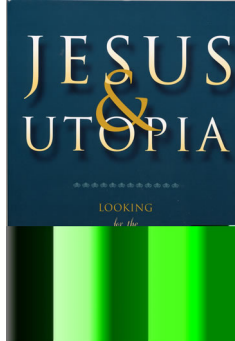# REVIEW OF MARY ANN BEAVIS, *JESUS AND UTOPIA*

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Darren Jorgensen reviews Mary Ann Beavis's *Jesus and Utopia: Looking for the Kingdom of God in the Roman World*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006.

The relationship between Christianity and utopian thought is potentially a very productive one, especially now as the scholarly tendency toward historicism pushes back the boundaries of the present's political, cultural and theological formation further into time. The contradiction with utopia here is that it was not yet defined in the ancient world, its facets only to be unified and named in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) many centuries later. More's own religious career would seem to suggest that there are parallels between this writer and the historical Jesus that are yet to be fleshed out. Yet this biographical comparison is but a shadow cast by the sum of psychic confluences to be found between the utopian and Christian, as the desire to make a better world turns into a constellation of historical deeds and devotions, heroisms and humble labours. It would seem inevitable that such a comparative project will come about, and for which Mary Ann Beavis's *Jesus and Utopia* makes some bibliophilic headway. With an ambitious grasp of Biblical scholarship, she briefly tours the great book and its commentators where it may pertain to utopianism, whether this be the intentional communities of the Old Testament or the prophesies of a 'kingdom of God' in the New. Her descriptions of the debates around the use of this phrase, her parallels between Biblical and various classical utopias, as well as the utopian possibilities represented by Jesus himself are co-ordinated in a wealthy overview of the research that has preceded her in these arenas.

It would appear however that the subject of these biblical debates themselves, ranging from whether or not the intentional communities described herein existed or not, or to what extent Jesus was engaged with local politics, are somewhat beside the point for contemporary utopian thought, a fact that is not borne out by this study. In this sense the promise of the title of this book, to somehow reconcile the great and historically contingent movements of Christianity and utopianism, remains unfulfilled. Yet in all fairness Beavis only sets out to survey one half of the

equation, the biblical, and on these limited terms, namely 'to bring together Jesus' teachings of the kingdom of God and ancient utopian writings in order to offer a new perspective on this central aspect of his message', may well have succeeded (103). Still the lack of engagement with utopian theory calls into question the methodology of a project that co-ordinates so much research, that takes account of so many diverse debates and so many areas of the Bible that would otherwise be unconnected. What is the relationship between the Essenes and the early Christian movement for the Kingdom of God? If utopianism is their common ground, this utopianism remains fuzzy at best, and one whose ahistoricism is complicated by the detailed historical research described in biblical scholarship here.

Utopian theory has been subject to the historicist turn more than most areas of scholarship, but not in the bibliophilic way that Beavis pursues this or that biblical dispute. For contemporary utopianism has been in the academy a thinly disguised code-word for Marxism, most notably in the works of Ernst Bloch, Louis Marin and Fredric Jameson, if not in Marx himself. Here the messianic, the good and the ideal are all well traveled themes that are also shared with the complexities of Christianity, which is after all Marxism's great psychic predecessor. In this sense these Biblical debates which so often hinge upon practice, upon how to bring about a better world, coincide with Marxism's own interests, the figures of Jesus, More and Marx serving as those ambiguous figures around which such heated debates arise. These debates could well have clarified the discussion later in *Jesus and Utopia* over the nationalistic and political content of Jesus' own place in the ancient world. In its deference to previous biblical scholarship Beavis fails to turn this world into anything but itself, often refusing to do anything but survey and conclude that 'there is general agreement' (81) or that 'a good case can also be made' (87).

The absence of this next critical step calls out for some claim or other, for a Christian message of utopianism or for the utopianism of Christianity. Instead, Beavis' theorisation remains within the loose categories of Doyne Dawson, which separate the mythological and fantastic utopias from the political ones. Why she employs this scheme, and subsequently uses it to separate political from non-political utopianism, only then to vaguely place Jesus in a new and transcendental category, is one of the mysteries of the methodology at work here. Indeed, any assertion of a non-political utopianism would strike the reader of contemporary theory as somewhat dangerous and naive, especially amidst a wave of new nationalisms that rely increasingly on antiquity to justify their territorialism. Here I am thinking especially of Israel, whose utopianism is in this book is immediately transcribed into nationalism, in an association of territory and utopianism that has since More been subject to extensive satire and debate, as fantasy and history collide in the ambiguities of utopian representation.

Thus it is that as a preliminary survey of the possible arguments that might be made about utopianism and Christianity, and about the possible subjects of a utopian biblical criticism, that includes not only Old and New Testaments but Ancient, Classical, Hellenistic and Jewish precedents, Beavis's research makes a great deal of headway. Yet the modern constitution of the utopia, its conceptualisation in the whirls and eddies of the nation-state, and amidst contemporary politics, makes its references to a non-political Jesus, or to Israel, beside the utopian point. Indeed, the concluding division of biblical utopias into nationalistic and Jewish, as opposed to non-Jewish, would seem to partake of modern constructions of identity rather than to raise these symptoms to a different and critical level. Here it is only necessary to trace the debates between Alain Badiou and Slavoj Zizek, most succinctly explicated by Alberto Morieus (2004) in this

journal, to unravel one version of the terms upon which such differentiations are made. The most pressing contradiction that such constructions point to, and one substantially negotiated by the positions of more recent Marxisms and post-Marxisms, is that between utopia for all and utopia for some, a distinction that would seem to gloss those distinctions described between many of these Old Testament and New Testament utopias. Even then, however, the terms of a utopian succession and the theological succession from the world described by these early utopian communities would seem to require some elaboration, as the structures of the political and the theological make different claims upon the subject.

In this sense the tendency displayed here to push utopia back before modern times, only to gloss the distinction between the ancient and the modern, would be counter-productive for utopian politics. In the absence of the critical and political aspect of utopianism, it would appear itself to become a meaningless idealism that is here confused with the religious itself, leading one to wonder even more than before what utopia might mean in a biblical context. Is it any alternative society that pertains to religion, the kingdom of God that is anticipated by the Ancients, or Israel itself? The wealth of twentieth century utopian theory would help immensely to position these various facets, to co-ordinate them within some greater schema of which Jesus might have appeared symptomatic, and within which his own complexities and contradictions may have been positioned.

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