of orientation in the text, and shows how texts always give the lie to their own putative formal or metaphysical coherence. The reader, Derrida says, is "no longer … very sure who addresses what to whom. But by a catastrophic reversal here more necessary than ever, one can just as well think this: as soon as one no longer knows who speaks or who writes, the text becomes apocalyptic … isn't this completely angelic structure, that of the Johannine apocalypse, isn't it also the structure of every scene of writing in general … of all discourse?"[18] A text or discourse, as the revelation of a definite source (voice, subject) with a definite meaning ("the truth, of course"),[19] when studied deconstructively, reveals nothing other than that it is a text or discourse *pretending* to be, acting like, a unitary, secure, true revelation.

Derrida's goal is essentially "to unfold a detailed analysis of the narrative voice in the Apocalypse," and this he certainly does in the course of his more general comments, when he notes with humor the nearly Borgesian entanglements of the text: "John is the one speaking, citing Jesus, or rather writing, appearing to transcribe what he says in recounting that he cites Jesus the moment Jesus dictates to him to write."[20] However, although Derrida is clearly emphasizing the text's internal ambiguities, without necessarily needing to explore the text as a whole, there is a problem with his reading. In spite of the fact that the indeterminacy of the revelation's origins and destinations really do make Revelation one of the most complex books of the New Testament, Derrida, almost accidentally, it seems, ends up assigning to the prophetic message a definite source and origin: Jesus.

As a Christian apocalypse, Revelation certainly seems to derive its own sense of authority from its vision of the cosmic Christ. Moreover, Jesus is mentioned early in the book as at least a potential source for the content of Revelation, and his appearance again at the end of Revelation seems only to make the work's Christological provenance more obvious. Derrida points this out

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[17] Jacques Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy," in Coward and Foshay (eds.), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, pp. 25-71 (66).

[18] Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone," p. 57.

[19] Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone," p. 53.

[20] Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone," p. 55.

by speaking of the "great voice of Jesus"[21] and "Christ's dictation."[22] And yet, if we pursue Derrida's own reading further, it becomes clear that Revelation is indeed precisely as unstable a text as Derrida suggests but perhaps fails to show. The messiah-figure, for instance, takes on a remarkable range of symbolic guises in Revelation, making any simple identification of Jesus with the lion, or the lamb, or the "one like the Son of Man" difficult if not impossible. For starters, the man Jesus is often invoked in Revelation as a relatively passive figure, as the martyr, say, or the one in whose testimony or witness the believers trust (1:2, 5, 9; 12:17; 14:12; etc.), and he—the one named Jesus—only speaks in the first person at 22:16. Although the Pléiade translation, along with my NRSV, instructs readers that other passages in the text in which a voice, out of nowhere, proclaims "see, I am coming soon" (22:7; cf. 16:15) are direct speech from Jesus, Revelation does not in fact make plain who is speaking at these moments. Indeed, so striking is the absence of Jesus from the body of the first half of Revelation that one commentator reads the book as a composite text, the fusing of an older Jewish apocalypse (chapters 4-11) with a Christian sequel.[23] What is more, Revelation itself, even though it eventually tries—without complete success—to name Jesus as the origin of this great unveiling to John, begins by attributing "the revelation of Jesus Christ" to God, and seems to indicate that not Jesus' but rather God's angel was ultimately John's primary source (Rev. 1:1).[24] Chouraqui's translation begins appropriately with the first line as a title, a unit grammatically independent from the text which follows.

[1] Découvrement de Iéshoua', le messie:
Elohîms le lui donne
pour montrer à ses serviteurs ce qui doit arriver vite.
[2] Il le signifie
en l'envoyant par son messager à son serviteur Iohanân.
[3] Il témoigne du logos d'Elohîms
et du témoignage de Iéshoua' le messie, de ce qu'il a vu.

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[21] Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone," p. 55.

[22] Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone," p. 62.

[23] J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation* (AB 38; Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1975).

[24] At the end of Revelation, Jesus actually only claims to have "sent [his] angel to [John]" (22:16), which suggests that while he may have played some role in the chain of communication, the ultimate authority of "his" message remains undisclosed.

After the colon, we begin with the subject, God, who gives the "découvrement" or revelation to Jesus in order to show his (i.e., God's) servants what must soon happen. The next verse begins with the subject "he," which may refer either to Jesus or God. If the subject is God, which seems most likely, then Jesus could function as the "messenger" in the following clause. That the subject probably is God is additionally suggested by verse 3, which indicates that John bears witness both to God's word and to the testimony of Jesus who, as a candidate for the messenger in verse 1, will have borne witness to God's word in passing the revelation along to John. The NRSV and the Segond Bible render the passage slightly more ambiguously by not detaching (as the title) "the revelation of Jesus Christ" from the text which follows. This ambiguity stems from the Greek text itself, although J. Massyngberde Ford reads "Jesus Christ" in Rev. 1:1 as an objective genitive, "concerning Jesus Christ," which helps her to emphasize that the revelation is from God to John via angelic courier.[25] Steven Thompson makes the same point by drawing attention to the relative clauses in 1:1: "the revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave … and *which* He made known."[26] Derrida's insistence upon the labyrinth from which John's vision originates is still valid of course. As Adela Yarbro Collins puts the problem: "the mysteriousness of that divine revelatory activity is shown by its indirect character. It originates in a distant and hidden God who communicates with his servants through Jesus Christ."[27] From all perspectives, it seems fair to say that God is lurking somewhere in the background. The issue to decide upon really concerns Jesus' specific agency in the whole process.

Certainly it is traditional to read the multiple figure(s) commanding John to write—in other words, that/those figure(s) in

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[25] Ford, *Revelation*, pp. 373-75.

[26] Steven Thompson, *The Apocalypse and Semitic Syntax* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 91.

[27] From there, in Collins' view, the message is sent by Jesus to John through Jesus' angel, not, as in Chouraqui's translation, through an unnamed messenger sent directly by God; Adela Yarbro Collins, *Apocalypse* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier,1979), p. 5. Robert Royalty Jr., taking a Foulcauldian approach, "deconstructs" Revelation's multiple voices with reference to Derrida; however he seems to conclude, in what is essentially an aside, that it is ultimately God's voice all along. See his "Don't Touch *This* Book!: Revelation 22:18-19 and the Rhetoric of Reading (in) the Apocalypse of John," *BibInt* 12.3 (2003), pp. 282-99 (294-5).

Rev. 1:9-20 to which Derrida most consistently refers—as Jesus. And yet, given the multiplicity of this/these figure(s), and the way divine agency seems powerfully but inconsistently shared among them throughout the rest of the text,[28] one can imagine Derrida making much stronger claims about the impossibility of discerning just who is saying what and why in Revelation. Moreover, when Jesus does finally appear on the scene, *as Jesus*, in chapter 22, he does so in a tactical rather than revelatory mode. That is, Jesus' self-identification functions as a kind of autograph, a stamp of authenticity, and ultimately as a warning against anyone who might try to tamper with "the words of the book of this prophecy" (22:19) that such an act would be counter to Jesus' own express command. This language echoes the canonical formula in Deuteronomy 4:2 and 12:32, and thus explicitly grants Revelation the same inviolability as the Law itself.[29] Derrida, of necessity, notices the oddness of Jesus' direct and yet indirect address, but he does little more than remark that "the play of quotation marks in the translation poses all the problems you can imagine."[30]

If it is true that "no one can exhaust the overdeterminations and the indeterminations of the apocalyptic stratagems,"[31] then certainly Revelation serves Derrida perfectly as a model, and not least of all because of a kind of generic confusion in the text itself. The book of Revelation announces itself as an apocalypse, and this indication of the book's content has come to define the genre. And yet, even here Revelation is unstable, for it is an apocalypse which also calls itself testimony (John testifies to Jesus' testimony, in 1:2) as well as prophecy (1:3). Which is it? Perhaps the very last thing on John's mind was the question of genre, and in

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[28] For example, while the "One like the Son of Man" ("un semblable à un fils d'humain" in Chouraqui) acts and speaks with authority in 1:13-20, the very same figure appears again at 14:14 as an automaton, waiting like any of the other angelic figures to be told what to do. Indeed, his wielding of the scythe in 14:16 is reproduced, almost identically by "another angel" in 14:17-19—as if the two figures, the messianic Son and the anonymous and very secondary angel, were wholly interchangeable.

[29] Although Price does not mention "Of an Apocalyptic Tone," he does discuss Revelation in terms of Derrida's analysis of the binary speech/writing, suggesting that especially in Rev. 22:18-19 John shares Plato's fear of a textuality severed from the voice of the author; Robert M. Price, "Saint John's Apothecary: 'Différance', Textuality, and the Advent of Meaning," *BibInt* 6.1 (1998), pp. 105-12 (109).

[30] Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone," p. 63.

[31] Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone," p. 59.

any case, as Michael Gilbertson sensibly argues, "to seek to press texts into only one genre, to the exclusion of others, can be unnecessary and misleading."[32] Given that Derrida's own essay plays with the notion of genre, with reference to the title of the Kant essay he is out to "mime … and then parody, deport, deform,"[33] it is surprising that Derrida does not latch onto the opportunities presented by Revelation 1:1-3. But even if we choose to limit ourselves to the questions of origin and authority, as Derrida does (though even in this we are still dealing with genre, insofar as Revelation can be read as a multiple and fractured epistle) we must ask why Derrida's reading is less than satisfactory. His frequent references to Jesus as the ultimate *envoi* tend to obscure just how much this Revelation is desperately struggling to be read *as* a revelation, in spite of its conflicts. Indeed, by insisting that this is a revelation to John by Jesus, Derrida makes Jesus, quite literally, the text's alpha and omega. Even though the various tensions of the text, its twists and turns, may be unsettling, a strong hint of internal instability, Derrida secures Revelation as a whole with reference to what we might call the frame-proclamation, the essential unity of the Jesus-voice which organizes and recuperates the various disunities within.

What does this mean for Derrida's understanding of discourse more generally? Probably little more than this: a good deconstructive reading requires great attention to detail, and can easily be derailed by the need to strike a certain pose, or affect a certain "tone," as Derrida does, self-consciously, in this essay. But perhaps it also suggests that readings which assume that a text or that discourse in general is a genre of concealment need to be more attentive to historical complexities. That is, John of Patmos or later editors could certainly have produced a more seamless Revelation had that suited his or their needs. That they did not may indicate that the text is not striving, as Derrida assumes, to mask its multiplicities and instabilities, but rather to expose them, to flaunt them. This Apocalypse, in any case, is not an act of epistemic or metaphysical seduction[34] requiring "demystification."[35] At

[32] Michael Gilbertson, *God and History in the Book of Revelation: New Testament Studies in Dialogue with Pannenberg and Moltmann* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 78.

[33] Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone," p. 28.

[34] Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone," p. 53.

[35] Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone," p. 57.

least, it might be possible to spin one's reading in this direction so as to exploit all the better the text's deconstructive possibilities without assuming, as Derrida does in his own apocalyptic way, that one is enacting a "catastrophic reversal" because one recognizes that it has become "more necessary than ever" to think differently about apocalypses and the apocalyptic tone.[36] Ultimately, any reading which, on the one hand, assumes an apocalyptic tone for itself, the project of a critical unveiling of what has been hidden, and yet, on the other, tends to limit the ruptures and aporias being read, may be revealing its own unexpected discomfort with instability by constructing unities where there are, in fact, none.

Mary Magdalene

What Derrida loses in his comments on Revelation as a New Testament text he gains in his discussion of the project of deconstruction in terms of apocalypse and the apocalyptic tone. Perhaps this is one reason why "Of an Apocalyptic Tone" seems to have attracted more attention than any other Derridean New Testament intervention. [37] Derrida's references to the New Testament in his *Le toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy*, are far less productive, however. [38] About one third of the way into *Le toucher,* Derrida engages in a very brief exercise which he entitles "un court traité théologique du toucher" [a short theological treatise on touch].[39] Touch, the sense of touch, the act of touching as an experience of being touched—the concepts behind this 'title' refer to an important metaphor in the work of Nancy.[40] Nancy's philosophical project is to articulate an ontology of relation, or perhaps of relatedness, which, like other poststructuralist utopias, is appealing in spite of its impossi-

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[36] Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone," p. 57.

[37] See for instance Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology*; Alison Jack, *Texts Reading Texts;* and Christopher Norris, "Versions of Apocalypse: Kant, Derrida, Foucault," in Malcolm Bull (ed.), *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 227-49. Interestingly, however, none of these readings comment directly on how well or how poorly Derrida's reading of Revelation suits the text of Revelation itself.

[38] This book has not yet appeared in English translation. All translations from *Le toucher* are my own.

[39] Jacques Derrida, *Le toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 2000), p. 117.

[40] See, for instance, the chapter called "Touching" in Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World* (trans. Jeffrey S. Librett; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 59-63.

bility. Derrida turns to the Gospels, and specifically to Jesus' touch as a healer, to explore Nancy's concept in a novel way. Or, more precisely, he turns to a culturally and theologically constructed fabric of interpretation and calls this fabric "Gospel." The most interesting aspect of Derrida's use of the Gospels in *Le toucher*, though, is not the way it helps to elucidate Nancy, but rather the complete absence of the critical awareness which ought to inform it.

The most obvious example of what I mean is to be found in Derrida's reference to Mary Magdalene in Luke 7:36-50. He refers to that moment in the Lucan story when the sinful woman enters the house and bathes Jesus' feet with her tears and anoints them with perfume as "l'immense scène qu'ouvre la pécheresse Marie-Madeleine" [the immense scene which the sinner Mary Magdalene opens],[41] and he goes on to cite Jesus' response to her as follows: "Tes péchés te seront remis, dit Jésus à Marie-Madeleine. Ta foi t'a sauvée, va en paix" ['Your sins will be forgiven you,' said Jesus to Mary Magdalene. 'Your faith has saved you, go in peace'].[42] The problem is, Mary Magdalene is never mentioned in this story. Derrida tells us in an earlier note that he is using, here, the Pléiade translation, which in fact does not insert Mary's name in this passage. Not only that, but the future tense in Derrida is actually in the present passive ("are forgiven") in the Pléiade. The change in tense, while it evokes a theology all its own—that Mary's faith has already saved her, but that her salvation is (or is also) in the future, reminds one of scholarly discussions of Pauline soteriology, according to which salvation is both now and not yet[43]—may only be a typo. But by making Mary Magdalene play the role of the woman in Luke 7, Derrida is tapping into an old misogynistic tradition within Christianity.

This tradition has, in part, to do with an ancient need on the part of Christians to harmonize the divergent accounts of Jesus' life that are the four Gospels. Because there are a number of Marys in the Gospels who seem to bear some resemblance to one another, it was not too difficult to name Luke's nameless sinner Mary, and so to have done with a troubling crowd of Mary-like

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[41] Derrida, *Le toucher*, p. 120.

[42] Derrida, *Le toucher*, p. 120, n. 1.

[43] Andrew Lincoln, *Paradise Now and Not Yet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

women.[44] Mary, the sister of Martha in John 11-12, it was decided, is really the same woman we see in Luke 7, in other words: the Mary Magdalene who also appears in each of the Gospels as a witness at the tomb of Jesus, and from whom Jesus had cast out seven demons in Luke 8.

Katherine Ludwig Jansen, in her *The Making of the Magdalene*, suggests that in addition to these more or less purely intertextual connections, Mary Magdalene and the unnamed sinner were conflated so as to reinforce Medieval views of women by exploiting a convenient ambiguity in the biblical texts. She relates that it was Gregory the Great who, in a 6th century sermon, first "transformed Mary of Magdala's demonic possession into a disease of the soul caused by sin. Consequently her physical symptoms became outward signs of the sinful sickness afflicting her soul."[45] And although the unnamed sinner's sins are never described in Luke, "there was no doubt in the minds of Medieval exegetes that hers was a sexual sin … [since] a woman's sin was inevitably construed as one involving sexuality."[46] Jansen indicates that later developments of the Magdalene tradition further transformed the sexual sinner into a kind of secondary virgin, second only to the Virgin, of course.[47] And it may be that, at some level, Derrida is aware of this since in a note later on in *Le toucher*, he refers to Mary the mother of Jesus as "l'une de *nos* Marie" [one of *our* Marys].[48] Moreover, like Jansen, he also says of the Magdalene, this time in *Glas*, that she is "destined for virginity."[49] In *Glas*, Derrida's focus is Hegel's interest in Mary, Luke's "beautiful sinner,"[50] and there his comments suggest that he knows very well that identifying the woman in Luke as Mary is an act of creative interpretation.[51] After all, "the facts [of the Gospel story] were or were not such

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[44] In *Glas*, Derrida refers to the "crowd of Johns" in the Gospel of John; Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand; Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 107.

[45] Katherine Ludwig Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalene: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Latter Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 147.

[46] Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalene*, p. 148.

[47] See the chapter entitled "In the Shadow of the Virgin"; Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalene*, pp. 286-306.

[48] Derrida, *Le toucher*, p. 135, n. 1. Emphasis added.

[49] Derrida, *Glas*, p. 63.

[50] Derrida, *Glas*, p. 61.

[51] Derrida, *Glas*, p. 62.

as they are told; what counts is the interpretation drawn from them."[52] This is both more and less than what Hegel himself says regarding the narrative. In "The Spirit of Christianity," Hegel seems almost to apologize for the liberty he knows he is taking with the text, but he says that the problems which might stem from this albeit illicit reading cannot be very serious "because nothing is to be said about the actual facts, and in our opinion there is no misrepresentation."[53] What follows is an exercise in Romantic homiletics—"this bliss of love drinking reconciliation from its effusion"—a pathos-filled extrapolation of the scene.[54]

However, Hegel, in his brief disclaimer, does not suggest, as Derrida has it, that the "facts" of the story may or may not be accurate. He is saying nothing about historical detail. He is intentionally combining narratives, yes, but the "facts" remain, untouched, unquestioned, and undoubtedly still believed as well. In a way, Hegel is simply rewriting the story, and then providing an interpretation of his own creative reworking. Derrida, on the other hand, shifts the focus away from Hegel's narrative, to the accounts in the Gospels and argues that any potential gap between interpretation and New Testament text "changes nothing in the conceptual intent" of the text.[55] Now, regarding the reference to the Magdalene in *Le toucher*, one would have liked to see at least some sign, some characteristic linguistic play, to indicate that Derrida knows the woman in Luke 7 is not named Mary in the text. In the absence of any such clues, it can seem that Derrida simply imported this myth of the Magdalene, and consequently not only some of the traditions with which it is encumbered, but also a specifically Catholic sensibility, since the reformers effectively deconstructed Mary Magdalene for Protestantism.[56] And yet, given the temporal priority of *Glas*, Derrida's reading of Hegel suggests quite another possibility: that Derrida's hermeneutic strategy, in this instance, is rather evangelical. Throwing caution to the wind (I could pun, here, were I writing in Greek), the radi-

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[52] Derrida, *Glas*, p. 62.

[53] G. W. F. Hegel, "The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate," in *Early Theological Writings* (trans. T. M. Knox; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 242.

[54] Hegel, "The Spirit of Christianity," p. 243.

[55] Derrida, *Glas*, p. 62.

[56] Jansen, *The Making of the Magdalene*, pp. 334-335. See also Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co, 1993), p. 249.

cally evangelical Christian does not interpret a text which is embedded in the complications of canon and tradition and their various translations, but rather experiences and interprets the Spirit behind or through the text. Interpretation is inspiration. Or, if you will, it is the radical cultural and/or political and/or psychological appropriation and recontextualization of the otherness of the New Testament document. Meaning becomes the interpreter's meaning and yet also, in the very same moment, the meaning of the text. According to Derrida, it simply doesn't matter what may have been going on between 30 and 90 CE, the Mary Magdalene version of Luke 7 is just fine as it is since the "conceptual intent" of this fantasy version of the text is the same as it was for Luke, who never wrote it.

Of course, I disagree, and I would like to suggest that the reference to Mary Magdalene in *Le toucher* may be a particularly good example of how Derrida missed an opportunity to effectively deconstruct a Christian tradition. The tradition itself is based upon the willful misreading of a text. The tradition as a text, in other words, arises from an aporia, an opportune gap in the original which allows later Christian writers to do two things: to close the apparently unstable openness of the Lucan Gospel by identifying the unnamed woman; and to curtail the radical potential of Luke, the Gospel most interested in granting agency to the marginalized and oppressed, by linking the unnamed sinner to Mary Magdalene in order to construct a demonized and sexual (and gendered) sinfulness. In another context, one that is nevertheless relevant for our purposes here, Steven Goldsmith writes that "the text [of Revelation] only achieves its closure when the deep threat of the feminine [and here Mary Magdalene would have her double in the Whore of Babylon] can be properly contained by a male champion."[57] What matters in terms of the stabilization of the text, and the securing of its vision of authority is "the erasure of a female character."[58] In a sense, Derrida's use of Mary Magdalene with reference to the Gospels does the same thing, only in reverse—it imposes demonic and sinful characteristics on a woman it has had to invent so that it, like Goldsmith's Revelation, can promote a certain unity and stability in the text. Instead of subverting the

[57] Steven Goldsmith, *Unbuilding Jerusalem: Apocalypse and Romantic Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993), p. 67.

[58] Goldsmith, *Unbinding Jerusalem*, pp. 21-22.

tradition's readings of Mary-as-sinner (and Nancy, by the way, who can write so incredibly that "a tomb is always open, like a woman lying in childbed,"[59] could benefit from this sort of subversion, surely), Derrida merely imports a history of readings into his own, and implicitly endorses the multiple projects they embody.

Jesus' Healing Touch

Mary Magdalene appears in *Le toucher* only as a specific instance of Jesus' healing ministry, which is really Derrida's principle focus in this 'theological treatise.' In discussing Jesus' special, healing touch, Derrida validates Nancy's language about the bidirectionality of touching (i.e., that *touch* both touches and, at the same moment, is touched) in a new context. Given the language of the Synoptics, this choice of context is particularly apt. What seems most curious, however, is the way in which Derrida muddles his Nancyan take on touch with the language of salvation and grace. Jesus touches people with his hands, in order to purify, heal or resuscitate them—to "save" them, in other words, according to Derrida.[60] And such people as Jesus heals are saved because in being touched by him they are "touché par la grâce" [touched by grace].[61] While the notion of grace seems to stem from an unexpectedly Protestant flourish on Derrida's part, and is especially odd given Derrida's appreciation of Nietzsche's critique of grace as the "self-destruction of Justice,"[62] the Pléiade New Testament certainly encourages a soteriological reading of Jesus' healing ministry. Derrida reproduces, and perhaps enhances, the language of this translation in distinguishing between the touch that heals, and the touch that saves. The Greek word *σώζω*, to save, with a special emphasis on rescuing from harm, is usually if not always translated in the Pléiade New Testament as "sauver," with all its theological implications. In the NRSV, by contrast, when *σώζω* and its related family of words are used to indicate a healing, the English translation is usually "heal" or "healed"—as in Mark 6:56. The Louis Segond Bible is similarly careful to mute the theological nuance of such passages. One notable difference is Mark 5:34 (and par.),

[59] Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, p. 65.
[60] Derrida, *Le toucher*, p. 117.
[61] Derrida, *Le toucher*, p. 117.
[62] Quoted in Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 114.

in which a woman with a 12-year hemorrhage is healed: "He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has *made you well*; go in peace, and be healed of your disease'" (NRSV). The Segond translation maintains the distinction between save and heal in the French: "Ma fille, ta foi t'a *sauvée*; va en paix, et sois guérie de ton mal" [My daughter, your faith has saved you; go in peace and be healed of your illness]. The Pléiade version does so as well, but it seems rather uncomfortable that "healed" may not be soteriologically forceful enough, and so it renders the last clause as "reste guérie de ta calamité" [be cured of your calamity].[63] The difference between the two is never remarked upon in Derrida, and one might legitimately conclude from his own language that both kinds of touch amount to pretty much the same thing, as when he refers to Matt. 17:7-8 and concludes that Jesus both "guérit *et* sauve" [heals *and* saves].[64] Given that this selection from Matthew is not a healing scene, but rather an account of the transfiguration, and that in it Jesus is touching the disciples both to get their attention and to dispel their fear, Derrida's use of the language of healing is a bit awkward. But apparently he recognizes some basic equivalence between the two terms since the same gesture, Jesus' touch, produces the same result, the dispelling of fear, a dispelling which is a healing and a saving at the same time, and in the same way.[65]

But the issue is not so clear cut. Certainly, socio-historical ap-

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[63] The Chouraqui version, which seems consistently to agree with the Pléiade translation regarding *σώζω*, has the much more dramatic, and also problematic, "sois assainie du mal qui te harcelait" [be purified of the evil/illness which harried you]. Jean-Marie Auwers takes Chouraqui to task in his translation of the Old Testament, saying that in his work "l'effet de surprise est très réussi, mais le souci d'intelligibilité est pratiquement nul" [the effect of surprise is very successful, but the concern for intelligibility is practically nonexistent]; Auwers, *La Bible en francais: Guide des traduction courantes* (Brussels: Lumen Vitae, 2002), p. 105. The same might be said of the Chouraqui New Testament as well, perhaps. Unfortunately, Auwers' book does not address Chouraqui's *Un pacte neuf*. What is more, it takes the translators of the Pléiade at their word and assumes that their Nouveau Testament is free of all ecclesiastical and theological colorings. In the passages with which we are concerned, however, the Pléiade seems anything but theologically neutral.

[64] Derrida, *Le toucher*, p. 118. Emphasis added.

[65] Interestingly enough, this is an equivalence that Christian scholars sometimes emphasize in stressing Jesus' intentions. So Ernest Best: "the healing stories with the stress they lay on the necessity of faith in God's power working through Jesus are examples to the Christian of the need for faith if he is to be redeemed"; Ernest Best, *The Temptation and The Passion: The Markan Soteriology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 110.

proaches to biblical literature often emphasize a rather different understanding of Jesus' healing touch. Steven Muir, for instance, argues against the notion that Jesus' cures would necessarily have been understood as salvfic, at least not in any otherworldly sense. He notes that "the most common understanding of [*σώζω*] … in the Greek-speaking world referred to deliverance from … specific and concrete things."[66] The faith that often accompanied the healing and perhaps made it possible, Muir argues, is similarly to be understood as a faith in the healer's power to produce the cure.[67] This is not to say, of course, that there is no religious significance to the healing miracles in the Synoptic Gospels. A critical inquiry into the context of such pericopes as Derrida chooses to focus on will indeed suggest that "the healings … are placed in a larger structure which sees what is happening as clues and foretastes of a new situation in which the purpose of God will finally be accomplished in the creation and his people will be vindicated and at peace."[68] However, according to this line of reasoning, it is probably irresponsible to endorse a wholly uncritical use of *σώζω* as a soteriologically-charged term. This is especially true given that in the Septuagint *σώζω* seems most often to have concerned rescue from harm, deliverance from troubles or enemies and the like.[69]

Now, one need not necessarily concern oneself with issues of translation from the Greek since we are rather more concerned with differences among French translations, and Derrida's use of them. Moreover, as Derrida puts it at the start of "Of an Apocalyptic Tone," "(hi)stories or enigmas of translation … are … without solution or exit."[70] But the fact that, in these references to the healing miracles, Derrida so uncritically adopts a theologically charged language, language which need not be so charged in every case, creates a problem precisely of language. The whole context, of course, derives from Nancy's play on the word "touch." And in a sense the fact that the ambiguities in the Greek go unnoticed in

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[66] Steven C. Muir, "Faith, Healing, and Deliverance in Mark's Gospel," in J. Kevin Coyle and Steven C. Muir (eds.), *Healing in Religion and Society from Hippocrates to the Puritans: Selected Studies* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999), pp. 85-104 (89).

[67] Muir, "Faith, Healing, and Deliverance," pp. 89-90.

[68] Howard Clark Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 79.

[69] Muir, "Faith, Healing, and Deliverance," p. 96.

[70] Derrida, "Of an Apocalyptic Tone," p. 25.

the French of the Pléiade translation undermines or rather brings closure to the openness of Nancy's linguistic play. What is interesting though, is that Derrida delimits the semantic potential even further by invoking the language of grace. A critical reading of Jesus' touch need not assume, even when one's New Testament translation uses "sauver" or "save" for healing, that a notion of salvation is necessarily implied in the text. Or, if it is, or seems to be, then there is nothing to prevent a disruptive reading of such an implied soteriology—certainly not in the Synoptics, in which Jesus' healings are not always successful (for example, Mark 8:22-26), often reflect debates about Jesus' status in the Jewish community as well as his interpretations of tradition, and frequently are obscured by the evangelists' emphasis on secrecy. In other words, the Synoptic texts which recount Jesus' healing miracles are richly complex and are not liable to singular, or singularly religious readings.

What is more, Derrida's uncomplicated reading of these Synoptic healing stories, blending as it does healing with the language of salvation and grace, casts Nancy's ideas on relationality into an entirely new and unwarranted register. In Nancy, touch has everything to do with the (ontological) reconceptualization of the subject or the community as a permeable border zone, and with the deconstruction of "subject" or "community" to the extent that these terms grant priority to the monadic entity which rests safe and secure in itself while surrounded by a world of alterity. In using the gospel texts in the way he does, though, Derrida has reasserted the absolute priority of the one who touches. He does note that "Jésus n'est pas seulement touchant, le Touchant, il est aussi le Touché" [Jesus is not only touching, the Touching One, he is also the One Touched],[71] but even here, the majuscules and the weak ambiguity of "touched" (after all, the examples which follow are not about Jesus' emotional response to suffering, but rather the fact that sufferers actually touch him to be healed) only further secure for Jesus the role of Savior. Moreover, what might have been an ironically non- or even anti-theological treatise ends, essentially, in a theology which runs counter to the arguments Derrida is making in this portion of the book. As in the reference to Mary Magdalene, the wholesale appropriation of a religiously

[71] Derrida, *Le toucher*, p. 119.

charged perspective on Jesus as a healer, and the uncritical use of a translation which foregrounds just such religiosity, create unproductive—or at the very least, inexplicable—tensions in Derrida's text, tensions which might in turn have been foregrounded profitably by Derrida in order both to further his reading of Nancy and, perhaps, to participate in Nancy's "deconstruction of Christianity."[72]

One can imagine a far more nuanced approach, one which would have exploited the openness of these Synoptic healing pericopes in the manner of Derrida's creative, incisive reading of the Sermon on the Mount. For instance, Derrida could have spent a great deal more time on Mark 5:25-34, focusing on how the woman's initiation of contact produces not just Jesus' eventual response, but what one can only regard as a wholly unexpected loss of power on Jesus' part (5:30). For a moment, Jesus is not simply the Savior who touches, but is in fact as frangible as the woman. Both of them "bleed" power, and there is nothing either one can do to stop it. They mirror each other, then, both open at the surface and liable to the unexpected and miraculous exposure of touch. Moreover, the woman touches him in faith, but perhaps the faith is in Jesus not so much as the sure source of healing, but rather as a conduit of a healing power which is not his own, and which, as it turns out, he certainly does not dispense in accordance only with his good will. Jesus, in her eyes, is not necessarily the center of power and authority. This is precisely the kind of situation Nancy would seize upon. Jesus as a site of healing power is "an apotropaic and apophantic place" he might say, and his power "is there without there being yet any *presence* at all."[73] But then, when Jesus turns and officially sanctions his being touched, given the woman's faith, he recuperates his temporarily displaced authority. He asks who touched him and the woman, who drops to his feet, fesses up "in fear and trembling" (5:33). Like the Jesus of Revelation, whom John of Patmos, in Derrida's reading, seizes upon for security, the Jesus of this pericope is merely the façade of miraculous power, the great face and voice of Oz. But the beau-

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[72] Derrida, *Le toucher*, pp. 68, 117. In *Le toucher* Derrida also makes the claim that, "la déchristianisation sera une victoire chrétienne" [dechristianization will be a Christian victory], p. 68.

[73] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence* (trans. Brian Holmes, et al.; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 170.

tiful thing about the story is that there is no man behind a curtain either to pay attention to or to ignore. Rather, the scene brings into focus a power which is nothing other than an uncontrollable encounter, an irrecuperable relationality without recourse to sanction or exclusion, save in the retrospect of impotence.

Paul

So far, the real problem we have noted in Derrida's use of the New Testament is the rather limited extent to which Derrida applies himself deconstructively to the texts under consideration. This, of course, leads to a variety of more serious problems. To borrow from Mieke Bal, Derrida's work on the New Testament, like the studies of Alter, Sternberg and Trible which Bal reviews, "should, but does not, challenge the traditional acceptance of social and theological ideologies that are assumed to underlie biblical literature."[74] Still, generally speaking, a look at Derrida's readings of the New Testament indicates that the method and critical aspirations allied with Derridean deconstruction can indeed be applied or endorsed with interesting results. Up to this point, then, one would have to agree with the most basic tenet of scholars like Moore and Seeley: Derrida does open new doors for readers of New Testament texts, even if in passing through those doors one is effectively leaving Derrida (as a reader of the New Testament) behind. Things change slightly, however, when one turns from the Gospels or Revelation to Derrida's references to Paul in "A Silkworm of One's Own." In this piece, which incorporates a series of shifting contexts for reflecting upon ideas of holiness or separation inherent, first of all, in the religious paraphernalia of veils—the hijab, the curtain of the inner sanctuary of the Jerusalem temple—but also in the tallith and in Derrida's own religious background, he rails against Paul, against the daring of "this very mild, this terrible Paul … who wanted to veil the heads of women and unveil those of the men, that very one [who] denounced Moses and the children of Israel."[75] Derrida refers here

[74] Mieke Bal, "The Bible as Literature: A Critical Escape," *Diacritics* 16.4 (1986), pp. 70-80 (71).

[75] Jacques Derrida, "A Silkworm of One's Own (Points of View Stitched on the Other Veil)" (trans. Geoffrey Bennington), in Gil Anidjar (ed.), *Acts of Religion*, pp. 311-55 (346).

to a set of texts which Daniel Boyarin discusses in the "Moses' Veil" chapter of his *A Radical Jew*, including Romans 2:25-29 and 2 Corinthians 3:7–4:6. Boyarin considers the veiling of Moses, however, within the context of what he calls Paul's "allegorical interpretation of text, history and world," in such a way as to situate Paul's interpretive strategies within the different Jewish modes of discourse available in the 1st century. [76] Boyarin, in other words, recognizes in the Pauline text the traces of "a legitimate cultural, hermeneutical, and political contestation" about the nature and status of "Israel."[77] For Derrida, on the contrary, Paul is simply either pro- or anti-Jewish. In Derrida's view, Paul, distinguishing between the letter and the spirit of the Law, denies or mocks Israel, and (falsely) thinks himself to have reinvented or rediscovered the inner meaning of God's relationship to humanity.[78]

In fact, Derrida goes so far in his own denunciation of Paul to say that "what [he] admire[s] most about Nietzsche is his lucidity about Paul."[79] A stunning proclamation. One assumes that he is thinking of the Paul who is nothing but a "forger, prompted by his hatred" to construct a "lie" on the grave of a "reality."[80] One assumes that he is *not* thinking of the Paul who, *precisely because he was a Jew*, was naturally incapable of knowing anything "of the passions [except] what is dirty, disfiguring, and heartbreaking."[81] The passages I have cited from "A Silkworm of One's Own" are essentially an impassioned *apologia* for the Judaism that Paul, ostensibly, and Nietzsche, quite openly, derides, and therefore it would certainly be inappropriate for Derrida to embrace an apparently anti-Semitic reading of Paul, here. [82] Alan Badiou, in his

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[76] Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 86.

[77] Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*, p. 105.

[78] Derrida, "A Silkworm of One's Own," pp. 344-46.

[79] Derrida, "A Silkworm of One's Own," p. 325.

[80] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, in Oscar Levy (ed.), *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* (trans. Anthony M. Ludovici; New York: MacMillan, vol. 16, 1924), pp. 125-231 (184-85).

[81] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (trans. Walter Kaufmann; New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 189.

[82] According to defenders of Nietzsche, such as Tim Murphy, Nietzsche's attitude is in no way anti-Semitic, but rather is "anti-Judaic," and specifically indicates Nietzsche's dislike of "the religion of Second Temple Judaism, without basing this on a *racial* theory of the character of 'the Jew as such'"; Tim Murphy, *Nietzsche, Metaphor, Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), p. 109. That a rejection of the "priestly" Judaism of Jesus' day betrays a distinctly Christian perspective

recent *Saint Paul*, is a more perceptive reader of Nietzsche.[83] He acknowledges, as one should, that Nietzsche "does not seem to have properly situated the apostle's teaching relative to the canonical shaping of the Gospel narratives."[84] That is, the story of Jesus, that one true Christian in Nietzsche's eyes, post-dates the last writings of Paul by a decade at the very least.

Derrida, of course, is not concerned at all with Paul's misrepresentation of the meaning(s) of Jesus. Instead, he is upset at Paul's statements about women and about Israel or "the Benéi Israël," and hence Judaism.[85] While no one should make excuses for misogyny, Paul clearly allows women to participate in his churches in every way. Given this, the passage Derrida cites from 1 Cor. 11:3-10, 13-15 is indeed especially troubling. However, Derrida's selective citation of it only compounds the problem, since in the same context Paul also insists that "Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of women" (v. 11). And he closes this section with a certain degree of discomfort at what he has just written: "But if anyone is disposed to be contentious—we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God" (v. 16). This last line could mean a variety of things. It could mean that the issue he has been discussing all along in this passage ultimately has little validity, since it is not a custom of his churches to make women cover their heads when praying or prophesying. It could mean that if anyone, either the men who may prefer women to cover their heads or the women who do not want to, is likely to get upset by this issue, then the best course of action is simply to drop it, since contentiousness is not a sanctioned "custom" of his churches. Moreover, one must notice that the passage in question is about dress, not dress *and* participation in the religious life of the Corinthian church. Paul here assumes as a mat-

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on Jewish history is something Murphy clearly recognizes in his discussion of 19th century German theology and historiography of religion. But because he understands Nietzsche principally to be writing against *this* grain, and also because he insists, despite the evidence of *The Antichrist* and other works, that Nietzsche was not just anti-Christian but also, and in a way that remains unclear, anti-Jesus, Murphy does not acknowledge the same tendency in Nietzsche's own "anti-Judaism"; Murphy, *Nietzsche, Metaphor, Religion*, pp. 104-26.

[83] Though perhaps not of Paul or of Paul's relationship to his Jewish heritage.

[84] Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (trans. Ray Brassier; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 62.

[85] Derrida, "A Silkworm of One's Own," p. 347.

ter of course that women can 'pray and prophesy' just as the men do. Thus, the passage in its entirety is perhaps not so clearly negative as Derrida suggests. In any case, some acknowledgment of the tensions and internal contradictions inherent in what Paul says would not only make for a fairer reading of Paul, but would enable Derrida to develop a richer, more effective, and ultimately more deconstructive argument. For this is a passage just crying out for deconstruction. Although David Seeley, in the chapter entitled "Deconstructing Paul" from his book *Deconstructing the New Testament*, does not address this passage from 1st Corinthians in particular, his general comments on Paul are nevertheless apt for our discussion: "the main problem in deconstructing Paul is knowing where to begin … he was no systematic theologian … [and] his letters are filled with ambiguities and complexities."[86] And all this is so obvious that, as Seeley puts it, "it has become almost obligatory for commentators" to point such "cracks and fissures" out.[87] Jouette Bassler, in her feminist commentary on 1 Corinthians, says essentially the same thing with regard to the Pauline text we considered above: "Paul's comments in these verses [from 1 Corinthians 11] are as obscure as any he makes. So convoluted is Paul's argument and so enigmatic are the terms he uses that it is impossible to determine exactly what activity lies behind these comments, why it is taking place, and what Paul objects to about it."[88] Given the radically open, wildly unstable nature of the Pauline text at this point, it is very nearly amazing that Derrida—the Derrida who noted, in his reading of Revelation, that such uncertainty and ambiguity is the very nature of discourse itself—does not take a moment to remark upon even the potential for a deconstructive reading of Paul.

The violent, misogynistic barbarian now known as Christianity, was at the gates, Derrida goes on to claim, and Paul let it in—to the lasting detriment of Judaism.[89] This, I argue, is a highly problematic reading of Paul, one not terribly aware of the contexts

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[86] Seeley, *Deconstructing the New Testament*, p. 129.

[87] Seeley, *Deconstructing the New Testament*, p. 129.

[88] Jouette Bassler, "1st Corinthians," in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (eds.), *Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), pp. 411-19 (416).

[89] Or at least this is how I read Derrida when he writes of Paul's "daring whose monstrous progeniture are our history and culture"; Derrida, "A Silkworm of One's Own," p. 346.

within which Paul wrote. Just as the issue for Paul was not whether or not women could participate in the most basic ways in worship, so the problem of Paul's religious affiliation was never about whether or not Judaism had died with the advent of Jesus as Christ. As John Gager reminds us in *The Origins of Anti-Semitism*, the reading of Paul as anti-Semitic or anti-Israel is a traditional one, "long established and almost universally held by historians, theologians and exegetes of the Pauline letters."[90] Described this way, the negative view of Paul constitutes a sort of master narrative in need of serious critique. And such a critique would have to start from the fact that the traditional reading of Paul is built on a strategy of masking that which, in Paul, is thoroughly pro-Israel. Certain Pauline texts are an embarrassment to Christians who consider the hyphen in Judeo-Christian as a wedge, an unbridgeable gulf, rather than an acknowledgment of dependency. "But," as Gager puts it, "to be embarrassed is not to be defeated. For those who do not simply ignore such texts, the solution lies in choosing not to begin with them, but to begin instead with passages that can be read as speaking of the demise of Israel and the abrogation of the Torah."[91] And this, it seems to me, is exactly what Derrida himself is doing here. We have seen, above, how a selective editing of Paul can produce a misogynistic Apostle. Now we can see how, by selecting only key moments in which Paul appears to negate his Jewish heritage, Derrida participates in, albeit from within a polemic critical of, Christian triumphalist discourse.[92] Thus, as we have already noted, for Derrida Paul is in some cut-and-dried way a betrayer of Israel. The Pauline corpus, however, reveals a much more complex situation. Boyarin shows how Paul's hermeneutic functioned *within* a Jewish context. As for Paul's relationship to the Gentiles, the problem of what we have come to call Christianity was how to understand the participation of non-Jews, via their manifest faith in Jesus, in the promises God had

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[90] John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 197.

[91] Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism*, pp. 204-05. See also Griffiths, who in his study of Margaret Thatcher's use of the Bible argues for the importance of reading the "absent texts" in the Thatcherite biblical "canon"; Griffiths, "Mrs. Thatcher's Bible," p. 114.

[92] Gager points out that Jewish readers have long had difficulties with Paul too, but he seems to suggest that this is in some ways a response to Christian triumphalism; Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism*, p. 263.

made to Israel. And not just to understand it, but also to try to come up with an explanation for early believers who, on the one hand, knew Jesus to be the Messiah of Israel, and yet on the other hand knew that non-Jews were experiencing gifts of the spirit upon their entry into the community that Jesus' Jewish followers had originally established. Add to this Paul's intense belief that the *eschaton* was just around the corner, and that therefore it did not make any sense to squabble over potentially divisive questions of religious affiliation which would become moot in very short order, and the general situation of Paul's letters becomes a little clearer. Derrida, failing to explore or exploit Paul adequately—even if his ultimate purpose might still be to take him to task for his apparently latent anti-Judaism—ends up recapitulating, vehemently, one of the most basic perspectives of a willfully ignorant, a-historical, and, ironically for Derrida, anti-Semitic strand in Christianity.[93]

Conclusion

Derrida's thoughts on Paul are even more disappointing given the turn to Paul in the work of recent theorists. Here, surely, was an opportunity to engage in a productive conversation with Badiou, Zizek and others. And yet here, as elsewhere, Derrida reads key New Testament documents in a way that produces only a strangely disappointing confusion. And so, we must return to the question with which this essay began: why is Derrida so poor a reader of his New Testament texts? Why, in his readings, does he often fail not only to be thorough in his deconstructive efforts, but also to escape from a certain Christianizing impulse, or at least from various moments in the Christian tradition which ought not to be adapted uncritically?

Three answers, or perhaps explanations (or even excuses), seem immediately available, even if ultimately none of them are fully ad-

[93] What makes this approach to Paul all the more surprising is that elsewhere Derrida treats elements of the Pauline tradition with a good-humored curiosity. See, for instance, his survey of the accounts (from Acts) of Paul's "conversion" in his *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 104, 110-17. In fact, just a few pages later in that text, Derrida manifests a vague disapprobation of the fact that "Nietzsche never had words cruel enough for Saint Paul and Saint Augustine"; Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, p. 123.

equate. First, nearly all of Derrida's work is critical of a metaphysics which, at its heart, is a Christian inheritance and which, therefore, may tend even in its critique to be in some way Christian. Derrida frequently argues that deconstruction undoes concepts which (deconstructive) thinking within the tradition deconstructed nevertheless cannot do without.[94] With regard to a critique of Christianity in particular, he has indicated that "the hyperbolic form of this internal critique of Christianity … is at the same time evangelical and heretical."[95] The critique can only be internal, and therefore no matter how effectively heretical it is, it will be, as heresy, merely a modification within the tradition itself. This is not a sufficient explanation for Derrida's strange failures to go as far as he might in his readings of New Testament texts, but it does indicate: 1) that Derrida's readings, insofar as they are an "internal critique," may have the entire tradition in focus and not just the texts in question; and 2) that even at his most critical Derrida will not claim to be stepping outside of Christian thinking.

Another reason may have to do, quite simply, with the absence of belief. If he is not religiously invested in the New Testament, perhaps he can read it, even while invoking the language of faith, as a given which merely needs to be acknowledged in his critical reading of others who make use of these texts or the traditions to which they have contributed. This is likely to be a useful explanation only in those cases, such as *The Gift of Death*, in which Derrida is in fact explicitly interested in the way ideas from the New Testament have become key concepts in a philosophical tradition. In a sense, his work thus focuses on the concepts and not the texts,

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[94] In his seminal essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Derrida makes this plain: "We have no language—no syntax, and no lexicon—which is foreign to [the history of metaphysics]; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest"; Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference* (trans. Alan Bass; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 278-93 (280-81).

[95] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 109. See also his comments about Nancy's deconstruction of Christianity, cited above. Elsewhere, however, Derrida seems to feel that "religion as such *can* be deconstructed" and he suggests that this deconstruction is carried out only "sometimes in the name of faith"; Jacques Derrida et al., "The Villanova Roundtable: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida," in John D. Caputo (ed.), *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p. 21. Emphasis added.

or on the texts as only one manifestation of a certain conceptual apparatus.

As a third explanation, one might argue that Derrida sometimes makes his participation in traditional Christian perspectives on the New Testament so flagrantly obvious that he is, or must be, performing a deconstructive parody of those perspectives. This is more or less in line with one strand of Derrida's thinking with regard to the anti-Semitic journalism of Paul de Man. In other words, Derrida, more or less acknowledging that there is no escaping Christianity even when one is attacking it, performs the tradition itself, deconstructing elements of it by rendering them palpably absurd.

But just as critics of Derrida have noticed that when deconstruction becomes *apologia* it ceases to be deconstruction,[96] so I would find it hard to accept that Derrida's readings of the New Testament are sometimes only *apparently* ineffective because they are more or less ironic. Of the cases above, perhaps only the references to Jesus' healing ministry in *Le toucher* might conceivably fall under the rubric of ironic reading since they alone are presented without critical comment. But even in that work, a study of Jean-Luc Nancy, there's no reason for Derrida to perform such a reading since Nancy's use of the New Testament is nowhere at issue and, moreover, Derrida, unlike Paul de Man, should certainly feel no need to resort to irony even if it were.[97]

As for the other possible explanations of Derrida's deconstructive shortcomings, one must note that scholars like Stephen Moore are in the same boat—working on a Christian tradition which is fated always and forever to recuperate the thinking of its most

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[96] See Dieter Freundlieb, "Derrida's Defence of Paul de Man's Wartime Writings: A Deconstructionist Dilemma," *Orbis Litterarum* 55.1 (2000), pp. 2-14; and Reed Way Dasenbrock, *Truth and Consequences: Intentions, Conventions, and the New Thematics* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), especially his chapter "Taking it Personally," pp. 85-106.

[97] In his article "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell," Derrida at one point tries to suggest that if one of de Man's articles "is [or seems?] necessarily contaminated by the forms of vulgar anti-Semitism that frame it, *these coincide in a literal fashion, in their vocabulary and logic, with the very thing that de Man accuses*, as if his article were denouncing the neighboring articles"; Jacques Derrida, "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man's War" (trans. Peggy Kamuf), *Critical Inquiry* 14:3 (1988), pp. 590-652 (625-26). Italics in original. The possibility that de Man's article mirrors the anti-Semitism of de Man's colleagues precisely because it endorses it is, unfortunately, not given full consideration.

trenchant critics. And yet Moore, Seeley, Jack and others I have mentioned go much, much further than Derrida in producing critical readings of these Christian texts. Either this means that Derrida is simply wrong about the impossibility of deconstructing Christianity, or Christianity is a much bigger, and less well policed, tent than he imagines. And the absence of belief is not sufficient to explain why Derrida seems to work, almost cautiously, from within a faith-based perspective. He is not always discussing the use others (such as Hegel) have made of the texts in question, and therefore one would still have to account for the missed opportunities when the focus is more or less exclusively the New Testament itself.

But even if none of these possibilities is wholly convincing in itself, the problem remains. The Derrida whose work serves to inspire biblical scholars in their readings of the New Testament, and the other Derrida whose readings of the New Testament can leave so much to be desired from a critical perspective, are one and the same. Does this mean that New Testament scholarship built upon a Derridean foundation is necessarily flawed? Certainly not. Younger critics often face an uphill battle in the academy when they try to work out their innovative approaches within traditionally conservative disciplines. Their efforts should be encouraged. And moreover, as I have been arguing all along, the inspiration Derrida provides certainly is justified. But so is a second (or, rather, a first) look at what happens when deconstruction and the New Testament intersect in Derrida's own work. This is especially true for those scholars working on New Testament texts, such as Revelation, about which Derrida has had something to say. A deconstructive study of, say, Revelation, which acknowledged both the merits and the defects of Derrida's work in "Of an Apocalyptic Tone," would ultimately be more successful at articulating and deploying critical methods, would lay claim to a greater critical acumen, than one which drew upon Derrida only generally. Such an awareness of where Derrida goes wrong, in other words, can only strengthen the work of New Testament scholars as they struggle, in so many vibrant ways, to get it right.

Abstract

Derrida is a source of profound inspiration for many scholars in recent New Testament studies. He makes available a variety of critical tools with which to

examine the fissures and rough edges of the New Testament texts, not (as with source and form critics) in order to reconstitute their origins and original meanings, but rather in recognition of the indeterminacies which constitute the texts themselves. Given his growing importance to the field, however, it is surprising to note that Derrida's own readings of the New Testament often fail to exemplify even the most basic possibilities that deconstruction has to offer. In his hands, the New Testament can take on a surprising resistance to deconstructive critique. This essay is primarily an effort at encouraging New Testament scholars (who clearly can out-Derrida Derrida with regard to the New Testament) to return to Derrida's readings of certain New Testament texts with a fresh, critical eye. It examines a number of Derrida's New Testament interventions, and in the process shows (a) the ways in which his reading of the texts is at odds with the critical project within which it is embedded, and (b) what a more adequately deconstructive reading of the same texts might look like. The article concludes with a complex of tentative thoughts on why Derrida's readings of the New Testament can seem so inadequately Derridean.