

## ○ EDITORIAL

Tempted as I am to tell a story (that will soon come), I think it is best to begin this first editorial with the statement of the journal's agenda. The Bible and Critical Theory is an exploratory and innovative internet journal. Fully peer-reviewed, the journal explores the intersections between critical theory, understood in the broad sense, and biblical studies. It publishes articles that investigate the contributions from critical theory to biblical studies, and contributions from biblical studies to critical theory.

By critical theory we mean a collection of methods and questions, often shortened to the word 'theory' itself. These methods include post-structuralism, feminism, psychoanalysis, ideological criticism, Marxism, eco-criticism, post-colonialism, queer theory, narratology, new historicism, utopian studies and so on. In literary criticism outside biblical studies these methods and others like them engage the majority of critics. Biblical studies remains in an extraordinary state of flux: the various methods of critical theory have been used by biblical critics for some time now. These methods have raised questions about the Bible concerning race and ethnicity, indigeneity, gender and sexual difference, the human-animal binary, class and ideology, hegemony and subversion, the nature of history, texts and readers, and so on.

Yet, much work remains to be done. Many parts of the Hebrew Bible, New Testament and extra-canonical literature remain unexplored in light of the questions and methods of critical theory. Those parts of the Bible that have been the concern of biblical interpreters working with critical theory require further work. As far as critical theory is concerned, there has been minimal and sporadic concern with the Bible, although the situation is beginning to change. For these reasons the journal publishes work not only by biblical critics, but also by critical theorists interested in the questions the Bible and biblical studies pose for critical theory.

And now the story: when we first began discussions about the possibility of a journal little did we imagine the way events would unfold. For the immediate background of the journal is the Bible and Critical Theory Seminar, which, since 1998, has developed into a time of intense energy and interaction over the last weekend in June each year. This is due only in part to the fact that we meet outside the usual venues of intellectual work. Over against the standard lecture halls and conference facilities, with their institutional architecture, inevitable graffiti on the tables, technological overload and new car smell of plastic and vinyl, we gather in the historic pubs of Melbourne, Adelaide, Sydney and Brisbane. If the walls are soaked with tobacco smoke and the conversations of a century or two, then so much the better. I still get a thrill when, on the standard pub-crawl to find a suitable venue, I mention to the publican of a potential pub that the 'Bible and Critical Theory Seminar' wants to meet there – 'Who?' he or she says, and after a repetition or two they are happy to show me the facilities. A few conference veterans have confided in me that the seminar was the best intellectual gathering they had ever attended. Given the attendance of people from Aotearoa/New Zealand over the last few years we are planning, as I write, a meeting in the land of long white cloud.

Since its first meeting the seminar has set out to provide a forum for the exploration of the intersections between critical theory and biblical studies. It actively works to engage in dialogue between biblical studies and specialists in literary theory, philosophy, cultural studies, anthropology and environmental studies, eco-criticism, Marxism and economics (and I list here merely

the specialities of the various speakers at the seminar over the last few years). We began organising the seminar for a number of reasons: the absence of any group that dealt specifically with our interests in critical theory and biblical studies; the scattered nature of biblical studies in the antipodes; the increasing number of postgraduate students working in innovative areas in biblical studies; and the desire to have a good time. There is nothing quite like being able to get up between papers and buy yourself a beer or a wine, or hear the click of balls on the pool table.

But what has happened is that our concerns in the antipodes, our focus on the interaction of critical theory and the Bible, have become an international affair. A number of events have come together to make this the right time for a journal such as this, a *kairos* if I might be so bold as to invoke a term from the New Testament. To begin with, the inevitable patterns of capitalism have moved in our favour: presses for innovative biblical studies such as Sheffield Academic Press became part of trans-national publishing houses, journals in this area ceased or changed direction, most notably *Semeia*, so that before we knew it there was an extraordinary emptiness. But I speak here only of biblical studies; at the same time there has been an inexplicable flowering of interest by critical theorists of all persuasions in the Bible. Slavoj Žižek turned to Paul and the New Testament in developing a distinct political position, especially in *The Fragile Absolute* (Žižek 2000), *On Belief* (Žižek 2001) and *The Puppet and the Dwarf* (Žižek 2003). Žižek himself was responding to Alain Badiou's extraordinary book, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Badiou 2003). Soon the discussion thickened: Terry Eagleton began invoking biblical themes in a series of books, including *Sweet Violence* (Eagleton 2003b), *The Gatekeeper* (Eagleton 2001), *Figures of Dissent* (Eagleton 2003a) and *After Theory* (Eagleton 2003c), Giorgio Agamben's book on Paul awaits translation from Italian into English (Agamben 2000), and Jacob Taubes's final lectures, his 'spiritual testament', were transcribed from an audio tape and translated as *The Political Theology of Paul* (Taubes 2004). Suddenly it seems as though everyone is interested in the Bible, joining the occasional voices of Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Fredric Jameson, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch and others from earlier on. Marxist conferences worry about the wave of interest in the Bible, biblical scholars – at least those who find this whole development fascinating – find their skills in high demand, and those in the various realms of critical theory wish they had taken at least one or two courses in biblical studies or theology in their dim and distant student days.

So it is not merely a case of biblical scholars dipping into critical theory for new methods, but a wholesale recovery of interest in the Bible outside biblical studies. However, the problem here, especially in the sample literature I have mentioned in the preceding paragraph, is that there is rarely if ever a direct engagement between biblical studies and critical theory. Biblical scholars continue to write for their disciplinary journals and presses, even when they dive into one form of critical theory or another, while critical theorists, although they may occasionally cite a biblical scholar (usually of a generation or two ago), hardly ever wade into current debates in biblical studies. It is this situation that the journal seeks to address, to provide a forum where interactions between critical theorists and biblical scholars may take place.

The other question that is relevant here is why there should be a wave of fresh considerations of the Bible now in philosophy, political theory and critical theory more generally. One answer may in fact be that of one of my students working on Paul, coming out of biblical studies to find this extraordinarily lively debate underway: it is as though, she said, philosophers and theorists have discovered that the Bible is as crucial to Western philosophy as Plato, but that for so long

biblical studies was sequestered away in seminaries and theological colleges, the preserve of the churches. While biblical scholars have for too long been ill equipped to deal with the wider developments in critical theory, philosophers have had to take up the task. I would want to add to this that the debates themselves may in fact be a symptom of something far deeper, that which Hardt and Negri attempt to trace in *Empire*, namely the fundamental changes in the very shape of capitalism (Hardt et al. 2000). If their analysis needs some revision, especially in the light of subsequent critics, it seems to me that their ability to read various intellectual developments such as postmodernism and postcolonialism as symptoms of the passage to a very different political economic order, then the same way very well apply to the extraordinary flowering of interest in certain aspects of the Bible by theorists and philosophers. So why don't I dispense with any remnant of modesty and suggest that what we have in this fascinating, albeit very different, return to the Bible is a mark of changes as profound, in political, cultural and economic senses, as that which marked the Renaissance, Reformation and emergence of capitalism.

But let me come down to earth a little with a word concerning Monash University ePress before I pass over to the articles of this inaugural issue: I don't want to go into the various points on the press's website – that the press is one effort among many to return control of academic publishing to intellectuals, that it is a not-for-profit venture, that it will set a new standard of internet publishing, at least in the humanities. Rather, let me begin with something that struck me and a number of contributors, namely the requirement to use Australian spelling, following *The Macquarie Dictionary*, for an international journal. I must confess this surprised me at first, although I had not thought about it all that much. My unconscious assumption was that we would probably follow the convention of accepting material in either form of the great divide between American and British spelling, as, for instance, Sheffield Academic Press used to do, or the journal *Thesis Eleven* still does. So it was rather a pleasant surprise to receive the guidelines for contributors from the press and find that the *Macquarie Dictionary*, the standard reference for Australian English, was in fact the standard to which all contributors had to conform. Contributors then had to switch over to Australian spelling, one of those in the first issue commenting good-naturedly that 'emphasise' just didn't look like a word.

Rather than some strange requirement, it seems to me that this is quite important, and not merely for the idea that the mouse can in fact roar, nor indeed for some futile assertion of regionalism over against the dominance of some rampant global culture. To begin with, it is a recognition that there is in fact a whole range of types of English, not just the 'Queen's English' and then that American bowdlerisation of such proper English (as my father, a Dutchman with an anglophile bent, is wont to describe it). It is an obvious point, but often forgotten, that we have Australian, Canadian, South African, New Zealand (in each of the preceding cases we should distinguish between indigenous and settler varieties), Caribbean, African-American, Scottish, Welsh, Irish and so on, apart from American and British English. A further point is that the insistence on Australian spelling reveals a certain blind spot, and here I refer to the unwitting assumption that the institutional settings of scholarship in North America and Europe also pertain to those 'other' places as well. I think of the established progressions in academic recognition and intellectual careers, publication expectations and promotional steps – phrases come to mind such as 'tenure track' or *Doktorvater* or the greater recognition of print over against electronic publication and so on. It is an obvious point, but those assumptions of intellectual life are in fact quite specific and not universal: Australia, India, South Africa, New Zealand and so on are quite different

places intellectually and that is a good thing too. Finally, the need for Australian spelling points quite simply to the fact that an international journal such as *The Bible and Critical Theory* does in fact come from Australia, where so often the assumption has been that the best that scholars from down under can do is keep up with developments in the metropolitan centres (modernism, for instance, has always been understood here as a process of catching up), which boils down to an Atlantic focus. Quite simply, it means that international leadership in matters intellectual can, and indeed does, emerge from places such as Australia.

Now for the articles themselves: since we are concerned with the intersections between biblical and critical theory, this inaugural issue models the types of essays we will publish. Two engage with biblical concerns from critical theory (Slavoj Žižek and Alberto Moreiras), two draw on critical theory in order to see what the implications are for biblical studies (Ron Simkins and Mark Sneed) and one straddles both (the essay by Erin Runions). Žižek has been one of the main interlocutors in the recent wave of debate over the political legacy and contribution of the letters of Paul, particularly in the titles I mentioned above. Here he engages with Levinasian ethics, arguing in a way that both draws on Levinas and challenges his fundamental ethical positions, particularly the notion of the ‘face-to-face’ that Levinas himself develops from the biblical motif of the sojourner/neighbor. As one of the leading proponents of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Žižek argues that Levinas does not go far enough, that what is excluded in the encounter with the Other is in fact the ‘third’, the faceless multitude, indeed the inhuman, from which one has selected the Other in the first place. What we must do is dispense with the Other (smash his or her face) in order to enable the faceless third to emerge, or as he puts it in biblical terms, to assume the legacy of monotheistic violence as the means to achieve responsibility to the other. Only in this way, suggests Žižek, can we begin to think of a truly universal justice.

Alberto Moreiras takes on the new wave of political theology, based particularly on the letters of Paul, to ask whether it is possible to develop the ‘radical possibility of a de-theologised theory of the political’. For what he finds problematic is the turn, particularly on the Left but not exclusively so (witness the conservative Roman Catholic position in *Political Theology* by Carl Schmitt (1985)), to Paul’s epistles in the New Testament for the possibilities of a new direction in politics itself. Over against Paul, Moreiras juxtaposes the (proto-gnostic) gospel of John, which suggests an underside of such political theology, namely that the non-subject ceases to count: the one that is outside faith, hope and love – the great Pauline triad from 1 Corinthians 13 – is in fact the non-subject of the political. On this question Moreiras finds both Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek wanting: ‘If politics are always necessarily eventful, what happens to the eventless, the neutral, the non-subject?’ What happens to the subaltern who is outside the universality that Badiou in particular proclaims as the great Pauline breakthrough? My suspicion is that this will not be the last word on this issue in the journal, in part because the second half of Moreiras’s article will appear in the second issue, but mainly because Moreiras has thrown down the challenge and it is for the newly remade political theologians to respond.

Both articles by Žižek and Moreiras are one side of the dialogue this journal seeks to pursue. If the articles by Sneed and Simkins come from biblical studies itself, Erin Runions’s piece, ‘Desiring War’, straddles both, for it an engagement at once in critical theory and in biblical studies with a distinctly activist agenda that is most welcome. Here we find George W. Bush at the forefront, or rather his speech writers and their neo-conservative agenda. Runions uncovers the philosophical underpinnings of these speeches in the now infamous work of Francis Fukuyama,

especially the way he reads Alexandre Kojève's reading of Hegel's master-slave dialectic (this is some feat on Fukuyama's part, since Kojève's seminar had a profound underground influence on a range of French Marxists). Runions systematically pulls to pieces the way Bush's rhetoric conflates apocalyptic biblical and economic motifs, especially through a personified history that places the United States, or at least the present powers, in a unique and self-appointed role as the defender of an exceedingly strange 'freedom', all in order to justify war.

The remaining two articles, those by Ron Simkins and Mark Sneed, provide a model in this first issue of the engagement with critical theory for those based in biblical studies. Sneed dips into Fredric Jameson's widely influential three-level method for interpreting literary texts – the gradual widening from the specific historical situation of a text to its broader patterns of social and ideological conflict and then to the final horizon that concerns mode of production itself. Jameson's approach is a far cry from the 'vulgar' Marxist one that seeks a direct cause of the various elements of culture, society and ideology in the economic base, for he pushes Adorno's agenda to a new level, namely that every feature of the superstructure (culture, ideology etc.) has a deeply mediated relation with the infrastructure, or base in political economics. The real edge of Sneed's paper is to argue that heretofore most critics of the biblical book of Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) have in fact been or are 'vulgar' Marxists, i.e., they assume and work with a direct correlation between the various features of Qoheleth and its supposed historical, social and economic setting. From this *tour de force*, Sneed proposes a mediated, Jamesonian reading, in which the well-known pessimism and scepticism of Qoheleth are in fact parts of an imaginary resolution of the very real social and political contradictions of the book's Ptolemaic context: in response to the tension between Judaic and Hellenistic options, Qoheleth attempts to provide a path for those who want to adopt Hellenism while not giving up on their Jewish identity.

Ron Simkins's piece, which is part of a larger project that argues for the importance of a patron-client mode of production in ancient Israel, tracks the textual signals of the tensions of transition from an older domestic mode of production to the newer one of patronage. If Sneed comes from a more literary angle, Simkins provides a welcome sociological perspective to debates within biblical studies. And for Simkins the key battle-ground is the 'family': the clan or gens, or as we might call it, 'the extended family', is the basis of the domestic mode of production, with its fierce loyalties to the clan and indeed tribe, whereas the 'nuclear' or rather 'conjugal' family is the form of the family favoured by the patron-client mode of production. And the reason for such a shift lies in the transition to the monarchy in ancient Israel. Here Simkins runs against the fashionable minimalist or revisionist position that argues for a late reconstruction of a fictional 'Israel', arguing that the texts make more sense in light of ideological, social and political tensions of an actually existing monarchic Israel, tensions that are best explained in terms of the category of mode of production.

A feast, then, of the best that is happening now in the intersections between critical theory and the Bible, and a good sample of the types of articles that *The Bible and Critical Theory* will publish. Given the intense interest in the journal before its first issue has even appeared and the number of articles attached to my ever-increasing number of email messages, the journal answers a deep need. The following issues should be at least as good, if not better still.

*Roland Boer, November 2004*

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