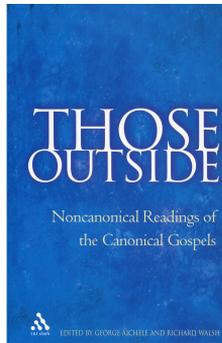


○ REVIEW OF *THOSE OUTSIDE: NONCANONICAL READINGS OF CANONICAL GOSPELS*, EDITED BY GEORGE AICHELE AND RICHARD WALSH

Gerald West, University of KwaZulu-Natal
Correspondence to Gerald West: west@ukzn.ac.za

Gerald West reviews *Those Outside: Noncanonical Readings of Canonical Gospels*, edited by George Aichele and Richard Walsh (New York and London: T&T Clark, 2005).



I really enjoyed reading this book. Though my reading was done on the veranda of a cottage overlooking the sea on the south coast of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, I was not as tempted as Jeffrey Staley, one of the contributors, to forsake this book as he was to forsake the Gospel of John for nature's pleasures. The primary reason for my sustained interest is, I think, the open declaration of the intertexts with which Anglo-American colleagues do their biblical scholarship.

While Anglo-Euro-American biblical scholars who locate themselves somewhat on the periphery of the mainstream enterprise are fairly responsible in declaring their social locations, this collection of contributors, working either in the United States of America or England, goes further than most. My sojourn in Sheffield in the mid-1980s, my biannual visits to the Society of Biblical Literature meetings in North America (mainly the USA), and my regular reading of biblical scholarship have, of course, made me aware of the wider contexts of such scholarship. But I am not sure that I have ever come across these declared discourse contexts in print in so undisguised a fashion.

The preface, written by the editors, is a bold declaration of the book's agenda. 'We', they state, 'consciously locate ourselves outside of the institutional order', an institutional order that claims to control the truth of biblical texts (x). At the same time, 'we' also 'reject the claim that our interpretations are the sole, proper truth' (x). The essays in this volume, then, set out to offer counter-readings, 'thieving interpretations' (xii). Here the editors confess that as interpretive thieves they 'are parasites who can live only along the side of (*para*) the guild, canon, ideology, or myth that they contest' (xii). Like the historical critics Richard Walsh refers to who encamp close to the Christ they seek to dis-mantle so as not 'to bite the hand that feeds them too severely' (163), so too the volume as a whole shares in the 'grain' of 'their institutional hosts', deliberately 'biting the hand(s) that feed them' (xii). Significantly, the essays go further than a 'gesture of re-

jection' (xii), but move into 'a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression' (xiii). I would have liked to have felt a more political edge to their practical critique, particularly as they inhabit the Bush-Blair axis of state-sponsored terrorism in the wake of 11 September 2001 attacks on empire. Tina Pippin's essay comes closest to this kind of political critique as she examines the signs of her time by interrogating the many 'Jesuses' she is surrounded by in the southern United States.

What I did find odd in the preface is the claim that 'we do consciously strive to read against our own ideologies' (xv). This comes after the editors have accepted that there 'are no ideology-free readings' and that 'our parasitic interpretations are every bit as ideological as those that we contest' (xv). 'However', they then go on to say, 'we do consciously strive to read against our own ideologies' (xv). Why this 'however'? Why not acknowledge one's ideology? Our ideologies are (part of) who we are and why we do what we do. Contestation of ideologies is important, as the editors say, but surely acknowledging that our ideologies are partial (in every sense) is not the same as claiming that we read against our own ideologies. Why would we want to do this if we also want to offer some kind of 'practical critique'? Surely it is our ideologies that drive us and guide us into actual concrete transgression?

I am getting carried away, but such has been the effect of this book on me that I want to engage in detail with each of the essays, having learned so much from them and wanting to enter into dialogue with them. For now, however, a more restrained review is required. The essay by Hugh Pyper, in which he reads Jesus reading / not reading the scriptures in Luke 4:16-30 as part of a larger Old and New Testament project to define 'who and what constitutes the community of "Israel"' (2) and the essay by Daniel Boyarin, in which he reads the prologue of John's gospel, asking what kind of Jew John is, are remarkably careful and insightful readings of their respective texts. While they may be counter-readings, they are certainly compelling and persuasive readings of these texts, readings which open up a host of lines of connection between these re-read texts and our current contexts. To their credit, both Pyper and Boyarin do overtly bring their respective contexts to bear in the interpretive process.

George Aichele's essay on the two fathers of Jesus, a reading of Luke (and other canonical intertexts) through the lens of China Miéville's urban fantasy novel, *King Rat*, struggles with the modern dis-ease with the traditional Christian 'god-man concept' (17). Because the metaphysical frameworks provided by Greek philosophy which traditionally undergird this concept are no longer fully convincing for modern believers, 'modern readers, especially those who want to regard biblical texts as true and relevant to their lives, must find an alternative framework for understanding these texts' (18). Miéville's rat-man provides Aichele with a modern dialogue partner in his attempt to make sense of the god-man.

As indicated, Tina Pippin's essay is overtly political, as she too tries to make sense of the plethora of Jesuses she encounters in modern America. As many of the other essays do, she engages with the biblical guild's attempts to historically locate Jesus, focussing her attention on Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet. She admits, as I think would Aichele, that she learns 'more about Jesus from fiction and film than from reading so-called historical-critical studies' (61), and goes on to give us an outline of her Jesus (62). In so doing she shows us what it is like to be 'an activist educator in the twenty-first century' in the heart of the beast of empire.

Just as Aichele and Pippin try to make sense of Jesus in their contexts, so too Larry Kreitzer tries to 'help us to portray the Christian understanding of redemption' (65). For him, the core

of this concept can be found in Matthew 11:28-30 and the offer of Jesus to give us rest from heavy burdens. His intertexts in interpreting this text for us today are John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Roland Joffé's film, *The Mission*. What is remarkable is that Kreitzer, like all the other contributors, is so overt about his connection to a faith community. This is amazing and refreshing to us African scholars who are often made to feel awkward (when we visit the UK, the USA and Europe) about our overt accountability to particular faith communities. Jeffrey Staley does not disappoint on this level either, as he traces his own personal journey in trying to make sense of John 7-8. Like the others, Staley not only allows us to see his connections to a faith community, he uses extra-canonical resources (the film *Liar Liar*) alongside the traditional resources of biblical scholarship to reconsider John 7-8, especially the place of John 7:53-8:11 within this literary unit.

Richard Walsh is a little more cagey about his particular community context, though he does locate himself clearly within a broad Christian theological frame. What lies behind the 'Christ', the Christian sign of Christian discourse, which overwrites / reads Jesus, is Walsh's main question (156). Taking Luke's overwriting / reading – Luke's 'smear campaign' – as his starting point, Walsh re-reads Luke with the aid of Jorge Luis Borges' *Three versions of Judas*. His careful attention to the text of Luke (and other canonical intertexts) makes this essay a worthy companion piece to those of Pyper and Boyarin, providing me and others with plenty to return to for further exploration, whether their particular non-canonical intertexts are part of our contexts or not.

The value of these essays goes beyond their particular intertexts. Their non-canonical resources are peculiar to their contexts, and they must be commended for naming them so overtly. We in the so-called third world are not used to this kind of overt display of contextual embeddedness (except when we watched CNN's 'embedded' reports during the first phase of the invasion of Iraq). It is refreshing and it does help the reader to make sense of why these scholars do what they do. They are reading for their contexts. This is what we African scholars do, but we are not used to seeing other more mainstream scholars admit to doing the same. Naming their intertexts and their contextual questions is useful too in helping us to see the similarities and differences between our contexts. While there is much in these essays that resonates with my African contexts, there is also much that is strange. We have clearly not been impacted by modernity in the same ways as the contexts of the writers of these essays, and so their questions are often not our questions. Our (modern) African world-view remains not that dissimilar to many of the elements of biblical world-views. We will take both the miracles and the ethics of Jesus, though HIV/AIDS is casting its questioning shadow over the former (Walsh, 163). Also, we have a quite different perspective on Judaism than those represented in these essays. We do hear about those who are waiting for the Temple to be rebuilt in Jerusalem (Pippin, 52) and we are somewhat puzzled by the hypersensitivity we encounter to any critique of biblical (or, indeed, modern) Judaism in Euro-Anglo-American biblical scholarship (Walsh, 166), but our concerns lie elsewhere. We judge Judaism in South Africa by how this faith community resisted or failed to resist apartheid and we are resolutely apposed to the modern apartheid-like state of Israel and its Euro-Anglo-American sponsors. So I learned much from Boyarin's and Walsh's essays, particularly in their nuanced refusal to take up the standard apologetic.

The indices included in this volume, both the 'Index of Scripture' and the 'Index of Modern Authors' are another useful resource, rounding out a remarkable book.