

○ HOW THE BIBLE CAN BE RED

SOME THOUGHTS ON ROLAND BOER'S *RESCUING THE BIBLE*

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How does one critique a manifesto? On the cover and again in the Preface to Roland Boer's book, *Rescuing the Bible*, it is described as a manifesto and even explicitly compared to *The Communist Manifesto* (vi). However, a manifesto as such is not a scholarly study, presenting arguments and evidence and analyses that are themselves to be examined closely and perhaps rebutted or confirmed in a scholarly response. A manifesto is a personal declaration or call to action, and we should not be surprised if the author paints with a rather large brush. A manifesto is necessarily addressed to a wide and not particularly scholarly audience,¹ and it omits the considerations of complexity and detail that characterize scholarly critical analyses. Indeed, one might critique a manifesto's sincerity or even its aesthetic qualities, but what it most calls for is a response, not a detailed study of argumentation.

How then does one respond to a manifesto? Shall we muster arms, take to the barricades, storm the citadel? Yet the audience who first heard me read this response, like you who read it now in *The Bible and Critical Theory*, are for the most part people who spend your lives thinking and analyzing and criticizing, and while each one of us undoubtedly has his or her own interests and commitments, which are not I hope entirely remote from our work as scholars, still this does not seem to be the place for that sort of response. Thus while there may well be people, myself included, who would be willing to mount those barricades given the opportunity, there is a deep incongruity about this discussion in this setting.

So I read my friend Roland's book as a manifesto, but I respond to it now as a critical scholar, and I don't really deal with that contradiction. Instead I put together this rather academic response to the book with considerable suspicion that I may have fundamentally mistaken the genre appropriate to this moment. If I have done so, please forgive me – I have a long history of mistaking genres, or at least some would say so! I do have a deep sympathy with what I take to be the spirit and the goal of Boer's book – that is, a call to 'a consistent and sustained effort of uncovering, debunking and denouncing [oppressive] uses and abuses of the Bible' (104), along with support for readings of the Bible that promote liberation and social justice – and I raise the following questions in that context.

First, I question Boer's claim that the religious right has stolen the Bible from anyone (35–40). For one thing, the Bible as a canon is inherently conservative, but I will have more to say about that later on. More to the point, I doubt that the religious right has stolen the Bible because I suspect instead that the religious left *gave the Bible away* (or perhaps threw it away!), and quite a while ago at that. Boer also hints at this possibility (34), but he does not develop the thought. Although I am not well qualified to speak about these things, my own rather limited experience has been that the religious left has tended to see the Bible as an embarrassment, or at best a reservoir of prooftexts to be used primarily for rhetorical effect. Of course there are exceptions, such as churches of racial minorities, gay churches, and 'peace churches', but even in these more or less marginal communities, the Bible is often read in traditional, highly theological and often

quite conservative ways, and its value as a call to radical political, social, or cultural change is muted.

As far back as I can recall, to the mid- or even early 1950s, the relation of the Bible to politics, or to larger social and cultural questions generally, was of little interest in the North American church as I knew it. This despite the fact that I grew up in a local Methodist church of a fairly open-minded variety. For example, although the middle-class suburban town that I grew up in was actually the first pastoral appointment of Billy Graham, it was not Graham that my church youth group went into Chicago to hear in the late 50s, but another Baptist, Martin Luther King. I was radicalized as a college student, thanks to the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement, plus large doses of Jean-Paul Sartre and Karl Marx, among others, but it wasn't until late in grad school that I began seriously to explore alternative ways to read the Bible, thanks largely to encounters with the writings of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, both Marxists of a sort, but neither one religious.

Of course, biblical studies was very much alive in those years and not at all under the thumb of the fundamentalists, but in its predominantly historical-critical mode it had then and still has today little to say to the left (or to the poor and oppressed). This I suspect has much to do with the bourgeois Protestant theological captivity of most historically oriented biblical scholarship. Indeed, I'm surprised that Boer hasn't paid attention in this book, as I know he has elsewhere, to the 'guild' of scholarly biblical studies itself as bearing some responsibility for the religious right's claims to the Bible – not that historical criticism supports fundamentalism (although there are deep affinities between them), but rather that the much vaunted 'scientific objectivity' of the historians offers little challenge to the theological or political claims of the religious right. In the USA, I know of no sustained, collective attempt by professional biblical scholars to actively contest fundamentalist claims to the Bible, apart from the late Bob Funk and his quirky Jesus Seminar, itself hardly a hotbed of political radicalism.

However, mine may be an isolated and exceptional case, and I am hesitant to base any generalization on it. But my experience does not support Boer's claim that the religious right has stolen the Bible from the left. Even now, and despite long years of experience, I am still astonished that many of my well-educated, more-or-less leftist friends – people who all would support the ideals of liberation from oppression and the end of exploitation that Boer sketches in this book – automatically and without question accept highly 'spiritual' or even fundamentalist readings of the Bible as the only correct ones. Of course they immediately reject the Bible as irrelevant or barbaric precisely because of these readings, and I think they are perplexed that I bother to study the Bible.

I'm glad to acknowledge that there was a time when political radicals such as Müntzer or Winstanley drew heavily upon the Bible for their revolutionary programs, and I know that this still happens today elsewhere in the world. I don't have any idea when the American religious left abandoned the Bible, or why they did so, but it seems to me that they must have, and thus when the religious right claimed the Bible as its own, there was no one willing to contest that claim. Indeed, the rejection of the Bible by early twentieth century Marxists and other radical atheists may have contributed to widespread abandonment of the Bible by the left, both religious and secular, despite exceptions such as Boer notes.

Given that concern, or perhaps it is simply a quibble, I take Boer's manifesto as a call to a wide variety of people on the left, both secular and religious, to (re)claim the Bible, however it

might have been lost. For that I applaud Roland's book. We need to contest the religious right's claim to the Bible wherever we can, and wherever possible we need to show that biblical texts offer words of comfort and encouragement to the poor and oppressed, and words of judgment and condemnation for oppressors and exploiters. Even more, we need to draw upon biblical materials for the construction of stories that offer utopian visions, not of otherworldly escape, but of an 'other' way for this world.

However, Roland uses the word 'myth' to describe such stories. I agree that myths can be creative and utopian, but it seems to me that *every* myth brings order to a world and as such is universalizing and totalitarian. In contrast, I suggest that the many local, fluid 'micronarratives' described by Jean-François Lyotard are preferable to any single, mythic grand narrative (1984, 60). Fairy tales and fantasies are among such little narratives. They offer creative 'lines of flight', to use Gilles Deleuze's terminology, points where oppressive or repressive systems are broken open. The Marxist fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes, who like Boer is deeply influenced by the writings of Ernst Bloch, comments that

Alterity is key to fantasy, the extraordinary in the ordinary, the explosiveness of the miraculous, that enables us to set our sights realistically on a promised land, otherwise we are left with false promises. The Bible does not leave us with false promises. Institutions do. ... Canons do. Religions do. *The Bible must be taken out of context. Re-turned to and into fantasy.* (1992, 8; emphasis added).

This leads to my second question, which concerns Boer's discussion of the biblical canon. While details of the history and theological motivation for the canon's construction are murky, Boer rightly notes the correlation, which cannot be a coincidence, between the effective closing of the Christian canon and the Constantinian triumph of the Christian church (57). As Jon Berquist says, 'The canonical text is not a unified whole; it is not a body of literature at all. Instead, it is an assemblage held together only by the imperialist power that first created it' (1996, 28). I would emphasize that this 'imperialist power' is not merely confined to the initiatory moments of the canon (rather like the dynamite charges that compress fissionable material in a nuclear bomb), but instead it is a dynamic intrinsic to the canon itself as an ideological mechanism and thus closely related to the long sorry imperial history of the Christian churches.

The canon is designed to protect the church and its faith, and thus it is inherently conservative. The canon attempts to secure the texts themselves, fixing their physical limits and guarding them against scribal change. Once a book is identified as the Word of God, deliberate modification is not permitted.² The canon also seeks to secure the meaning of the texts, suppressing the polysemy or what Boer calls 'multivocality' of the diverse component texts and channeling their many different significations into a single authoritative message. One ideological function of the Christian canon has been to secure internal homogeneity by providing a base from which heresy could be rejected and the traditional 'purity' of the faith could be defended. A second ideological function has been to guarantee external legitimacy by identifying the church as the true Israel, the sole heir to the divine covenant. The desire for a uniform scripture to be read by a universal, everlasting church is addressed by the canon as a totalitarian mechanism, an intertextual structure by means of which the various books supplement and elucidate one another. It is no surprise that the great defender of the biblical canon in the USA today is the Christian right.

This would seem to lead to a paradox for Boer: that is, in order to ‘rescue the Bible’ for the left, to make the polysemy of its texts available for radical social change, the canonical status of the Bible must be rejected. But the canon is precisely that which makes the Bible the Bible, and without the canon there is no Bible, merely an assortment of more or less unrelated writings, which may or may not be ‘scriptures’. To be sure, they were scriptures before they were Bible, but will they still be scriptures if the canon ceases to control their meaning? The individual texts will continue to exist, at least as long as people continue to read them, but if the assemblage of those texts is no longer authoritative, then will people continue to read them? If the canonical totality of the Bible is no longer a factor in the way that the Bible’s texts are read, then the exclusive intertextual framework, the juxtaposition of writings that guarantees that these texts (and only these) all speak together the authoritative and universal, coherent Word of God, disappears. In other words, the Bible as such disappears.

Boer’s argument here leads to the consequence that in order to rescue the Bible, we must destroy the Bible. Zipes says that ‘The Bible must be taken out of context’, but the Bible *is* the context. The only way to encounter the fantastic alterity of the Bible’s texts is to read them apart from the canon (as Zipes also suggests). In other words, from a radical point of view, the only good Bible is a dead Bible. I have argued elsewhere that the Bible is already effectively dead for a great many people today, and that it will only become more dead as time goes by (Aichele 2001). Once the codex disappears from everyday use – and with the advent of electronic culture, that moment draws closer every day – the Bible will degenerate into an abstract idea, or a sacred relic on the pulpit, to be ritually pounded every now and then. More important, the canon already no longer functions to control the meaning of the biblical texts, despite loud claims to the contrary from Christians (especially among the religious right). Texts from the Bible – sometimes mere snippets, sometimes entire books – increasingly float free from its canonical control and into strange and intriguing new juxtapositions with a wide variety of other texts in the popular media. A striking recent example is the transformation of the Eden and Christ stories in Philip Pullman’s popular and controversial novel trilogy, ‘His Dark Materials’ (1995, 1997, 2000).

In these new intertextual contexts, freed from canonical control, the mutually contrary multivocality of the Bible’s component texts becomes more and more evident. Boer notes the remarkable ‘Brick Testament’ web pages (27). When I showed this Internet site to my New Testament class, the students wondered whether it was ‘serious’. They didn’t know whether to be offended or amused! That is precisely the point: the meanings of these texts have been freed from their traditional theological context. In their strange way, these web pages translate major portions of the Bible, but they are no longer the Christian canon.

However, if the Bible as a canon has already died, then it does not need to be rescued at all – indeed it cannot be rescued, because in effect the Bible already no longer exists, except as a kind of husk, an unopened codex, the illusion of a book. In this context, the claims of the religious right to ownership of the Bible become ludicrous, simply more evidence that these people are withdrawing further and further from reality and would not otherwise be taken seriously were it not that they possess alarming amounts of wealth and power.

Many members of the religious left do not agree with my arguments that the canon is near death. These people still want to rescue the Bible as an authoritative canon, or in a more secular version of the argument, as the venerated classic of the Christian tradition. They regard the Bible as God’s subversive Word of liberation, or in the more secular version, as the church’s ‘dangerous

memory' of Jesus, to use David Tracy's formulation (1981, 235). In either case, the Bible is held to be quite capable of multivocality even or perhaps especially when it is kept together as a whole. Indeed, this multivocality within the biblical canon may be precisely what makes it the Word of God. But if we follow either of these options, then the paradox unfolds again, only in the opposite 'direction'. That is, in order to reclaim the Bible's subversive and anti-hegemonic moments, such as Mosaic nomadism, we must accept also the totalitarian and universalistic impulses that led to the Bible's construction in the first place, which are reflected in stories such as those of the house of David (Boer, 71–74). Indeed, the modern-day equivalents of those ancient impulses towards canon formation are much scarier.

Despite hints to the contrary, I think that Boer belongs to this group. He wants to rescue the *whole* Bible. His argument is not entirely consistent here, but it seems to be that we have to keep the whole thing because multivocality is a feature of the Bible itself, as a fixed, canonical assemblage (28). In order to rescue the radical bits we must also retain the larger narratives of oppression in which those bits are embedded. I argue instead that the Bible's multivocality arises at the level of its component texts, the various books of the Bible or even smaller parts of those books. In Deleuze's terminology, this polysemy is molecular, not molar. Indeed, if we read the Bible's texts without the theological blinders imposed by the canon – again, apart from the canon – then we see that there are actually quite a few subversive moments in the Bible. These are points where the texts are splintered by what some recent philosophers call 'difference',³ a difference that is semiotically prior to any monological, monovalent unity, just as heresy is theologically prior to orthodoxy and polytheism is epistemically prior to monotheism. All written texts are riven by difference, but in some this difference more violently and thoroughly disrupts the reading.

Thus I am inclined to reverse the polarity of Boer's claim that the Bible is multivocal because canonical hegemony is unstable (66). Instead, I think that canonical hegemony is incomplete because some of the component texts are so disturbingly polysemic, so torn by writerly difference, that they are constantly in danger of breaking free from the Bible's control. In contrast to those who argue that the multivocality of the canon is its finest feature, I argue that the canon is always at war with multivocality, and if it does sometimes seem to allow a plurality of 'voices' (such as the four gospels, Kings and Chronicles, or the old and new testaments) this is only so that its readers can eventually unite these differences into a greater, thoroughly monovocal harmony. In short, multivocality is not inherent in the Bible as Bible (i.e., as canon), but rather multivocality is a symptom of the failure of the canon as canon (i.e., as Bible).

This brings me to my final question, to which I have already alluded, and which is: why should we want to rescue the Bible? Why hang on to the Bible at all? What is our motivation in opposing the use of the Bible for oppression and exploitation and favoring its use for liberation and justice? Does this motivation come somehow from within the Bible itself? After all, this appears to be the argument of the religious right: that it's not *they* who favor the suppression, oppression, or even killing of women, homosexuals, people of color, the poor, Jews, Muslims, and many others, but rather it is *God* who has commanded these activities (and other noxious ways of thinking and acting) through His Divine Word, which is the Bible.⁴ According to the religious right, as Christians they are not willfully reading the Bible in oppressive ways – instead, the Bible is speaking God's clear, monovocal Word to them. Don't *we* then practice the same hermeneutic if we say that the Bible as God's Word commands us to align ourselves with the left? Boer's dis-

cussion of Müntzer, Winstanley, and liberation theology strongly suggests that all three of these movements do this very thing (108, 116, 125), albeit in somewhat different ways. For example, Müntzer's words sound to me very much like the extreme religious right in the USA today, which I think of as the Christian Taliban.

I have no wish to support a Christian theocracy, even one that benefits the poor. Indeed, Boer rather clearly has similar concerns, and he calls in chapter 6 for a healthy dose of ideological and theological suspicion. Very good, I agree, but what is the motivation for this suspicion? If the Bible calls us to be suspicious of the Bible, then shouldn't we suspect that call as well? But if we deny that the Bible itself provides our motivation, or that God makes us read the Bible in the way that we do, then that implies that our motivation and our hermeneutic come from outside of the Bible, and finally that *we* are the ones who determine our moral and political and theological interests, for reasons of our own.

This too is secularism. In other words, the Bible's texts may provide the occasion or the platform or even the tools for the engagement of *our own* desires, but they do not themselves cause our desires. Nor does any text by itself cause anyone's desires, values, or beliefs, ever, regardless of what they might say. A text is an inert thing, a bunch of signifiers, like a pebble or a blot of ink. It is a signifying possibility, which for a variety of reasons we choose to pursue and use (or abuse if you prefer, but every use is also abuse), and thereby we give it meaning.⁵ Biblical texts by themselves do not say anything.

This takes me back to my previous two questions, for the problem as it now appears is both that the religious right claim to be the only proper spokespersons for the Bible, but also that others, including many on the left, recognize that claim as legitimate. This claim to ownership involves among other things the claim that the Bible is a canon, the unique, authoritative Word of God, that the Bible 'speaks' clearly and coherently, and that they alone, the religious right, are the ones who hear correctly and obey. In other words, not only do they own the Bible, but the Bible owns *them*. If that is the case, then perhaps what *we* need to do is not so much to rescue the Bible, but rescue people (including ourselves) from owning or being owned by the Bible.⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ In this regard, frequent typos and other indications of insufficient editorial attention in *Rescuing the Bible* are especially troubling.

² See Gamble 2004, 37–38 for an example.

³ E.g., Derrida 1978, Lyotard 1988, Deleuze 1994.

⁴ For an example, see the conclusion of D.A. Carson's review of Boer's book, in the *Review of Biblical Literature*, 19 July 2008.

⁵ See further Aichele 1996, chapter 7.

⁶ A much shorter version of these comments appears in my review of Boer's book for *Biblical Interpretation* (forthcoming).

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