

○ EDITORIAL

In February of this year I spoke on Australian national radio about the *Bible and Critical Theory* journal. It was in fact an interview, conducted by David Rutledge for 'The Religion Report' of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio division. It's not every day that the launch of an academic journal finds its way onto the national airwaves, but David Rutledge is in fact a biblical scholar who studied in Edinburgh in the early 1990s, wrote a book on deconstruction and the Bible and then ended up working on radio. He got wind of the journal, tracked me down and arranged for an interview. You will find a snippet of the interview on the ABC's website, <http://www.abc.net.au>. But what I want to do here is pick up a couple of items from the cutting room floor, although these digital days it would be the 'Recycle Bin' on whatever ABC computer David happened to be using in those early days in February.

David began one of his questions by mentioning the new 'Creation Museum' established in the USA by a group calling itself 'Answers in Genesis'. The museum, of course, is an attempt to respond to the countless museums in which evolutionary theory in its various forms is an underlying theoretical assumption, and it sets out to show how creationism is not merely a viable science, but is in fact the *only* science – you know the story: the fossil layers are there to test our faith, the evidence for the age of the universe may be read in a much shorter time frame, and above all the account in Genesis 1 gives us the correct sequence of creation. David asked me, somewhat mischievously, whether we would publish material like this, or at least by people who held such views. I don't think I need to repeat my answer to that question.

But then he went on to ask about the sense of a growing religious conservatism around the globe. A very common observation, is it not? Increasingly the machinery of the state seeks to enlist and is influenced by the ideological state apparatus of religion. In the United States, fundamentalist Christians who assume that the Bible is inerrant have the ear of the President, and thereby a disproportionate influence on domestic and foreign policy. In Australia, they form a powerful lobby group in the inner circles of government, touting the agenda of 'biblical values' (which ones?). In New Zealand, the Civil Unions Bill in Parliament met with vociferous opposition from conservative Christians, especially in the Destiny Church. In Rome, the former head of the successor to the Inquisition, Joseph Ratzinger, has become pope. In Israel, ultra-conservative Jews generate the major tension in Israeli society between religious and secular Jews, pushing for a raft of measures that includes the dispossession of Palestinians. And in Islamic nation-states, conservative and literalist Muslim leaders and governments seek to enforce a social model based on the Qur'an and the Hebrew Bible.

As far as biblical studies is concerned, David asked, is it true that the heyday of deconstruction, feminism, Marxism, queer theory and so forth has passed? Did they undermine too many things? Did they fail to provide the answers that people increasingly seek in some master narrative that we can extract from the Bible? In my various ports of call in the last year or so, I have heard comments that each year the intake of students in undergraduate and (post-)graduate programs in biblical studies and theology are more and more conservative.

In the interview I responded in two ways, but I want to add a third one here. Firstly, I pointed to the burgeoning interest in the Bible outside the disciplinary boundaries of biblical studies: cultural theorists, literary critics, political philosophers and others – nearly all from the Left –

have been writing, interviewing and talking about the Bible. I have in fact commented on this already in the first issue of the journal (Boer 2004) – Žižek and Badiou and Taubes on Paul, Negri on Job, and even Eagleton on the Bible and theology are but a few of the recent examples, and now there is a swirl of response and debate over these readings that shows little sign of abating. This development was of course one factor in establishing the journal. Secondly, I suggested that with all of the changes that have been happening globally in terms of politics and culture, the old connections and associations of the Bible – mostly theological and ecclesiastical – have been broken down or are starting to break down. The result is a greater openness in terms of the ways in which people are talking about or looking at the biblical material. And what is intriguing about such readings is the simultaneous awareness that this is both a foundational text and that it is profoundly ambiguous, ambivalent, riven with contradictions – which is what makes it interesting in the first place.

A third response was left begging, it seems to me now: for the first time in living memory the Bible is truly gunpowder on a geopolitical scale. We need to remember that despite the appropriations of the Bible by reactionaries in Washington, Wellington, Rome or Canberra, the Bible – to paraphrase Ernst Bloch – is also the conservatives' bad conscience. Liberation and political theologies saw something of this, as did Gerard Winstanley and the Revellers, as did Thomas Müntzer and the peasants in Germany, as did Ernst Bloch and the peasants who fought for the communist revolutions in Eastern Europe, as did the fight against slavery and then, with Martin Luther King, the battle against segregation in North America, as did the anti-colonial struggles the world over, as did the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, as does the resistance against sexism, homophobia and indigenous oppression today. The Bible is, in other words, a site of struggle, one that has dramatically broken out of the confines of sundry religious and educational institutions and now runs in the streets and corridors of power.

The essays gathered seek to deal with various questions that come out of such a context. Graeme Davison's essay focuses on the event that in many ways has become the sign of this context – September 11 – while Judith McKinlay is concerned with the postcolonial and feminist implications of Huldah in the Hebrew Bible for a crucial political debate in Aotearoa New Zealand over the ownership of the seabeds and foreshores. Robert Seesengood too draws on postcolonial criticism, now reading Paul as a mimic who constructs a hybrid community. Joseph Marchal and Michael Carden in their different ways bring in the crucial questions of sexuality and gender, one again with Paul and the other concerned with the Virgin Mother of the Hebrew Bible, Sarah.

But now I want to whet your appetite, encourage you to forage in this issue of the journal for some timely insights – it is, in other words, that moment when I undertake the traditional editorial task of introducing the essays themselves. Graeme Davison is, as you will soon find, a historian, especially of the city, as well as the recent winner of the Victorian Premier's Award for Literature for his book *Car Wars: How the Car Stole Our Hearts and Destroyed Our Cities*. In the wake of the flood of commentary on the attack on the Twin Towers in New York in 2001, Davison provides a welcome historical perspective. For the invocation of the Tower of Babel and its themes in talking about and representing the Twin Towers was not the first time this has happened. The Lisbon earthquake of 1755 evoked comparable soul-searching on the theme of pride, arrogance and punishment, as indeed did the fall of 'Marvellous Melbourne' in the 1890s. Davison is of course concerned with the tensions of the city, tensions between promotion and

pride in one's city and its vulnerability to disaster, but what is also interesting here is the way conservative Christian leaders in the USA (at least until the White House indicated its displeasure with their position), left critics, and the majority of those outside the USA (overwhelmingly so in Muslim countries) all agreed that the USA had indeed brought the event on itself. The content of course was different – moral decay, brutal foreign policy, exploitation for the sake of American interests – but the theme of pride and its fall underlay them all.

Judith McKinlay writes out of and about a situation in Aotearoa New Zealand regarding ownership of the seashores and foreshores. McKinlay pays patient attention to the hegemonic workings of a text such as 2 Kings 22, in which the prophet Huldah is co-opted into the dominant deuteronomistic ideology (the underlying current of the books from Deuteronomy to Kings in the Hebrew Bible). The text then becomes the lens through which she reads the political manoeuvrings over the Seabed and Foreshore Bill before the parliament of Aotearoa New Zealand. Although Huldah may seem at first to be a welcome woman's voice in the Bible, McKinlay tracks the motif of 'even a woman' – you must agree with this position/ideology/bill since *even a woman* does so. A comparable pattern is at work, she argues, with the efforts by the ruling Labor Party to co-opt its three Maori women to vote for a Bill that would put all ownership of the seabeds and foreshores in the hands of the 'Crown' (a quaint colonial euphemism in Commonwealth countries for the state) and thereby remove Maori claims. In this case, argues McKinlay, 'even a woman' has the overlay of 'even a Maori'. It seems, then, that not only do we find feminist, postcolonial and indigenous concerns in McKinlay's paper, but an undercurrent of ecological sensibilities as well.

Robert Seesengood's essay takes on an assumption all too common in biblical scholarship per se – that the various texts that make up the Bible constitute exceptions to their environment, whether that is the discovery of 'historical' narrative in the Hebrew Bible, the figure of Jesus or, and this is Seesengood's concern, the occasional pieces that have come together as the Pauline epistles. Bringing together a careful attention to detail and postcolonial criticism – particularly the central ideas of mimicry and hybridity – Seesengood puts Paul's exceptionality (or indeed his 'genius' status) to rest. Paul is very much a creature of his environment. Taking up the metaphor of the athlete in Paul's letters, Seesengood argues that he creates nothing new: what he does do is mimic and mock the athletic metaphor, using it not for self-aggrandisement but for self-deprecation as a basis for Christian community. 'Athletic metaphors refer to the self-denial and struggle necessary for individuals to live in harmonious community' writes Seesengood. But even this mimicry may be found in Hellenistic philosophers and elite Jewish intellectuals, so that Paul ends up being one of a number of Hellenistic thinkers who sought to undermine the discourse of empire. What we end up with is not a new community – the Christian one – but a hybrid community that is caught in a double bind: the very possibility of transforming Hellenistic culture relies on that very same culture.

With Joseph Marchal we remain on the same Pauline territory, but now with an agenda shaped by gender and sexuality. I hardly need to point out that the 'politics of the bedroom' – or rather, sexual politics – is everywhere about us, from its use by the Bush campaign in marginal states in the 2004 election (the so-called gay-marriage referenda) through the Civil Unions Bill in Aotearoa New Zealand to the Australian National-Liberal government pandering to the Family First Party. But Marchal's essay does not seek to resurrect a pro-feminist and pro-gay Paul – let alone any other Paul who may suit a distinct political agenda, whether green, blue,

pink or red. Paul's texts are not a repository of truths into which we may dip every now and then: Marchal takes on Paul's texts as a site of struggle, a contested zone that will yield political possibilities in the act of interpretation, ones that we leave to conservatives at our own peril. And Marchal's concern is not Romans or 1 Corinthians but Philippians, that apparently innocuous piece that so often manages to slip out of the spotlight, preferring a warm and comfortable couch in front of the TV. However, when Philippians has to answer for itself, it turns out that the apparent valorisation of mutuality, community and cooperation are less liberating than they seem, especially in light of the hierarchical, sacrificial, slave and, I would add, with thanks to Jennifer Bird, military metaphors that also abound in this epistle. That Paul's rhetoric of mutuality should also be used by those seeking to shore up hetero-normativity against the range of challenges – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, queer and so on – acts as a timely caution to the way we might use arguments of mutuality, love and tolerance in political struggles. Marchal suggests that we should look to the margins of the text, in this case the two women, the missionary couple of Euodia and Syntyche in Philippians, as hints of alternative views of community that Paul sought to overcome. And I espy here a suggestion that a mutuality based on difference is perhaps another, more viable model that for all his efforts may in fact unseat Paul's own model.

No stranger to political and sexual politics, Michael Carden undertakes here nothing less than the recovery of the Virgin Mother Sarah as a positive political myth. Beginning with the so-called 'wife-sister' or 'endangered ancestress' stories of Sarah and Rebecca in the Hebrew Bible – where their husbands pass them off as 'sisters' to foreign rulers – he carefully identifies the way Sarah is characterised as a Virgin Mother, so much so that the lines and shapes of an alternative Eden begin to come into focus. To my mind, the telling point in Carden's argument is that myth provides the opportunity to test a range of possibilities, explore dangerous tensions and contradictions that might otherwise be foreclosed. And one of these is in fact Sarah, who becomes a foremother of Israel, who reaches back to the mythical origins in Eden and foreword to the messianic era. This is a bold paper, for it dares to take a step beyond critique in order to (re)construct and (re)claim some biblical texts for a liberative sexual politics.

Some timely and crucial engagements, then, in a political and cultural context where biblical interpretation is, as Marchal suggests, a case of 'arguing for our lives'.

And don't forget the book reviews!

Roland Boer, Editor, January 2005

REFERENCES

Boer, Roland. 'Editorial'. *The Bible and Critical Theory* 2004; 1 (1): 01-1 to 01-6.

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