POWERS OF HORROR: JEWISH LAW AND THE EPISTLE OF BARNABAS

Patrick West

The things I will be saying about the Jewish Law in the following paper are motivated by my interest in the question of history. I want to deal with history at the abstract level of its rules of operation, and not with regard to its empirical effects. I am therefore not interested in historicism, because I am not concerned to 'relativize' or 'contextualize' a specific historical event; rather, I want to explore what one particular event or text - namely the Jewish Law - has to say about the processes and structures by which history itself is organized. This is a crucial distinction: it is based on the difference between a study that 'assumes' history and goes on to explore one or another of its discrete moments or trends, and a study (like this one) that takes history as its object in what must be in the first instance a radically ahistorical gesture. My strategy in this paper will be to interrogate Julia Kristeva's interpretation of the primarily dietary edicts of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy with my own reading of the apocryphal Epistle of Barnabas.[1] My basic project is an attempt to resuscitate a theory of 'historicity' in the field of a theoretical paradigm - 'structuralism' - precisely considered to be antithetical to any sustained engagement with historical thinking. More specifically, the structuralist project excludes history from its considerations to the extent that it operates on the basis of a scientific model (the linguistic sign) that has no room for the historical interruptions and potentialities that characterize those rare discourses (for instance, certain forms of marxism) that fracture the established power structures of society. Unthinkingly, structuralism holds to an implicit model of history that is powerful in its force to prevent the irruption of a genuinely liberating or revolutionary mode of history. Structuralism therefore operates in a sort of 'endless present' and can seemingly make no comment on the concept of history itself.[2] This is the situation I intend to redress here. I want to question the more usual imputation that structuralism and, by

extension, most brands of psychoanalysis, can say nothing of value about history. With this in mind, I want to begin with the interpretation of the Jewish Law put forward in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* by the french psychoanalyst, semiotician and literary critic Julia Kristeva.

Kristeva's interests lie in the field of the relations of the subject to language: in particular, most of her texts concentrate on the tension between the absolute importance of language for proper socialization, and, the consequences of exploring the limits and the edges of language, primarily in artistic discourses. This very general summary of her work provides the context for her analysis of the Jewish Law, which proceeds on the terms of the psychoanalytic constitution of the subject. The key term of this analysis is 'abjection'.[3] Abjection describes the failure of the subject to complete the separation from its primary and fundamental object: the Mother. It is a position in the development of the Oedipus complex where it emerges prior to both the mirror stage and the threat of castration. It therefore constitutes the most archaic and the weakest desire on the part of the not-yet-fully-constituted subject. Abjection is closely associated with a psychotic foreclosure or expulsion of the paternal signifier or, more correctly, of the first realization of this signifier in the guise of what Freud labelled the 'father of individual prehistory'. The presence of abjection in the patient consequently indicates a subject who is outside the realm of meaning and society. In linguistic terms, abjection acts as a threat to the speaking capacity of the subject, which depends on the absolute symbolic distinction of subject from object.

There are two parts to Kristeva's definition of abjection. I now want to turn to the second of these. Kristeva argues that any 'halfway' or 'indeterminate' process or state can be regarded as a representation of the abject. Abjection by this token identifies a general crisis of limits and borders: it will therefore be that which disturbs the separations that construct and maintain the permanence of our identities. This serves to introduce Kristeva's reading of the text of the Jewish Law. One of the best-known instances of the Jewish Law is found in both Exodus and Deuteronomy: "You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk".[4] Kristeva isolates the precise intention of this law as a concern to maintain proper boundaries of separation and distinction. In her reading, it is the integrity of the border itself that separates the Jewish race from the outside. To this extent, the nauseating 'half-boundary' between two versions of the 'same' in the previous example (milk/that nurtured by milk) marks a trespass of the Law for the Jew.

The work of Mary Douglas is cited by Kristeva as astutely emphasizing "the logical conformity of Levitical abominations, which, without a design of "separation" and "individual integrity," would be incomprehensible."[5]

Given that separation is for Kristeva a necessary requirement for the proper development of the psychoanalytically 'normal' speaking subject, she draws from her theory of abjection a crucial contrast between Jew and anti-Semite. She identifies the figure of the Jew as the paradigmatic expression of 'normal', completed Oedipal development (that is, a subject marked 'cleanly and properly' beneath the rubric of an absolute separation from the Mother). On the other hand, she characterizes the historical figure opposed to the Jew - the anti-Semite - as subject to abjection. The Jew, therefore, as the Oedipal and speaking subject. The anti-Semite, therefore, as the failure of Oedipus and the failure of language.

This is an appropriate point at which to summarize the position so far, before proceeding to the consequences it holds for a theory of history. Kristeva's essay of 1980, *Powers of Horror*, isolates the key element of the Jewish Law as a concern with separation and distinction. In line with her psychoanalytic motivations, she argues that the fundamental text of Judaism is therefore equivalent to the most basic structures of the Oedipal or speaking subject, which relies on an absolute symbolic distinction between subject and object. The Jewish exclusion of the Mother repeats exactly the initiating moment of the subject's linguistic capacity. Abjection, on the other hand, identifies a general crisis of limits and borders: it refers to the ambiguous and nauseating moment in which the subject fails in its separation from its primary object: the Mother. The Jew, authorized resident of the Symbolic Order of language, is thus contrasted with the anti-Semite, who indicates the failure of Oedipus and the subsequent irruption of abjection. What I now want to explore is the implicit model of history that is a direct accompaniment to the pattern of Kristeva's thought that I have just outlined.

Kristeva's theory of language reveals her structuralist affiliations to the extent that she positions history as always a consequence, in a highly reactive fashion, of the unfolding of the sign. In a monumental or mythic understanding of history, Kristeva isolates Judaism and anti-Semitism as the indexes of the only possible historical structures in a world in which history finds its absolute definition in the sign. These two structures mirror the system in which the Jew is bound to signification via the imprint of scripture, while the anti-Semite is

similarly defined by its failure to occupy the sign: that is, via abjection. While the form of history implied by the figure of the anti-Semite would seem to offer an exit from history as a function of the sign, what abjection in fact indicates is a failure of the sign that inevitably stays within its confines: the structure of abjection, and this is what gives Kristeva's theory of history such massive force, is inherent in the structure of the sign. Abjection is always anticipated by language. History will always defer to the sign: this is the fundamental point of Kristeva's work, on the basis of which the question of the relative success or the failure of the sign is of marginal importance only. To a large extent, Kristeva inherits her conception of history from the structuralist ideas of Jacques Lacan; however, as will become evident, it is the work of Lacan that also provides a different interpretation of the interpretation of history put forward in Kristeva's text. I am seeking to interrogate Kristeva's work with the help of a concept drawn from the theories of her primary intellectual mentor, Lacan, yet one which is generally neglected in her own texts. I am referring here to the concept of the Lacanian Real Order, but to understand its relevance to my paper it is necessary to consider first the Epistle of Barnabas.[6]

The Epistle of Barnabas was most probably written between AD 96 and AD 98.[7] The male author is almost certainly not to be identified with the Apostle Barnabas mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, a companion of Saint Paul.[8] Best understood as a tractate in the form of an epistle, the anonymous text has been generally established as the work of one person and many commentators accord it a clear unity in form and content.[9] It is therefore worthy of intensive scholarship. One of the most interesting questions to emerge in any summary of Barnabas concerns the religious affiliations of its author: he has been variously described as a Jewish Christian, a Gentile with knowledge of particular Jewish traditions, and most explicitly as "an Alexandrian Jew, whose Judaism had helped him but little, and had been wholly abandoned in favour of the Christian faith which had really met the needs of his soul".[10] It is certain that he and those associated with his thought possessed an ambiguous relationship to both Jewish and Christian thinking. Obviously the central characteristic of this tension has its logic in the theological negotiation of the Old Testament with the New Testament, and the various contradictions and reconciliations that are apparent here. Barnabas has been situated at different times inside and outside of the canon of biblical writings.[11] This last aspect of the text finds its logic in Barnabas' use of an

expansive range of canonical and non-canonical written and oral sources: these include texts from different prophets, words that are nowhere apparent in canonical writings, and further assorted enumerations of sayings and quotations.[12]

The audience for the Epistle of Barnabas comprised a certain group of uncircumcised Jewish-Christians whose faith was at potential or actual risk from a resurgent Judaism.[13] The nature of this threat is unclear. It is often linked, nevertheless, to the destruction of the temple in AD 70 and the more or less frequent attempts, associated with the nationalistic and religious hopes of the Jews, at rebuilding it.[14] What is patent is that the text must be regarded in the light of some massive circumstance of contemporary origin. However, I do not want to enter the debate surrounding the isolation of this event. It appears to me alternatively that the very ambiguities and difficulties that attach to Barnabas in the field of its historical context and historical consequences appear to support my basic proposal: namely, that this neglected and recondite text in fact performs a brilliant and exciting reworking of the organization of the structure of history that is indicated in Kristeva's study. Rather than looking for a specific historical event which could have triggered the construction of this text, I want to suggest that what most commentators understand as a problem of context is actually a problem of text. That is, Barnabas does not follow the logic of the sign in describing an event of contemporary significance; rather, the text takes history into itself as a constituting aspect of its functioning. On a more mundane level, what Barnabas highlights are those minor characteristics of the Jewish Law which, while they are discernible in its canonical manifestations, are nevertheless superficial enough to pass without notice in Kristeva's interpretation. The apocryphal work highlights these features in the established text, and thus motivates my direct interrogation of Kristeva's theory.

Kristeva argues, as I have already explained, that the Jewish Law is posited on the structure of separation as a basis for linguistic and social competence. Separation stands in opposition to abjection. Kristeva acknowledges the existence of other interpretations of the Jewish Law (and in fact can only account for certain instances of it by discarding them as "specious prohibitions")[15] but she maintains in dogmatic fashion that these other interpretative positions in fact "do no more than unilaterally emphasize the complex dynamics of biblical thought concerning impurity".[16] This appears at first blush to indicate a rather glib dismissal of alternative readings on the part of Kristeva. What I

now want to point out, however, is that Kristeva's exegesis here has the particular value of highlighting not only the similarities that she must be finding in the otherwise diverse work of various biblical commentators, but more importantly the assumptions which must be at the base of her claims to be able to establish a sameness between the positions they represent. The deep influence of structuralist thought on Kristeva's work is revealed, among other ways, in her insistence on a scientific universality for her theories. Roland Barthes comments that Kristeva's work "takes up all the space it deals with, fills it precisely, making it necessary for anyone who counts himself out to reveal himself as an opponent or a censor".[17] And the content of this space mentioned in Barthes' analysis is, not surprisingly, the operations of language itself. This explains her reluctance to grant any theoretical autonomy to those other positions on biblical impurity Kristeva mentions in *Powers of Horror*. They all, in her eyes, defer to the sign. This element of Kristeva's thought highlights a challenge to any critical interrogation of Kristeva that seeks to retain some aspects of her theories while discarding others: that is, a study like my own that attempts in debating her work to avoid either outright opposition or blind obedience to it. The nature of this challenge will become obvious in what follows.

To summarize: Kristeva understands language as a saturation of history in which historical activity reflects nothing more than the constant structure of the sign. She reads this theory as a consequence of the laws of separation and distinction that her interpretation locates in the Jewish Law. However, to move the argument to its next stage, is it necessary to defer without right of appeal to Kristeva's claim that separation always and inevitably denotes the precise structure of language, and no other, that she claims it does? I want to suggest that if we retain the idea of separation as the indication of some form of language that is not necessarily identical with the linguistic structure posited by Kristeva - with all the implications the latter holds for our understanding of history - then we can interrogate her work without absolutely opposing it.

I want to now move directly to the Epistle of Barnabas. The apocryphal work is not closed to the interpretation based on the opposition between separation and abjection that Kristeva locates in the canonical text. However, it indicates at the same time a second feature that is not accounted for in *Powers of Horror*. This aspect of the Jewish Law concerns the material as opposed to the symbolic conditions of the survival of the Jewish population. Baruch A. Levine's

recent study of the dietary regulations accommodates Kristeva's position while situating it at another level that implies a different formation of language and, by extension, a different formation of history.[18] That is, to take a central instance of the Jewish Law, the characteristic association of split hoofs and an ability to chew the cud as a prerequisite for purity is understood by Levine as only a secondary indicator of a previous distinction. A distinction to be sure, thus implying a form of language, but one that pre-exists the structure of language defined in Kristeva's analysis. For Kristeva, the creatures that possess such attributes by that fact follow the logic of separation and propriety. "The pure," she writes "will be that which conforms to an established taxonomy; the impure, that which unsettles it, establishes intermixture and disorder."[19] For Levine, on the other hand, if food takes on a symbolic value, it also retains its functioning as a necessity for physical survival. I do not want this to be understood as simply a question of hygiene or health; rather, it is contingent on the symbolic organization of the economic habits of a people dedicated to their own survival in what must now emerge as a new historical space. Levine notes, for instance, an emphasis on those animals, fish and birds that would be naturally found in the domesticated surroundings of settlements.[20] The key issue for Levine is one of a people and their economic habits, as defined by the population's relation to such factors as climate, environment and geography: that is, the fact of the species. Barnabas is sympathetic to just such a reading:

> You shall eat neither eagle, nor hawk, nor kite, nor crow. Do not, He means, associate with, or resemble, such people as do not know how to obtain their food by sweat and labor, but, in their disregard for law, plunder other people's property. While walking about in seeming simplicity of heart, they watch sharply whom they may rob to satisfy their greed - just as these birds alone do not provide their own food, but, sitting idle, look for a chance to devour the flesh of others - the mischievous pest they are![21]

What is demonstrated in this passage is a concern with production, consumption and the distribution of resources by various means. A design of separation is apparent here; but what also presses its claims on interpretation is a particular stress on the material agency of circumstances that are beyond the model of language proposed by Kristeva. The text of Barnabas disrupts therefore the argument of

Powers of Horror in a way that invites exploration in two distinct yet, as I hope to demonstrate, related directions.

The often neglected Real Order of Lacanian theory serves as a conceptual rubric for the argument I will be setting in place as a conclusion to this paper. Distinct from the naive concept of a pre-discursive reality, the Real indicates both the impossible point at which the Symbolic Order disappears at its juncture with the physical world, in addition to the biological processes of what Kristeva, focusing on the role of the Mother, identifies as the survival of the species.[22] It is biological and symbolic. Its application to my reading of Barnabas is therefore crucial, because it contains the two features that I have highlighted in Barnabas: a new version of the sign, and, a concern with the conditions of the survival of a population, the human species. The Real provides a means for retaining the Kristevan emphasis on the necessity of language for the subject's successful entry into culture, while at the same time accommodating a concept of history free from the normative restraints of a structuralist analysis. It acknowledges the need for the sign, while introducing a material and revolutionary element to the life of the subject. If history is to be anything other than either a slave to the sign or a function of luck, chance and aleatory events, then its encounter with the Real must be acknowledged and encouraged.

In this respect, the work of Slavoj Zizek, a Lacanian theorist from the former Yugoslav republic of Slovenia, provides a cogent account of the Real Order which gives some idea of the scale of the massive reworking of history that it implies.[23] Zizek does not provide the particular characterization of the Real that I have tried to present in the form of the role of the species merged with a new organization of the sign. However, his work is comparatively rare in psychoanalytic and structuralist discourse in its enthusiasm for the Real. Zizek's position runs as follows:

> This kernel of the Real encircled by failed attempts to symbolize-totalize it is radically non-historical: history itself is nothing but a succession of failed attempts to grasp, conceive, specify this strange kernel ... the ultimate mistake of historicism in which all historical content is "relativized", made dependent on "historical circumstances," - that is to say, of historicism as opposed to historicity - is that it evades the encounter with the Real.[24]

This paper has attempted to clear the theoretical ground for the emergence of the Real Order in an as yet unrecognizable space of history. Such a project strikes me as one of the very few ways still open to us for the construction of a revolutionary discourse capable of 'giving the slip' to the sign, which not only ensures our survival, but imprisons it as well.

University of Melbourne

REFERENCES

1. See Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), and the Epistle of Barnabas, James A. Kleist, trans. and annot., Ancient Christian Writers, 6 (New York: Newman, 1948) 27-65.
2. See, for instance, Andrew Milner, Contemporary Cultural Theory: An Introduction (Sydney: Allen, 1991) 65-66.
3. For an intelligent analysis of Kristeva's theory of abjection, see Juliet Flower MacCannell, "Kristeva's Horror," Semiotica 62 (1986): 325-55.
4. Exodus 23:19, 34:26. Deut. 14:21.
5. Kristeva, Powers of Horror 99.
6. For a definition of this concept, see Alan Sheridan, "Translator's Note," Ecrits: A Selection, by Jacques Lacan, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977).
7. See A. Lukyn Williams, "The Date of the Epistle of Barnabas," Journal of Theological Studies 34 (1933): 344.
8. See Jay Curry Treat, "Barnabas, Epistle of," The Anchor Bible Dictionary, vol. 1, 1992 612.
9. See Treat 612 and Williams 338.
10. See Treat 612 and J. Armitage Robinson, Barnabas, Hermas and the Didache (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; New York: Macmillan, 1920) 24.
11. See Treat 614.
12. See Treat 612 and Robinson 23.
13. See Treat 613.
14. See Treat 613 and Williams 342.
15. Kristeva, Powers of Horror 98.
16. Kristeva, Powers of Horror 90.
17. Roland Barthes, rev. of Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art, by Julia Kristeva, paperback edition cover of Powers of Horror.
18. See Baruch A. Levine, The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation, ed. Chaim Potok (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989).
19. Kristeva, Powers of Horror 98.
20. Levine 247.
21. Barnabas: 10:4.
22. See, in particular, Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," The Kristeva Reader, by Kristeva, ed. and comp. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986) 162.
23. See Slavoj Zizek, For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor, Phronesis (London: Verso-New Left, 1991) trans. of Ils ne savent pas ce qu'ils font.
24. Zizek 101.