

RBL 09/2016



Robert J. Myles

The Homeless Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew

Social World of Biblical Antiquity 2/10

Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014. Pp. xiii + 220.
Paper. \$95.00. ISBN 9781909697386.

Warren Carter
Brite Divinity School at TCU
Fort Worth, Texas

This stimulating ideological study was originally a PhD dissertation at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, under the direction of Elaine Wainwright and Tracey McIntosh. Myles locates his study of Jesus's homelessness in Matthew's Gospel over against those who, influenced by neoliberalism, have noticed but idealized Jesus's homelessness without attending to the destitution, desperation, and lack of agency that constitute its displacement. Shaped by a Marxist critique of the neoliberalism that pervades contemporary New Testament scholarship, Myles sees Jesus's homelessness not as freely chosen in response to his divine mission to save from sins (1:21) but as the by-product of wider economic, social, and political forces. He employs Žižek's theory that ideologies refer to extrapolitical *sublime objects*; that is, material objects are elevated to positions of inexplicable importance so that they stand out from or above the reality of ordinary things. He argues that Jesus's homelessness is such a sublime object in biblical scholarship whereby homelessness is idealized and attention is diverted from crucial questions concerning why people become homeless and what role the wider socioeconomic and ideological-political systems play in the production of homelessness.

Chapter 1, "Homelessness and Ideology," elaborates the rich theoretical foundations for the study. It locates Matthew's Gospel in Antioch in Syria and declares its concern with the Matthean Jesus. Myles rejects so-called objective historical criticism, locating his

discussion in ideological biblical criticism and particularly in a Marxist framework concerned with class struggle. Myles understands ideological criticism as an approach concerned to connect biblical scholarship with the structures of power and power relations in the wider society. In a helpful discussion of definitions and causes of contemporary homelessness, he sees “displacement” or “placelessness” as central to homelessness. He rejects individualist (homelessness is a choice) and structuralist (failed government policies) approaches and favors a *symptomatic* understanding that sees homelessness as a symptom of well-functioning societal power structures. He claims that inadequate understandings (homelessness is a lifestyle choice) shape interpretations of Matthew’s Gospel. His alternative framework for reading the Matthean Jesus’s homelessness emphasizes that it emerges as a symptom of the societal arrangement of power where displacement, deviancy, social class, and objective violence are dynamics of the normal and smooth functioning of the sociopolitical and economic order. Finally he introduces Vernon Robbins’s sociorhetorical approach with its five textures (ideological, inner, social and cultural, intertexture, sacred) as the framework for investigating selected Matthean texts.

Chapter 2, “Displacement,” focuses on Matt 1–2 as the gospel’s supreme example of homelessness and displacement. Throughout Myles rejects scholarship that has romanticized and/or spiritualized the chapters and neglected the significant displacement of the narrative. Myles observes that “of the forty names mentioned in the genealogy at least fifteen can be connected to episodes of forced displacement, itinerancy and/or homelessness” (58). The displacement of Jesus, Joseph, and Mary (2:13–23) initiates themes that will recur through the gospel. Myles’s discussion of the flight to Egypt sets aside previous scholarly concerns with intertextual evoking of Moses and scriptural fulfillments to attend to the geographical and social uprooting and displacement experienced by Jesus and his parents. The chapter links this forced displacement with a marginal self-identity that conflicts with the status quo cultural and political institutions.

Chapter 3, “Reaction,” critically rereads the beginning of Jesus’s itinerant mission and calling of the first disciples (4:12–25). The target comprises dominant ideologies of homelessness that foreground agency or choice. John the Baptist is “an archetypal homeless prophet” (84) whose food and existence in the wilderness denote outsider status. He is a forerunner for Jesus and for the first disciples. The latter respond to Jesus’s proclamation of the kingdom of heaven as an alternative kingdom that disrupts dominant arrangements of power and embraces the homeless. Accordingly, they leave their livelihoods and households to form an alternative community. He critiques readings of these scenes that reinscribe neoliberal discourse focusing on individualism and free choice without regard for structural and systemic factors.

Chapter 4, “Destitution,” takes up 8:20 (“foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head”). Myles reads Jesus’s saying as a lament of homelessness that expresses “the destitution, desperation and offensiveness that accompany Jesus’ homeless existence” (113) and against readings that romanticize homelessness. The discussion of the rejecting scribe and the grieving disciple plays down individual choice or agency to highlight cultural norms that indicate the offensiveness of an itinerant existence.

Chapter 5, “Rejection,” examines Jesus’s return to his hometown (13:53–58), where he is met with disdain and rejection. Central to the reading is Myles’s construction of Jesus’s status as an expendable outsider who struggles to be recognized with honor in his hometown. In this dishonoring and disdain are tensions with Jesus’s kinfolk. A focus on differentiations of power in this hometown rejection scene highlights Jesus’s marginalization from normalized society. The irony that Jesus has a “hometown” seems to be missing from the argument.

Chapter 6, “Extermination,” attends to the arrest and execution of Jesus as a homeless deviant who threatens the security and stability of everyday life. Extermination and systemic violence are the dominant perspectives in the discussion of Jesus’s arrest (26:47–56) and death on the cross (27:38–50). Jesus’s homelessness and deviant behavior are understood by the ruling powers as a criminal threat that has to be removed in order to preserve normal functioning.

Myles offers a rich and provocative study that is a welcome addition to the studies of Matthew that take seriously the socioeconomic and political factors shaping the Gospel’s production and the homelessness it reinscribes. One disappointment is that this well-written and engaging study focuses on a limited sample of six text segments (though with some discussion of literary context). Can the argument be sustained throughout the whole gospel? How does Myles’s thesis, for example, cope with the alternative household code of Matt 19–20?

Problematic are the references to Jesus’s “own city” (9:1) and “the house” that seems to belong to Jesus (9:10, 28; 12:46 (?); 13:1, 36, 57; 17:25). Myles acknowledges these “house” texts (e.g. 5, 37, 123–25) but in my view does not deal adequately with them. His distinction between “house and home” (123–25) is not adequate. Here he argues the issue in terms of “literal or metaphorical” homelessness, a distinction proposed by some previous interpreters but one that he has convincingly dismantled in showing that Jesus is literally displaced/homeless for sustained periods of time. Rather, the issue that needs address comprises Myles’s insistence that Jesus’s homelessness is not a matter of individual choice but is a symptom of the socioeconomic and political forces of a well-functioning

system. The binary seems unnecessarily restrictive. Of course, individual choice is never “pure” or isolated from systemic shaping. But individuals can contest societal power, so why deny any role for choice in favor of systems? In a textual analysis of Matthew the two might more usefully be held together in tense relationship.

For example, various texts seem to recognize that Matthew’s Jesus exercises some choice in favor of his challenging, divinely sanctioned task that creates his homelessness. Myles rushes over 4:23, when Jesus begins his homeless travels around “all Galilee.” This is a crucial text for his consistent rejection of Jesus’s homelessness as a chosen consequence of his divine mission and his advocacy for homelessness as symptomatic of sociopolitical and economic forces. Myles argues that the sociopolitical arrest of John the Baptist (88–90, 110) forces Jesus and his followers into homelessness at this point. But against this claim it must be noted that in 4:12 Jesus’s “withdrawal” to Galilee is to *dwell* there (4:13). Homelessness follows later in 4:23, when he undertakes his tasks of “preaching the gospel of the kingdom/empire” and “healing.” As much as John’s death has forced him to dwell in Capernaum, it is by no means clear that it launches his public activity.

The commencement of this activity has more to do narratively with the force of his commissioning of 1:21–23 that he embraced in his baptism (3:15) and temptation as God’s agent (4:1–11). Yet imperial structures are not absent from this commissioning. This preaching and healing activity contests imperial power, though Myles fails to recognize any link between sickness and imperial power. Further, narratively, the house texts indicate periods of time when Matthew’s Jesus chooses not to be homeless. Concerning disciples, is their homelessness chosen or symptomatic of socioeconomic and political factors or both (4:18–23)? Another troubling text, 19:29 (“everyone who has left ... houses ... for my sake”), receives little attention (mentioned once in the index) in relation to the binary. This element of a chosen mission belongs, in my view, with but does not negate Myles’s welcome attention to sociopolitical and economic factors. Perhaps, like many binaries, there is some truth in the either/or, agency/choice, or symptom/system options but more truth in a both–and approach. I do not find the text to be as sharply contrastive as his argument draws it. The forced homelessness of 2:1–23, the chosen homelessness of 4:23; the lament of 8:20, the house texts, 19:29 (“for my sake”), the decision to go to Jerusalem, and so on seem to hold choice/agency and symptom/system together more than this study’s argument recognizes.

That being said, Myles offers an important study that draws attention to an often-neglected dimension of Matthew’s Gospel.