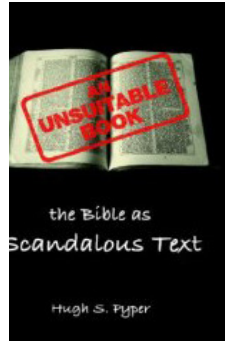


○ REVIEW OF HUGH PYPER, *AN UNSUITABLE BOOK*

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George Aichele reviews Hugh S. Pypers' *An Unsuitable Book: The Bible As Scandalous Text*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005. Pp. viii + 186. \$85 (cloth).



This book collects eleven chapters around the central concept of the unsuitability of the Bible. These chapters do not develop a single sustained argument but rather offer a variety of interlinked approaches to this concept, rather like a wolf pack attacking some large prey, each individual contributing its own distinctive effort to the collaborative enterprise. About half of the chapters have been previously published in various journals and other collections, but most of these have been at least somewhat revised for their appearance in this book. The remarkable breadth of Pypers' interests and knowledge are well displayed here. Biblical texts considered come from the full extent of both the Jewish scriptures and the New Testament, and references to nonbiblical writers range from Alexander Pushkin to Jorge Luis Borges, Muriel Spark, Lewis Carroll, Isak Dinesen, and Franz Kafka, among many others. Søren Kierkegaard is a special favorite of Pypers', as are Julia Kristeva, Harold Bloom, and Sigmund Freud. The book also includes a brief preface, indexes of biblical, rabbinic, and classical references and also of authors, and bibliography.

The book is dedicated to the late Robert Carroll (and also to Ronald Weitzman), and Carroll's influence on Pypers is evident throughout, but especially in the concluding chapter, which is devoted to reflection on Carroll's book and its related metaphor of the Bible as a *Wolf in the Sheepfold* (better known in the USA as *The Bible as a Problem for Christianity*). The Bible's problematic wolfishness results in a 'scandalous document' whose 'wild opposition to [the] world' of conventional Christianity (quoted from Annie Dillard by Pypers on p. 148) renders it entirely unsuitable – but that is a good thing, according to Pypers, and this book is his recognition that this scandalous quality of the biblical texts is a plus, not a minus, for several different reasons. As Carroll said, 'If you want neatness, close the book and turn to theology. But if you can tolerate contradiction and contrariety and can handle hyperbolic drive and chaotic manipulation of metaphor then the

Bible will burn your mind' (quoted by Pyper on p. 165). Unlike the placid Christians chastised by Dillard, Pyper's mind has been burned.

Carroll was a founder and important early contributor to 'cultural criticism' as a focus for biblical scholarship, and Pyper's book is a worthy addition to that stream of criticism. He draws the concept of the Bible's unsuitability from a quote from a novel by Ivy Compton-Burnett, on which he reflects at some length in the book's introductory chapter. Compton-Burnett's words also mention the reading of children, and this is another, closely related interest of Pyper's, which is developed further in Chapters 8-10. The Bible is unsuitable for all readers, but its unsuitability is perhaps specially evident in relation to young readers, which is all the more reason, according to Pyper, that they should read it, although not in the horribly mutilated form of 'children's Bibles'. After all, it is children to whom the kingdom of God belongs, as Jesus said. They are the chosen ones, the (Passover) lambs – who are also, as Pyper reminds us, the edible ones. It is children (as well, perhaps, as those of us who dare to become child-like) who can best perceive the powerful strangeness of the biblical texts.

In Chapter 2, Pyper draws on his background as a student of evolutionary genetics to describe the Bible as a 'meme pool', whose goal is always to promote its own survival. A biological species is defined by and as a gene pool, in which the genes are units of genetic information. The gene pool replicates itself through the procreation and viability of those individual members of the species who possess 'successful' traits. Following the work of biologist Richard Dawkins and philosopher Daniel Dennett, Pyper defines a meme as a unit of cultural information, and he understands the Bible as a collection of memes that replicates itself by encouraging human beings to make copies. As such it is an instance of 'exosomatic heredity', and as in any parasitic relation, 'the interests of the text and those of its nurturing community may not coincide' (p. 20). The great diversity of Bibles – of books within the Bible, of translations and editions, and even of canons – increases the prospects of its survival. This theme of survival also reappears in Chapters 3 and 4 (both on Job) and 7 (on Lamentations) among others: survival as a theme in the texts as well as survival of the texts themselves. Indeed, in many chapters of his book, Pyper's continued interest in biology is evident.

Chapter 3 concerns the role of the male reader in relation to the silences of biblical texts (often the silences of women), and it introduces a second approach to the Bible's unsuitability, which also reappears in Chapters 8 (on child sacrifice and "family values") and 9 (on circumcision).

Insofar as the Hebrew Bible is a source of revelation, it is a revelation of darkness as well as light, of the involvement of human – mostly, but not exclusively, male – fear, greed, insecurity and viciousness in all that speaks of the divine, and of the constant psychological process of the engendering of personifications on whom these emotions can be vented (p. 101).

This is the question of the text as both wound and that which wounds: text as tissue, as (fore)skin, as flesh that must be pierced or cut in order to signify, but also text as weapon or tool, mutilating the reader. Derrida and others have indeed already surveyed much of this territory, but Pyper illuminates their analyses through the wry ambivalence of his own reading of the Bible, developing further implications and remarkable insights. This theme reappears in a somewhat different mode

in Chapter 10, Pyper's somewhat autobiographical reflections on childhood memorising of metrical psalms from the Scottish Psalter and learning from that experience that language could be distorted for pleasure. 'Language was being twisted under constraints which could ride roughshod over conventions of grammar in the interest of some conceived higher purpose. The tortured syntax exposed some of the sinews of English in a startling way (p. 137).'

Chapter 5 presents Pyper's take on the work of Harold Bloom: *The Book of J*, but also (and in the context of) the larger Bloomian project of the 'anxiety of influence', 'the Western canon', and the inevitability of misreading. Like his Yale colleagues, Paul de Man and Geoffrey Hartman, Bloom deserves more attention from biblical scholars, especially those who are deconstructively inclined, and Pyper's attention to Bloom (as well as Kierkegaard) is part of what makes his readings so interesting. Pyper's interest in Bloom continues into Chapter 6, which attends to many of the modern 'versions of Judas' as forms of fascination with, once again, silences or gaps in the biblical texts. Judas becomes a crux in the struggle of modernism with its Christian roots, a kind of magnet for heterodox speculations about Christ. The normalisation of Bible reading, through canon and theology, is countered through other strong misreadings, and the Bible's scandalous silences about Judas become one more way that the biblical meme pool ensures its own survival.

This is an enjoyable book, ablaze with remarkable insights into the Bible in relation to contemporary culture and written in a highly readable style, informal and witty but no less scholarly for all that. I only have two concerns, neither of them terribly serious yet each one worth mentioning here. First, the book is marred by a large number of typos, mostly minor mis-spellings or omitted or extraneous words – likely signs of a somewhat hasty rewriting and insufficient copy-editing. These errata do not seriously interfere with the understanding of the text – although in a book about both the inevitability of misreading and the effects of 'bad writing', that might be a particular concern – but they are quite annoying. Second, and perhaps more important, one downside of Pyper's innovative approaches is a tendency to leap from one insight to the next without slowing down for much reflection on larger implications. For example, if we take seriously the idea of the Bible as meme pool and 'active replicator' (perhaps even a virus!), are there theological or ideological implications? Or, if the Bible's silences inevitably result in a proliferation of misreadings, some stronger than others, are there grounds for preferring some readings over others? If reading causes pain, is there an 'ethics of reading'? Questions such as these continually lurk in the background. As a result, I finished each chapter feeling a bit breathless but also vaguely dissatisfied, wanting more – as perhaps I should, with any unsuitable book. This is by no means to say that Pyper's book is unreflective or that his analyses are weak – merely that his book makes me very much aware of how much more still needs to be said on these matters.