

## Review of Robert J. Myles, *The Homeless Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew*, Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014

Michael J. Sandford

ROBERT MYLES'S MONOGRAPH is a major contribution to ideological biblical criticism and a cutting-edge intervention for the discourse of New Testament studies. Myles is thorough and convincing in his demonstration of the way in which scholarship on Matthew's Gospel (and also on the historical Jesus) has been shaped by neoliberal ideological currents, especially in relation to the 'homelessness' of Jesus. Myles presents a thorough and compelling reading of Matthew's Jesus as homeless.

A word should be said first about the title of the volume, which foregrounds the Gospel of Matthew. To be sure, the Gospel of Matthew is Myles's primary source material and Myles engages in detail with both with the text of Matthew in its original language and the contemporary scholarship that surrounds it. The chapters of Myles' book also align with the chronology of Matthew's narrative, with chapters on the flight to Egypt (for Myles, 'Displacement'); the beginning of Jesus's public ministry; the itinerant ministry of Jesus and the disciples; the reception of Jesus in his hometown; and the execution of Jesus (or, for Myles, his 'Extermination').

However, it is Myles' critical attention to ideology that defines this work, and that focus is what makes it such an important contribution to New Testament scholarship. Myles locates his work within 'the realm of ideological biblical criticism', which, he notes, is 'not strictly a methodological approach *per se*, but a form of criticism that seeks to uncover and promote rhetorical agendas within the variables of biblical interpretation: the author, the text, and the reader' (p. 16). This work stands as an important contribution to the development of ideological biblical criticism, and in this work Myles develops the approach in a manner that is strikingly fresh within the field of New Testament studies.

In the first chapter, Myles offers an introduction to ideological biblical criticism, as well as an introduction to debates about how homelessness is framed within the ideological context of neoliberalism. Here Myles first lays out his central contention that biblical scholars have romanticised and idealised Jesus's homelessness, sanitising the uncomfortable economic realities of homelessness and mirroring broader ideological discourses about choice. Referencing Lacan (via Žižek), Myles argues that Jesus's homelessness functions as a 'sublime object' in New Testament studies (pp. 24-25).

The next five chapters are a reading of Matthew's Gospel (and its contemporary interpretation), which grows out of the ideological-critical framework that Myles builds in the first chapter. The first of these chapters, 'Displacement', focuses on the so-called flight to Egypt. Myles argues that the forced displacement of the flight to Egypt, 'frames homelessness as an objective reality, inseparable from external political and social pressures' (p. 81). For Myles, Matthew's 'flight to Egypt' narrative emplaces Jesus from

the outset, not just geographically but socially too—in terms of ‘displacement, marginality and exteriority’ (p. 81).

In the next chapter, ‘Reaction’, Myles argues that the displacement narrative continues through the beginnings of Jesus’s public ministry. For Myles, Jesus’s announcement of the *basileia*, which is ‘an imaginary counter-culture [sic] space in which the order of society is reversed’ (p. 110), stems directly from Jesus’s internalisation of socio-political realities, such as the trauma of his infancy and the arrest of John the Baptist. Myles argues that Matthew embeds the disciples, too, within this broader social and political context.

The fourth chapter, ‘Destitution’, deals with what we might call the ‘nowhere to lay his head’ text (Matthew 8.20), which is most often referenced in connection to Jesus’s homelessness. Myles considers this text within its narrative context and argues that the surrounding texts, which focus on the anxiety of poverty (Matthew 6.25-34) and torturous illness (Matthew 8.1-17), ‘amplify the destitution, desperation, and offensiveness that accompany Jesus’s homeless existence’ (p. 113).

In the fifth chapter, ‘Rejection’, Myles focuses on the rejection of Jesus in his hometown. In Myles’s reading, Jesus’s social exclusion is a gradual process of denial and rejection which sees Jesus ‘denied a space in both his home village and local synagogue’ (p. 162). Moreover, Jesus’s ‘personal failure’ to take up the gendered role expected of him as a supplier of material resources adds to his shaming in his hometown. The question ‘is this not the carpenter’s son?’ and the naming of his mother, his four brothers and his sisters ‘further stresses’ for Myles ‘that Jesus has not lived up to his household responsibilities and/or social obligations’ (p. 160).

In the final chapter, ‘Extermination’, Myles deals with Jesus’s execution and the surrounding narrative. Myles argues that the crucifixion of Jesus in Matthew’s text ‘amounts to the extermination of a social and political pest’ (p. 190). Myles reads the mocking, taunting, verbal insults and the offering of cheap wine as evidence of the ‘scorn and contempt’ of those surrounding him on the cross. In the extermination of Jesus, Myles’s ‘hermeneutic of radical desublimation’ (p. 113) is most pronounced, as the romanticization of Jesus’s homelessness is ‘finally traversed as he meets a torturous and fatal displacement’ (p. 191).

In Myles’s reading of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is depicted numerous times as one of the *lumpenproletariat*, or expendable class, part of the refuse or excrement of society, and an exterminated pest. Myles’s language of radical desublimation emphasises the offensiveness of the homelessness of Jesus in a manner that deliberately confronts and affronts the reader. Myles is convincing in his argument that Matthew’s text has been sanitised by its interpreters, and he starkly redresses this trend.

Myles’ reading could, naturally, be challenged at points. I am not convinced, for example, that the disciples travelling without money, extra tunics, sandals, or staff (Matthew 10.9-10) works as a ‘*deliberate* externalization of their inner turmoil’ (p. 139, emphasis mine). Deliberateness implies volition and choice, ideas that Myles is elsewhere extremely suspicious of. Why not here? The problem is that it is indeed hard to understand why Jesus would command the disciples to go without money and possessions if they did not possess any in the first place. This in turn suggests that the passage presumes some form of voluntary divestment. The text therefore poses a minor problem for Myles’s reading.

Nonetheless, Myles’ reading is highly engaging and the method that he develops is most insightful. Myles certainly achieves the aim, as he puts it in his conclusion, to

'develop a more viable construction of a homeless Jesus within the Gospel of Matthew' (p. 192). The reading that Myles develops in these chapters is not only a compelling one; it is also urgent.



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