

Storie, Deborah, Barbara Deutschmann and Michelle Eastwood (eds). *Reading the Bible in Australia*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2024). 296 pp. \$62.70 paperback.

This is an important book for Australian Christians for we mostly read the Bible through a generic European lens rather than through a lens shaped by our particular history and culture. It follows up a lot of issues raised by Meredith Lake's *The Bible in Australia: A Cultural History* (NewSouth Books 2018). As well as reading the book I've had the benefit of watching the launch panel comprising Robyn Whitaker, Graham Cole, Jonathan Cornford and Naomi Wolfe online www.facebook.com/100093353610607/videos/1605302973650041

The editors are to be especially commended for bringing neglected indigenous voices to the theological conversation, who are surely part of the lens through which all of us in this country must read the Bible. These indigenous voices include the artist Safina Stewart (whose beautiful painting "Healing Prayer" is on the cover and reflections inside), Naomi Wolfe, Ray Minniecon, and Anne Pattel-Gray. All write with grace while not shrinking from pointing out uncomfortable parts of our Christian and national histories. As Jonathan Cornford put it at the launch, he struggles with the "moral problem of Australia", a country he loves yet recognises was founded on theft and violence. He notes the paradox of being sensitised to this moral problem by the Bible even though Christianity was entwined with colonization. It is a complex moral problem which he suggests we have only just begun to grapple with as Australian Christians.

My own interest was especially aroused by the sustained attention to economics. It comes up in Mark Brett and Deborah Shuh Yi Tan's chapter on translations of Genesis 1 from the 1840s by William Thomas (1793-1867), who was an Assistant Aboriginal Protector from 1839 in the Port Phillip District.

It is central to Jonathan Cornford's chapter "Money Made Us. Reading Australia through Jesus Teachings on Money" which offers an account of Australian history where economics is central – where our national identity is shaped by the prosperity of most of the settler population story while avoiding important the Biblical material on prosperity. His reading of the Bible on economics sharply challenges the dispossession of the indigenous people of this land, ecological exploitation, inequality of economic outcomes, among other aspects of our economic system. In his view the problem is not just that a good number of individual Australians, including Australian Christians, have fallen victim to the idolatry of wealth, but that Australia's economic culture and system is inconsistent with Biblical teaching. One does not need to agree with all of what Cornford writes to find much that is challenging for Australian Christians.

Also concerned with economics is "The Free Enterprise Parable? Contesting John Howard's Appropriation of a Story told by Jesus" by Deborah Storie. I learned much from Deborah's 2016 doctoral thesis on the parable and her article with Mark Brett ("The Church

in the Economy of God” published by the Zadok Institute for Christianity and Society), and this chapter takes her analysis further. The parable of the talents occurs in Matthew and Luke in different contexts and with significant differences in the stories. They are puzzling texts that we all too quickly read as validating our contemporary culture of entrepreneurship, investment and the making of money. Just as John Howard did. But there are many elements of the story that don’t sit easily with that reading – it requires us to identify Jesus with Herod Archelaus who was a pretty nasty piece of work even by the standards of Judeo-Roman rulers. The servant is admonished for not at least putting the money out at interest – something unexceptional for us but problematic usury for the original audience. Storie considers an alternative reading of the parable where the servant who refuses to cooperate with the exploitative master is the hero, making the parable a critique of money making. But there are problems with this reading as well, and in the end Storie (and I) remain puzzled about what this parable is teaching. As with some of Jesus’ other economic parables.

Gender is another prominent topic, and the standout here is Barbara Deutschmann’s chapter on portrayals of women in early Australian history. The dual poles of Anne Summers’ 1975 observations in *Damned Whores and God’s Police*, correspond in the Christian tradition to Eve and the Virgin Mary. Deutschmann argues that there is no biblical warrant for Eve as sexual temptress, this was a later tradition, especially when Genesis 3:1-6 was paired with the woman of Proverbs 1-9. This chapter is a fine example of what Meredith Lake did so well in *The Bible in Australia*, showing how our national culture is bound up with the Bible in often complicated ways.

Less satisfactory was “Truth within the Public Square: Morality, Rhetoric and the Australian Christian Lobby” by Michelle Eastwood. She writes: “In truth, the ACL's rhetoric is limited to promoting the interests of a select group of Christians that are not necessarily representative of wider Christian attitudes in Australia. They are predominantly focused on policing morality, which in the ACL's communications is too often reduced to sexuality and gender identity. The witness of the ACL can then be perceived as continuing to support small interest groups while harming vulnerable people. This brings the validity of all Christian claims about justice and truth into question. For this reason, one hopes that the wider public may understand that the ACL does not speak for all Australian Christians, including me.” (p216). Eastwood is correct that the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL) does not speak for all Australian Christians, but they deserve a fair hearing. I’m not an ACL insider but seen a fair bit of the organisation through teaching at the Lachlan Macquarie Institute (LMI) which was founded by the ACL but now operates as an independent organisation with its own board and funding. LMI welcomes young Christians across the political spectrum with a vocation for political engagement to its 3-month residential course on a property outside Canberra, and in my view does excellent work. ACL of course became notorious for its role on the losing side of the postal ballot about same sex marriage, and that episode I speculate is the reason that the ACL has attracted critical attention from Eastman. But a full picture must include other aspects such as the ACL’s criticism of government policies in relation to refugees and asylum seekers.

The ACL certainly puts its point of view strongly and clearly, as any political actor surely should, but Eastwood's characterisation of them as denying there are other Christian positions does not ring true. I don't share the ACL view of many matters and have observed at LMI a willingness to discuss differences honestly, and a similar grace in my interactions with ACL people. By contrast I've seen many individuals and organisations on the opposite side to ACL of debates about sexuality behave much less generously towards those who hold different views. Too much of Eastman's argument is personal about the former ACL Director Martyn Iles, who was succeeded some time ago by Michelle Pearse. Eastman's analysis of the Isaiah 59 passage quoted on the ACL website is lengthy and sound, but it seems unfair to expect a work of biblical scholarship when a text is quoted on a website. God's concern for truth seems here to me legitimately part of the meaning of that text, even the text means much more. So, I didn't find her conclusions convincing.

Overall, this is an excellent and much needed book. Buy a copy and read it. As one of the launch panelists said we are still trying to figure out what it means to be Christians in Australia so I hope that the issues the editors and authors alert us to will be taken further by others.

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