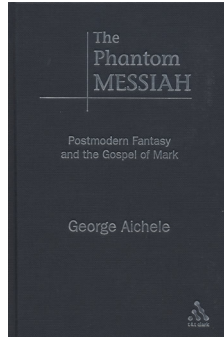


○ REVIEW OF GEORGE AICHELE, *THE PHANTOM MESSIAH: POSTMODERN FANTASY AND THE GOSPEL OF MARK*

(NEW YORK: T & T CLARK, 2006)

Tina Pippin, Agnes Scott College



Moving adeptly between critical theories and biblical scholarship, George Aichele presents a bold rereading of the Jesus stories in the Gospel of Mark. Aichele uses his deep knowledge of fantasy theories to show us the act of ‘reading a gospel as fantasy.’ This strong collection of essays on Mark represents the possibilities of postmodern readings, especially how the theoretical, theological, mythic, fictional, and fantastic intersections connect and disconnect in multiple ways.

Aichele takes journeys (and sometimes leaps) outside the official ‘canon’ of the historical critical method of biblical interpretation and engages multiple conversation partners, often simultaneously: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Kafka, Tolkien, Jack Zipes, Tzvetan Todorov, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, ‘Mark,’ various Gnostic Gospels, mainstream biblical scholars, Clark Kent (Superman), and Buffy Summers (the Vampire Slayer), and several Jesuses, to name a few. The focus is on Mark’s aggressive gospel and on different ways to meet both Mark and Mark’s Jesus(es). He summarizes his reading of Mark: ‘Mark brings the reader to near belief, and as long as the implied reader remains suspended in hesitation between the uncanny and the marvelous, no point of focalization can succeed in determining the meaning of Mark’s text. The language is awkward, the theology is uncertain, and the ending is unsatisfactory’ (232). Aichele heads straight for the most irritating or confusing parts of Mark: for example, the dishonored family’s unsuccessful attempt to retrieve Jesus, the indecipherable parables, the often violent miracles Jesus performs, the confrontation at Philippi, the ‘ransom for many,’ the appearance of a ghost-like Jesus walking on the water, and the non-appearance of Jesus after his death.

The first part of the book is a fuller discussion of utilizing fantasy fiction and theories to read Mark. Aichele takes the postmodern turn of imagining other worlds with/in Mark. Reading against the grain of modernist dualities of real and unreal, Aichele shows the power of the fantastic at work in the gospel narrative. It is acknowledging these spaces in the text, not some meaning beyond the text, that opens the text to potentials of transformation. In other words,

faith-full readers bring ideas about Jesus's identity to the text, aligning their positions with the singular Jesus they imagine in the gospels. They deny the fictionality (or hyperreality, see chapter 7) of the text and of the Jesus(es) in these texts. Aichele relates that 'the resistance to belief appears in the fantastic elements of Mark's story, the very elements that are rewritten or removed by Matthew and Luke' (58). The confusing, indeterminate, problematic parts of Mark these other two gospels change or ignore give new meaning to the term 'synoptic gospels' for this trio. The term becomes ironic since they really do not see with *one* eye (syn-optic) but with/through instruments of their own design. Mark's eye is his mind's eye, the imaginative viewing of someone who is an 'eye-witness' in the sense of this fantastic eye (and narratological, via Seymour Chatman's diagram of the relation between authors, readers, and texts made into an eye by Alan Culpepper). A kaleidoscope is perhaps a better postmodern optic image. But the adventure of reading Mark as postmodern fantasy is more like entering Alice's rabbit hole or Tolkien's Middle Earth (notice I did not mention Narnia!).

Part Two focuses on the particular fantasy of the Gospel of Mark. Aichele's central point is that by reading the gospel as fantasy literature, one can discover new ways of thinking about Jesus's identity and the meaning of this gospel's portrayal of Jesus (132). Aichele shows how violence works in Mark, a theme of violence that extends beyond the apocalyptic ground zero, Mark 13. Jesus is murdered but there are no stories of resurrection or appearance (154). At the end of the gospel we are left with fear (said about the women, and implied about the hidden male disciples). The other gospels react against such narrative loose ends. Of the problematic, abrupt ending in Mark 16:8, Aichele says that the women's fearful 'not telling anyone anything' about the tomb leaves 'the reader with the paradox of a story that was never told' (155). Modernist scholars attempt to tame and control Mark and its (singular) meaning; Aichele reveals how deceived they are. Mark has a mind (or minds) of its own and to truly honor the text is to read 'outside the canon' (chapter 4).

Aichele demonstrates ways to read extra-canonically in Part Three where he looks at 'Postcanonical Readings' of cyborg and virtual bodies in Philip K. Dick (stories, *The Man in the High Castle*; *Do Androids Dream in Electronic Sheep?* and its film version, *Blade Runner*), and of the television shows *Lois and Clark*, *Smallville* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. This section includes the most focused popular culture readings of/with Mark. Aichele is able to deepen the discourse of not only Markan scholarship but also the gospel itself. Jesus, like Superman, has a secret identity that we as readers already know. Readers want to know the true identity of the son of man, of being privy to the 'messianic secret.' As Aichele notes, Mark's gospel calls those who would be insiders to lives of repentance, poverty and servitude (Mark 10:17–22; see discussion on 180–181). Jesus is an endless simulacrum (Giles Deleuze), a copy upon a copy, pieced together in the guise of the Word in the New Testament (180). Thus is Aichele engaging in a christological task of reading the many lives of Jesus in popular culture, side-by-side and sometimes criss-cross (intertextually) with Mark's gospel. I found this section of readings to be the most concrete and enjoyable.

I had the pleasure of hearing many of these chapters presented in draft form at conferences over the course of recent years. Hearing the separate chapters allowed Aichele a chance to draw a full creative scene with each entrance into Mark. As I read these offerings as a whole, I found the amount of theoretical knowledge a bit overwhelming. These readings of Mark's gospel lead the reader in new directions; any mainstream biblical scholar will hesitate, even cry out, as the

disciples do as ‘the phantom messiah’ approaches them in their boat on the Sea of Galilee. The mainstream tends to go for safer readings, readings that exorcize ahead of time the spectres of Jesus (or Marx, for that matter). They preempt the power of a sudden encounter in the dark night of the text. Aichele, in a kind of Rod Sterling-in-*The Twilight Zone* type of role, emerges from his shadowy theory space and announces the basic plot for each encounter of this phantom messiah, allowing the actors (philosophers, theologians, fantasy writers and theorists, gospel characters and ghostly writers) to play out the stories. Too many scholars, like the disciples in Mark 6:48–52, have hardened their hearts to these theoretical possibilities. Besides, Aichele could be leading us astray. Like in José Scrimmage’s novel, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, both Satan and God sit with Jesus on the boat, and it is really difficult to distinguish the good guys from the bad. Aichele does not want to sort out these identities for us; rather, he wants us to join him in the fun of the fantasy genre and of experiencing the gospel in new and sometimes fleeting ways. The indeterminate text reflects back on the indeterminate reader, allowing for possible liberation and/or transformation (see 233). And the choir of voices Aichele gathers may or may not be a heavenly one (with fantasy literature utopia is also a phantom), but what matters is the gathering and the fantastic cacophony that occurs with his conducting skill. One can hope that more than just the ‘choir’ hears Aichele’s words.