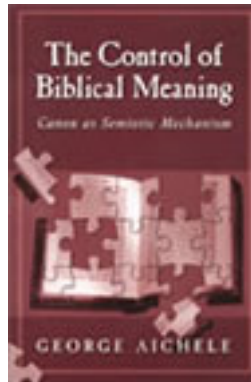


## ○ REVIEW OF GEORGE AICHELE'S *THE CONTROL OF BIBLICAL MEANING: CANON AS SEMIOTIC MECHANISM*

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David Jobling reviews George Aichele's *The Control of Biblical Meaning: Canon as Semiotic Mechanism*. (Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International; 2001. xi + 259 pp. ISBN 1563383330.)



George Aichele's thesis is that 'The biblical canon ... functions in a primarily negative or reactionary way – that is, the canon *prevents* readers from freely reading the texts of the Bible' (p. 12). The Christian Bible of Old and New Testaments controls, and exists to control, the meaning of its component parts, for the sake of an orthodoxy imposed from without. In particular, the New Testament controls the meaning of the Old Testament. But the canonical machine never functions perfectly; the reading of texts always develops surpluses of meaning that escape canonical control.

After an Introduction laying out the issues, Aichele argues his case in four theoretical (1-4) and five exegetical (5-9) chapters. In the theoretical chapters, he draws on a great variety of theorists to develop a postmodern case against canon. Chapter 1 deals with the semiotics of texts, mainly through the concept of 'intertextuality' which Aichele develops in ambiguous directions. Texts have no meaning in themselves – readers create meaning as they bring the text before them into intertextual relationship with an infinity of other 'texts'. But canon works by a negative kind of intertextuality, reading the given text only in relation to orthodox texts, in order to impose a single meaning.

Chapter 2 reviews the effect on canonicity of the changes in medium through which the biblical texts have historically passed – oral, written (scroll and codex), printed, and digital. Writing and printing enable canon, but Aichele subtly demonstrates how they also undermine it. He argues that digital culture is analogous to oral culture, and threatening to canon. Chapter 3 takes up a topic for which he is well known – translation. His main target here is 'dynamic equivalence' translation, very popular among Christians and the theoretical basis for, for example, the work

of the Bible Society. This approach claims that there is a 'message' in the text entirely separable from its particular verbal form. This is for Aichele a prime example of Western 'logocentrism', which he contrasts to a Jewish tradition of fundamental respect for the form of the text and suspicion of translation. Dynamic equivalence works only for texts where denotation is uppermost (scientific texts, 'how to do it' manuals). It is inappropriate for literary texts – emphatically including the Bible – where connotation is uppermost. In Chapter 4 he examines the notion of the biblical canon as a 'classic'. The classic imposes itself irresistibly on its readers through some intuitive process, guiding the ways in which it is interpreted anew in every age. Aichele shows how this notion of the classic is bound up with imperialism; the canon is 'both the product and the producer of imperial ideology' (p. 96).

In each of the five exegetical chapters, the New Testament is shown exercising control over the way Christian readers read parts of the Old Testament. In each case the limits of this control are teased out, and the question is sometimes posed of what would happen if the Old Testament were allowed to control the New. These readings are superb. Aichele not only interrogates the texts of both testaments with great skill, but brings into the discussions large areas of theory and sometimes extra-biblical texts. Chapter 5 is on Babel and Pentecost. Though Acts 2 never refers to Genesis 11, canonical pressure has made Babel into a story that points to Pentecost, particularly the possibility that something lost at Babel was restored at Pentecost. For Aichele, Umberto Eco has proved that nothing was lost at Babel, since a perfect 'divine' language is semiotically impossible. The 'Babelians' are ordinary humans, and their dispersal (semiotic as well as geographic) can be read comically rather than tragically. Pentecost opens two possibilities – apostolic control over language's essential message, or a new superhuman era of the Spirit in which language has become superfluous. Chapter 6 uses Peircean semiotics, as well as Exodus 4:24-26 and Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony', to deconstruct Paul on circumcision and writing. Paul translates circumcision and the written code into 'circumcision of the heart' (Rom 2:29) and writing on hearts (2 Cor 3:6), but the Exodus and Kafka passages resist this spiritualising tendency by insisting on 'writing' on the flesh.

Chapters 7-9 form a set, on the gospels, particularly Mark. Mark is the gospel which for Aichele best exemplifies how texts free themselves from semiotic constraint. In Chapter 7 he shows how the gospels turn the expression 'son of man' – always in the mouth of Jesus – into something supernatural, when in the Old Testament (with the sole exception of Daniel 7:13) 'sons of men' are ordinary humans. But a crux comes in Mark 3:28, where 'sons of men' commit sins and blasphemies. Is Jesus including himself among these? Chapter 8 examines the gospel occurrences of 'son of David'. Apparently these affirm Jesus's messiahship, but again one text (Mark 12:35-37 and parallels) gets in the way, Jesus himself shows that the son of David cannot be the messiah! Aichele notes that if the Old Testament were allowed to 'read' the gospels, it would focus attention on gospel hints that Jesus and his disciples were (like David and his men) a band of brigands. The *leitmotif* of these chapters (and to some extent of Chapter 9, on Jesus's 'name' – 'in my name', etc. – and the status of 'signs') is traces Aichele sees in Mark of Jesus as an ordinary man who invites others into the ordinary human reality called 'kingdom of god'.

In his conclusion, Aichele considers the likely future of the Christian canon. He sees no future for it except in 'reactionary enclaves'. But he follows this with a reading of Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* which seems to rob his prediction of its force, for in Stephenson's near-future

dystopian world *everything* has become enclaves, including national governments. At any rate, canon, as 'grand narrative', is doomed.

There is a bibliography of manageable length, and indexes of biblical references and names; also a useful glossary, which in part compensates for the lack of an index of subjects.

I find this book magnificent but maddening. Both of the main parts, theoretical and exegetical, I heartily recommend to advanced students. Aichele is a reliable guide to postmodern theory, and his exegetical work is clear, thorough, and ground-breaking. In fact, I like everything about this book except its main thesis! Even to this I am not totally opposed. I agree that canon as a semiotic structure *can* operate in Aichele's way, and that it has often had constraining effects. But does it have to function so, and does it in fact typically function so?

Is the intertextuality that results from binding the biblical books together always a constraining one? Gabriel Josipovici (*The Book of God*) makes a compelling case that reading one biblical book through the lens of another opens up quite unexpected areas of potential meaning. This implies that Aichele's freeing counterreadings are just as much the workings of the canonical machine as the constraining readings that he exposes. For me, the canon is a negotiation between very different belief systems; I don't at all understand, for example, Aichele's argument that 'the inclusion of multiple gospels ... does not encourage diversity but rather *subjects* diversity under ... a greater unity' (p. 30).

I got annoyed at being repeatedly told, from a viewpoint apparently external to any Christian community, what *all* Christians *must* believe: 'the Bible as a canon [with all the negative implications] is indispensable to Christian faith' (p. 218), 'all Christians' believe biblical narratives to be 'nonfictional' (p. 80), etc. I am a Christian who doesn't believe these things and doesn't come under institutional pressure to believe them. Different Christians take very different views of canon, and many I know would greatly appreciate Aichele's approach. Oddly, Aichele himself sometimes strikes an opposite note (e.g. 'It is arguable that the Bible no longer has any genuine canonical hold over anyone today' [221]), and seems to imagine the possibility of 'a very different sort of Christian faith' (p. 82). But he does not develop this line of thought, and generally writes as if from one side of a great divide.

Aichele's pursuit of traces of a 'christology' according to which Jesus simply calls on followers to emulate him (rather than be saved by him, give him the right titles, etc.) is exciting, and I would like to foster an engagement here between him and some of my theologian friends. Church-affiliated biblical scholars have long since got used to (and some mightily rejoice in) sharing our field with people without such affiliation. Very few church theologians have made the corresponding shift in consciousness. But Aichele defines himself as a 'theologian' (p. 12, albeit qualified by 'postecclesiastical'), and I wish that, as such, he would enter the christological debate, undeterred by the fact that, for the time being, this debate mostly happens in church circles.