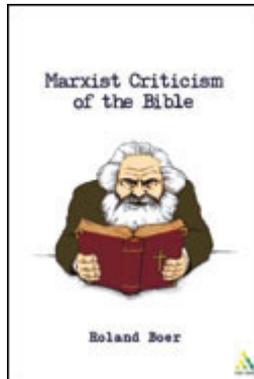


○ REVIEW OF ROLAND BOER'S *MARXIST CRITICISM OF THE BIBLE*

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David Jobling reviews Roland Boer's *Marxist Criticism of the Bible*. (London and New York: T & T Clark International; 2003. xiii + 265 pp. Cloth ISBN 0826463274; paper ISBN 0826463282. Note: on the publisher's website this book has a subtitle, *A Critical Introduction to Marxist Literary Theory and the Bible*, which does not appear in the cloth copy.)



Roland Boer's book is the most important contribution so far to the discussion of how Marxism is, and may further be, related to biblical studies. The dialogues here proposed and pursued are not confined to traditional 'Marxist' issues (economic, social- scientific, liberationist), but include a great range of issues in literary and cultural criticism. They entail a revisiting of basic canons of the biblical scholarship that has emerged under the hegemony of historical criticism.

The main part of the book consists of nine chapters, in each of which Boer deals with one Marxist theorist. Each chapter has two parts: a consideration of the theorist centred on one or two of his works (all are male), and a biblical reading stimulated by the theorist's work. The chapters are arranged by (roughly) canonical order of the biblical readings (Genesis 25, Exodus 32, Ruth, 1 Samuel 1-2, 1 Kings 17 - 2 Kings 9, Ezekiel 20, Isaiah 5, Psalms, Daniel 7-12). So in relation to chronology or any intrinsic logic within twentieth-century Marxism, the theorists appear in random order: Louis Althusser, Antonio Gramsci, Terry Eagleton, Henri Lefebvre, Georg Lukács, Ernst Bloch, Theodor Adorno, Fredric Jameson, Walter Benjamin. This surprising organisation seems to me to entail gain rather than loss. The quick leaps from chapter to chapter, the great variety of biblical texts and reading strategies, impress on the reader the overwhelming *variety* within Marxism, and negate reductionist attempts to define what Marxism 'is'. The book is a cornucopia.

Boer does not take up a position of uncritical adulation of his theorists. Several chapters are driven, and the biblical reading shaped, as much by fundamental critique of the theorist in question as by his constructive contribution. This is notably the case with Benjamin and Althusser, and to a lesser extent with Eagleton.

The pairing of theorist with biblical passage is almost always convincing, the theoretical exposition lucid, the biblical reading imaginative. Three of my favourite chapters are on Gramsci, Lukács, and Jameson. Boer reads Gramsci reading Machiavelli (*The Prince*), and in parallel reads Exodus 32 as a myth of state-formation in Israel. Moses is, in fact, one of Machiavelli's ideal rulers. (Boer pays close attention to work directly on the Bible by some of his theorists – above all Bloch, but also notably Benjamin.) Moses knows how to combine 'persuasion and force', avoiding the error of Aaron, who tries to rule entirely by clemency and humaneness; Machiavelli's ideal prince prefers that people fear him rather than love him. There is a close relation between this chapter and the preceding one on Althusser and Genesis 25. Both deal with the ideological work of state-formation, in relation to Althusser's 'Ideological State Apparatuses' of family and religion (Genesis) and Gramsci's more agonistic analysis of the state's struggle for ideological 'hegemony' (Exodus).

In the chapter on Lukács and Kings, Boer is inspired by Lukács's famous thesis that formal contradictions in the historical novel (e.g., between the undistinguished hero and the epoch-making events he unwittingly mirrors) are symptoms of the historical struggles which generated this literary form. Boer shows how the generic duality in Kings between historiography and prophetic literature – the chronicles of the kings being retarded and distorted by a mass of prophetic legends – demonstrates the impossibility, within the Asiatic Mode of Production, of solving the problem of the relationship between sacred and secular authority.

Boer uses Jameson for his most ambitious biblical project, a comprehensive understanding of the Psalms and the history of their criticism. Form-criticism responds to a 'floating' quality in the Psalms, the endless repetition and recombination of a few elements, while another long tradition (from the superscriptions to historical-critical commentary) tries to fix and order them. Boer employs Jameson's adaptation of Greimas's semiotic square to discover how these and other approaches (theological, devotional) are logically related to each other. (But Boer oddly puts the contradictory along the top line of the square and the contrary along the diagonal, reversing usual practice.)

Boer is not always easy on his readers, failing sometimes to resolve adequately the inevitable complexity of his discussions (though the paragraph-length summaries of each chapter in his Introduction are helpful here). Some chapters are less successful, notably the one on spatiality in Lefebvre. It was unclear to me what counts as 'space' – the spatial dichotomy between 'womb' (Hannah's) and 'shrine' was too sharp. In the Bloch chapter, I found the choice of Ezekiel 20 as an 'anti-Yahwistic' text odd. Anti-Yahwistic texts are ones where Bloch finds a class-based counter-tradition to the Bible's dominant discourse. But the protest against Ezekiel's Yahweh is surely by the reader rather than by prophet or community.

To the book's other achievements, its final pages (pp. 240-246) add an extraordinary bonus. The Conclusion is on 'Mode of Production'. Mode of production has in fact been a recurrent theme throughout the book. In a challenge to current notions of 'biblical history', Boer insists that the Bible offers far more important testimony to centuries-long states of affairs (modes of production) than to particular events. This means that efforts to date texts precisely miss the real historical point – but also that recent revisionist suggestions that the Bible is scarcely a testimony to ancient history at all are a cop-out! In the Conclusion, Boer summarises the mode of production discussion in biblical studies, but then recasts the whole theory in a radical way. Here he is *doing* Marxism, rather than just applying it! He draws on 'regulation theory' in economics, especially

as developed by Robert Boyer. Boyer shifts the emphasis from the overarching (capitalist) mode of production to particular 'regimes of accumulation' (e.g., information technology, currency speculation) whereby the fundamental desire of capitalism (maximisation of profit) is pursued. Boer suggests six regimes of accumulation within Israel's instance of the Asiatic Mode of Production: gender-based, land-based, tribute, war machine, *corvée*, patron-client.

While I have problems with Boer's general treatment of mode of production (see below), I believe he has here pointed the next step for mode of production theory in biblical studies. For example, the patron-client relationship, a key feature of the ancient Mediterranean world, has been poorly dealt with in mode of production theory. It cannot be promoted into a separate mode of production, but makes sense as *one* means whereby real social wealth is accumulated within a larger mode.

Boer will be castigated for his all-male cast of Marxist theorists. In private conversation, he has indicated that the feminist-Marxist interface will be the subject of a separate work. The inclusion of one or two women here would, I believe, have been artificial and tokenistic, given the history of twentieth-century Marxism, but Boer should have discussed the issue. He must be credited with keeping feminist issues always to the fore, particularly in the chapter on Eagleton and Ruth. Here he discusses the basic Marxist question of the 'ultimately determining instance'. Are women's issues or class issues the 'bottom line'? Boer says, neither, and he both criticises Eagleton for making class 'ultimately determining' and praises him for insisting on class in a postmodern climate which ignores it.

I have two main criticisms. First, in his Introduction Boer calls biblical studies 'a subset of literary criticism'. This seems to me contrary to his dialectical approach, and in fact to be precisely an ultimately determining instance! Biblical studies is a subset of several fields: ancient history, social sciences, etc., and most particularly of theology. Boer seems incapable of acknowledging theology as an ally in his cause, though he acknowledges many individual allies who work in theological settings. My second critique, which I can only sketch here, has to do with Boer's summary of 'biblical' modes of production. He retains Marx's term 'Asiatic Mode of Production' and rejects Norman Gottwald's shift to 'tributary', which I and many others adopt. The only reason, I believe, why anyone adjusts Marx's term is that not all the societies involved were Asian, so that the retention of the term seems like an instance of 'orientalism'. I also fail to make sense of Boer's various comments on pre-tributary modes in Israel. He does not seem to understand why some of us have suggested a 'household mode' – certainly it has nothing to do a 'fantasy' of primitive 'matriarchy', as he claims.

The book has indexes of biblical references and authors, but it would have been enormously useful to have also an index of subjects. There are unacceptably many misprints – I found about fifty – and odd mistakes (e.g., replacing Crassus with Scipio in the First Triumvirate, and finding a period of 3,335 days in Daniel 12:12). It is a pity that such things should mar one of those rare books which deserve to be called epoch-making.