Britt, Brian

Rewriting Moses: The Narrative Eclipse of the Text

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In Rewriting Moses, Brian Britt argues that “There is a great difference, even a tension, between the reputation of Moses and the biblical account of him” (1). Therefore, his purpose in this book is to examine “the conjunctions and disjunctions between selected contemporary and biblical images of Moses” (8). Britt’s subtitle plays with Hans Frei’s famous terminology, reflecting a sense that the many portraits of Moses that have developed in the last two millennia have overshadowed the character who is actually present in the pages of the Bible. The plan of the book is to move back through time, against the chronological grain of the development of Moses as a cultural figure. In part 1 Britt examines contemporary novels about Moses, films about Moses, and scholarly reconstructions of Moses. An “interlude” examines the development of biblical traditions about Moses from late antiquity through the Middle Ages. Part 2 is a reading of “uncanny biblical texts.” In the process of this backward movement, Britt wishes to “follow the hermeneutical position of the contemporary reader gradually toward the ‘horizon’ of the biblical text itself (9).

Chapter 1, “Subverting the Great Man: Violence and Magic in Moses Fiction,” is primarily concerned with twentieth-century novels about Moses. A helpful chart of thirty-four works of literature about Moses from 1859 to 1998 appears on page 14. These are
mostly novels, but Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, along with one play, one opera, and two collections of poetry, are included. Britt concludes that most of the novels are “anxious to address crises but loathe to confront them,” so they “follow familiar patterns to form a literature of repression” (17). On the other hand, a minority of the novels resist the tendency toward repression and “could be called the literature of confrontation” (18). These are the works Britt is most interested in, and he devotes most of his attention to Zora Neale Hurston’s *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Lincoln Steffens’s *Moses in Red*, and Thomas Mann’s *Tables of the Law*. What these novels confront is “the myth of Moses as a great humanist and Romantic hero” (39). Each of these three works inserts Moses into a very specific sociopolitical context. In doing so, they bring out the great paradoxes present in Moses and the traditions that have grown up around him. Hurston, for example combines the Enlightenment/humanist vision of Moses with a portrait of Moses as a magician in a way that challenges both views and the cultural constructs they represent.

The second chapter, “Double-Moses: Gender and the Sacred in Moses Films,” is most concerned with the problem posed by the requirement that a film about Moses make him physically present. In contrast, “the biblical Moses is … ultimately defined by his absence” (42). This contrast mirrors that between the character named Moses in the Bible and the Moses of tradition who writes the Bible. Films about Moses deal with his ambiguous identity through the process of doubling, which runs along the lines of religion, race, and gender. Britt’s discussion of films gives primary attention to *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Moon of Israel* (1924), and *The Prince of Egypt* (1998). The discussion of *The Ten Commandments* makes use of Sigfried Kracauer’s distinction between “corroborative” and “debunking” films. DeMille’s classic falls into the corroborative category of films, which seeks to persuade the viewer to accept some view of reality without questioning it. Moses is “doubled” by his rival, Ramesses. “Their resemblance lies in their shared desire for Nefertiri and the Hebrews” (51). All three of these films “eclipse” the story of Moses in the book of Exodus, making no distinction between which elements are actually in the Bible and which are not, and by departing significantly from the biblical story line.

In “Legend and History in Modern Scholarly Portraits of Moses,” the third chapter, Britt evaluates the work on Moses by Julius Wellhausen, Hugo Gressmann, Martin Noth, Gerhard von Rad, and Martin Buber. Much of this material will be familiar to biblical scholars, of course. While Britt distinguishes von Rad and Buber from the others because of their explicit attempts to bring the Moses tradition to bear on the modern world, he finds in all five of these nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars a portrait of Moses common “among German idealists, which depicted him as a solitary individual and legendary hero” (80). In this sense, German scholarship of this era produced “a figure closer to the Moses of Philo and Josephus than the Bible” (80). As in the novels and the
movies, the biblical text was eclipsed, most often by attempts to go behind the text and to reconstruct ancient Israelite religion with Moses as its founder.

The interlude in chapter 4, “Concealment, Revelation, and Gender: The Veil of Moses in the Bible and in Christian Art,” looks at traditions that have developed around the episode in Exod 34:29–35. This is a richly developed chapter that includes clear black and white images of numerous works of art related to the tradition of the veil of Moses. Christian interpretation of this tradition, although often misguided, has been much more extensive than Jewish interpretation. Britt reviews both and offers explanations for the directions they have taken. The most prominent development was the association of the veiled Moses with the blindfolded figure of Synagoga, contrasted with Ecclesia in works of art in the Middle Ages. Britt argues that the veiled Moses has had limited direct appeal in Judaism and Christianity because it feminizes Moses and because it covers the powerful image of Moses’ shining (horned) face. Even when the veiled Moses is portrayed, it is often with his face only partially concealed, “making the tension between revelation and concealment visible and compelling” (114).

Part 2 of Rewriting Moses attempts a return to some uneclipsed texts. Chapter 5 is “Moses’ Heavy Mouth: Discourse and Revelation in Exodus 4:10–17.” Most of the chapter is a detailed literary interpretation of the text that gives careful attention to the structure and content of divine-human dialogue. “What is the significance of ineloquence in Exod. 4:10–17?” (125). This is Britt’s central question, and he proposes that “the diminution of speech in Moses’ commission implies the magnification of Moses’ other means of communication—writing” (126). The great mediator Moses must be mediated, by Aaron in the story and by written language in the biblical tradition.

Chapter 6, “The Torah of Moses: Deuteronomy 31–32 as a Textual Memorial,” offers a detailed analysis of a text that stands out in both form and content from the preceding portions of the book of Deuteronomy. The literary development of the text is the major focus of attention, but Britt argues that its composite nature is a critical element in the way it functions. “The hermeneutical processes within the Bible also intersect with canon formation” (142). The “layered composition” of the text illustrates its role as a “textual memorial.” These ideas carry over into chapter 7, “The Song and the Blessing: Poetic discourse in Deuteronomy 32–33,” in which Britt claims that “the Song and the Blessing self-consciously combine diverse textual strata into a sacred text that is at once a fixed document, a traditium, and the manifestation of an interpretive process, or traditio.” Again, an extensive literary analysis of the texts in view is provided. This analysis highlights the connection of the Deut 32–33 complex with other pentateuchal texts, particularly the song of Jacob in Gen 49. Britt concludes that these chapters expand the
scope of Deuteronomy and develop the biblical tradition of Moses as both a character developed within the text and a writer in whose work the text is developed.

In the final chapter, “The Birth, Death, and Writing of Moses,” Britt asserts that “Moses remains an elusive character.” In particular, “the birth and death of Moses call attention to the process of forming a written tradition centered on covenant and people rather than legend or biography of a hero” (165). The elusiveness of these stories takes the attention of the Bible off of Moses, an effort that was thwarted by later handlers of the tradition such as Philo and Josephus. The birth and death stories play an important role in legitimating writing as a mediator of the tradition. The struggle between the life of Moses and the written Torah begins there and continues in the “after-lives” of the biblical text.

Despite a beginning that may raise some doubts, Britt’s decision to move in chronological reverse succeeds admirably. *Rewriting Moses* carries the reader back through two and a half millennia of tradition about Moses and finds a strange and elusive being whose hidden birth and hidden death frame a life that struggles with the hiddenness of lonely mountaintops and a veiled face. This book manages to bring together modern cultural analysis and rich, creative biblical exegesis in a complexity worthy of the character for which it searches.