

Review of Chester Brown, *Mary Wept Over the Feet of Jesus*, New York: Drawn & Quarterly, 2016.

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Chester Brown's graphic novel *Mary Wept Over the Feet of Jesus* reinterprets 10 different biblical stories, followed by an afterword and extensive notes. Brown argues Jesus supported prostitutes and advocated against blind obedience to God. While he references various biblical scholars in his notes--most notably Jane Schaberg, Yoram Hazony, and John Dominic Crossan--Brown is not formally trained as a biblical scholar. Indeed, this book might better stand in for a short novel or the Sunday comics than for a scholarly monograph. (But, who doesn't enjoy reading the Sunday comics?) In this review, rather than lamenting or detailing Brown's lack of scholarly training, I will attempt to bracket some of these concerns and assess *Mary Wept* on its many merits.

Brown's background as a graphic novelist with a keen interest in Christianity allows him to produce a fascinating artistic work that tackles theological and social concerns regarding sex, prostitution, and obedience in early Christian history.¹ His comics are known for their thorough notes and citations, and, happily, *Mary Wept* is no exception as Brown quotes a number of historians and biblical scholars in his intriguing research. Several of his reinterpretations focus on the women mentioned in Gospel of Matthew's genealogy of Jesus—Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary—in order to highlight the ways all of these women could be seen as prostitutes or as engaging in prostitute-like behaviour. (One of the book's later vignettes depicts Matthew himself finding inspiration for how to hide the clue of Mary's true identity as a prostitute within this genealogy) The focus on these women expands to the questioning of religious obedience and laws more broadly. This is seen particularly in Brown's reinterpretations of Cain and Abel, the anointing of Jesus, and Jesus's parables concerning the talents and the prodigal son. By asserting the presence of prostitutes in several biblical stories, he ultimately presents a view that could be quite liberating, not only for modern sex workers, but also for individuals who feel alienated by a perceived Christian tradition that fears sexuality and advocates strict adherence to rules and norms.²

¹ Brown has also produced a number of comic book versions of the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Matthew. See his completed version of The Gospel of Mark in Chester Brown, *Yummy Fur*, issues 4–14, Vortex Comics (1987–89) and his partial telling of The Gospel of Matthew in Brown, *Yummy Fur*, issues 15–17, 19–22, 24, Vortex Comics (1989–1990); Brown, *Yummy Fur*, issues 25–27, 29, 31–32, Drawn and Quarterly (1991–94); Brown, *Underwater*, issues 2–11, Drawn and Quarterly (1994–97).

² In addition to his notes on the topic in *Mary Wept* (186), Brown has written of his own interest in sex workers and argues for the decriminalization of prostitution in Chester Brown, *Paying for It: A Comic-Strip Memoir about Being a John* (Montréal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2011).

The reworked stories from the Hebrew Bible lay the groundwork for Brown's interpretive work with several New Testament stories. Through his depictions, Brown argues that the obedient person consistently loses God's respect while the disobedient one earns it: Abel bucks God's law to "eat the plants of the field" and yet, God picks Abel's lamb over Cain's crops. (Murder is still bad, though!) After this initial story, the next several vignettes focus on the question of how the clear and unambiguous presence of women behaving like prostitutes might alter the stories of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, and what they might indicate about Mary, Jesus's mother, and about prostitution in the time of Jesus. In several circumstances, Brown's "thinking with" prostitution adds depth to the biblical stories by highlighting the possible roles and actions of marginalized characters. Brown's depictions are often forthright where the biblical accounts are ambiguous, such as when Ruth thinks, "Feet—that's a euphemism for penis. She [Naomi] wants me to seduce Boaz" (85). For Brown, this euphemism is significant not only in the story of Ruth, but also in the tale of Bathsheba and David, and in the anointing of Jesus. Bathsheba's story presents a challenge for Brown, as her biblical identification as prostitute-like is ambiguous at best. Indeed, many interpreters reasonably view her as the victim of sexual assault at the hands of a powerful ruler. Yet, because Matthew's gospel associates her with other women who engaged in prostitute-like behaviour (201), Brown's reinterpretation depicts Bathsheba as a woman who wants to be seen bathing and wants David to bring her to his bedroom because her husband Uriah is "not interested in spending time in bed with [Bathsheba]. He'd rather be with his army friends" (98). (Brown's adaptation conveniently stops before David receives punishment for disobeying the Lord by fulfilling his desires with Bathsheba.) These reinterpretations allow Brown to turn to the New Testament where he positions several key women as prostitutes and Jesus as a supporter of prostitutes in his practices and parables.

Mary, Jesus' mother, is revealed to be a prostitute by Brown in a four page vignette that combines and reinterprets Matthew 1:18-23 and Luke 1:26-35. Readers do not get any scenes of a young Jesus hanging out at the brothel with his mom, or some other more direct exposure of Mary's prostitution; the mother remains young and innocent as a prostitute. Rather, Mother Mary's prostitution is established through dialogue with Joseph. Mary is upset about getting pregnant not because she is a virgin, but because she is not married and her prostitution secret has been discovered by her fiancé. Indeed, as Brown's naked female angel tells Joseph: "It's not important which man got her pregnant. God wanted her to get pregnant" (116-117). On the other hand, Brown establishes the prostitution of Mary of Bethany/Mary Magdalene/the unnamed woman (the same person for Brown, 183) by pointing out her uncovered hair as she anoints Jesus in Luke and John's gospels. Brown's Jesus walks with Mary in an invented dialogue where they plan his anointment and debate about whether or not she is a virgin. (In the notes, Brown argues that *parthenos* might be translated as "young and innocent" rather than sexually inexperienced, 203-04) Because the woman anoints Jesus's feet in Luke and John, and "feet" in the Book of Ruth were a euphemism for genitalia, Brown assumes the ritual is sexual in nature. So, Mary "anoints" Jesus in mysterious black panels with suggestive word bubbles. The pair are surrounded by attentive others who make comments about the cost of the

ointment and the sinfulness of Mary, before being rebuked by a preoccupied Jesus. *Mary Wept* does not depict Jesus washing the disciples' feet, which could have been interesting. Prostitution, it would seem, is strictly heterosexual for Brown.

Several parables also display Jesus' support of prostitution and respect for human disobedience in *Mary Wept*. Using an alternative ending to the Parable of the Talents from the Aramaic *Gospel of the Nazareans*, Brown depicts the first of the three slaves as spending all of his share of the money on prostitutes and still receiving the master's praise. This first slave is respected because "he accepts that what God gives us is ours to do with as we will. God doesn't expect or want obedience" (178). Jesus also supports prostitution in Brown's so-called pre-Lukan version of the Parable of the Prodigal Son (180–81), in which the son spends all of his money on whores. Upon returning home, he hears from his father, "I love you BECAUSE of what you did, not DESPITE it" (164).

In spite of Brown's extensive notes, *Mary Wept* seems to occasionally disregard significant historical or geographical differences between biblical texts. Brown also regularly asserts that his interpretation of the history, biblical texts, or scholarship shows the one correct interpretation, which is an approach that has been significantly challenged by postmodern biblical scholarship. Yet, while *Mary Wept* makes some incredible leaps at times, it highlights the value of thinking critically and creatively into the silences of history, especially the voids around rebellious men, women, and sexual practices. I hope to see more graphic novels devoted to critical and artistic exploration of biblical texts in the future—perhaps one devoted to the diverse lives of early Christian prostitutes rather than to the men who support them.