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Book Reviews



David Neville, *The Vehement Jesus; Grappling with Troublesome Gospel Texts*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stick, 2017), pp. 292 + xiii, \$20:00 (hbk) ISBN 978-1-62032-408-6 (pbk), 978-1-4982-8750-0 (hbk), 978-1-5326-4272-2 (ebk).

In this book David Neville posits shalom/peace as the anchor of biblical hermeneutics, a governing control elicited from Scripture and read back upon Scripture. His contest is with the many texts that threaten the hold of that hermeneutic. There are New Testament texts that portray Jesus' words and deeds as complicit in, if not authorizing, violence. This book as such is a prequel to Neville's *A Peaceable Hope* (Baker, 2013) because it confronts with honesty the gospel texts that darken the exemplary way of a Jesus thoroughly committed to the path of peace.

The task before Neville is no easy task. Multiple instances can be cited where certain passages have been extorted in religious and political history to justify institutionally-backed violence. Neville acknowledges some of these but he wants to resist the temptation glibly to extract what he wants from gospel passages and set his assertions against the weight of the history of interpretation.

The texts chosen for examination come as no surprise. Passages that exalt the symbol and reality of the sword figure prominently (Matt 10:34–36 and Lk 22:35–38). What Neville calls 'Turbulence in the Temple', namely Jesus' expulsion of money-changers from the outer temple court is dealt with in two chapters (chapters 5 and 7), largely because of its emblematic support for Jesus the man of ('righteous') violence in the history of just war theory.

Neville recognizes that it is the words of Jesus rather than the actions of Jesus narrated in the canonical gospels that are the most troubling, precisely because they appear to privilege a violence with divine origins and authorization. He leaves the full-scale eschatological retribution of apocalyptic passages to his earlier book allowing one chapter (9) to be a partial reprise but with some modulation.

Of greater concern in this book are the immense problems of the most benign of Jesus' forms of speech—the parables. Three are singled out: the unforgiving slave (Matt 18:23–35), the parable that Neville calls 'a throne claimant' (Lk 19:11–28—more familiar as 'the parable of the pounds') and the parable of the tenants in the vineyard (Mk 12: 1–12 and parallels). The brutality exacted on poor unfortunates at the conclusion of these parables presents enormous challenges to the thesis that Jesus is always and ever 'prince of peace'. Indeed, Neville admits that there is a difference between Jesus' parabolic and non-parabolic teaching in that some parables at least seem to authenticate a violent eschatology not present in other eschatological teaching (p. 252). Violence of a non-eschatological variety is acknowledged in the woe chapter of Matt 23 and in the culpable history of its use in Christian anti-semitism (chapter 8).

The task Neville sets himself—that is the provision of authentic alternatives in exegesis of these passages in order to remove the barnacles of violence from the shalom (of) Christ—is immense. Further texts might have attracted his scalpel. The most obvious is that text which directly uses one Greek word for violence and associates it with the reign of God (Matt 11:12). This text gains only a passing mention in *A Peaceable Hope* (p. 23). Commentators have been content to assign the meaning to the executions of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. But when the kingdom is characterized as 'coming violently'—an alternate translation of the opening clause—then some explanation seems warranted.

More importantly, there is extremely little recognition that women and children all-too-often bear the burden of violence. Violence for Neville is cast in large frame—the persecution of Jews, slaughter of colonized peoples, preemptive and defensive warfare (p. 11). These are real; but the genocide by rape, the forbidding of native tongues amongst children, the brutal economics of the expatriation of peoples as fodder for (sex-)slave markets, let alone the family violence that bears down on women and children—these do not figure in the book. The gendered complexity of violence does not enter the discussion. Some decades ago, Louise Schottroff pointed out how dangerous the apparently non-retaliatory injunctions of Matt 5:38–42 was for the safety of women.

Similarly, texts that are apparently supportive of Jesus as 'an inherently peaceful' person can readily, in the hands of his posthumous devotees, become abrogated as the ideological buttress for military intervention. The use of Lk 9:62 to justify the United States' military occupation in the Philippines early in the twentieth century or the extortion of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37) by one Australian Defence Force bishop to justify Australian police action in the Solomon Islands in this century, shows just how readily New Testament texts can be turned to support (preemptive or defensive) violence.

An examination of the tendency to ‘militarize’ texts or build them into broader supports for retribution would seem to be part of the necessary examination of the tendency to change the Jesus of peace into the Jesus of vengeance.

If Neville is to succeed in maintaining the Bible as normative (for Christology, ethics and so on), anchoring biblical interpretation in a peace hermeneutic and yet, at the same time, resist the temptation to anaesthetize readers into acceptance of a bland uniformity, then a rigorous honesty in interpretive approach is demanded. By and large, Neville succeeds. But to do so, he is forced to rely on a range of interpretive approaches, some which he is ambivalent about using ... and not always consistently! The same awkward tension attaches to the thematic line governing the progression of the book—the ‘vehement’ Jesus. Vehemence is nowhere closely defined apart from an opening sortie into dictionary options. Sometimes it is set off against violence but it can also appear synonymously (pp. 155, 173).

My key concern is how to compel a shift of the book into public discourse about the making of a peaceful society. As it stands, the book utilizes a level of exegetical examination that flags a particular *ecclesial* audience. Neville considers that the primary ‘conceptual matrix’ for the Gospel texts are Jewish writings (p. 140). But both the methodological accent (on concepts) and the isolation of Jewish texts actually operates against ‘peace’ being a *socio-political* ambition. Neville allows that the Jewish conceptual matrix may not go uncontested (p. 145) but by confining debate to that matrix—and privileging Jewish writings as the acceptable comparative storehold—peace neither finds its prime contestable opponent nor its prime ‘contextual matrix’—imperial Rome. Neville occasionally allows the presence of Rome (most especially in regard to the destruction of the temple in chapter 3), but its importance is muted. When the emperor Augustus paraded his own ideological self-justification in his *Res Gestae*, promulgated throughout the empire, he provided the fundamental eschatological rationale for violence as the necessary precursor for peace. Parallels in the birthing of peace from violence are clear in Jewish prophetic texts and in some New Testament texts (not least the Book of Revelation). Accordingly, the portrayal of Jesus (or Paul for that matter in Acts) as a pacifist, law-observant, non-retaliatory Jew could, pursuant to rabbinical and philosophical advice, be crucial to the survival of a minority group.

The moment that Neville allows that Jesus might have been re-constructed in the canonical gospels, the opening is granted for re-constructions *towards* a ubiquitous shalom (of) Christ as much as away from a pervasive shalom (of) Jesus. Jesus as missionary and promoter of peace cannot be divorced from the larger “contextual matrix” of imperial Rome, its propaganda and its military machinery. Any ‘peace’ that is personified in Jesus cannot be severed from this

context. The question is not merely whether the gospels consciously become players in wider imperial debates, as John Crossan argues. But rather, given the ubiquity of Rome, whether immunity from such contests was possible.

If this is the case, then by transport from the first and second centuries to the twenty-first century, Neville's book *can* be securely placed into the public arena. Whilst its technical exegetical aspects might be daunting in an Australian context for public policy makers (*quaere* if the same level of biblical [il]literacy occurs in an American context), the careful, sound, scholarly investigation has the capacity to perform two important functions. Firstly, the book can provide for Christians operating in public space a means to interrogate sometimes-centuries-long interpretations of biblical texts as justifying violence, especially the just war theory. The texts on which the validation of violence has rested no longer seem to provide such a secure basis for argument. This position does not require a turning from the Bible, even as 'normative'—but it does subject the Bible to a rigorous and disputational examination as part of the effort to find an ethics that is profoundly integral to the work of/for peace. Secondly, it resists the abrogation of biblical texts and images for the promotion of violence or even of peace-through-violent-intervention by those whose prime interest is the formation or promotion of policy that is to guide public acts. For both these reasons, Neville's book is a critical contribution far beyond the sphere of some enclosed Christian circle.

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