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Book Review

The Bible Doesn't Say That: 40 Biblical Mistranslations, Misconceptions, and Other Misunderstandings

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Cartier persuasively argues that much of the groundwork for the success of the contemporary gay liberation movement was done in gay bars before the watershed event of Stonewall. *Baby, You Are My Religion* is an engaging contribution to the historical study of the lesbian experience in America, and is a must-read for anyone interested in the intersection of theology and cultural studies.

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The Bible Doesn't Say That: 40 Biblical Mistranslations, Misconceptions, and Other Misunderstandings.

Joel Hoffman

New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2016. 304 pages.

ISBN-13: 978-1250059482

\$25.99

In *The Bible Doesn't Say That: 40 Biblical Mistranslations, Misconceptions, and Other Misunderstandings* Joel Hoffman, a linguist by training, brings his expertise to bear on the subject of errant Bible interpretation for a popular audience. The author promises to take his reader into a journey into “the Bible itself, stripped of its later interpretations, the biases from agenda-laden theologians, the distortions of both accidental and purposeful mistranslations, and the various impacts of history” (11). Hoffman attempts to bring the tools of contemporary historical-critical scholarship and linguistic theory to a wide range of topics, from the *bereshit* of Genesis 1, the crucifixion of Jesus, and the themes of violence and justice in the Bible, organized for consideration in forty

chapters, each one briefly delving into a particular mistranslation or misunderstanding. In the final section of his book, Hoffman looks at more abstract concepts in the Bible such as slavery, marriage, divorce, violence, and justice, and argues that contemporary preachers and teachers often misrepresent the complexity of the Bible, or stretch it to fit contemporary agendas (ch. 31-40).

Hoffman divides these misunderstandings of the Bible into five categories: ignorance, historical accident, cultural gaps, mistranslation, and misrepresentation, with several misunderstandings being grounded in multiple categories. Chapters on evolution and Genesis 1-3, Noah's ark, lifespans in the Old Testament, and David and Goliath (chaps. 2-5) emphasize the cultural gaps between contemporary modes of science and history and the mindset of the biblical authors. He identifies "mistranslation" as a primary culprit responsible for many mistaken biblical readings, including the complexities of rendering Hebrew into Greek (for example the "virgin" birth of Jesus (chap. 24), as well as translating ancient Hebrew into English (the word "commandment" as both *dabar* and *mitzvah*, chap. 8), associations based on wordplay in the Latin Vulgate (the "apple" of the Tree of Knowledge and the Jubilee years in ancient Israel, chaps. 26-27), and confusions stemming from shifts between King James' and contemporary English ("for God so loved the world," chap. 10).

Hoffman is at his best when he applies his linguistic training to better explicate issues of translation. His examples of biblical wordplay seemed particularly valuable, such as the pun on *aletheia* (truth) and *eleutheroō* (to set free) in the famous line "the truth shall set you free" in John 8:32 (chap. 11), or the pun on *afar* and *efar* (dust and ashes) in Genesis 18:27 (chap. 15). In both cases, these puns contribute to the literary impact of the text, but are not captured in English translations. Many of Hoffman's examples in this book are adapted out of his earlier book *And God Said: How Translations Conceal the Bible's Original Meaning*, including his comments on *parthenos* (chap. 24), the idiom "my

sister, my bride” in Song of Songs (chap. 37), and the difficulties of capturing the nuances of biblical shepherds in modern English (chap. 16).

The chapters on cultural gaps and misrepresentations generally felt cursory. He deals with the question of “Did the Jews kill Jesus?” in only eight pages, answering in the negative and assigning responsibility to some members of the Jewish and Roman aristocracy (ch. 7). The final chapters on broad biblical themes often ignore relevant passages; for example, Hoffman’s discussion of gender roles as portrayed in the Bible (ch. 37) omits Paul’s salutation to female Christian leaders in Romans 16. This chapter’s nine-page whirlwind tour of a complex and nuanced subject is supported by a few handfuls of prooftexts, as is also typical of the later chapters.

The Bible Doesn’t Say That is clearly intended for a general audience, omitting any serious discussion of contemporary methods or perspectives on biblical translation which could guide the reader deeper into the subject matter. For example, Hoffman does not discuss the opinions of other scholars in relevant fields, excludes source citations, and omits even a general bibliography at the end of the book. Because of this, it is often unclear whether a given interpretation is idiosyncratic to Hoffman or is grounded in any kind of scholarly consensus, a problem that seemed especially prominent in his chapter on the linguistic origin of the Tetragrammaton (chap. 13). While Hoffman’s efforts to provoke his general audience reader out of a naïve literalism are useful, those efforts would be better if this book guided that reader to other biblical scholarship. Further, as mentioned above, many of the best parts of this book are adapted from *And God Said*, a book with a stronger central thesis and more extended analyses of each of its translation test cases. Readers interested in a more nuanced and academically rigorous discussion of these same topics may find Hoffman’s previous books more useful, both *And God Said* and *In the Beginning: A Short History of the Hebrew Language*. Those books contain the sustained argument and scholarly

rigor which this one lacks; ultimately, this book reads more like a potpourri, a grab bag of topics rather than a sustained conversation.

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Vanity Karma: Ecclesiastes, the Bhagavad-gita and the Meaning of Life

Jayadvaita Swami

Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 2015. 384 pages.

ISBN-13: 978-0892134496

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In *Vanity Karma*, Jayadvaita Swami accomplishes a difficult task: producing a work that is widely accessible, personally engaging, and academically credible. Additionally, this book manages to occupy a rare literary niche that may be especially useful in the university classroom. Let me explain.

Books on Comparative Religion tend to fall into one of several genres. Most accessible are the ubiquitous non-academic monographs. A trip to your local bookstore (be it brick and mortar or virtual) will show that there is a seemingly endless supply of popular trade books comparing Hindu and Abrahamic scriptures, practices, and thought. Unfortunately, these books can vary widely in terms of readability, accountability to a tradition's actual teachings, and the authors' qualifications. One assumes