

Wongi Park, *The Politics of Race and Ethnicity in Matthew's Passion Narrative*.

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This book offers a timely interrogation into the ideologies of race and ethnicity in interpretation of the passion narrative of Matthew's Gospel. The argument centres on the title *ho basileus tōn ioudaiōn* (NRSV: 'the king of the Jews') which appears twice in Matthew's passion with reference to Jesus (Matt 27:11; 27:37). Author Wongi Park defines 'race/ethnicity' as a discursive category that does not graft onto any ontological or stable biological basis, but rather functions as a 'fluid discourse of representations' (2). In further situating race/ethnicity as a dialectical category, Park suggests it functions 'as an ideology that structures the formations of power between dominant groups and minority groups' (3). Although focused on the interpretation of one phrase from Matthew, the book and its approach have wider implications for both interpretation and the field of biblical studies more generally, as they expose the discipline's failure to account for ethnoracial dimensions of interpretation. Such oversights have real-world effects, such as the marginalization of minoritized groups in society.

The book contains five chapters that lead toward Park's own 'ethnoracial reading' of Matthew's passion. After a brief preview of the general argument in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 seeks to identify the dominant narrative by detecting a pattern of non-ethnoracial readings surrounding Jesus' identity as *ho basileus tōn ioudaiōn* in Matthew's passion. Park describes two trajectories: first, theologically oriented readings that emphasize Jesus' identity as the Davidic messiah (cf. Matt 1:1); and second, socio-political readings that, in an attempt to offer a corrective to reductive theological approaches, highlight the 'subversive' political meaning of the title against the backdrop of Roman imperial power. Both approaches, however, exhibit blind spots when it comes to the obvious ethnoracial dimensions of the phrase. For example, theological readings (e.g., focused on Jesus' identity as Davidic messiah) can bypass the dehumanizing nature of Roman crucifixion and over-emphasize the title's religious meaning in a way that strips it of any ethnoracial but also imperial or political meaning. Indeed, crucifixion was intended by the Romans not only to execute but to utterly delegitimize a person, and such ideas extend beyond the individual to their social and indeed 'ethnoracial' associations. (Crucifixion was rarely used against Roman citizens but reserved primarily for foreigners.) While the latter shortcoming has been addressed to a certain extent by socio-political readings, such readings seem equally concerned with theology in that they also champion Jesus' messianic identity over and against Herod and Rome. What they seem to have missed is a critical exploration of the ethnoracial meanings produced by, for instance, the process of Jesus' marginalization by the authorities (see below).

Chapter 3 continues the analysis by situating patterns of non-ethnoracial interpretation within the world of real readers. Park argues convincingly that the 'coding and decoding of this pattern largely depends on the perspectives and parameters of one's reading location' (47). Park draws on the insights of whiteness

studies, primarily informed by the theoretical work of Robert Miles (no relation) and Malcolm Brown. Miles and Brown situate racialization as an open-ended discursive process to unmask power dynamics involved in scholarly reconstructions of Jesus wherein the non-ethnoracial pattern is shown to be symptomatic of a deracializing ideology in the world in front of the text, informed by ‘the dominant Western representation of the white Jesus in the modern Christian imagination’ (48). Put simply, the reproduction of white invisibility in biblical interpretation is systemic rather than accidental and is related to the standpoint of real ‘flesh-and-blood’ readers in the world in front of the text.

Chapter 4 moves in a constructive direction by engaging with minoritized representations of the historical Jesus to show how they inevitably reinscribe the ideology of white invisibility. Park calls for a rethinking of the very discourse of race/ethnicity away from the fragmentation of voices or perspectives of various minority groups (e.g., African American, Native American, Latinx American, etc) to a reading site or strategy that can appeal to the common racialized experiences of various groups.

Finally, Chapter 5 functions as a crescendo to the study, with a presentation of an alternative reading of Matthew’s passion narrative from such a perspective, attuned to the politics of minoritization and racialization, specifically by situating Jesus as the racialized-other. Park convincingly argues that references to Jesus as *ho basileus tōn ioudaion* in Matthew’s passion narrative should be understood not primarily or exclusively as a messianic title, but rather as a racial slur. Indeed, such a reading is also consistent with his public execution, which was intended to humiliate and/or ‘minoritize’ Jesus as well as propagate ideas about Roman superiority over ethnic Judean inferiority. Park traces the evolution of minoritization through the trial of Jesus in the ‘official’ Judean and Roman courts to the court of popular opinion (trial before the crowds), and the divine court (the climactic cry on the cross), noting the various ways in which these differing contexts leads to Jesus’ total othering. As Park writes, ‘he is made proud in the Judean court; he is made inferior in the Roman court; he is made illegal in the popular court; and he is made foreign in the divine court’ (136). Park observes that Jesus is virtually silent through the proceedings and, in fact, his presence diminishes through each scene. Ultimately, Park argues the Roman governor Pilate is ‘the culminating figure who authorizes Jesus’ crucifixion’ (130), who, as the holder of imperial power, is able to co-opt and manipulate the Judean leaders and the crowds through a cynical diminishing of his own agency and responsibility—an intriguing explanation/interpretation of Matthew’s apparent and confusing exoneration of Pilate.

In sum, the book is a model for competent ideological biblical criticism in the way that it systematically addresses ideology as it constricts and produces meaning in the worlds behind, within, and in front of the text. The flow of the argument is clearly outlined and easy to follow. After reading Chapters 2 and 3, I will not be able to consult the major commentaries on Matthew the same way again for, despite their often exhaustive and sober exegesis, they are *all* reductive in their approach (or non-approach) to Jesus’ ethnoracial identity. The exegetical showcase of Chapter 5, where Park offers his own reading of Matthew’s passion, brought home the issues raised in previous chapters and challenged me personally as a critical scholar of Matthew to rethink my overall reading framework when undertaking exegesis, so as to be more readily able to discern the subtle ethnoracial dynamics at play in complicated texts like Jesus’ trial scenes.

While the parameters of the study are somewhat narrow, and it would be interesting to see the same ideological analysis applied to a broader range of New Testament texts, the chosen approach nonetheless facilitated in-depth analysis. The book successfully demonstrates, through the focussed analysis of a singular example, how the broader construction of non-ethnoracial readings of Jesus more generally perpetuate deracializing logics that drive the dominant discourse of a universal Christianity transcending ethnoracial particularity. In doing so, the book elucidates some of the severe limitations of the guild of biblical studies, but also the wider implications for exegesis. I do worry the book could be more easily ignored (or marginalized) by the guild due to its own narrow focus. In any case, although technical, the book's penetrating insights should not be limited to scholars. Teachers of Matthew and/or the Gospels should set this book, or chapters from this book, as required reading in their university and seminary courses. This way it might have a greater impact in decentring whiteness in the reading of biblical texts.



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