

A Response to Athalya Brenner

SEBASTIAN SELVÉN

Högskolan Dalarna

see@du.se

We have all learned a biblical, New Testament, concept: quarantine. First used in Venice in the fourteenth century, a forty-day period of isolation was imposed on arriving ships in order to safeguard against the Black Death. This forty-day period, in Venetian called *quarantena*, was modelled on the *Quadragesima*, Lent, and the forty days that Jesus spent in the desert. In fact, the three related concepts, quarantine, the forty days in the desert, and Lent, were for quite a while used synonymously in English, as for example in William Wey's fifteenth-century poem in his *Itineraries*:¹

By yonde ys a wyldernys of quarentyne,
Wher Cryst wyth fastyng hys body dyd pyne;
In that holy place, as we rede,
The deuyl wold had of stonys bred.

The cliff that, according to tradition, was the location of Jesus' fast, was in the middle ages called Mount Quarantania and in Anglo-Norman, *un quarantain* was the term for a forty-day fast. That the Venetians, in their attempt to control the spread of the plague, reached for the number forty, and that this forty-day period got associated with Lent and the temptation in the desert, was all but inevitable in a period steeped in biblical literary references. When so much literature and so many cul-

¹ Wey, William, *The Itineraries of William Wey, Fellow of Eton College; To Jerusalem, A.D. 1458 and A.D. 1462; and to Saint James of Compostella, A.D. 1456. From the Original Manuscript in the Bodleian library* (London: Roxburghe Club, 1857), 14.

tural practices related to the Bible, it should come as no surprise that the Bible also surfaced in an early version of the field of epidemiology.

In Brenner's paper, we have seen a modern version of this phenomenon: in biblically literate circles, biblical references, models, and explanations will tint the understanding of modern-day events, be they cultural or biological. It has also become painfully clear that those pre-understandings and interpretative frames can be as destructive as they can be constructive. The Charedi communities and their response to the Covid-19 pandemic can of course not, as Brenner is keenly aware of, be reduced to religious norms, texts, and traditions. Socioeconomic realities, language barriers, and insular media are just as influential factors in shaping the communities' strategies and practical conduct.

That religious behaviour does play a part is, however, clear from the insistence in Israel on keeping synagogues open. It is not just present-day ritual life that has been the subject of discussion when we think about the last year and a half and how religious communities have coped with the situation. An important aspect concerns the resources in the traditions themselves that have been marshalled in navigating a new public space with new norms.

Brenner mentions the Rabbinic adage "all Israel are responsible to/for each other" (b. Šeb. 39a). This reminds me of other, earlier responses to epidemics and calamities. Venice and the forty-day "Lent" quarantine is one example of traditional, textual resources mingling with responses in people's here and now. Other examples come to mind as well.

One such example is a set of prayers, rituals, and, for that matter, desperate filicides during the First Crusade, modelled on the sacrifice of Isaac and invoking the expiating powers of the *efro shel Yitzchaq*, the ashes of Isaac who in ancient interpretative traditions was sacrificed and later resurrected. Rabbinic sources describe a ritual which was supposed to have taken place in times of great communal need, in which the community would carry the ark of the covenant into the square, don sackcloth and put ashes on the head of everyone involved. In b. Ta'an. 16a it is explained as a reminder to G-d of the atoning ashes of Isaac.

This belief is also reflected in the Aramaic translation of 1 Chr 21:15, where the Bible describes the plague brought about by David counting the Israelites: “The Lord sent His angel to Jerusalem to destroy it. As he was about to destroy, God saw and repented of the evil ...” In the Aramaic, this account is embellished:

The word of God sent an angel to Jerusalem to destroy it, and when He came to destroy it He saw the ashes from the binding of Isaac at the base of the altar, and remembered His covenant with Abraham.

The context here—David having conducted a census—goes hand in hand with the other plague measure known to ancient Jews, that is, not to count Jews, something that to this day can cause trouble when ascertaining whether you have a *minyán*, the liturgically required quorum of ten.

In both these measures—the rich but these days rarely used repository of prayers and practices relating to the dead Isaac, and the taboos surrounding counting Israelites or Jews—we see responses to communal crises, especially epidemic crises. It is assumed, just as Brenner has pointed out, that the logic behind these biblical texts, is that G-d is both the bringer of, and refuge from, calamity, an assumption powerfully carried over into these later practices.

One thing becomes clear, in these brief examples and in the picture of modern Israel that Brenner has painted, and that is the relevance, acute and painful, of the Bible and the interpretative traditions related to it.

Brenner’s last point, in a paper that rightly highlights the pain involved when texts and traditions meet calamity, is the one that might be the most *intellectually* painful: the disappointment that Brenner describes in the failure of biblical scholars to engage in current affairs and discussions. I can only second this observation, that uninspired re-readings of Gunkel and von Rad or, depending on your temperament, Ricoeur and Gadamer, will always be more highly valued than saying something of importance to society.

That the *Bible* is important should be clear, but is *biblical studies* important—or even relevant—to anyone? The question leads me to the observation made concerning modern university philosophy, by Richard Rorty who in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* notes that intellectual or philosophical intuition is really just ...

... a certain technical vocabulary—one which has no use outside of philosophy books and which links up with no issues in daily life, empirical science, morals, or religion.²

Seeing as philosophy only really exists as a hermetically sealed university field, and the only viable career path for a philosophy student is to become a philosophy teacher for new philosophy students, it is hard to argue against this harsh assessment. Sadly, biblical scholars are hardly in any position to gloat. One can with the author of Song of Songs say of biblical studies that: “Your neck is like an ivory tower” (Song 7:4).

One way of putting the question is: What are biblical scholars really good for? Most of us are teaching at state universities, and all of us receive tax funding. Whence do we derive our mandate to pour all these resources into this particular work and not, say, *Moby Dick*? Why should we claim public funding and who are we conducting our research for, except for one another in the guild, so to speak?

The importance of the Bible is clear. Even within a Nordic context, where the Bible has been marginalised in the public sphere over the course of the twentieth century, interpretations of the Bible can still affect politics. The issue of same-sex marriage in Finland, which was only allowed in 2017 after resistance from Lutheran bishops, is only one possible example. An example from Sweden is, of course, the presence of ostensibly secular parties within the Church of Sweden. In Israel, family legislation is mainly left to religious institutions such as the Chief Rabbinate, and the relevance of the Bible to American political debates should be obvious. On issues such as refugees, marriage, and abortion

² Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 22.

rights, the Bible is, in many countries and communities, relevant material to bring to the discussions.

Culturally, too, the Bible might not command the same centrality as it once did, but it is still one of the most recognisable literary works in the West. It is thus not hard to make an argument for putting more money into studying the Bible than, say, James Joyce's grocery lists. What is at issue is, rather, how the study of this influential text is conducted. One should of course take care not to cater too much to the demands of the day, but if what is demanded is guidance on abortion rights, and what is supplied is observations concerning phonemes of ancient Ugaritic, then we will simply not be around for much longer. The problem is, of course, that there is not much status in outreach and popular education. Getting another paper published is what will help your career.

What to make of a situation in which we in the humanities both want to fight for our intellectual independence, where the relevance of our research might not be obvious in a marketplace, but where we should also feel the urgent pressure of our duty to reach out?

Often, arguments in favour of the relevance of the humanities quickly degenerate into high-minded slogans. Knowledge for the sake of knowledge is not a bad such slogan but does not provide us with any mechanism for discerning bad scholarship or pointless research projects. And frankly speaking: if that is our rallying call, then we have already been pushed back to the last line of defence.

Simply put: when do we know when we are barking up the wrong tree, if we do not take contemporary relevance into account as one important, albeit not determining, factor?

For us, the outside world consists mainly of religious groups and organisations. Of course we should not work in liaison with religious communities, letting them dictate the direction or content of either teaching or researching. The vulnerability of biblical studies in Sweden in relationship to the training programmes of priests for the Church of Sweden is a highly problematic academic situation already.

On the other hand, an attitude of studied irrelevance will lead to the further decline of what used to be the country's most prestigious field of academic study; what used to be called Oriental languages and which was the subject of the highest-ranking chair in Sweden-Finland through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. History has turned the topology of academic chairs and funding against theology but has already bequeathed us with an alliance with one religious community, the Lutheran majority church. Whether we want to see and acknowledge that is another question, but there are other religious groups out there with which dialogue, rather than dependence, is possible.

We do have one great, but rarely used, strength built into the field. Biblical studies is a strange creature, methodologically speaking, with a built-in interdisciplinarity. Biblical studies as a field is defined not by its methods but by its object of study: the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts that make up the Jewish and Christian canonical bibles. In that endeavour, we come together from the fields of philology, linguistics, archaeology, history, theology, literature studies, etcetera, and often link up with church history, Jewish studies and other fields as well. The field is inherently multidisciplinary in its approaches, methods, and research interests.

The problem is more one of relevance and reception: How often and in what ways are we read and heard outside of university walls? We cannot do much about the plummeting cultural relevance of the biblical texts. This is not Venice in the 1300s. But our mandate obliges us to engage with society outside of the academic world, and that means primarily with those members of society who do take the Bible seriously and where interpretations of the Bible matter when it comes to lifestyle and ethics.

To put it sharply: A gay teen's suicide in an evangelical family is, in part, a failure on our part to engage with the outside world of religious communities in problematising interpretative traditions. It is not up to use to "save" the "unenlightened" masses when they might have robust interpretative traditions of their own, capable of generating knowledge

about the text, just because their knowledge traditions are not part of the long Enlightenment project to which Western universities have become so tightly intertwined. These Enlightenment perspectives are historically contingent and will one day be replaced in turn. That does not make them any less relevant here and now. It also does not make older knowledge traditions based on earlier epistemologies any less relevant. It is, however, up to us to engage those reading traditions and communities the same way academic fields generally engage relevant communities, interest groups, even clients. Whether this is as a thorn in the side for problematic reading traditions or as a knowledge and perspective provider for laudable efforts within religious communities, will have to depend on context and situation.

It should be an obvious, even assumed, part of our research goals to reach out with our results concerning these texts to those communities that engage most directly with those texts. Engineering is not studied to keep constructing the ivory tower, but the parking lot around it. Our ivory tower might be found in the Song of Songs, but should, equally, be part of a public or communal conversation.