

## The Perpetual Allure of the Bible for Marxism

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### Abstract

In light of the general lack of awareness of the long history of Western-Marxist fascination with the Bible, this article offers a synopsis of part of that history. After showing how the Bible was an important element in the work of Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, it offers a critique of the current engagements with it by Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Terry Eagleton and Giorgio Agamben. The third section deals with the most significant element of the religious Left in recent years, namely liberation theology. It closes with some comments concerning the growth of Marxist biblical studies and some suggestions for the way Marxism might reconnect with a non-reified biblical tradition.

### Keywords

Bible, Western Marxism, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Terry Eagleton, Giorgio Agamben, liberation theology, biblical studies

Marxism has a long and complex – more complex than we might care to admit – relationship with the Bible. And, although my task here is deceptively simple, namely a synopsis of the ways Marxism has been influenced by the Bible and biblical studies, it continues to surprise me how little both biblical and Marxist critics know of that rich history. In fact I would hazard the suggestion that the situation now, with political philosophers such as Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben creating a swirl of discussions around their readings of the New Testament and an increasing number of biblical critics (admittedly from a small base) immersing themselves in Marxist methods, is healthier than it has been for some time. So, I engage in an effort to dispel some ignorance concerning the long fascination with the Bible by Marxists, offer some critiques and assessments, and dare a thought or two for the future.

I have organised my discussions in three rough sections, although there will be myriad overlaps between them: I begin by tracking the consistent uses of the Bible made by Western Marxists such as Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin

and Theodor Adorno in the development of their thought. Their underlying motive was the extraction of political and materialist insights from the Bible, a feature that flows over into the next group of thinkers. Here the discussion moves onto what is variously called neo-Paulinism or political theology, namely the contemporary fascination with the Bible, particularly Paul's letters in the New Testament, by the likes of Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Terry Eagleton and Giorgio Agamben. Finally, I engage with what is the most well known intersection between Marxism and biblical studies, namely liberation theology.<sup>1</sup> Before I proceed, a word on the sense of 'biblical studies' in the following discussion: my focus is on the Bible and biblical studies, although I inevitably touch on theology. As with many biblical critics, I understand biblical studies as the study of a profoundly influential literary, historical and social document, making use of a full range of critical tools ranging through history, the social sciences, literary criticism, cultural critique, philosophy, linguistics and so on. If theology does appear on the horizon, even though biblical studies and theology are distinct disciplines, then I am always wary of its tendency to colonise and reify, in the name of the gods, an unruly and fractious collection of literature.<sup>2</sup>

## Western Marxism

I begin with Ernst Bloch, for one of the great sources of inspiration for his work was in fact the Bible. The Bible, he argued, formed the world-view of so many people – workers and peasants – who were at the centre of the communist project in Eastern Europe. Rather than discard the Bible, he argued that communism needed to understand its revolutionary drive. It is not for nothing that Bloch's work was preserved and transformed through political and liberation theologies (which I will discuss below) only to be passed on to other, more recent areas of political and literary interpretation such as postcolonial criticism and utopian studies.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, along with Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, Bloch is one of a number of Western Marxists who reflected at some length on the Bible (in contrast to the likes of Althusser, Lefebvre, Gramsci and Lukács who

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1. For now, I leave the task of dealing with the Bible in Marx and Engels's own texts to another time. At the risk of being oxymoronic, the commonplace that they knew their Bibles rather well is often forgotten. Not only are their writings saturated with biblical allusions, but, at times, they also engage more explicitly with the Bible, as even the briefest look at the endless pages on Bruno Bauer and Max Stirner in *The German Ideology* will show.

2. See further on this question, Boer 2007b.

3. See Moylan 1997.

concerned themselves with theology and ecclesiology). On one side, my concern is with the function of the Bible in the frame of their work as a whole. Thus, the overriding drive for Bloch and Benjamin is to use the Bible as a resource, however complex their engagements might be, for rethinking certain problems within Marxism, of which the underlying one would have to be the search for a way to break out of capitalism. Adorno's encounter is a little more ambiguous than this, drawing deeply on the Bible while developing a critique that is of relevance for biblical studies itself.

But let me stay with Bloch, who is one of the few Marxists to have written a book on the Bible, the little-read *Atheism in Christianity*.<sup>4</sup> Here, he undertakes a Marxist introduction to the Bible suffused with his own distinct agenda, namely to discern the thread of subversion within the Bible. He identifies a logic there of rebellion against overlords and oppression, marked most strongly by the drive to overturn the God of the oppressors. And that logic leads eventually to a protest atheism that enables the emergence of the human, the *homo absconditus*, once God has faded from the scene – hence the 'atheism' within Christianity. As part of this agenda, Bloch focuses on myth, which I find one of the most promising elements of his work. For Bloch, myth is neither a pure false consciousness that needs to be unmasked, nor a positive force without qualification. All myths, like ideologies, no matter how repressive, have an emancipatory-utopian dimension about them that cannot be separated so easily from deception and illusion. In Bloch's reading, the very process of manipulation and domination also contains a moment of utopian residue, an element that opens up other possibilities at the point of the failure of the revolutionary project. Bloch is particularly interested in biblical myth, for the subversive elements in the myths that interest him are enabled by the repressive ideologies that come to the fore again and again.

Thus, Bloch asked of myths: do they speak of transformation and liberation? Do they have cunning heroes who win through a ruse? But this requires some distinction within the broad category of myth, between the despotism and domination of myth proper and those that, like later fairy-tales, subvert such domination. The story of Prometheus in Greek mythology, or the serpent in Paradise in the Bible, gives voice to this 'fairy-tale' element in myth. Bloch would much prefer to retain both conformist and non-conformist elements of myth rather than no myth at all, since the banishment of myth discards the 'joyful message', the 'deepest utopian theme'<sup>5</sup> of mythology along with all that

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4. Bloch 1972.

5. Bloch 1998, p. 300.

is oppressive. He is, of course, trying to run myth through dialectics – ‘destroying and saving the myth in a single dialectical process’.<sup>6</sup> At his best, Bloch’s discernment of myth is an extraordinary approach, for it enables us to interpret the myths of the Bible as neither completely reprehensible nor utterly beneficial. That is to say, it is precisely through and because of the myths of dominance and despotism that those of cunning and non-conformism can be present too. Bloch’s programme then becomes a vast recuperation of these glimpses and fragments of subversion and hope in the midst of oppression.

In contrast to Bloch, Benjamin’s interaction with theology is a critical field worn down with many crossings, but, as for the Bible, there is far less commentary. At the heart of Benjamin’s intriguing and idiosyncratic appropriation of the Bible lies his failed effort to use the Bible in order to develop a way to break out of the mythical hell of capitalism. He does so by drawing on the final or anagogic level of the old allegorical mode of biblical interpretation, with its vast schema that runs from creation to *eschaton*. Thus, in the extraordinarily influential last chapter of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*,<sup>7</sup> Benjamin offers a deep reworking of the fourfold medieval allegorical schema – literal, allegorical, moral and anagogic – to argue that, in the baroque mourning plays we find the marks of a fundamentally Christian mode of exegesis that is possible only in the wake of the Fall. For, in a fallen world, only ruins and traces remain of the prelapsarian world; allegory then becomes the means of a failed deciphering of salvation among those ruins. If, in the *Trauerspiel* book, Benjamin sets his sights on simultaneously describing and developing a theory of allegory, then in *The Arcades Project* [*Passagenarbeit*]<sup>8</sup> he would come to use the method itself in all its fragmentary and broken form – hence the curious status of the work as a vast collection of quotations and commentary.

Let me focus on the anagogic level of allegory – that curious and sophisticated mode that characterised more than a millennium of interpretation and continues to hold the interest of Marxist critics such as Fredric Jameson<sup>9</sup> – and pick up first Benjamin’s earlier concern with the point of origin, particularly the first chapters of Genesis. Thus, in ‘On Language as Such and the Language of Man’ he juxtaposes Genesis 1–3 and 10 (the stories of Creation and the Fall and then the Tower of Babel) to argue for pure language. This is none other than the language of the name – the first language is Adam’s naming of the

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6. Bloch 1972, p. 37.

7. Benjamin 1998.

8. Benjamin 1999.

9. See Jameson 1981, especially pp. 69–74.

animals in Genesis 2 – in which man communicates with God in and not through language.<sup>10</sup> Such a primal language has been lost with the Fall, and what we find instead is the multitude of languages, or what Benjamin calls ‘prattle [*Geschwätz*]’, that is the result of the story of the Tower of Babel. Rather than the pure language of naming, the only concern of these fallen languages is communication. Benjamin’s agenda, however, is to suggest that his interpretation of the Fall is analogous to the status of bourgeois language in his own day. This language too is ‘prattle’, going on endlessly, and its major concern is communication. In order to overcome this fallen, bourgeois language, Benjamin argues that translation should strive eschatologically for the lost, pure, primordial and harmonious language.<sup>11</sup>

Already, the juxtaposition of creation and *eschaton* is manifest, but Benjamin will shift his focus decidedly towards the latter in *The Arcades Project*. Here this ‘inveterate adversary of myth’<sup>12</sup> focuses his energy on various ways of thinking through the break from the mythical hell and dream-work of capitalism, represented in its most advanced and decayed form in the Paris of the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> He does so by means of the dialectical image, the caesura of the explosion out of history, as if waking from a dream. Yet the mark of his failure in this project lies in the very language he uses, for he resorts to sexual language, particularly in terms of women and maternal functions. But this language is precisely that of the biblical myths of creation and *eschaton*. Even when he does not explicitly invoke the Bible in his writing, the Bible leaves its mark where Benjamin’s texts overflow with the language of sexuality, the gendered text, women as mythical other and the incessant repetition of birthing metaphors. In other words, at the point where he seeks a way to think through the breach in the myth of capitalism he reverts to biblical myths, especially those of Genesis and the *eschaton*, a reversion marked by the language of the maternal function.

Let me spin this point out a little, since it is important for my criticism of Benjamin – the feminist critique of Benjamin is crucial for understanding his ambiguous treatment of myth. Feminist responses to Benjamin’s work fall roughly into two groups, the one criticising his various representations of women and their uses in the structures of his thought,<sup>14</sup> and the other arguing

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10. Benjamin 1996, p. 65.

11. Benjamin 1996, pp. 253–63.

12. Wohlfarth 1997, p. 67.

13. As a general introduction to *The Arcades Project*, nothing surpasses that by Rolf Tiedemann (Tiedemann 1991).

14. Chow 1989, Stoljar 1996, Wolff 1989.

that Benjamin's work constitutes an insightful and political criticism of the uses of women within capitalism, art, philosophy and so on, thereby providing a stimulus to contemporary feminism and politics.<sup>15</sup> In fact, what I have noted in Benjamin's work in terms of creation and the maternal body is not new in itself, especially the appropriation of maternal creation for notions of male creativity.<sup>16</sup> However, let me develop two elements from Eva Geulen's excellent essay on gender in Benjamin's writings:<sup>17</sup> the ambiguity of the question of gender in his work and the need to reconsider Benjamin's primary philosophical concerns in terms of gender (as language, history, experience and materiality). It is less a question of ambiguity, it seems to me, than of Benjamin's curious knack of offering a criticism that simultaneously traps him within that which he criticises. Thus, his criticism concerning the appropriation of women is analogous to his criticism of myth: he sees the problems and yet cannot move beyond them no matter how hard he tries. For instance, even though he registers the profound reification and commodification of women in terms of the prostitute, the woman-as-thing that shows up the reality of 'love' in capitalism, he is all the same lured by the prostitute, especially in his early work, where she becomes a figure for knowledge itself.

It seems to me that such an ambivalence is characteristic of Benjamin's treatment of myth as well: the resolute opponent of myth finds that he must use myth itself – particularly the stories of creation and apocalypse from the Bible – in order to attempt to go beyond myth. But there is a closer connection between the question of gender and myth in Benjamin's work. Here, I want to pick up Geulen's suggestion that we need to reconsider Benjamin's major interests in terms of gender. Specifically, my argument is that the continual appropriation of the maternal body, of conception, pregnancy and birth, is a signal of another problem in Benjamin's writing, namely the perpetuation of biblical myth. In fact, I would suggest that the mechanism by which he appropriates such images of procreation is to trace the removal of such functions from women under capitalism – who now become sterile prostitutes, corpses and mannequins, frivolous foci of fashion<sup>18</sup> – and relocate them in the

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15. Weigel 1996, pp. 85–98; Leslie 2000, pp. 106–14; Rauch 1988.

16. Thus, for Weigel, Benjamin shows how 'the concept of intellectual creation replaces that of natural creation, a process in which the female element necessary to it is consumed and exhausted, while the creator is newly born at the very same moment as the work is completed: as "the first-born male of the work that he once conceived"' (Weigel 1996, p. 70). The problem, in the end, is that Weigel reads Benjamin as too much of a proto-feminist critic. For an alternative critique that seeks a balance between dismissal and appropriation, see Geyer-Ryan 1988.

17. Geulen 1996.

18. Benjamin 1999, pp. 79–81.

break from capitalism. And so we get the images of insemination and birth as those that mark the breakout from the spell of capitalism. Yet, it is precisely these images that land Benjamin squarely back in the realm of myth, especially the biblical myths of creation and the end of the world that appropriate precisely such imagery.

Thus, in his very effort to break out of the horrible myth of capitalism, Benjamin reverts to myth itself, especially myth of a distinctly biblical variety. However, in this failure, in this reversion to myth in the effort to rupture myth itself, Benjamin unwittingly provides a way of rethinking the category of myth in both politics and biblical studies. In his very use of myth, it seems to me that Benjamin begins to imagine the possibility of the future not by taking terms from our present and projecting them into the future, but by working in reverse: the terms and concepts of a communist future, however degraded and partial they might be in our present perception and use of them, provide the way to think about that future itself.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the very eschatology of the biblical myths themselves suggests that myth is one crucial way in which we might reach across the divide between a capitalist present and a communist future to draw terms from that future itself, however imperfect they might be. The problem, of course, is that if the future is as radically distinct as Marxists like to think – however gradual or sudden a transition could turn out to be – then the very ways of thinking and arguing will also be qualitatively different. Here lies the reason for the unwitting insight of Benjamin's focus on myth: the inescapably mythical nature of the material with which Benjamin works – the narratives of creation and the messiah – suggest that the language of myth, with all its promises and dangers, provides one way of imagining a very different future.

In a current project, I have begun to argue that both Bloch and Benjamin are linchpins for a reconsideration of political myth for the Left, carrying on Georges Sorel's unfinished project.<sup>20</sup> But any such project will require a decent dose of Adorno's theological suspicion. Along with his famous ban on images, these two items form the basis of Adorno's engagement with the Bible. The two are, of course, closely related, for the *Bilderverbot*, the ban on images drawn from the second commandment in Exodus 20/Deuteronomy 5 has at its heart the criticism of idolatry that becomes crucial for Adorno's critique of secularised theology. The important texts here are the formidable but enticing

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19. It would indeed be possible to read Benjamin's famous 'angel of history' parable in this way, rather than merely as a devastating criticism of the idea of progress.

20. Sorel 1961.

*Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*,<sup>21</sup> *The Jargon of Authenticity*<sup>22</sup> and the much more widely read *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that he wrote with Horkheimer.<sup>23</sup>

Adorno would call on the ban on images, in its full dialectical glory, time and again in various areas of his work, from music criticism through aesthetics to reflections on utopia. In that famous passage from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer stress that the ban destroys myth and conciliates magic in the idea of God:

Jewish religion . . . associates hope only with *the prohibition against calling on what is false as God, against invoking the finite as infinite, lies as truth.*<sup>24</sup>

Already, we can see the implications for utopia and philosophy with their focus on the dialectic of rejecting falsity, finitude, lies and indeed belief itself – in short, all that comes in the way of salvation. But what I want to do here is pedal backwards for a moment to the second commandment itself in order to clarify the logic of idolatry that lies behind Adorno's appropriation.

Here we find a prohibition on making [*śb*] any hewn or cut image [*pesel*]. Just to ensure that the ban is comprehensive, the commandment specifies that the image should not be in the form [*temunah*] of anything in the heavens, on earth or in the seas beneath the earth. More importantly, however, it follows the first commandment, 'You shall not have other gods before my face' (Exodus 20: 3; my translation): neither gods in the first nor their images in the second commandment, not even an image of the Hebrew god Yahweh. In the slippage between god and image we find the bite of the polemic against idolatry: it is not the existence of images *per se*, but rather the danger of disconnecting the image from its referent (god). *The image itself becomes a 'god', an idol in place of god.* This is also the logic of reification, and it seems to me that Adorno not only shows how reification is entwined with the biblical criticism of idolatry, but also how a non-reified use of the Bible by the Left might work. I want to focus on two uses by Adorno of this logic of idolatry, namely the critique of the personality cult and theological suspicion itself.

As for the former, Adorno argues that the possibility of the personality cult that has bedevilled the Left relies on a pernicious dialectic of Christology: only through the logic of the God-human, that is Christ, does it become possible

21. Adorno 1989.

22. Adorno 1973.

23. Adorno and Horkheimer 1999.

24. Adorno 1999, p. 23.



to raise another human being to divine status.<sup>25</sup> In other words, it is precisely because God becomes a human being in Jesus Christ (if we push the divinity far enough we end up with the very human Christ and vice versa), that a human being can become god – not just Christ, but any human being. Not merely a critique of the theological underpinnings of what represents a consistent problem for the Left, this argument also becomes part of the larger agenda of theological suspicion. And that suspicion emerges with great force in the demolition job on Kierkegaard. ‘All I leave is a memory’ might have been Adorno’s slogan, for time and again he attacks Kierkegaard’s effort to construct a philosophical system based on theology. That system rattles to pieces, either on the irresolvable paradoxes that fail to become dialectical or on the historical conditions of Kierkegaard’s work. In a different vein, theological suspicion also appears in the criticism of secularised theology in *The Jargon of Authenticity*. Here, in his attacks on both liberal theology and a philosophy that is a barely concealed secularised theology (especially Heidegger and the whole apparatus of existentialism), Adorno argues that the danger lies in the smuggled structures of authority that come with the terms now emptied of their theological content. In short, such moves risk the idolatry identified in the ban on images.

Alongside the reassessments of myth that come from Bloch and Benjamin, it seems to me that Adorno’s theological suspicion is crucial for both biblical studies and Marxist thought, or indeed philosophy as such. For Marxism and philosophy, the danger of secularised theology remains, as we will see. For biblical studies, Adorno reminds us that the Bible and theology are the most uneasy of associates, for the fractious and disparate texts of the Bible were gathered and colonised under protest by Church and Synagogue. Any biblical interpretation, in fact, needs to operate with a perpetual theological suspicion to prevent the text being hijacked by theological reifications.

### **Neo-Paulinism, or, after Western Marxism?**

Beneath the tracks I have followed until now, there is a discernable pattern that seeks to locate possible political insights in the Bible, to generate, if you will, thoroughly secularised motifs for political struggle. This agenda also lies at the centre of those who come after the close of Western Marxism with

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25. On this ‘pretence on the part of the finite’ see Adorno 1999, p. 177. A stark recent example is the adulation heaped upon the reactionary Pope John Paul II on his death in late March 2005.

Adorno. And yet, Adorno's warnings about the danger of secularised theology hang over this new work, which may be called, following Alberto Moreiras, neo-Paulinism.<sup>26</sup>

What do we find in this new moment, characterised as it is by a curious vibrancy of Marxism whose paradoxical mark seems to be a widespread sense of crisis and downturn? A situation marked simultaneously by a focus on a particular section of the Bible – the letters of Paul and the New Testament more generally – and by a notable caesura from the earlier deliberations of Western Marxism on the Bible. Agamben's concern with Benjamin is, of course, the exception here, but such a lack of connection becomes all the more curious in light of the similarity with the underlying drive that I identified in the preceding paragraph: namely the search for viable political models from the Bible.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, with the closing down of believable and viable models for revolutionary politics, especially the figure of Lenin, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek look to St. Paul (or rather, Paul, since we really need to dispense with the 'Saint') in the New Testament. As Lenin is to Marx, so Paul is to Jesus, the one who codified and brought to fruition the revolutionary implications of the charismatic founder. What Badiou attempts to do with Paul is to materialise or laicise his central doctrine of grace, and that grace is none other than the unverifiable fable of Christ's resurrection.<sup>28</sup> As grace, this assertion is necessarily a fable, one that is outside all canons of cause and effect. But Badiou is actually interested not in the resurrection itself but in Paul's experience and naming of the event, a process he identifies as the truth-event. For, in naming this event, Paul establishes a militant group characterised by fidelity to the event, love and a confident hope. Paul is then the militant *par excellence*, one who writes occasional pieces (epistles) while on the move, constantly organising, making up policy on the run, and thereby bringing into being a vast movement. In terms of Badiou's own philosophy of being and event, Paul is a great exemplar of the irruption of the event – unexpected, momentary and contingent – within the order of being. Paul's fundamental philosophical achievement is to found a notion of the universal by means of a contingent and specific moment, a universal that is thereby democratised and made available for any human

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26. Moreiras 2004.

27. I would dearly have loved to include Julia Kristeva at this point, but sadly the ever so light Marxism is overrun by psychoanalysis in the scattered moments she has written on biblical texts. Another task would be to bring those readings back within the Marxism that perpetually lurks beneath the surface of her texts (see Kristeva 1982a, pp. 56–132; 1982b, 2001; 1987, pp. 83–100, 139–50; 1989, pp. 98–103; 1998, pp. 71–80).

28. Badiou 2003.

being (Badiou's background in mathematics comes to the fore here, especially the breakthroughs of Gödel and Cohen).<sup>29</sup> Or, to put it in more political terms, Paul enables a constitution of the political subject whose basis is not the inclusion of an individual within a political process, but rather the constitution of the subject as an exception (that is, by means of grace).

Now, despite Badiou's neglect of the earlier heavy political import of Paul's texts, especially the explosive epistle to the Romans in the context of the Reformation, or even the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth, I must admit to being quite taken with two elements of Badiou's reading of Paul, or rather, two elements that, in fact, I read in Badiou but also against him. Firstly, what I see as the necessary fable, or the inescapable process of fabulation within the event itself, lies at the heart of any political movement. Indeed, such a necessary fable carries on Sorel's call for an underlying political myth on the Left.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, even though Badiou argues for a radical immanence – and this is one of the few points he shares with Deleuze – it seems to me that he is, in the end, a thinker of transcendence.<sup>31</sup> And this, I think, is crucial: any viable political programme must begin in the realm of transcendence, for only so does the plane of immanence become a viable political arena. Of course, I cannot develop this point here, save to point out that it both needs to be twisted and reshaped in light of temporal rather than vertical transcendence and that such a move preserves, in its own way, Adorno's theological suspicion. What I mean here is that such a temporalisation maintains the transcendent reserve over against any tendency towards idolatry or reification (of thought itself, personalities and so on).

I am much less enamoured of the efforts of Slavoj Žižek and Terry Eagleton, however. Although Žižek, following Badiou's cue, eventually works his way to a materialist grace at the close of the final book of his 'Christian' trilogy, he finds that he must leave his beloved Jacques Lacan by the side of road, however reluctantly and temporarily. What I find in these three books – *The Fragile Absolute*,<sup>32</sup> *On Belief*<sup>33</sup> and *The Puppet and the Dwarf*<sup>34</sup> – along with his earlier

29. Hallward 2003, pp. 323–48.

30. Sorel 1961. In a subsequent engagement (the 'Singularity and Multiplicity' conference at Duke University on 26 March, 2005), Badiou responded to my argument for a necessary fable at the heart of the event by cordoning such a fabulation of the event within religion alone. Needless to say, I find the fabulation of the event crucial to Badiou's work and will develop this argument further in the future.

31. This will, of course, require a reading of Badiou much like his reading of Deleuze as a thinker of the One (see Badiou 1999).

32. Žižek 2000.

33. Žižek 2001.

34. Žižek 2003.

engagement with both Badiou and Paul in *The Ticklish Subject*<sup>35</sup> is that Žižek works his way through Paul in order to become a political writer. That is, his explicitly Leninist position can only emerge through the New Testament. In Žižek's characteristically provocative dialectical inversions, Lenin's absolute freedom is indeed the political expression of theological grace! The problem is that Žižek lumps such a reading of grace in with Christian love and ethics: love, especially that espoused in the famous passage of 1 Corinthians 13, becomes one with grace in a fashion that is thoroughly alien to Paul. If anything, as Badiou points out, love follows as a response to grace. And when Žižek throws ethics into the mix, we have a Roman-Catholic notion of grace that is far from the irruption that Badiou emphasizes as the key to Paul's position. One simply cannot equate grace and love and end up with an ethics (as Calvin, for all his sins, was astute enough to point out). To be fair to Žižek, he does move beyond this to a starker and more political notion of grace in the closing pages of *On Belief* and *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, but, in the latter book, he calls upon a messianism reminiscent of Benjamin which then becomes subject to the criticism of redeemer figures (or the personality cult) I drew earlier from Adorno's theological suspicion.

This insight towards the end of these books is but a fleeting one, for, in a number of subsequent pieces, Žižek recycles his earlier points, albeit with one or two significant variations.<sup>36</sup> Even though he desperately wishes to keep Lacan in the cycle, I cannot help but notice that, when he begins speaking of the New Testament, Lacan disappears with undue haste. Thus, in the interview with Joshua Delpuch-Ramey in *The Journal of Philosophy and Scripture*,<sup>37</sup> Žižek begins with the Lacanian criticism of Badiou that the latter neglects the death drive, but, as soon as he folds this into the crucifixion (an astonishing move in itself), Lacan slips out the back like some Weberian vanishing mediator. Further, he continues to equate, quite mistakenly, Badiou's emphasis on grace in Paul with Christian love (the old warhorse of 1 Corinthians 13 comes into service yet again). For Christian love – which I assume to be *agape*, rather than the radical communal love of *philadelphia* – is for Žižek the key to revolutionary politics. But how does Žižek manage to argue that Christian love is what we need in politics? The first signal comes with Žižek's perpetual reliance, through the Christian trilogy and in the subsequent articles, on Kierkegaard's comments on love, especially the latter's *Works of Love*. The catch with the various citations Žižek uses is that no matter how much Žižek or Kierkegaard emphasise the

35. Žižek 1999.

36. Žižek 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, and 2005.

37. Žižek 2004a.

uniqueness of Christian love, *agape*, the prescriptions on love are inescapably ethical.<sup>38</sup> Here, again, on the question of ethics, the later articles recycle the arguments of the books. If Christian love actually means ethics, albeit a radical ethics, then what about ethics itself? As far as ethics are concerned, in the later articles the sparring partner is now Levinas, and Žižek argues with and then against Levinas to suggest that we need not so much to name the ‘Other’, to give this other a face, but to opt for the nameless, faceless crowd of thirds that is perpetually excluded from ethical concerns.<sup>39</sup> In other words, for Žižek as for so many others when we speak of ethics, we are in fact speaking of politics. What we get then is a curious slippage, where the message of Christianity is love, love entails ethics, politics becomes the domain of ethics, and so the political solution is... Christian love. But let us return to Levinas: as soon as Levinas comes into play, Žižek returns to an old theme of his – the relations between Judaism and Christianity. He walks a fine line here, setting up what are often caricatures of both Jews and Christians, wanting to give Jews the credit for insights into the nature of the law and its paradoxes, but then eventually siding with the Christian ability to face the paradoxes (law and transgression, freewill and determinism, iconoclasm and representation, ethics and love), to thoroughly disrupt the economy that keeps them in place and open up a new place for struggle. But all this is still very much under the shadow of Kierkegaard, and it seems to me that Žižek could well do with a read of Adorno’s devastating critique of Kierkegaard mentioned above.

Although I find some of these moves problematic for reasons at which I can only point here, I must admit to finding Žižek’s work thoroughly intriguing. It is just that on Paul, Badiou is a better read. As is well known, Eagleton too is a pleasure to read, but the recent return to his theological roots in the Catholic Left of the 1960s and early 1970s has all the problems associated with an emphasis on both Christology and ethics that I have identified in my discussions of both Adorno and Žižek. Although these reflections are scattered over a number of recent works, especially *The Gatekeeper*,<sup>40</sup> *Figures of Dissent*<sup>41</sup> and *After Theory*,<sup>42</sup> the most sustained moment must be the final chapter of the book on tragedy, *Sweet Violence*.<sup>43</sup> In a chapter that is a lightly revised version, more than three decades later, of the final chapter of his last theological

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38. See more on this problem in my chapter on Žižek in Boer 2007a.

39. Žižek 2004c and 2005.

40. Eagleton 2001.

41. Eagleton 2003a.

42. Eagleton 2003c.

43. Eagleton 2003b.

book, *The Body as Language*,<sup>44</sup> Eagleton finds that the great value of the story of Christ's death is that he becomes the scapegoat or scandal. He locates echoes in other literature from ancient Greece through to contemporary fiction, but the key lies in the political model of identity with the outcast and rejected – for Eagleton, the majority of today's global population – and then their overcoming of oppression which is modelled on the resurrection. While Eagleton no longer believes in such doctrines (or does he?), he finds much political value in the paradigm itself as well as Christ's teaching: Jesus Christ becomes the well-known political messiah with a revolutionary ethics. It matters less that this is not particularly new. But what is more problematic, especially in light of Adorno's criticism of the personality cult, is that Eagleton returns squarely to a redeemer figure, in this case perhaps the central redeemer figure in Western culture.

I am tempted to invoke the analogy of the gospels in the New Testament to the relations between Badiou, Žižek, Eagleton and Agamben: if the first three are the synoptics, connected to each other in complex patterns of dependence and independence, then Giorgio Agamben is Saint John, a voice separate from Matthew, Mark and Luke, yet one that covers very similar territory.<sup>45</sup> A new wave of critical work has begun to follow the English translation of *Il tempo che resta*.<sup>46</sup> In contrast to the others, Agamben engages directly with the earlier moments of Western-Marxist appropriations of the Bible, specifically Benjamin's notion of the messianic, which he interprets in two senses, one in terms of time and the other in terms of act. As for the question of time, he argues that messianic time is a suspended moment [*kairos*] between an instant of chronological time and its fulfilment. This moment in between is the 'time that remains' until the end of the current political order. As far as the messianic act is concerned, Agamben argues that it deactivates the law in order to pump up its potentiality so that it may be fulfilled – a little like a footballer who is rested in the middle of the game so that he may come on in the last minutes.

There are two problems with Agamben's argument, it seems to me, and they concern his understanding of the term 'messianic' and his focus on the law. First, as a paradigm of the political, Agamben sets the messianic up as a distinct category from eschatology and apocalyptic, two terms he takes as synonymous.

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44. Eagleton 1970.

45. Unfortunately, Antonio Negri's book on Job is available only Italian (2002), and as I do not read Italian I will have to leave my reference to a footnote. It is currently being translated, but until its publication he will have to function as the Hebrew background to the New-Testament critics.

46. Agamben 2000a, 2004 and 2005.

Unfortunately for his argument, the three terms are in fact distinct. Eschatology, without the redeemer figure of both messianism and the more fevered apocalyptic, is perhaps the more preferable of the three, not least because it avoids the traps of the personality cult. Second, Agamben's resolute focus on the law – to the extent that Paul becomes a thinker of the law and the messianic deals mainly with the law – means that he leaves little room for grace. On this matter he could not be further from Badiou: in the great divide of Paul's thought, one sides with law and the other with grace. I must admit to preferring the political possibilities of Badiou's materialist grace, especially the unexpected political moment that breaks into the current order, than Agamben's concern with a fulfilled messianic law.

Agamben's other great concern has more mileage. I refer here to his emphasis on the remnant rather than Badiou's universal. For Agamben, Paul uniquely carries through a series of distinctions that when layered over one another begin to break down and cut across conventional distinctions. Thus, when we look at the way Paul operates, juxtaposing wisdom and foolishness, spirit and letter, law and grace, Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free, then we end up with the remnant, a division of existing divisions, those left over after all of the distinctions have done their work. Except, of course, that the remnant is crucial in some Hebrew-Bible (Old-Testament) texts, especially among the prophets. They are the few who, through no merit of their own, remain after all of the destruction has done its work and thereby come to represent the whole. Not so much the revolutionary vanguard as that bewildered leftover, the remnant comprises the least worthy of any group which then becomes the locus of unexpected possibilities.

Although I have concerned myself in this section with the search for viable political models in the pages of the New Testament, preferring Badiou's focus on the rupture of a materialised grace or Agamben's concern with the remnant, there is also a distinct contribution they can make to biblical scholarship itself. And that is quite specifically the radically political nature of Paul's texts that runs against the overly benign and liberal readings of Paul by New-Testament scholars as the great and somewhat comfortable institutionaliser. All of which should really come as no surprise, since Paul's texts have been at the centre of political debate before – the Reformation and the fundamental political reorganisation of Europe is but the most telling example.

### **Liberation, political and materialist exegesis**

Of course, neither the search for viable political models in the pages of the New Testament, nor political reflections on biblical texts are at all unique to

the European academe or the Western-Marxist tradition. While it may seem as though we are moving to the other side, into the domain of the Church and theology itself, at least since the late 1960s political and liberation theologies have undertaken a very similar task, namely the search for viable political models drawn from the biblical traditions. The only difference is that the secularising effort of such readings gives way before a critical and politically aware religious commitment.

The liberation and political theologies that emerged in the Third World and the urban, Western centres of poverty and exclusion from the 1960s onwards were initially of a more theological nature, and significant contributions were also made in biblical studies. I will, however, begin with the small contribution from neither England (political theology) nor the Americas (liberation theology), but Portugal. Fernando Belo's *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark* has always been something of a maverick in biblical scholarship.<sup>47</sup> Bringing together semiotics and Marxism, Belo's great model is Roland Barthes's *S/Z*, a reading of Balzac that Belo appropriates in his own way, identifying a whole series of codes (actantial, analytic, basileic, chronological, mythological, social, strategic, symbolic and topographical) and actants (adversaries, crowds, disciples and Jesus). It is an extraordinary effort by the self-taught Belo to link such an avowedly literary reading with detailed sociological reflection. And so he seeks to identify the political economic context – which he describes as a sub-Asiatic mode of production – in order to identify a context for the symbolic order of the Gospel of Mark.<sup>48</sup> In this context, Jesus becomes a political operator who challenges not so much the religious leaders of his time, but the Roman Imperial order on behalf of the powerless. Mark's passion narrative, with its focus on the death of Jesus, becomes a distinctly political account that registers the marks of empire on Jesus's body. And his resurrection asserts that this was one realm the Romans did not control, a mark of insurrection and source of hope for current politics. But Belo's text is also profoundly hermeneutic, and this is where he comes close to those thinkers I have considered thus far. He wants, in other words, a message for today, and a distinctly political one at that: 'I am offering a translation-tradition of the Gospel narrative in a new epistemological space'.<sup>49</sup> That message comes through the *ekklesia*, which he leaves in its Greek

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47. Belo 1981. See the summary and expansion in more accessible format in Clevener 1985.

48. I will explore this side of Belo's text in a subsequent article on Marxist reconstructions of biblical societies.

49. Belo 1981, p. 296.



transliteration to avoid the heavy weight of the word ‘Church’: if Jesus’s resurrection generates insurrection, then the *ekklesia* is the revolutionary group that emerges from the impetus of the resurrection. In many respects, Belo’s text lies behind the subsequent reconstructions of a political Jesus from Ched Myers to Richard Horsley.<sup>50</sup>

Belo’s book appeared in French in 1974, emerging from work in the 1960s, the same decade that the movement and journal *Slant* was causing a stir in the Roman-Catholic Church of sixties England and liberation theology was taking shape in both Americas. While Gustavo Gutiérrez’s classic, *The Theology of Liberation* was published in 1969,<sup>51</sup> James Cone’s *A Black Theology of Liberation* appeared in 1970<sup>52</sup> in North America and independently from the movements in Latin America. Leonardo and Clodovis Boff<sup>53</sup> and Juan Luis Segundo<sup>54</sup> followed Gutiérrez in what became an extremely well-known movement within and outside the various churches, although most were Roman Catholic. While their arguments focused on giving a distinctly economic and political tint to key Christian doctrines such as sin, grace, the incarnation, salvation and redemption,<sup>55</sup> a significant number of biblical critics, such as Jorge Pixley, Jose Miranda, J. Severino Croatto, Ernesto Cardenal and Elsa Tamez concerned themselves with the Bible.<sup>56</sup>

In the work of these scholars, coming from a context of liberation and anticolonial struggles throughout Latin America (Castro in Cuba, Allende in Chile, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, to name but a few) and the involvement of certain elements of the Roman-Catholic Church, such as the Colombian *guerrilla*-priest, Camilo Torres, with insurgent peasants, we find the same themes as those that emerged both in the circle around *Slant*, including the early texts of Terry Eagleton that I mentioned a little earlier, and the moves toward ‘black-liberation theology’ in North America, of which Cone’s book was the key text. The scandal of the liberation theologians, as with *Slant* and Cone, was the conjunction of Marxism and theology. And the result was an emphasis on God’s preferential option for the poor,<sup>57</sup> read in texts of both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, the distinctly political elements of the

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50. Myers 1989, Horsley 2002, and 2003.

51. Gutiérrez 1969. See also Gutiérrez 1983.

52. Cone 1970.

53. Boff 1987.

54. Segundo 1976 and 1985.

55. See Ellacuria and Sobrino (eds.) 1994.

56. Pixley 1987; Croatto 1981; Miranda 1974, 1982; Cardenal 1979; and Tamez 1982.

57. A legitimate Catholic doctrine since the 1979 Puebla Conference of Latin-American Bishops.

Kingdom or Rule of God, the political and revolutionary dimensions of the Jesus movement, a revolutionary ethics, and a critical engagement with major currents of Western thought. Although there is a good deal of systematic theology, especially in the work of Gutiérrez, Segundo and Cone, liberation theologians rely heavily on the Bible. The two foci of liberation theology have been and remain the narrative of the Exodus in the Hebrew Bible and the figure of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

Thus Croatto, making use of Paul Ricoeur's earlier work on interpretation, argues for the central role of the Exodus as a liberating political and theological event that lies at the centre of the Hebrew Bible. Through a highly problematic reliance on the historicity of the Exodus event, Croatto brings to bear all of the hermeneutical resources he can muster to render the Exodus a continuing paradigm for political work today.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Jorge Pixley invokes the Exodus, as well as the work of Norman Gottwald's Marxist reconstruction of early Israel, to argue for a revolutionary core to the Hebrew Bible.<sup>59</sup> While Elsa Tamez concurs, she backs up such a reading with a systematic analysis of the terminology of oppression that saturates the biblical text.<sup>60</sup> However, when we get to Miranda's classic text, we find that the Bible becomes a resource for offering a wholesale criticism of the objective and disinterested Western science and epistemology stemming from the ancient Greeks. His premise is that a reading of the Bible, properly and on its own terms, leads us to a critique very similar to, but with greater ontological depth, than Marx's. While Miranda's reading, as with nearly all of the liberation-biblical scholars, comes out of long and direct involvement of the struggles of the poor in Latin America, Enrique Dussel brings to bear a significant philosophical background to enhance Miranda's hunch: the major movements of Western philosophy, especially those from Descartes onwards, develop crucial philosophical categories of autonomy and universalism at the same time that European imperialism first begins flexing its muscles.<sup>61</sup> For Dussel, this is hardly a coincidence.

Despite the profound influence of Ernst Bloch on liberation theology,<sup>62</sup> these liberation readings of the Bible each eschew ambivalence over the Bible –

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58. Croatto 1981.

59. Gottwald 1999 (first edition 1979).

60. Tamez 1982.

61. Dussel 2003a, 2003b.

62. In fact, Bloch's work had profound effect on a range of theologians, including various liberal theologians (the death-of-God, developmental and secular theologians), as well political theology in Germany (Jürgen Moltmann and Johannes Metz) and liberation theology (Gustavo Gutiérrez, Franz Hinkelammert and others) in the 1960s and 1970s. Many of these theological responses came during the revolutionary turmoil of 1968 and afterwards, and I remember

Bloch famously quipped that the Bible is not always a folly to the rich. They take the notion, born out of direct political struggle, of the preferential option of the poor at its word, arguing that any reactionary dissolution of such a message contravenes the central message of the Bible. I suspect they would prefer Bloch's other comment, that the Bible is the Church's bad conscience. Indeed, I would rather have more of a de-linking of the Bible and theology in many of these readings, taking much of the Bible itself as a fractious, murmuring and problematic text for theology and the Church.

All the same, liberation theology and biblical interpretation generated outrage from conservative forces including the Reagan administration and the IMF,<sup>63</sup> as well as the recently deceased Pope John Paul II. While John Paul II turned a blind eye as he sought to drag the Roman-Catholic Church into its current reactionary position, and while the current pope (when he was still Cardinal Ratzinger and head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) berated one liberation theologian after another, US-backed forces systematically exterminated the leaders and members of churches that espoused liberation theology.<sup>64</sup> Neither pope would have been as happy with the explicit support of Pentecostal and Charismatic evangelism in South America that the US under Reagan and the elder Bush fostered. Indeed, in this example, we have a classic case of Christianity turning against itself in order to obliterate the radical element within: first the Roman-Catholic hierarchy takes on liberation theology, and then the US administration encourages evangelical Protestant and charismatic elements against both Roman-Catholic and liberation-theological positions.

And yet liberation theologians have always held Marxism at a distance, while using its methods for analysing capitalism, the social, political and economic dimensions of oppression and exploitation. For they have maintained an ontological reserve, arguing that, without some form of divine transcendence, one cannot avoid fetishising what is human. So, the only perspective that avoids idolatry,<sup>65</sup> the raising of human beings or the products of human hands into the status of gods, is ontological transcendence itself. And this includes Marxism, the proletariat, or indeed the leader of the movement. The catch with this move is that it does not block such idolatry or reification, but merely

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reading them avidly in the 1980s when the debates were over the connections between the earlier secular and political theologies and the emergent liberation theologies.

63. Löwy 1996, p. 66; and Hinkelammert 1999, pp. 36, 39–43.

64. Fernando Segovia, Cuban biblical scholar and theologian now at Vanderbilt University, told me recently of the huge memorial in San Salvador to all those who 'disappeared' during this era, often for no other reason than being a member of such a church.

65. Löwy 1996, p. 35, suggests this is the principal aim of liberation theology.

replaces one form with another. However, the significance of the political and liberation theologians is similar to that of Badiou and Agamben, namely that it is not so much a matter of ‘add Marxism and stir’; rather, this work shows both the inescapably *political* nature of these texts, and suggests, as Michael Löwy argues, that the traditional Marxist analysis of religion may need reformulating in the wake of political and liberation theologies.<sup>66</sup>

### **Conclusion: Marxist biblical critics in the new world order**

Each of these disparate trends – materialist, political and liberation-exegesis – have influenced the current group of biblical scholars who make use of Marxism. This is particularly true for Gerald West,<sup>67</sup> Norman Gottwald,<sup>68</sup> Richard Horsley<sup>69</sup> and Ron Simkins,<sup>70</sup> as well as Itumeleng Mosala, Jorunn Økland, Gale Yee, David Jobling, Mark Sneed and myself. While there has always been a small contingent of biblical scholars using Marxism to reconstruct the ancient societies in which the Bible arose – the subject of another essay – a significant amount of energy is now directed to what might loosely be called literary interpretations, or to use a somewhat conventional Marxist category, the analysis of the realm of ideology in its relation to culture, philosophy and religion. For instance, Itumeleng Mosala, explicitly acknowledging the role of his approach in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa (he now holds a senior post in the Ministry of Education), seeks to apply Marxist categories of class and ideology to the traditional determination of sources in the books of Micah and Luke. In doing so, he seeks to uncover the way questions of class, gender and race overlay each other in such sources.<sup>71</sup> David Jobling connects Marxism with feminism, psychoanalysis and deconstruction in some of the most astute readings of the Hebrew Bible I have encountered;<sup>72</sup> Jorunn Økland brings together the work of Henri Lefebvre and feminism to read Paul’s letter to the Corinthians;<sup>73</sup> Gale Yee engages with a series of texts that present woman as evil in light of Marxist historical reconstruction and the function of such texts in the ideological superstructure;<sup>74</sup> and Mark Sneed has offered a

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66. Löwy 1996, p. 4.

67. West 1995, 1998.

68. Gottwald, 1989, 1992, 1993, 1999.

69. Horsley 2002, 2003.

70. Simkins 1999, 2004.

71. Mosala 1989.

72. Jobling 1991, 1992a, 1992b, 1998.

73. Økland 2004.

74. Yee 2003.

metacommentary of Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) in light of Fredric Jameson's texts.<sup>75</sup> My own research, as this essay shows, continues to focus on the moves back and forth between Marxism and biblical criticism.<sup>76</sup>

In such a survey, one becomes acutely aware of the caesurae and disruptions between the various Marxist engagements with the Bible. However, I want to draw a few brief observations from my synopsis of this interaction. To begin with, Michael Löwy's point needs to be taken seriously: what might a rethinking of religion look like for Marxism? Nearly all of the work that I have discussed moves from biblical studies, and often theology, to politics, seeking political insights from these sources. Perhaps it is time to ask what the implications are for religion, and more specifically for biblical studies. I am not thinking of a return along the same path, back from politics to religion, but rather of taking the next step, following the logic of political readings to their end and then seeing what emerges. Secondly, a question remains for biblical critics: what does it mean to use Marxist categories for a text produced in a very different political economic system and which remains enormously influential, for good or (all too often) ill, today? This involves not merely the continuing task of historical reconstruction, but also reading and interpreting the texts themselves and accounting for their continued influence. Finally, the burgeoning interest in the Bible by critics such as Badiou, Žižek and Agamben, largely outside the somewhat parochial concerns of biblical studies, urges biblical critics to enter these debates, not only to raise Adorno's old theological suspicion, but also to ask why this should be happening outside of and with considerable disregard for the concerns of biblical studies.<sup>77</sup>

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75. Sneed 2004.

76. Boer 1996, 1997, 2003. With Jorunn Øklund I am currently gathering a collection of essays by various scholars under the title of *Marxist-Feminist Criticism of the Bible*.

77. Many thanks to Ibrahim Abraham, my invaluable research assistant, for his work on this article.

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