

Borges y la Biblia

Gonzalo Salvador

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As is implicit in the title, Gonzalo Salvador's *Borges y la Biblia* examines the presence of the Bible in Borges's writings. It comprises three parts, the first, a review of Biblical representation in literature, the second, discussing Borges's relationship with the Bible, and the last, an analysis of the significance of a small number of biblical figures in Borges's writing, most particularly in his poetry.

In section one, looking at the changing attitude to the Bible in Dante, Milton and Blake, the author notes that for Dante, writing within a late-medieval tradition, theology could be a source for poetical imagination though within decreed canonical boundaries, whereas for Milton, coming in the wake of Protestantism, it was a much more personal reading, in which the poet's interpretation took central space. In the case of Blake, however, whose reading appeared unmediated (by theology), it was as if he were writing the Biblical text afresh, traditional echoes and memories surviving only as traces. The sole explicit connection with Borges is the observation that just as Dante was a poet who used theology as a theme—not an end—Borges was a poet who used philosophy in the same way. To read the one as a theologian is as misguided as to read the other as a philosopher. The implicit connection, one assumes, is to contextualize Borges's unorthodox approach and suggest it as a sequel to these

literary precedents. Some discussion on these lines might have given this interesting and informative chapter greater justification, particularly with regard to the vast critical bibliographical information provided without comment, both here and elsewhere. At a time when this information is readily available on the internet, it is as well to keep such references to works consulted, with some guidance as to how they related to the arguments put forward.

The second section consists largely of well-known biographical information about Borges's relationship with the Bible, and repeats some of his more famous dissenting declarations on this topic. Salvador argues that Borges's free thinking, his "falta de compromiso etimológico" (53), accounts for the peaceful co-existence of a wide variety of belief-systems in his creative output. In this chapter, there is ample evidence of assiduous research into the existing body of criticism, though it may be felt that the author leans somewhat too heavily on this material. His main focus is on the importance of Cabbala in Borges's religio-poetic imaginary, and on the treatment of the Cabalistic notion of divinely inspired writing, but offers little contribution to this debate. In a chapter on the Book of Job, Salvador discusses Borges's admiration for the biblical text, in particular for the way it conveys through poetic means the idea of God's inscrutability, the ultimate mystery of God. He quotes at length the passage relating to the mythical Behemoth and Leviathan, symbolic monstrous figures of supernatural dimension, to substantiate this assertion. Salvador emphasizes the importance of the Book of Job as a source of poetic inspiration, and as a metaphor for an unfathomable universe, putting forward the idea that it is for Borges "el precursor de toda la literatura fantástica, cuyo valor fundamental reside, en definitiva, en ser símbolos de problemas humanos universales" (74). As an indication of the general tenor of this discussion, a list of allusions to the Biblical story is relegated to a footnote, and while the quotation that is the epigraph to "Deutsches Requiem" is included, there is no discussion of how it might relate to the main story.

Having set the scene in these two expository chapters Salvador's study comes into its own in the last chapter of his book, where he offers closer readings of Borges's texts in an insightful analysis of certain Biblical texts or themes which he considers crucial. The detailed quotations from the original provides a useful referent for the argument put forward.

Although most of this discussion relates to the poetry, rightly regarded a more personal and direct expression of Borges's ideas, there are some welcome allusions to their fictional treatment, though at a somewhat superficial level. Salvador is reluctant to read against the grain. His overall preoccupation is with fundamental considerations, and not with the ambiguities presented in the fiction, as I argue below. *Ecclesiastes*, consistently and unaccountably referred to as Qohélet, its transliteration from the Hebrew, is singled out as the closest in spirit to Borges's awareness of mankind's epistemological limitations and to the radical skepticism that underlies his entire output. As the author perceptively concludes, “[e]n el *Eclesiastés* Borges parece encontrar un precedente de su personal cosmovisión” (145).

The linking of Adam with Christ in terms of different approaches to temporality is convincingly argued, invoking the residence in the Garden as a metaphor of eternity in contrast to the Labyrinth, used largely as a metaphor for an exile whose only way out is death. The slavery of temporality versus the nostalgia of atemporality (117) is well observed as a persistent motif, though the Swiftian flavor of a story such as “El inmortal” belies this contention. Salvador propounds that Adam and Christ are linked in their temporality, Adam by his banishment, and Christ for having become Flesh, “para andar entre los hombres” (125), both tragic heroes. While allusions to the story of Cain and Abel are examined in a number of poems in which sibling envy is the central theme, its treatment in the ensuing discussion regarding individuality and duality in transcendental terms is insightful, as is the discussion on the eventual cancellation of difference as a surprising consequence of rivalry, but I miss some mention of a differing approach, such as in “La intrusa,” for instance, surely a paean to brotherly love. With regard to rivalry in gaucho literature, I would point out that hatred and envy are not always the case, for in “Biografía de Isidoro Tadeo Cruz (1829-1874),” the confrontation on “la llanura,” while recalling its biblical setting, leads to solidarity, and the violence in “El fin” leads to continuation. Although “ludic” may not be a term that one readily associates with Borges's treatment of Judas, it is incisively linked by Salvador to the blurring of categories of postmodernism, and Cain and Judas are joined interestingly as “figuras bíblicas malditas.”

As one of the very few books on this topic, *Borges y la Biblia* is a welcome addition to Borges studies. It offers a helpful overview of previous investigations but its most valued contribution is in the author's sensitive and original presentation of his own ideas.

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