FUNNY STORY: RELIGIOUS FICTION AS TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY MIDRASH

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BY
MICHHELLE K. V. SALOMONS

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REV. DR. STEPHEN FARRIS
RABBI DR. ROBERT DAUM
To my wonderful spouse, Geoff,
who urged me not to give up on this project,
and to my baby, Kiran Alicia,
who napped well so I could write.
The insistence that the Word of God could be heard within carefully defined boundaries of specific documents and nowhere else appears to be a peculiarly Protestant obsession with no historical and little theological justification.

Lloyd Gaston, “Sola Scriptura”
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the role of fictional portrayals of Gospel material, specifically the humorous novel *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ’s Childhood Pal* by Christopher Moore. This thesis places the novel within the body of Rewritten Bible midrash as studied by Philip S. Alexander. The second chapter identifies the criteria of Rewritten Bible midrash, positioned alongside traditional rabbinical Midrash. Later chapters of this thesis are comprised of an analysis of the novelist’s Afterword and novel using Alexander’s criteria, feminist and literary criticism.

The final chapter of this thesis addresses the convergence of humour and faith in *Lamb*. There is a dearth of scholarly material on humour in faith, especially in Christianity. The last section of this thesis explores of the work of M. Conrad Hyers and Robert Darden, providing a meta-analysis on the roots of religious humour, and concludes that a humorous approach to faith is a theological imperative in the twenty-first century.
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CHAPTER 1

A TIME TO LAUGH

In 2002, novelist Christopher Moore applied his absurdist stylings to the life of Christ. *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ’s Childhood Pal* \(^1\) fills in the periods missing from the Gospels, creating for Jesus (“Josh”) \(^2\) a wayward and decidedly flawed best friend in Levi Bar Alphaeus – or “Biff”. The novel follows their lives from ages six to thirty-three, weaving traditional gospel stories into an otherwise fictional (but often historically accurate) first century Palestine. Moore’s original Afterword suggests that Moore felt his book would not appeal to many Christians, stating “if the reader knows the Bible well enough to recognize the real references, there’s a good chance that he or she has decided not to read this book.” \(^3\) However, I suspect this is a question of the reader’s political bent. \(^4\) In a spring 2010 poll on the website of the CBC book club, *Lamb* topped the list of “Books to Make You Laugh”. \(^5\)

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\(^1\) Henceforward abbreviated to *Lamb*.


\(^4\) In his 2007 edition of *Lamb*, which is a leather-bound, gold embossed soft-cover with a red ribbon bookmark, Moore wrote a second Afterword. Therein he explains that he finished writing Lamb in the America of the year 2000 and the religious politics surrounding the nation’s Presidential elections. By the time *Lamb* was published in 2002, America’s post-9/11 religious fervour made him fear significant backlash. However, he writes “Of all of those [twenty thousand] missives, only three had been negative;
Yet is it appropriate to laugh at a book about the Lord? Is comedy set alongside crucifixion actually funny? Perhaps it is a safer bet to rewrite Bible as obvious comedy, so that an author does not inadvertently prompt giggles with serious work. *Lamb* is comic, albeit with satirical elements, but homiletic in its over-the-top portrayal of Everyman Biff. Moreover, the Historical Jesus movement has opened up a way for more human portraits of Jesus. Kenotic imaginings of Jesus must involve a man who laughed and played as a child, and maybe even occasionally got into trouble. This novel provides a beautiful and, despite the absurd adventures they embark on, surprisingly realistic and touching portrayal of the Saviour. This novel’s humour is what lends it such appeal to younger generations. Moore’s target audience is not coincidentally the cohort that is most conspicuously absent from Sunday morning pews.

It can be argued that the ability to smile and laugh at the people, ideas and texts we hold most sacred is a theological necessity. The surprising allure of the novel has led me to an extensive examination of the sacred and the comic and to why the twain meet rarely. I have discovered traditions of faith through laughter that are older than the Gospels, yet academia is short on evidence for it. I will also explore the comic and homiletical role of a trickster figure to better understand the fictional evangelist Moore presents his readers.

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2, coincidentally, were from people in Alabama who hadn’t actually read the book but were offended by the idea of it.” Christopher Moore, “Afterword II: When the Muse Sneezed,” in *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ’s Childhood Pal* (New York: W. Morrow, 2007), 417.
6 See chapter 5 of this thesis for further discussion of this claim.
7 See chapter 5.
Inspired by Lloyd Gaston’s work on biblical canon, in this thesis I am proposing that Lamb is in fact a midrash. I will demonstrate how the novel fits the midrashic sub-genre of Rewritten Bible in particular. The humour in the novel fits well into the tradition of the comic within Midrash.

History of Research

Primary Sources: Lamb and Its Author’s Crafting of It

This thesis will employ three vital primary sources of information from novelist Christopher Moore. The most obvious is the novel itself. The second primary source is the Afterword, which acts as a commentary upon the first. Its placement at the end of the book, rather than at the beginning, is a clever editorial choice. Moore wrote a second Afterword, “When the Muse Sneezezd”, as an addendum to his 2007 edition of Lamb. As it primarily describes his research journey to the Holy Land, it will not be referred to nearly as much as the first Afterword from 2002, “Teaching Yoga to an Elephant”. My third primary source is a collection of personal correspondence between myself and the author.

Secondary Sources: Midrashic Rewritten Bible and Holy Laughter

Midrash Aggada falls into two categories. The first is the traditional body of rabbinic work which comprises most scholarly attention. It is not my intention to provide an overview of traditional, rabbinic Midrash. Rather, I will rely on the extensive expertise of Jacob Neusner and Daniel Boyarin for their analyses of the same. The second category of

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9 See chapter 3.
10 See chapter 5.
Midrash Aggada is the genre: the storytelling framework and style. The latter category allows for the ongoing creation of contemporary (small ‘m’) midrash, which has experienced a massive resurgence in the last 30 years, especially among certain communities of North American Jews.

Since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran, much scholarly attention has been directed to re-investigating canon. The sub-genre of midrash called Rewritten Bible has received unprecedented attention.11 Through his work with ancient midrashic texts,12 scholar Philip Alexander has listed the nine “principal characteristics” of traditional Rewritten Bible.13 I shall apply these defining traits to identify how Moore’s novel sits within the tradition of Rewritten Bible. Interestingly, most of the contemporary authors engaging in the creation of work in this sub-genre are women writing revisionist biblical stories. I include Moore under the umbrella of feminist rewriters of scripture, despite his gender, as I do not wish to exacerbate the neglect of men’s contributions to feminist academia. I will explore emerging feminist scholars of midrash, including Judith Kerman, Naomi Graetz and Jody Myers for their work on modern midrash-making as a movement among postmodern Jewish women re-engaging with sacred text. A sub-section here will explore the oft-feminist realm of trickster scholarship, given the habitual enactments of that role by characters Biff and Maggie.

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12 Notably Jubilees, Pseudo-Philo, Genesis Apocryphon and Josephus’ Jewish Antiquities.
There is a poverty of work about humour around sacred texts. Much biblical scholarship seeks out the humour within scripture, but very little has been written about approaching scripture with humour or applying humour to scripture. As such, I will use M. Conrad Hyers’ 1969 work on Holy Laughter, Regent College film maker Murray Stiller’s documentary Nailin’ It to the Church (2008) and Holy Laughter by Robert Darden, senior editor of The Wittenburg Door, to examine the use of religious humour by deeply religious people (in contrast to the mocking of another’s religion). Moore was mistaken when he believed those who know the Bible wouldn’t be interested in his book. Admitting as much in his second Afterword, Moore writes:

[The American public has surprised me, my family and my publisher in the most pleasant way. And it is interesting that in most of the letters I receive the writers also mention that they think the book will anger others, but not them. We are long on faith, just not in one another, apparently. And I was certainly guilty of lack of faith and understanding by fearing the reaction of the faithful.]

When I began this project many years ago, Moore was surprised to have three seminary students (including Murray Stiller and me) interested in examining Lamb. Now, according to a recent email from Moore, the book is “taught in several seminaries, and dozens of colleges in Bible as Literature and comparative theology classes.” Perhaps I am on to something.

Research Methodology

Lloyd Gaston proposed in his 1987 Presidential Address to the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies that the Bible with New Testament should be renamed “the Hebrew

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15 Michelle K. V. Salomons, by Christopher Moore, Email Correspondence with Author, August 2007. This information is corroborated in Moore, "Afterword II: When the Muse Sneezeed," 417.
Bible and its Post-biblical midrash.\textsuperscript{16} I am adopting a redactionist, Gastonian interpretive lens to exegete Lamb as midrash.

Midrash theory has a whole genre dedicated to Rewritten Bible. The tradition of retelling and reinterpreting scripture has been in place for millennia. Homiletics depends greatly on retelling and reinterpreting sacred story. What Christopher Moore has accomplished for his modern audience differs little, except that, in true postmodern fashion, he intentionally neglects to provide a moral to his story.

I hold a degree in English Literature, which I completed in the twenty-first century. In the course of this program, deconstruction and postmodernism were the expected critical approaches to text. Feminist theory was considered a given (almost passé), and for a long time I thought of myself as a post-feminist scholar; because feminist ideals were so normal for me, I would not address them in my work. The longer I have been a part of academia, the more naïve I understand my former position as a “post-feminist” to be. Unfortunately, the multifaceted concerns of women’s equality in theological academia, and quite obviously on a global scale, have a long way to go. As a result of my literary training, I am drawn to Moore’s postmodern and clearly deconstructionist gospel. Concerning the feminist angle, I feel I have a responsibility as a female theological academic to draw attention to midrash as it is giving voice to women’s theologies, and to recognize the actions taken by Lamb’s female hero\textsuperscript{17} as she subverts expected societal norms.

\textsuperscript{16} Gaston: 17.
\textsuperscript{17} I have not used the term “heroine” because Maggie is not the protagonist of the book. But as far as the book’s female characters go, she is their hero. Also, heroine inadvertently connotes illicit drug use. I find it best to use “hero” all around.
Anticipated Conclusions

Lloyd Gaston asserted that all New Testament writings should be considered to be midrashim on the Hebrew Bible.\textsuperscript{18} Moore’s work is in keeping with this statement. As such, my second chapter will examine Midrash as a literary genre. The traditional Rabbinical Midrash (as defined and delineated by Jacob Neusner and Daniel Boyarin) will not be closely examined, except insofar as is necessary to establish its relation to its modern offspring. Particular attention will be given to the sub-genre of Rewritten Bible, its popularity among contemporary female Jewish scholars, and its criteria as established by Philip Alexander.

In *Does God have a Big Toe?* Marc Gellman states, “The best way to understand a story in the Bible is to make up another story about it.”\textsuperscript{19} Moore has done this, and his novel functions as midrash – specifically, Rewritten Bible – by definition. Moore’s original “Afterword” to *Lamb*, “Teaching Yoga to an Elephant” acts as an apology, laying bare his hermeneutics in the creation of the novel. My third chapter will use this Afterword as a lens through which the rest of the novel may be read, or indeed is intended to be read. Having provided definitions and criteria for *Lamb* as midrash in previous chapters, my fourth chapter will consist of a close reading of key passages of the novel. In an effort to illustrate its midrashic qualities as per Alexander’s criteria, I will provide a small selection of episodes from the novel for redaction criticism. The biblical tradition of trickster characters will be examined here in the roles enacted by Maggie and Biff.


My concluding chapter will provide an overview of the (mostly) well-hidden comic traditions in Judeo-Christian religious expression. Little scholastic work exists in this field, especially on the Christian side. I will explore why the dearth exists, and its contemporary implications. I will address the following questions: Is religious humour safe in our time? Is it unwise or not? Is there a place for comical portrayals of Christ in our churches? I believe that it is vital for younger generations of Christians to embrace a midrashic lens when approaching our sacred texts. Boyarin’s explanation of the genesis of Midrash can be easily transposed to our post-Christendom society: Rabbis created Midrash while their cultural heritage was crumbling, especially with the destruction of the Temple. They “found in the creation of an explicitly and pervasively intertextual literature the ideal generative and reconstructive tool, which preserved the privileged position of the biblical text by releasing it from its position of immobilized totality.”

The dialectic of midrash plays with the very notion of canon by playing on canonical notions. The temple of Christendom has been crushed under postmodernism. As our Christian cultural heritage crumbles, midrash-making about Jesus may in fact be imperative.

Humour is often used as a means of political subversion. The increasing political influence of conservative Christianity in North America has caused the church to become, for many, the Powers and Principalities, perhaps a humourous (yet respectful?) retelling of Jesus’ story becomes a counter-attack on fundamentalism. What are the implications for an author making a tongue-in-cheek portrayal of Christ to publish as pulp fiction? And how audacious does an author have to be to make such a move? I

wonder if Moore’s gospel presents a story of faith that is lesser than the traditional New Testament stories, and if so, by how much? Moreover, we Christians are called to face the possibility to die for our faith. Is Moore’s Christ not worth dying for? Or has he simply made a mockery of the Christ and his death and resurrection? The enigmatic final chapter of the book supplies an answer to this question, as well as a tongue-in-cheek answer to the question of why Biff never appeared in traditional New Testament texts. Biff died the same day as Joshua (Jesus). He took his life because he couldn’t live without Joshua in his daily existence. Whether this demonstrates an utter lack of faith or his own version of martyrdom is up to the reader to decide, but to me, it shows that Moore understands what a life walking alongside Jesus is worth.

Reformatting a novel as midrash serves my purposes in purporting that *Lamb* is good Christology and even a basis for faith. Moore’s book is an answer to every moderate preacher’s favourite sermon topic: Is there a place for the Bible in today’s world? Those who would answer ‘yes’ are roughly divided into two groups: those who would base their whole lives on the verbatim teachings of their favourite translation of biblical text, and those who are happier to claim the Bible has an ‘overall message’. Moore tacitly sides with the latter group, retelling the story of Jesus in such a way as to reflect the ‘gist’ of the original Gospels’ portrayals of Christ, while taking outrageous artistic liberties. In placing the character of Biff opposite the Christ figure in his novel, Moore creates an (exaggerated) Everyman. It is my opinion that the reader is to relate more closely to Biff than Josh, despite Biff’s buffoonish nature. However, Moore creates

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a perfect and human friendship between the two. Thus, the whole story may be taken as an extended metaphor for the relationship available between all we imperfect people and the divine Christ.
CHAPTER 2

MIDRASH AND REWRITTEN BIBLE

In this chapter I will define what I mean by Midrash. Using Lloyd Gaston as a
touchstone, I will explore the realm of modern midrash-making. One sub-genre of
midrash is called Rewritten Bible and has roots in ancient midrashic writings. Scholar
Philip Alexander has examined these ancient texts and compiled a list of criteria for
Rewritten Bible, which I will cross-reference with Moore’s original “Afterword” in the
following chapter. In recent decades there has been a resurgence of midrash-making,
particularly among Jewish women in North America writing revisionist, feminist
midrash. Alexander’s work, reflected in the modern work of Naomi Graetz, Judith
Kerman, and Jody Myers, helps us understand why midrash-making appeals to and
continues to be relevant to contemporary audiences.

At the dawn of the eighteenth century, Reformed Protestants brought forth the
notion that the New Testament was “a collection of apostolic writings, universally
acknowledged by the Church as authoritative in its entirety, written under the inspiration
of the Holy Spirit, and guarding the truth of Christianity against all heresy”¹ in order to

¹ Heresiology presumes purity as its opposite, therefore religious purity and pure forms of religion emerge
as the ideal against which hybridity is deployed, as per Homi Bhabha. Daniel Boyarin, “Apartheid
provide an eternal norm for Church doctrine.”\(^2\) James A. Sanders names this Bibliolatry, and counters that “God is divine, not the Bible!”\(^3\) However, this post-Enlightenment rigidity regarding the Bible as sacrosanct has shaped Protestant Christianity.

Gaston engages in canonical criticism, “with its necessary aftermath called comparative midrash”. He hypothesizes that we “often say ‘canon’ where we ought to say ‘Scripture’… The Hebrew bible is the starting point, and there then begins a tradition of midrashic interpretation of the Scriptural text.”\(^4\) Gaston would prefer “not to speak of a canon at all but rather of midrash”.\(^5\) Midrash, as shall be explored in this chapter, both re-asserts and diffuses the authority of scripture. Midrash on scripture is a form of recycling, “both of signifying text and of signified meaning”.\(^6\)

Towards a Definition of Midrash

The Bible’s literary style is often “[t]erse, lacking in detail, typically silent regarding the thoughts or motives of its characters”. Believers seeking direction and inspiration in its pages are left to imagine their own detailed versions of the ancient stories. Deuteronomy 4.2 prohibits the alteration of Torah. To help navigate and explicate

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2 Childs writes that this view was opposed by some Protestant groups, most notably Lutherans. Despite these differences, what Childs names a “dogmatic formulation of the role” of New Testament canon was now widely accepted. Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1994), 6.


the intricacies of scriptural storylines, the interpretive technique of midrash developed. The most basic definition of Midrash is a story about a Bible story. Jacob Neusner defines midrash as the exegetical exercise which "mediates between the Holy Scriptures of ancient Israel and the living age. The way of doing so forms a paradigm." However, a caveat issued by Moshe Idel must be noted: "midrashic literature is far from being a sure kind of hermeneutical approach." Any attempt to provide a specific definition of midrash is in many ways an exercise in futility. Indeed, it is "difficult to specify the precise hermeneutical underpinnings of midrash. Rather than possessing a hermeneutics, a systematic base for interpretation, midrash may be said to have been impelled by a narrative of interpretation."

Historically, midrash evolved from the two major exegetical trends in Jewish interpretation: peshat and derash. Peshat is the plain meaning of a text. The "evocative" sense of scripture is found via derash (or derosh), which means to "draw meaning from" a text for homiletical purposes. To many, the distinction is redundant.

Derash was renamed Midrash in the rabbinical period. In Scripture itself, the word

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8 Gellman and De Mejo, vii.
9 The leading authority on traditional midrash, R. Jacob Neusner tends to address midrash as something that exists only in late Antiquity: the writings of the Sages. It is hard to think of Moore as a Sage.
10 Jacob Neusner, A Midrash Reader (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 139.
12 David Stern, Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies, Rethinking Theory (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 53.
14 Gruenwald.
15 Gruenwald, 20.
midrash appears only in 2 Chron 13.22 and 2 Chron 24.27, in reference to "annals". Rashi used both *peshat* and *derash* in the 11th century, which became a trend among French and German scholars of his era. Augustine is as close to midrashic as the Patristics get. In *Confessions*, he understands "be fruitful and multiply" in Gen 1.22,28 as "an injection to multiply interpretations of Scripture," says Stern. Traditionally, Midrash makers, those who "write stories about stories in the Bible are called *darshanim*", though I will use the contemporary English term "midrashists".

Neusner asserts that traditional, rabbinic midrash consists of three types: paraphrase, prophecy, and parabolic or allegorical reading of Scripture. By contrast, Myers identifies five types, and their evolution. First, the exegetical, which consists of "discrete, short comments on scriptural passages". Second is the homiletical, and the third is narrative, consisting of a "body of stories and legends about heroes and events from biblical or postbiblical times". The fourth, which emerged in the High Middle Ages, is running commentary, which blended in the first three types with personal perspective. The fifth type, which appeared in the third century of the Common Era, is midrash halakhah, the focus of which is usually Law.

The difficulty modern midrash scholars encounter is that "Midrash as a term refers both to a literary technique and to discrete pieces of literature". Myers' typology provides a classification system for the classical midrash of the rabbinic era. Gruenwald

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17 Gruenwald, 8.
18 Cohn-Sherbok, 14.
19 Stern, 24.
20 Stern, 24.
21 Gellman and De Mejo, vii.
24 Myers, 120.
asserts that the academic world is beginning to see midrash beyond “esoteric forms of rabbinc elegies of Scripture”. Further, Gruenwald explains that midrash is both a “literary genre and form of interpretive expression [which] is present in almost all forms of literary creation”\(^\text{25}\) — a form which, by extension, continues to be present in contemporary literature. This second, more nebulous meaning of midrash is of an interpretive stance or style. It is difficult to make a clear distinction between these two primary aspects of midrash (text and style), and “a measure of confusion is inescapable”.\(^\text{26}\) Stern points to the hybridity of midrash — as a mix of Israelite and Greco-Roman elements — as the reason it is difficult to compare or contrast it to Hellenistic interpretive models.\(^\text{27}\)

In recent decades, midrash as a style has seen a resurgence, and new literature is being generated as midrash. Much contemporary midrash-making is an American and Israeli phenomenon that has emerged especially since the translation of traditional midrashic literature into English has led to an increased demand for Jewish Studies courses.\(^\text{28}\) Stern, a literary theorist, writes that “the inclusion of midrash has enlarged the canon of theoretical criticism.” Midrash, meanwhile, has been “affected” by its “encounters” with “structuralism, semiotics, deconstruction, cultural studies” and the like.\(^\text{29}\) In scholarly circles, “the same wayward, antic features of midrash that had often been considered scandalous in the past” still fascinate. These features include holding multiple interpretations, brought on by “the desire to tease out the nuances of Scripture rather than use interpretation to close them off”, and mixing text and commentary in

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\(^{25}\) Gruenwald, 6. Emphasis added.

\(^{26}\) Myers, 124.

\(^{27}\) Stern, 6.

\(^{28}\) Myers, 123.

\(^{29}\) Stern, 1.
discourse thereby “intentionally blurring the differences” between exegesis and literature. Post-structuralists in particular are impressed by this “transgressive character of midrash”.

Midrash is particularly appealing as a mode of interpretation because it “embodies the principles of interpretive elasticity” that invigorate religious tradition. By Gruenwald’s definition, midrash as a “form of cognition” keeps Scripture at the centre of religious tradition, no matter the cultural shifts over time; it “supplies terms of reference and channels of perception for people who organize their lives in accordance with a scriptural world of ideas.” Personal theology dictates midrashic freedom. If one holds the “belief that the Torah is – literally or figuratively – made up of God’s words, midrashic elaboration is naturally limited”. If one’s theology holds that “[t]he sacred is accessed through the self, society, and nature”, a more playful stance towards Bible is fitting. Midrash allows for a poetic re-examination, or recycling, of Bible for contemporary audiences. This is no new concept. As any preacher will readily admit, “the stories in the Bible are so rich and deep and packed with a thousand different meanings that they cannot be explained just one way.”

The process of midrash involves more than sacred text and the interpretations it inspires. Jacobs reminds us of the third “indispensable component, the people for whom

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30 Stern, 3.
31 Stern, 4.
32 Gruenwald, 6.
33 Gruenwald, 6.
34 Myers, 125.
35 Myers, 131.
36 Gellman and De Mejo, vi.
the text was intended."37 Indeed, the audience "exercise a formative influence on the manner" in which new midrash is presented.38 Roger Le Déaut writes:

Midrash ... is first of all the response to the question: What does Scripture want to say for the life of today? And no effort is spared – even at the price of methods which are strange to us – to allow it to make its response.39

According to several sources, a classical midrashist was obliged to follow certain rules, including the use of "formal principles of scriptural exegesis (the Middot used in the interpretation of the Torah), social needs, new ideological and political positions, historical requirements, or any current disposition of the community."40 Gruenwald also identifies "the need to meet a certain consensus of opinions maintained and zealously guarded by the social group."41 This is of particular concern for me. The majority writes the rules. A.K.M. Adam speaks of the "cultural imperialism and intellectual xenophobia" of the interpretive community where majority rules by "only local customs and guild rules".42 If it is constrained by 'correct theology', how can midrash offer more than what the Canon already provides?

A tension vacillates between scripture and its midrashic offspring. On the one hand, traditionalists like Neusner are happy to assert that scripture "defines the permissible limits of Midrash, and by implication, of all interpretation. Valid biblical interpretation says only what Scripture says: paraphrase and application."43 However, all

Text is realized by being interpreted. As such, midrash exerts control over the original

38 Jacobs, 14.
40 Gruenwald, 12. My emphasis.
41 Gruenwald, 12.
42 A.K.M. Adam in McWhirter, 3.
43 Neusner, A Midrash Reader, 139 - 140. My emphasis.
text. By its allusion to biblical story, a midrash reiterates the privileged status and authority of scripture. In joining scriptural authority with freedom of interpretation, “each in balance and proper proportion, Midrash realizes in the here and now the continuity of culture.” Boyarin sums up the equilibrium tidily, expressing that with the creation of midrash, “the fact that both the example and the exemplified are stories makes for a very intriguing ambiguity.”

The basic theological presupposition underlying Midrash-making is the assumption that the Bible is not the painting itself but more like the palette of colors that an artist used to create a painting. It provides the language, metaphors, stories, promises, and prophecies that are to be used to reflect on the new reality in which we find ourselves.

John Coulson, proponent of Matthew Arnold’s nineteenth century opinion that the Bible should be read as literature, comments: “Our understanding of scripture must be exposed to the full range of literary experience.” Boyarin emphasizes that “[a]ccording to rabbinic insight only a fiction can be an exemplary text, a text that carries significance.” Boyarin refers here to parabolization in which any attempt to draw meaning from a ‘true’ story assimilates it to the genre of parable. That is, in searching for the ‘moral to the

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45 Alichele, 197.
47 Daniel Boyarin, "Take the Bible for Example: Midrash as Literary Theory," in Sparks of the Logos: Essays in Rabbinic Hermeneutics (Boston: Brill, 2003), 104.
50 Boyarin, "Take the Bible for Example: Midrash as Literary Theory," 110.
story’, we transform whatever ‘true’ account we’re examining into ‘story’, since stories are where morals are found.\textsuperscript{51}

Rewritten Bible

The term “Rewritten Bible” was coined in 1961 by Geza Vermes in \textit{Scripture and Tradition: Haggadic Studies}.\textsuperscript{52} Vermes used the term to indicate where a midrashist “inserts haggadic development into the biblical narrative” in an attempt to “anticipate questions, and to solve problems in advance.” Vermes dedicates a whole chapter to the sub-genre of Rewritten Bible, indicating that the midrashic techniques therein reflect “exegetical process which is probably as ancient as scriptural interpretation itself.”\textsuperscript{53}

Philip S. Alexander aims to “advance the definition of” the “rewritten Bible type of text” by using four of the ancient texts that are recognized as belonging to the genre. These are \textit{Jubilees, Genesis Apocryphon, Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum (LAB)} and Josephus’ \textit{Jewish Antiquities}.\textsuperscript{54} Alexander identifies the nine principal characteristics of Rewritten Bible, which will be applied to \textit{Lamb} in the following chapter.

\textsuperscript{51} Boyarin, “Take the Bible for Example: Midrash as Literary Theory,” 111.
\textsuperscript{52} Fraade, 60.
\textsuperscript{54} Alexander, 99 - 100. Bernstein posits that Alexander generating these criteria for Rewritten Bible was motivated by a “frustration similar to [Bernstein’s] with the lack of clarity in the general scholarly employment of the term” Rewritten Bible. Bernstein: 173 n.4. Bernstein’s annoyance has to do with the number of ancient texts which he considers to be more \textit{parabiblical} than Rewritten Bible, but concedes that Rewritten Bible is “too useful an expression to give up, provided that it is used with care”. Bernstein: 172 n.3.
The Principal Characteristics of "Rewritten Bible"

A) They are narratives or chronologies, which "may be described broadly as histories", and may have a theological aim.\(^{55}\) Rewritten Bible "often speaks itself in the voice of Scripture".\(^{56}\)

B) "They are, on the face of it, free-standing compositions which replicate the form on which they are based." Contrary to the traditions of rabbinic midrash, "the actual words of Scripture do not remain highlighted within the body of the text."\(^{57}\)

C) They are not intended to replace the original text.\(^{58}\)

D) They cover substantial portions of the Bible [in contrast to meshalim]. If external stories are brought in, they are built into the biblical framework.\(^{59}\)

E) The stories follow the Bible, but are "highly selective in what they represent. Some passages are reproduced more or less literally, some are omitted altogether, some abbreviated, some expanded." Alexander elaborates: "A proper balance between the 'literal' and the 'non-literal' sections is probably of fundamental importance to the genre."\(^{60}\) A typical expansion is the naming of unnamed biblical characters\(^{61}\), especially in the case of women.\(^{62}\)

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\(^{55}\) Alexander, 116.

\(^{56}\) Fraade, 62.

\(^{57}\) Alexander, 116.

\(^{58}\) Alexander, 116.

\(^{59}\) Alexander, 117.

\(^{60}\) Alexander, 117.

\(^{61}\) Fraade, 62.

F) The author(s)' intention is "to produce an interpretive reading of Scripture" whose commentary is indirect and the significance of which "can only be grasped if the original is borne constantly in mind."\(^{63}\)

G) Unlike rabbinical traditions, Rewritten Bible as a genre is \textit{not} polyvalent. The narrative retelling offers \textit{one} interpretation of the story.\(^{64}\)

H) The author's exegetical process is not clear, due to the use of narrative form.\(^{65}\) Within the new text, "fresh meaning is imputed by obliterating the character of the original text and rendering or translating it in a new sense. The barrier between the text and the comment here is obscured and the commentator joins in the composing of the text."\(^{66}\)

I) The new text involves extrabiblical, "fresh materials" which are meshed into the original.\(^{67}\) Oral tradition and legends may be synthesized with the canonical text. Alexander posits that authors of Rewritten Bible do this "to draw out the sense of Scripture and to solve its problems, and at the same time to read non-biblical material into Scripture, thereby validating it and preventing the fragmentation of the tradition."\(^{68}\)

Rewritten Bible is especially popular among feminist biblical scholars whose work "cannot remain within the limits drawn by the established canon."\(^{69}\) The nature of midrash as an open-ended method of approaching text, being at once a playful and sober

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\(^{63}\) Alexander, 117.
\(^{64}\) Alexander, 117.
\(^{65}\) Alexander, 117.
\(^{68}\) Alexander, 118.
art “has easily leant itself to feminist use.” Midrash making allows for the “words of women ‘to rise out of the white spaces between the letters in the Torah’.”70 Bowen directs her readers to a “feminist liberationist approach” to sacred text which would “call for expanding the definition of ‘text’ to include other media besides print.”71 I would say that while this is absolutely necessary, convincing the religious world to surrender their notion of sacred text beyond their long-accepted canons is challenge enough.72

Why would traditional Biblical gender roles be relevant to a discussion about a piece of fiction? “Insofar as the Bible views men in a hierarchical position over women, and insofar as this view is considered to be divinely ordained, this has real consequences for real women.”73 Recycling the Bible by way of pop culture is a way of reappropriating one’s religious heritage.74

For modern Jewish women, especially, midrash is “the mode of religious and artistic expression best suited to explore their own identity, their relationship to others, and their encounter with the sacred.”75 Myers contends that feminist midrash engages mostly with relationships, and that women midrashists especially “generally ignore theology and are unconcerned with establishing a rationale for the commandments – matters that preoccupied premodern midrashists.”76 “Feminists in general have favored the creative use of midrashic methodology,” while often avoiding traditional midrashic

72 My aspirations to convince my academic superiors of the gospel merit of a work of humorous fiction will most certainly be met with raised eyebrows and mild exasperation.
73 Bowen, 193.
74 Aichele, 197.
75 Myers, 119.
76 Myers, 120.
texts. Focusing on midrash as “a ‘methodology’ or ‘impulse’ of reading and writing” has become very popular, but can be achieved only by “decontextualizing its methodological approach from the literature that first comprehensively employed it.”

Does Moore’s work, the focus of which is human relationship and which blithely ignores theology, make him a feminist? He has certainly created a “midrash with a feminist hermeneutic. We can retell biblical stories of women and violence in ways that critique the violence and promote egalitarian, non-hierarchical paradigms for how to live.”

I claim that Moore’s work has feminist markings. Moore is a man, though, and his protagonist is a male who relates to women as sex objects. Moore may be guilty of the “androcentric tendency to portray women only as they relate to men. This tendency,” writes McWhirter, “prevails in stories created by men for men.”

When placed alongside the satirical Everyman Biff, however, Moore’s portrayal of Maggie reveals his feminism.

Recycled Bible

Literature, “almost by definition, must refer outside itself”. George Aichele writes: “As the world becomes increasingly postcanonical, we need more attention to postcanonical recyclings of the Bible”. Fortunately for us, “the academy now welcomes contributions from reader-response critics, post-modern exegetes, and many whose political agendas render their readings overtly subjective.” The methological intransigence of the modern era is slipping.

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77 Fonrobert, 246.
78 Bowen, 195-196.
79 McWhirter, 139.
81 Aichele, 200.
82 McWhirter, 3.
I contend that midrash is necessary. Novels playing on religious subject matter are imperative. A religion, Coulson warns, "that turns its back on poetry and the imagination is under a sentence of death, since it is peculiarly within the experiences it shares with poetry and literature that religion lives most strongly."\footnote{Coulson, 42.}

Myers' final comment anticipates the argument of my third chapter, stating: "A person who crafts a new midrash is contesting or augmenting the existing renditions of the text. This is a creative act, but it is also an aggressive one that involves determination and willingness to face opposition."\footnote{Myers, 135.} Moore's recognition of this truth is demonstrated by the very existence of his Afterword, which he freely admits "was covering my ass."\footnote{Michelle K. V. Salomons, by Moore, Email Correspondence with Author, September 2011.}
CHAPTER 3

MOORE'S AFTERWORD AND THE CRITERIA FOR REWRITTEN BIBLE

Christopher Moore's novel acts as modern midrash. In this chapter, I will examine Lamp from a literary standpoint, applying the definitions and imperatives of midrash from the previous chapter to the novel. I will claim that Lamp belongs to the category Rewritten Bible, using Philip Alexander's criteria, with special reference to Moore's Afterword. For illustrative purposes, I will begin this chapter with a summary of Lamp, followed by an analysis of how the structure of the novel allows it to become a venue for intertextual biblical criticism.

The author's inclusion of the "Afterword" as an addendum to the work provides a fascinating and candid counterpoint to the literary mayhem the novel affords. The Afterword stands as an apology, presenting his biblical and authorship hermeneutics. While introductions "help the reader set what follows into a wider context", Moore's choice of an Afterword allows readers to draw their own conclusions reading the novel and to verify their assumptions afterward. None of his other novels include a similar postscript or explanation, and none of his other novels involve sacred texts being revised.

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Plot Summary

Christopher Moore, absurdist novelist who has delved fearlessly into the genres of myth and fantasy, provides a new gospel for contemporary readers courtesy of Biff. After 2000 years, the childhood playmate of the Saviour is resurrected to provide his side of the greatest story ever told.

Meeting at age six at the village well, Joshua (the Jesus character) and Biff become fast friends. They play at enacting the Bible stories, during which Joshua must always be the one to play Moses. At an early age, they realize that Joshua is the Messiah. Unfortunately, in Roman occupied territory, there are none around to teach Joshua what that means. Vague directives from dimwitted angels are of little help; then Mary suggests they seek the learned men from the East who visited Joshua at birth. Biff joins Joshua to protect him. ² They leave on the morning their beloved Maggie (Mary the Magdalene) is married to the village bully.

The teenaged pair travels through Antioch, Afghanistan, China and India seeking the wisdom of Balthasar, Gaspar and Melchior. From the first, Joshua learns the lessons of Confucius and Lao Tzu, and that a Messiah must bring change. From the second, that freedom cannot be given by any individual, but must be found within oneself. Joshua also learned how to be a bodhisattva or saviour who “will not evolve to nirvana until all sentient beings have preceded him there.” ³ From the third, Joshua learned to multiply food and about the Divine Spark within all souls, which he would later rename the Holy

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Spirit.\(^4\) Christ's gospel message, according to the novel, is to embrace the divine spark or Holy Spirit inside each of us (even Romans).\(^5\)

The most disturbing event in their Asian journey is a depiction of the festival of Kali in Calcutta. Moore pulls no punches on the gory display here, and while the episode may seem totally irrelevant to the plot (besides providing an opportunity for Biff to use explosives and curse words), this is in fact the scene that cements Joshua's path to the cross. Moore's Christology reflects a unique theology which is best summed up by Biff's prayer and subsequent explanation for his tone\(^6\) with the Almighty.\(^7\) Joshua went willingly to the cross to prove a point to God, not necessarily to people.

While Joshua is learning to be the Messiah, Biff is the quintessential human. While very much in tune with his baser instincts, he is not without wit or compassion. Next to Joshua's unfailing innocence and trust, Biff is the street-smart wiseass. Moore's Christ is a lovely figure who is full of love and compassion. Yet, while presented as divine Son of God, Joshua is a most incarnate, human depiction of Christ. He has deep and lasting friendships, a sense of humour, a libido, and the occasional punch reserved for his best friend. Moore lets his audience observe the development of the boy saviour as he picks up the lessons and tricks he'll need during his famed ministry. We witness his practice runs at raising the dead, and his ecumenical awareness as he goes from a devout (and occasionally legalistic) Jewish child to the saviour of the whole world.

\(^6\) Biff's tone while praying is reminiscent of Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*.
Story Structure as Criticism

The structure of the novel is a story in a story. This literary conceit allows a subtle outlet for Moore’s intertextual criticism on the canonical New Testament as it has been received. Its author having been granted the Gift of Tongues, the Gospel according to Biff is written under duress in a hotel room in St. Louis and is being cross-referenced to its Gideon Bible in secret. Obsessed with bad TV, Biff’s angelic captor Raziel fails to notice Biff’s discovery of the Gideon Bible, in which Biff learns of Easter for the first time. According to James Brenneman, there are five relationships involved in intertextuality: 1) reality; 2) syntax; 3) (con)text; 4) process; 5) that which the reader brings to the text(s). The fourth level, process, is the most central. Brenneman defines this as the “function or interplay of an older text or tradition cited, alluded to, or echoed within its new textual setting.” It is then essential to ask how the echo might be re-appropriated, drawing as a hermeneutic necessity a distinction between “traditum (content, form) and its traditio (the process of its use over time). Biff’s gospel is the book within the book. Moreover, “the Gospels” are also in this gospel. Moore has created quadruple layers of intertextuality. Biff’s remarks about the canonical gospels make for terrific commentary. By having Biff claim there is no way the evangelist Matthew was the same person as the Apostle he had known, Moore is able to teach or remind his readers of the true dating of the canonical gospels. Furthermore, Biff is mentioned by

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8 Acts 2.4; 2.11; 10.46; 19.6
10 Brenneman, 21.
11 Brenneman, 22.
12 Brenneman, 22.
13 There is interplay between the Hebrew Bible, the canonical gospels, Biff’s gospel-as-true-story, and the story about Biff’s writing of the gospel in modern times.
name in the actual gospel of Mark as one among many tax collectors and sinners, so he can claim at least some credibility as a witness to Joshua’s ministry.\textsuperscript{15}

Moore has adopted a widely available genre to address contemporary audiences. By using the novel genre, he protects himself by clearly associating his version of the events as fictive. However, by presenting Gospel as Story, he leaves open the suggestion that all gospel is (mere) story. And this is probably at the crux of why Moore thought believers would not like his novel. However, as has been asked by Christian satirists, how can anyone “satirize something that’s already a parody”?\textsuperscript{16} The way Bible is sometimes used as a means of oppression undermines its weight and value as sacred text, legitimizing protest forms of Bible, of which \textit{Lamb} may be deemed an example.

\textbf{The Afterword and Rewritten Bible Criteria}

In this section I will address Moore’s Afterword as it pertains to Alexander’s criteria for texts of the Rewritten Bible genre.

A) Rewritten Bible narratives often have a theological aim and may mimic scripture in tone and voice.\textsuperscript{17} The new midrash narrative mimics Scripture (specifically, the canonical and extracanonical stories of the life of Jesus), which “is itself a narrative … Now, the biblical narrative certainly makes referential claims. It claims not only that these events could possibly have happened out there in the world, but that they certainly \textit{did} happen.”\textsuperscript{18}


\textsuperscript{17} Alexander, 116. Fraade, 62.

\textsuperscript{18} Boyarin, “Take the Bible for Example: Midrash as Literary Theory,” 105.
Lamb consists of two interwoven, chronological narratives. The major narrative, Biff's Gospel, is heavy with Christological questions. As for mimicking the voice of scripture, Joshua frequently alludes to Torah, while Biff quotes from imaginary books of the Bible: Excretions, Imbeciles, Dalmatians and Amphibians. In the latter cases, Biff is partial to the prelude "it is written..." While Biff tells his "real" version of the events in the novel, Moore cautions in his Afterword that: "The book you've just read is a story. I made it up. It is not designed to change anyone's beliefs or worldview, unless after reading it you've decided to be kinder to your fellow humans (which is okay)". Moore qualifies that while he is in no way portraying the "true story", he attempts to provide a historically accurate picture of society in first century Palestine. Historiography and fiction are not mutually exclusive, but are "different semiotic functions within the text"; both are commentaries on external realities. As for producing a creative narrative that has a theological aim, Moore's

sending Joshua and Biff to the East was motivated purely by story, not by basis in the gospel or historical evidence ... While historians and theologians don't completely rule out the possibility that Christ may have traveled to the East, they seem to agree that he could have formulated the teachings we find in the Gospels with no more influence than the rabbinical teachings in Galilee and Judea. But what fun would that have been?

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19 Moore, "Afterword: Teaching Yoga to an Elephant," 441.
23 Boyarin, "Take the Bible for Example: Midrash as Literary Theory," 112.
The journey to Asia highlighted how similar the teachings of Jesus are to those of Buddha especially, but also to Lao-Tzu, Confucius and the Hindu faith, “all which seem to include some version of the Golden Rule”.  

B) Rewritten Bible differs especially from the more common rabbinic form mashal due to its lack of direct citation, or prooftexting. 

The “all pervasive, radical poetics of quotation”, as termed by Boyarin, give way to the more subtle poetics of illusion. Moore does not often use direct quotation, except in the occasional dialogue. Lamb is bursting with biblical allusion. The absence of visible scriptural citation was an editorial decision made so as not to detract from the book’s readability. Lamb provides no prooftexts, excepting those from Eastern religions. Moore encourages readers unfamiliar with the Bible to ask someone who does about the truthiness of passages in Lamb, stating: “If you don’t know someone who is familiar with the Bible, just wait, someone will come to your door eventually.” The author's impression of those who know the Bible well is telling: “if the reader knows the Bible well enough to recognize the real references, there’s a good chance that he or she has decided not to read this book.”

Moore, "Afterword: Teaching Yoga to an Elephant," 443.
Alexander, 116. Boyarin, "Take the Bible for Example: Midrash as Literary Theory," 101, 110; Stern, 42.
Boyarin, Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash, 37.
Moore, "Afterword: Teaching Yoga to an Elephant," 442.
Merriam-Webster’s word of the year for 2006 was coined by satirist Stephen Colbert. It is defined in two ways: First, as a “truth that comes from the gut, not books” per Stephen Colbert, Comedy Central’s "The Colbert Report," October 2005; second, by the American Dialect Society as “the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true”. "Word of the Year 2006", Merriam-Webster, Incorporated http://www.merriam-webster.com/info/06words.htm (accessed February 27, 2012).
Moore, "Afterword: Teaching Yoga to an Elephant," 442.
Moore, "Afterword: Teaching Yoga to an Elephant," 442.
C) Rewritten Bible narratives are not intended to replace scripture. While Moore aimed to provide a historically accurate setting, at least where he chose to stick to reality, being an absurdist, he took liberties: “This story is not and never was meant to challenge anyone’s faith; however, if one’s faith can be shaken by stories in a humorous novel, one may have a bit more praying to do.” Moore relishes artistic license and playfulness. The extremes of silliness which Moore brings to tradition are carefully deployed. Irony has “the protective advantage of making no claims. It [is] almost synonymous with literature’s awareness of its own limitations.”

D) Rewritten Bible narratives draw inspiration from substantial portions of the Bible [in contrast to mashalim]. If external stories are brought in, they are built into the biblical framework. Alexander calls them “centripetal: they come back to the Bible again and again.”

Lamb begins the tale of Joshua’s life at age 6, but refers back to his infancy. Biff’s gospel ends on Good Friday. Moore’s aim was to provide a fuller account of the life of Jesus of Nazareth, with special emphasis on his development in childhood and youth. Moore writes that given conditions for Jews living in first century Palestine under Roman rule, it’s “more than a small anachronism that I portray Joshua having and making fun, yet somehow, I like to think that while he carried out his sacred mission, Jesus of Nazareth

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33 Alexander, 116.
34 Moore, "Afterword: Teaching Yoga to an Elephant," 439.
36 Moore, "Afterword: Teaching Yoga to an Elephant," 443.
37 Barfield: 224.
38 Alexander, 117.
might have enjoyed a sense of irony and the company of a wisecracking buddy."\textsuperscript{39}

Fictional Biff is positioned alongside biblical Mary Magdalene. Moore was inspired by the anointing of Christ’s feet (Mark 14:3-9; John:1-8)\textsuperscript{40} as “certainly one of the most tender moments in the Gospels and the primary basis for my rendering of Maggie’s character.”\textsuperscript{41}

Moore provides justification for the liberties taken with the canonical stories with a citation from the Gospel of John 21.25: “And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written everyone, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen.”\textsuperscript{42}

E) Bible stories are being rewritten. This means there will be significant differences in the narrative, especially in terms of omissions and expansions.\textsuperscript{43} A typical expansion in Rewritten Bible is the naming of unnamed biblical characters, especially in the case of women.\textsuperscript{44}

Though the gospels do not mention how many wise men there were, Moore keeps three according to the three gifts, and names them “Balthasar, Gaspar and Melchior” according to the “Christian tradition written hundreds of years after the time of Christ.”\textsuperscript{45} The use of “new” names for biblical characters (especially Joshua\textsuperscript{46} and Maggie) separates his story

\textsuperscript{39} Moore, "Afterword: Teaching Yoga to an Elephant," 443.
\textsuperscript{40} This passage echoes the pericope in Luke 7:37-8, where a “sinful woman” anoints the feet of Christ in the presence of some Pharisees. Shortly thereafter, Mary Magdalene is introduced as a woman who has had seven demons cast out of her. (Luke 8:2)
\textsuperscript{41} Moore, "Afterword: Teaching Yoga to an Elephant," 442.
\textsuperscript{42} Moore, "Afterword: Teaching Yoga to an Elephant," 438.
\textsuperscript{43} Fraade, 62. Alexander, 117.
\textsuperscript{44} Fonrobert, 246.
\textsuperscript{45} Moore, "Afterword: Teaching Yoga to an Elephant," 442 - 443.
\textsuperscript{46} Joshua is an alternate derivation of Jesus, and is not technically ‘new’. However, Joshua lacks the cultural baggage associated with “Jesus,” allowing Moore greater license.
from the figures in canonical text, and buys the author a sort of insurance against the charge of sacrilege.

"The available written history about the peasant class, society, and the practice of Judaism in the first century in Galilee degenerates quickly into theory." Thus, Moore excuses his liberties while filling in the blanks. He reminds his readers in his Afterword that, "The historical life of Jesus ... is again mostly speculation." The canonical gospels are fragmentary at best with regards to capturing the whole life of Jesus. "Of the time from Jesus' birth to when he began his ministry in his thirties, the Bible gives us only one scene: Luke tells of Jesus teaching in the Temple in Jerusalem at age twelve. Other than that, we have a thirty-year hole in the life of the most influential human being ever to walk the face of the earth." Explaining his omissions, Moore acknowledges "elements of the Gospels which I left out in the interest of brevity, but you can always find them in the Gospels if you want."

Of the "many historical inaccuracies and improbabilities" in Lamb, Moore admits to his most transparent being the journey into China. The timeline in the novel of Buddhism's spread into China is too early by five hundred years. "The martial arts would not be developed by Buddhist monks until after that, but to remain historically accurate, I would have had to leave out an important question that I felt needed to be addressed, which is, 'What if Jesus had known kung fu?'"

It is perfectly acceptable for Moore to completely avoid swaths of the canonical gospels (especially the parables) dealing with coins, wheat, robbers, etc., because these

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50 Moore, "Afterword: Teaching Yoga to an Elephant," 443.
51 Moore, "Afterword: Teaching Yoga to an Elephant," 440.
are based on the socioeconomic realities of first century Palestine. Jesus, as a *construct*, is very much a part of *our* socioeconomic reality. The canonical, biblical text as a construct is as fundamental to our cultural existence in North America as grapes and shepherding were to the people of the early Common Era. Does that make Jesus fair fodder for parabolic midrash-making? I really don’t see why not.

F) The author’s intention is to “to produce an interpretive reading of Scripture” whose commentary is indirect and the significance of which “can only be grasped if the original is borne constantly in mind.”

Biff’s commentary on the Gideon Bible, as previously discussed, reinforces this criterion as applied to the reading of *Lamb*, and underlines the author’s use of the received canon. One role of canonical criticism is that “Whenever a tradition is cited, whether in oral form or in written, there is presented the opportunity to discover by what hermeneutics the author or tradent caused the tradition to function in the new situation.” For biblical sources, Moore referred to the Hebrew Bible as it is received today. For New Testament sources, he drew only on the four canonical gospels, which he attempted to harmonize, as well as Acts insofar as the gift of tongues was concerned. The only extracanonical source Moore alluded to is the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, for its proximity to both Mark and certain Buddhist ideas.

G) The narrative retelling offers *one* interpretation of the story.

Biff’s Gospel is marketed as true events, frequently more true than what is offered by the canonical gospels. However, the fact that the novel is fiction told by a fictional evangelist

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52 Alexander, 117.
53 Sanders, 186.
54 Moore, "Afterword: Teaching Yoga to an Elephant," 443.
55 Moore, "Afterword: Teaching Yoga to an Elephant," 441.
56 Alexander, 117.
underlines the book’s status as an interpretive retelling, nothing more.\textsuperscript{57} When faced with opposing opinions among scholars on what reality would have been like for the boy Jesus, Moore takes the tack that “makes for a more interesting story.”\textsuperscript{58}

The constraints against multiple interpretations of the text set out in this criterion carry a special irony given that in the novel, Biff hates parables. Biff’s difficulty with parable as a genre is a common one: they are polyvalent. In contrast to the narrative offered by Biff’s own rewritten gospel in which the gospel message is clearly spelled out, Joshua’s parabolic explanations leave everyone confused: “Three hours later, Joshua was still at it, and he was starting to run out of things to liken the kingdom to, his favourite, the mustard seed, having failed in three different tries.” Next to parables, Biff’s independent account of gospel truths is a relief.

H) The novelist concurrently creates and deconstructs, the new work inherently becoming a commentary on the original sacred text. Yet, the author’s exegetical process is not clear, due to use of narrative form.\textsuperscript{59}

“The barrier between the text and the comment here is obscured”\textsuperscript{60} George Aichele writes that “to comment on a text is in effect to ‘canonize’ it”.\textsuperscript{61} Thus, \textit{Lamb} re-canonizes scripture by setting itself as an alternate and obviously fictional version of the biblical events.

Matthew Arnold has asserted that (serious) literature is “criticism of life”. There are two schools of thought on what Arnold’s assertion implies. The first is that literature should have a practical purpose “directed to bringing about social reform”. The second

\textsuperscript{57} Boyarin, "Take the Bible for Example: Midrash as Literary Theory," 105.
\textsuperscript{58} Moore, "Afterword: Teaching Yoga to an Elephant," 439.
\textsuperscript{59} Alexander, 117.
\textsuperscript{60} Neusner, \textit{What Is Midrash?}, 7.
\textsuperscript{61} Aichele, 195.
understanding is that criticism is the “true function of literature, provided always that the
criticism was implied rather than argued, provided it was limited to irony”. Given the
ironic treatment of the New Testament by Biff, Moore has fulfilled this latter role well.
By providing his own interpretation, Moore aimed to fix people’s “misassumption[s]”
concerning the popular (but not biblical) notions, such as that Mary Magdalene was a
prostitute.\footnote{Barfield: 224.}

I) New materials are woven into the traditional stories.\footnote{Moore, "Afterword: Teaching Yoga to an Elephant," 442.}
Traditionally, this means infusing the text with extrabiblical religious legends and
traditions, some which predate the canon. Modern Rewritten Bible takes even greater
artistic liberties. This criterion is perhaps the most normative to midrash as a genre, and is
perhaps the most liberating. This is where midrash brings contemporary life into play
with sacred traditions. This is the criterion where midrash ceases to be a way of telling
stories and begins to revitalize faith. Extrabiblical—even pop-culture—allusions draw in
the reader and make them pay attention.

For example, there is a trend among contemporary Jewish families to eat Chinese
food on Christmas day, and Moore, providing his own nonsensical explanation for this,\footnote{Alexander, 118; Neusner, What Is Midrash?, 7.}
makes the reader consider actual reasons why. Citing the cultural myths that are
perpetuated about the life of Jesus, Moore provides the following advisory: “[w]e make
assumptions based on what we have been fed over the years at Christmas pageants and

\footnote{Moore, Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ’s Childhood Pal, 168. Joshua was in China on his
birthday, so he and Biff ate Chinese food when celebrating.}
passion plays, but often, although inspired by faith, that material is little more that what you have just read: the product of someone’s imagination.”

Aichele states that postcanonical readings are capable of providing “not only instruction but entertainment”. Moore’s Lamb is more than mere farce or deconstructive work (with the potential to cause offense). In fact, contrary to Moore’s assumption, the people who know Scripture well should best understand its humour: that midrash “may appeal to the postmodern sensibility is not so much for the way it liberates from cultural exemplars … but for the way that it preserves contact and context with the tradition while it is liberating.” Moore’s statements throughout his Afterword clearly reflect this sentiment. At the same time, they help place his novel safely within the parameters of Rewritten Bible midrash as established by Alexander.

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66 Moore, "Afterword: Teaching Yoga to an Elephant," 443.
67 Aichele, 200.
68 Boyarin, Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash, 37.
CHAPTER 4
THE NOVEL AS MIDRASH

I love the strong theologies that I know the way I love great novels, but I maintain an ironic distance from them occasioned not only by the fact that they are invariably in league with power but also by my conviction that the event that is astir in the name of God cannot be contained by the historical contingency of the names I have inherited in my tradition.

John Caputo, The Weakness of God

The term ‘trickster’ was coined by scholar Daniel Brinton in the nineteenth century with reference to North American aboriginal characters, which highlights the colonial undertones of the trickster paradigm, “a character type based on criteria developed within the scholarly community.”¹ The trickster character acts as a “mechanism of praise for those who are able to turn a system of oppression on its head through ridicule of those in control.”² Biff and Maggie are characters that embody traditional biblical trickster roles, and as such, reflect a particular theology. Having established the impact two trickster figures can have on tradition, Moore’s fulfillment of Alexander’s criteria for Rewritten Bible will be illustrated in this chapter by way of a source-critical literary analysis of

² Steinberg, 4.
Biff’s gospel story. I will examine in broad strokes key portions of Joshua’s childhood, ministry and Passion. Moore used the four canonical gospels as touchstones to his novel, and did not reference any extracanonical sources (including infancy narratives) save portions of the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas. The following stories best capture the essence of Moore’s midrash: Joshua’s excursion as a child into Sepphoris to circumcise a ‘graven image’, his visit to the temple in Jerusalem at age 12, the raising of Lazarus and the clearing of the temple. Finally, the events of the Last Supper are where Moore does his best midrash, explaining the birth of the communion ritual, Peter’s threefold denial of Christ and Judas’ betrayal.

Christopher Moore’s Biff overturns oppressive systems explicitly in the story with the character interplay between Biff, Maggie and the high priests, and implicitly by writing his own funny gospel story. The social role of the trickster or clown vacillates “from pure entertainment to a psychological steam-valve for critiquing social values to a means of testing and expanding social boundaries.” Lamb’s Maggie is much smarter than both Biff and Joshua. The trickster is often tragic, never high-ranking, which emulates the Carnivalesque in the character’s challenge to imperialism and hierarchy. Trickster differs from the Carnivalesque, however, the latter which seems “to act out protest against the politically powerful, while at the same time consolidating the

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3 I will rely on NRSV Bible text and The Other Bible’s compendium of extra-canonical sources for my source-critical citations.
4 Moore, “Afterword: Teaching Yoga to an Elephant,” 441. While Thomas is a sayings source only, Moore found within it Buddhist-like ideas that served his sending Biff and Joshua to Asia.
5 Steinberg, 5.
6 Steinberg, 2 - 3.
7 Steinberg, 2.
8 Carnivalesque was first defined by François Rabelais in the sixteenth Century, and expanded on by Mikhail Bakhtin. The latter categorized forms of carnivalesque discourse as those which, in the spirit of Renaissance carnivals, involve the “temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers” between people of all social levels and institutions. Edward F. Fischer, "Gramsci and Bakhtin", Vanderbilt University http://www.vanderbilt.edu/AnS/Anthro/Anth206/mikhail_bakhtin.htm (accessed March 15, 2012).
established order” by its parody.9 “Tricksters make available for thought the way things are not but might be.”10

Occasionally in mythology, the trickster figure “is a deity who represents a primordial blend of power, creativity and destructiveness … Other times he is a being created by the High God for a special purpose.”11 In Lamb, Joshua wonders if Biff was sent by the Devil to vex him, to which Biff responds, “Could be. How am I doing so far? You feel vexed?” Joshua’s answer comes as “Yep.” But Biff has another idea: “Maybe God sent me to talk you into being a stone mason so you would hurry up and go be the Messiah.”12

Biff is the quintessential male trickster figure, “lusty and loud, a destroyer and a creator, both stupid and clever, but always comical.”13 Biff’s deviousness serves Joshua well, as they both recognize too-trusting Joshua as an easy target.14 Biff prompts predatory Balthasar to reveal part of his closely-guarded knowledge with an allusion to Exodus 33.23, demanding that he share with them the equivalent of “God’s butt”.15 A “transformer of boundaries, a link between the sacred and the profane”,16 the trickster poses a challenge to Platonic dualisms. Steinberg points to the social sciences that have found “that individuals resort to the use of trickery under certain social conditions. In particular, when individuals lack authority … they resort to strategies which allow them

10 Ashley, 113.
13 Steinberg, 2.
16 Steinberg, 2.
to achieve their goals and gain compliance with their wishes.”

This is certainly true of Biff: battling under an oppressive Roman occupation, the strict social strata of Jewish society, danger posed from the Sicarii, and being a dweeb. Biff made his way despite these roadblocks. Young Biff distracted a Roman soldier for Joshua’s sake by singing one of his “famous dirges”, which being sung in Aramaic, lamented a murdered Roman’s plight: “didn’t we tell you that you shouldn’t eat pork, la-la. Although looking at wounds in your chest, a dietary change might not have made that big a difference. Boom shaka-laka-laka-laka ...”

His multiple sexual escapades, some of which transpired in order to tell Joshua what sin felt like, are built into the trickster persona. Berger writes that “sexuality has been a source of comedy from immemorial times” since it reveals “most sharply the discrepancy between spiritual aspiration and bodily bondage.” Without Biff’s raunchiness, Joshua could not have shone so in comparison.

Biff, set alongside the Saviour, becomes both trickster-clown and Everyman.

Mandated to teach Joshua to be human, Biff is in the extraordinary position of being able to set his position as normative, even archetypal. His theological explanations are ironically phrased variations on rather traditional theological understandings, and are positioned in the book as truth. On being the chosen people, Biff states: “he [God] came to us: ... We didn’t go to him. We didn’t ask. And since he came to us, we figure we can hold him responsible for what he does and what happens to us. For it is written that ‘he who can walk away, controls the deal.’ And if there’s anything you learn from reading

17 Steinberg, 6.
the Bible, it’s that my people walked away a lot.” Northrop Frye writes: “The comic hero will get his triumph whether what he has done is sensible or silly, honest or rascally.” Moore’s novel is full of mischief, mayhem, sex, and beauty. His Christ figure’s ultimate triumph was missed by his protagonist, who walked away. Yet in the end, Biff is redeemed and becomes the comic hero.

Maggie, Moore’s characterization of Mary Magdalene, is an archetypal female trickster. In the Hebrew Bible, trickster figures are most often women: Rebecca, the midwives of Ex 1:15-19, Rachel, Delilah. Steinberg posits whether “trickery” might indeed be “a woman’s issue?” In the Bible, “[w]omen’s roles and status are primarily restricted to the family as daughter, wife, mother, and widow. Women do not decide whom to marry; instead, a man ‘takes’ a wife,” as is the case with Moore’s Maggie. James C. Scott asserts that “nothing illustrates the veiled cultural resistance of subordinate groups better than what have been termed trickster tales”, in which case adult Maggie certainly fits the trickster profile. She faked demon possession (Luke 8.2) in front of a group of Pharisees (who make great witnesses) to leave her marriage, after years of avoiding sexual relations with her husband by telling him she had bleeding for sixteen years. The terrible predicament of the woman in Matthew 9.20, Mark 5.25 and Luke 8.43 has been co-opted by Moore who has stretched the bible’s twelve year diagnosis to sixteen to suit his plot’s timeline, and instead highlights Maggie’s wily

25 Steinberg, 4.
26 Steinberg, 6.
27 Bowen, 190.
30 Moore, Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ’s Childhood Pal, 361. Maggie knew Jakan would not "embarrass himself among the members of the Pharisee council by asking them about their own wives".
deceit of her hated husband. According to Robert Pelton, the trickster represents "the transforming power of the human imagination."31 Maggie transgresses the established social order and becomes a cunning champion of women.32 She and Joshua publicly breached social protocol at the wedding at Cana,33 which is appropriate since "both weddings and clowns shatter boundaries."34

Alexander’s criteria for Rewritten Bible are met throughout the novel, with articles C and H, which deal with authorial intent, recognized in Moore’s Afterword. The other conditions, that the text be free-standing, yet related to the Biblical form of which they cover substantial portions, that biblical stories are expanded, abbreviated or omitted, and nameless characters given title and voice, and providing one reinterpretation of tradition – all of these are apparent in the structure and content of Lamb. Alexander’s articles E and I, dealing with expansions and inclusion of new materials into tradition, are especially evident.35

One such episode early in the novel is pure fantasy, yet its historical circumstances are plausible. When Joshua begins work at age ten, he joins Biff in training as a stonemason. Their apprenticeship takes them into the Roman fortress city of Sephoris, whose city gates bear a nude statue of Venus. They knowingly whisper to each other about their first sighting of a ‘graven image’, and wonder why the Jews allow it to stand. A band of Zealots had torn it down, apparently, and had been crucified by the

31 Pelton in Steinberg, 3.
34 Judith B. Kerman, "A Teshua on Sacred Clowning , from Reb Kugel," in The Monstrous and the Unspeakable: The Bible as Fantastic Literature, ed. George Aichele and Tina Pippin (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 68. Familial (tribal) boundaries are redefined at weddings, bringing that which was separate together.
35 Alexander, 116 - 118.
Romans. After being humiliated by his Greek employer, Joshua decides to take Biff and Maggie into Sepphoris at night to circumcise the man’s ten foot statue of nude Apollo. They are interrupted by a patrolling Roman soldier they had met previously and who poses no threat to them. Suddenly, a Zealot emerges and murders the soldier. This is the beginning of Joshua’s multicultural tolerance. He reproaches the murderer, who identifies himself as one of the Sicarii and states: “Only when the Romans are dead will the Messiah come to set us free. I serve God by killing this tyrant.” Joshua counters that he serves evil, as “The Messiah didn’t call for the blood of this Roman.” The episode, though pure fiction, creates a picture of how a young Messiah, under military occupation, may have rejected the violent means of resistance expected of him.

The childhoods of Jesus and John the Baptist are most prominent in Lukan stories. Moore plays on these in his retelling of Joshua’s Passover pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem at age 12. The pericope of Luke 2.41-50 describes that on the annual pilgrimage, Jesus’ parents could not find him, as he was in the temple amazing the teachers with his knowledge. He says to his parents “Did you not know I must be in my Father’s house?” but they did not understand. Moore’s version elaborates, sending Joshua to the temple to inquire of the Holy of Holies how to be a Messiah, but being dissuaded by Hillel the Elder. En route, Joshua meets John the Baptist for the first time. At first, the latter boasts that Joshua cannot be the Messiah because his birth (Luke 1.13) “was announced by an angel as well. It was prophesied that I would lead. You’re not the

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The next day, however, he confesses his immense relief once it is clear Joshua has greater powers. In the temple, Joshua ends up amazing the Pharisees and priests with his knowledge only once he provoked them by being obnoxious. Moore satisfies every parent of wayward teenagers by having Mary firmly reprimand her son when he excuses his absence with having been in his Father’s house (Luke 2.49): “Don’t you pull that ‘my father’ stuff on me, Joshua bar Joseph. The commandment says honor thy father and thy mother. I’m not feeling honored right now young man.” In the middle of the pilgrimage segment, Moore weaves in a new story about the temple at Passover. Biff experiences a sort of panic attack in the temple when faced with hundreds of lambs being carried to slaughter. Joshua caught him and stared into him, “It’s God’s will,” he said. He laid his hands on my head and I was able to breathe again. “It’s all right, Biff. God’s will.” And while the scene ends with Biff avowing never to eat lamb again, the foreshadowing with the line, “I suppose I should have known right then” sends shivers.

Moore takes a comical route with both the raising of Lazarus and the clearing of the temple. The eleventh chapter of John depicts the death and resurrection of Lazarus. With a commanding voice, Jesus orders the dead man to come out, and asks those gathered to unbind him (John 11.43-44). Having first established that Lazarus who died was a leper rather than a leopard, Moore’s scene confirms the unease of John 11.39 about the corpse’s stench. Joshua has to command Lazarus three times to come out, but Lazarus refuses to come out because he’s “all icky.” In direct contrast to the biblical
account, rather than ask that Lazarus be unbound, Joshua storms into the tomb ranting, “I can’t believe that you bring a guy back from the dead and he doesn’t even have the courtesy to come out—WHOA! HOLY MOLY!” Biff describes his Messiah friend emerging stiff-legged from the tomb, calling for “bandages, lots of bandages.” 46

In Mark, Jesus and his disciples have been going back and forth between Jerusalem and Bethany, and clearing the temple is one day’s activity (Mark 11.15 – 17), having made his triumphal entry (and exit) the previous day (Mark 11.1-11). Matthew 21.12 – 14 has Jesus occupy the temple immediately after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem in a traditional Messianic scene. Moore places Joshua in the outer court of the Temple, attempting to preach the kingdom to those gathered. “Each time he would get started, a vendor would come barking”, hawking his wares. Finally fed up with being interrupted, Joshua began his rampage against the vendors and money-changers, shouting “This is a house of prayer! Not a den of thieves.” 47 In Philip and Biff’s estimation, it is this action, above everything else that seals Joshua’s fate: “The priests took a big percentage from the moneychangers. He might have slid by before, but now he’d interfered with their income.” 48 No one knows why Jesus drove the vendors out of the temple. To think that it was because he was being interrupted by salespeople is the most light-hearted possibility, and makes a wonderful contrast to the tension inherent to the plot.

Moore’s midrash on the Last Supper explains on one page three of the greatest mysteries in Christian tradition: what Communion is all about, why Peter’s threefold denial is predicted at table, and why Judas betrayed the Messiah to the authorities. In

keeping with the novel’s gospel message about the universal Divine Spark, the
Communion ritual began as a means of Joshua trying to teach his disciples. In an effort to
demonstrate that his divine parentage did not mean God was within him alone, but was in
everyone, he said, “Watch, take this bread.” Having given everyone a small piece, he ate it and declared, “the bread is part of me, the bread is me. Now all of you eat it.” The
disciples don’t understand when, having obliged, Joshua tells them that “Now it is part of
you, I am part of you. You all share the same part of God. Let’s try again. Hand me that wine.” Biff’s hypothesizes that the disciples understood once they’d had enough wine.\footnote{Moore, \textit{Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ’s Childhood Pal}, 414.}
The theology involved in this reading is far removed from Anselm, but not totally
implausible.

A more plausible explanation for a biblical mystery is Peter’s denial of Christ.
Moore lessens the culpability of Peter alone by telling all his disciples that they will have
to deny him. At Peter’s promise not to, Joshua predicts that he will deny him three times.
Immediately he elaborates, “I not only expect this, I command it. If they take you when they take me, then there is no one to take the good news to the people.”\footnote{Moore, \textit{Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ’s Childhood Pal}, 414.} Joshua is not a
judging Christ, admonishing Peter’s weakness. Instead, he is a compassionate pragmatist.
The often covert movements of the Early Church associate well with such a directive from their Saviour. What follows Joshua’s explanation to Peter in \textit{Lamb} is his prompt to Judas regarding betrayal.

The canonical gospels differ significantly on Judas’ motives and moves to betray Jesus to the priests and scribes. The Synoptic gospels agree that Judas instigated
negotiations with the priests, though the timelines for the meetings vary. Luke specified
that Judas was careful to find an opportunity to betray Jesus when the crowds of followers were not present. In all the Gospels, Jesus knows that he will be betrayed and indicates so by identifying someone at table with him at the Last Supper (Matthew 26.23, Mark 14.20, Luke 22.21) but only John has Jesus instructing Judas to “Do quickly what you are going to do” at the table (13.27).\footnote{Matthew 26.50 has Jesus voice a similar phrase, but only after Judas has kissed him at Gethsemane.} Judas’ motives for betraying Jesus are different across the Gospels. He either bargains for money (Matthew 26.14-16 and Mark14.10-11), or seeks to betray him because of demon possession (Luke 22.3). The consumption of bread at table with Christ has a peculiar effect on Judas in John 13.27, as it prompts the devil to enter him, despite his already having been described as being “a devil” in John 6.71. Moore provides a more complete account of Judas’ betrayal, with a clearly human rationale. Simon the Canaanite and Judas Iscariot are portrayed as Zealots who frequently quote the Sicarii slogan (per Moore) of “No master but God!” Judas is thrilled at Joshua’s ability to multiply food because it could sustain Jewish army rations, and believes his Messiah speaks in parables because he’s not “ready to strike” against the Romans.\footnote{Moore, \textit{Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ’s Childhood Pal,} 392.} As the Bible does not elaborate, a common assumption made by Christians is that Judas betrayed Jesus in order to prompt him to take action against the Romans.\footnote{Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, \textit{Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels} (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 407.} In \textit{Lamb}, Judas certainly starts out with these motives, but Joshua makes himself clear: “we can’t cast the Romans out of the kingdom because the kingdom is open to all.” Biff describes the Zealots’ profound disappointment, as “[t]hey’d waited their whole life for the Messiah to come along and establish the kingdom by crushing the Romans, now he
was telling them in his own divine words that it wasn’t going to happen.” 54 After the death of Joshua, an unrepentant Judas tells an avenging Biff that “You can’t have someone like [Joshua] alive” 55 since “[h]e would have just reminded us of what we’ll never be.” 56 The Bible’s Judas is one-dimensional, playing the New Testament equivalent of Eden’s serpent. Moore’s characterization is much more complex: Judas’ expectations were betrayed by his Messiah, and betraying him right back was his only recourse.

The framework of Rewritten Bible as delineated by Alexander grants enormous freedom to the midrashist. Moore has availed himself of this liberty to explore ideas, provoking his readers to imagine new theological ideas, even truths. In turning scripture on its head, Moore himself plays trickster.

CHAPTER 5

RELIGIOUS HUMOUR

Humour in religious expression is healthy, even essential. Moore’s playful Midrash can invigorate faith. The audacious humour brought to sacred story in Lamb provides renewed opportunity for theological exploration. By filling the gaps in the stories of Jesus’ life in his zany way, Moore reminds readers of the existence of those gaps in the canonical texts, providing opportunity for faithful meditation on other possible accounts of the genesis of the Lord. Of greater import, though, and that which sets Lamb apart from other ‘gospel’ novels, is the humour of this particular Midrash. Having taken certain precautions to avoid being disrespectful, Moore’s madcap gospel offers an outlet for religious laughter. Sacred humour is a vital and underserved part of religious experience.

The interrelationship between the comic and the sacred is “significant, indeed more crucial, than the occasional and often quite miscellaneous attention afforded the issue would indicate”. Of the few people writing about the benefits of humour in faith, a

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1 Refer to the third chapter of this thesis.
tragic number overemphasize how humour shows us how far from our divine potential our sinful selves are. Reinhold Niebuhr, for example, states that the “ability to laugh at oneself is the prelude to the sense of contrition. Laughter is a vestibule to the temple of confession.” Moore has flipped this outdated notion on its head. Our ability to play shows us how divine we are, what a sacred gift our lives are. What a glorious statement we make about our Creator if we say that, made in God’s image, we have the capacity not only to mourn, but also to find hilarity in life. Moreover, in terms of Christology, it is my belief that before he became Resurrected Christ, Jesus lived a human life. If he never laughed, not only would he have been a very odd human, he would not have successfully drawn people to himself. The Bible has no verses overtly stating that Jesus laughed. However, there are plenty of verses where clearly he employs irony, apostrophe, hyperbole and the subversion of social norms in the course of his ministry and teaching. There is much humour in the Gospels. Midrashic retellings of gospel stories provide opportunities for this humour to be brought to the fore. However, as shall be explored in

3 Chrysostom, St. Augustine, and Tertullian were all clearly opposed to any blending of humour and faith. It is not necessarily a coincidence that they are all three also anti-woman. Robert Darden, Jesus Laughed: The Redemptive Power of Humor (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 63, 67.
5 Niebuhr, 141. My emphasis.
6 Hyers, 2. Darden, 51. The Nicene Creed quotes that Christ is “very man of very man”.
7 Taubebeck writes that in spite of “attempts to humanize Christ from more recent times, ... the Christ figure we have today is still in many ways hardly recognizable as a human being.” Moore also fails, but I wonder if it’s even possible. Moore may come closest to achieving a “consistently humanized, existential Christ” through Biff; and the Christ figure’s friendship with him. Steven Taubebeck, “The Existential Turn: Refiguring Christ from Kazantzakis to Scorsese,” in Jesus in Twentieth-Century Literature, Art, and Movies, ed. Paul C. Burns, UBC Studies in Religion (New York: Continuum, 2007), 110.
8 Darden, 43 - 50. Here are a few of the instances rife with potential humour as identified by Darden. Peter walks on water for a short while (Matthew 4.28-31); The parable of the wedding banquet (Matthew 22.1-10, Luke 14.15-24); Specks and logs in eyes (Matthew 7.3, Luke 6.41); Stones for bread (Matthew 7.9-10, Luke 11.11-12); A camel passing through the eye of the needle (Matthew 19.24, Mark 10.25, Luke 18.25); The calling of Nathanael (John 1.35-51), The wedding at Cana (John 2.1-11); Jesus spots Zachchaeus up a spindly tree (Luke 19.1-10).
this chapter, in the world of religious humour there exist safeguards between the irreverent and the pejorative. Done right, as within Lamb, humour using religious material can be refreshing and illuminating. When those who appreciate Lamb are faced with the dissent of those either too pious to find laughter in faith or who consider the book’s message to be in bad taste, the folks at The Wittenburg Door would say to pass the literature on to “someone smarter”.  

Humour has long had a place in Judeo-Christian religious expression, but it has rarely been a place of honour. There is wit and humour throughout both testaments of the canon, in Rabbinical Midrash and in the Jewish festival of Purim. These traditions garner little attention from the theological community, at least volume-wise. The application of humour to religion continues to be controversial: how can faith be funny? Niebuhr claims that “Humour is, in fact, a prelude to faith; and laughter is the beginning of prayer”. Yet even Niebuhr draws limits to where laughter may be considered appropriate.

There is a very long tradition of sacred clowning in Judaism. The two primary examples being the community-wide clowning during the festival of Purim and the role of the badkhn, the Orthodox wedding clown. Purim involves carnivalesque role reversal with the sages. In such carnivalesque situations, “even acts bordering on sacrilege may be permitted” but rather than desecration, these comic reversals of cultural and religious

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9 Stiller.
10 Niebuhr, 134 - 135.
11 Niebuhr, 131. The concluding chapter in Holy Laughter places Chad Walsh in direct opposition to Niebuhr on this issue. Darden provides a tidy summation of Niebuhr’s position as it counters that of Walsh in Jesus Laughed, Darden, 96-7.
12 Kerman, 64.
13 Kerman, 65.
structures result in “essential qualifications of the absoluteness of the sacred.” At least temporarily, “what might otherwise be an oppressive tyranny of taboo is ameliorated.”\textsuperscript{14}

Jewish folklore and traditions are full of religious humour.\textsuperscript{15} The homiletical nature of Midrash in particular invites humour.\textsuperscript{16} The role of humour in Midrash plays off the dialectic between the homiletical and prophetic nature of retelling sacred story, even to the point of turning tradition on its head.\textsuperscript{17} Christianity has evolved in such a manner that makes the application of humour more challenging, but as authors like M. Conrad Hyers and Robert Darden have shown, we are not without our funny moments.

Christological models of Kenosis involve the separation of Christ into two conditions: status \textit{exaltationis}, “the divine person in heaven” and status \textit{humiliationis}, “the humiliated state of the divine person on earth”.\textsuperscript{18} The trouble with this terminology is that while certainly human life is much less exalted than dwelling in perpetuity on a heavenly cloud, per se, these Christological models can undermine the significance of Jesus the Christ's human life. If Jesus lived his three decades life aware of his celestial origins, he must have recovered from his “humiliated” state very quickly so that he could be an effective human. Moore identifies the importance of concentrating on the humanity of Jesus through Biff explaining that to think constantly of Joshua as Messiah is paralyzing: “If I was basking in the light of his holiness all of the time, how would I take

\begin{footnotes}
\item[18] Francesca Aran Murphy, \textit{The Comedy of Revelation: Paradise Lost and Regained in Biblical Narrative} (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 342.
\end{footnotes}
care of him? ... Even Josh can’t think about what he is all of the time, Maggie.”19 Once we are able to separate ourselves from the dualistic discourse of kenosis, which tends to treat Jesus’ humanity only in terms of humiliation, we are better able to move beyond the “misguided piety” that “has made us fear that acceptance of His [Christ’s] obvious wit and humor would somehow be mildly blasphemous or sacrilegious.”20

Christians’ ventures into the realm of mirth are hampered by the brutality of the cross. Hyers identifies “the Jesus that is not only a tragic but a comic hero who assumes the burdens of others as the butt of the joke ... the scapegoat sent forth in mock regal robes who ironically saves others but cannot save himself”.21 The “fools’ king” of 1 Corinthians makes for a sick joke.22 The only humour in the cross is ironic,23 even derisive: Jesus saved others, but could not save himself.24 Faced with the cross, how dare any Christians laugh? The answer to this is simple: Easter. Considering the Easter triumph, it is no wonder that Nietzsche quipped that the redeemed ought to look more like it.25

While faith is a solemn matter, it can be simultaneously very funny. Chad Walsh, the concluding author in Hyers’ seminal book on religious humour, Holy Laughter, identifies that despite the seriousness of aspects of religious faith,

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\text{[t]he comic is not a wart on the human soul but a part of the soul, and the soul is diminished if the comic is excised by any kind of spiritual X-ray. The man or woman who passes into the holy of holies and ceases to laugh is bringing into}
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23 Frye, 46. In his discussion of the ironic comedy genre, which frequently portrays mob violence, Frye writes that “the element of play is the barrier that separates art from savagery, and playing at human sacrifice seems to be an important theme of ironic comedy.”
24 Niebuhr, 139.
25 Nietzsche in Darden, 87.
God’s presence a mangled creature, one who is less than the full being that God intended him [or her] to be.\textsuperscript{26}

Representing a breach from western history, our culture as a whole no longer holds any one thing explicitly sacred or profane: “No objects, places, persons or texts are culturally considered holy in themselves.”\textsuperscript{27} Moore intentionally paired the Bible with elements of modern popular culture, creating cognitive dissonance, effectively challenging the “privileged status of the biblical text”.\textsuperscript{28} Tara King touts irreverence as “a tool by which theological certitude is deconstructed, opening up a space for ambiguity.”\textsuperscript{29}

Comedy is a double-edged tool, which “can be used to devastate as well as temper, to deride as well as humble.”\textsuperscript{30} Hyers and King, among others, warn that when created at the expense of others, humour becomes not only a means of reinforcing our own beliefs but a form of aggression.\textsuperscript{31} Becky Garrison of The Wittenburg Door does religious satire for a living. She advises that to do so effectively, we “can only satirize what we love.”\textsuperscript{32} The goal of those using humour together with the sacred, especially when employing irreverence, should be to “undercut traditional religious authority through humour while reasserting the importance of spiritual questions.”\textsuperscript{33}

In mocking one’s own tradition it is possible to fully accept it. In fact, Strassfeld argues such mocking is imperative, warning that “otherwise we make the tradition into an

\textsuperscript{26} Walsh, 244.
\textsuperscript{27} David E. Klemm, "Schleiermacher’s Hermeneutic: The Sacred and the Profane," in The Sacred and the Profane: Contemporary Demands on Hermeneutics, ed. Jeffrey F. Kess (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2003), 61. While pockets of society hold objects or ideas sacred, this can’t be said for the majority of our diverse, post-Christendom society.
\textsuperscript{28} Black, 9.
\textsuperscript{29} Tara Marie King, “Treating Theologically Transmitted Diseases: Generation X Irreverence in Television and Film” (Master’s Thesis, Vancouver School of Theology, 2006), 67.
\textsuperscript{31} Hyers, “The Comic Profanation of the Sacred,” 25. See also King, 12. Walsh, 245.
\textsuperscript{32} Stiller.
\textsuperscript{33} King, 13 - 14.
idolatry rather than a smasher of idols.” 34 Once our idols have been smashed, we may find among the remaining fragments the beginning of the face of God. 35

Humour is proof of self-consciousness. It allows all people to “recognize the ludicrous and absurd aspects of their pretensions.” 36 Ideologies are not big on “comic awareness”. Hyers elaborates:

*it is difficult to imagine anyone with a profound sense of humor in relation to his own most ultimate convictions participating in the burning of another at the stake because he failed to subscribe to a certain formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, or engaging in violent acts of aggression in order to convert others to one’s own ideological persuasions.* 39

Faith leaves us vulnerable to doubt; when one’s hope (that is, the hope that they know what they believe is true) is challenged, anger is a common response. 38 The anger of the self-righteous gives rise to the categorization and delineation of sacrilege. 39 Often, when challenged, the religious fall back on their sacred texts as a bastion of support.

Brenneman asks, “[i]s it any wonder that the sword is often closely allied to the spirit and word of God, a symbol of both physical extermination and psychic decision?” 40 In terms of rhetoric, Biblical tradition equates war with “efficacy of the spoken word, especially when spoken by God or one of God’s prophets.” 41 If the Bible is used by the Powers and Principalities 42 to repress dissenting voices and/or perpetuate hate, perhaps Moore

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34 Kerman, 66.
35 Becky Garrison expressed this in the film by Stiller. Robert Darden, senior editor for The Wittenburg Door, defines good “genuine humour” as what happens when one places “interesting people into challenging situations and [listens] to their responses.” Darden, 43.
36 Niebuhr, 140. See also Walsh, 245.
38 Stiller.
39 Boyarin identifies that deviance can only exist within created parameters of normativity. As such, the notion of heresy can only exist if orthodoxy has been established. Boyarin, "Apartheid Comparative Religion: The Ideological Construction of Religious Difference in Antiquity." Darden, 84.
40 Brenneman, 3.
41 Brenneman, 4.
42 Powers and Principalities here can mean the State, major religious organizations, the moral majority, or a terrifying combination of the three.
retaliates in subversive, trickster fashion. In lieu of using a sword, he brandishes a rubber chicken. His foolery is impotent on its own but has a disarming effect when facing others brandishing their leather-bound ‘swords’.

Humour necessitates “the refusal to take the sacred with unqualified seriousness, to absolutize the sacred, and is an act by which the sacred is momentarily and periodically profaned.”43 A distinction must be made between pure farce and good humour, the latter which I consider Lamb to be a prime example: “Seriousness is the prerequisite and ground of humor; it is the precondition apart from which humor would be reduced to cynical contempt.”44 All such good humour, writes Willimon, is “seditious” to the overzealous.45 An alternative to over-serious, dogmatic faith, is imagined by the likes of Hyers, Chesterton, and later, Darden: religion characterized by “an increased appreciation of humor and comedy as intrinsic elements in the experience and expression of the sacred”.46

The sacred and the comic, when apart from one another, “are equal prey to distortion”.47 Niebuhr places humour in a no-man’s land between faith and despair. Hyers tempers the statement thus: “Faith without laughter leads to dogmatism, while laughter without faith leads to despair.”48 Religious humour, even religious satire, is part of a movement for redemptive change.49 Yet the freedom granted to us by humour to explore the absurd needs grounding. Successful humour requires “absurdity and nonsense set in

45 Willimon, 11.
49 Stiller.
relation to a transcendent ground of meaning and reason".\textsuperscript{50} This is why the humour of 
\textit{Lamb} is so successful.

Biblical hermeneutics, “as a theological subject, permits people from one

generation to another to reinterpret scriptural texts in the light of their times and culture,”

presuming “common understanding” among readers from the same “cultural heritage”\textsuperscript{51}

For those of us who are not from any insular village, without much in the way of

ancestral memory, the task of defining one’s cultural hermeneutic proves difficult.

Deconstruction and postmodern criticism undergradired my education. Does the Bible, in

my time and culture, deserve a special place where it can remain untouched and

unquestioned? The process of biblical interpretation, according to Elisabeth Schüssler

Fiorenza, is to use “methods as dance steps in such a way that the moving powers of

biblical texts that have been frozen or fossilized by the regimes of domination are

released and can become effective.”\textsuperscript{52} Every new reading of a text “represents the reality

of a particular people situated in a particular time and space ... Cultural hermeneutics

therefore refers to the analysis and interpretation of how culture conditions people’s

understanding of reality at a particular time and location.”\textsuperscript{53}

Our culture is one that finds irreverence a commonplace occurrence, or should do.

The Bible has been accorded a place of privilege so lofty, while at the same time, much

\textsuperscript{50} Hyers, "The Dialectic of the Sacred and the Comic," 235.
\textsuperscript{51} Musinbi R. A. Kanyoro, \textit{Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective}
\textsuperscript{53} Kanyoro, 9. Murphy identifies the importance location plays in comedies: “Comedies can be categorized
by the level of space in which their action occurs”. \textit{Lamb} goes wide, while the Bible as comic literature
goes tall (transcendent). However, tragedy is more temporal. So \textit{Lamb} takes the comic lit genre much
further into space than Bible stories, at least geographically – not to mention temporally. Murphy, 24.
of what we think we know about our over-familiar Bible stories is rumour or myth.\textsuperscript{54} Lamb shakes things up, and fulfills what King defines as the role of salvation: "to help people live, truly live in the world right now. This makes life itself sacred. Any other idealistic and unrealistic vision thrown from religious groups and figures is worthy of the deepest and most heartfelt irreverence".\textsuperscript{55} Moore has linked nonsense with questions of deepest importance. This juxtaposition allows for new theological possibilities to be imagined, including "theologies of the body."\textsuperscript{56} The comic plot of Lamb takes the taboo subjects and treats them as literal facts. By carrying the facts to their logical conclusion, the humour emerges. Thus, if Jesus was ever a teenaged male, he must have spent quite a bit of time wondering what sex is like.\textsuperscript{57}

So why do we need a funny gospel? Elton Trueblood credits our "extreme familiarity with the received text" for our failure to see humour throughout Christ’s teaching.\textsuperscript{58} People in Western society are divided into those who either wholly embrace or mistrust institutionalized religion. Another Jesus novelist, Nino Ricci, wrote Testament aiming to "hold on to Jesus" by explicitly "reinventing him, seeing him no longer as a figure of faith but of history, on the one hand, and of myth, on the other".\textsuperscript{59} Moore has crafted a similar formulation, yet has treaded more carefully, as his Afterword attests. Reinventing Christ is a dangerous pursuit, however compelling the author’s reasons. Any

\textsuperscript{54} Take the notion that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, for example, or the number of unnamed Wise Men. Moore, "Afterword: Teaching Yoga to an Elephant," 442. Trueblood, 169.
\textsuperscript{55} King, 65. This sentiment is echoed by Kierkegaard, as stated in Hyers, "The Comic Profanation of the Sacred," 10.
\textsuperscript{56} King, 33.
\textsuperscript{57} Murphy, 23.
\textsuperscript{58} Trueblood, 169.
"Christ without any oomph can be the object of satire, but this deflated figure cannot hold earth and heaven together." Sheldon Sacks states that it is the "novelist, ironically, from whom the greatest degree of ethical revelation is demanded." Much like Lamb, a novel like Gulliver's Travels includes many "ludicrous remarks which are not directed against an easily identifiable external object. Opportunities for brief absurd portrayals are inevitable in such a fiction and, to the extent that they do not obscure the satiric pattern, they may contribute to our general expectation of ridicule." Episodes like Biff stacking monks to keep warm, or Joshua becoming stuck in a wine jar while practicing yoga serve to amuse and to call attention to the absurd (and thus fictional) nature of the text.  

What are Christians to make of such blatant fictionalizing of the story of Jesus? Congregations regularly tolerate dramatizations and re-narratization of the story, in the pulpit and beyond. The Mel Gibsons of the Church overstate their case, religious traditions are used derisively in crass comedy, and now we have Moore. The absurdist author routinely tackles known genres (from Horror, to Indigenous legend, to Fantasy, to Shakespeare) and flips them on their heads with humour. Biff's gospel serves as proof of Hyers' statement that,

Comedy is not simply a response to the incongruities and absurdities of life, or the lighter side of tragedy – a correlation which some interpreters of the comic

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60 Murphy, 344.
61 Sheldon Sacks, Fiction and the Shape of Belief; a Study of Henry Fielding, with Glances at Swift, Johnson, and Richardson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 271.
62 Sacks, 44 - 45.
never get beyond. In its own right, and in its own terms, comedy points toward, and even creates for its own plaything, incongruity and absurdity.⁶⁴

All Midrash serves a homiletic function. With Lamb, Moore gives us a Midrash of Jesus that enchants and astonishes when set in its context of buffoonery. The novel is a gentle place to do this, and much more wide-reaching than any sermon – and, at least to non-churchgoers, its motives less suspect. Hyers states that the essence of good religious humour holds “trust as the distinctive mark of faith”.⁶⁵ We can trust that God chuckles along with us, within us, and imagine that the Holy Spirit is a joyful one. In the words of Moore’s heroine, Maggie, who is much smarter even than the Saviour, “Faith isn’t an act of intelligence, it’s an act of imagination.”⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Hyers, “The Dialectic of the Sacred and the Comic,” 238.
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