

○ ECO-JUSTICE, MULTIVOCALITY, THE RELIGIOUS LEFT AND THE GHOSTS OF REVOLUTION

A REPLY TO AICHELE, ELVEY AND JOBLING

Roland Boer, *University of Newcastle*

INTRODUCTION

Let me begin by saying thank you to Anne Elvey, George Aichele and David Jobling for their intelligent, critical and provocative comments on my *Rescuing the Bible*. For some reason, at the Auckland conference where they made their initial responses, all manner of small theological groups emerged from their burrows (I met some people from my own dim and distant past who had never been to an international conference in their lives) and the meeting as a whole took on a very theological tone with a distinctly conservative swerve. So it was a relief to be able to talk about more radical biblical matters.

The main questions relating to *Rescuing the Bible* that emerge from the papers by Elvey, Aichele and Jobling boil down to six: the absence of an eco-justice dimension; the question as to whether the religious Left has had the Bible stolen or whether it gave the Bible away; whether the Bible as canon is inherently multivocal or univocal; the issue of interpretation, or the opposition of use and abuse; the nature of the religious Left; and the importance of the ghosts of revolution. Not a bad collection, really, so let me see what can be done with them.

Most of these issues are specific to the individual papers, but there are a few common themes. In each case, my three interlocutors ask how one should respond to a manifesto? David Jobling adopts it as his own, since it expresses many of his own political and religious positions, although not without misgivings on the 'manifesto of the month' that we find with the Blackwell series. Anne Elvey nods in approval, but only partially, since it leaves a large zone untouched. George Aichele wonders how one should respond to a manifesto. A critical academic response is hardly appropriate, he feels. A manifesto is really an effort to provide a coherent position, a narrative that voices the desires and wishes of many people, no matter how personal it may be, and a reference and resource for those involved in political action. Not so much a call to action, it is what activists read to make sense of their political activity. And I can say that in part at least this manifesto has been successful. I have received messages from those involved in both the religious and secular Left (despite the hostility to the religious Left that David Jobling detects), asking questions, thanking me, engaging in further discussion, asking for more. Much to my pleasure, this manifesto has crossed from the rarefied atmosphere of academia to the public sphere.

There are two other preliminary matters. Anne Elvey asks why one would want to read the Bible in the first place. Is it desire, she asks? Is it religious commitment (a very common assumption)? Is it the cultural history of a text that is, for better or worse, one of our central documents? Is it because it has been and remains a complex and troubled source of revolutionary inspiration? All of the above, I would suggest. George Aichele wonders why one would want to rescue the Bible at all, given its woeful history in justifying myriad forms of oppression in the name of God and church? My simple answer (given at the Auckland meeting) is that the Bible remains important for too many people for us to ignore it. A more detailed answer, which I explore below in the

discussion of multivocality and univocality, is that it is neither simply an oppressive nor simply a liberating text. Each of these positions is taken up all too often: the Bible's deepest and central message is one of liberation, both spiritual and material; or it is an inescapably conservative collection that supports the status quo and has a hard word for those who would challenge the oppression of workers, women, ethnic groups, nature, indigenous people and many others. In response, one of my main arguments is that the Bible is both. It can be used to justify obedience to regimes that grind people into the dust, to back up despotic power and the most brutal of acts, but it has provided and continues to provide one revolutionary movement after another with a world-view and motivation for their insurrectionary acts. For that reason, it is too important to discard.

ECO-JUSTICE

The main point of Anne Elvey's essay is that I do not give enough attention to the environment and what is often called eco-justice. Anne both points out a shortcoming and wants to extend the project of *Rescuing the Bible*. However, before I focus on this issue there are one or two smaller matters raised by Anne with which I will deal briefly.

We'll agree to disagree on whether the Australian Labour Party is any improvement in government over the former Liberal-National coalition (Anne prefers reform over revolution). More substantially, Anne suggests I am attempting to produce a canon for the Left, specifically one that favours revolutionary readings at the expense of reactionary ones. One response would be the usual one: we all have our favourite texts and we are merely kidding ourselves if we argue that we don't. This is true as far as it goes, but it doesn't get to the heart of the matter. There are at least two ways in which such a canon within the canon is taken. One is to argue that our favoured texts express the deeper 'truth' of the Bible and that those which contradict it have a lesser status (Anne suspects I am playing this game at times). We might demote those troublesome texts by arguing that they are later interpolations, or that they are texts particular to their time and not of universal relevance (a dubious theological move if ever there was one), or they may be regarded as progressive for their time. A second tactic is to see the Bible as a vast orchard or supermarket. We can wander through and pick an apple here, a cherry there and maybe a banana somewhere else (I was accused of this on a BBC radio debate). Neither approach gets us very far.

By contrast, I prefer a more conflictual approach. Let me put it this way: many of the stories in the Bible ask you to take sides. Take the constant stories of murmuring and rebellion by the children of Israel in the wilderness. They complain against Moses, Aaron and God for bringing them into the desert to wander in circles and live on starvation rations. Again and again they are punished and we are supposed to agree that they have been punished for rebelling and sinning. But I am more interested in taking sides with the rebels. Given a choice between autocratic rulers (Moses really comes through as a theocratic tyrant; while in Ezekiel, Yahweh appears as a complete bastard) and those who rebel against them, I know whose side I am on. The upshot of this approach is that we can't take some stories and quietly dump the others: we need the whole lot so we can see what is at stake in these stories and take sides where needed.

But I am more interested in responding to the main issue of Anne's paper, namely eco-justice. She charges me with neglecting a – for Anne and many others, *the* – political issue of our time.

In particular she objects to my criticism of the widespread argument that we suffer from a spiritual malaise, especially in relation to the environment. In sum: through excess rationality and technology we have become spiritually separated from nature, or what Anne prefers to call the ‘more than human other’. Anne wants a more balanced approach that links material and spiritual elements in dealing with our eco-crisis.

How to respond? A small correction is in order. I do not say that the ecological crisis is to be attributed purely to spiritual causes, but rather that those who so attribute it have missed the point. To argue for a spiritual primary cause is to argue from idealist principles – all we need is a change in attitude and change will follow. Fortunately, neither Anne nor I do this.

A more detailed response needs to bring in Anne’s six eco-justice theses. In brief they are:

1. A more than human alliance is necessary.
2. Such an alliance recognises both human power and vulnerability.
3. A relevant politics and ethics are needed.
4. The Bible is a material artefact by one part of one species.
5. We should be open to the potential inclusion of divine otherness (through negative theology and phenomenology).
6. Interpretation should resist abusive readings and encourage eco-activism.

Since Anne offers these six theses (in response to the six theses that structure *Rescuing the Bible*) as a gift, I accept the gift, albeit not without a few comments. To begin with, I am troubled by the invocation of ethics. I must admit to being thoroughly sceptical of the way ethics is used. In its current usage it is really an effort to tell me how I should live my individual life or how we must live collectively. At that level it is little different from preaching. Unfortunately too much of green politics is bedevilled by such preaching or moralising. This is another argument that I am developing elsewhere, but ethics is really a second-order reflection on how people relate to one another – and in the case of green politics, how human beings as part of nature do so. However, I do want to make one point: the moralising that passes for ethics usually assumes that there is an ‘other’ with whom I seek to relate. This ‘ethics’ sets out to provide guidelines as to how I should relate to this ‘other’. But who tells me what this ‘other’ is? Why is it an ‘other’? I would suggest that we have the relation topsy-turvy. It is standing on its head and needs to be put back on its feet: the ‘other’ is not prior to ‘ethics’, for the current form of ‘ethics’ produces this ‘other’ in its very effort to tell us how we should relate.

Further, the narratives of the eco-crisis usually follow three lines. We often find depictions of how bad our situation is and what it will look like if we continue in our (evil) ways. What is needed is a change in life, a new direction that recognises how mistaken we are and sets out on a new path. In other words, we need repentance and conversion. Or we find those who drop the last part and forecast our imminent doom, much like Jonah in relation to Nineveh. When God saves Nineveh after the people repent, Jonah is thoroughly miffed, for he wanted to see Nineveh destroyed. We also come across those who argue that doom is inevitable, so all we can do is try to save a portion so that life may begin again. In other words, alongside the repentance and Jonah narratives we also have the Noah story.

I do not outline these options – those of repentance, Jonah and Noah – to say that we should dispense with them and find something new. But I do think we need to be aware of the narrative

we choose and consider which one will have the most effect. That brings me to my next point: it seems that we can imagine all manner of disasters, except the end of capitalism – even when we face an economic crisis to rival the Great Depression! It might be a meteorite, or perhaps a mega-volcano, or a new epidemic, or the Muslim hordes out-breeding us and taking over, or environmental collapse. Yet the collapse of capitalism is not high on the list, if it makes the list at all. On this matter I am largely persuaded by the eco-socialist movement (see the ‘Ecosocialist Manifesto’ at <http://gptu.net/gleft/glesoc.shtml>). I am also persuaded by David Harvey’s (1998) argument that the environment as we know it is as dependent on capitalism as capitalism is dependent on the environment. The collapse of one leads to the end of the other – but that is as it should be. If we want the end of capitalism, then we will also see the end of the natural environment as we know it. Or let me put it this way: nature and capitalism constitute the enabling limits of one another. Capitalism with its need for unlimited growth must come up against a limited planet at some point. So, just as one is not imaginable without the other, they also lead to mutual destruction. While capitalism systematically dismantles the world of the more than human other, that world eventually brings capitalism to its knees. Either that or we intervene. As my friend, Joost Hircz, a scientist, Marxist and politician in Amsterdam says, it is simply stupid for a species to produce a social and economic system that leads to its own destruction.

Finally, there is one very important item that is implicit in Anne’s theses, namely that political change may well come from outside human agency. Let me brazenly generalise: all hitherto models of revolution or indeed of reform have been anthropocentric. Human beings are both the cause of the rot and the agents of change. But it seems to me that we may well have come to a time when the agency for change will come from those ‘more than human others’ that Anne invokes. In other words, we will be left with no option but to radically alter our economic and social structures.

GIVING AWAY THE BIBLE

In his response, George Aichele stops me in my tracks and takes on a major argument early in the book. I argue that while the religious Left has been obsessed with identity politics it has had the Bible stolen from it. These various programs – anti-racist, feminist, gay and lesbian, indigenous and environmental causes (all of them very worthy) – are conveniently labelled by the religious Right as ‘issues’ that are not central to the Gospel, which they of course conveniently create in their own image.

George simply points out that the religious Left has not so much had the Bible stolen from it as it has given it away. And George is absolutely correct. Too often the religious Left finds the Bible an embarrassment, turning red-faced at one silly story after another, dropping large slabs in favour of a canon within the canon that favours the ethical sayings of Jesus and the social critique of the prophets. So what is to be done? I think that my argument for the inseparability of the narratives of oppression and liberation is one way to go. If we want to take sides with the rebels who are punished by the motley collection of despots, tyrants and megalomaniacs, then we need these colourful characters as much as the sly rebels. Another way to go is to follow David Jobling’s argument that the religious Left hasn’t given the Bible away completely – he cites a few instances where it certainly claims the Bible as its own.

But then George goes on to point out that the religious Right does not really feel as though they own the Bible; it owns them. It is like the relation between the flea and the dog: it is not that the flea owns the dog, even if it sometimes thinks so, but that the dog owns the flea. Do we not say, ‘Spot (or Rover or whoever) *has* fleas’? So also with the religious Right. The example is my own, but it leads George to make one of his most arresting statements: ‘If that is the case, then perhaps what we need to do is not rescue the Bible as such, but rescue people (including ourselves) from owning or being owned by the Bible’. The Bible is of course no one’s exclusive possession, but I would not follow the line that the Bible as such should be dumped *in toto*. Here we come back to a point I made at the beginning: the Bible is too important for vast numbers of people for us to drop it in a recycling bin.

UNIVOCAL OR MULTIVOCAL?

All of this is really the warm-up for George Aichele’s main point, namely that the Bible is primarily a univocal document. This is a direct challenge to the crucial plank in *Rescuing the Bible* that the Bible is by nature a multivocal document. I make this argument for both historical and political reasons, although one could also add theological ones. George’s challenge is made in terms of the function of myth and the nature of the canon.

Before I consider this challenge in more detail, I should point out that it is part of an ongoing debate between George Aichele, David Jobling, and me, among others. For some time now George has criticised the Church (singular) in various ways, not least for its imperialist control over the Bible. David has responded that the ‘Church’ is a theological construct – think of the Protestant notion of the ‘church invisible’ and the Roman Catholic one of the ‘Catholic’ church. In fact, there is no monolithic ‘Church’ but only myriad churches. The point is as obvious as it is troubling for George’s position, at least in my opinion. Do we settle for a theological construct or for the empirical reality of massive divergence between different types of Christianity?

This point neatly slips into the difference George and I have over univocality and multivocality. Is the Bible primarily univocal or multivocal? If the former, then multivocality is what arises later, in resistance to the univocality of the text (George’s position). If it is by nature multivocal, then univocality is an imposition on a fractious and unruly mob of texts (my position).

The main points of George’s argument are as follows. The Bible is univocal since it is monolithic, totalitarian and imperialist. If we want to speak of the Bible as a collection of myths (as I do, especially political myths), then the problem is that myth by nature imposes order and is therefore totalitarian. This is a no-go zone for George, who prefers micro-narratives rather than any master narrative. Further, by definition ‘canon’ designates what is fixed, hegemonic and monolithic. The upshot is a paradox: if we want to rescue the Bible, then we need to rescue the Bible from the canon; the catch is that canon defines the Bible as ‘Bible’, so by rescuing it we destroy it. In fact, the very act of rescuing the Bible is a totalitarian move and that should be avoided at all costs. In short, George can’t see any point in rescuing a collection of texts that are by definition univocal and totalitarian.

Now I have a different take on all this. For starters (and in order to tease a little), I think we need to distinguish between beneficial and repressive totalitarians. Usually this distinction takes the form of totalising (which is fine in some circumstances) and totalitarian (not so good). But I would like to take this a step further and argue that some totalitarianisms can do a pretty good

job. One has only to look at the age of Greek tyrants or indeed Tito in the former Yugoslavia to see that a benign dictator is not a bad form of government at times. Why would I want to make this argument? Firstly, it challenges the political assumption that democracy=good and totalitarianism=bad, an assumption steeped in the tradition of liberalism in the USA and other comparable places. Secondly, it is a staple of an earlier form of post-structuralism, in which the challenge to the monolithic and universal patterns of structuralism came to be undermined by the challenge to master narratives. The reason usually put forward is that such master narratives suppress all manner of other voices – those of women, indigenous people, gays and lesbians and so on. Once again, this is a deeply liberal argument.

However, let me tackle George's arguments systematically. To begin with, his position on myth (that it imposes order) comes very close to that of Theodor Adorno. Faced with the wholesale use of myth by the Nazis, Adorno regarded myth as the first stage in fixing and ordering. It is a short step to the instrumental reason of capitalism, for which myth is the perpetual underside. In response, Adorno proposed that the pre-mythic moment of magic and nature was worth further exploration. I am not so sure. In my *Political Myth* (2009a) I trace the way myths throw out all manner of options for social, psychic, sexual and political relations – options that are not extant in the societies that produce those myths. In other words, the moment of closing down comes after myth, which preserves the openness of imagination. Obviously, my point is that myths witness to a primary multivocality. I have written 'myths' in the plural for a reason, since there is never one myth.

The nub of George's argument turns on canon. The Bible does not exist as Bible until the moment of canonisation, which must be defined as a political decision made by one or more people (the church councils of the 4th and 5th centuries). Forgive me for making an empirical point, but has the canon of a singular Bible ever been closed? Is closure possible? In light of continued variations in canonical scope, the long and difficult history of trying to close the multiple canons, and the ongoing task of deciding what version of a text is canonical, I would argue that the canon simply cannot be closed. Why? The literature that has been gathered in the Bible is far too diverse and fractious ever to be comfortable with some over-arching framework that is imposed upon it. Even with the most minimalist position, the literature we have in the Bible spans a millennium. If we were to gather some of the most significant literature of Western civilisation of the last thousand years, we would face comparable problems. Put Shakespeare, Descartes, Kant, Marx and Nietzsche together and it would be a push to find some water-tight coherence among them. Of course, this effort goes on all the time, but the difficulties of producing the canon of Western literature faces insurmountable problems and profound differences of opinion. So also with the biblical canon.

But then another problem arises: the Bible is not defined purely by its status as canon, since the literature of the various canons precedes those final decisions. Here we need to include in our reckoning those maddeningly intangible items such as authority, influence and prestige, although here too the role of astute and sly political operators should not be ignored. In many cases the decision to canonise constitutes a recognition of such intangibles; that is, the decision to include a text in the canons of the Bible may be seen as a rubber stamp for the already existing status of that text.

Further, the notion of a singular 'Bible' is as much a theological construct as the singular 'Church'. At this level George's criticisms are spot on, for he deconstructs those theological cat-

egories. Yet beyond those constructs there is the empirical reality of multiple Bibles, as George shows so well, passing through, in a fashion reminiscent of Régis Debray (2004), the phases of written, print and electronic media. Are these not multiple Bibles rather the singular entity called 'the Bible'.

At one level I do agree with George in *Rescuing the Bible*: canon is a unifying move, an effort at ideological hegemony. As David Jobling astutely points out, George and I share this basic perspective. I also agree with George that such a canon is highly unstable, as is the case with all hegemonies (this was the basic drive of Gramsci's invention of the concept). However, it is not because multivocality has crept in the back door and disrupted the calm univocality of the Bible; rather, it is a result of the impossible effort to impose some order and unity on a multifarious collection. This difference leads to varying assessments of what that instability means. For George it is a sign that the castle is crumbling – a battlement here, a wall there, a gate somewhere else. For me it means that there are many political possibilities that open up, some of which are progressive.

Now I would like to introduce David Jobling's point concerning the common starting position of both George Aichele and me, namely that canon is an effort at the 'control of meaning'. Where we differ is how resistance shows its face. David finds this approach to canon problematic, even if it is a widespread position. In its place he offers an angle on canon drawn from Norman Gottwald: the canon is a result of socio-economic tensions. David doesn't spell out what those tensions are except for mentioning modes of production, so let me do so.

For Gottwald the basic tension is between what he calls a 'tributary' mode of production and a 'communitarian' one. The former, as the name suggests, is a brutal system of exploitation in which a ruling elite draws its surplus from the peasant population. By contrast, the communitarian mode is what characterised early Israel, which broke away from the tributary system to set up one based on communal cooperation in a harsh environment. Gottwald traces the tension between these two modes of production (although they often function as Weberian ideal types) through the history of Israel and then early Christianity. For example, the prophets and Jesus embody one line, while the kings and priests embody another. I leave aside much debate over this argument, but in regard to canon, the argument is that it productively manifests and preserves this tension at a literary and theological level. We could introduce Lévi-Strauss's argument (which David knows all too well) that cultural products are efforts to deal with irresolvable social and economic tensions, and that they nevertheless manifest these tensions within them.

Actually, it's not a bad argument and I am willing to embrace it since it enhances my own basic position that the Bible is politically multivalent. I am not sure that we need to be tied to different modes of production, since each mode of production is a compromise between contradictory forces, and since the whole question of the economics of the ancient Near East remains unresolved and under-examined. Yet I have made a somewhat similar argument concerning Paul's mass of oppositions in the New Testament (2009b).¹ The reason Paul's arguments are weighed down with these contradictions is that he sought a passage through them, primarily by means of the narrative of the death and resurrection of Jesus. But in his effort to provide a solution, those tensions show up all over the place – flesh and spirit, Jew and Greek, grace and law, and so on. In this light I am happy to grant David's argument concerning Qoheleth, for it is better than my own take on it.

USE AND ABUSE

David Jobling has been part of our conversation on a couple of occasions already, particularly with the debate over multivocality and univocality as well as the issue of use and abuse. What I would like to do here is pick up the latter issue, for David makes some thoughtful comments concerning it.

He points out that what is really at stake with the distinction between use and abuse is the question: do texts speak as they are or do they need some subtle hermeneutics? As far as David is concerned, I do both. On some occasions, I state that a text is abusive as is, without any interpretive embellishments. Yet on other occasions, I argue that a text – like the pseudo-Pauline injunction that those who do not work should not eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10) – has been misinterpreted by a conservative like the Australian politician, Tony Abbott. Abbott uses it to justify a ‘work for the dole campaign’ while I point out that in its context it refers to travelling preachers. David suggests that it may be useful to do both for political expediency; sometimes a deft piece of interpretation may work best, while at others a simple denouncing of an abusive text may be better. Anne Elvey also has problems with my use-abuse distinction, pointing out that I introduce a new kind of literalism in that distinction. That is, we must take the text as is and then decide whether it is useful or not.

Let me recap my argument before responding. By ‘abuse’ I do not mean the misinterpretation of a text, since that assumes some pristine meaning that we may recover through the correct interpretation (which then becomes ‘use’). Instead, by abuse I mean the direct use of a text for abusive purposes. The Bible has plenty of obnoxious and toxic texts that can be used quite easily as they are. When such direct *use* is done for oppressive and reactionary reasons, it is also *abuse*. I realise there are problems with the distinction, and that I waver between arguing that an interpretation of a text is mistaken and that a text should be taken as is. Of course, no text comes to us uninterpreted, but the reason for making this move is to counter the tendency to detoxify the Bible in some situations. Some progressives for whom the Bible is an important religious text need to recover some of it in usable form. So we find attempts to argue that Paul was really quite progressive in regard to women, gays and lesbians, the environment, and so forth. My response is that there are some brutal texts in the Bible and that any amount of interpretation is not going to get around that fact – think of Jephthah’s daughter in Judges 11 or the Levite’s concubine in Judges 19.

What are we to do with such texts? Here my earlier comments in response to Anne Elvey and George Aichele are relevant. Often biblical narratives ask us to take sides, or try to persuade us that one side is right and the other wrong. The story of the tree(s) in the Garden of Eden is a good example, as is the murmuring of the Israelites in the desert. Other texts leave the question wide open, such as Job, although we tend to take Job’s side. I have already indicated which side I prefer to take in these and other biblical narratives. In terms of the use/abuse opposition, that means I take sides against abusive texts and in favour of texts we can use productively and progressively. Does that mean I wish to throw those abusive texts out of my saddle-bags to lighten the load? Not at all, for they are inseparably entwined with one another. In other words, we need those abusive texts so that we can take sides against them and those who claim they give divine sanction for lethal and reactionary positions.

WHERE IS THE RELIGIOUS LEFT?

The topic that most fires David Jobling up is what he senses to be my disparagement of the religious Left and organised religion in general. He takes me to task for being too pessimistic, pointing out that, contrary to my depiction, the religious Left is alive and well. But there is also another element within this criticism – the question of experience and my own context. Let me take these issues in turn.

David points out that the overall tone of the book is quite negative in regard to organised religion. He quotes a particular passage – outlining my scepticism that churches *as a whole* may be progressive – and argues that it is characteristic of the book as a whole (I don't think this is fair). Suggesting that this is a fashionable perspective from the secular Left, he provides an example of one church that may be regarded as progressive as a whole – the United Church of Canada. Even more, the UCC is closely aligned politically with the New Democratic Party of Canada, a party that wants those Christians involved to be involved out of religious conviction. I remember my delight when living in Canada to find a decent and viable political party of the Left – even if it is more social democrat than socialist – since it opened up political debate to spectrum much wider than in Australia. I was also delighted to learn that the NDP's base was rural Canada, for my own experience was that rural areas tend to be dreadfully conservative. So it seems to me that this example should be added to those I provide in the book – I refer to Gerald West and Erin Runions and then say that I leave it up to the reader to come up with more examples. David has done that by showing that the alliance between secular and religious Lefts is already happening in Canada.

So is the tone of the book disparaging to organised religion? Perhaps that depends on the reader. I take David's point, but should mention that others within organised religion have found my assessment rather more positive. I should add that I also think that anti-clericalism is part of any healthy theology, as Luther and Calvin showed all too well.

Before I move onto matters of context and experience, I would like to respond to David's sense that I have implicitly attacked his own situation. This comes from my argument that many biblical scholars are caught in contradiction: on the one hand, they are supposed to undertake 'scientific' research that excludes issues of divine causality. So biblical history is concerned with economics, politics, society, and other matters, but not the way God acts in history. Or exegesis is concerned with matters such as intention (for some diehards), structure, ideology, language, politics (here too), economics (and again), and a host of other matters, but it is not concerned with how God speaks to us. On the other hand, many biblical scholars are believers who attend church or synagogue on a regular basis and often preach from the Bible where God is very much a concern. To me that seems like a contradiction, and many have dealt with it in different ways. This depiction in the book has led to a number of misunderstandings, since I did not make it clear enough that I had in my sights the traditional shape of historical critical biblical studies. In order to establish biblical criticism as a viable 'scientific' discipline, scholars found themselves needing to take this path in order to put biblical studies on par with other 'scientific' disciplines. Issues of secular universities, suspicions about theology, and academic integrity were at stake. Even more, early historical critical work was and is perceived to be a direct challenge to the churches – you only need to consider the situation in Germany in the 19th century. Since then, of course, historical criticism has been well and truly domesticated by the churches. Does this

situation apply to David Jobling? No, it does not, for he is not a traditional historical critical scholar and is not caught in such a contradiction. Although the majority of biblical scholars are still historical critics, I should have made it clearer that it does not apply to all.

Finally, there is the matter of experience and context. David draws on his own experience of the United Church of Canada and St. Andrews Theological College in Saskatoon. He even offers some experiences of my own from the United Theological College in Sydney (a college of the Uniting Church of Australia). Here our experience differs. I came to that college expecting it to be more progressive than it was. If it had been more like St. Andrews I might well have been happier. After trying a few initiatives – that could be classified as genuinely of the religious Left – only to have them stymied, I decided it was not worth wasting my time. The college turned out to be stuffy and insular (focused very much on the church), and they told me I did the wrong type of writing and far too much of it! The ‘progressives’ in the church as a whole were really liberals with a social conscience and they were aging rapidly. The Evangelical Union within that church and the charismatics were gaining ground rapidly. There were pockets of more progressive people, but they too tended to be marginalised and one or two left. I have found it much easier to work outside that sort of environment. Perhaps it has changed; if so, well and good. I should add that I was recently invited to speak there on postcolonialism and the Bible, but declined; I have, however, preached recently at Paddington Uniting Church, since that is one of the few bases of the religious Left in Australia. All the same, I deliberately did not seek to generalise from my experience of the Uniting Church; it seems to me difficult to find a large number of churches where the religious Left is a majority voice – one need only consider the Roman Catholics, various Orthodox churches, Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Baptists, and Pentecostals.

Finally, David assumes that my context is the secular Left and that I am trying to tell the religious Left what to do. In that light, he advocates a co-authored work with someone from the religious Left. I am not sure that assumption is warranted. All he need do is read my new book with Westminster John Knox – which still refuses to publish anything with ‘Marxist’ in the title – called *Political Grace: the Revolutionary Theory of John Calvin*.

GHOSTS OF REVOLUTION

I would like to close with another matter that comes from David’s oral presentation in Auckland (2008) but is not found in the different written response published in this issue of the journal. This is the point concerning the ghosts of revolution. One of David’s favourite texts is Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1994), based on a keynote address given at a ‘Rethinking Marxism’ conference in 1993. David laments the fact that I don’t make more use of Derrida in my work, especially this text. The reasons are many, not least of which is the sense that Derrida’s lame, liberal political comments later in life were not so much the waning of a great mind but the political consequences of his thought. Be that as it may, what David draws from Derrida and develops further is the idea of a revolutionary tradition – the ghosts of revolution whom we forget at our peril.

That is what he finds in *Rescuing the Bible*, especially when I discuss William Wilberforce (although he was really a reformer), Thomas Müntzer and the Peasant Revolution in 16th century Germany, Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers in 17th century England, and Camilo Torres and liberation theology in the 20th century. It is a good point, since the history of any region of the

world can barely be understood without considering the periodic revolutions that have taken place. But David's (and my) interest is in the religious revolutionaries, especially those for whom the Bible has been an important inspiration. There are other figures in the book who also count, such as Erin Runions and her anarchist activism in North America, Gerald West and his passion for a new and just South Africa, so much so that he had to leave the country for a while for fear of arrest, and the old Maoist, Alain Badiou. I am in fact completing a five-volume study called *The Criticism of Heaven and Earth*, which is a comprehensive treatment of all those Marxists who found something in the Bible and indeed theology that fed into their own tradition of revolutionary socialism: Marx and Engels, Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Kautsky, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Louis Althusser, Henri Lefebvre, Lucien Goldmann, Alain Badiou, Gilles Deleuze, Antonio Gramsci, Antonio Negri, Fredric Jameson, Slavoj Žižek, Terry Eagleton, E. P. Thompson, Michael Löwy, and G. E. M. de Ste. Croix. Perhaps the unsurpassed study of the religious precursors of socialism may be found in Karl Kautsky's *Forerunners of Socialism*, of which only part has been translated into English (1976, 2002a; Kautsky and Lafargue, 1977). Among many others, he deals with groups such as the Waldensians (deriving from the 12th century and still existing today in Piedmont, they hold to the model of Christian communism in Acts), Lollards (followers of Wycliffe who stressed personal faith, divine election, and the Bible and were involved in a series of uprisings in England), Taborites (a 15th century religious movement that championed asceticism, communal living and the establishment of the kingdom of God by force of arms), and More (Kautsky 2002b).

It is a rich tradition indeed, and continues up to the present day. One last observation: we need to be wary of arguments that attribute the motivation for these revolutionary movements exclusively to the Bible or to anything but the Bible. In the latter case, biblical language is but a screen for deeper political aspirations; it is the language most readily available but can be discarded once we have a better one (this was Engels's position on Thomas Müntzer, although not early Christianity, which he saw as revolutionary). In the former case – the primary and exclusive motivation comes from the Bible and religious commitment – politics tends to slip out of the window and all we get are idealistic motivations. Rather than separate them, these two options need to be held together. On the one hand, these revolutionary movements found answers to their political and economic oppression in the Bible. On the other hand, they were motivated by the Bible, but only because they saw the inescapably political implications of its myths and stories.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ I should also clear up a slight misunderstanding, largely of my own making. I mention in the book the 'Church's Paul', for which David takes me to task. Perhaps I should have written the 'canonical Paul' who is the preserve of conservatives.

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Cite this article as: Roland Boer. 2009. 'Eco-justice, multivocality, the religious left and the ghosts of revolution: A reply to Aichele, Elvey and Jobling'. *The Bible and Critical Theory* 5 (2): pp. 23.1–23.12. DOI: 10.2104/bc090023.