

Review of George Aichele, *Simulating Jesus: Reality Effects in the Gospels*. BibleWorld. London: Equinox, 2011.

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Simulating Jesus is an engaging and provocative book that stems from one fundamental supposition: “despite interesting similarities between the four gospels’ stories and their Jesuses, neither the stories nor the characters in them are the same. Important differences and even contradictions appear between these stories, and therefore they cannot all be true and they all cannot refer to the same person named Jesus. Instead, the name of Jesus serves as a hook in each story on which it hangs diverse predicates, and as a result each of these Jesuses is a distinct reality effect. These four Jesuses are four distinct simulacra or virtual beings, the ideological products of the reader’s attempts to decode the texts” (p. 187).

The book is arranged in three parts. In Part One (“Virtual Bible, Virtual Gospel,” chapters 1 and 2), Aichele lays the theoretical groundwork for the various reading experiments that follow in the remainder of the book. He begins by tackling the biblical canon, which “obscures and replaces the component texts themselves with something else, a signified or at least a signifying potential that far surpasses any of the included texts. *This is the virtuality of the Bible* ... The virtual Bible is the dream of coherence and identity that the canon seeks to realize” (p. 12). The success of this intertextual mechanism is always precarious and never guaranteed by any particular presentation of collection, and therefore requires a great deal of supplementation. Ultimately, the virtual Bible “does not convey a universal, apostolic message, but it has itself become the message” (p. 20).

In chapter 2, Aichele further builds his theoretical framework by turning his attention to simulations of Jesus and to “the virtual gospel.” “Each gospel creates a referential illusion or reality effect,” writes Aichele. Drawing on the work of Roland Barthes, he explains that “the effect of the real arises when codes of denotation dominate the reading of a text” (p. 31). Borrowing from Gilles Deleuze, Aichele describes the Jesuses produced by the gospels as simulacra. The resemblance and identity among these simulacra “form a pattern of repetition and difference that creates the reality effect ... The simulacrum is the effect which *produces* reality by simulating it, the afterlife that generates its precursor” (p. 32). The name (“Jesus” in this case) plays an important role in these processes insofar as it joins various signifying elements, saturates the narrative function, creates a subject, and makes the text more “readerly” (*lisible*), i.e., transparent. The canon, in turn, extends “the name from one virtuality or world to one or more other, and distinctions between the reality effects of the different narratives are blurred or eliminated” (p. 39), ultimately creating a “virtual gospel.”

Part Two (“Four Jesuses,” chapters 3-6) offers readings of each of the canonical gospels’ Jesus simulacra: Matthew’s Jesus vis-à-vis Pier Paolo Pasolini’s 1964 film, *Il vangelo secondo Matteo*; Mark’s Jesus vis-à-vis the language of “children” and “kingdom” in that gospel; Luke’s Jesus in relation to the two fathers associated with that simulacrum; and John’s writing Jesus. As Aichele describes it, these chapters explore “aspects of the four different Jesus simulacra of the canonical gospels, not in order to produce a complete statement of their differences, which would be impossible, but ... to illustrate the kinds of reality effects that appear when one reads each of these gospels more or less independently of the semiotic controls provided by the Christian canon” (p. 141).

Finally, in the four chapters that make up the third section (“Canonical Reality Effects”), Aichele attempts to “reverse the polarity,’ as it were, to explore how the semiotic effects of canon and the virtuality of the Bible encourage the reader to ignore these and other differences of the gospels’ Jesus simulacra and produce instead, both from and against those differences, the single simulacrum of Jesus Christ” (p. 141). He does this in relation to various aspects or implications of the synoptic problem, for example Mark and “Minority Report” (both the story written by Philip K. Dick and the film directed by Steven Spielberg); Q and minor agreements against Mark vis-à-vis fantasy; the combined effect of Luke and John in producing the “Gospel of Jesus Christ” of institutionalized orthodoxy; and finally the “gospel” simulacrum generated in and through the letters of Paul, together with the control exerted by the canon. To be sure, these dialogical performances expose fascinating contours of both the biblical texts and the other texts with which they are juxtaposed. One might, however, perceive a certain darkness in Aichele’s vision, which stems at least in part from his choice of intertexts. Note, for example, his description of Dick’s reality effect as “a paranoid one, in which occasional glimpses of truth do little more than emphasize the prevailing darkness; it is a bleak universe in which redemptive knowledge is rare or of little value” (p. 150). I was never entirely sure what, if anything, to make of this, which I suspect says more about me as a reader than about Aichele as a writer.

Those familiar with Aichele’s work will recognize some of the material in this book. Seven of the chapters have appeared in various journals and edited collections, while the remaining three were each written specifically for this volume. It must be pointed out, however, that this is not simply a collection of previously published essays. Each of the previously published chapters has been revised for this volume, and the arrangement of the material translates to a very coherent argument.

Notwithstanding the highly complex nature of the theoretical concepts, Aichele’s presentation is clear and nuanced, making the book relatively accessible. He does a marvelous job of repeatedly pointing up just how deeply and how thickly we are entangled in the canon and in canonical ideology. Moreover, for all its theory, the book is keen to speak to the concerns and realities (a word I must, of necessity, use with caution here) of the contemporary world in which we live: see, for example, pp. 111-112, where Aichele points out that, “along with the canon and traditional, logocentric theologies, monotheism is on the wane in our contemporary world, and a polytheistic theology may appropriate to its fragmented realities and plural discourses.”

The book is clearly best suited to graduate students, scholars, and researchers. However, there are aspects of it that I think would translate easily and quite productively to undergraduate courses focused on the figure of Jesus, particularly those courses that dare to introduce theory and that do not presume to be making future Bible scholars. Not only does it seem to me that it would be quite difficult to return to the standard fare of typical undergraduate New Testament courses after reading a book like this, if one takes its argument seriously, but more importantly, I think *Simulating Jesus* offers an excellent resource (depending on how one uses it) for demonstrating to students the sort of creative (but no less critical) reading that the biblical text and modern individuals need, and in a way that ultimately enables and empowers those students to try their hands at practicing such reading in an intelligent manner. Granted, Aichele’s book is thoroughly dependent upon a certain degree of familiarity with basic “facts” and longstanding debates in the field. However, Aichele’s inventive, imaginative, playful (but always with a seriousness lingering nearby), and intriguing engagements with the material, both biblical and otherwise, are not *always* dependent on such familiarity, and in fact one might even argue that those less familiar with the gospels and the traditional constraints governing their interpretation would be among those most open to readings like this. And by open I do not mean simply more willing to accept them, but actually more capable of seeing and understanding them in meaningful and productive ways.

The work of Roland Barthes has long fascinated me, and Aichele is the only biblical scholar I know of who has taken up and engaged Barthes' writings so fully, and to such fruitful and stimulating ends. Aichele's richly intertextual readings open up the biblical narratives in a remarkable and deeply thought-provoking manner, highlighting and then reawakening the writerly (*scriptible*) textuality of these materials (versus reinforcing their readerly transparency), making them once again "texts of bliss" (see, e.g., p. 71). And it is worth noting that *Simulating Jesus* is a rather blissful read in its own right.



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