

# WRITING IN THE ABSENCE OF THE WORD OF GOD: DERRIDA, CHRISTIANITY AND THE COMMENTARIAL TRADITION OF JUDAISM

Professor Philip C. DiMare

We will try to determine the law which compels us (by way of example and taking into account a general remodeling of theoretical discourse which has recently been rearticulating the fields of philosophy, science, literature, etc.) to apply the name "writing" to that which critiques, deconstructs, wrenches apart the traditional, hierarchical opposition between writing and speech, between writing and the (idealist, spiritualist, phonocentrist: first and foremost logocentric) system of all of what is customarily opposed to writing. . . .

Jacques Derrida, "Outwork"

In the more than thirty years that Jacques Derrida has been exploring the complex relationship between writing and speech, he has not chosen to perform an explicit reading of the texts of Christianity. This should not seem surprising, as Derrida has never claimed to be doing anything which could be considered exegetical, at least in a theological sense. And yet, because the focus of Christianity has always been on the "logocentric" idea of the self-presence of the Divine Word, on speech as opposed to writing, this critical lack does seem strange. It may be argued, however, that Derrida has been reading the texts of Christianity throughout his career,

but that these readings have remained hidden within the shadows of a peculiar negative, or apophatic, theology.

Characteristic of Hellenistic, Jewish and Christian mystical traditions before and after the beginning of the common era, apophatic theology uses "negating concepts" to define what God is by saying what he is not. The power of this type of theological articulation, especially for someone like Derrida, is that it exposes the inadequacy of human language to speak about God in the very moment that it gives expression to concepts which are applied to God. This act of apophatic doubling appears to be much like Derrida's own deconstructive doubling. Indeed, in his *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida himself admits that the "detours, locutions, and syntax" within which he "will often have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology."<sup>1</sup>

The theological framework within which Derrida discovers the possibility of his own apophatic expression is that of Judaism. In particular, Derrida finds the rich commentarial tradition of Judaism appealing because of the emphasis it places on writing as an "endlessly productive signifying practice." It is this emphasis on writing, says Derrida, which distinguishes Jewish commentary from the logocentrism of Christianity and also makes it "irreducible to some ultimate, self-evident truth."<sup>2</sup>

In order to understand how Derrida's work moves to a point where it often becomes so much like negative theology, it is necessary not only to trace the evolution of Derrida's work, but

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 228 and 229.

also to explore the mostly silent connection of this work to the logocentrism of Christianity and the commentarial tradition of Judaism.

### **Struggling With Hegel**

In his book *Positions*, Derrida admits that his whole career has been a struggle with Hegel. As he says in this book: "We will never be finished with the reading or rereading of Hegel, and, in a certain way, I do nothing other than attempt to explain myself on this point."<sup>3</sup> This is so, it seems, because for Derrida, the phenomenological system of Hegel is "necessarily fissured."<sup>4</sup> It defines, in the same moment, a totalizing "*metaphysics of the proper*," as well as a space of "irreducible difference." Although at times, says Derrida, Hegel may have been unaware of the "radical implications of his own analysis of the philosophy of identity," he is still vastly important because "he rehabilitated thought as the *memory productive* of signs." In so doing, "he reintroduced . . . the essential necessity of the written trace in a philosophical--that is to say Socratic--discourse that had always believed it possible to do without it."<sup>5</sup>

By joining forces with and against Hegel, Derrida is seeking to impose a kind of deconstructive pressure on the intellectual traditions of the West. According to Derrida, Western thought has always been based on certain "binary oppositions": The transcendent and the immanent, spirit and mind, presence and absence, and, especially, speech and writing, have traditionally been placed over against each other in the history of the West. And since the "first term in each pair has been forcibly elevated over the second," these oppositions have always

---

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, translated by Alan Bass (The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 77.

<sup>4</sup> For one of the best discussions of Hegel's influence on Derrida, see Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans., Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (The Johns Hopkins University Press,

represented a kind of repression, as the relationship between the two terms is "one of hierarchical violence rather than equal partnership."<sup>6</sup>

Derrida argues that in drawing a hierarchical distinction between speech and writing, the West made speech into the basis for both "presence" and "truth," while it made writing out to be an expression of the "weakness of human understanding."<sup>7</sup> Put differently, Derrida is suggesting that the Western intellectual tradition claimed from its beginnings both that the spoken word made "truths" such as God, being, essence, and existence present, and that the written word covered over these truths with dissimulation and disguise. As the authors in "The Bible and Culture Collective" suggest in their discussion of Derrida and "Poststructuralist Criticism," "[a]s lifeless written marks in place of present living speech, writing has often seemed to be an inferior, if necessary, substitute for speech." And because it has been "cut off from the *pneuma*, the breath, severed at its source from the authorizing presence of a speaker," writing has too often been understood as "an orphan, no sooner born than set adrift, cut loose from the author who gives birth to it."<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, Derrida has sought to break apart the oppositional bond between speech and writing by using "writing" as his tool. As he says in the essay "Outwork," the preface to his book *Dissemination*, the name "writing" will be applied to that which "deconstructs" the written word and its privileged opposite, speech.<sup>9</sup> It is significant that Derrida makes this application of the name "writing" in a discussion of that which is supposed to lie "outside the text," in this case

---

1974), p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (Yale University Press, 1995), p. 122.

<sup>7</sup> See, *Derrida*, p. 229.

<sup>8</sup> *The Postmodern Bible*, p. 123.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Outwork," in *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson (University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 4.

a "preface." For, in presenting the reader with this preface to the "book" itself, a preface, incidentally, which "deals with the impossibility and necessity of prefacing," Derrida is rethinking the "structures of unification and totalization" which make claims to "progress in an orderly way toward meaning and knowledge."<sup>10</sup>

This rethinking of normative structures begins for Derrida on the face page of *Dissemination*. This page bears the title: *Hors Livre*, literally, "outside the text." But it also bears the subtitles: Outwork, *Hors D'Oeuvre*, extratext, foreplay, bookend, facing, and prefacing. Here, by way of these multiple titles, Derrida is seeking to determine exactly what makes up the text and what lies outside of it: Is the preface, which precedes the text but is written after its completion, really part of the text? And what does this have to do with speech and writing?

Again, the authors from "The Bible and Culture Collective" are helpful in teasing apart what Derrida is seeking to do by way of his "outwork" and how this act of working outside the text relates to speech and writing: Derrida approaches the border between speech and writing by asking: What if the illegal alien, the parasite, were already within? What if speech were already the host of writing? What if the apparent immediacy of speech, the sensation of presence that it evokes, were but a mirage?<sup>11</sup>

One can hear the resonances of Saussure's structuralism in these poststructuralist questions concerning textuality. As is well known by now, in Saussure's linguistic system the sign is made up of a "signifier" and its "signified." The acoustical element of the sign, the signifying sound, is linked to the conceptual element of the sign, the concept which is signified. Bound together in this way, the sign points beyond itself to an object which is termed by

---

<sup>10</sup> *Dissemination*, p. XXII.

<sup>11</sup> *The Postmodern Bible*, p. 123.

Saussure the "referent." Thus, in Saussure's famous example of a tree, the signifying sound "tree" is linked to the mental concept of a "tree," the signified, and this sign points to its referent, an actual tree.

The real power of Saussure's argument, though, and what attracted Derrida and other poststructuralists to it, is its suggestion that the signifier and its referent define an arbitrary relationship: Many sounds can signify a tree, depending upon the language that is being used. What is not arbitrary, however, is the uniqueness of the sound within the general system of signs. In other words, what allows the signifier to make sense is not its relationship to its referent, but the difference between it and every other sign in the linguistic system. What this means, says Saussure, is that "in language there are only differences."

When Derrida names "writing" as the tool which he will use to deconstruct the privileged place of speech in the hierarchical opposition between speech and writing, he is pushing the Saussurian theory of signs even further than did Saussure. For not only does the "play of differences" which Saussure uncovers prevent any sign within the linguistic system from being "present" in and of itself, it also prevents writing from being defined merely as "a particular, derivative, auxiliary form of language in general." No longer, says Derrida in the *Grammatology*, does writing simply designate "the exterior surface, the insubstantial double of a major signifier, *the signifier of the signifier*." It is not that "the word 'writing' has ceased to designate the signifier of the signifier," says Derrida, but, "strange as it may seem," that the signifier of the

signifier "no longer defines accidental doubling and fallen secondarity." In the "movement of language," the "signified always already functions as a signifier."<sup>12</sup>

Derrida extends the discussion of writing as a "parasite" beyond the "outwork" which precedes *Dissemination*, and into the body of that text, itself. In his extremely important essay, "Plato's Pharmacy," Derrida traces the problem of writing back through the history of Western thought, all the way to its Socratic origins.

Of course, Plato is unique. He stands at the very beginning of Western thought, at the originary place where writing comes to be understood as a secondary, "repetitious" form of expression. Thus, a reading of Plato's texts seems perfectly natural. But Derrida does not read Plato in the traditional way. He does not read him as the author who merely follows the teacher who "did not write," the author whose writings mark the inception of the "logocentric era" because he defined the foundational elements of a "certain way of thinking about language, truth and reality." For Derrida, "to think of Plato as a 'source' for such ideas is again to fall back on that loaded system of binary distinctions--speech/writing, presence/absence, origin/ supplement--which marks the discourse of logocentric reason." As Derrida argues again and again, there is no escaping the "logic of supplementarity," as the "desire to fix an origin for truth and knowledge must always get entangled in textual complications beyond its power to predict or control."<sup>13</sup>

In "Plato's Pharmacy," Derrida suggests that throughout his work, Plato describes a certain "kinship" between "writing and myth," which distinguishes them from the more highly thought of "*logos* and dialectics." This is particularly apparent in a dialogue like the *Phaedrus*, where Plato privileges the "living speech" of the philosopher over the "dead discourses" of

---

<sup>12</sup> *Of Grammatology*, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> *Derrida*, p. 34.

mythology and writing, which are used by the sophists and rhetoricians. But there is something interesting about the *Phaedrus*, says Derrida, as it relates both to myth and writing and to *logos* and dialectics.

The *Phaedrus* begins in an unusual way: Although Socrates and Phaedrus meet inside the city walls, Phaedrus convinces Socrates to follow him outside the city, away from the colonnades and onto the "open roads." This invitation is extended so that Socrates might hear the speech of Lysias, the speech which Phaedrus has in its written form hidden underneath his cloak. To accompany someone outside the walls of the city is highly unusual for Socrates, who prefers to commune with his friends and students behind the massive gates which lock out that which is not allowed inside. But the speech of Lysias seduces Socrates, and he and Phaedrus settle down by the banks of the Ilissus, where Phaedrus begins the dialogue by immediately asking Socrates if it is somewhere near this spot that "Boreas seized Orithyia from the river." Socrates says that no, it is said that it was just a little further down the river, where there is an "altar dedicated to Boreas."

One can easily see what draws Derrida to this dialogue. By locating Socrates and Phaedrus outside the walls of the city and beginning the dialogue with a mythical exchange, Plato is performing his own kind of "outwork," disrupting the boundaries of the text from the very beginning. According to Derrida, one can see this disruption clearly if the first dialogical exchange between Phaedrus and Socrates is traced a bit further:

PHAEDRUS: . . . [P]ray tell me, Socrates, do you believe that the story [of Orithyia and Boreas] is true?

SOCRATES: I should be quite in the fashion if I disbelieved it as the men of science do. I might proceed to give a scientific account of how the maiden, while at play with Pharmacia, was blown by a gust of Boreas down from the rocks hard by, and having thus met her death was said to have been seized by Boreas, though



it may have happened on the Areopagus, according to another version of the occurrence. For my part, Phaedrus, I regard such theories as no doubt attractive, but as the invention of clever, industrious people who are not exactly to be envied, for the simple reason that they must then go on and tell us the real truth about the appearance of centaurs and the Chimera, not to mention a whole host of such creatures, Gorgons and Pegasuses and countless other remarkable monsters of legend flocking in on them (Phaedrus, 230 c-d).<sup>14</sup>

The traditional reading of this exchange is that Plato positions it at the beginning of the dialogue in order to distance himself from the "clever" sophists, who use stories, or "myths," to draw their listeners away from the "real truth," away from the logos of the philosophers. But Derrida thinks that there may be something else going on here: Is "this brief evocation of Pharmacia at the beginning of the *Phaedrus* . . . an accident?" Is it, like the preface to *Dissemination*, merely an *hors d'oeuvre*? Let us at least retain this, says Derrida, "that a little spot, a little stitch or mesh (*macula*) woven into the back of the canvas, marks out for the entire dialogue the scene where that *virgin* was cast into the abyss, surprised by death *while playing with Pharmacia*."<sup>15</sup>

As Derrida suggests, the term "pharmacia" is also "a common noun signifying the administration of the *pharmakon*, the drug: the medicine and/or poison." Indeed, it is precisely the *pharmakon*, the written text, which lures Socrates out of the city. For as Socrates says: "You must forgive me, dear friend; I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the town do. Yet you seem to have discovered a drug for getting me out" (*Phaedrus*, 230 d-e).<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> All quotations from Plato's dialogues, except when otherwise noted, are taken from, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, (Princeton University Press, 1961).

<sup>15</sup> *Dissemination*, p. 70.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in *Dissemination*, p. 71. Derrida reminds us that he is using a particular translation of this dialogue, and that others translate *pharmakon* in this instance as "remedy" or "recipe." It can also be translated as "poison" or "philter," and for Derrida, this problem of translation is part of what he means by the differential

Derrida finds this process of pharmacological seduction extremely significant, as it acts to distinguish writing from speech, although not in the normative, hierarchal way. According to Derrida, if the speech had been spoken, if it had been "proffered *in the present, in the presence* of Socrates, it would not have had the same effect." It is only because the words of Lysias are "the *logoi en bibliois*, because they are deferred, reserved, enveloped, rolled up, words that force one to wait for them in the form and under the cover of a solid object, that they draw Socrates as if under the effects of a *pharmakon*, out of his way."<sup>17</sup>

For Derrida, then, writing, the *pharmakon*, is a kind of "marginal" discipline, representing, as it does, both difference and deferral, but never the "naked" truth of the *logos*. Understood in this way, the *pharmakon* may be traced back to Derrida's notion of *differance*. "Neither a word or a concept," says Derrida in his *Margins of Philosophy*, *differance* functions rather as the condition for the possibility of a significative moment of difference and deferral which occurs in the act of writing. Here, Derrida is playing on the idea of the insinuation of the letter *a* "into the writing of the word *difference*," such that it appears as *differance*. Because in French these two terms cannot be distinguished when they are spoken, the differential process of signification is always marked by a fundamental deferral. In other words, the difference between *difference* and *differance* is never "booked in the present," it must always wait to appear until later, until after the terms are written down.<sup>18</sup>

As Derrida points out, it is precisely with this problem of significative deferral that Plato is struggling when he gives expression to yet another myth in the *Phaedrus*, a myth which, interestingly enough, deals with the invention of writing:

---

character of language.

<sup>17</sup> *Dissemination*, p. 71.

SOCRATES: Very well. The story is that in the region of Naucratis in Egypt there dwelt one of the old gods of the country, the god to whom the bird called Ibis is sacred, his own name being Theuth. He it was that invented number and calculation, geometry and astronomy, not to speak of draughts and dice, and above all writing. Now the king of the whole country at that time was Thamus, who dwelt in the great city of Upper Egypt which the Greeks call Egyptian Thebes, while Thamus they call Ammon. To him came Theuth, and revealed his arts, saying that they ought to be passed on to the Egyptians in general. Thamus asked what was the use of them all, and when Theuth explained, he condemned what he thought the bad points and praised what he thought the good. On each art, we are told, Thamus had plenty of views both for and against; it would take too long to give them in detail. But when it came to writing Theuth said, "Here, O king, is a branch of learning that will make the people of Egypt wiser and improve their memories; my discovery provides a recipe for memory and wisdom." But the king answered and said, "O man full of arts, to one it is given to create the things of art, and to another to judge what measure of harm and of profit they have for those that shall employ them. And so it is that you, by reason of your tender regard for the writing that is your offspring, have declared the very opposite of its true effect. If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks. What you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder. And it is no true wisdom that you offer our disciples, but only its semblance, for by telling them of many things without teaching them you will make them seem to know much, while for the most part they know nothing, and as men filled, not with wisdom, but with the conceit of wisdom, they will be a burden to their fellows (*Phaedrus* 274d - 275b).

As one can see, in this myth Theuth brings his invention of writing to King Thamus, claiming that he has discovered a "recipe" (*pharmakon*) for "memory and wisdom." But the king explains to him that his discovery is just the opposite of what it claims to be. Instead of being a "recipe" or "remedy" for forgetfulness, it is rather the very thing that will "implant forgetfulness" in the souls of men. Thus, what seems to be a remedy is really a poison, good only as a "reminder," only as a "semblance" of wisdom.

---

<sup>18</sup> See, Derrida's article, "*Differance*," in *Margins of Philosophy*, pp. 3-27.

By way of this mythological rejection of writing, Plato calls to mind his own dismissal of painting in the *Republic*. Indeed, in the *Phaedrus*, he once again makes reference to the danger of painting in comparing it to writing:

SOCRATES: You know, Phaedrus, that's the strange thing about writing, which makes it truly analogous to painting. The painter's products stand before us as though they were alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words; they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever (*Phaedrus*, 275 d-e).

As we know from the *Republic*, painting is merely an image of an image, an "opinion." It is a "mimetic art" which, because it captures only the "phantasm" of an object, is "far removed from the truth" (*Republic*, 598 b). And so it is with writing, which is particularly dangerous because once marked on the page, it "drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it" (*Phaedrus*, 275 e).

It would seem, then, that in the *Phaedrus* Plato subordinates writing to speech. But just after he has Socrates say that, like painting, writing is merely a mimetic art, Plato has Socrates go on to say that there is "another sort of discourse" that is "brother to written speech" and is of "unquestioned authority":

PHAEDRUS: What sort of discourse have you now in mind, and what is its origin?

SOCRATES: The sort that goes together with knowledge, and is written in the soul of the learner, that can defend itself, and knows to whom it should speak and to whom it should say nothing.

PHAEDRUS: You mean no dead discourse, but the living speech, the original of which the written discourse may fairly be called a kind of image (*Phaedrus*, 276 a).

As Derrida points out, in the very moment that Plato links "living speech" with that other discourse of "unquestioned authority," he is presenting writing as "a false brother--traitor,

infidel, and simulacrum." And further, for the first time, Socrates is "led to envision the brother of this brother, the legitimate one, as *another sort of writing*: not merely as a knowing, living, animate discourse, but as an *inscription* of truth in the soul."<sup>19</sup>

According to Derrida, this Platonic act of distinguishing between "bad writing" and "good writing" marks the beginning of a "pattern" of differentiation that will "dominate" the entire history of what he calls the "onto-theological" tradition of the West. In attempting merely to distinguish between speech and writing, says Derrida, philosophy and theology have ended up defining two types of writing: the privileged brother of the spoken word, understood as the "writing on the soul," and the banished brother, understood as the writing on the page. Thus, both the philosopher and the theologian "write against writing," and by "this very gesture" forget and deny "what occurs by [their] hand." In the end, their writing is an attempt to remain within "the logocentric circle," an attempt to "reconstitute the circle, to interiorize a continuous and ideal presence. . . ." <sup>20</sup>

### **Christianity's Inscription Of The Logocentric Circle**

According to Derrida, Christianity began to define its own version of the "logocentric circle" as it emerged during the first century of the common era.<sup>21</sup> In part, this attempt by Christianity to locate itself within "logocentric" boundaries may have been a result of its exposure to the influences of Jewish and Hellenistic thought. Indeed, this seems probable, given

---

<sup>19</sup> *Dissemination*, p. 149.

<sup>20</sup> *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 291.

<sup>21</sup> Although it is all but impossible to find any specific references in Derrida's work to the logocentric problems of Christianity, see the following for discussions of this topic: *Derrida*, Chapter Eight: "Nietzsche, Freud, Levinas: on the Ethics of Deconstruction," pp. 194-237; *The Postmodern Bible*, Chapter Three: "Poststructuralist Criticism," pp. 119-148; *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*.

that in both the Jewish and Hellenistic worlds, the *logos* was understood as a creative force which profoundly affected every aspect of human existence. But although influenced by the ideas of Judaism and Hellenism, it may be argued that Christianity offered up a radical recasting of the notion of the *logos* in the moment that it equated the truth of God with the incarnational presence of the Word.

In relationship to the idea of the *logos*, the similarities and differences between Christianity, Judaism and Hellenism become clear if certain texts of these three traditions are explored.

One widely known thinker whose work is reflective of the idea of the creative power of the *logos* is the first century Greek-speaking Jew, Philo of Alexandria. In tracts such as *On the World's Creation* and *On the Cherubim*, Philo says that:

The discernible order in all things is nothing else than the *Logos* of God, perpetually engaged in the action of creation.<sup>22</sup>

And:

We shall find that the cause of it (the universe) is God, by whom it came into existence. The matter of it is the four elements, out of which it has been composed. The instrument by means of which it has been built is the *Logos* of God. And the object of its building is the Goodness of the Creator.<sup>23</sup>

In these passages from Philo, one can hear resonances of Plato's notion of the *logos* as the primordial "writing on the soul," especially when Philo says that "the discernible order in all things is nothing else than the *Logos* of God." Although the God of Philo is clearly different from

---

<sup>22</sup> Philo, *On the World's Creation 6, Philo*, Vol. I, trans. F.H. Colson and G.H. Whitaker (William Heinemann, London, 1941), p. 235. Quoted in Davidson, *The Gospel of Jesus: In Search of His Original Teachings* (Element Books, Inc. 1995), p. 239.

<sup>23</sup> Philo, *On the Cherubim 35, Philo*, Vol. II, p. 235. Quoted in Davidson, *The Gospel of Jesus*, p. 239.

whatever Plato may have conceived the sacred to be, his idea of the *logos* as a creative force nevertheless seems to be the same as that expressed by Plato.

Philo's understanding of the *logos* also parallels the Wisdom tradition of both Greek and Hebrew literature. Even though the Greek and Hebrew terms for Wisdom, *Sophia* and *Hokmah*, can refer simply to the notions of human understanding and knowledge, they can also be linked to the creative power of the divine.<sup>24</sup> For example, in the Greek text, "The Wisdom of Solomon," which is attributed to Solomon but was probably written by a Hellenistic Jew in the first century before the birth of Christ, we find the following:

<sup>24</sup>For wisdom is more mobile than  
any motion;  
because of her pureness she pervades  
and penetrates all things.

<sup>25</sup>For she is a breath of the Power of  
God,  
and a pure emanation of the glory  
of the Almighty;  
therefore nothing defiled gains  
entrance into her.

<sup>26</sup>For she is a reflection of the eternal  
light,  
a spotless mirror of the working of  
God,  
and an image of his goodness (Wisdom of Solomon, 7:24-26).<sup>25</sup>

And in "Proverbs," a book of the Jewish Scriptures, which like the apocryphal book of Wisdom is also attributed to Solomon, we find the following:

---

<sup>24</sup> *The Gospel of Jesus*, p. 240.

<sup>25</sup> All Biblical quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from: Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible With the Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version* (Oxford University Press, 1973). The editors of the Revised Standard Version say the following about the authorship and date of this text: "The Wisdom of Solomon, which the Latin Vulgate Bible entitles simply the book of Wisdom, professes to have been written by Solomon. . . . Internal evidence, however, indicates that the book was composed in

<sup>22</sup>The Lord created me at the  
beginning of his work,  
the first of his acts of old.  
<sup>23</sup>Ages ago I was set up,  
at the first, before the beginning of  
the earth.  
<sup>24</sup>When there were no depths I was  
brought forth,  
when there were no springs  
abounding with water (Proverbs, 8:22-24).

Interestingly, this passage from "Proverbs" not only sounds very much like the Hellenistic literature of the last centuries before and the first century of the common era, but also very much like the opening verses of the New Testament Gospel of John:

In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God, and the  
Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was in the beginning  
with God; <sup>3</sup>all things were made  
through him, and without him was not  
anything made that was made. <sup>4</sup>In him  
was life, and the life was the light  
of men. <sup>5</sup>The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness has not overcome it.

Beyond their resemblance to the passage from "Proverbs," the opening verses of the fourth gospel can also be traced back to Genesis, the first book of the Jewish Scriptures. As with the author(s) of Genesis, John names his gospel with his opening verse: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Unlike the opening verse in Genesis, though, John is not speaking about the beginning of creation in his first line, but rather about what precedes this originary moment. For John, the beginning is marked by the coexistence of God and the Word, the coequal relationship between God and the Word, and the predication that God is the Word. The moment of the creative beginning comes only in verse

---

Greek by an unknown Hellenistic Jew, probably at Alexandria during the latter part of the first century B.C."



three when John tells us that: ". . . all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made."<sup>26</sup>

Although John's use of the term *Logos* is often understood to refer to the message or teachings of Jesus, it seems that what he is really describing in the opening passage of his Gospel is the creative power of the unified Son and Father. As was already mentioned, this idea of the Word as the creative power of God was widely used before and during the first century, so it was not something which was unique or new to John.<sup>27</sup> In fact, it can be found in early Christian texts like the Letter to the Hebrews and the letters of Paul.

In the anonymous Letter to the Hebrews, for instance, the author says the following:

<sup>3</sup>By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear (Heb. 11:3).

In the Letter to the Colossians, Paul argues against false teachers who are putting forth what he believes are heretical notions concerning the essence of Christ Jesus and the proper expression of religious practices. Toward this end, he says the following:

<sup>8</sup>See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.<sup>9</sup>For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,<sup>10</sup> and you have come to fullness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.<sup>11</sup>In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ;<sup>12</sup> and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead (Col. 2:8-12).

<sup>16</sup>Therefore let no one pass judgement on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath.<sup>17</sup>These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ (Col. 2:16-17).

---

<sup>26</sup> See, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, translation and commentary by Raymond Brown (The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, 1966), pp. 4 ff. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*

<sup>27</sup> For an excellent discussion of the use of the concept of the Word of God, see Davidson, *The Gospel of Jesus*, pp. 237-287.

Here, in discussing Christology and religious orthodoxy, Paul is addressing issues which he confronts in other places in the New Testament. For instance, in regard to the Christological problem of Jesus, Paul says the following in I Corinthians:

<sup>45</sup>Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became a living a life-giving spirit. <sup>46</sup>But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual. <sup>47</sup>The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. <sup>48</sup>As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven (I Cor. 15:45-48).

And in regard to religious orthodoxy, he says the following in Galatians:

<sup>11</sup>But when Cephas came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. <sup>12</sup>For before certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. <sup>13</sup>And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their insincerity. <sup>14</sup>But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the Gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" <sup>15</sup>We ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, <sup>16</sup>yet who know that a man is not justified by works of the law but through the faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the law shall no one be justified (Gal. 2:11-16).

In rejecting the orthodoxy of Jewish practices concerning circumcision, food and the sabbath, and in arguing that in Jesus the "deity dwells bodily," Paul, like John and others, is attempting to shift the focus of the early Christian message from the Law of Judaism to the *Logos* of God.

Beyond this attempt by first century figures like Paul and John to distance themselves from Judaism by defining the *Logos* as the truth of the in-dwelling presence of God, the Christian battle against "heresies" continued into the second and third centuries. Thinkers like Irenaeus and Tertullian now fought against the evil of Gnosticism, which they considered to be

merely a form of Hellenistic mysticism that was being passed off as an expression of Christian orthodoxy.

Irenaeus was particularly troubled by what he understood as the gnostic foundations of the texts of Valentinus and his followers. Not, as might be expected, because he felt the Valentinians were offering up a completely different idea of the divine *Logos* than he was, but rather because their ideas represented a "perverse mirror image" of the "Apostolic faith" to which Valentinus, himself, was once committed.

In Book I of his text, *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus details the gnostic metaphysic of the Valentinians. In painstaking detail, he describes the thirty aeons which comprise this heretical system. Bythus, the "eternal and unbegotten" one, who is "invisible and incomprehensible," determines "to send forth from himself the beginning of all things." Thus, he pours his seed into Sige, the female counterpart of his own maleness. She bears Nous who is "similar and equal to him who had produced him, and was alone capable of comprehending his father's greatness." Aletheia "was also produced along with Nous," and it is these four who "constituted the first and first-begotten Pythagorean Tetrad, which they also denominate the root of all things" (*Against Heresies*, Book I, I, I).<sup>28</sup>

Clearly, this gnostic metaphysic bears a remarkable resemblance to the Christian gospel tradition, within which the unbegotten God (Bythus) impregnates Mary (Sige); Mary (Sige) gives birth to the Christ figure (Nous) who alone knows the secrets of this Father's message; and the Holy Spirit (Aletheia) stands as the sacred third in relation to the Father and the Son. Further similarities can be seen when one compares the Christian Trinity and gnostic Pleroma. The

---

<sup>28</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in, Volume 1, *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, edited by Alexander Roberts, D.D. and James Donaldson, LL.D. (Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995).

Pleroma, which is "invisible and spiritual" is, like the Trinity, tripartite, being divided into an Ogoad, a Decad, and a Duodecad" (*Against Heresies*, I, I, II). Obviously, it is not difficult to see the Christian idea of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit reflected in this formulation.

Beyond the idea of the gnostic trinity, the Valentinians also put forth a sort of "second Christ," who is not the same as Nous, but who, like the Christ figure of the orthodox Church, possesses a special knowledge, which is revealed by this Savior "through means or parables to those qualified for understanding it" (*Against Heresies*, I, III, I). Here, one needs only to call to mind the sayings of Jesus which are expressed as parables to see that the similarities are once again striking.

As was mentioned before, the concepts of the Valentinians, so much like the concepts of the Christians, disturb Irenaeus precisely because they seem to be the same as those he takes to be orthodox. Irenaeus writes page after page detailing the structure of the gnostic metaphysic, and then writes page after page delimiting the truth of Christianity over against this metaphysic. It is almost as if he believes that the vastness of his presentation can bring the common reader of his day to his or her senses. Or, it may just be that he knows of no other way to combat such an insidious enemy. As he, himself, says, it is "because their language resembles ours, while their sentiments are very different . . ." that he must exhort true Christians "to avoid such an abyss of madness and of blasphemy against Christ" (*Against Heresies*, I, Preface, II).

Ironically, when defending his orthodox position against the heretical "language" of the gnostics, Irenaeus sounds very much like Plato in the Phaedrus when Plato says that writing is dangerous because it "drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who

understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it." Indeed, like Plato, Irenaeus is trying desperately to make everyone understand that although what the Gnostics have written sounds very much like the truth, it is really only a "semblance" of what has been spoken by God, of the Divine *Logos*. Thus, like Plato's "good writing," which is the "legitimate brother" of "living speech," the "inscription of truth in the soul," what Irenaeus writes is also "legitimate" because it is bound to the "living speech" of God. What the Gnostics write, however, is writing presented as "a false brother--traitor, infidel, and simulacrum." Or as Irenaeus, himself, says, it is writing as "an abyss of madness and blasphemy against Christ."

### **The Loss Of Heavenly Voices**

Thus, it may be said that Irenaeus' critique of Gnosticism brings us back to Derrida. For, although Derrida remains as silent about Gnosticism as he does about Christianity, it seems as if he has a certain sort of affinity with the Gnostic "abyss of madness." Indeed, if one turns to a Gnostic text like the "The Gospel of Truth," one finds passages which sound remarkably like Derrida's own work, and in particular his early work on Freud:

There was manifested in their heart the living book of the living--the one written in the thought and the mind [of the] Father, which from before the foundation of the totality was within his incomprehensibility--that (book) which no one was able to take, since it remains for the one who will take it to be slain. No one could have become manifest from among those who have believed in salvation unless that book had appeared. For this reason the merciful one, the faithful one, Jesus, was patient in accepting sufferings until he took that book. . . .<sup>29</sup>

Here, a parallel may be drawn between the Gnostic idea of the book which lies behind the book which is manifested in the heart, and Freud's idea of the latent and manifest content of dreams.

---

<sup>29</sup> James M. Robinson, General Editor, *The Nag Hammadi Library* (Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), p. 41.

Both ideas, it seems, call for a process of decoding, an interpretive process which seeks to make sense of that which lies beneath the surface. This, of course, is exactly what bothered Irenaeus so much about what the Gnostic thinkers were saying: If, in fact, the book of the heart is only a dim reflection of the "the one written in the thought and the mind of the Father, before the foundation of totality was within his incomprehensibility," then how can we possibly claim to know the "self-evident truth" of the Word of God?

In his essay, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," Derrida says the following in regard to this issue of the necessity of interpretation, although again, he never mentions Christianity or Gnosticism:

"Dreams follow old facilitations," said the *Project*. Topographical, temporal, and formal regression in dreams must thus be interpreted, henceforth, as a path back into a landscape of writing. Not a writing which simply transcribes, a stony echo of muted words, but a lithography before words: metaphonic, nonlinguistic, alogical. . . . With dreams displaced into a forest of script, the *Traumdeutung*, the interpretation of dreams, no doubt, on the first approach will be an act of reading and decoding.<sup>30</sup>

It may be, then, that although he remains silent about it, Derrida has been performing deconstructive readings of Christian texts all along, readings which have never been "booked in the present," readings that have only appeared as the "detours, locutions, and syntax" of a negative theology, as "traces" within an "endlessly productive signifying practice" of interpretation. And further, it may be that examples of these silent readings of the Christian texts are to be found in theological essays like those which explore the work of the Jewish thinker Edmond Jabes. In one of his early essays, for example, entitled "Edmond Jabes and the Question

---

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference* (The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 207.

of the Book," Derrida examines the paradisiacal union between Adam and Eve.<sup>31</sup> In order to understand what Derrida is doing in this essay, and why he turns to the work of Jabes, it is necessary to call to mind the stories of creation which are found in Genesis. In one of the first of these stories, attributed to a later source tradition known as P (Priestly), the description of creation is expressed in the following way:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. <sup>2</sup>The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. <sup>3</sup>And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. <sup>4</sup>And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup>God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night (Gen. 1:1-5a).

<sup>26</sup>Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth." <sup>27</sup>So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it (Gen. 1:26-28b).

As is well known, the priestly version of creation echoes that which is found in the Babylonian epic, the *Enuma elish*. As in the canonical account from Mesopotamia, the Divine Spirit of Genesis calms the raging force of primeval chaos. In the *Enuma elish*, the struggle for cosmic order is depicted as a great battle between the god Marduk and the monstrous Tiamat, who is represented as both the ominous, dark sea, and as the serpent who lives in its chaotic depths. In the end, Marduk defeats Tiamat, divides her body in two and separates the halves with the sky, and then creates the mountains, the heavenly bodies and the springs.

While the Divine spirit in the *Enuma elish* is "coexistent and coeternal with cosmic matter," in the Genesis account of the priestly author, the Divine spirit "creates cosmic matter

---

<sup>31</sup> See, Derrida, "Edmond Jabes and the Question of the Book," in *Writing and Difference*, pp. 64-78.

and exists independent of it." But as in the Mesopotamian epic, chaos abounds in P's story, and is represented there as an earthly wasteland whose depths are covered by darkness. Ultimately, P's God, like Marduk in the *Enuma elish*, divides the heavens and then creates all the things of the universe.<sup>32</sup>

What is interesting about P's version of creation, though, is that although he offers up a series of contrasts between what God considered good and what must be inferred to be other than good, the author's description of the formation of the first man and woman is expressed as a moment of creative singularity. Indeed, even though in this story "man" is instructed by God to "Be fruitful and multiply," P's account of creation ends in a way that would seem to preclude any act of procreation. Put another way, because there is no sense of human alterity within the garden of the priestly author, the possibility of the copulative moment does not exist.

It is not until the second story of creation, attributed to an earlier source tradition known as J (Yahwist), that the possibility of the procreative act is given expression.

The creation story of the Yahwist tradition unfolds in the following way:

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens,<sup>5</sup> when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up-- for the Lord god had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground;<sup>6</sup> but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground--<sup>7</sup> then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.<sup>8</sup> And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed.<sup>9</sup> And out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

---

<sup>32</sup> See, *The Dictionary of Global Culture*, eds. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1996), p. 210; and *The Anchor Bible: Genesis*, translation and notes, E.A. Speiser (Doubleday), pp., 9-13.



<sup>21</sup> . . . the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; <sup>22</sup>and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. <sup>23</sup>Then the man said,

"This at last is bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
she shall be called Woman,  
because she was taken out of  
Man."

<sup>24</sup>Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, <sup>25</sup>and were not ashamed (Gen. 2:21-25).

Although J's story of the creation of Adam and Eve seems to define an originary moment of alterity, as the woman is created after the man and is literally "taken out of" him, J's ending is much the same as the ending of the priestly author. As in P's version, J leaves the sanctity of paradisiacal unity in place when he tells us that "the man and wife were both naked, and were not ashamed." But there is something very different about these stories.

Where P's account depicts humanity as merely one "majestic" element within the cosmic boundaries of heaven, in J's account "the earth is paramount and man [is] the center of interest." Indeed, part of what makes J's approach in Genesis so "earthly and vividly personal" is the decision to include the story of the Fall of Adam and Eve:

3 Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made. He said to the women, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'" <sup>2</sup>And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; <sup>3</sup>but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" <sup>4</sup>But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die. <sup>5</sup>For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." <sup>6</sup>So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. <sup>7</sup>Then the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons (Gen. 3:1-7).

In this story of the Fall, the serpent, who like Tiamat is a cultural symbol of the chaos which lies outside of the boundaries of paradise, convinces Eve that God's prohibition against eating from the tree of good and evil is imposed only because of God's fear that his children will become like him. When the serpent says that Adam and Eve will be like God, what this means, of course, is that they will know the meaning of good and evil. Or, as J goes on to say, they will know that they are naked or "cunning" beings.<sup>33</sup> For J, this knowledge is the mark of the utter alterity of Adam and Eve--they are radically different from each other and from God.

It is here that the creation myths of Genesis bring us back to Derrida's reading of Jabes. For what Derrida is suggesting by way of the poetry of Jabes, is that it is only when the creation stories of J and P are coupled together with J's story of the fall that a truly human sense of unity in difference is given expression in Genesis: Not until the fall do Adam and Eve know that there is someone else in the garden, for there *is* no encounter between the first man and woman until their eyes are opened and they know that they are cunning, naked beings. And of course by then, the originary separation of human existence has "always already" occurred. As Derrida makes clear, the fall marks the point at which the "unity of Being" is "broken open" and "the other and difference" are welcomed into "the source of meaning." Thus, Derrida is saying that from the very beginning, any encounter between the self and the other "signifies exile as the conceptualization of Being," it "signifies that Being never is, never shows *itself*, is never *present*, is never *now*, outside difference. . . ." <sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> The Hebrew term "arum," used in the story of the Fall, may be translated as either "naked," it's normative translation, or as "cunning." This is a translation which, it seems, might appeal to Derrida.

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Edmond Jabes and the Question of the Book," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 74.

And what of God, after the Fall? According to Derrida, no matter what God is conceived to be, his fate is the same: "Whether he is Being or the master of beings, God himself is, and appears as what he is, within difference, that is to say, as difference and within dissimulation." Along with Adam and Eve, God is forever absent from the paradise of the garden. After the first encounter, God follows humanity into the desert, and as Jabes suggests, all become known within "the sands of a book in which wandering and mirages are always possible."<sup>35</sup>

It may be this sense of significative wandering that Derrida finds most compelling about the work of Jabes. In fact, in the second of the two articles on Jabes which appear in *Writing and Difference*, Derrida tells us that in its "moment of wandering," in the moment that it cannot find its way back to its origins, "writing keeps vigil, between God and God, between the Book and the Book." Indeed, according to Derrida, it is the wandering of signification which repeats the "epoch of the book," leaving it "suspended between two forms of writing, its withdrawal, and that which is reserved within it."<sup>36</sup>

What this act of inscriptive repetition describes, says Derrida, is the origins of the book "from the vantage of a writing which does not yet belong to it, or no longer belongs to it, a writing which feigns, by repeating the book, inclusion in the book." Here, in a subtle way, Derrida is defining the bond which ties him to the Rabbinic tradition of Judaism, a bond which is drawn tight in the moment that Derrida inscribes the final page of *Writing and Difference* with his signature: *Reb Derissa*.

Although, as with the Jewish Scriptures, Derrida never explicitly mentions any of the commentarial texts of Judaism, one can understand what he finds so powerful about them if a

---

<sup>35</sup> *Writing and Difference*, p. 69.

<sup>36</sup> *Writing and Difference*, pp. 294 and 295.

lesson like that found in the "Tractate Baba Mezia" is explored. Entitled "Miracles Are Not Decisive," it unfolds in the following way:

We studied in the Mishnah (Eduyot 7:7) that if a pottery stove was cut into tiles, and cemented over with sand placed between the tiles, R. Eliezer declared it unsusceptible to ritual uncleanness, while the other Sages declared it susceptible. This was the Akhnai stove.

Why was it called Akhnai? Said R. Judah in the name of Samuel: They surround it with arguments as a snake winds its body around the object, and declared it unclean. It has been taught: On that day R. Eliezer marshaled every conceivable argument, but they did not accept them. Then he said: If the law is according to my views, let this carob tree prove it. Thereupon the carob tree was thrust to a distance of a hundred cubits from its place, and some say four hundred. They replied to him: We adduce no evidence from a carob tree. Again he said to them: If the law is in accordance with my views, let the stream of water prove it, and at once the stream of water flowed in the opposite direction. But they said: We adduce no evidence from a stream of water. Again he said: If the law agrees with my views, let the walls of the academy prove it, and the walls of the academy began to bend and were about to fall. R. Joshua rebuked them saying: If scholars argue on a point of law, what business is it of yours? The walls did not fall out of respect for R. Joshua, but they did not become straight again out of respect for R. Eliezer.

Thereupon he said: If the law is in accordance with my views, let them prove it from heaven. A heavenly voice came forth, saying: What have you against R. Eliezer? The law is as he propounds it in all instances. R. Joshua then stood up and quoted: "It is not in the heavens" (Dt 30:12). What did he mean by quoting: "It is not in the heavens"? Said R. Jeremiah: That the Torah has already been given at Sinai, and we pay no attention to heavenly voices, for You have written at Sinai in the Torah: "Incline after the majority" (Ex 23:2).

R. Nathan met the prophet Elijah and he asked him: What did the Holy One, praised be He, do at that time? He replied: He laughed, and He said: My children have won over me, my children have won over me!

The Tractate Baba Mezia, 59a-59b<sup>37</sup>

Interestingly, what is exposed by way of a reading of this lesson is a certain kind of textual disruption, the same kind that was found in Plato's *Phaedrus*. For even though the interpretive question which occupies the Rabbis seems to be focused upon the issue of whether

---

<sup>37</sup> Ben Zion Bokser, translator, *The Talmud* (Paulist Press, 1989), pp. 184-185.

or not one should pay attention to "heavenly voices" after the Law has been recorded, there is, as Derrida says about the *Phaedrus*, a "little stitch or mesh (*macula*) woven into the back of the canvas" of the text.

At the very beginning of this story concerning the ritual cleanliness of a pottery stove which has been "cut into tiles," it is disclosed that the stove is called "Akhnai." Is this merely a reference to the owner of the stove? Perhaps, but the Rabbis go on to give a homiletical interpretation of the name of the stove: "Why was it called Akhnai? Said R. Judah in the name of Samuel: They surrounded it with arguments as a snake winds its body around an object. . . ." For as it turns out, *akhna* means "snake," and as a result of the use of this concept, imply the Rabbis, the hermeneutical turn is necessary. In other words, the snake cannot be ignored simply because it forces the interpretive act which differentiates this Rabbinical moment. Thus, as in both the Genesis story of the Fall and the *Enuma elish*, the "Tractate Baba Mezia" presents us with the image of the snake as something which is representative of separation: Clean and unclean, whole and broken, God and humanity--we no longer listen to voices from heaven. Here, in the end, or again, as in Genesis, in the beginning, the Word of God cannot be heard as something which is spoken, as something which is present.

What this Talmudic lesson means for Derrida, especially as it stands in relationship to the poetry of Jabes, is that the Jewish experience is always one of "reflection" and "repetition." It is an experience of the "work" which must be done "outside the garden," the work which must be done in the place of "lost immediacy" where "God separate[s] himself from himself in order to let us speak," in order "to astonish and to interrogate us." Not by speaking, but by writing, by a divine inscription which "starts with the stifling of his voice and the dissimulation of his face."

As Derrida says: "This difference, this negativity in God is our freedom, the transcendence and the verb which can relocate the purity of their negative origin only in the possibility of the Question."<sup>38</sup>

Although Derrida's idea of a book of questions is somewhat different from the "sandbook" of Jabes, and finally different from the Jewish commentarial texts, all are saying something extremely important about writing as a marginal discipline, as a discipline which acts to disrupt the possibility of a textuality of presence. For Derrida, what makes both the commentarial texts of Judaism and the poetry of Jabes so important is their quality of being a/theological. They are, to use the language of Derrida, acts of differing and deferring, writing the slash which both separates and joins together the no and the yes of the theological moment.

---

<sup>38</sup> *Writing and Difference*, p. 67.