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Book Reviews

Mary Wept Over the Feet of Jesus: Prostitution and Religious Obedience in the Bible. Chester Brown. Montréal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2016. 270 pages. \$24.95 CDN (Hardcover).

Chester Brown wrote one of the best studies of Louis Riel, more than 10 years ago: it was a work that took religion seriously. His only major work after this, *Paying for It*, is a polemic in favour of legalizing sex work, and a personal memoir of his experiences with sex work.

His new book, an eccentric adaptation of scriptures about prostitution in the Bible, extends the religious seriousness of his Riel work, but also provides an argument about both his politics (Brown has run several times for the Libertarian Party of Canada) and his personal life. To put it crudely, Brown's central post-Riel project has been to justify his taste for sex work, and this volume—though less explicit than *Paying for It*—continues to pursue that goal.

There have been recent efforts to complicate how sex in the Bible can be seen as transactional (see especially Ipsen's *Sex Working the Bible*, but also Reid, Hollywood, and recent scholars of medieval prostitution). However, Brown's work functions more as literary criticism, or confession, than theological exegesis. Even more so, it is a polemical essay in exegetical drag.

Brown's work could be considered in this new radical sexual exegesis if his theological practice was less maladroit. Brown's explicit framing provides a formal structure for biblical texts, which are ambivalent at best. Each page has four panels, with the exception of pages that introduce characters or stories. The exception to this is the story of Job near the end of the book. There is little excess decoration; the work told in simple line drawing.

These framings tell the story through simple vignettes (Cain and Abel, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba from Jewish Scripture; and Mary, the Mother of God, Mary of Bethany, the Parable of the Talents, and the Parable of the Prodigal Son in the Christian scripture, with an afterward telling the story of Job). Some of the vignettes are very much about sex work, some are thought to be about sex work by certain scholars, while some seem not to be about sex work except in the mind of Brown.

Brown conflates the orthodox and heterodox. He makes the same common mistake as many amateur theologians in assuming Christ is a figure recognizable to progressive, contemporary Westerners; and in blaming Paul for sex negativity while ignoring some of the gospel's prohibitions against divorce, or Christ's words against the Syro-Phoenician woman. For example, he seems to include the Cain and Abel story in order to talk about Yoram Hazony's *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, which posits that God wishes to seek challenge rather than obedience. But Hazony's Philosophy is largely derided by more conventional theologians and religious historians.

Brown leans on Hazony because he is useful. This is an ongoing pattern, leaning heavily on the liberal John Dominic Crossan, and not mentioning any of the 19th century German scholars that allowed Crossan to do the work that Brown pillages.

The cherry-picking of scandal and blasphemy here has a strange rhetorical power. It makes an argument about inclusion—and the problems of gender—that more nuanced forms might lack. The most effective blasphemy, he argues, is the possibility of Mary, the mother of God, being a prostitute because of her age and her financial station. He justifies this by quoting Jane Schaberg's haunting work, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*. Schaberg argues that Mary was raped, and Christ as child of rape explains some of the taboos around his birth. There is a violation in how Brown uses the work of Schaberg, dismissing careful scholarship, without careful argument, in favour of a position that matches his polemic taste. One of the marks of some libertarian criticism in favour of sex work is the underplaying of rape. The misuse of Schaberg is the most obvious, but it is a continued pattern of Brown.

In his discussion of Bathsheba, he does not mention the culture of women as war trophies. In the story of Ruth, it becomes more of a metaphor for the positive power of entrepreneurship. In arguing in favour of sex work, the recognition that the sexual ethics of the Bible are often confusing and have to be read within the tradition of both ancient times and current usage is occasionally absent.

This does not mean that there are arguments not worth making. Making Rahab the saviour of the Israelites, even though she was a foreigner and a sex worker, is a story not told often enough. Brown's work on her manages to be tender, sensitive and inclusive. Even some of his leaning on other sources and other histories provides a useful corrective. The Parable of the

Talents structure did not work in the same way as other parables. Peter Cresswell argues for an early Matthew in his editing and translating of *The Book of the Nazarene*, folding in discussions of historical prostitution that seem to line up with his understanding of the text. It is a nice piece of historical detective work. Indeed, Brown reads widely, but without the rigour of an academic.

All caveats aside, serious artistic and personal engagement with scripture seems rare these days. I am reminded of the Anglo-American comic artist Basil Wolverton, who found a particularly apocalyptic Jesus in the late 1960s, after almost half a century of drawing pop grotesques. Wolverton was a bad exegete, but a brilliant artist like Brown.

Brown's brilliance shines through in the paranoid, bodily closeness of David in his bedchamber, and the three pages of Ruth getting her courage up to ask to glean—and even how he draws a ladder in the story of Rahab. Wolverton's biblical work was for a magazine called *Plain Truth*, and worked as a tract. I wonder, considering the social and political nature of Brown's work, if it might have been better in the ephemeral middle ground between tract and comic.

Anthony Easton

Veiled Figures: Women, Modernity, and the Spectres of Orientalism. Teresa Heffernan. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016. 240 pages. \$55.00 CDN (Paperback).

Teresa Heffernan is a Professor of English at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. In her most recent work published by the University of Toronto Press, *Veiled Figures: Women, Modernity, and the Spectres of Orientalism* (2016), Heffernan traces the history of Western perceptions and understandings of the veil in Islam. Indeed, by exploring how the clash of “Eastern” and “Western” civilizations is perpetuated by the rhetoric of “veiling” and “unveiling” women, Heffernan argues that women's bodies have been unjustly used to exacerbate the divide between religion and rationality, and Islamism and global “secularism” in the contemporary period. In particular, she looks to the legacy of Orientalism, and how it has come to inform the ways in which perceptions of Muslim women and