

Robert J. Myles

The Homeless Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. The Social World of Biblical Antiquity, Second Series. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014. Pp. vii + 220. \$95.00.

In this book based on a PhD thesis completed at the University of Auckland in 2013, Robert J. Myles presents a fresh and critical reading of Jesus' homelessness in the First Gospel. The basic premise of the argument is that if homelessness in the modern world cannot be viewed apart from a careful consideration of the wider social, political, and economic forces that produce it, then understanding the homelessness of the Matthean Jesus, in theory, should be no different. Yet the dominant ways in which New Testament scholars have interpreted Jesus' homelessness is often dissociated from any external factors, social or political. The prevailing depiction of Jesus' homelessness, instead, is a self-imposed and voluntary lifestyle devoid of hardship. Over and against this romanticized depiction, Myles raises two questions the book seeks to address: "First, how have ideologies of homelessness in the world before the text shaped the reading and interpretation of Jesus? And, secondly, how might the text be re-read in a way that disrupts and advances beyond these dominant ideologies?" (1). After an introductory chapter that outlines a methodology, Chapters 2-6 present a reading of six key Matthean texts that elucidate the harsh social and political circumstances surrounding Jesus' homelessness as a displaced outsider: Matt 2:13-23; 4:12-25; 8:18-22; 13:53-58; 27:47-56, 38-50.

In Chapter 1, Myles begins by justifying and situating his reading strategy within current trends in ideological biblical criticism. Not precisely a method so much as an interpretive stance, ideological criticism helps to orient a subject within the differential relations of power in contemporary society. Such an approach is particularly relevant, he argues, because homelessness is the direct result of unequal distributions of power in society. On the one hand, Myles rejects individualist accounts of the causes of homelessness (i.e., homelessness as an individual, personal choice). But on the other hand, he finds structuralist accounts to be equally unsatisfying (i.e., homelessness as a failure in the government or society at large). Instead, he approaches homelessness as a by-product that is symptomatic of a much larger phenomenon, namely, the neoliberal-democratic system itself (34). Chapter 1 concludes with a brief description of various socio-rhetorical textures Myles invokes to support his reading of the Matthean text—namely, ideological texture, inner texture, social and cultural texture, intertexture, and sacred texture (44-50).

Chapter 2, entitled "Displacement," is essential to staging the argument. Dominant interpretations of the Matthew's genealogy (Matt 1:1-17) and the flight to Egypt (Matt 2:13-23) focus on a number of technical issues ranging

from the historicity of the infancy narrative, the use of fulfillment citations, and the theological motif of Jesus as the New Moses. What Myles's contributes is a sustained treatment of these passages as an overture to the Matthean narrative of displacement. Beginning with the genealogy, Myles makes a keen observation that 15 of the 40 individuals cited have experienced homelessness in one form or fashion (e.g., David, Abraham, and Isaac). The net effect is that Matthew's genealogy locates Jesus within a long narrative tradition of displacement. Turning to the flight to Egypt passage, Myles shows how the motif of displacement carries over into the events surrounding Jesus' birth. For instance, Herod's decree of infanticide was a routine practice in the ancient world designed to protect the ideological-political resources and interests of the elite. As a result, Jesus' family is forced to withdraw (*ἀνεχώρησεν*, Matt 2:12)—a key term that occurs most frequently in Matthew compared to Mark and Luke. From this vantage point, Jesus' homelessness is not caused by a private or personal circumstance, but is the result of external realities concerning the political and economic instability of Herod's regime. But after Herod's death, instead of returning to their home in Bethlehem, Jesus and his family experience a further displacement, settling in Nazareth in north Galilee. In this way, Jesus' marginal self-identity as a displaced outsider is established in genealogical form and narrative fashion from the very beginning of the First Gospel.

In Chapters 3-4, Myles proceeds to substantiate the link between Jesus and homelessness established in the previous chapter. Chapter 3, entitled "Reaction," continues his case for reading Matthew as a narrative of displacement by underscoring how Jesus' mission begins as a critical response to his physical and social displacement. Crucial to this argument is the arrest of John the Baptist who dwells in the desert (*ἐρημος*) as a displaced outsider apart from the economic cycles of agricultural production (*χώρα*) and consumption (*πόλις*). Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom thus represents a symbolic counter-cultural space for the non-elite—a structural challenge to the entire system of the reigning ideological-political order (95-6). Chapter 4, entitled "Destitution," argues that Jesus' call for the dissolution of family ties offers further support for reading Matthew as a narrative of displacement. In Matt 8:18-22, two characters approach Jesus: an eager scribe and a grieving disciple. Both maintain the social and cultural expectations of normalized society and are therefore at odds with Jesus' destitute, itinerant, and uprooted lifestyle as expressed in his lament that "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the son of man has no place to lay his head" (Matt 8:20, NRSV).

Chapters 5-6 bring Myles's reading of Matthew as a narrative of displacement to a conclusion. Chapter 5, entitled "Rejection," offers an analysis of Jesus' hometown rejection in Matt 13:53-58. Reading this scene as a form

of social exclusion, Myles shows how Jesus' rejection as the carpenter's son is a form of institutional estrangement from his local village and synagogue. In Chapter 6, entitled "Extermination," Myles pays close attention to how "crucifixion functions as an instrument of torture and as part of a broader politics of extermination" (164). In Jesus' arrest, for instance, there are a number of armed enforcers involved such that the distributions and institutions of power are dispersed, and responsibility ultimately rests on the broader judicial apparatus of the ideological-political system. In the end, Jesus is mocked as a displaced outsider and eliminated as a social and political pest (190).

Myles's reading of Matthew as a narrative of displacement is convincing on many counts. His exegesis is competent, thorough, and well-argued—particularly, his sharp insights on Matthew's genealogy. There are also a number of detailed lexical and intertextual studies in each chapter (e.g., κλίνω [120-121], ἀναχώρω [66-69], house versus home [123-125], and πατρις [143-147]). However, there is one connection in Chapter 5 that is not as convincing—that of itinerancy and mission, on the one hand, and homelessness and placelessness, on the other. Strictly speaking, Matt 13:53-58 foregrounds Jesus' wisdom and deeds of power in relation to his mission and itinerancy, rather than his homelessness. In this specific case, the religious overtones are just as if not more prominent (cf. Matt 13:58 "because of their unbelief") than social or political overtones, as Myles's reading suggests. This minor criticism notwithstanding, there is much to be commended in this book. Although his approach is pitted against an exclusively religious-theological reading, that is not to say that there is no theological import to his reading. In fact, there is an important ethical imperative undergirding Myles's appeal to ideological criticism. For if the Bible has been used to support the dominant discourse surrounding modern-day homelessness as merely a personal or social failing, then reading Jesus' homelessness apart from the contemporary situation is not only unethical, but is at some level complicit. It is therefore incumbent upon biblical scholars not to remain detached in their scholarship. Overall, then, this book represents an important corrective to conventional readings that tend to gloss over and romanticize the harsh realities associated with Jesus' birth, ministry, and death.

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