

Borges, Jorge Luis

Unusual for a writer from a mostly Catholic country, Borges (b. 1899, Buenos Aires, Argentina, d. 1986, Geneva, Switzerland) was both a nonbeliever and someone who quoted the Bible with precision. His paternal grandmother, Frances Haslam de Borges (1842-1935), came from an English Methodist family and could reputedly recite the entire Bible from memory; perhaps from this tradition come such Borges titles as the poems "Lucas, XXIII" (on Luke's account of the Crucifixion), "Mateo, XXV, 30" (on the weeping and gnashing of teeth), two different poems with the title "Juan, I, 14" (on the Word made flesh), "Génesis, 4, 8" (on Cain's murder of Abel), "Génesis, 9, 13" (on the rainbow that is given as a sign to Noah), "Mateo, 27, 9" (on the thirty pieces of silver paid to Judas) and "Eclesiastés, 1, 9" (no new things under the sun). "El Evangelio según Marcos," the famous story from *El informe de Brodie*, tells of a reenactment of the Crucifixion by illiterate gauchos who are impressed with the gospel story when it is read aloud to them. "La intrusa" has as its epigraph "2 Reyes, I, 26," which refers to the line from the second book of Samuel (sometimes called the second book of Kings) about David's love for Jonathan which was "wonderful passing the love of women." Two stories, "Tres versiones de Judas" and "La secta de los treinta," concern Judas Iscariot, while the essay "El espejo de los enigmas" glosses the line from Paul's first Epistle to the Corinthians about seeing through a glass darkly. Besides these works explicitly glossing Biblical passages, there are hundreds of other Biblical references in Borges's works.

The Bible interested Borges in various ways: as an archive of stories that are told and retold, as the book of books, as texts (as diverse as the Quran and Dante's *Commedia*) that mattered to him. Though he did not know Hebrew (a language of which he pronounces himself "unsurpassingly ignorant") or Greek, he comments on biblical versions in Latin, English, Spanish, Old English and Old Norse, and his interest in the topic of literary translation (shown in his essays on Homer and on the *Arabian Nights*, in which he argues for the autonomy of the translated text) extends also to the Bible. Several stories, including "La biblioteca de Babel" and "El libro de arena," work with the idea of the book of books, and of course the title of "La biblioteca de Babel" refers to the tower of Babel in Genesis 11, although the story modifies the biblical trope: instead of concerning speakers of mutually unintelligible languages, Borges's story concerns librarians who are guardians of a library that includes

all possible combinations of the letters of the alphabet, resulting in a vast number of unintelligible pages (and entire books) but also necessarily including all texts in all languages.

Throughout Borges's work there are frequent references to theology and hermeneutics. A brief example: a note at the end of *La cifra*, that refers to the Biblical reference in the title of the poem "Eclesiastés, 1, 9," reads: "In the verse mentioned some have seen an allusion to the circular time of the followers of Pythagoras. I think that this concept is entirely alien to Hebrew thought." Similarly, "Tres versiones de Judas" (published in 1944) refers to the then-lost *Gospel of Judas*; Borges bases his story on the medieval refutations of the Gnostic gospel, and his account closely coincides with the recently published text.

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