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“It’s Somewhere Near the Back”

Or, The Simpsons as Model Postmodern Biblical Interpreter

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ABSTRACT: Postmodern biblical interpretation seeks to de-privilege a single, authoritative reading of the Biblical text. It opens to the reader the possibility that the text speaks in community, with a multiplicity of voices, and that none of these voices exists apart from the subject speaking. In its lengthy run, *The Simpsons* has consistently shown a similarly postmodern, multi-voiced approach to interpreting the Bible. Each character reads the Bible differently and from her or his own clearly subjective stance. Above all, the show has consistently dismantled the idea of the Bible as an ideological or theological monolith. This article will argue that, in its multi-voiced, highly subjective use of the Bible as well as its playful approach to the relationship between the reader and text, *The Simpsons* serves as a model postmodern biblical interpreter.

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Introduction

In spite of occasional accusations of moral depravity or religious insensitivity over its lengthy run, *The Simpsons* has never shied away from religious themes or ideas. David Feltmate estimates that 95 percent of the episodes through 2013 contain some kind of religious imagery, far more than any other show on television.¹ When asked about the religiosity of the titular family, creator Matt Groening told *Mother Jones*

¹ David Feltmate, “It’s Funny Because It’s True? The Simpsons, Satire, and the Significance of Religious Humor in Popular Culture,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 81.1 (2013): 222.

magazine, “Not only do the Simpsons go to church every Sunday and pray, they actually speak to God from time to time,” suggesting that they were far more religiously entrenched than most every TV family of the time.² Such an emphasis on religion, especially in the Christian tradition, has led Iain Ellis to declare, “*The Simpsons* airs pro-spirituality themes as no other TV sitcom has ever done before.”³

This decidedly pro-spiritual emphasis comes, however, from a consistently critical approach to the foundational religious texts of these faith traditions. Since so many of the episodes deal with the Judeo-Christian belief system, the Bible is (unsurprisingly) a perpetual source of material, with references spanning the scriptures from Genesis to Revelation. Interestingly, the writers have not simply quoted or reproduced biblical stories, but have displayed a thoughtful hermeneutic when it comes to the Bible throughout the series which I would call “post-modern.” Indeed, this article will argue that in its multi-voiced, highly subjective use of the Bible, its playful approach to the relationship between the viewer and text, and its decidedly deconstruction approach to hierarchies of biblical interpretation and authority, *The Simpsons* serves as a model postmodern biblical interpreter for viewers of the show.

What is Postmodern Biblical Interpretation?

Post-modernism is notoriously difficult to define, particularly when it comes to biblical studies. Well-known postmodern biblical scholar Andrew K. M. Adam notes that “[i]f, in the course of your explorations, you find one certified postmodern thinker making claims that another postmodern thinker polemicizes against, you ought not be surprised; just chalk it up to the enduring capacity of the topic ‘postmodernity’ to start heated arguments under any circumstances.”⁴ Similarly, biblical scholar

² Brian Doherty, “Matt Groening.” *Mother Jones*, March / April 1999, 36.

³ “Is The Simpsons TV’s Most Sacred Show?” last modified June 23, 2013. <http://www.popmatters.com/column/172555-the-simpsons-tvs-most-sacred-show/>

⁴ A. K. M Adam, *What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1.

Ronald Hendel states: “ I will use the term ‘postmodernism,’ for lack of a better term, acknowledging that it is a family of practices and that not every member of the family agrees (or gets along) with other family members.”⁵ Indeed, we find that postmodern biblical scholars overwhelmingly want to define themselves by what they are not (even if that is another postmodern scholar) rather than what they are.

And yet, when it comes to postmodern literary interpretation of the Bible, we do find a few common features we might draw on for our present study. These are by no means universal features, as such a thing is contrary to the spirit of post-modernist analysis anyway, but instead offer a set of friendly identifiers that we might employ to give some structure to our work.

First, following Aichele et al., I identify postmodern biblical interpretation by its emphasis on diversity. “Postmodernism is characterized by diversity in both method and content and by an anti-essentialist emphasis that rejects the idea that there is a final account, an assured and agreed-on interpretation, of some one thing—here the biblical text or any part of it.”⁶ That is, if one is doing the work of postmodern biblical interpretation, one is as likely to come to multiple competing (or at least coequal) interpretations as one is to come to a single view – more likely, perhaps. Part of the reason for this multiplicity of readings is an awareness that all interpretations are essentially fictions – creations of the interpreter more than realities or reflections of some essential or objective “truth.” The resistance to objectivity will inevitably result in reader-oriented and highly subjective readings of the text. Each reader, coming from her own interests, creates her own meaning. “[R]eading and interpretation is always interested, never disinterested; always significantly subjective, never completely objective.”⁷ Thus, we

⁵ Ronald Hendel, “Mind the Gap: Modern and Postmodern in Biblical Studies,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133.2 (2014): 422.

⁶ George Aichele, Peter Miscall, and Richard Walsh, “An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretation of the Bible,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128.2 (2009): 384.

⁷ Robert Fowler, “Post-modern Biblical Criticism: The Criticism of Pre-Modern Texts in a

should expect to see diverse, subjective, and anti-essentialist use of the Bible in postmodern readings of the text.

This sense of anti-essentialism and the awareness that all readings are kinds of fictions leads to a certain playfulness with the biblical text, which I consider a second identifier of postmodern interpretations. Those who embrace a postmodern approach often play with language, or with meaning, or conventions of writing, or with the intersections of a given text and other, unexpected, cultural forms. As A. K. M. Adam notes, postmodern critics “playfully blur the distinction that separates history from fiction, or literature from criticism, or interpretation from politics.”⁸ This “play” destabilizes the text under investigation, reminding the reader that there is nothing fixed about its meaning or purpose.

Tina Pippin has exemplified this type of post-modern playfulness with biblical texts, specifically. In “I Stand at the Door and Knock,” for example, Pippin imagines the resuscitated figures of the New Testament (e.g. Lazarus) as horror movie zombies, relying as much on the works of George A. Romero and Martin Scorsese for her analysis of the raising of Lazarus as on “expected” biblical scholars or methods.⁹ Her playful and mischievous tone is disarming, but purposeful.¹⁰ Through this approach, Pippin is able to destabilize some of the most established biblical texts, helping the reader to see the strangeness and even humor within. If a writer (like Pippin and others) presents a postmodern reading of the Bible, then, the viewer or reader should be able to discern a certain playful, revisionist, genre-mixing sensibility in that presentation.

A third marker of postmodern interpretation is the tendency to view texts through a lens of “deconstruction.” Deconstruction (another incredibly difficult term to delimit) is a method in which social constructs (such as language, gender, power, race, etc.) are viewed with suspicion

Post-Critical, Post-Modern, Post-Literate Era.” *Forum* 5.3 (1989): 3-30.

⁸ Adam, *Postmodern Biblical Criticism*, 22.

⁹ Tina Pippin. “Behold I Stand at the Door and Knock: The Living Dead and Apocalyptic Dystopia.” *The Bible and Critical Theory* 6.3 (2010): 1- 14.

¹⁰ As in her paragraph on Jesus as zombie: “The Word Became Flesh with bits and pieces falling off, forever sloughing?” (13)

and a desire to make plain the role of humans in the “making” of the construct. The approach reminds the reader that connections between language (signifiers) and objects (the signified) are simply the creation of communities – they do not naturally or innately mean anything – and have no sure foundation. Deconstructive thinkers are particularly concerned with making plain the constructed nature of signifiers we take most for granted, such as those that create identity, and the ways in which these types of signifiers inevitably create normativity and dualisms. For example, a deconstructive approach to gender might note the ways in which “maleness” is set as normative over against “femaleness,” as well as the accompanying structures of Othering that result from this artificial construction.

Deconstruction, which was made famous in the secular literary studies of Jacques Derrida, can be equally applied to biblical texts. A key human construct that biblical scholars of this ilk seek to problematize is the dualism between the academy and the lay interpreter of the Bible. The modern approach to the Bible was particularly marked by the historical-critical method, in which one could uncover the “real” and objective historical situation of a biblical text. Modernist interpretation was done by academics, biblical scholars who then produced authoritative explanations of the “true” meaning of the Bible. As A.K.M. Adam states, a “deconstructive reading will no longer allow a simple binary opposition separating the legitimate interpreters ... from those who are not authorized to interpret it, [and] it will likewise undermine the hitherto sacred distinction between historical interpretation and all other sorts.”¹¹ This is a critical matter to postmodern biblical study; the artifices of the academy, and in particular a historical-critical approach to scripture, are seen as power structures that manufacture inequalities between interpreters and force the legitimation of one form of reading above another. For the postmodern scholar, such constructs are fictions. They are built on a false claim to “knowledge,” by which the claimant simply

¹¹. Adam, *Postmodern Biblical Criticism*, 34.

means an enforced reading of the text that the claimant wishes to imbue with authority.

We see, then, that certain features characterize a postmodern reading of scripture. For one, such a reading would be marked by a multiplicity of interpretations that delight in anti-essentialism. There is a certain playfulness, as well, to postmodern interpretation; thinkers and writers will destabilize accepted notions of a text by playing with language or meaning, knowing that all interpretation is at last a fiction. A postmodern critic of scripture will also seek to question structures of language or culture that appear “natural” or “true” and to dismantle the claims of “experts” as only one type of reading among many. Over all, the postmodern reader of scripture would joyfully, even mischievously, overturn our accepted readings of the Bible and claims on its authority.

In the next section we will take what we recognize as characteristics of postmodern biblical interpretation and draw them into conversation with *The Simpsons* television series. I will argue that *The Simpsons* has consistently shown a postmodern, multi-voiced, deconstruction approach to the Bible. Each character reads the Bible differently and from her or his own clearly subjective stance. The show’s writers resist straightforward readings of the Bible and approach it playfully, by changing out characters or by reinventing endings to Biblical tales. And, the show has consistently dismantled the idea of the Bible as an ideological or authoritative monolith. In all, the “most religious show on television” takes its scripture in a thoroughly postmodern way.¹²

“I’m not saying Jezebel is easy ...”: *The Simpsons* Characters Read the Bible

There are a spectacular number of biblical quotations in *The Simpsons*. “The Simpsons Archive,” a fan wiki, counts more than 160 direct references or quotes in episodes through April 2014, and hundreds of additional mentions of biblical themes or ideas.¹³ A quick scan of this list

¹² Jim Bennett, “Have the Simpsons Gotten A Bad Rap?” *Deseret News*, (West Valley, UT) October 13, 2014.

also shows that not just Rev. Lovejoy or Ned Flanders quote the Bible, either; characters as diverse as Krusty the Clown, Troy McClure, Kent Brockman, and Lisa Simpson all seem to know the biblical text. The Hebrew Bible, Apocrypha, and New Testament all make appearances, and Flanders even has a Gnostic (non-canonical / “heretical”) Bible on his bookshelf.¹⁴ Certainly, the Bible is a pervasive presence in the lives of these characters. However, it is the way that many of these characters *use* and *read* this omnipresent text that indicate the show’s postmodern approach.

As was already mentioned, just about everyone in Springfield can quote the Bible. What becomes apparent when one attends to these citations, however, is that the given quote tells us much more about the speaker than about any universal truth or absolute meaning of or in the text. For example, Lisa Simpson is portrayed as a pacifist, a feminist, and a deep and compassionate thinker throughout the series. She is a self-described Buddhist and vegetarian. Thus, it is not surprising that when Lisa quotes the Bible it is with the desire to support her conciliatory values. On two separate occasions Lisa cites Matt. 7:1 (“Judge not lest ye be judged.”). In the first instance it is to dispute Rev. Lovejoy’s condemnation of Bart, who has been accused of stealing the collection plate money¹⁵. In the second, a revisionist take on the Salem Witch Trials, she quotes it to save her mother from being killed as a witch by Officer Wiggum.¹⁶ In both cases, the plea falls on deaf ears;¹⁷ however, connecting this selective citation of text with this character shows the viewer how the text says more about the subject who chooses it than any other thing. As Lisa is compassionate and nonjudgmental, she selectively

¹³ “Religion on the Simpsons: Bible References,” *The Simpsons Archive*, accessed June 7, 2016. <http://www.simpsonsarchive.com/guides/religion.html#b>

¹⁴ *The Simpsons*, “Home Sweet Home-Diddly-Dum-Doodly,” Season 3 Episode 1, Initial airdate: October 1, 1995. Hereafter, individual shows will be cited as “Season number x Episode number” (e.g. 3x1), airdate.

¹⁵ “Bart’s Girlfriend,” 6x7, November 6, 1994.

¹⁶ “Treehouse of Horror VII,” 8x1, October 27, 1996.

¹⁷ In perhaps the most perfectly postmodern biblical interpretation in the series, Chief Wiggum responds to Lisa’s plea to save herself by noting, “The Bible says a lotta things.”

reads the Bible to create a fiction in which the text itself admonishes others not to judge.

Marge Simpson shares Lisa's sense of compassion, but is better known as the most longsuffering and patient member of the Simpson clan. In her interactions with her family, particularly, Marge is identified by her tolerance and love but also her on-going exasperation with the family's shenanigans. So, the Bible of Marge's creation becomes a reflection of both her patience and quiet frustration. In "Homer vs. Patty and Selma,"¹⁸ when Homer says that Marge's sisters are teasing Homer at the DMV "just like [God] teased Moses in the desert," Marge patiently replies: "Tested, Homer. God tested Moses. And try to be nice to my sisters. It's very hard on me to have you fighting all the time." And in "The Otto Show,"¹⁹ when Marge is confronted with a homeless Otto the bus driver living in her garage, she reminds Homer "whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, you do to me" (Matt 25:40). What is interesting in both of these examples is that the biblical text is spoken as part of a capitulation to the situation and a request for tolerance; her Bible is, by her creation, a guidebook for her longsuffering.

While Lisa and Marge, as some of the most developed characters, may be the clearest examples of this subjective citation method, many minor characters also cite the Bible for their own ends. In "The Simpson's Bible Stories"²⁰ (to which we will return in the next section), Krusty the Clown plays a court jester in ancient Jerusalem. As fans of *The Simpsons* will know, Krusty is a (rather bad) clown comedian on a children's television show, and is steeped in the Jewish tradition. (His father is a rabbi.) Thus, when Krusty uses the Hebrew Bible, he mines it for (rather bad) Jewish jokes: "I'm not saying Jezebel is easy, but before she moved to Sodom it was known for its pottery!" Likewise, Troy McClure – a ridiculous over-actor – turns the Bible into ridiculous films: *David vs. Super*

¹⁸ "Homer vs. Patty and Selma," 6x17, February 26, 1995.

¹⁹ "The Otto Show," 3x22, April 23, 1992.

²⁰ "The Simpsons Bible Stories," 10x18, April 4, 1999.

*Goliath and Suddenly Last Supper.*²¹ And, when hysteria-prone journalist Kent Brockman comments on the rebellious acts of Marge and another woman named Ruth in “Marge on the Lam,”²² he compares their lawlessness to the apocalyptic scenario of the last book of the Christian New Testament, saying, “It’s in Revelations, people!” in an effort to provoke his audience.

I would note that, in the above analysis, I don’t even touch on the numerous quotes offered by either Ned Flanders or Rev. Lovejoy, the two most overtly religious characters on the show. (Rev. Lovejoy, for example, cites or alludes to scripture dozens of times throughout the series from both the pulpit and in personal conversation in spite of calling the Bible a “Two hundred page sleeping pill.”²³) However both Ned and Rev. Lovejoy, as inherently religious characters representing institutional religiosity, are often also portrayed as representing institutional, mainstream views of the Bible in which it is an authoritative and monolithic text. As this article is more interested in the post-modern interpretations offered in *The Simpsons*, paying attention to the quotations from Flanders and Lovejoy may mislead the reader from the focus here. Instead, I wish to turn now to the character that I contend best exemplifies the postmodern, subjective, interpretation-as-fiction approach to the text: Homer Simpson.

While the above characters cite the Bible from their own subjectivity, it appears that for the most part they still cite real text. Homer, however, takes an even more radical approach by citing a Bible that is entirely the product of his imagination. For example, when Homer is plagued by the presence of a homeless Otto in his garage in the aforementioned “The Otto Show,” and Marge cites the Gospel of Matthew (“whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, you do to me,”), Homer replies: “but doesn’t the Bible also say, ‘Thou shalt not take moochers into thy hut?’”²⁴ In another episode, when he wants to gamble with Lisa but

²¹ “Das Bus,” 9x14. February 15, 1998.

²² “Marge on the Lam,” 5x6, November 4, 1993.

²³ “She of Little Faith,” 13x6, December 16, 2001.

²⁴ To those unfamiliar with the accepted text: no, it does not.

Marge disapproves, Homer tells Lisa that the Bible says it is ok to do so “somewhere in the back.”²⁵ In “Lisa on Ice,”²⁶ Homer employs his fictional text again, telling Lisa that the scriptures teach us that girls are to stick to girl sports like “hot oil wrestling, and foxy boxing.” And, when Marge wants to work at the nuclear power plant in “Marge Gets a Job”²⁷, Homer retorts, “As the Bible says, ‘Thou shalt not horn in on thy husband’s racket.’”

We might assume (because it is Homer) that all of this misquoting is due to ignorance. Indeed, in other academic treatments of the Bible in *The Simpsons* this is the main assumption. For example, Pinskey concludes that Homer’s fuzzy citations come from “monumental” inattention and misunderstanding and that he is “extremely hazy” when it comes to the *real* text.²⁸ I disagree. For Homer, it hardly matters what is in the objective text. When he talks about moochers in his hut, or foxy boxing, he is expressing the sentiment he wishes to convey at the moment. And, since the conversation seems to be centered on the Bible, he obliges with a “reference” that makes his point. It doesn’t matter, in the end, that the quote is in the Bible (or not) because the point is to recognize and play with the convention of biblical authority in the present context.

The beauty of Homer’s exchanges is that, to a casual viewer, they do make Homer appear his usual oafish self. But there is actually something much more interesting going on here: by playing with the convention of quoting the Bible, Homer is also playing with the idea that the Bible has any real authority. The writers have him deconstruct the very notion of an authoritative text that says something “true.” Indeed, Homer’s reading of the text is the most obvious allusion to the postmodern approach; just as the postmodernist would say there is no objective

²⁵ “Lisa the Greek,” 3x14, January 23, 1992

²⁶ “Lisa on Ice,” 6x8, November 13, 1994.

²⁷ “Marge Gets a Job,” 4x7, November 5, 1992.

²⁸ Mark Pinskey *The Gospel According to The Simpsons*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 114.

meaning in a signifier, Homer recognizes that there is no objective truth in the Bible – there is only the meaning we want it to mean from the context of our subjectivity.

In this section, I have emphasized the characters' widely divergent readings and interpretations of the Bible, as well as noting the thread of selective, self-oriented use of text among them. In so doing, I have argued that one way the show serves as a model postmodern interpreter of the Bible is by aligning the characters with subjective acts of interpretation, even to the point of creating overt fictions. As we noted earlier, postmodern interpreters of the Bible claim that there is no one true disinterested text, from which an objective truth can be mined; there is instead always an interested "text" that is created by and reflects the interpreter her- or himself. The interpretive acts of *The Simpsons* characters similarly undermine the cultural ideal that the Bible says something "true" or objective in any way, reflecting the attributes, wishes, or needs of the character/subject instead. In the next section I will explore the ways in which the show's writers have employed a second feature of postmodern biblical interpretation: a playful, mischievous, and cross-referential attitude toward the stories of the accepted text.

"In No Particular Order": Playing with Bible Stories in *The Simpsons*

While the most obvious postmodern use of the Bible in the show may be in the subjective employment of quotations by its interested parties and characters, this is not the only way the Bible is appropriated. Several times over the run of *The Simpsons*, the writers have actually recreated whole Bible stories with the main characters playing key parts.²⁹ In these instances, a character does not quote the Bible; she or he enacts it. When the writers put their characters in these situations, we see a certain sense of playfulness with the accepted text. Popular culture allusions, political references, modern-day jokes, and outright mischievous humor all

²⁹ It is important to note that *The Simpsons* is not the first nor only show to re-enact or allude to biblical stories. Indeed, this is a well-established genre of American literature, television, and film.

infiltrate the standard story and show a certain postmodern sensibility because of it.

Early in the series, we get our first instance of this textual play. While the majority of the episode³⁰ is about Homer stealing cable and Lisa's resultant concern for his immortal soul, the cold opening is a short recreation of the story of Moses delivering the Ten Commandments (Exod 19-20). Before Moses appears with the tablets, "Homer the Thief" is happily stealing golden boars from the collection of "Azron, Carver of Graven Images" and sending warm regards to "Zohar the Adulterer" from his wife. All three are engaged in pleasant conversation, and seem perfectly at ease with each other's "occupations." When Moses appears, saying, "The Lord has handed us these Ten Commandments by which to live. I will now read them in no particular order," he proceeds to disrupt all of the good feeling and productivity among the men with a few Thou Shalt Nots and some tablets.

Two things set this recreation far apart from the biblical tale. First, *The Simpsons* retelling is clearly not modeled after the Hebrew Bible story but instead on *The Ten Commandments*, Cecil B. DeMille's famous 1956 movie starring Charlton Heston as Moses. In the biblical story, God first *speaks* the commands against adultery, idolatry and thieving. It is only later (Exod 24 and 34) that Moses receives tablets. But *The Simpsons* takes after the movie, having Moses come down (in Charlton Heston's striped robes) to deliver the tablets himself. A second and more intriguing difference is that the entire tale is flipped so that it is told from the perspective of those hearing Moses, rather than emphasizing Moses' speech or God's commands. The adulterous, thieving, idolatrous men are perfectly fine with their ways and with each other. The advent of the Law is both an inconvenience and an end to their idle / idol ways.

These two distinctions from the biblical narrative are, of course, intentional. They play with both the expected story and perspective. They provide humor, but even more so they disrupt notions of a fixed or

³⁰ "Homer vs. Lisa and the 8th Commandment," 2x13. February 7, 1991.

expected meaning to the story. By emphasizing the happy debauchery of the regular folks the writers of this episode make a bit of mischief with our accepted narrative that Moses' giving of the Law was a gift to the chaos at the base of Mt. Sinai. By doubling up on this mischief with an overt nod to a movie, rather than the Bible tale as found in Exodus, the writers further play with our expectations. If you were looking for a straightforward retelling, they seem to say, we will remind you that that your memory of the "Bible" is more informed by popular culture than the text itself. In both cases, the writers take liberties with the accepted tale in a way that upends our assumed narrative in a playful, but finally disarming, way.

The *tour de force* of *The Simpsons* biblical retelling, however, comes several seasons later in "Simpsons Bible Stories," mentioned above. In this episode, on a very hot Easter Sunday, the Simpson family falls asleep in church as Rev. Lovejoy reads through the Bible from beginning to end. In a series of shorts, each member of the family (except Maggie) has a different dream in which she or he becomes the main character in a Bible tale. Marge dreams of herself as Eve in the Garden of Eden; Lisa imagines that she helps Moses liberate the slaves from Egypt; Homer sees himself as King Solomon; Bart becomes David slaying Goliath. In each dream, the line is blurred between the accepted tale and contemporary cultural references.

Some of the anachronistic cultural references in these pieces are political, particularly related to political scandals. For example, in Marge's dream about the Garden of Eden, Homer/Adam apologizes to a banished Marge/Eve for "that whole apple-gate thing," a reference to the Watergate and other scandals of contemporary American politics and public life. In Lisa's dream, when Bart is arrested by the pharaoh he shouts, "That bush set me up!" Here, Bart alludes to the words of Washington D.C. Mayor Marion Barry, who was arrested for crack cocaine possession in 1990. According to *The Washington Post*, when FBI agents entered the hotel room Mayor Barry shared with ex-girlfriend Hazel Diane "Rashida" Moore,

Mr. Barry “muttered over and over, ‘Bitch [Moore] set me up . . . I shouldn’t have come up here . . . goddamn bitch.’”³¹

Other anachronistic references are from popular culture and media instead of politics. Homer, dreaming he is King Solomon, hears a case between Jesus Christ and Checker Chariot (an allusion to the famous U.S. Checker Taxi Cab Company) as the “People’s Court” theme song plays. When Bart dreams he is King David, he takes part in a montage of physical training to prepare for his battle with Nelson/Goliath II that is reminiscent of the *Rocky* movies. The montage is even accompanied by action hero theme music (in this case “Winner Takes it All” by Sammy Hagar). And, at the end of the show, when the Simpsons wake from their dreaming to realize it is the end of the world, the AC/DC classic “Highway to Hell” plays over the closing credits.

The act of injecting anachronism, political satire, and pop culture references into Biblical stories is certainly very funny, and it makes this episode a favorite for many.³² For our purposes, however, the insertion of popular/contemporary culture into the accepted narratives is another clue that the writers are taking a notably postmodern approach to the text. As mentioned before, one of the hallmarks of postmodern biblical criticism is the tendency to play with time, genre, and cultural allusion. As Tina Pippin does in her zombie Jesus piece, so the writers of *The Simpsons* do here. And, too, as Pippin’s writing destabilizes our accepted notions of the New Testament by getting us to think of its characters as zombies, so the writers of *The Simpsons* undercut our expectations and images of the Bible as a whole through these anachronistic and playful retellings.

³¹ Tracy Thompson and Elsa Walsh, “Jurors View Videotape of Barry Drug Arrest,” *Washington Post* (Washington D.C.), June 29, 1990.

³² This includes show creator Matt Groening, who said on the commentary track to the DVD for *The Simpsons: The Complete Tenth Season Collectors Edition* that the apocalypse scene at the end of the episode is one of his favorite gags of the entire series.

“Did you know the Bible has the word ‘piss’ in it?”: Deconstructing the Authority to Interpret in *The Simpsons* Universe

The many references, the quotes, and the stand-alone Bible episodes of *The Simpsons* point to a writing and production staff well-versed with Scripture. Indeed producer Matt Groening is famous for having read the Bible all the way through as a young man -- to look for and mark all the “naughty parts”³³. In an interview for *My Generation* he said, “Yeah, it’s true. Did you know the Bible has the word ‘piss’ in it? Plus, there’s lots of stuff that’s just weird. For instance, there’s a parable about Jesus driving demons into a herd of pigs, and the pigs jump off a cliff. I wanted to know what the pigs did to deserve that.”³⁴ In a *New York Times* interview, Groening mentioned the pigs again when asked what the most comical biblical story was.³⁵ Undoubtedly, he is a man who is close to even the tiniest details of the accepted text. Other members of the writing team have also been interviewed about their views on the Bible and biblical characters, including their own childhood experiences with biblical ideas. (See, for example, David Owen’s interview with George Meyer about the latter fearing Jesus as a child in a 2000 issue of *The New Yorker*.³⁶)

And yet, when we look at the writing staff of the show over the last twenty-five years, we find no academy- trained biblical scholars. Their engagement with biblical texts comes from a decidedly lay perspective and the subsequent interpretations of those texts do not follow any acceptable modernist-bible-scholar approach. In my research, I could find no biblical retelling or usage among *The Simpsons* episodes that failed to play with the modernist assumptions of universal or objective truth, for example, and certainly none that sought to discover the historical “facts” behind a biblical tale. Instead, the writers employed a highly creative, entirely anachronistic, playful, expectation-bending approach that

³³ Kristine McKenna, “Matt Groening,” *My Generation*, May/June 2001, 48-52, 54.

³⁴ McKenna, “Matt Groening,” 54.

³⁵ “Questions for Matt Groening.” *New York Times*. December 27, 1998.

³⁶ David Owen, “Taking Humor Seriously - George Meyer, the funniest man behind the funniest show on TV.” *The New Yorker*. March 13, 2000, 64.

dismantles the “rules” of biblical scholarship developed in the modernist agenda.

Since this is the writers’ approach, the characters within the show unsurprisingly display an affinity for non-scholarly interpretation and a deconstruction approach when it comes to hierarchies of biblical knowledge. As just one example, in “Missionary: Impossible” Rev. Lovejoy sends Homer to the South Pacific to minister to indigenous people (and to hide from PBS Television, whom he has defrauded).³⁷ In his first Bible lesson with the supposed savages, Homer, holding an English Bible, states: “And Lo! What a wondrous message [the Bible] is. Like this ... [opens Bible at random] ... from the book of Pah-salms: ‘God will shatter the heads of his enemies, the hairy crown of those who walk in their guilty ways, that you may bathe your feet in blood!’ [In a slightly academic tone] As true today, as it was when it was written.” Here, the writers have Homer play with several hierarchies they wish to deconstruct. Homer is the “expert” on the Bible who is actually a fraud; the text is “true today” when in fact it was selected at random; the text has a recoverable history (“when it was written”) that contributes to its truth, but it appears without any discussion of historical context. Any idea of objective meaning, authority, legitimately recoverable history, or even truth is roundly deconstructed in Homer’s speech.

In this section, I have shown that the postmodern approach to the Bible in *The Simpsons* extends even to deconstructive views of authority and the hierarchy of interpretation. When considered alongside the multi-voiced and self-referential use of Bible quotes and the mischievous and playful retelling of Bible stories, I argue that both the characters and the writers of this long-running show display themselves as model postmodern biblical interpreters at every turn.

³⁷. “Missionary Impossible,” 11x15, February 20, 2000.

It's Funny Because It's Not True: Postmodernism, *The Simpsons*, and the Bible

I would be remiss if, after all this discussion, I did not reassure the reader that I understand that *The Simpsons* is a comedy and a cartoon. Above all, and whatever approach they enact within the writing or for the characters, this show is *funny*.

However, I would argue that even the humor – and especially the humor that comes from interpreting the Bible – is successful because the writers are not afraid to play with convention, expectation, and authority. They upturn our “accepted text” and deconstruct our hierarchies for who can explain these texts. These are hallmarks of the postmodern approach, and in the final analysis they actually make the show funnier than many other things on television. As H. Peter Steeves argued in 2009, “Like David Letterman, Monty Python, and the late-great Andy Kaufman, *The Simpsons* belongs to a class of comedy that separates it from the its peers. To ask what comes next, what comes after postmodern comedy, is not a legitimate question. It’s the modernist, after all, who believes in a linear narrative, historical progress, and one moment necessarily leading to another. What comes next for *The Simpsons* is a twenty-first season. And for us ... comes the laughter, the expectation of anything coming next at all, and the weird yet joyous possibility of I-don’t-even-know any more.”³⁸ What Steeves grasps is that it is the joy and play of postmodern interpretation that makes the show, and its very postmodern use of the Bible, so funny and finally so very good.

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³⁸. *TV Quarterly* Vol. 39, no. 1 (2009), 18.

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