The Clenched Hand

AUGUSTE RODIN, CAST BY THE FOUNDER ALEXIS RUDIER, PARIS
MODELED C. 1885; CAST 1925 BRONZE 18 1/2 × 11 3/4 × 8 INCHES (47 × 29.8 × 20.3 CM)
PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART: BEQUEST OF JULES E. MASTBAUM, 1929
The Poetics of Abjection in Psalm 44

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Postexilic liturgical texts such as Psalm 44 offer rich possibilities for critical inquiry positioned at the intersection of literary criticism, theology, and ethics. Recent decades have seen a burgeoning attentiveness to constructions of identity in ancient texts. Central to this endeavor has been the analysis of operations of power implicated in ancient texts’ rhetorics and narratological praxes. It no longer suffices for biblical criticism to offer erudite re-description of biblical content framed by means of a few broadly sketched points about historical context. Theory is necessary, to the dismay of some and the delight of others. Generations of biblical scholars have observed that the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile constituted formative experiences for ancient Judah that raised urgent questions about the nature and capacities of Israel’s God. Since the advent of postcolonial criticism, inquiries have probed the sociopolitical effects of imperial ideologies and the cultural adaptations and strategies of resistance inscribed in the literatures of subjugated peoples. The present essay seeks to engage the poetics of Psalm 44 as a contribution to that larger interdisciplinary conversation. I am interested in three dimensions of signifying in this ancient poem: the voicing of the subaltern as represented by the shamed speaker; the way in which venerable tradition is evoked to frame the abjection of the faithful community and the potential abjection of the deity; and possibilities actualized via some contemporary postcolonial approaches for a fuller theorizing of Judah’s trauma.

First, I will outline the critical framework within which I seek to understand in literary and political terms the significance of the poem’s use of the abject. My critical framework draws on artistic depictions of suffering and resistance as analogues for understanding the performativity of diction and imagery in Psalm 44, moves away from a redaction-critical model for understanding literary tensions in the psalm, and affirms the usefulness of postcolonial theory for understanding dynamics of power and abjection in this ancient poetry. The second section of the essay is devoted to analysis of semantic and structural elements of the psalm. En route, I will engage a 2013 volume of essays that I find productive for framing interpretive issues in biblical rhetoric: Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination, edited by Ann Laura Stoler.1 My interweaving