

Online Reviews

Anfray, Clélia. *Zola biblique: La Bible dans les Rougon-Macquart*. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2010. Pp. 230. ISBN: 978-2-204-09314-9

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Émile Zola's usage of biblical references in the *Rougon-Macquart* has traditionally received little attention. As Anfray notes in her introduction to *Zola biblique: La Bible dans les Rougon-Macquart*, scholars have recently shown interest in the influence of Greek and Roman mythology on Zola's works, but biblical themes remain largely undiscussed. *Zola biblique* thus sets out to explore biblical references in the *Rougon-Macquart* in order to develop a dimension of the author's work outside the boundaries of the "traditional naturalist reading" (199). Anfray's research uncovers an impressively consistent stream of allusions to the Old and New Testaments throughout the series and offers original analysis supported by detailed examples from both the *Rougon-Macquart* and the Bible. The essay seeks above all to investigate Zola's complicated relationship with the religious imagery he weaves into even the most secular passages.

The book is divided into five thematic chapters. Rather than follow the sequence of the *Rougon-Macquart*, the essay is structured according to biblical chronology from the Old Testament to the New Testament (although a final nod to the Old Testament appears at the end of chapter five). Subtitled sections of each chapter develop comparable themes in different novels. The first two chapters are devoted to themes found in the book of Genesis, mainly the fall from Eden and fratricide. Highlights include a section devoted to *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* as a "rewriting of Genesis" and analyses of *Le Ventre de Paris* and *La Terre* as modern retellings of Cain and Abel. Chapter three, "De Sodome à Babylone: la cité maudite," analyzes the role of the city in a number of novels, paying particular attention to allusions to the fall of Paris as a sort of apocalypse which allows for the possibility of the rebirth of a "city of justice"—a theme which resurfaces later in *Trois Villes* and *Les Quatre Évangiles*. The final section of the chapter is a remarkably thought-provoking analysis of *Au Bonheur des Dames* as a rewriting of the book of Esther in which the store becomes a "harem" and consumerism a "new religion" (124-25).

Chapters four and five move on to the New Testament, first considering the influence of Renan's *Saint Paul* on Zola's interpretation of the apostle and then drawing attention to Pauline themes in *Germinal* and *La Joie de vivre*. The final chapter, "De Jésus-Christ à David. Mythe naturaliste, mythe personnel," is primarily an analysis of the Christ-like qualities of various male characters throughout the *Rougon-Macquart*. The essay closes, however, with an intriguing investigation of *Le Docteur Pascal* in which key references apply to both the "personal myth" inspired by Zola's romantic relationship with Jeanne Rozerot and the Old Testament tale of King David and Abishag.

Throughout *Zola biblique*, Anfray ultimately seeks to reconcile Zola's allusions to the Bible with more commonly studied Zolian themes such as "heredity, sexuality [and] socialism" (14). Zola's tendency to blend biblical myths, politics, and naturalism surfaces as a foundational element of his masterpiece (189). Anfray's work highlights Zola's seamless fusion of references to the Old and New Testaments, Christian and Pagan myths, and the secular and the sacred in order to capture the timelessness of the human experience. Zola uses the Bible and theology to facilitate the illustration of his own social and political ideas through shared cultural references which would have been readily

recognizable to his readers. Chapter two, for example, advances from the standpoint that familiarity with the myth of Cain and Abel is essential to the *Rougon-Macquart* since the power struggle symbolized by fratricide serves as the catalyst for the entire series (81).

Despite a general effort to show that usage of religious themes in the *Rougon-Macquart* remains consistent with Zola's social and political ideals, the author does find conflict between his feminist reputation and his perpetuation of conservative female stereotypes. The "novelist of original sin," according to Anfray, "oscillates between Marx and Saint Paul, between feminism and Saint Augustine" (29). Anfray exposes Zola's surprising adherence to certain archetypes consistent with Christianity, such as traces of the cult of the Virgin in *Le Docteur Pascal* and *Le Rêve* (40). She points out that it is Zola who takes the liberty of adding feminine fault to the biblical myth of fratricide in *Le Ventre de Paris* (83). Similarly, in *Pot-Bouille*, the fault once again rests squarely on female characters, Berthe and Hortense, in this retelling of Sodom and Gomorrah (117-21).

Those less familiar with biblical myth will appreciate the author's inclusion of concise retellings of relevant biblical stories and accounts of the Bible's influence on the cultural climate in which Zola studied and wrote. An analysis of *Le Ventre de Paris*, for example, explains in detail why Zola's representation of Cain is closer to the medieval concept of the character than the popular romantic concept evoked by the likes of Byron (77). A wealth of other details from Anfray's research unravels Zola's writing process to reveal important historical points, such as the novelist's choice of biblical translations and his readings of both ancient and modern theological texts. All in all, *Zola biblique* is essential reading for Zola scholars and an excellent resource for anyone with an interest in religious themes in nineteenth-century literature.