Like a grain of sand irritating an oyster. Howard Jacobson's *The Very Model of a Man* and the Bible.

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Abstract
For contemporary novelists rewriting the Bible (e.g., for Winterson, Barnes, Roberts, Crace or Diski), Scripture proves a potent irritant with which contemporary literature can still maintain a lively, interactional relationship. Far from being taken for granted, neglected, plundered, the Bible functions as a grating cultural presence approached with a sense of both abrasion/unease and incorrigible attachment. This paper focuses on Howard Jacobson's The Very Model of a Man *(1992), a novel rewriting the biblical narrative of Abel and Cain, and examines the ways in which the novel plays out its attachment and detachment, friction and acceptance of the Bible. It is argued that the complex character of the novel (written by a Jewish born British author) derives from midrash (a rabbinic mode of reading and relating to Scripture), a form not unknown in English literary tradition. Drawing on those theories of midrash which emphasise the culture-bound, historically conditioned position of the Bible reader, the paper investigates the ways the scriptural "irritant" is filtered through/inflected by the cultural milieu of its late twentieth-century reader.*

Keywords
the Bible, midrash, subversion, contemporary novel

According to Terry T. Wright, rewriting the Book of Genesis involves "wrestling" with the biblical text.[1] Wright's phrasing suggests that a novelistic re-scripture of the Book of Genesis resembles the patriarch Jacob's wrestling with an angel, in that it neither rejects nor submits to the ancient text but preserves a creative tension between itself and the Bible. Such novels play the tug-of-war with Scripture, the effect of which is that the desire to overpower the parent-text and the sense of being overpowered by the Bible are kept in precarious balance. Theirs is the "Genesis of Fiction" (as Wright puts it in the title of his book), the simultaneous engendering of biblical stories and coming to terms with being engendered by the first book of the Bible, the respect for tradition and the readiness to subvert it. Though Wright does not discuss Howard Jacobson's *The Very Model of a Man* (1992), a novel rewriting the biblical narrative of Abel and Cain, his statements can shed light on the manner Jacobson reads the Bible. Like Jacob from the Book of Genesis, Jacobson is a wrestler who will rather become crippled in the confrontation with the powerful text than give up on the struggle. His reading-as-wrestling feeds on conflict, violence and daring; it searches for the Bible's potentially weaker points – its equivocalities, gaps, and extravagancies – insinuates itself into those places, twisting their meanings or challenging their traditional reception.

"The Lord was our shepherd. We did not want," we are told at the very beginning of the novel. "He fed us in green and fat pastures, gave us to drink from deep waters, made us to lie in a good fold. That which was lost, He sought; that which was broken, He bound up; that which was driven away, He brought again into the flock. Excellent, excellent, had we been sheep."[2] By reading the pastoral metaphor against the grain,

1 Terry T. Wright, *The Genesis of Fiction: Modern Novelists As Biblical Interpreters* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 1.

2 Howard Jacobson, *The Very Model of A Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 1.

Jacobson strikes at the taken-for-granted readings of the passage: on his account, the idea of divine shepherding connotes stalking or excessive control rather than safety, and combines with the idea of sheepish followers rather than independent believers. Also, "to be a sheep in the biblical world is an ambiguous fate"[3] because lambs are fed and looked after to ultimately become sacrificial offerings. "The destiny as lamb chops [...,which] undermines the image of security [...the original biblical passage] has been at such pains to establish"[4], lays a menacing shadow on the life of God's flock in *The Very Model of a Man*. Throughout his novel, Jacobson exposes the poverty of Abel's lamb-like posture, the manipulatory character of God-the-Shepherd's interventions into Adam's, Eve's and Cain's lives, and the sacrificial status of humans, whose ends are known long before men and women reach the stage of decision-making. We may say that Jacobson revisits the Bible in a spirit of bitter irony, violating its pieties, mocking its metaphorical certainties, debunking the iconic status of some of its ideas.

Jacobson critically probes the Bible's fissures and yet, his subversions remain "strange secular attachments to, *in detachment from*, the biblical text."[5] Jacobson's dislike for complacency (Abel's and Babel-dwellers') and for "punctilious"[6] observation of reason-offending laws, mark his distance from the biblical ideas he nevertheless explores from within the framework of the biblical original. Jacobson tries to avoid the crime his main character commits – unlike Cain, he neither eliminates the opponent nor silences ideas he does not share. Cain was "literal enough to insist that [...his] view must alone prevail, and his punishment is identical with his crime – single-mindedness. Single. Mindedness."[7] Once he rises "against his own yearning [...] to enjoy and suffer disjunction"[8] and kills his brother, Cain suspends for himself the life-energising principle of opposition ("Opposition is the beginning and the end of us."[9]) and spends the rest of his days among polite, complacent and characterless citizens of Babel. In contrast to Cain, Jacobson never relinquishes his yearning to "enjoy and suffer" the disjunction from the Bible. He wrestles with, rather than murders the ancient text. His rewriting of Scripture is simultaneously irreverent (or heterodox) and attentive (or dedicated) to the parent-text. His sympathising with outcasts (with Cain, Esau, Korah) is the badge of his late modern, dissenting sensibility, while the fact that he focuses on *biblical* dissenters puts him in line with those who read the Bible (reverently or otherwise) and who, by doing that, maintain the relationship between the secular and the scriptural.

Jacobson's wrestling with the Bible: re-scriptures and subversions

Jacobson's wrestling with the Bible (and, paradigmatically, his struggling with the ancient story of Jacob struggling, which he changes into Eve comically wrestling with an angelic rapist), is exceptional neither in style nor in the choice of narratives. As Valentine

3 Hugh Pyper, "The Triumph of the Lamb: Psalm 23 and Textual Fitness," *Biblical Interpretation* 9 (2001): 388.

4 Pyper, "Triumph of the Lamb," 388.

5 Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives. The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 200.

6 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 302.

7 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 286.

8 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 286.

9 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 55.

Cunningham observes, the Wrestling Jacob - together with Jehovah, Jonah, Joseph, Jeremiah, Job, the J-author of the Old Testament and other biblical "J-texts"[10] – has become emblematic of the (post)modern larger struggles with the notion of ultimate signification. Like other writers or theorists, Jacobson is drawn to a particular "neo-canonical" type of biblical narrative characterised by narratological quirkiness or gappiness, and peppered with equivocal characters and enigmatic situations.[11] Through mimicking and repeating stories from the "neo-canon", the contemporary reader "locks closely in a necessary wrestling match with the ultimate divine antagonist, puts him or herself fearfully, but optimistically, in the arena with Jacob, the man who toughed it out with God."[12]

Significantly, the contemporary *agon* with the Bible involves not merely reading but also a self-conscious reflection - a reflection on that reading, as well as on the ongoing revisions of interpretive manners. Thus, reading Scripture not only functions as the condition of possibility for the contemporary re-scriptures, but also figures as one of the elements such re-scriptures problematise and historicise. In Jacobson's *The Very Model of a Man*, a prophet-like character called Sisobk the Scryer reads fragments of the not-yet-written Bible and discusses its challenging passages with rabbis who come to his study-room from the distant future; Adam, Eve, Abel and Cain are engrossed in an midrashic argument over the meaning of one of the divine laws; and in one of his metacommentaries, the narrator presents a number of possible readings of Moses's injunctions, taking advantage of his late-twentieth century knowledge. Jacobson's anachronisms, meta-reflection as well as extravagant fictionality introduced into the recognisable biblical stories, are all ways of handling the temporal difference between the Bible and its readers.

On the one hand, those devices work to undo the discontinuity between the past with its alien ways and no-longer-upheld beliefs, and the present; on the other hand, they foreground the unbridgeable gap between the past and the present. Since Jacobson makes his characters cultivate late modern values, their subversiveness often figures as the late twentieth-century level-headedness. Modernising Cain and Korah, recasting them as men like us and making them speak to us, Jacobson makes them impervious to displays of supernatural power,[13] unsentimental about the infantilisation of humans, and realistic about the pettiness of the ritual.[14] However, neither Cain's nor Korah's behaviour can simply be judged by modern standards. The fabulously rich Korah, who ridiculed Moses in public and who was responsible for the brewing rebellion among the Israelites, "was safe, in the thirteenth century before Christ, from the charge of champagne insurrectionism. The three hundred mules count against him only in the modern mind."[15] Cain becomes the patron saint (the "saint of discontent"[16]) of all the rebels down until the twentieth century, and epitomises the modern virtues of individualism, freedom and difference. Yet, Cain is simultaneously innocent enough not to understand the consequences of his physical assault on Abel. As he says, "we had no experience of [death] among ourselves. [...] No one had said whether we were built

10 Valentine Cunningham, *In The Reading Gaol. Postmodernity, Texts, and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 371.

11 Valentine Cunningham, "The Best Stories In the Best Order? Canons, Apocryphas and (Post)Modern Reading," *Literature and Theology* 14 (2000): 74.

12 Cunningham, *Reading Gaol*, 371.

13 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 256-257.

14 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 78.

15 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 119.

16 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 33.

to go the way of Abel's flock – a bleat, a gush of blood, and then up in smoke to please God; or whether life would drip out of us, in a crimson trickle, like wine from a punctured wineskin. We were untutored in mortality."[17] The innocent murderer fulminating against God and forcing Him to react – really toughing it out with the transcendent and worthy wrestler - is a figure the contemporary reader may feel nostalgic about. Like the citizens of Babel, we are attracted to Cain's "anteriority", we marvel at his face "accentuated by God"[18] so different from our self-fashioned faces, and listen enchanted to his extravagant stories whose falsehood we measure by our own, taken-for-granted reality. Together with the people of Babel, we admire Cain for really meaning to subvert, for believing subversions matter, and we allow him to present a narrative spectacle of his world-shaking rebellion.

The complex relations between the past and the present, between the Bible as a text of the past and Jacobson's novel are also signified by means of the ineradicable mouldiness and the whiff of Edenic mud/earth Jacobson's Cain grudgingly wears about him. In the novel, mud and mould (images which connote fuzziness and indefiniteness) are associated with both continuity, the ongoing (act of) creation, life, breeding, creative separation, *and* with discontinuity, death, decay, decomposition, non-differentiation. Muddy and mouldy, the past resists becoming totally separate from the present. The image of Asmar, Babel's top potter, covered in mud and fighting with his rebellious son, "reminds Cain of what he never saw but always sees – his father's birth, the terrible moment when he rose grey and dripping from a bog [...]."[19] This is a frightening sight, in which the "sad, sickening, insulting inadequacy of beginnings"[20] is displayed, and in which the momentary/imaginary subversion of chronology – watching one's progenitor's birth – far from simply giving the sense of power, threatens one's strength. To witness a creation-like scene is to occupy God's position, but the resulting subversion of hierarchy is a mixed blessing since to see the muddy "prototype"[21] of humanity is also to realise human abject constitution. Interestingly, the simultaneously farcical and terrifying scene showing the human potter reduced to a lump of clay offers even more than a power-giving and power-reducing glimpse of the creation of the first man. Since immediately before the Asmar scene, Jacobson evokes a verse from Isaiah "We are the clay and thou our potter"[22], the reader is encouraged to see nothing less than God-the-divine-Potter in the slimy figure of the Babel-based artist. The Creator of the Book of Genesis, who shaped Adam from earth, is here being shaped and moulded by Jacobson. While Jacobson allows his main character to envision preceding his own father, he allows his readers to have the impression of antedating God and seeing His formation. Through the clay-centred metaphors, the divisions between the human and the divine, the creator and the creature, the before and after are muddied. More importantly however, though the fantastic and subversive fiction of watching the formation of the Potter (the fiction forced on Cain rather than fabricated by him) indicates the faultiness of the displaced Creator, it also intimates the weakness, the "leakiness"[23], of all creators, subversive or not.

17 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 328.

18 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 35-37.

19 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 227.

20 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 227.

21 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 227.

22 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 224.

23 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 224.

Though the imaginary genesis of the Source of Genesis does not make Jacobson sound triumphant about his cleverly reversed belatedness, his novel does portray moments of "pleasure involved in shrinking the booming brittle deity"[24] either to an absurd lover wooing Eve with light tricks, or to an unimaginative, second-rate author keen on pirating somebody else's literary gems. Having witnessed the clay scene, Cain reflects on the "sad, sickening, insulting inadequacy of beginnings"[25], which elsewhere in the novel are related to instances of the divine "spirit of Ineffable Plagiarism".[26] Jacobson shows God as stealing the best passages from humans and passing them as His own in the Bible. Most memorably, we learn that Adam's clever flattery meant to persuade God to allow him to make love to Eve again, will be appropriated as the renowned Behemoth-and-Leviathan speech with which God silences Job. "I was not there when Thou laidest the foundations of the earth [...]. Wherefore I am weak, Lord, and abhor myself", cunningly cries Adam in Jacobson's novel.[27] "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding," asks God in the Book of Job.[28] The effect of making God a plagiarist is similar to the effect of showing the potter (or the Potter) and his son as "slithering maquettes"[29] - Jacobson slings mud at the biblical plagiarist, himself being a plagiarist adapting, reappropriating bits of Scripture. Like Asmar and his rebellious inheritor struggling in clay, the parent-text and the novel wrestle with each other, tainting each other and re-making each other in their likeness.

Like mud, mould frustrates neat divisions between the like and the unlike. Though, as Jacobson's Abel observes, "one thing is not another" and "life is not death [...,] neither are they complete strangers to each other."[30] The temporal rupture effected by death is not absolute since "the past will grow like mould [...] in the mind of any man who keeps his memory warm and damp enough. But in Cain's case, the chamber where he cultivates remembrances of his childhood, of his parents, of his native mud, can be likened to a hothouse."[31] The more he tries to forget about Eden and seduce his listeners with his moulded or luxuriating story, the mouldier he himself becomes. The more decayed or disjunct the past is, the livelier the present symptoms of its demise. Analogically, the more obviously withering the tradition, the more insidiously it presents itself today. Even if the Bible seems culturally dead these days, it leads an intriguing, spongy afterlife which keeps the somewhat exhausted scriptural body in a discreet, fungal bloom.

Midrash: the tradition of subversion

If the reading of Jacobson's text presented so far leaves the impression that the novel is quite subversive in its daring reading of the Bible (as well as in its interpretive self-consciousness, theological insolence, or literary ambition), that impression should be only partially trusted. *The Very Model Of A Man*, like a host of other literary and non-literary

24 Sherwood, *Biblical Text*, 205.

25 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 227.

26 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 141.

27 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 141.

28 Jb 38:4.

29 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 227.

30 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 310.

31 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 152.

texts, consciously locates itself within a very old tradition of approaching Scripture – the midrash – and comes to be shaped (indeed, moulded) by its peculiarities. Jacobson's subversive reading of Scripture should be examined in the light of the midrashic tradition he repeatedly invokes - the tradition with the reputation of "eccentricity" and "extreme incoherence", the tradition in which "the shattering of Logos, like the breaking of the atom, [...] released an enormous stockpile of hermeneutical energy, the sparks of Logos."[32] To understand the choreography of Jacobson's wrestling with Scripture, one needs to consider the midrash, itself a wrestler with orthodox Christianity. To what extent is the "eccentric" midrash subversive, and how does it frame or motivate Jacobson's subversiveness?

Midrashim, "the foundation-stone of rabbinic Judaism"[33], first gathered into collections in the third century C.E., are readings of Scripture, in which hermeneutic and exegetical functions coexist with literary creativeness. Studying Scripture, midrashists exploit bumps, blanks, inconsistencies, irregularities of the sacred text, from which they derive new meanings relevant for their contemporary situation. Midrash is based on "the sense of interpretation as play rather than as explication, [on] the use of commentary as a means of extending a text's meanings rather than as a mere forum for the arbitration of original authorial intention."[34] The most common techniques of midrash are: (1) the atomisation of the biblical verse, i.e., reading its every phrase, word, letter as meaningful; (2) using biblical prooftexts for the proposed reading of a biblical item, i.e., reading Scripture through Scripture, and viewing it atemporally; (3) revising the initial interpretation by referring to the succeeding phrase in the verse; (4) reading words differently from the way they are written (making use of the *qeri-ketiv* (written-read) variations[35]); (5) describing God anthropomorphically and anthropophatically. Midrash is "multiple, heterogeneous, and conflicting"[36] – its witticism and humour go together with its earnestness and seriousness; its multivocality and polysemy coexist with its firm belief in the divine guarantee of meaning; its flamboyant and farfetched readings exist side by side with its attachment to tradition. Since the collections of midrashim are arranged into series of controversies in which various rabbinic interpretations contradict one another, midrash can be viewed as a continuation, representation and a"metacommentary"[37] on the inner-biblical re-readings, on the Bible's own double-voicedness and its internal intertextuality. Far from being simply the Revelation as different from the chronologically posterior interpretation, Scripture itself is a product of exegesis and internal revisions.[38] "The heterogeneity of the midrash is thus a response to the heterogeneity of the Torah."[39] If the midrash is subversive, it is so only to the extent legitimised by the Bible it subverts.

32 Daniel Boyarin, "Midrash and the ‚Magic Language': Reading Without Logocentrism," in *Derrida and Religion. Other Testament*s, ed. Yvonne Sherwood and Kevin Hart (New York: Routledge, 2005), 136.

33 James Kugel, "Two Introductions to Midrash," *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 144.

34 David Stern, "Midrash and Indeterminacy," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1988): 132.

35 Michael Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 19.

36 Gerad L. Bruns, "Midrash and Allegory: The Beginnings of Scriptural Interpretation," in *The Literary Guide To the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1987), 632.

37 Daniel Boyarin, "Inner Biblical Ambiguity, Intertextuality and the Dialectic of Midrash: The Waters of Marah," *Prooftexts* 10 (1990), 29.

38 Fishbane, *Garments*, 3-18.

39 Boyarin, "Inner Biblical Ambiguity," 35.

Midrash resists a uniform definition. It may be seen narrowly as "a form of cognition that supplies terms of reference and channels of perception for people who organise their lives in accordance with a scriptural world of ideas".[40] Alternatively, midrash may be perceived as a very broad, if not universal, phenomenon: "a literary genre and form of expression [...] present in almost all forms of literary creation" and raising "hermeneutical questions that have interesting consequences for the study of literature and philosophy",[41] or "not a genre of interpretation but an interpretive stance"[42], or even "a form of life".[43] Defined either way, midrash figures as a powerful means of modernising, actualising, and maintaining the relevance of the ancient text. "The key to midrash lies in this reciprocity between the text and history. Midrash is a dialogue between text and history in which the task of giving an account – giving a midrash - does not involve merely construing a meaning; it also involves showing how the text still bears upon us, still speaks to us and exerts its claim upon us even though our situation is different from anything that has gone before."[44]

Described from the historical perspective, midrash is on the one hand the powerful resistance to Christian Logos theology and its concomitant split between the material and the ideal[45], and on the other hand, the product of the post-prophetic period during which the sense of the discontinuity between the world described in the Bible and the world experienced by people becomes visible. The not-yet-enacted but authoritative words of ancient prophets, which belong to the time where God acted in the world, have to be studied and interpreted in order to make them speak to people living in the time when God is not acting.[46] After the destruction of the Temple in C.E. 70, "the estrangement that the rabbis felt between God and the world, the disparity they saw between the divine promise and its fulfilment in human reality, appears to have turned their energies inward, into the construction of paradigms of holiness within their self-enclosed society."[47] Since the Torah was now a trope for the continued existence of the covenant with God, reading the Torah became the prime medium of developing the relationship with God. "Understood this way, the object of midrash was not so much to find the meaning of Scripture as it was literally to engage the text," to make it a locus of the ongoing conversation with God.[48] The midrashic reading of Scripture arose from the sense of a crisis – a rupture, a discontinuity, an incomprehensibility – and aimed not so much at collapsing the Bible's and the present time as at making one intersect the other. "The dynamic role of midrash as both a conserver and a converter of tradition is thus clear."[49] If midrash subverts the Bible, it does so only to help it survive.

Significantly, the broader (not historically-oriented) approaches to midrash draw to a large extent on the conserver-cum-converter character of midrash. Midrash "embodies

40 Ithmar Gruenwald, "Midrash and the ‚Midrashic Condition': Preliminary Considerations," in *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History*, ed. Michael Fishbane (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 7.

41 Gruenwald, "Midrash," 7.

42 Kugel, "Two Introductions," 144.

43 Bruns, "Midrash and Allegory," 629.

44 Bruns, "Midrash and Allegory," 633-634.

45 Boyarin, "Midrash and the ‚Magic Language'," 132-135.

46 Kugel, "Two Introductions," 143.

47 Stern, "Midrash and Indeterminacy," 153.

48 Stern, "Midrash and Indeterminacy," 153.

49 Fishbane, *Garments*, 21.

the principle of interpretive elasticity"[50]thanks to which the Bible and other past texts are neither forgotten nor simply devoured and dismantled by contemporary culture. Thus, Valentine Cunningham asserts that "biblical reading is always of necessity midrashic, always modern, always of now, always historical for particular readers,"[51] that we are "all rabbis nowadays,"[52] and that the ancient text survives by its midrashic "potential for renovation and by its practical renovations."[53] For Cunningham, all readings are abusive, and in that respect they share in midrashic flamboyance. Gruenwald contends that "midrashic-like modes of relating to a scriptural or canonical text can be extended to any type of mental relationship that entails the concern for establishing relevance and relatedness to any given fact or piece of information."[54] Some literary theorists (most notable Geoffrey Hartman) take midrash as a paradigm of good reading. Hartman writes about "para-midrashic readers"[55] who practise close reading modelled on midrash, whose features are inquisitiveness, openness, and text-dependence. Interestingly, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when midrash enjoyed a tremendous popularity with literary theorists, it acquired the status of the major nonlogocentric tradition believed to culminate in deconstruction as its contemporary heir. By virtue of its waywardness and transgressiveness, midrash was hailed an "embryonic form of theory"[56] and became a blueprint for reading as a creative and imaginative act.

Since the 1980s, the appeal of the so-called "midrash-theory connection" has subsided. What persists, however, is the manifold investment in midrash and midrashic-like modes of relating to the Bible. In *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives*, for one, Yvonne Sherwood asserts that "If midrash is [...] a tradition that regenerates through disruption, that preserves contact with the tradition while it is liberating, and that treats the words of Torah as a 'repertoire of semiotic elements' that can be recombined in new discourse, there is evidently something very 'midrashic' about contemporary culture's relation with the biblical."[57] In an admirable attempt to illustrate what she preaches, she starts her book-length study devoted to readers of the Book of Jonah with a midrash on the Torah given to humans in the form of flax and wheat and meant to be transformed into something eatable and comfortable. For Sherwood, inspired by the rabbis, Bible readings across centuries are tailor's shops and restaurants transforming the scriptural raw materials into palatable (or appetising) and presentable (or well-cut) forms. Sherwood not only develops the midrashic idea or watches readers "spin out meaning, engage in careful exegetical stitch-work, and cook up ever more spicy and appealing recipes,"[58] but also works out her own midrash-rooted style for her scholarly argument, which she applies to both ancient and postmodern texts. Thus, Sherwood's readers fall victim to

50 Gruenwald, "Midrash," 6.

51 Cunningham, "Best Stories," 72.

52 Cunningham, *Reading Gaol*, 371.

53 Cunningham, "Best Stories," 72.

54 Gruenwald, "Midrash," 7.

55 Geoffrey Hartman, "Midrash as Law and Literature," in *The Geoffrey Hartman Reader*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Daniel T. O'Hara (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 216.

56 David Stern, *Midrash and Theory. Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanstone, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 4.

57 Sherwood, *Biblical Text,* 204.

58 Sherwood, Biblical Text, 1.

interpretive "dyspepsia"[59], "regurgitate"[60] Jonah, or deal with "Jonah on the oncology ward and [with] the beached-up whale carcass."[61] Symptomatically, both the object of Sherwood's study and the manner of studying it partake of midrashic tradition.

There are a few observations to be made on the basis of this brief discussion of midrash. First, judging by the amount and the range of ways in which midrash has been evoked in the late twentieth century, we may conclude that it no longer occupies the position of the non-normative or the mainstream-challenging other. Admittedly, once midrash's alleged non-logocentrism and indeterminacy have been largely demystified, midrash could not but confirm its own mainstream status.[62] Second, the cultural success of midrash may ultimately lie elsewhere than in its once foregrounded intertextual playfulness. It is likely that prioritising the role of midrashic reading in the construction of scriptural meaning today is related to "the desire to overcome the knowledge of a decisive break with the past – a break in whose shadow we live – and to find in midrash a kind of hermeneutical metanarrative that would transcend the ironic awareness of history".[63] If extravagance is *de rigueur* these days, if – as Slavoj Žižek argues - transgression is the new law, perhaps the midrashic-like modes of reading should not be perceived today through the prism of their heterogeneity but through their discontinuity-attenuating powers. Third, midrash is subversive only insofar as

> biblical rewriting is always subversive, ironic, or deconstructive—whatever the author's intentions. That is to say, the changes an author makes in rewriting a biblical text are unlikely to be entirely neutral or without theological significance. One important reason for this, of course, is that the Bible as sacred scripture is protected cultural territory [...]. But even the best-intentioned of pious rewriters are likely to cross certain unacceptable lines, too, because of the ambiguities inherent in the original material.[64]

If this is so, midrashic subversiveness responding to the Bible's ingrained ambivalences may be the standard or orthodox attitude, which can be classified as "paradoxically pious subversion".[65] Is not subversion a form of piety when what is at stake is the survival of the source of all pious sentiments? As Hugh Pyper's provocatively argued, the Bible functions like a gene, or a meme (the smallest replicating unit in culture) or a "mind-virus" which, once instilled into readers, affects them by aligning its own survival with the survival of its hosts. Readers who follow the often repeated, inner-biblical command to hand down and teach the Word actually propagate the Bible. But Scripture may prove "infective", and therefore, culturally successful, outside the circle of religious readers since "the biblical text is not affected by the fact that the person who reads it is only doing so to refute it as long as there is a sufficient cultural community

59 Sherwood, *Biblical Text,* 176.

60 Sherwood, *Biblical Text,* 196.

61 Sherwood, *Biblical Text,* 201.

62 Stern, *Midrash and Theory,* 8-9.

63 Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 10.

64 Jay Twomey, "A Funny Thing Happened On the Road to Damascus. Piety and Subversion in Johnny Cash's *Man in White*," in *Subverting Scriptures. Critical Reflections On the Use of the Bible*, ed. Beth Hawkins Benedix (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 13.

65 Twomey, "Funny Thing," 20.

or meme-pool to maintain the argument and therefore sustain the need for the text."[66] As the Bible throws up many variants and welcomes divergent readings, it is able to insinuate itself into various environments and boost up its chances for survival. "Vilified, misread or venerated, the text still exists in more copies."[67] In the long run, a subversive reading is as needed as a pious one, which Pyper brilliantly demonstrates on the example of Psalm 23 - the same which opens Howard Jacobson's novel.

Smoothing subversive re-scriptures: *The Very Model Of A Man* as a midrash

The Very Model Of A Man as a whole rehearses a midrashic attitude to the Bible in so far as Jacobson fills in the blanks in the biblical account and gives the otherwise unknown details concerning Babel, Cain's life among the Shinarites, and the life of the Eden family. So, he informs us, among other things, of the Babel people's fascination with stories rather than towers, of Adam's linguistic incompetence and his passion for craftsmanship rather than for naming, of Eve's adoration of Abel and her short spell of infatuation with God, of Abel's compulsive shell-playing and Cain's alternative gardening skills. In the novel, midrash - introduced and developed on several intersecting levels – is the most important narrative strategy contributing to the subversive effects of the novel. Yet, like the qualified or conditional subversiveness of midrash discussed before, the novel's midrashic subversion is not unconstrained or unchecked. Jacobson's midrashim, which either tell the story of rebellious characters like Cain, Korah, Lilith, or present subversive interpretations of scriptural ideas, actually work to confirm the cultural authority of the Bible. Cain subverts his part of Scripture by calling God a ridiculously "indefatigable Proscriber [...] and a most fastidious Picker at food"[68], and by predicting that "there will come a time when the undeviating worship [He] jealously exact[s] will sicken [Him]; when the thousand times a thousand roasted rams will stink in [His] nostrils; and the rivers of oil will drown every pleasure [He] once took in our vain oblations."[69] Jacobson via Cain corrects the prodigal God of Pentateuch, but his admonitions are taken from the Bible (from its prophetic part - the Book of Micah 6:7, "Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil?"). Cain uses Scripture to support his subversion of the scriptural story. He may know better than God, but only to the extent that Scripture knows better than God, as is illustrated by the most famous midrash on rabbi Yermiyah, who effectively invoked Scripture against God.[70] Thus, Jacobson's subversion is legitimised by the Bible as well as by the midrashic tradition.

Jacobson makes his characters use midrashic techniques, weaving those additional elements into his main midrash narrative. Thus, towards the end of the novel, the first family is shown as having a rabbinic-like argument over the meaning of the divine law which decreed the sacrifice of "a handful of flour."[71] "How big a handful [...]? A handful heaped or a handful flat[?]" Every disputant reads the law differently: Adam insists "handful" means "hand full", whereas Eve disagrees because "handful" "implies what

66 Hugh Pyper, "The Selfish Text: The Bible and Memetics," in *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies: The Third Sheffield Colloquium*, ed. Cheryl Exum and Stephen Moore (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 86.

67 Pyper, "Triumph of the Lamb," 386.

68 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 256.

69 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 335.

70 Stern, "Midrash and Indeterminacy," 152.

71 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 306-308.

a hand can naturally hold, not what a hand can be made to hold."[72] Abel says both Adam and Eve are right since the ruling is ambiguous, while Cain claims neither is right and explains that the sense of the law is "that which can be carried in a closed fist"[73] because otherwise the flour would be spilt. In the midrash fashion, Jacobson preserves the polysemy of the dispute, never intervening to tell us what the correct meaning of the "handful" is. What he does tell us (via Cain) even before the readings are presented is that "too much scope for [...] individual interpretation [...] is the death of all religions."[74] Cain's fist-conclusion may emphasise the more-than-midrashic subversiveness of his reading of the Bible since to derive the symbol of rebellion from God's words – to read the fist out of the passage on sacrifice - is to shake one's fist at Scripture. However, Cain's interpretation, subversive as it is, brings the threatening controversy to an end, reduces the possibility of irreligion, and manages to "harmonise [...his] unhappy warring parents with themselves, with each other, and with short-tempered nature."[75] In his ironic reconciliation of the fragmented family, Cain seems to foreground the otherwise hidden mechanism underlying the midrash, which brings together the objectionable and the unobjectionable readings to produce "a *fantasy* of social stability, of human community in complete harmony, where disagreement is either resolved agreeably or maintained in peace."[76] The harmony and the stability achieved by the subversion may be a sheer fantasy, but equally unreal is the subversion itself. The fist evoked by Cain brings to mind Adam's often repeated gesture ("Look: closed! Behold: an angry man!"[77]), which as a faint imitation of true (divine) rage, indicates helpless or futile anger that poignantly knows its own ineffectiveness. The fist is a fantasy of subversion, a witticism, a doubly veiled sign of preservation through rebellion. Cain is right to indicate that not to lose what comes from God (flour, or words) one has to close it – and crush it – in one's fist. Cain's (and, more importantly, Jacobson's) subversion here is far from overthrowing the accepted order of things, but contributes in its own ironic way to the survival of the scriptural ideas.

On a different level, midrash in *The Very Model Of A Man* functions as a metanarrative which *reflects on* subversiveness rather than *enacts* the rebellious spirit. Such reflection, not unlike the standard midrashic smoothing or cocooning of textual irritants, lessens the effects of subversion. Jacobson intersperses his narrative of Cain with scenes in which biblical exegesis worked out by "cacophonous Babylonian schoolmen"[78] is offered either to one of the Babel-based characters or immediately to us. Those interpretations are concerned primarily with two instances of subversive behaviour in the Bible – Jacob's depriving his brother Esau of birthrights and Korah's challenging Moses about the authenticity of Torah. We learn that in the case of Jacob, rabbis celebrate his subversion as beneficial, while in the case of Korah, they deem his subversion as blasphemous and praise the punishment. The novel does not seem to side with those interpretations, preferring its own opinions about both Jacob's and Korah's actions. If – as rabbis maintain - Jacob was right in talking the undeserving Esau out of his birthrights, Korah might be right in exposing the absurdity of Moses' laws. If Korah is "fatherer

72 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 307.

73 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 308.

74 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 306.

75 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 308.

76 Stern, "Midrash and Indeterminacy," 156, italics added.

77 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 4.

78 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 273.

of murmuring and lawlessness",[79] Jacob is "an opportunistic burglar of brothers' birthrights."[80] The self-conscious usage of the Korah and Jacob midrashim simultaneously points to the weaker, inconsistent parts of the Bible (against which the novel may rebel) and, being part of midrash, "builds a smoothing mound which both assures that the reader will not fall and, at the same time, embellishes the path with material taken from elsewhere".[81] As the pious subversion and the ungodly one are connected by the same mound built around them, the sharpness of the rebelliousness becomes attenuated.

Moreover, in using the midrashim to anatomise subversion, in making subversion a debatable problem, Jacobson frames rebelliousness, attenuates it and maintains a critical distance from his own workings. For example, Cain presenting his subversive story in one of Babel's theatres is only one "jabbering"[82] voice in a vast chorus of other, similarly jabbering voices of poets, myth-makers, fairy-tale tellers. Faced with the task of attracting attention of those steeped in an "orgy of wondering and marvelling", Cain is initially "as crass and false and obvious" as the rest of story-tellers.[83] In the end, Cain manages to make his listeners love him ("A hit! [...] They all love you."[84]), but his narrated struggle with God, nicely framed with Babel's love of fancy, loses its subversive sharpness. Brought to the foreground and contained, treated as a motif and consciously developed, rehearsed and staged for an audience, Cain's subversion offered as a midrash becomes his art.

A wrestler become an artist, Jacobson's Cain represents the ambivalent fate of midrash and – more generally - of the Bible reading in contemporary culture. Readers of the Bible "wrestle with this book as Jacob wrestled with the 'man', in pitch blackness, and not for the mere sake of the contest or in order to wrest the book's secret from it, but in order that we may hear it utter its blessing upon us."[85] The midrashic and para-midrashic readers struggle with its opaqueness, hoping to make it speak to them in a comprehensible way; they rebel against its reticence on issues relevant for the late modern man, or feel satisfaction when the Bible, overburdened with contemporary demands, proves a feebler opponent than they thought. Yet, simultaneously, they are attracted to its silences, and to its "Auerbach effect"[86], to what constitutes the textual "still small voice" rather than a high-pitch clamour. The pious subversions and impious readings relish a transcendent opponent straining his muscles. But they also feed on the less spectacular and the more abrasive - on "handfuls", "lambs" or "clay". Those and other biblical idiosyncrasies are "the grain of sand which so irritates the midrashic oyster that he constructs a pearl around it. Soon enough – pearls being prized – midrashists begin looking for irritations and irregularities"[87] and become pearl artists. Though the struggle does not disappear, it becomes less sensational; though the subversions keep fascinating the contemporary Bible reader, they become less heterodox, tradition-mediated. In the end, when enveloped by the para-midrashic story, the Bible – in itself as immaterial for the contemporary culture at large as a grain of sand – attracts attention and survives.

79 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 33.

80 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 275.

81 Kugel, "Two Introductions," 145.

82 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 20.

83 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 20.

84 Jacobson, *Very Model*, 338.

85 Gabriel Josipovici, *The Book of God. A Response to The Bible* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 28.

86 Cunningham, "Best Stories," 70.

87 Kugel, "Two Introductions," 145.

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