In the Beginning Was a Screaming Mother

A Response to Anthony Paul Smith

HANNAH M. STRØMMEN

Hannah M. Strømmen is senior lecturer in biblical studies at the University of Chichester.

h.strommen@chi.ac.uk

In this response to Anthony Paul Smith's thought-provoking paper, "Thinking the Scream: Figures and Forms of Death and the Story of Christianity," I would like to pick up on the fantasy of origins Smith refers to by turning to Mark's Gospel and its dying Messiah. I do so to probe the claim Smith puts forward about stories bringing coherence to the incoherent – in particular the Christian story. At the end of his paper, Smith posits that "to provide a grammar for screaming one must give up on coherence, on origins and ends, and instead give attention to the sensations of the flesh." As Smith puts it, "the liberating message of Jesus' death is doomed to *only be a story* of liberation" (my italics). I suggest that Jesus' death transmits intensities not as a story primarily, but as event, as the changeable, the accidental, in living on and acting upon bodies across time and space.

Smith states that scholars – and I would add particularly biblical scholars – fantasize about returning to the origin, to fathom what "it all means" or what "it all meant." As Ward Blanton argues, this fantasy has not simply been an endeavour to accurately determine an ancient reality. Instead, "modernity's depictions of original Christianity must be read as a working through of its own identity."[1] Smith asks: what if instead of origins there are

1. Ward Blanton, *Displacing Christian Origins: Philosophy, Secularity, and the New Testament*, Chicago 2007, 7.

only accidents? Accidents of birth, accidents of death. Are we, as he implies, spinning stories out of what is better left unnameable? Western art has been obsessed with nativity scenes and crucifixion scenes, as if part of the cultural working through of identity is a constant coming to terms with life and death, and, particularly, the iconic life and death of Jesus. Rifling through the beginnings, there are many we could land on, from John's "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1) to Matthew's genealogy (Matthew 1:1–17). Or, we could begin with the scream that presumably emitted from Jesus' mouth before or while he was wrapped in "bands of cloth and laid in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). Or with the flesh, blood, and gore of child-birth and the screams emitting from Mary's mouth that are not to be found in Luke's Gospel or in much high culture: in the beginning were a screaming Mother and a screaming baby, and their screams were with God, and the scream was God.

The search for singular and secure origins in the biblical archive is doomed to fail because, as Brennan Breed puts it, "biblical texts are, from the very moment of their initial inscription, already sedimented with various semantic, literary, and historical contexts"[2] and biblical literature is and always was "a changing process," "built up over a lengthy span of time and continued to develop and transform until well after any supposedly 'original' period."[3] Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John assemble different Jesus-figures from the scraps of their time, knitting these scraps together into differing fabrics, screwing together different parts and building different Christ-machines: constructions of a historical Jesus that work in different ways and are assembled from different parts (memories, texts, remains). The multiplicity that is Christian origins, and the multiple accounts of Jesus and his death, produce different Christianity-assemblages. An assemblage has no essence; there are no once-and-for-all defining characteristics, only contingent and singular ones.[4] If we want to know what an assemblage is, something like a Christianity-assemblage, "we cannot presume that what we see is the final product nor that this product is somehow independent of the network of social and historical processes to which it is connected."[5] To see Christianity as multiple assemblages forming and reforming over time means suspending the question of what Christianity *is*, and of reflecting instead on how different Christianity-assemblages work, what they work

2. Brennan Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History*, Bloomington, IN 2014, 204.

3. Breed, *Nomadic Text*, 12.

4. Thomas Nail, "What is an Assemblage?", *SubStance* 46:1 (2017), 24.

5. Nail, "What is an Assemblage?", 24.

with, with what other machines do they connect or break away from, what domains are territorialized and de-territorialized. Does Jesus' death stand erect in the midst of these Christianity-assemblages, as the monument that territorializes all Christianities? And if so, how does this figure of death work with its harrowing scream at the end: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34)

With Mark we get the earliest extant descriptions of Jesus' death, which Matthew and Luke drew on for their own Gospels. Here we have one of the slippery points of "origin." There is no attention to Jesus' birth, or any scream that may accompany it, although the Gospel is set off with the shriek of John the Baptist in the wilderness (Mark 1:3). Smith argues that "the way that death comes to be narrated matters for the way such death lives in the world. The way such death, like the death of flesh, nourishes the life of the world." How could we say that this earliest of stories about Jesus' death is narrated and lives on? In his reading of Jesus' death, Stephen D. Moore shows how there could be said to be at least two Messiahs that step out of Mark's Gospel, the suffering Messiah and the triumphant Messiah. Both are assemblages, one is "rough hewn, crudely constructed from a few wooden beams, held together by a few nails" while the other is "the glorified Messiah enthroned in his throne assemblage."[6] While the throne-assemblage that was taken up by Christianized Rome under Constantine could certainly be classed as something of a success, Moore suggests that it is Christ on the cross that has become the "hyperaffective" assemblage for the ages.[7] That is, an assemblage of wood and nails and flesh that has become hugely effective – or rather, affective. Affect arises "in the capacities to act and be acted upon"; it

> is the name we give to those forces – visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion – that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension.[8]

Thinking for a moment of Mel Gibson's tortured Christ, and the spectators' "repugnance, the retching" at the blood and body fluids – all the "shit that life withstands"[9] – there is simultaneously a powerful attraction to this

6. Stephen D. Moore, *Gospel Jesuses and Other Nonhumans: Biblical Criticism Post-poststructuralism*, Atlanta, GA 2017, 56.

7. Moore, *Gospel Jesuses*, 56.

8. Melissa Gregg & Gregory J. Seigworth, "An Inventory of Shimmers", in Melissa Gregg & Gregory J. Seigworth (eds), *The Affect Theory Reader*, Durham, NC 2010, 1.

9. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York 1982, 2–3.

death, a pathos as well as a more mundane appropriation of it. Millions of Christians carry the cross around their necks after all. The capacity of the Jesus-cross-assemblage to become hugely effective "inheres in the fact that it is an affective machine, a generator of affects. Arguably, indeed, it is the most powerful affect generator ever assembled."[10] In other words, the assembling of cross and nails and flesh has continued to produce forces and intensities across time and space. Would not this be a way of understanding the figure of Christ as not "linked to essence, but to what, in principle is its opposite: the event, or even the changeable, the accident"?[11]

Smith writes that "the liberating message of Jesus' death is doomed to only be a story of liberation, never liberation itself." No one can "die the death of another." The social death of the slave, discussed by Smith, cannot be made coherent by Jesus' death, and we cannot "fashion coherence out of biological death." If we take on Moore's point about Mark's Christ-assemblage as an affect generator, though, the deaths of Jesus narrated in the Gospels are not perhaps "only stories" that simply seek to provide coherence. As Smith argues, they cannot offer or guarantee liberation. But to millions of flesh-and-blood people the Jesus-cross-assemblage continues to affect different domains of life in very real ways. It is not necessarily a matter of what Jesus' death means or what its essence is, but what it does and what accidents it accelerates: what does it function *with*, and in connection with what other things does it transmit intensities?[12] Figures like Catherine of Siena (1347–1380) and Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226) testified to experiences of Christ's wounds on their own body, or of lapping up the blood of these wounds, while millions of Christians all over the world live according to Paul's dictum that they have been crucified with Christ so that it is not they who live but Christ who lives in them (Galatians 2:20).[13] For Paul, death with Christ is a mode of becoming, becoming-birthed anew in Christ. In the scream of Jesus' death, then, we are returned to the screams of birth: in the beginning were a screaming Mother and a screaming baby, and their screams were with God, and the scream was God. ▲

10. Moore, *Gospel Jesuses*, 47.

11. Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon and the Logic of Sensation*, New York 2003, 124.

12. Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, New York 2013, 2.

13. Moore, *Gospel Jesuses*, 42.