

BOOK REVIEW

Sexuality, ideology and the bible: antipodean engagements, edited by Robert J. Myles and Caroline Blyth, Sheffield, Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015, 202 pp., £60/\$95 (hbk), ISBN: 978-1-909697-83-6

This anthology, written by Bible scholars from Australia and New Zealand, includes nine splendid essays, an introductory chapter, and a response on the study of selected Hebrew Bible and New Testament texts in conjunction with their socio-political, cultural, and religious interpretation histories. Perhaps I have to get myself to the Antipodes, the home of these creative, sophisticated, and dazzling exegetes who engage biblical texts with such antipodean, that is, “not northern” (167), gusto. They demonstrate that the Bible has indeed an “antipodean underside” (xi) to be read with “queer antipodean resistance” (175). I wonder when I last read a book in biblical studies that was so much fun, so inspiring, and so willing to make grand socio-political, cultural, and religious connections. For sure, I will assign this book as a foundational reading in the next installment of my course on queer Bible hermeneutics.

The selection of biblical texts, the many references from the biblical interpretation history and other cultural sources, and the diverse voices included make for a thoroughly engaging reading experience that yields new exegetical insight, hermeneutical perspective, and intellectual horizon. The antipodean group of scholars comes from a wide range of academic disciplines, including biblical studies, religious studies, social practice, education, the humanities and social sciences, and theology. The assorted approaches, views, and subject matters are held together by the geopolitical location of the contributors. Only the respondent, Hugh S. Pyper, hails from somewhere else, namely Scotland. The Scottish people, Pyper reminds us, have a several centuries-long antipodean relationship to the colonial power in their immediate geographical vicinity. With their quilts swinging in the wind, male Scots do not fit imperial norms and ideology, representing the North’s antipodean with an “intrinsically queer identity” (169). A clear-cut binary between the North and the South is thus a colonizing illusion that needs to be disentangled and deconstructed. This book exposes and unmasks some of these tangles as they relate to sexuality, ideology, and the long journey of the Bible to the “other side” of the world.

The first essay, written by Deanne Galbraith, articulates in conversation with biblical and theological scholarship as well as with Giorgio Agamben’s musings on messianic time how Augustine came to invent the idea of original sin in his reading of the Pauline letters. In a nutshell, his invention is grounded in his “own bodily sensations” determined by “the Bishop’s penis” and his “contemplation” (18) on the very organ. Original sin, thus exposed, is part of Augustine’s mighty theological effort to maintain control when he least experienced it.

The second essay comes from Emily Colgan who investigates Jeremiah 6:1–8 as a rape text. In conversation with Marcella Althaus-Reid, she posits that the biblical passage “encodes a sexual logic based upon a heterosexual binary that polarizes a masculine, penetrative God and a feminized, emasculated Land” (20). Accordingly, the biblical text illustrates a “poetics of rape” (23), not an entirely new idea, but Colgan’s careful exegetical investigation of each verse shows that interpreters have long contributed to “reinscribing ancient ideas of acceptable sexual behavior” and so “potentially normalize[ed] violence toward subordinate others” (24).

The third essay by Christina Petterson is particularly intriguing for it brings into the conversation Count Zinzendorf, the founder of the Moravian Brethren in seventeenth-century Germany. Petterson traces the founder’s and his movement’s views about the “body of Christ” in 1 Corinthians. She suggests that “[g]endering is not an issue in 1 Corinthians” (51)

whereas it is for contemporary “fragmented identities” (51) that perceive the body as always already gendered and individualized. Thus, in Moravian theology it was not the physical penis that made a man into a “youngling” but his virginal disposition toward receiving Jesus as “the true Bridegroom” (42). In other words, it was not the gendered individual body that mattered to Moravian theology but the collective identification of the believer.

The fourth essay, authored by Roland Boer, investigates the biblical vocabulary for vagina and womb. Boer is self-conscious about writing on female genitalia, even worrying of “becoming an old lecher ... [l]asciviously licking my lips and lecherously pondering biblical treatments of female pudenda” (57). His decision “to stay as close as possible to the Bible’s own preference for down-to-earth language” is thus a good idea, if the Bible can indeed prefer anything. A discussion of semantic clusters, an outline of the various biblical terms for female genitalia, and an examination of several Bible passages on the “various parts of female genitals” (57) structure the essay.

The fifth essay by Alan H. Cadwallader explores “what happens to Paul when one of his letters is read by a woman,” namely Phoebe (69). Cadwallader shows that Paul’s masculinity is fragile and in flux, certainly not standing in “a continuum from David to Western man” (72). As the male subject becomes radically dependent “on the female ‘Other,’” meaning changes from “letter-bearer to letter-presenter” (79). In this shape-shifting performance Paul sounds, presents, and is “like a woman” (82).

The sixth essay, written by Gillian Townsley, links the 2013 Marriage Amendment Act in Aotearoa/New Zealand with a discussion on the ethics of reading Philippians 4:2. After a brief review of some of the pioneering positions in feminist and queer biblical studies, Townsley, an Anglican priest, presents Euodia and Syntyche as leaders in the Philippian church. She shows that the feminist proposal by Mary Rose D’Angelo in which the two women appear as “a missionary [lesbian] couple” has been effectively sidelined not only in “mainstream” (105) exegesis but also in feminist scholarship.

The seventh, eighth, and ninth essays offer particularly creative approaches to the volume. Elaine M. Wainwright develops an ecological reading of the Sermon on the Mount that links insights about “embeddedness” and animals as articulated by feminist philosopher Donna Haraway, and indigenous Australian views about space to “the mountain-top preaching Jesus” (122). Yael Klangwisan combines Hélène Cixous’s thoughts about the Song of Songs with a first-person midrash from the perspective of the woman in the Song. Finally, Caroline Blyth and Teguh Wijaya Mulya present a first-person monologue from the perspective of Delilah that searches for the unusual, non-normative, reconfigured, and queer character in Judges 16.

In sum, the volume invites readers to imagine how the scholarly conversation in biblical studies might look like “if a truly queer reading site of the Antipodes were to dominate the conversation” (xvi). It speaks back to “the dominant power base of North Atlantic scholarship” (xvi) while making full use of North Atlantic academic conventions, interpretative assumptions, and exegetical conventions, to then break, challenge, and subvert them. As a whole, the book presents the Bible from the upside down and the other way around, queering biblical meanings and resisting colonizing norms and ideologies. I cannot wait to read the next anthology from my far-away colleagues so that I can keep unlocking my “inner Antipodean” (174) with their generous assistance.

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