

Review of Philip Culbertson and Elaine M. Wainwright, eds., *The Bible in/and Popular Culture: A Creative Encounter*. Semeia Studies 65. Readings: A New Biblical Commentary. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010.

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In 1998, after a visit to a prestigious Biblical Studies conference, Stephen Moore lamented that the event was so “mired ... in nineteenth-century epistemological assumptions that I sometimes have to rub my eyes to reassure myself that a given presenter at a seminar or plenary session is not sporting muttonchop whiskers, a stovepipe hat and a frock coat” (Moore 1998, 251). After an encounter with *The Bible in/and Popular Culture: A Creative Encounter*, for all of its strengths, a reader might be inclined to recall Moore’s words and wonder if the discipline remains behind the times, though perhaps now not *quite* so far behind, moving itself into the era of bellbottoms, hip-huggers, and skinny ties (though the muttonchops, incidentally, would have come back into fashion).

Edited by Philip Culbertson and Elaine M. Wainwright, the volume is composed of, in Wainwright’s words from her brief introduction, a “collection of essays in which biblical scholars engage with the Bible in/as popular culture in ways that are both serious and fun” (p. 1). Most of the fourteen essays are reflections, often more theological than not, on the place of the Bible in contemporary English-language popular culture. In the sheer diversity of the texts it examines – there are essays on works as diverse as Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses*, Alan Moore’s visionary graphic novel *Watchmen*, and the New Zealand animated television series *bro’Town*. The book points clearly to the sheer scope of the challenge that faces any scholar who wants to take popular culture seriously.

Michael J. Gilmour opens the volume with an intriguing essay analysing *The Satanic Verses* and the ways it adapts sacred texts, particularly the biblical story of the fall of Lucifer, to paint a subversive picture of immigrant life in Great Britain. The great strength of Gilmour’s essay, and a further necessary lesson for scholars wanting to approach popular culture, is that he reads the novel with an eye to its rewriting of Christian sources while keeping a firm eye on the unique place the novel has in the realm of contemporary Islam. Switching both media and method, Mark McEntire’s “Red Dirt God: Divine Silence and the Search for the Transcendent Beauty in the Music of Emmylou Harris” builds on recent scholarly work on God as a character in the biblical narratives to offer a reading of “the divine figure” moving through (or perhaps behind) the surface of Harris’ 2000 album *Red Dirt Girl*, a figure which remains “a mysterious, hidden force” (p. 30). The following essay, Dan W. Clanton, Jr.’s “‘Here, There, and Everywhere’: Images of Jesus in American Popular Culture,” examines the seemingly infinite malleability of the figure of Jesus in American popular culture. Clanton casts his net widely and makes some cogent points about texts like the comic book *Loaded Bible: The “Jesus vs. Vampire” Gospels*, the sorts of texts that are too often written off by scholars as silly or trivial. Clanton’s conclusions are challenging, admirable in their willingness to assess the ambiguous place of Jesus in American culture: “Jesus functions as an empty shell into which various meanings or significations can be poured” (p. 57).

The following essay, Culbertson’s “‘Tis a Pity She’s (Still) a Whore: Popular Music’s Ambivalent Resistance to the Reclamation of Mary Magdalene,” is one of the volume’s highlights. Reflecting on the fraught experience of teaching the Bible and popular culture, Culbertson offers a frank

assessment of the power of popular imagination and the inability of the academic voice to penetrate that imagination. Surprised by the resilience of images of Mary as a prostitute, Culbertson concludes: “no matter how well we teach the exegesis of Scripture and the hermeneutics of culture, there will still be people who actively resist what we are trying to teach because they ... have something to gain by not changing their minds” (p. 63). This leads him to ask a far more fundamental question, one which too few of the other essays in this volume address directly: what happens to the biblical sources when they are buried under the sheer weight of popular culture?

Jim Perkinson’s “Spittin’, Cursin’, and Outin’: Hip-Hop Apocalypse in the Imperial Necropolis,” is altogether different. Channelling the spoken-word poetics of hip-hop music, Perkinson asserts that the study of the Bible needs a hip-hop aesthetic and ideology to help to reclaim the anti-imperial impulse he sees in the original texts. It is difficult to know what to make of this. Within the staid boundaries of academic writing, such stylistic experimentation is admirable. There is, however, something fundamentally contradictory about Perkinson’s effort, regardless of what one makes of the aesthetic value of his poetry and the fact that he is a member of the spoken-word poetry scene in his native Detroit. Firstly, he (or the editors) sanitises hip-hop, refusing, for example, to spell out the word “nigger” (p. 84), which renders his defiant tone hollow and unconvincing. More damningly, he also ignores the simple fact that the mass marketing of hip-hop has become a multi-billion dollar part of the culture industry and an important part of American cultural imperialism, something that sits very uncomfortably with his championing of the syncopated gospel. This would have been far more convincing coming on the heels of Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five’s seminal 1982 LP *The Message* or Public Enemy’s 1988 masterpiece *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* than in a world where 50 Cent’s *Get Rich or Die Tryin’* topped the charts as long ago as 2003, pushing a consumer-driven ideology of attainment.

Noel Leo Erskine’s “The Bible and Reggae: Liberation or Subjugation?,” a deft mix of biography, history, and insightful lyrical exegesis, looks at how the Bible is refracted in Rastafarianism and then again in the music of Bob Marley. Tex Sample’s “‘Help Me Make It through the Night’: Narrating Class and Country Music in the Theology of Paul” is a similarly well-contextualised look at two of Kris Kristofferson’s songs from 1971 in the context of the stark realities of working-class life in America. Grounded in an uncompromising look at the ideologies of country music and an astute reading of the songs themselves, Sample’s critique of contemporary American working-class Christianity carries all of the authority and weight of his historical analysis.

Arguably the finest single essay in the collection, Roland Boer’s “Jesus of the Moon: Nick Cave’s Christology” continues his on-going exploration of the music of Nick Cave, here providing an in-depth study of Cave’s Christology, as revealed particularly in the 1997 song “Brompton Oratory.” Cave’s Christ, Boer argues, is heretical, a highly sensual, highly ambiguous figure, lacking even a specified gender, leading Boer, in his inimitable fashion, to ask seriously about Cave’s musings on “the smell of you still on my hands”: “Is this the smell of Christ. Or is it the smell of sex, of vaginal fluids, or perhaps something else?” (p. 134) In his sadly brief conclusion, Boer addresses the inherent ideological underpinnings of popular music and “the sacrosanct and inviolable individual,” the hoariest and least examined of all modern clichés:

Cave has “chosen” and constructed the heresy that means the most to him. I must admit that I am the last one to allow anyone else to tell me what to do or think, but I am troubled by the way Cave buys into the underlying ideology of the private individual in the very act of making his heretical choice (p. 137).

Again switching media, Terry Ray Clark’s intriguing “Prophetic Voices in Graphic Novels: The ‘Comic and Tragic Vision’ of Apocalyptic Rhetoric in *Kingdom Come* and *Watchmen*” finds a hopeful and subversive reading of prophecy as an act of *agency*: “As apocalyptic rhetoric, the graphic novels do not teach their readers a tragic, divinely determined perspective on humanity’s fate, but instead

admonish their readers to avoid passivity and to exercise their freedom and power for constructive ends” (p. 155). Steve Taylor, working Michel de Certeau’s methodology from the *Practice of Everyday Life* into a strategy for reading popular culture, provides us with “Reading ‘Pop-Wise’: The Very Fine Art of ‘Making Do’ When Reading the Bible in *bro’Town*.” Reading the animated *bro’Town* with this “pop-wise” sensibility, Taylor argues, “we encounter a specific critique of the cultural captivity of contemporary Bible-reading practices in Pacific Island communities, while still maintaining an explicit theological framing for identity and ethics” (p. 157). The last proper essay in the volume, Tina Pippin’s “Daemons and Angels: The End of the World According to Philip Pullman,” adds to the immense volume of critical literature on Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* and teases out some of the connections between apocalyptic narrative and fairy tales. Implicitly rejecting conservative Christian vilifications of Pullman’s work, Pippin argues instead that his vision of the end times stakes important ground against the biblical Revelation, which presents an eschatological scenario that she argues is both oppressive and irresponsible.

The collection closes with two “Responses,” both of which unintentionally bring out the weaknesses of the book as a whole, as when Laura Copier, Jaap Kooijman, and Caroline Vander Stichele insist that “it is important to keep in mind that the use of the Bible in popular culture is not always meant to be taken (too) seriously, as (biblical) scholars are prone to do ... simultaneously, we should also not underestimate the political workings and ideological implications of popular culture” (p. 194). Innocuous as this statement may seem, it undercuts the volume’s attempts at taking pop culture truly seriously. Adding to this a wealth of minor errors—as when Pippin mistakes science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin as a “fantasy” writer (p. 177)—and the repeated insistence that this kind of scholarship is both “fun and serious” (rather than simply serious), it is difficult to escape the feeling that many of these authors maintain serious reservations about the value of popular culture.

Recalling Moore’s lament, much of the work in this volume seems instantly and badly dated. This is perhaps most obvious in Erin Runions’ closing Response, in which she writes: “these essays implicitly argue that popular culture is more than simply entertaining: it not only reflects but also engages philosophical, theological, and political concerns in its own rewriting of scripture” (p. 201). This insight, which Runions asserts is nothing less than “a new way of thinking about biblical scripture and its contents” (p. 197), would not have been out of place in literary criticism and other disciplines in the Humanities three, even four decades ago. In her introduction, Wainwright highlights an unsurprising conclusion that, again, was anticipated elsewhere decades ago: “The surprising lesson from this volume is, however, the possibility that one comprehensive theoretical framework for the nexus of the Bible and popular culture may not be possible. The media are too diverse and the possible approaches too numerous to try to engage the topic within a single framework” (p. 8). Here again Biblical Studies is coming into contact with the larger world rather late and, more critically, seems blithely ignorant of much of the solid work done over the decades in these other disciplines. This is, in fairness, perhaps a fault with the discipline as a whole rather than one that is specific to *The Bible and/in Popular Culture*, but it nevertheless remains a serious problem that demands a serious response.

## REFERENCES

Moore, S.D. 1998. Que(e)rying Paul: Preliminary Questions. In *Auguries: The jubilee volume of the Sheffield department of biblical studies*, ed. by D. J. A. Clines and S. D. Moore. JSOTSup 269. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.



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