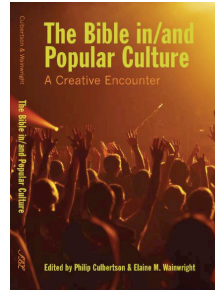


***The Bible in/and Popular Culture: A Creative Encounter*, edited by Philip Culbertson and Elaine M. Wainwright**

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For the vast majority of those living in secular societies, popular cultural texts are perhaps the primary means of engagement with biblical characters, themes, and stories. Popular culture thus exerts a significant influence over the Bible's interpretation and authority, and so should be taken seriously as a space of critical enquiry.

Appearing under the Semeia Series of the Society of Biblical Literature, *The Bible in/and Popular Culture*, edited by Philip Culbertson and Elaine M. Wainwright, contains a number of essays concerned with both the interpretation of the Bible in popular culture and the relationship between the Bible and popular culture. The volume seeks to read the Bible outside of organised religion, in order to see what happens when the biblical text and its reception is analysed as a cultural product. What is the intention and effect of using biblical texts beyond their traditional religious boundaries?

The book consists of thirteen contributions: eleven essays and two responses. While the subject matter is not entirely new terrain, the volume attempts to go beyond some of the more dominant media previously studied (such as film and art) to analyze a wider range of media within popular culture, including television, popular music, and comic books/graphic novels. The collection also does well to avoid a North American (and/or Hollywood) cultural bias by including a global group of contributors and addressing popular cultural texts from other parts of the world.

In her introduction, Wainwright notes that, until now, there has been no systematic study of the interrelationship between the Bible and popular culture to construct general theoretical frameworks. While this volume itself does not seek to provide a single comprehensive theoretical framework, the individual essays rely on a range of theorists of biblical hermeneutics and popular culture to demonstrate the multiple ways that such a topic can be approached. Wainwright observes that a single framework may not be possible given that “the media are too diverse and the possible approaches are too numerous to try to engage the topic within a single framework” (8). Because of this diversity of both content and approach, in what follows I provide an outline of the individual essays, making the occasional critical remark, before summing up to consider how the collection functions as a whole.

To begin, Michael J. Gilmour provides “Some Novel Remarks about Popular Culture and Religion” with regards to Salman Rushdie and the adaptation of sacred texts. Gilmour employs intertextuality and postcolonial theory to explore how the biblical character of Satan appears in both Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* before examining the sociopolitical function of Rushdie’s work. The essay lucidly introduces the concepts of intertextuality and reception history and offers a frame for the subsequent contributions.

The next three essays also investigate the appearance of major biblical characters in the world of popular culture. Mark McEntire, in “*Red Dirt God*: Divine Silence and the Search for Transcendent Beauty in the Music of Emmylou Harris,” compares the characterization of God in the Hebrew Bible with some examples from contemporary music. McEntire observes that the Hebrew Bible gradually leads its readers to a veiled construction of God, one who is silent, elusive, and non-interventionist. This, McEntire convincingly argues, is the God we find in Harris’ album *Red Dirt God*. Similarly, in “Here, There, and Everywhere: Images of Jesus in American Popular Culture,” Dan W. Clanton analyzes the multifarious image of Jesus in American popular culture through the lens of reception history. He covers a wide range of media to suggest that Jesus, in many ways, is a blank slate upon which people (believers and non-believers) can project their ideas. The essay astutely demonstrates how as culture changes, different interpretations of scripture are able to emerge.

Philip Culbertson’s essay “’Tis a Pity She’s (Still) a Whore: Popular Music’s Ambivalent Resistance to the Reclamation of Mary Magdalene,” assesses the reception of the biblical character using Freud and Jung. Culbertson

starts with an anecdote of how many of his students resisted the idea that, according to the New Testament, Mary Magdalene was not a prostitute. The students, he suggests, have something to gain by not changing their mind upon encountering new evidence. Culbertson demonstrates through songs about Mary Magdalene how popular culture has ingrained a particular interpretation of Magdalene that has become more authoritative than the canonical texts themselves. It would have been interesting to see Culbertson engage with Avaren Ipsen's recent book *Sex Working and the Bible*, in which she argues that the liberationist and feminist attempts to "redeem" Mary Magdalene (the hermeneutical standpoint which Culbertson adopts) are often exclusive of, and perpetuate violence towards, sex workers. Is the concern to reclaim Mary Magdalene's "original" desexualized image really out of respect for the biblical text, or is it grounded in a particular framework of human sexuality that regards prostitution as deviant?

The next cluster of essays fixate on the sociopolitical dimensions of the use of biblical themes in popular culture. Jim Perkinson's "Spittin', Cursin', and Outin': Hip-Hop Apocalypse in the Imperial Necropolis" is written to a beat echoing the hip-hop genre and attempts to explore the spaces in between hip-hop music and the Bible. Perkinson illustrates in both the style and content of his essay how music, poetry, and rhythm reveal biblical themes in a way better able to inspire cultural and political change. Similarly, in "The Bible and Reggae: Liberation or Subjugation?" Noel Leo Erskine observes how the Bible has been used in the Jamaican context as both a tool for subjugation by the colonial elites and as a source for liberation, for instance, in Bob Marley's reggae. Marley employed biblical themes and symbols to awaken Jamaica's poor to their situation of oppression. A slightly different approach is found in Tex Sample's "Help me make it through the night': Narrating Class and Country Music in the Theology of Paul." Sample uses the reception of two of Kris Kristofferson's songs within their context of the working class in America to form a lens for reading Paul's theology (with a focus on Galatians). Sample draws on Bakhtin and de Certeau to suggest that the music's popularity is the result of its embedded practices of resistance, something also found in Paul's vision of freedom in Christ.

Roland Boer's essay, "Jesus of the Moon: Nick Cave's Christology," contains some important methodological considerations for biblical scholars engaging with popular culture, through both his innovative use of critical theory and his overall approach. Boer insightfully remarks that when analyzing music we cannot just focus on the lyrics (which text-based critics like biblical

scholars are prone to do), but must, in fact, come to terms with the whole aesthetic experience. Boer then examines Nick Cave's Christology through the lens of three categories: volume and noise, sex and seduction, and heresy. Boer argues that Cave's turn to quieter music relates to his turn to Jesus and that his Christology is heretical and unique.

Popular culture is adept at critiquing traditional Western constructions of God, a recurring theme the remaining essays all pick up on in various ways. Terry Ray Clark, for instance, tackles "Prophetic Voices in Graphic Novels" by placing the apocalyptic rhetoric of *Kingdom Come* and *Watchmen* in dialogue with Conrad Ostwalt's theory of secularization and sacred texts. Ostwalt suggests that contemporary biblical scholarship has devalued the more metaphorical and mythical effects of biblical narratives in addressing questions of ultimate human concern. Clark contends that the graphic novels in question critique the view of a controlling, distant, and violent God. Steve Taylor's essay also shows how popular cultural texts can challenge conventional constructions of God and Western theology. Taylor employs the biblical scholar Gerald West's hermeneutic of "reading otherwise" (that is, with ordinary or non-scholarly readers) to make sense of the portrayal of the Bible and its themes and characters in the New Zealand animated series *bro'Town*. Taylor writes that *bro'Town* uses the Bible in a way that satirizes traditional Pacific Island migrant interpretations in order to critique this way of reading. At the same time, however, the God of *bro'Town* is an Islander wearing a lavalava, challenging racial norms. The Pacific reimagining of God and Jesus is a means of reclaiming their use for contemporary Pacific communities. The closing frame is an essay by Tina Pippin entitled "Daemons and Angels: The End of the World according to Philip Pullman," in which she focuses primarily on the death of God in Pullman's trilogy, *His Dark Materials*. Pippin takes the theme of the apocalyptic through a number of texts and refractions, for instance within the works of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, and then relates the apocalyptic imagination to the empire of the contemporary United States. Pippin's essay is also concerned with the construction of God but in a world where God has dissipated into nothingness.

The collection concludes with two quite different responses that assess both the scope (and limitations) of the volume and its advances in discussions of the Bible in/and popular culture. The first response, co-authored by Laura Copier, Jaap Kooijman, and Caroline Vander Stichele, notes the focus on individual texts of the Bible rather than the Bible as a whole. They also point out the broadness of the concept of popular culture, which blurs

between information and entertainment, politics and meaning-making. Alternatively, Erin Runions' response asks how the essays function in terms of cultural change and the ways in which popular cultural texts cross canonical and literary boundaries. What are the political-ideological impacts of both the use and interpretation of biblical themes and texts within popular culture? Runions also writes that the implicit argument of these essays is that popular culture is more than simply entertainment, but that it "engages philosophical, theological, and political concerns in its own rewriting of scripture" (201).

As a whole, it is difficult to determine whether the collection has significantly advanced our understanding of the Bible and popular culture nexus in a single direction or created more questions that remain unanswered. What the term "popular culture" is thought to encompass remains ambiguous. The focus on cultural texts, for instance, means that other areas of popular culture, for example the secular observance of religious holidays or sport as religion, are overlooked. Regardless, the individual essays show a variety of ways in which scholars might approach the relationship between the Bible and popular cultural texts and the fruits of using an interdisciplinary and eclectic methodological base. The volume also demonstrates the importance of biblical scholarship not confining itself to just questions of the past, but, in fact, taking note of the significant ways in which the Bible affects and is affected by wider culture and a complex history of popular interpretation.

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