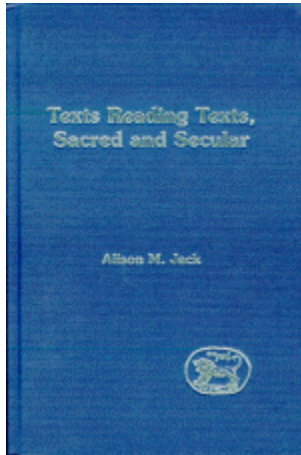


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Jack, Alison M.

Texts Reading Texts, Sacred and Secular: Two Postmodern Perspectives

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Literary theory has been a growing influence in NT studies since the late 1980s. What distinguishes this book (hardly a typical NT dissertation) from other recent literary studies of the NT and Revelation is that the author breaks free of the canon and engages other secular literature as an object of critical inquiry on equal terms with the biblical text. This is not another literary study of Revelation but a study of Revelation and the Scottish author James Hogg's 1824 Gothic novel, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. The effort is noteworthy and well worth the attention of scholars interested in where literary theory can lead NT studies.

The Introduction (chap. 1) sets out the main theoretical issues at stake in reading any text, including the Bible, and argues strongly for postmodern literary perspectives, including but not limited to Derrida's classical theory of deconstruction. In a relatively short chapter, the author lays out the major problems in the role(s) of author, text, and reader in a clear and concise manner. Well-versed in the nuances of recent critical discourse, she argues consistently for a postmodern perspective by foregrounding issues of marginality and canonicity. The definitions of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction here (pp. 28-30) are key to the plan of the book. Part I is a postmodern, ideological reading of the two texts, focusing on Hogg's *Confessions* and the Apocalypse as marginalized texts, while Part II reads the same texts from the classic Derridean perspective.

Jack also begins here the difficult task of convincing the reader that a comparison of Hogg's *Confessions* and John's Apocalypse is at least worthwhile, if not illuminating for both the texts themselves and postmodern critical theory. The average biblical scholar who reads this review or picks up Jack's book might not be an expert on James Hogg, the "Etrick Shepherd," or his most famous novel (I certainly was not!). Hogg's *Confessions* combines the "found" copy of the "Confessions" of Robert Wringhim, who murders his (half-?) brother George Colwan under the shadowy influence of the (satanic?) Gil-Martin, and the "Editor's Narrative," which frames the "Confessions." Studies of Hogg and this novel in particular seem to be on the rise, at least in British circles, in part because of his position outside the traditional literary canon and the "deconstructed" nature of the novel itself. Jack seems to have completed this book before the advent of *The Blair Witch Project*, but both books might get a bounce from that indie film phenomenon, since Hogg has been cited as a precedent (http://www.shootthemessenger.com.au/9910/f_bwitch.html). Reading from a postmodern position, the novel raises questions of intertextuality, the ability of the authorial voice to convey intended meaning, and fixed determinations of meaning in texts. For Jack, the novel also calls into question the status of the Bible as an authoritative text, as it is used by the characters Gil-Martin and the strict Calvinist Wringhim Sr. Jack labors mightily to keep Hogg's *Confessions* and Revelation together, but this reader viewed the connection with some skepticism. Jack makes frequent use of L. Hutcheon's notion of "ex-centric" texts (*A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* [London: Routledge, 1988]) in her reading of Hogg and Revelation. But as often as Jack points out the "ex-centric" character of Hogg's *Confessions*, she is unsuccessful at establishing Hogg himself as a marginalized character. For instance, she fails to note that nine years before the publication of the *Confessions*, Hogg had received the patronage of the Duke of Buccleuch, including the granting of a farm at no rent. He was also a lifelong friend of Sir Walter Scott. Jack's comparison of Hogg to the marginalized community of Qumran or John and his early Christian readers seems forced.

In Part I, "Marginalization," Jack constructs postmodern readings of Hogg's *Confessions* (chap. 2) and the Apocalypse (chap. 3) that focus on how the two texts read the Bible. Jack sees the *Confessions* as calling into question fixed, determined meanings of the Bible and indeed the status of any sacred text. For Jack, Hogg's reading of the Bible is "ex-centric," revealing his own marginalized position in Scottish literary society. Jack develops her argument by describing the influential views on the Bible of Thomas Boston, an Etrick minister accused of antinomian sympathies stemming from his belief in the predestined grace of God, and other 18th-19th century Scottish preachers (pp. 49-54). Hogg "realizes the inadequacy of [such] fixed interpretations of the Bible, and weaves that realization into his text" (p. 58). The novel in effect becomes "proof" for Jack of the merits of postmodern literary theory and even Derrida's "deferred meaning and endless supplementarity" (59). Her claim that Hogg decenters the authority of the Bible (pp. 69-74) brought to my mind Hogg's more influential Scottish predecessor David Hume, whose "Of Miracles" in 1748 questioned the Bible's authority in a more radically

modern, rather than postmodern, way. Jack further sees satire of the Bible as an example of postmodern decentering of the text (p. 66), without noting the tradition of satire in 18th century British literature. Since Jack was placing Hogg in historical context, a broader perspective on the history of ideas and literature might have strengthened this chapter.

In chapter 3, Jack argues that Revelation's reading of the Hebrew Bible reveals its situation as a marginalized text. She begins by entering deeply into the debates about midrash and postmodernism (pp. 75-87; Appendix 1 consists of Genesis Rabbah 19.9-10) and intertextuality and the NT (pp. 88-94), focusing chiefly on Paul and Richard Hays (*Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989]), and then on Revelation and Stephen Moyise (*The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation* [JSNTSup. 115; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995]). In her apt critique of Moyise, Jack recognizes that Revelation does not read the HB as a stable and privileged text but rather as a reconfigured and subverted text (pp. 93-94). She then charts briefly the scholarship on the social setting of the Apocalypse (pp. 94-104), choosing typical examples rather than surveying the field, and giving the nod to the position of Leonard Thompson (*The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* [Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990]). The next step is to explore an example of intertextuality in Revelation itself by delving into a complex triangulation of Revelation 11, Ezekiel 37, and 4Q385 2 ("Second Ezekiel," reprinted in Appendix 2), in part around their readings of Gen 2:7. Jack sees an analogy between the marginalized communities of Qumran and Revelation and their common "ex-centric" readings of the HB (109). She then examines the hitherto unnoted echo of Ezek 37:10 in Rev 11:11; 4Q385 2 lines 5-8 draw on the same passage from Ezekiel. A key difference is how the texts reconstruct the role of the prophet: whereas Second Ezekiel hides the prophet's role and yields center stage to Yahweh, John steps forward in the Apocalypse, identifying himself with the prophet Ezekiel, the two witnesses in Revelation 11 and Christ himself as he asserts his own self-importance (p. 117). An "incidental" and historical-critical excursus on the tree in 4Q385 2 line 10 as the tree of life (pp. 117-24) does not fit with the chapter or the methodology of the book itself and should have been published elsewhere as a critical note. Jack's conclusion (p. 124) that Second Ezekiel has "radically transformed" the promise of restoration in Ezekiel 37 is overstated, given the broad traditions of biblical reinterpretation in Second Temple Judaism, but her focus on Revelation's exclusionary inversion and delay of Ezekiel's promise for the early Christian readers who accept John's alternative vision effectively foregrounds a generally unrecognized aspect of the use of the HB in the Apocalypse.

In Part II, "Deconstruction," Jack follows similar patterns for each text, the *Confessions* in chapter 4 and Revelation in chapter 5. She describes traditional readings of the text in which commentators have found stable and closed meanings that accord with the author's intentions; contrasts that with recent critics' deconstruction of the text; and then offers her own deconstructed readings. Both texts are full of inconsistencies and instabilities. But whereas critics have traditionally either explained these as intentional

strategies of the author or have found ways (often ingenious) that the reader can resolve them, Jack views them as marks of the indeterminacy of the text and the merit of deconstruction as a literary theory. For Hogg's *Confessions*, Jack borrows from Tina Pippin's "reading from the Abyss" ("Peering into the Abyss: A Postmodern Reading of the Biblical Bottomless Pit," in *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament*, 251-68 [ed. E. S. Malbon and E. V. McKnight; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994]) and applies that perspective to both the *Confessions* and, somewhat inexplicably, Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* of 1833. Reading from the abyss or pit in Hogg's *Confessions* destabilizes all sense of meaning, including the authority of the Bible and the notion of God. For Revelation, Jack surveys and critiques the interpretations of D. H. Lawrence and Austin Farrer, with somewhat more favor towards Lawrence, and then turns to Derrida and Tina Pippin again, this time her *Death and Desire : The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992). Jack presents her own reading of "The Nightmare Worlds of Revelation" (197-204), a reading that foregrounds the controlling images of keys and doors and the conflicting claims of God. For Jack, God attempts to impose a hierarchy of control in the Apocalypse, but the unstable text undermines all claims for authority. Reading Revelation as nightmare allows the reader to reject it as scripture, lifting the burden imposed by the text and freeing the reader to construct "an alternative vision of the future that does not involve torture, anxiety and loss of control and independence" (p. 204).

A fine Conclusion (chap. 6) does not merely summarize the points of the book but tackles the main methodological problems raised: the compatibility of postmodern ideological readings of "ex-centric" texts and classic deconstruction theory; and the comparison of Revelation and a 19th century Scottish novel. She does not really justify the "strange and arbitrary" combination of Hogg and Revelation (208), but has penetrating insights on the use of theory in NT studies. By juxtaposing postmodern and classic deconstruction readings, Jack offers two points of view on critical theory for her reader to consider. If one accepts deconstruction's philosophical premises, she asks (p. 207), can any reading still look to the social context of the author and the original reading community? Such a question is crucial to biblical studies, which has by far emphasized historical methodologies. And thus also postmodern ideological readings have been more readily accepted by the scholarly community than classic deconstruction. Jack hopes that the "shock" of deconstruction might be softened by the postmodern readings in Part I, but one must wonder if the shock is not really meant to support the more historically grounded ideological perspective. That at least is the effect.

Although the book raises a number of methodological and interpretational problems, it is also a fascinating combination of theory and exegesis that could be a signpost for future literary studies of the NT. The work is overly reliant on prior scholarship for reading both Hogg's *Confessions* and Revelation; Jack's exegetical contributions on their own are minimal. But by combining different postmodern perspectives, and especially by combining the study of the two texts, Jack has gone beyond previous efforts at

postmodern readings of the NT. The pastiche of texts and methods itself almost becomes a metaphor for postmodern theories of literature. Literary students of the NT should take note.