

# Abandoning Theology for Theory: Stephen D. Moore, Gilles Deleuze, and the Secularization of Biblical Studies

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## INTRODUCTION:

### ANTON FRIDRICHSEN AND A CRISIS OF EXEGESIS?

In the pioneering issue of *Svensk exegetisk årsbok*, founder and editor Anton Fridrichsen (1888–1953)—“undoubtedly the greatest Scandinavian New Testament scholar of this century”—published the important programmatic article: “Realistic Interpretation of the Bible: A Scientific Demand and a Practical Desideratum.” Here, Fridrichsen draws attention to *the* crisis of the modern study of the Bible, diagnosing it in terms of its relation to “method.”<sup>1</sup> Ruminating first on the “unparalleled prosperity” in the fields of philology, ancient history and archaeology during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Fridrichsen states that:

Never before has the exegetical study of the biblical writings experienced such a high watermark scientifically, as during the period from Strauss and Baur to Wellhausen, Holtzmann, Jülicher and Harnack. Both quantitatively and qualitatively the exegetical achievement of these past hundred years is really

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<sup>1</sup> Chrys C. Caragounis and Tord Fornberg, “Preface” in *Exegetical Writings: A Selection*. Trans. and eds. Chrys C. Caragounis and Tord Fornberg. WUNT 76 (Tübingen: J. C. B Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1994), ix.

extraordinary. And yet the Church today reverberates with the cry for a new interpretation. Here also a strange fact meets us, that this immense boom in biblical science coincides exactly with the period during which the Bible lost its dominant position in the West. This is the situation in which we find ourselves at present and to which we must devote our attention. It is obvious that the parallel in crisis of interpretation of both humanities and theology points to something common, something generally applicable to the situation. However, the latter issue has its own particular form and is fraught with its own peculiar problems within the sphere of the Church and theology.<sup>2</sup>

Without a nomenclature explicitly drawing attention to a notion of “secularism,” Fridrichsen is clearly worried about tribulations afflicting methodologically oriented and post-Christian biblical studies, in terms of “the period during which the Bible lost its dominant position in the West.”<sup>3</sup> The science of the Bible is caught in a relay of the domains of a methodic, secular “Caesar” and theological interests of “Christ,” as it were. Scholarly “interpretation” produced by theological faculties housed in the state-funded universities signified by the names Strauss *et al.*,<sup>4</sup> are

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<sup>2</sup> Anton Fridrichsen, “Realistic Interpretation of the Bible. A Scientific Demand and a Practical Desideratum.” in *Exegetical Writings*, 21–22; “Realistisk bibelutläggning. Ett vetenskapligt krav och ett praktiskt önskemål.” *SEÅ* 1 (1936), 20–30 (21).

<sup>3</sup> A contemporary analysis of this thesis is found in relation to so-called “Nordic Bibles.” The editors of the volume bearing the same name as this concept “investigates, by means of case studies, how the so-called ‘Great Code’ of Christianity and Western culture, despite all rumors of religious and cultural amnesia, is remembered and mobilized in the public sphere of the Nordic countries today”: Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, Kasper Bro Larsen, and Outi Lehtipuu, “Bible Reception in a Nordic Context” in *The Nordic Bible: Bible Reception in Contemporary Nordic Societies*, eds. Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, Kasper Bro Larsen, and Outi Lehtipuu (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 3–4.

<sup>4</sup> The names mentioned by Fridrichsen are important with relation to the problem of secularism, modern biblical criticism, and theological faculties reliant upon governmental resources and policies. I would like especially to draw attention to F. C. Baur, who was founder and leader of the “Tübingen school of theology,” and Julius Wellhausen who moved between Göttingen university, Philipps-Universität Marburg, Greifswald university and Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg and is of particular interest because of his resignation from Greifswald because of tensions between theology and “historical criticism.”

recast as wholly subservient to ends other than “the Church” and “theology”, according to Fridrichsen. A juxtaposition appears where scientific prosperity in the fields and “methods” of philology, history and archaeology is celebrated while also underlining specific, ecclesial needs. From a scholarly perspective, and in accordance with Fridrichsen’s interpretive framework, the New Testament demands interpretation that is uncompromisingly Christological and kerygmatic in orientation. A genuine apprehension of the message conveyed in the earliest Christian texts presupposes a disposition of loyal empathy and an earnest commitment to understanding their theological substance. It is only by engaging these writings with a readiness to perceive the faith they articulate that one can grasp the proclamation at their core: Κύριος Ἰησοῦς. At the same time, Fridrichsen praises the advancement of the history of religion-approach and claims that “exegetical research can and may never be directly edificational, its only aim is historical truth, no other consideration is valid.”<sup>5</sup>

Fridrichsen’s observations are significant on many levels, I claim. First, and to speak with Michel Foucault (1926–1984), Fridrichsen is correct to draw attention to a significant shift in expression of Scripture. In pre-modern societies and *episteme*, Scripture exercised a high level of “pastoral power” in Europe. With the arrival of the European Enlightenment, the societal and cultural hegemony of Scripture came under attack and partially withers away from Western societies.<sup>6</sup> There is a significant change taking place in the wake of the “religious wars” of 16–17<sup>th</sup> century, and the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648) in particular, resulting not least in the emergent political context of nation-states. The new political role of Scripture is to be located with relation to Enlightenment critique of religion and developments of an invigorated scientific

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<sup>5</sup> Fridrichsen, “Realistic Interpretation of the Bible,” 25.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651) and Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-political treatise* (1670).

investigation of the Bible, which ends up producing interpretations hostile toward a dogmatic interest.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, Fridrichsen's language of "interpretation" ("talkning") unwillingly perhaps underlines the importance of treating modern scholarship itself as dependent upon certain kinds of "publics", and thereby also locates modern biblical criticism within the domain of a reception history of the Bible.<sup>8</sup> Fridrichsen is in many respect one of the last champions of a large scale, programmatic theological study of the New Testament in Scandinavia, and in this respect is of particular importance in relation to the history of the discipline.<sup>9</sup> In the end, Fridrichsen's own prototype for a new type of biblical theology and interpretation, based on scientific methods (called "realistic interpretation"), leaves no significant mark on Scandinavian exegesis, and "a crisis" of theological interpretation of the Bible in research has arguably

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<sup>7</sup> Foucault discusses the role of the Bible and modern politics—especially with relation to the shift from pastoral power to governmentality—in the lecture series *Security, territory, population: lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78*. Ed. Michel Senellart, Trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and lecture 1 March 1978. On the political role of the Bible in 17–19<sup>th</sup> century and the relation of modern exegesis and secularism, see: Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: translation, scholarship, culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Jeffrey L. Morrow, *Three Skeptics and the Bible: La Peyrere, Hobbes, Spinoza, and the Reception of Modern Biblical Criticism*. Eugene (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016); and Scott Hahn and Jeffrey L. Morrow, *Modern Biblical Criticism as a Tool of Statecraft (1700–1900)* (Steubenville: Emmaus Academic, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> In relation to Jonathan Roberts' definition of Bible reception as comprising "every single act or word of interpretation of that book (or books) over the course of three millennia" it is important not to neglect biblical scholarships as "intepretation" and connected to a particular epistemic, modern context. Jonathan Roberts, "Introduction," in *Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, ed. Michael Lieb et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.

<sup>9</sup> This claim needs to be substantiated with relation to the *œuvre* of other professors of the New Testament in Scandinavia during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a project I intend to follow up and discuss in depth in another study.

prevailed to the present moment.<sup>10</sup> According to one of Fridrichsen's own disciples, Birger Gerhardsson (1926–2013):

The demand that the New Testament be interpreted in this manner—from within, in a christologically absolute way—was unlikely to be fulfilled by Fridrichsen's disciples. Among them, a history-of-religions approach came to blunt the Barthian edge that had characterized Fridrichsen's original program.<sup>11</sup>

After the failed program of “realistic interpretation,” non-theological approaches to the Bible take precedence in a new manner in Scandinavian scholarship.<sup>12</sup>

Fridrichsen was correct in locating biblical exegesis and scholarly interpretation of Scripture as located within issues of secularization and the political role of theology, I argue. Importantly, biblical studies' *raison d'être* is largely dependent on the societal role of “theology” and political importance of the significant Scandinavian, Lutheran context.<sup>13</sup> In this so-called highly secular part of the world and during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in

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<sup>10</sup> See discussion on Fridrichsen's article especially in Harald Riesenfeld, “En framtidssyn i backspegeln. Realistisk bibelutläggning efter 50 år.” *STK* 63.1 (1987), 1–10; Birger Gerhardsson, *Fridrichsen, Odeberg, Aulén, Nygren: fyra teologer* (Lund: Novapress, 1994), 31–34.

<sup>11</sup> “Kravet att Nya testamentet skall tolkas på detta sätt—inifrån, kristologiskt-absolut—skulle knappast komma att uppfyllas av Fridrichsens lärjunnar. Hos dem kom ett religionshistoriskt arbetssätt att trubba av den bartianska spets som Fridrichsens program hade”: Gerhardsson, *Fridrichsen, Odeberg*, 32. My translation.

<sup>12</sup> This claim will be substantiated more in future studies, exploring the role of secularism in theological faculties of Scandinavia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the manner exegesis, not only partakes but actively disseminates a non-theological study of the Bible.

<sup>13</sup> On the history of the theological faculties in Scandinavia and the development of exegesis, see A. W. Geertz and P. Ingesman. “Det Teologiske Fakultet-Årbog 2000.” (Aarhus: Århus universitet, 2001); Mogens Müller, *Det Teologiske Fakultet i det 20. Århundrede: en skitse* (København: Københavns Universitet, 2013); Birger Olsson, Göran Bexell och Göran Gustafsson (eds), *Theologicum i Lund. Undervisning och forskning i tusen år* (Lund: Arcus, 2001); Oloph Bexell, *Teologiska fakulteten vid Uppsala universitet 1916–2000: Historiska studier*. Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis (Uppsala: 2021); Halvor Moxnes, Turid Karlsen Seim, and Reidar Aasgaard, “Fortolkning og forkynnelse: det Nye Testamente ved Universitetet i Oslo i det 20. århundre.” *NTT* 101.1/2 (2000), 33–51.

particular, professors of exegesis in Scandinavia have most often been ordained ministers in “folkkyrkan,” or peoples’ churches.<sup>14</sup> The “pastoral” and ecclesial, power of Scripture therefore remains significant within biblical scholarship in Scandinavia during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, albeit in an indirect and hidden manner. Interestingly, New Testament professors after Fridrichsen sometime act as defenders of a non-theological investigation of the Bible, advocating for emerging theories in literary, cultural, and sociological studies.<sup>15</sup> Gerhardsson, known for his interest in rabbinic material, while reflecting on a four decade long career as exegete, remembers his own introduction to Uppsala in the 1950s and public conflict between academic theology and philosophy spearheaded by Ingemar Hedenius, and notes that “In our educational system, we expose ourselves to contemporary knowledge, studying all these books that train us to reason as if God does not exist. We learn to think in completely secularized patterns.”<sup>16</sup> When critique of the 1961 dissertation *Manuscript and Memory* surfaced, comments typically “followed confessional lines rather than historiographical ones” Gerhardsson argues, which

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<sup>14</sup> Following Foucault’s analysis of sovereignty, politics and religion in modernity, the professors of theology are all “ministers” in an important sense of acting as mediators between two forms of power of Caesar and Christ: “in modern Europe at least, the fundamental problem is undoubtedly not the Pope and the Emperor, but rather that mixed figure, or the two figures who in our language, and also in others, share one and the same name of minister. The minister, with all the ambiguity of this word, is perhaps the real problem and where the relationship between religion and politics, between government and the pastorate, is really situated. So that is why I have insisted somewhat on this theme of the pastorate”: *Security, territory, population*, 191–92.

<sup>15</sup> An interesting Norwegian perspective, responding to the challenges to “theology” made by Heikki Räisänen, can be found by Halvor Moxnes, “From Theology to Identity: The Problem of Constructing Early Christianity,” in *Moving Beyond New Testament Theology: Essays in Conversation with Heikki Räisänen*, eds. Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> “Inom vårt utbildningsväsen exponerar vi oss ju för dagens vetande, studerar alla dessa böcker som vänjer oss att resonera som om Gud inte finns. Vi lär oss tänka i totalsekaliserade banor” Birger Gerhardsson, “Tillbakablick: avskedsföreläsning.” *STK* 68.3 (1992), 97. My translation.

displays that "my profane-scientific method was not as natural out in the world as it was in Uppsala."<sup>17</sup> In short, professor Gerhardtsson exemplifies a purported move away from theological interpretation and instead openly defend a "secular" interpretation of the Bible, noting that Uppsala stands out in a global context for its "secular-scientific methodology."<sup>18</sup>

The contemporary academic study of the Bible has, of course, progressed even further since Fridrichsen and noteworthy are theoretical perspectives and societal challenges to theology taking place from 1950s and onward. At the same time, exegesis continues to be conducted in close—yet sometimes forced—relation to formal education of clergy, in the Churches of Denmark, Norway and Sweden. In the context of Fridrichsen's "crisis" produced by 19–20<sup>th</sup> century developments in method, what of recent appeals to "high theory" and post-structuralism? Is theory a resource or risk for a contemporary, critical study of the Bible in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?<sup>19</sup> And in what ways does "theory" interact with Fridrichsen's diagnosis of a crisis of exegesis? In Scandinavia and the state-funded theological faculties of Aarhus, København, Lund, Uppsala, and Oslo, the question has multiple senses of actuality.<sup>20</sup> Is continental

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<sup>17</sup> "Följde konfessionella linjer snarare än historievetenskapliga... Min profanvetenskapliga metod inte var lika naturlig ute i världen som i Uppsala": *Ibid.*, 105. My translation.

<sup>18</sup> This perspective is typical of Scandinavian scholarship in general. For present purposes, the tension between exegesis and (dogmatic) theology can be found in the sparse examples produced of biblical theologies in a Nordic perspective in general and Scandinavia in particular. For a review of this field on a large scale and also in relation to the Nordics, see: Heikki Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology: A Story and a Programme* (London: SCM Press, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood. "Biblical Studies 'after' Theory: Onwards Towards the Past Part Three: Theory in the First and Second Waves." *Biblical Interpretation* 18.3 (2010), 191–225.

<sup>20</sup> The present analysis of biblical exegesis in relation to the value and lasting impact of "theory" upon scholarship is limited to the context of Scandinavia and the state-funded theological faculties therein primarily to offer a geographical area often connected to secularism. It would be interesting to investigate the role of Nordic scholarship more widely, not least since the important work on "Nordic Bibles" have yet to consider exegesis as a

philosophy perhaps simply the last strata of secularizing biblical studies, and an attempt to replace a “secular-scientific methodology” with the historical role of “theology” for the discipline? To paraphrase the patristic apologist, Septimius Tertullian (c. 155–220 CE), *what has Paris to do with Jerusalem; what concord is there between the Sorbonne and Exegesis?*<sup>21</sup> Athens is symbolically representing the city that birthed the platonic concept of Greek “theology” (found for the first time in Plato’s *Rep.* 2.379a–6), and have historically operated as a primary sparring partner with exegesis. In line with Tertullian’s *sentencia*, there has often even existed outright antagonism between Jerusalem and Athens. Since at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, exegesis under the banner of “criticism” have often conceptualized itself to represent a disinterested study of the “primitive” Christian religion, and posited dogmatic theology as mere handmaiden of the Church, in one way or another. Today however, this dialectic between theology and exegesis, historically also found in Scandinavian faculties of theology, is becoming less evident and survives in a surreptitious state. In its wake, a juxtaposition of critical study of the Bible is rarely conducted with relation to a clear theological standpoint.

Pursuing Fridrichsen’s methodological crisis into the realm of theory then, is Paris replacing the tension between Athens and Jerusalem? Stephen D. Moore and Yvonne Sherwood have addressed the peculiar coupling of theology and biblical studies in *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar*, locating the modern biblical scholar in the epistemological landscape of the European modernity.<sup>22</sup> The book challenges scholars to reconsider biblical criticism and explore new, untried forms of

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scientific practice as an object of study. For more on the relevance of placing Stephen Moore’s book on Deleuze and the question of theory in relation to reception history is discussion below.

<sup>21</sup> Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heresies*, viii. *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: The writings of Tertullian*. Vol. 15, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (London: T. and T. Clark, 1870).

<sup>22</sup> Stephen D. Moore, and Yvonne Sherwood. *The Invention of the Biblical Scholar: A Critical Manifesto* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2011).



interpretation, in terms of theory specifically. Moore and Sherwood raise questions about the intersection of the religious and the secular and posits a potential for biblical criticism to evolve beyond traditional methods, looking to “post-structuralism” in particular. Against this background, few generations of intellectuals have had a longer lasting impact on the field of theory in the humanities than the phenomenal Parisian ensemble that included Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), Alain Badiou (1937–), and not least Gilles Deleuze (1925–95). Born in the city of Paris, where he lived most of his life as well as died in an ambiguous accident (by “falling out” from a window in the city of Paris, trying to catch some air), Gilles Louis René Deleuze has had an immense impact upon the study of architecture, history, language, literature and lately also on exegesis.<sup>23</sup> Together with Michel Henry (1922–2002) and François Laruelle (1936–2024), Deleuze is arguably most known for challenging conventional ideas of “transcendence.” In fact, his philosophy offers one of the most systematic approaches to an ontology of “immanence”; a concept purposefully suggesting that meaning is inherent to the world. The world is seen to be in a constant process of becoming and unraveling itself. Thinking back on the contributions of his friend and fellow philosopher, Foucault once remarked that “perhaps one day this century will be

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<sup>23</sup> “At the time (the early 1970s), few people outside the cloistered environs of the Latin Quarter would have heard of Deleuze, so the intended audience was ‘the sandbox’, as Foucault’s former tutor Louis Althusser called Paris’s intellectual milieu. Today, though, a century after he was born, and three decades after he died, Deleuze’s work is read all over the world, and his works can even be found in airport bookstores (probably because like Alain de Botton he wrote a book about Proust, albeit without claiming to be able to save anyone’s life). Presumably Deleuze was correct in thinking Foucault simply intended to irritate certain people and make others laugh. Yet increasingly this offhand remark is beginning to seem like an accurate prognostication”: Ian Buchanan, “Reflecting upon a Deleuzian century”: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/au/discover/bloomsbury-academic/blog/featured/reflecting-upon-a-deleuzian-century>. Blogpost published 2025-01-27. Accessed: 2025-02-20.

known as Deleuzian.”<sup>24</sup> Since it has been a hundred years since the birth of Gilles Deleuze, what are we to do with such a statement within the field of biblical studies? Deleuze, for one, himself considered it nothing more than a joke, “meant to make people who like us laugh, and make everyone else livid.”<sup>25</sup> The anecdote is telling. Primarily, it demonstrates the importance of intertwining humor, style, and serious line of argumentation for this group of French thinkers. Secondly, it also showcases a particular tendency to create an “either . . . or”-reaction among “everyone else”; those not considered to belong to “us”. Eccentric treatises that define figures like Deleuze, Derrida, and Foucault are often charged with being exclusivist or “no fun”, to speak with the joke. Is Deleuze’s “theory” and an immanent philosophy only for those who already “like” him, or Foucault, Derrida, and Badiou? In other words, what can Deleuze’s philosophy do for the academic study of the Bible? And, most importantly, why is a philosopher best known for discussing problems with transcendence not related to issues of religion and theology in relation to a critical discussion on the Bible?

### “WHY READ THE BIBLE WITH DELEUZE?”

It is not Deleuze the philosopher, in any case, whom I will be reading, and reading with, but Deleuze the theorist, since the Bible and theory—reading the former with and through the latter—has long been my passion. What makes Deleuze a theorist in the specific sense in which that term is employed in my sector of the humanities? - *Bible after Deleuze*, 3.

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<sup>24</sup> Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory. Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 165–96; quotation from p. 165.

<sup>25</sup> See discussion of Foucault’s infamous remark in Charles J. Stivle, “*Comment peut-on être deleuzien?* Pursuing a Two-Fold Thought.” in *A Deleuzian Century*. ed. Ian Buchanan (London/Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

In *Bible after Deleuze*, Stephen Moore presents an extraordinary attempt to summarize previous and guide future appeals to Deleuze by exegetes.<sup>26</sup> He attempts nothing less than a synthesis of the seemingly asymmetrical dyad of biblical studies and a demanding, process-oriented philosophy. Through a focus on the triad of “affect”, “assemblages,” and “Body without Organs,” Moore unfolds the complicated *Weltanschauung* of the notorious Parisian intellectual, with the aid of constant reference to biblical studies and passages. However, despite an obvious connection between Deleuze and themes on religion and theology, Moore seems to avoid these terms and instead underlines the importance of Deleuze as theory for how we are to think history.<sup>27</sup> We will return to this theological lacuna later.

The opening chapter, “INTRODELEUZE: who and why?”, offers an overview of primary concepts.<sup>28</sup> Seamlessly moving between “machine,” “interpretosis,” “history,” “assemblage,” “Body without Organs” (BwO), “affect” (etc.), as well as the different thinkers Claire Parnet, Jacques Derrida, Brian Massumi, Baruch Spinoza (*et al.*), Moore asks: “Why read the Bible with Deleuze?” Interestingly, a foundational text for the approaching found with *A Thousand Plateaus: Schizophrenia and Capitalism* (1980) written together with the French philosopher, political activist, and psychoanalyst, Félix Guattari (1930–92). Instead of looking to Deleuze’s solo works, can *A Thousand Plateaus* present tactical terms and re-invigorate a critical study of the Bible? Moore looks to Deleuze’s *oeuvre* when tackling the issue of defining and defending a contemporary, theoretical study of the Bible in this context. The ontological duality of “Being” or “Becoming” that has haunted philosophy since at least the

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<sup>26</sup> Stephen D. Moore, *The Bible after Deleuze: Affects, Assemblages, Bodies without Organs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 1–57.

<sup>27</sup> A serious treatment of the potential of Deleuze with reference to “religion” remains superficial all throughout the work, yet references can be found in: *Ibid.*, 97, 108, 138, 168–69, 263. In a similar and even more unsystematic manner, “theology” appears with relation pp. 1–2, 103.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–57.

pre-Socratic era, serves as a pedagogical background for this chapter. Through *A Thousand Plateaus*, the task ahead is posited as underlining the theoretical value of change, difference, and open-ended processes over against notions of essence, intention, and stasis. In the end, Deleuze's philosophy and the Bible are viewed as two porous yet dynamic entities that together constitute a "machinic" couple, meaning that there is an aleatory element to their conjunction that Moore intends to study. Further, Moore makes it clear that

The book's main title plays fast and loose with the book's contents. That title is a sobriquet for the book's less sexy real title: The Bible, with Special Reference to the Synoptic Gospels and the Book of Revelation, after Deleuze and Guattari. Second, the book contains no overarching, unifying argument, incrementally crafted, each chapter ending by deftly handing of the rhetorical baton to its successor chapter.<sup>29</sup>

The following chapter, "TEXT (the Bible without organs)", explores a definition of "reading the Bible".<sup>30</sup> By an initial turn to Foucault's influential texts "What is an Author?", *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, and Deleuze's appraisal of the entire Foucauldian *œuvre* is discussed from a general standpoint. In tangent with the concept of "discourse," the Bible is considered "an assemblage of expression,"<sup>31</sup> emphasizing this library's impersonal collection of statements, that stand in direct relation to "a multiplicity of other assemblages."<sup>32</sup> With this maneuverer, the concept of authorial intention along with the idea of locating a singular, originary historical situation is uprooted. Considering instead the "Bible-as-assemblage with "Body without Organs,"<sup>33</sup> Moore draws attention to the theological potential of approaching this matter with an ontology of immanence. From this point of view, transcendent underpinnings of a common sensical definition of the Bible are strongly criticized.

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 58–110.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

In the chapter, “BODY (why there are no bodies in the Bible, and how to read them anyway)”, we are invited to follow up on already established trajectories and collision courses of “becoming” and “immanence”.<sup>34</sup> The main thrust of this section takes aims at the domain of corporeality and the world as material. Returning to Foucault’s impactful arguments on ancient sexuality and the synoptic gospels are theorized in relation to a “Deleuzian body”. Tackling an interesting array of issues through an in-depth awareness of current discussions on gender and masculinity in New Testament studies, on the one hand, Moore goes the extra mile and steps into a Deleuzian immanence-ontology, on the other. Drawing on Deleuze’s *The Logic of Sense*, the biblical “paper people” of the synoptic express a dimension of incorporeality; trapped in a prison of meaning and textuality, as it were. Technical issue surrounding the production of meaning from the appearance of these incorporeal entities is therefore linked to the central concept of “the virtual,” where a manner of approaching real-world effects a “paper Jesus” arrives. All this to say, the bodies that materialize in the synoptic gospels are not “representations” (or “resemblances”), of a stable, unified “human” body, from a mythic or historical past. For Moore, these textual figures instead express a particular potentiality of “what bodies can do” (to evoke an infamous dictum by Spinoza) and therefore need to be considered from the concept of corporeality.

In “SEX (a thousand tiny sexes, a trillion tiny Jesuses)”, Moore spends a chapter digging deeper into the topic of gender, and different processes of sexualizing and engendering bodies.<sup>35</sup> This section argues that Deleuze (and Guattari’s) impact upon queer theory is underexplored, especially within the field of biblical studies. Primarily, Moore explores the different aspects of queerness in relation to Deleuzian thought, before turning reaching for examples in Mark’s gospel. The concept of “desire” is underlined as central to the investigation, by way theorization of *libido*

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 111–145.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 146–180.

in a non-teleological and purely functional manner. Rebranding the second gospel as “Queer Mark,” Jesus is treated as “haemosexual” (Gr. αἷμα, *haima*: blood), whose libidinal economy is discovered with the symbolic investment constructed by eucharist’s emphasis on the consumption of the Messiah’s body and blood, as well as the imperative to the disciples to mimic self-deprecatory love of others, for instance. Drawing on previous work by Gretchen Riordan, Jesus is a “bloody BwO” that transgresses limits associated both with the divine and mundane, especially in relation to the passion narrative. An awareness and interest to theological issues again comes to the fore.

With the chapter “RACE (Jesus and the white faciality machine)”, a previous focus on the synoptics, and its present function as incarnation of “the Bible” takes a step back.<sup>36</sup> for the de-colonizing discourse prompted by figures like W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), Franz Fanon (1925–61), James H. Cone (1938–2018), in relation to founding father of the school of structuralism, and linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and Deleuze and Guattari. The gathered set of thinkers are related to the Western European reception of Jesus’s face in culture and art, in particular. Synoptical passages serve the function of providing examples of a Deleuzian theory of “race matters,” yet in a more restricted sense than before (see pp. 203–6; 225–32). In contrast to the sections, Moore focuses more on theological aspects and issues than challenges pertaining strictly to biblical studies per se. Nonetheless, the review of contemporary, theoretical challenges “facing” theology in relation to whiteness and cultural role of Jesus in art and iconography is engaging and steeped in the same eclectic style of previous chapters. The danger of leaving the figure of Jesus unproblematized in relation to conscious or unconscious associations Whiteness is rightly underlined and posited as a proper, exegetical concern.

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 182–232.

Finally, and with the chapter designated “POLITICS (beastly boasts, apocalyptic affects),” a more pronounced personal tone intensifies.<sup>37</sup> With the closing section, Moore offers a reflection on the cultural importance of the Book of Revelation (Rev.) in particular. From a perspective of apocalyptic traits of the Covid-19 pandemic and Donald Trump’s loss of the 2020 presidential election, Moore is here invested in the political ramifications of a Deleuzian exegesis and its lasting value for the contemporary study of the Bible. The chapter is significant, as it demonstrates the range of Moore’s playful style, along with its consequences. Through an appeal to the genre of the “plague journal” for instance, the argument is presented through semi-structured reflections upon the impending political challenges and the identification of Trump with “a Beast from the abyss beneath every democracy,” in line with the apocalyptic, biblical traditions of the Book of Daniel and Revelation. And like the previous chapter in particular, “POLITICS” treat the Bible as an American, cultural object, or at least allows this to be a starting point, rather than the critical, scholarly discourse on ancient Judaism and early Christianity, for instance. From the angle of Deleuze, Moore struggles a bit with the idea of characterizing Trump with biblical apocalyptic beasts, in relation to Deleuze’s staunch anti-Platonism and the problem of “representation”. A high point of this analysis and the book arrives with the analysis of the Deleuze’s 1978 article, “Nietzsche and Saint Paul, Lawrence and John of Patmos”. This piece is essential from the methodological perspective of Moore, since it deals not only with the topics of religion and biblical material head on, and—most importantly perhaps—since the great figure of “anti-representationalism” himself ends up reading Rev. in terms of allegory. Moore therefore effectively demonstrates that Deleuze searches for the power of resemblances and thus ends up employing an interpretative tool of transcendence when dealing with the Christian canon. The theoretical tension that emerges between the lack of immanent approach to the Bible from the perspective of Deleuze and

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 233–284.

Moore's own advocacy for a Deleuzian exegesis is not completely untangled however, I believe. Along with other fundamental aporia, such as what a Deleuzian exegesis of the Bible is to do with the highly negative judgements on certain practices of history in works of Deleuze and Guattari, a problem present itself in Deleuze's own lax attempt at engaging with the Bible in "Nietzsche and Saint Paul, Lawrence and John of Patmos". Nonetheless, the juxtaposition of Deleuze and Trump-as-Beast brings Moore to interesting and provocative conclusion, where "In the minds of the Beast's white, Christian followers, the Book [of the Bible] is with the Beast even when not visibly clutched by the Beast" (284). In the year 2025, Moore's comments offer new light on the complex relation of the academic study of the Bible and contemporary politics, not least in America.

### CHALLENGING THEORY?

In terms of mimicking a "post-structural" style, *Bible after Deleuze* approaches the potential of connecting Deleuze with the Bible through the employment—or perhaps weaponization—of unnumberable block quotes, that create the effect of "caesuras" and cavities, on a majority of the work's pages. As an expression of the force of the Deleuze's imagination, Moore's stylistic approach simulates a "capacity to affect and be affect" (abbreviated simply with the concept "affect," in the writings of Deleuze) commonly felt by the philosopher's audience, I argue.



translates Foucauldian thoughts into Deleuzian thoughts with suspiciously few rips or seams.<sup>6</sup>

And when the term "post-structuralist" (still hyphenated) is later coined (when and by whom is aptly unknown, given poststructuralism's disdain for origins, but its first tentative usages are trickling into print in the United States by the mid-1970s)<sup>7</sup> and begins to circulate in the anglophone world, and Foucault is "promoted" from (reluctant) structuralist

"I have never been a structuralist."<sup>8</sup>

to (equally reluctant) poststructuralist,

"I... do not understand what kind of [philosophical] problem is common to the people we call 'postmodern' or 'post-structuralist'."<sup>9</sup>

Deleuze likewise has the poststructuralist sticker affixed to his forehead, being included in the first anthology of poststructuralist theory and criticism.<sup>10</sup>

Notable, too, in this context is the symbiotic relationship Jacques Derrida unexpectedly claimed to have had with Deleuze in his moving eulogy for him following his tragic death: "From the very beginning, all of his books... have been for me not only, of course, strong provocations to think but each time the flustering, really flustering, experience of a closeness or of a nearly total affinity.... Deleuze undoubtedly still remains, despite so many dissimilarities,

the one among all those of my 'generation' to whom I have always considered myself closest."<sup>11</sup>

That would not have been my own sense at all, by which I simply mean that during the 1980s and 1990s when poststructuralism ruled the theoretical roost, most of all in North America, and increasing numbers of restless biblical scholars (a fidgety flock with which I myself ran) were reading the proliferating literature of, and on, poststructuralism with fervid fascination, seeking to apply one or other French thinker to this or that biblical text, I would have been incapable of slotting Deleuze neatly into my own mini-metanarrative of how French structuralism mutated into French poststructuralism, a saga in which Derrida, of course, played a leading role. Deleuze didn't seem to fit neatly into any of the readymade pockets in such a saga.

But when the English translation of Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille Plateaux* began to appear on the "theory" shelves of academic bookstores in 1987,

"A Thousand Plateaus, which... was our most ambitious, most immoderate and worst-received work" (Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, ix).

I promptly purchased it. It was immediately clear—even from a brief, bemused inspection of its contents—that it ranked alongside Derrida's *Glas* as one of the most exotic blooms to date of the Parisian intellectual hot-house.<sup>12</sup> But it gathered dust on my bookshelf during the next two decades, only occasionally being picked up and peered into, while I busily applied the unambiguously poststructuralist French poststructuralists and their postcolonial and queer progeny to biblical texts.

### Tall Tales of Theory Told around the Campfire

"High" poststructuralist theory, however, had lost so much air by the opening decade of the present century that the most notable theory-related development seemed to many of us in biblical studies to be the funeral "theory is dead" refrain echoing from numerous quarters—so much so that when

<sup>6</sup> Foucault had recently died as Deleuze penned the book, and in it Deleuze appears to be performing a postmortem reconciliation of Foucault's thought with his own.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Gerald Prince, "Narrative Signs and Tangents," *Diacritics* 4, no. 3 (1974): 4; Marie-Rose Logan, "Graphesis," *Yale French Studies* 52 (1975): 11.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, "Structuralism and Post-Structuralism" (1983), in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, 437.

<sup>9</sup> Foucault, "Structuralism and Post-Structuralism," 448. In contrast, Deleuze's published writings contain no pronouncements either on poststructuralism or postmodernism per se—although he did comment briefly on deconstruction, as we shall see.

<sup>10</sup> Along with Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Paul de Man, among others, all thinkers who, by then, were coming to be seen as seminal poststructuralists. See Josué V. Harari, ed., *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979). Neither Deleuze nor even Foucault resisted the poststructuralist moniker in this instance, apparently. Harari remarks in his preface: "I am grateful to Deleuze and Foucault for giving me a free hand to edit their [previously published] texts with an American readership in mind" (13).

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, "I'm Going to Have to Wander All Alone" (1995), trans. Leonard Lawler, in Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 192–93.

<sup>12</sup> *Glas* has recently appeared in a second English translation (the first was in 1986): Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. David Wills and Geoffrey Bennington, *Posthumanities* 62 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1974] 2020).



Along with multiple in-text references, and citations from the Deleuzian *oeuvre*, the “cutting up” of the page’s body expresses a similar trait of a Talmudic tract, with the visual traits of the “daf,” and its inclusion of multiple commentaries, notes, and other para-textual features, on a single folio. From this angle, Moore’s conjuring of a “Rabbi Gilles” and Talmudic, theoretical discourse on “the Bible” treats individual folios as multifaceted “daf” with its many quotes and references to exemplify the concept of “assemblage,” through a characteristic arrangement of the book’s text. This “affect” of *Bible after Deleuze* effectively replicates an experience of reading the text that can be labeled תלמיד (*talmid*): “the student.” In other words, *Bible after Deleuze* invites its reader to take the position of a *talmid*: a Talmudic student. Multiple voices, arguments, and often conflicting lines of thought are “assembled” on most pages of *Bible after Deleuze*, forcing the reader (or *talmid*) to interact with conflicting voices.

Without ending up with an emphatically fixated meaning or *telos* for the discussion, Moore therefore also re-creates a Talmudic “demand” upon the mind and body of its *talmidim*. *Bible after Deleuze* along with its “dark precursor” with the rabbinic discourse enjoys an employment of obscure terminology, explores often humorous and interesting sidetracks into parallel discussions, and hereby places a noticeable yolk upon its reader, and takes them on a path of decidedly complex, multi-tiered arguments. Since it is usual for *Bible after Deleuze* to leave its innumerable quotes uncommented, the reader is left with the impression of hearing a choir of multiple voices, at once. In a unique way therefore, Moore re-creates a *talmid*-affect, or the experience of struggling with Deleuze’s style and thought, that demonstrate the open-endedness that defines the concept “Body without Organs.”

Certain difficulties and challenges remain throughout this book, however. It is my gambit that these concerns serve the function of highlighting looming issues for those of us invested in “theory” writ large and biblical studies. In short, theory is presently under pressure to prove its worth and relevance in the flooded market of methodological approaches

to the biblical archive. *Bible after Deleuze* signifies more than a singular stance of a particular French theorist in relation to the field of biblical studies. In its stylistic approach and analytic grasp of the “Bible” wider concerns of the “theorist” in relation to exegesis is made apparent, I argue. From this angle, what is noteworthy from Moore’s Deleuze?

A primary concern resides with Moore’s methodology and manner of selecting material for discussion. There is a lack of clear research questions, and the audience of *Bible after Deleuze* are not privy to the fundamental framework that drove individual investigations of the relation to the Bible and Deleuze. An emphasis is found on biblical material located in the New Testament. This fact is natural given Moore’s previous work in the field. Yet, what is meant by the signifier “Bible” in the context of the *Bible after Deleuze* and its methodology? Further, while the historical background to Deleuze’s thought time and again appear in relation to the discussion, the material or philological aspects that define the immanent history and becoming of “the Bible” appear less significant, it seems. To put it bluntly; which “Bible” is ultimately dissected in the analysis of *Bible after Deleuze*? Are “actual” aspects of the Bible (manuscripts, different canonical editions etc.) less interesting than “virtual” and ideal ones, to speak with Deleuze? Are theorists only interested in the Bible as ideal type and “icon”, or can a theoretical perspective also seek to engage with the nitty gritty of contemporary research on the New Testament, for instance? Ongoing, scholarly discussions on the historicity and reception of “the Bible”, along with its writers, appear less central for than contextualizing the “the historical Deleuze” in relation to the many works by Deleuze cited as crucial in *Bible after Deleuze*, at least.<sup>38</sup> Along the same line of thought; why is the worked entitled *Bible after Deleuze*, rather than “The Bible after Deleuze and Guattari”? Is Moore really interested only in “Deleuze”? Most analyses focused on concepts Deleuze conjured and

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, ix–xiii.

developed together with Félix Guattari (“assemblages”, “Bodies without Organs”).<sup>39</sup>

Another thought-provoking aspect is located with Moore’s rather limited conversation with other biblical scholars, strictly on the theme of Deleuze. The title of the work invites the imagination of the readership to access a thorough review of past biblical studies dealing with Deleuze. However, except for mentioning Bradley H. McLean, Brennan W. Breed, George Aichele (on p. 10 note 23), Moore does not offer a section of “previous research” of critical scholarship that uses Deleuze for purposes of exegesis. This fact makes the research questions underlying the study harder to comprehend. Further, in relation to listing the overall impact of Deleuze upon the humanities, Moore on p. 10 note 23 also writes that “[m]ore than a dozen additional articles or book chapters by other biblical scholars that engage Deleuze or Deleuze and Guattari could also be listed (and several of them are referenced in the chapters that follow).” Again, and considering the ambitious tone and title of the work, I was expecting a more engaged stance toward the already-existing work that combines a critical study of the New Testament and concepts by Gilles Deleuze. While recognition to previous works on the explored theme is mentioned initially, it primarily takes the shape of a tip of the hat rather than a critical engagement, which I found rather unsatisfying. Since only a limited number of scholars have published on this subject, I had hoped to find a more substantial treatment of trends and positions within this “minor” discourse; perhaps even a mapping of the field, so to speak.

Lastly, the characteristic style and use of “caesura-quotes” are not merely visual phenomena. It also raises the question of the book’s (intended) audience. The sheer volume of references to Deleuze (and Guattari *et al.*) firstly highlights the strictly academic question of an

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<sup>39</sup> I am aware that “BwO” is found already in the work *The Logic of Sense* (1969), published prior to Deleuze’s philosophical friendship with Guattari. Importantly, the concept is explicitly theological, no least seen in light of its history and originary relation to Antonin Artaud’s radio play, “To Have Done with the Judgement of God.”

appropriate quantity of in-text quotations for a research paper, or study. In many ways, *Bible after Deleuze* is aptly described in the manner a Talmudic discourse interweaves biblical material with that of the sages. I do not see a particular problem with this approach, from a Deleuzian standpoint or otherwise, if it would have been addressed. Secondly, the symbolic value of the style in *Bible after Deleuze* seems to me to point to an “intended audience” in the shape of a graduate seminar, already familiar with Deleuze. From this end, I would have like to see the creative and engaged discussion that defines *Bible after Deleuze* to have struggled a bit more with the demanding and arguably tedious task of translating a biblical scholar’s love for Gilles Deleuze to a perplexed discipline.

### CONCLUSION: FRIDRICHSEN’S DIAGNOSIS AND MOORE’S DELEUZIAN BIBLE

What challenges can be found to underlie the task of implementing high theory to a methodologically driven discipline, such as biblical studies? And what can post-structural philosophy offer teachers and students of exegesis in a Scandinavian context? Moore seem to advocate for a path for biblical scholarship where “theory” actively leads away from dealing with questions of religion and theology proper and instead focus on “biblical” problems of culture and politics. This is highly compatible with the trajectory found within Scandinavian academia, and therefore strengthens Fridrichsen’s narrative of crisis, now with an emphasis also on theory. The main contribution of *Bible after Deleuze* is found in analyses that look to “usual suspects” of theoretical studies (race, body, politics). However, more depth and clarity would surface if Moore also would have look to ongoing (non-theoretical driven) discourse of exegesis. As a “theorist,” Deleuze himself took time to study specified scientific problems in the field of semiotics, mathematics, psychoanalysis, history, physics, geology, economics, etc., and seamlessly mentions a wide array of

academic discussions when dealing with a particular philosophical issue.<sup>40</sup> When employing Guattari-Deleuzian terminology, a similar kind of generosity toward the already-existing problems and vocabulary of the methodologically driven approaches of the biblical texts, and by using examples from debates on “Paul within Judaism”, “the historical Jesus”, “social-memory theory” or “new philology” (etc.), would have served the purpose of demonstrating ways in which Deleuze can offer fresh perspective on potential, theoretical deadlocks, not least in relation to a critical study of religion. Notably, Deleuze is not an anti-theological thinker, and a “theological” study of the Bible would have been a highly relevant problem to address. Time and again, Deleuze is found dealing with issues of transcendence in terms of “God” and “Christ,” offering a way forward for scholars invested in religious material in one sense or another, albeit from a post-Nietzschean perspective.

Anton Fridrichsen’s diagnosis of exegesis, in terms of a crisis created by methodological development and where exegesis progresses in terms of a scientific discourse at the expense of theology, is still important for its ability to force scholars to recognize the power of biblical scholarship. Fridrichsen’s notion of the West losing interest in the Bible has rightly been put in perspective by recent scholarship, where the cultural and political relevance of Scripture remains strong.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, Moore’s use of Deleuze point to the importance of allowing the scholarly discourse on the Bible to be analyzed as “interpretation” (as Fridrichsen puts it) and from a reception historical perspective. That is to say, the value of Moore’s *Bible after Deleuze* is found not only when investigated the perspective of high theory and humanities writ large, but when seen in terms of *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Scripture in Europe. What can Deleuze offer exegetes in a Scandinavian context, standing on the boundary between academy, church and society? Looming underneath Moore’s interesting book and its application of Deleuzian theory is the question of the

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. *Deleuze and Science: Paragraph Volume 29 Number 2*, ed. John Marks (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Kartzow, Larsen and Lehtipuu, *The Nordic Bible*.

future of theology for biblical studies. Since Moore explicitly avoids a critical discussion of the study of religion in a post-Christian society, much can be learned from Deleuze's own reading and reception of different sciences contemporary to his own writings. Considering Deleuze's own Nietzschean musing that theology is "the science of non-existing entities,"<sup>42</sup> why not address the specter of secularizing affecting exegesis, by way of theory, head on? Stephen D. Moore's *The Bible after Deleuze: Affects, Assemblages, Bodies without Organs* effectively displays the potential of (Guattari and) Deleuze's *oeuvre* for contemporary investigations of the New Testament. However, more transparency and contextualization are needed in relation to the reception Moore offers of biblical studies and Deleuze. In the end, Moore's engaged interaction and coupling of biblical exegesis and Deleuze would have benefit from a more transparent methodology and problem-based approach to the "material" reality of the abstract entities "Gilles Deleuze" and the academic study of "the Bible."

Enthusiastic appeals to high theory as offering a path toward the future for the study of the Bible therefore remain unclear with relation to the academic study of theology, I find. In this way, the call for more theory prolongs a secularizing tendency within exegesis. Its ability to revolutionize a scientific scrutiny of the New Testament, or leave it severely impacted by a particular theories, is illuminated by Deleuze's own reply to Foucault's joke: if "outsiders" to this entire discourse do not already appreciate "theorists", chances are that claims made to revitalize a study of the Bible—without successfully completing the task at hand with impeccable precision—risks making "make everyone else livid." Rightfully so.

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<sup>42</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004), 281.