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Biblical Curses and the Displacement of Tradition (Book Review)

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In this thoughtful and complex volume, Brian Britt explores the fascinating world of the curse—beginning in ancient Israel and blossoming outward, in selected moments, toward the modern period and up to present-day debates regarding hate speech. Perhaps the most striking, general reminder offered by Britt’s study regards the juxtaposition of the frequency of ancient cursing vis-à-vis what would seem to be the loss of the curse among modern devotees of the biblical tradition. Cursing, oaths, and so on were apparently a common part of ancient religious discourse. But what about the “afterlives” (177) of these curses and their home in the world of powerful or numinous speech?

In the introduction Britt lays out the main contours of his arguments and summarizes the contents of the subsequent chapters. A curse is initially defined as “the use of words to threaten, invoke, or impose harm” (2), and thus Britt is able to pose a long-standing question: “do words have power, and if so, how does this power relate to other forms of power (divine and human)” (3). Curses are not simply the words themselves, in Britt’s conception, but rather function as a category of rhetorical analysis—curses draw power not just from the performative command of the speech act itself but also from their position within a variety of shared, imaginatively constructed social settings through time (4). Central to Britt’s project are two convictions: (1) biblical curses fundamentally resist the “sacred/secular dichotomy”; (2) biblical cursing was never destroyed or “secularized,”
but rather, through a (Freudian) process of “displacement,” curses continue to show up in mutated—and yet recognizably “biblical”—forms throughout the millennia. The topic of cursing has itself become a sort of subplot in the grand narratives of secularization that scholars have told throughout the twentieth century, and continue to tell. For example, in one of the more weighty volumes of this genre (not cited by Britt), A Secular Age (2007), the philosopher Charles Taylor talks of the emerging secular transformation in the sixteenth century in terms of the rise of “polite society,” a novel, public space of discourse that encouraged “a stance of cool and ironic distance from the heated, ugly, and frequently cruel and destructive actions of those in the grips of religious fervor” (Taylor, 241). Cursing, even biblical cursing, in such a society was viewed as retrograde. Britt insists, however, that the allure of the curse persisted through it all and that “no grand narrative alternative to secularization is necessary or available to carry on the conversation about the Bible, religion, and secularism” (21).

The rest of the study is divided into three major sections, covering cursing within the Hebrew Bible, curses in the early modern period, and the contemporary legacy of the curse. In chapter 1, “Covenant Curses as Models of Displacement,” Britt argues that ancient Israelite curses demonstrate the (allegedly value-neutral) phenomenon of “displacement,” since in the Hebrew Bible curses appear in different contexts and may demonstrate change through time. For example, Job’s curse acts (such as Job’s famous birth-day curse in Job 3:1 and the mouth-covering gesture in Job 40:4–5) are a kind of “self-silencing” and thus may “represent a displacement from a more outward-focused model of theodicy to a more inward one” (56). Following David Carr’s work in Writing on the Tablet of the Heart (2005), Britt sees writing, speech, and performance in the biblical curse tradition as a continuum of action, and the similarities between curse elements in various biblical and other Near Eastern texts may be attributed to a shared scribal milieu.

The six chapters that follow—divided into two sections, “Early Modern Cursing” (chs. 4–6) and “The Contemporary Legacy of Biblical Curses” (chs. 7–9)—are complex and rich and detail and do not submit to easy or simple summary. Nevertheless, in chapter 4, “Power and Profanity: Cursing in Seventeenth-Century England,” Britt argues that the biblical curse was not lost but rather displaced into the realms of politics and literature, thus again refuting the claim that curses can be easily drawn into a secularization narrative. For example, Shakespeare’s plays utilize cursing at points, though the effects are sometimes unclear, and the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed a rise of laws against, and condemnations of, profanity and swearing of various kinds. Characters in John Bunyan’s typically didactic The Life and Death of Mr Badman (1680) look with disapproving astonishment on those who curse with the ascendant sixteenth-century phrase “God damn me.” Such phrases (and particularly the singular word “damn” or
“damme”) thus begin to serve as a gesture toward biblical notions of powerful speech generally, though they are found not on the lips of prophets or of priests but on the lips of the singers of popular ballads and comedic actors (132–33).

Britt turns toward the nineteenth-century context of ballads in chapter 5, “Broadside Ballads, Lyrical Ballads, and the Wandering Jew: On the Literary Displacement of Powerful Speech.” Here Britt follows the path of curse-displacement through the works of Romantics such as Coleridge and Wordsworth. Coleridge’s famous “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” serves as an especially fascinating example of curse language and, potentially, the displacement phenomenon. In chapter 6, “Nietzsche and Freud, Cursing Moderns,” Britt focuses on the power of the curse in Nietzsche’s imprecations against Christianity, though in fact Nietzsche is forced to draw upon the (distinctively?) biblical power of the curse itself to do the cursing. However, Britt perceptively avers that Nietzsche was more subtle and understanding than many have recognized, in that Nietzsche “neither affirms nor denies religious claims but rather attempts to disrupt prevailing understandings of biblical tradition,” which amounts to “a serious attempt to understand the dynamic of tradition and change in biblical tradition” (179). Turning to Freud, Britt deepens his engagement with the displacement concept by discussing the famous “Rat Man” case. The elements of obsessing vowing or cursing by the “Rat Man” patient function, for Freud, “like an inverted Balaam,” thus revealing the religious significance of the curse both for the patient and for the psychoanalyst (200).

The twentieth-century American short story takes center stage in chapter 7, “Biblical Curses in American Fiction: Hurston and O’Conner.” Britt demonstrates the “dialectical relationship” between literature and religion in these stories, as both evoke supernatural elements alongside naturalism to tell the stories of justice attained or reimagined. Hurston’s “Sweat” involves a woman who utters what could be interpreted as a “curse” or prayer each night, wishing for her abusive husband to “reap his sowing”; he is later bitten and killed by a snake, raising the question of whether her incantation summoned the animal. O’Conner’s “Revelation” is particularly interesting, since the story’s main problem is introduced by a curse hurled at a woman, who is thus forced to question her own place in the universe and later receives a revelatory vision. Chapter 8, “Erasing Amalek: Remembering to Forget with Derrida and Biblical Tradition,” addresses, among other things, the odd curse against Amalek in Exod 17:14–16, in which the Israelites are promised that Amalek will be utterly forgotten—despite the fact that this act of forgetting is permanently inscribed in the Torah. Erasure is thus a kind of curse, an act of ongoing poiesis. As a final stage in the story of curses, Britt examines contemporary uses of powerful speech in chapter 9, “Curses Left and Right: Hate Speech and Biblical Tradition.” Something of the effect of the ancient power of words is felt in modern society, for certain types of words—such as those hurled against funeral mourners by the
infamous members of the Westboro Baptist Church or the words of witches and fortune tellers in modern Israel—are still thought to carry the power to harm (271–74). Where this power is thought to come from, Britt points out, is not often addressed, possibly because it forces us into the uncomfortable territory of trying to articulate “whether a purely secularist idea of powerful speech is possible” (276). Thus, religion lives on. In the conclusion, Britt summarizes the main currents of the previous discussions. Though they are “[t]heologically problematic, biblical curses may nevertheless be indispensable to biblical tradition from the beginning as instances and ideas of powerful words” (281).

For this reviewer, the portions of the book dedicated to cursing in early modern Europe, American fiction, and contemporary legal debates were often dazzling in the best of ways, original, and provocative. Indeed, Britt’s work here should be successful in fulfilling a mandate often bandied about in circles of biblical scholars (but rarely fulfilled in practice), that biblical scholars succeed in writing something that a nonbiblical scholar would actually want to read—or indeed, have to read. The insight Britt offers into Flannery O’Conner’s “Revelation” and the fate of its main character, Mrs. Turpin, is itself a kind of revelation and could serve very nicely as a required reading in college or graduate literature courses. Britt’s focus on the curse in this story offers an original and compelling view of the religious elements in this story, and he compares the notion of a curse-turned-to-blessing for O’Conner’s protagonist with a similar dynamic in the story of Shimei’s curse on David in 2 Sam 16:5–12. Unlike David, whose ongoing story after the attempted curse is made clear, “[t]he reader [of ‘Revelation’] leaves Mrs Turpin in a post-hieratic reverie, without learning whether the vision has transformed her heart” (232).

The opening chapters on the Bible, however, leave something to be desired. Because Britt has not, in my view, exactly offered a compelling view of what is “biblical” or distinctive about the curse traditions in the Hebrew Bible (if they can even be considered under a single rubric), the author sometimes struggles to articulate exactly what it is that he finds “biblical” about the curse traditions as they supposedly found a new home in later settings. What is “biblical” about the biblical curses themselves? This problem arises later in the study, where Britt adduces very vague and thus unconvincing examples of “biblical” displacements in later texts; in the chapter on Coleridge, for example, Britt states that the “Rime” “relates to biblical tradition” insofar as it “follows and fulfills a romantic ideal of poetry as a kind of powerful speech” (169). How is this distinctly “biblical”? Because Britt is determined to show that the sacred/secular dichotomy is not helpful in any time period and for any text, he is forced to argue that the biblical curse texts themselves represent “displacements” and do not submit to any narrative of historical or social change that could be laden down with a value judgment. One may find oneself confused, then, at the use of the term “displacement” in some instances, where the term seems to simply refer to “some change” or “something that is different from
something else,” in which case it would seem to be no great revelation that the Bible evokes different concepts of cursing (or anything). Does “displacement” only work diachronically? If so—and one would assume so?—then it must be predicated on a clear dating of the texts and traditions under discussion, a task Britt does not undertake.

I am thus duly suspicious of whether the “displacement” terminology has really solved any of the problems with “secularization” that Britt seeks to avoid, but of course interested readers can decide the issue for themselves. My sense is that Britt is not nearly as comfortable in the realm of biblical scholarship as he is in theory and literature more generally, evidenced by an overreliance on the secondary literature as a means of making arguments and by his struggle, at points, to make straightforward statements about the meaning of the materials he adduces. On page 88, Britt uncontroversially places Job in the category of “wisdom literature” and Jeremiah in “the prophets,” yet on this basis states that the birth-day curse in each book must resonate differently, since, “[a]s a wisdom text, Job is expected to raise questions of the meaning and value of life.” Of course, almost all of the prophet books—indeed, all of the Hebrew Bible’s books?—raise questions about “the meaning and value of life” in different ways, and traditionally conceived “wisdom” motifs are readily found in many contexts and genres (e.g., possibly in Ps 37; 2 Sam 20; Deuteronomy; Amos 3). Moreover, I found it somewhat odd that Britt did not deal with one of the more famous biblical curses: Jesus’ curse on the fig tree in Matt 21:19–21 // Mark 11:12–24. Further, readers may be interested to know how Britt would treat the paradox introduced into the biblical cursing tradition by the injunctions offered by Jesus (Matt 5:27) and James (James 5:12) that forbid extravagant oath language or, seemingly, cursing of any kind (?).

Overall, this book offers insights of value in every chapter and makes simultaneous contributions to the fields of secularization theory, biblical studies, psychoanalysis, modern American fiction, and contemporary hate speech. Whatever the value of the small criticisms I have offered above, then, this book stands as a weighty and learned addition to Sheffield’s Bible and the Modern World series, and the author is to be congratulated for the achievement it represents.