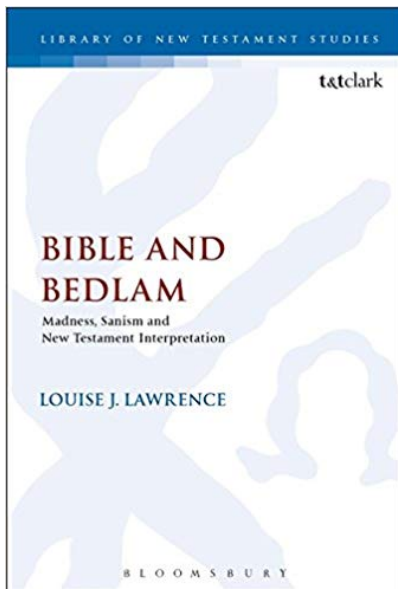


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Louise J. Lawrence

Bible and Bedlam: Madness, Sanism, and New Testament Interpretation

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In this thought-provoking book, Louise J. Lawrence seeks to reconfigure prejudicial assumptions and interpretations within biblical studies concerning madness. The goal is to retrieve the voices and agency of those deemed mad and to decenter existing interpretations of the Bible that privilege sanity and its discursive connections to broader systems of power. According to Lawrence, “Mad studies is a multidisciplinary and multivocal endeavour that has emerged over the last few decades, and is rooted within social movements of the 1970s surrounding ‘Mad’ identity politics, Mad pride and advocacy” (9). Lawrence is keen to situate her project within these discursive and deconstructive, rather than psychological and psychiatric, investigations into madness. Rather than focusing on diagnosing mental illness disorders, a Mad studies approach instead seeks to problematize normative categories and labels that construct madness as deviant. Mad studies, according to Lawrence, provides tools for “transgressions of archives” which also “entail transgressions of disciplinary boundaries and contexts” (9). Moreover, “‘madness’ can be understood as a feminist and/or postcolonial vehicle of subversion; a purposeful performance” (6–7) of protest against systems of authority.

In chapter 1, Lawrence probes the discipline of biblical studies’ “banishment of ‘madness’ through the methodological, epistemological and discursive privileging of reason, rationality and ‘right’ minds” (18). She identifies a certain disciplinary and exclusionary “sanism” within the field—a kind of irrational prejudice stemming from Enlightenment-

fueled scientific discourses that privilege the reason and rationality of “right minds,” perpetuate negative stereotypes in relation to mental difference, and naturalize psychiatric discourses that position those individuals or groups perceived as mentally ill or mad as other. The meta-critical analysis in this first chapter provides a solid basis for the subsequent interrogation of New Testament texts.

“The Curious Incident of a Jew in the Night-Time” (ch. 2), for instance, responds to recent appropriations of Nicodemus—the character who misunderstands Jesus’s metaphorical language in John 3—as autistic. Despite their good intentions, Lawrence challenges such “diagnostic” readings, highlighting the ways they reinscribe negative stereotypes often associated with autism and, consequently, construct autistic individuals as deviating from some hypothetical “neurotypical” norm. Instead of gazing voyeuristically upon a tokenistic autistic character, Lawrence champions how autistic presence may itself potentially transform sensory embodiment for the reader, such as through Nicodemus’s ability to aid in the visualization of an ambiguous verbal word (ἀνωθεν).

Following this, in chapter 3, Lawrence attempts intersections between madness, gender, race, colonialism, class, and servitude. As she observes, “gender has, of course, long occupied a significant place in the annals of madness, the feminine frequently being distanced from normative masculine structures and negatively implicated in dualisms surrounding representation, performance, language and communication” (70). Lawrence explores the interpretation of two biblical women who have been subject to psychopathological labelling to denote their otherness: the Canaanite woman in Matt 15:24–28 and the Pythian slave girl possessed by a spirit of divination in Acts 16. Through her close reading of texts, Lawrence manages to form insightful connections between the labeling of these characters as mad (e.g. hysterical) or “wounded” and the subordination and control of women through various markers of colonial, sexual, and racial identity.

Chapter 4, entitled “Gatekeeping the Madness of Jesus and Paul: Negotiating Mythologies of Madness in an Age of Neoliberalism,” argues that there has been a reluctance to link Jesus and Paul with madness, given its largely negative cultural associations. Of those exceptions, however, only positive features of madness are highlighted in order to underscore Jesus’s and Paul’s respective exceptionalism and individual genius. Attune to the idea that neoliberalism, which “insists that each person ‘configures themselves as a resilient flexible entrepreneur of their own selves willing to adapt to changing market conditions’” (99), Lawrence engages a selection of recent studies on Jesus to demonstrate how psy-discourses are routinely employed to accentuate Jesus’s construction as an able and diligent, not to mention resilient, neoliberal subject. Similarly, a selection of recent portraits of Paul envisaging him as a “mad genius” or “tortured/creative crisis leader” are unpicked to show how they neatly conform to the dominant ethos of neoliberalism.

Finally, in chapter 5 Lawrence turns to the so-called happiness turn in biblical studies. The happiness turn refers to a wider cultural imperative, especially influential in the United States, upon individual happiness and mental well-being as self-actualized. Lawrence contends that such discourses heighten sanist impulses by employing happiness as an instrument of normative regulation, thereby stigmatizing those who do not follow such scripts. She introduces two projects in biblical studies, including one of her own, that have produced interpretations of the Gospel of Mark with groups of readers who could be regarded as “mad affect aliens.” She then concludes by suggesting that the Gospel of Mark’s own inability to offer a happy resolution so often yearned for by its readers can function to disrupt the prevailing cultural obsession with happiness and well-being.

The book rounds out with a strong conclusion urging for the keeping open of minds in biblical interpretation. Lawrence notes that the book has *not* engaged in voyeuristically parading the mad around as spectacles of disorder and strangeness. Rather, the book has underlined the discipline of biblical studies’ complicity in perpetuating dominant stereotypes, othering, and gatekeeping around the social phenomenon of madness.

Because Lawrence herself engages critically with certain aspects of neoliberalism, for the remainder of this review I want to bring attention to some of the neoliberal assumptions that implicitly shape her adopted hermeneutical strategy, especially as madness interconnects with class and capitalism.

As noted above, Lawrence situates Mad studies within the larger realm of identity politics. While sympathetic to movements for emancipation and the end of bigotry in all its ugly forms, I have become increasingly suspicious of the use of identity politics within biblical studies. This is because, as Wendy Brown has persuasively argued in her aptly titled *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, a focus on diffusing difference and extending recognition can simultaneously function as a strand of depoliticization in liberal democracies. In particular, the critique of the global dimension of capitalism is often displaced, through the silent suspension of class analysis, onto the horrors of an extending array of fragmented -isms, from sexism and racism to ableism and now sanism.¹ Building on Brown’s analysis, Slavoj Žižek suggests that, while the critique of these systems is important, identity politics tends to “leave out the resignation at its heart—the acceptance of capitalism as ‘the only game in town,’ the renunciation of any real attempt to overcome the existing capitalist liberal regime.”² Within Lawrence’s book, for example, despite promising to detect “the leaks of madness into other intersectional

1. Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

2. Slavoj Žižek, “Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, Please!,” in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000), 95.

marginalities including gender, race, class and sexuality” (18), Lawrence never really gets to class other than as a matter of identity discrimination, that is, classism (interestingly, class is the only category here not afforded an entry in the book’s index). What, however, might it mean to understand the relationship between madness and class as an expression of collective exploitation and struggle in relation to the whole system of economic production? What about queering the irrationality of capitalism itself? In writing on his experiences of depression, for instance, the late Mark Fisher reflected that “the ‘mental health plague’ in capitalist societies would suggest that, instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is inherently dysfunctional.”³ Lawrence comes closest to this perspective in chapter 4 but arguably leaves it underdeveloped, and the critique of neoliberalism is absent in other chapters. Indeed, like the psychiatric models and psychoscience it rightly critiques, Mad studies informed by identity politics continues to conceptualize madness in primarily individualized terms, a bourgeois pretext that aligns comfortably to the neoliberal impulse to *privatize* every social dimension of our lives. Marginalization or othering is typically measured on the basis of individual educational or vocational opportunity, upward mobility, reward in proportion to effort, and other normative bourgeois cultural and economic ideals. It should come as no surprise, then, that identity politics has in recent years become enthusiastically weaponized by liberal elites, a phenomenon not unrelated to the backlash represented by Trumpism and the alt-right.

Furthermore, through the book, Lawrence is also intent on “subverting” fixed and essentialized notions of mad identities. Identity politics often engages in this kind of broader, postmodern “fetish for subversion,” which, as I have suggested elsewhere, is now everywhere in biblical studies, whether in the guise of historical-critical scholarship (repeatedly blinded by its own ideological trappings), but also in work falling under the diverse umbrella of ideological criticism, as this study does.⁴ The fetish obscures a more complete analysis required for the actual overthrowing of systems of power, by limiting its focus to gestural or performative transgressions that do not really destabilize the underlying liberal-capitalist edifice. In other words, an obsession with “permanent transgression” becomes a kind of ideological deadlock further binding us to those social and economic forces that govern our lives. Think about how the anti-imperial Jesus, or in Lawrence’s case the Canaanite woman and Pythian slave girl who “speak truths about dehumanizing ideologies, structures and practices” (93), effectively perform our radicalism for us, and also in some sense displace it to the distant past.

3. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Ropely: Zero, 2009), 19.

4. Robert J. Myles, “The Fetish for a Subversive Jesus,” *JSHJ* 14 (2016): 52–70.

With all that said, the fresh insights advanced by this book, as well as its challenging impetus, make it a welcome contribution to the ongoing ideological and meta-critical analysis of biblical studies. In reading Lawrence's analysis of texts, I was forced to reflect on my own complicity in subtly perpetuating some of the myths and stereotypes of madness in my previous writing and teaching. The book breaks new ground by initiating several important and timely conversations. It demands a wide readership and engagement.