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## *Twenty-five Years of Marxist Biblical Criticism*

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### ABSTRACT

In the context of a renewed interest in Marxism outside biblical studies, this article surveys and critiques the background and current status of a similar renewal in biblical studies. It begins with a consideration of the background of current studies in liberation, materialist and political theologies, and moves on to note the division between literary and social scientific uses of Marxist theories. While those who used Marxist literary methods were initially inspired by Terry Eagleton and Fredric Jameson, more recent work has begun to make use of a whole tradition of Marxist literary criticism largely ignored in biblical studies. More consistent work, however, has taken place in the social sciences in both Hebrew Bible and New Testament studies. In Hebrew Bible studies, debates focus on the question of mode of production, especially the domestic or household mode of production, while in New Testament studies, the concerns have been with reconstructing the context of the Jesus movement and, more recently, the Pauline correspondence. I close with a number of questions concerning the division into different areas of what is really a holistic approach to texts and history.

**Keywords:** historical reconstruction, Jesus movement, literary approaches, Marxist criticism, modes of production, Paul of Tarsus, social sciences.

### *Introduction*

My concern is with the use of Marxism by biblical critics in the last twenty-five years. One might have thought that, with the passing of the first flush of liberation theologies and the end of communism as a viable social and political alternative, Marxism and Marxist criticism would fade from dis-

ciplines like biblical studies. Not so, it seems. In fact, the present situation for Marxist biblical critics appears to be better than it has been for a long time. Released from the straitjackets of both failed efforts at communism as a state ideology, and the anti-Marxist polemic of Cold War warriors like W.F. Albright (1922: 402-403), Marxist criticism is again able to do its job properly.

In what follows, then, I map out the current situation in Marxist criticism of the Bible. Such an effort will of course need to account for older major works that are crucial reference points in contemporary debate, so I will draw on one or two of these works as well. I begin with a few brief comments on the background of Marxist biblical criticism in the mix of liberation, political and materialist exegesis of the 1970s and 80s. I then consider the two main areas in which Marxist biblical critics may be found—what are often called literary or theoretical approaches (for want of a better title), and the social sciences. Such a division is, however, arbitrary, since Marxism characteristically links together these and many other areas. Finally, I offer a few suggestions for reconstructing the economic picture of Ancient Israel and early Christianity.

Before I proceed, a word on the sense in which ‘Marxist criticism’ is taken in this essay. Rather than a template or recipe that one applies to the biblical text and archaeological materials in a mechanical fashion, Marxist criticism designates a set of problems or questions that are constantly under debate and investigation. These include, but are not limited to, such notions as: ideology; mode of production; class and class conflict; patterns of exploitation (the theory of value); and so on. But at a deeper level, Marxist criticism designates careful attention to data, and a robust concern with the heuristic models used to understand and interpret that evidence. In the same way that Marxism first arose as the detailed and careful study of a distinct economic formation, namely capitalism, so also any study that is Marxist pays close attention to the specific nature of very different economic formations such as those of the ancient Near East. Finally, I include studies that are both explicitly Marxist in their focus, and those that use Marxist categories without necessarily identifying themselves as Marxist. In other words, if it looks, smells and behaves like a fish, it is probably a fish.

### *Background: Liberation, Political and Materialist Exegesis*

The liberation and political ideologies that emerged in the third world and the urban, Western centres of poverty and exclusion, beginning in the 1960s, were initially limited to explicitly theological inquiries, but significant

contributions were also made in biblical studies. While Gustavo Gutiérrez's classic *A Theology of Liberation* (1969) was published within a year of James Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), a significant number of biblical critics focused on biblical themes rather than the more theological focus of Gutiérrez and others (see Ellacuria and Sobrino 1994). Here we find biblical critics such as Pixley (1987), Miranda (1974; 1982), Croatto (1981), Cardenal (1979) and Tamez (1982).

In the work of these scholars, coming from a context of liberation and anti-colonial struggles throughout Latin America—Castro in Cuba, Allende in Chile, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua to name but a few—and of the involvement of certain elements of the Roman Catholic Church, such as the Columbian *guerrilla*-priest, Camilo Torres, with insurgent peasants, we find the initial scandal of the conjunction of Marxism and theology. The result was an emphasis on God's preferential option for the poor (legitimate Roman Catholic doctrine since the 1979 Puebla Conference of Latin American Bishops [Eagleson and Scharper 1989; see also Cleary and Berryman 1989]), read in texts of both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, the distinctly political elements of the 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. Apart from the biblical critics, even the 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 (1981) 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. In what is now 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 (1981). Similarly, Pixley invokes the Exodus, as well as the work of Gottwald's Marxist reconstruction of early Israel (1999), to argue for a revolutionary core to the Hebrew Bible (Pixley 1987). While Tamez concurs, she backs up such a reading with a systematic analysis of the terminology of oppression that saturates the biblical text (1982). However, when we get to Miranda's classic text (1974), we find that the Bible becomes a resource for offering a wholesale criticism of objective and disinterested Western science and epistemology that stems 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 Marx's, but with greater ontological depth. While

Miranda's reading, as with nearly all of the liberation biblical scholars, comes out of long and direct involvement in the struggles of the poor in Latin America, Dussell (2003a; 2003b) 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. For Dussell, this is hardly a coincidence.

Despite the profound influence on liberation theology of Ernst Bloch (1972; 1995; 1998)—who famously quipped that the Bible is 'often a scandal to the poor and not always a folly to the rich' (Bloch 1972: 25)—these liberation readings of the Bible generally eschew ambivalence over the Bible. They take at its word the notion, born out of direct political struggle, of the preferential option of the poor, 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: 'The Bible has always been the Church's bad conscience' (Bloch 1972: 21). Indeed, I would rather see more of a de-linking of the Bible from theology in many of these readings, taking much of the Bible itself as a fractious, murmuring and problematic text for theology and the Church. This lack of ambivalence regarding the Bible will carry through into the work of biblical critics inspired by liberation readings (see below).

### *Marxist Literary Criticism*

In different ways these disparate trends—materialist, political and liberation exegesis—have influenced the current group of biblical scholars who make use of Marxism. But what we find among these biblical scholars is a division between so-called literary—what some mistakenly call 'postmodern'—methods, and social scientific approaches. This division is as much an institutional problem as anything else: in a scholarly society (the Society of Biblical Literature) that follows the distinctions among academic disciplines found elsewhere, we find sections devoted to literary and theoretical concerns, and others focused on the social sciences. Marxist biblical critics have tended to move in one or the other circle, although this division has begun to break down of late.

Let me begin, then, with those who are more literary than anything else. The initial inspirations came from Eagleton and Jameson. Both of them have developed distinctly Marxist methods of literary interpretation that may be characterized as an effort to understand literature both as literature

in its own right, and as part of a much larger whole that includes culture, politics and economics. In other words, their methods take literature as both autonomous from, and integrally linked with, its social and economic context (Eagleton 1996, 2006; Jameson 1981, 1991). Subsequently, a whole range of writings have begun to inspire Marxist literary readings of the Bible, such as: work on the politics of space by Henri Lefebvre (1991); the ideology of power by Antonio Gramsci (1971; 1992); the hermeneutics of hope by Bloch (1972; 1995; 1998); the dynamics of ideology by Louis Althusser (1971); the reflections on myth and theological suspicion by Theodor Adorno (1973; 1989; 1999); and the patterns of the constitutive exception by Slavoj Žižek (2000; 2001; 2003).

For example, using Eagleton, Gottwald explores the overdone rhetoric of Deutero-Isaiah as an exercise in propaganda designed to entice a reluctant ruling elite back to Jerusalem from a comfortable exile in Babylon (1992a). 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), applies Marxist categories of class and ideology to the traditional determination of sources in the books of Micah and Luke. In doing so, he analyses the way questions of class, gender and race overlay each other in such sources (Mosala 1989). Yee also relies on Eagleton for her methodological basis in her book on the ideological representations, from Genesis to Hosea, of woman as evil in the Hebrew Bible (2003). All three employ Eagleton's emphasis on the dynamics of class and material production for any text.

While Eagleton is the more accessible writer, Jameson has been the preferred theoretician for Marxist biblical scholars. His key text, *The Political Unconscious* (1981), argued for a three-level scheme of interpretation that moved from the particular concerns of the text and its contradictory politics, through its wider context in class conflict, to its position within the broad sweep of history and the tensions of mode of production. Penchansky makes use of this method to interpret the book of Job (1991), while Jobling brings it to bear on Psalm 72 in order to explore the contradictions of the royal ideology (1992). Indeed, Jobling has gone on to connect Marxism with feminism, psychoanalysis and deconstruction, thereby providing some of the most astute readings of the Hebrew Bible I have encountered (Jobling 1991; 1998). Pippin (1992a; 1992b) interprets the Apocalypse in both its ancient and modern uses through both Eagleton and Jameson's work. Sneed (2004) has offered a metacommentary on Qoheleth in light of Jameson's texts. More recently, he has taken up Jameson's focus on texts as imaginary resolutions of real social and political contradictions to argue that the presentation of

Woman Wisdom and Woman Folly in Proverbs are codes for social class in Persian-era Yehud (personal communication). Sean Burt has recently begun a PhD project at Duke University that brings together Jameson's insights into the tensions of a text, along with Jameson's ability to link historical and literary concerns, for a rereading of the 'Nehemiah Memoir' in the book of Nehemiah. Rather than try to resolve the contradiction in favour of Nehemiah's representing himself as either anti- or pro-Persian, Burt argues that the contradiction is actually a feature of the text. It is not that Nehemiah is schizophrenic, but rather, that he lived in schizophrenic times. Finally, my own work began under the theoretical tutelage of Jameson. I have sought at various times to track: the contradictions of the Jeroboam narratives in Kings, Reigns (LXX) and Chronicles (1996); or the tensions in the various options open to Psalms scholarship (2003: 180-203); or the way the Bible is appropriated in contemporary culture (1999).

In many respects, this work is only the beginning, since a far greater tradition of Marxist literary criticism awaits the patient student. Samples of this work include Økland's study (2005) of Paul's Corinthian correspondence in light of the groundbreaking study of space by Henri Lefebvre (1991; 1996), particularly mediated by David Harvey (1989), which has influenced a whole range of disciplines from geography to literary criticism, along with detailed attention to archaeological materials (Økland 2005). Like Økland, Cadwallader has brought together archaeology and the Marxist analysis of economic contradictions to interpret the narrative of Caesar's coin of Mark 12.13-17 in a new light (2006). He is also exploring the socialism of the nineteenth-century biblical scholar Westcott, first president of the Christian Social Union, formed in 1848 (see Wilkinson 1998), and the impact his political positions had upon his work (personal communication). In South Africa, West has brought together Marxist inspiration from the struggle against apartheid and the central role of the Communist Party of South Africa in that struggle, as well as the insights from common readers, to argue for a distinct biblical hermeneutics of liberation (1995; 1998). In my own work, I have explored both the contributions that Marxist critics such as Bloch, Benjamin, Althusser, Gramsci and others might have for biblical studies (Boer 2003), as well as the role of the Bible in the formation of their thought (Boer 2006). Further, by means of bringing together Marxist, psychoanalytic and feminist approaches, I have explored the dynamic of the political myth from Genesis to Joshua, and its use and abuse in current foreign policy (Boer 2007).

In many cases, however, what appear to be literary studies cannot help but raise questions that one would expect to be located in the social sci-

ences and historical research—questions such as social formation, economics, gender dynamics, and politics. This should come as no surprise, since one of the attractions of Marxist criticism is that it expects and enables such connections, rather than separating each area of research into its own discrete field. In the case of nearly every scholar and work that I have just noted, the social sciences, as well as history, archaeology, economics, and political science, are as much a part of the analysis as are literary and theoretical concerns. We have, then, been slipping into the social sciences on a number of occasions already. In what follows, let me take up the social sciences directly, first with the Hebrew Bible, and then with the New Testament and early Christianity.

### *The Hebrew Bible and the Social Sciences*

As far as the Hebrew Bible is concerned, the anchor of these discussions has been and still is the question of mode of production, particularly concerning the viability of the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP) or a number of suggested replacements, mutations, or indeed completely new modes of production. The founding figure in this respect is Gottwald and his magisterial *The Tribes of Yahweh*, originally published in 1979 (repr. 1999).

However, before launching into Gottwald's work, let me provide a brief outline of the AMP as defined in Marxist scholarship (Bailey and Llobera 1981; Krader 1975; Lichtheim 1990; Marx 1973 [1857–58]: 472–514; 1975 [1859]; Marx and Engels 1976 [1845–46]: 38–41): common rather than individual private property in land, although this common ownership was often personified in the figure of the god-ruler who stood in for the community; the centralized control of public works by government (irrigation, building, roads, and so on); the decentralized and self-sufficient economic world of villages, with their resilient combination of agriculture and handicrafts, over against the imperial state; and the social division of labour in terms of usefulness. Over time, more features were added: the basic means of production involved the various techniques associated with widespread hand-tooled agriculture and domesticated animals. Any new developments in technology were directed toward agriculture—improved quality of implement metal, or irrigation, and so on. The relations of production involved a multitude of small landholders, mostly in villages, who paid tribute to various layers of a significant bureaucracy, at a local, 'national' and imperial level.

At the top of the bureaucracy was the imperial centre—Babylon, Egypt, Asshur, and so on—where the tribute was lavished upon a standing army



(used to ensure the regular payment of tribute and to increase the empire), buildings of imperial government and religion, and the officials required to keep the system running. Politically, the concentration and reorganization of power necessary for the formation of a state followed remarkably similar patterns: the gradual differentiation of wealth and power and their concentration in certain individuals, usually called chieftains, and then the elevation of such chieftains into kings of various types as the state became more complex and established. The states of the ancient Near East did not, for instance, operate by means of oligarchies or citizen assemblies (as in Greece) or a senate (as in Rome): rather, the ruler was in some sense related to a god or the gods, whether actually divine, as in Egypt, or the 'son' of the gods, as in Israel. A number of states existed at any one time, some weaker and some stronger, but all of them driven by the logic of the system to expand at one's neighbour's expense. Thus, the smaller states such as Moab, Ammon, Phoenicia or Judah merely struggled to replicate the patterns of the larger imperial states. Culturally and ideologically, religion or the sacred was the central language for expressing political, philosophical, juridical and political control (except that it is a little anachronistic to put it this way). The production of space in the AMP depended upon the layering of tribute payments enforced upon the peasants: there were very few centres of bureaucracy (i.e., the ancient 'city') toward which all tribute was directed, followed by the subservience of even these spaces to a larger centre, of which the smaller centres seem like various points on the spokes of a wheel. Spatial practice was then focused upon the flow toward and away from the centres, and this movement was inextricably tied up with the religious authorities' centralization in the places of power, and their status as the destination of tribute. Domestic space was then ordered in terms of the need to maintain such a system, while the family unit was a much larger entity, focused on ensuring that enough was produced to survive and pay tribute. This familial situation necessitated having as many children as possible with the presence of multiple generations, all co-existing in basic four-roomed dwellings (including cohabitation with animals), resulting in a life-span that did not get one much past the early thirties.

Back to Gottwald: in light of criticism (1999: 631-63) of the AMP outside biblical studies, he redefined the AMP as tributary, a mode of production for which the production of surplus took place by means of the exaction of tribute, in produce, labour or money, through a complex chain that began with over-taxed peasants, worked its way through local tax collectors to the immediate government (e.g. Jerusalem), which then passed it on to the imperial coffers (e.g. Babylon). For Gottwald, this tributary

mode of production was the status quo of the Canaanite city-states that pre-dated Israel. These states were fundamentally oppressive in their economic structure and hierarchical in their social and political structures. Rebelling against the tributary mode, and making use of new iron implements, lime plaster lining of cisterns, and terracing, the society of early 'Israel' established, in the thirteenth century BCE, a very different mode of production, which Gottwald named 'communitarian'. It was co-operative, egalitarian, and dispensed with an oppressive bureaucracy. Early Israel was then a motley collection of disaffected peasants who, after the depredations of epidemics and warfare of the Late Bronze Age, formed a revolutionary society based on a new mode of production (Boer 2002: 98-156; Gottwald 1999).

The key for Gottwald is not the reworking of the AMP, but his proposed communitarian mode, which has had remarkable resilience in biblical studies. I will turn to that in a moment. For Gottwald, however, the story does not stop with early Israel: even though the tributary mode returned with the monarchy of Saul and then David (roughly at the beginning of the first millennium BCE), Gottwald finds the communitarian mode at various points in Israel's history, especially with the prophets and occasional protest movement. Above all, it comes back with a vengeance in the movement around Jesus, setting the communitarian mode against both the remnants of the tributary mode and the newly imposed slave-based mode of production that came in with the Romans. Gottwald also finds it in the Jewish practices of communal cooperation, especially with the reconstruction of Judaism by the Pharisees after the two revolts against Rome (67-74 CE and 132-135 CE) (Gottwald 1992b).

What is fascinating about Gottwald's reconstruction is what the communitarian mode itself involves. I have critiqued this at length elsewhere (Boer 2002), but there are two points worth raising. First, Gottwald has combined the conventional Marxist categories of tribal society, neolithic agriculture and primitive communism in his 'communitarian' mode of production. Secondly, there remains an implicit ethical, if not theological, agenda in this work, for Gottwald seeks a model of communal living that will inspire us today—that he finds this with early Israel, the prophets, and Jesus is enough to alert us to such an agenda.

The basic structure of Gottwald's argument concerning modes of production has remained largely in place in biblical studies. His proposed revolutionary origin to Israel remains a great moment in biblical scholarship, but it has not fared so well in subsequent debates (but see Pixley 1987). Let me give four recent examples that assume and refine Gottwald's

theory, specifically in regard to modes of production—Meyers (1988: 49, 126), Yee (2003: 31-34), Jobling (1991: 242-43; 1998: 16-17, 144-46), and Simkins (1999a: 127-40; 2004: 06-3–06-6). A feature that has evoked considerable debate was Gottwald's assertion that the early communitarian Israel was egalitarian, particularly with regard to women. He later backed down from this position, suggesting that the situation was more favourable for women than the tributary mode of production. Both Meyers and Yee focus on this dimension of Gottwald's argument, and argue for a new term: the familial or household mode of production, a term that both replaces the communitarian mode, and seeks to recognize the role of women in the economy.

The primary source on the familial or household mode of production, however, is Marshall Sahlins (1972). In biblical studies, it was Meyers, in her widely influential *Discovering Eve* (1988), who made the discovery, as it were. Yet, curiously, Meyers refers just once (1988: 142) to Sahlins's 1968 book, *Tribesmen*, and not to the text in which he discusses the term at length, *Stone Age Economics* (1972). (Sahlins, it must be noted, introduces the term with no reference to Marxist debates.) From this slender beginning, the household or domestic mode of production has become orthodoxy in its own right. It means, for Meyers, that the household, the *bet-av*, was the primary unit of economic and social production. Meyers takes up various other elements from Gottwald and bases them in her field of expertise, archaeology, all with the distinct agenda of discerning the situation for women in early Israel. Her argument is that in the new highland society of early Israel, the participation of women was much greater than at first appears, for the people vowed 'en masse to establish an alternative and egalitarian society, answerable only to their god Yahweh and not to any human master' (Meyers 1988: 52).

What I find both intriguing and lamentable about Meyers's work is that it eschews any reference to Marxism. Sidelineing Gottwald's explicit Marxism, she builds her argument on Gottwald's meticulously laid foundations. I have argued elsewhere that Meyers' reconstruction is much closer to primitive communism than even Gottwald's (Boer 2005b: 11-13). Meyers shares this with at least two others, Yee and Jobling. In her recent *Poor Forgotten Daughters of Eve* (2003)—a book we have met already for its literary focus—Yee brings Gottwald and Meyers into contact with Marxist feminism. By and large, Yee agrees with Meyers concerning the nature of the domestic mode of production, or as she prefers, the familial mode of production. Further, she accepts Gottwald's argument for an initial tributary mode of production out of which early Israel emerged, only to slip back into a tributary mode under

the monarchy that developed about two centuries later. Yee's focus, however, is the effect on women. Thus, under the familial mode of production, the family kin group was the basic socio-economic unit. With the reimposition of the tributary mode of production under the monarchy, such kin groups took loyalties away from the king. Consequently, we find efforts to break down these kin groups, or extended family units, by controlling the sexual behaviour of women. This happens directly with the favouring of nuclear families over against the power of extended families, for smaller units are easier to bring under royal power. Apart from taking up Gottwald's argument concerning the self-sufficient and mutually supporting and protecting nature of tribal Israel, Yee's reconstruction of the familial or household mode of production involves fierce loyalty to the father's house and tribe, resistance to the point of rebellion to efforts to break down such social organization, and the overarching role of the paterfamilias.

Jobling, like Meyers and Yee, favours the domestic mode of production (Jobling 1991, 1998). He seeks to patch Meyers's work into a more explicit Marxist framework: the depiction of the primacy of the household in early Israel; the dominance of domestic buildings and the absence of fortifications; and the division of labour according to gender (women grow and cook food, make textiles, and socialize and educate children, whereas men clear forests, cut cisterns and build terraces)—all of these are elements of the domestic mode of production. Jobling then links this with Yee's focus on the tensions between different models of domestic space; except, according to Jobling, we do not have so much the nuclear and extended family, but the patrilocal and matrilocal systems of marriage. Or, rather, he picks up Bal's reworking of these as virilocal (from a woman's perspective, the woman leaves her household to live in the man's) and patrilocal (the man leaves his household to live in the household of the woman's father) (Bal 1988: 6, 85-86, 152, 156). Not only do these two marriage systems generate many of the narrative tensions we find in the Hebrew Bible, but they are also signs of the breaks and ruptures between the domestic and tributary modes of production. In other words, while virilocal marriage is characteristic of the tributary mode of production in the era of kingship, the preferred domestic mode of production operates with a patrilocal system. The catch with all of this is that I see no necessary reason to connect patrilocal and virilocal marriage with the domestic and tributary modes of production. If we accept the division, then there is no reason why both types of family could not have existed side by side in the proposed domestic mode of production.

At least Jobling seeks some precision concerning Yee's problematic distinction between nuclear and extended families, although he later gives

way and uses precisely these terms (Jobling 1998: 146). I have always been uneasy about the model of a nuclear family in the Hebrew Bible: apart from the anachronism of the nuclear family retro-fitted into ancient Israel, the complex family structures, identified as early as the early nineteenth century by anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan (1877: 393-504), are simplified into two terms that obscure such complexity. Still, the extended-nuclear division is favoured by one other Marxist critic, Simkins, who uses it as part of yet another modification of Gottwald's distinction between tributary and communitarian modes of production (Simkins 1999a; 2004). For Simkins, these become the clientalistic (nuclear family) and domestic (extended family) modes of production, the latter obviously drawn from the work of Meyers, Yee and Jobling. As far as Simkins is concerned, the components of the domestic mode of production 'have been extensively documented for early Israel' (Simkins 1999a: 132; see also Simkins 1999b), but any notion of a more just social system has all but disappeared, for Simkins astutely argues that the texts exhibit an ideology of egalitarianism that attempts to ameliorate the everyday experience of economic and social inequality. For example, under the ideology of a domestic mode of production there was supposed to be no competition for resources since there was an equal distribution of goods to all members of the clan. In reality, some members acquired more resources at the expense of other members, leading to significant inequality. In effect, the ideology sought to conceal such inequality (Simkins 1999a: 137).

In order to address the failure of the domestic mode of production to deal with increased inequality, the patron–client mode—a reworking of Gottwald's tributary mode—comes in to replace it under the Israelite kingship:

Patronage is a system of social relations rooted in an unequal distribution of power and goods, and expressed socially through a generalized exchange of different types of resources. The structure of these relations is hierarchical. Patrons are those who have access to goods and the centers of power, whereas clients are in need of such access (Simkins 2004: 06-4).

This basic dyadic relation accounts, argues Simkins, for economic exchange, the ideologies of reciprocity and societal structures (elite and peasants, king and people, Yahweh and the state), as well as unequal social relations in which the client relied on the patron for access to the means of production. Ideologically, such hierarchical relations are expressed in terms of reciprocity: the patron or 'father' provides for and protects his

‘sons’ or ‘servants’, and they in turn provide him with services. However, it seems to me that Simkins’s proposal functions very well as one element in a larger social formation, but it is not enough to form a mode of production in and of itself.

As is probably clear by now, the debates within Marxist biblical studies have become somewhat engrossing and complex, so let me summarize the situation thus far in terms of a table:

	<i>MP of Early Israel</i>	<i>MP under Kingship</i>
Gottwald	communitarian	tributary
Meyers	household/familial	—
Yee	domestic (extended family)	tributary (nuclear family)
Jobling	domestic (patrilocal family)	tributary (virilocal family)
Simkins	domestic (extended family)	clientalistic (nuclear family)

At one level, we can only celebrate the fact that such discussions have been taking place in studies of the Hebrew Bible for the last twenty-five years or so, at least since the publication of Gottwald’s *Tribes of Yahweh* in 1979. This means that my criticisms can take place *within* a certain debate, rather than having to set up the debate itself.

The three great problems with the work thus far lie with: the relics of primitive communism in these arguments (except that of Simkins); the way these critics approach the theory of modes of production; and the replication of the ‘modes of production’ controversy, now within biblical studies. As for the first problem, the argument that social relations were, even at a minimal level, somewhat more equal, especially in regard to women, may be traced back to the work of Bachofen (1967: 76-79, 92-93, 96-97, 109-10, 114-15, 134-39, 143-44, 148-49, 190-96) and Morgan (1877: 535-63). Jobling provides the link, via the important but wayward Wittfogel (1963). Wittfogel strangely based his theory of ‘oriental despotism’—an economic system that covered the Ancient Near East and Asia—on the question of irrigation. The despot’s key to power lay in the control and organization of irrigation. What made his book palatable for Western scholarship was its anti-Stalinist stand, for it argued that Stalin was the epitome of ‘oriental despotism’.

Two quotations from Jobling throw the connection into sharp relief. The first comes from 1991:

Based mainly on study of early Chinese society, Wittfogel correlates the shift from primitive commune to the Asiatic mode with shifts (1) from mother- to father-right (a 'patriarchal system of kinship'), (2) from extensive (female-dominated) to intensive (male-dominated) agriculture, and (3) from communal to individual ownership (1991: 242).

Seven years later, Jobling modifies this slightly, but now without the nod to Wittfogel:

the transition from a more egalitarian to a tributary mode is typically accompanied by shifts from female-based to male-based patterns of kinship and social organization, from a low-level agriculture dominated by women to an intensive agriculture organized by men, and from the extended family to the nuclear family (1998: 146).

The slippages here are most revealing, although the one that catches my eye is the replacement of primitive communism, in the first quotation, by a 'more egalitarian' (i.e. the domestic) mode of production, in the second. For all his protestations otherwise, Jobling provides the link to primitive communism that lies at the core of the variously-named 'domestic', 'household' or 'familial' mode of production (see further Boer 2005b).

Closely related is my second criticism: there remains in such work an ethical, if not theological, loading. The search for an original situation—whether in early Israel, or the Jesus movement—that could become a model for how we might want to live is still part of the search for an ideal paradigm. Such an agenda is explicit with Gottwald's communitarian mode of production, but we find traces of this agenda in the work of Meyers, Yee, and Jobling as well. While the motivation is to produce an alternative, and politically more desirable, narrative to the dominant theological ones presented by churches, it can also be a forlorn search.

The value of the work I have surveyed lies not only in its laying the groundwork for subsequent research, but also in its openness to specific concerns of the ancient Near East, and in its attempts to deal with tensions in literary texts by connecting them with conflicts between modes of production. To my mind, biblical critics avoid these tensions at our peril, although there is a catch to which I shall return in a moment. As for the specific concerns of the ancient Near East, rather than applying major Marxist categories as a template onto any period, we need a healthy mix of heuristic models, and need to develop categories that arise from the information available. Simkins is explicit about this in his work, but my sense with all of this research is that it does not go far enough, that it still relies on



certain categories—class and class conflict, mode of production, and so on—that may themselves be open to question in a situation very different from capitalism.

*Marxism, the Social Sciences, and the New Testament*

But I signalled a third problem—a biblical modes of production controversy. Let me approach this one through the New Testament: in contrast to the energy devoted to the Hebrew Bible from within Marxism, work on the New Testament has been more sporadic, although that is beginning to change. The debate really turns on the extent to which the AMP resisted the incursions of Hellenism and then slave-based mode of production. Gottwald, as we saw above, argues that his communitarian mode of production returned whenever efforts at liberation came to the fore. In the New Testament, this was the circle around Jesus as well as the Pharisaic communities after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE (Gottwald 1992b: 88-89). This mode of production arose in opposition to the vestiges of the tributary, and then slave-based mode of production.

The basis of this work in New Testament criticism comes out of the extraordinary study by Belo, *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark* (1981). First published in French in 1974, it generated discussion groups and a handbook designed to render the formidable theoretical apparatus in far simpler terms (Clevenot 1985). Most of the book offers a semiotic reading inspired by Roland Barthes' *S/Z* (1970), along with doses of Marx, Lacan (1977), Bataille (2001), and Althusser. At this level, the book is clearly a literary study. Belo's great model is Barthes's *S/Z*, a reading of Balzac's work 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). *A Materialist Reading* is an extraordinary work by the self-taught Belo, linking such an avowedly literary reading with detailed sociological reflection.

Yet, when it comes to reconstruction, Belo relies entirely on Georges Dhoquois's *Pour l'histoire: Essai d'histoire matérialiste comparative* (1971). Here is trouble, for Dhoquois multiplies modes of production in a fashion comparable to Hebrew Bible scholars. So we get the Asiatic, Sub-Asiatic, Para-Asiatic and Asiatic Feudalist modes of production, along with slavery and European Feudalist modes of production—all of which fall into that famous catch-all 'pre-capitalist economic formations'. Belo opts for the Sub-Asiatic mode of production for New Testa-



ment Palestine: while the state leaves the operation of the local economy alone, it interferes at the level of relations of production by appropriating surplus value, and attempting to control exchange in order to ensure such appropriation.

There is no great advance in Belo's reconstruction. The temple in Jerusalem formed the ideological *axis mundi* of the Sub-Asiatic mode of production, so that its destruction by Emperor Titus in 70 CE led to a major crisis within Judaism. Belo directs us, however, to the third problem with Marxist biblical studies in general, a problem thrown into relief by Dhoquois—the generation of ever-new modes of production. Although this is the topic of another study, biblical studies seems to be replicating the Marxist 'modes of production controversy' of the 1970s. The issue in this debate was the relationship between 'developed' and 'undeveloped' societies: did developed economies—that is, indigenous capitalist ones—rely on undeveloped or third world economies within which capitalism was a foreign body? (Foster-Carter 1978).

Two items from this debate are relevant for biblical (especially Hebrew Bible) studies. First, the category of class devolves all too readily into the relations of power: 'When class is reduced to its power dimension then every time inequalities of power are identified someone inevitably announces the discovery of a "new" mode of production' (Feiner 1986: 69). This shows up most clearly in Simkins's analysis, where the inequalities of the domestic mode of production lead to the clientalistic mode, but it undermines the work of Meyers, Jobling, and Yee as well.

The second problem leads to the same outcome: the question of articulation between modes of production has the effect of producing a series of mediating modes of production. Just as in the modes of production controversy, we find proto-colonial, colonial, post-colonial, peasant, patriarchal-subsistence, subsistence, simple commodity mode and so on (Feiner 1986: 69; Foster-Carter 1978: 72), so in biblical studies we find Asiatic, Sub-Asiatic, tributarian, clientalistic, communitarian and domestic/household modes of production. In the end, we are back with the same issue: in the words of Foster-Carter, 'each Andean valley has its own mode of production, and individuals may change them two or three times a week like underwear' (1978: 74). Either we have the devil of an all-encompassing mode of production, or the deep blue sea of endless sub-species of modes of production.

Political readings of the New Testament, and particularly the figure of Jesus, are not new. We can find them among the revolutionary movements of Thomas Müntzer (1988) and the Peasants Revolt in Germany,

and Gerard Winstanley and the Diggers (see Winstanley 2006) in England. What Belo did was bring Marxism to the forefront of such analyses. From here, Marxist studies have gone in two directions: one is to focus on the figure of a revolutionary Jesus, and the other is to make use of Marxist categories to reconstruct the context of the texts. Often the two go together, but the catch is that with such a powerful figure within religious traditions, any work on the person of Jesus easily becomes its own gospel. This is the case with Myers's political reading of Mark, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (1989). If, for Belo, Jesus and his followers become political operators who, through the story of the resurrection and the revolutionary group known as the *ekklesia*, challenge the Roman Imperial order on behalf of the powerless, then, for Myers, Jesus is an exemplar of nonviolent resistance to the powers-that-be in his day, and one that we should follow in radical discipleship today. Myers himself is something of an evangelist, constantly on the move, giving lectures, talks, sermons and interviews. But he does situate his work in the context of Marxist studies, or what he calls materialist and liberation interpretations. Thus, the revolutionary challenge of Mark's Jesus comes in the context of the Jewish uprising of 66–70 CE, and it must be understood in the socio-political matrix of the times.

I cannot help but feel that Bloch's quip about the Bible not always being folly to the rich is appropriate at this point. What I miss in studies like those of Belo and Myers is a stronger sense of contradiction and tension. In other words, a solid grounding in the social sciences is called for, and here I pick up the second strain of New Testament Marxist criticism. The social sciences are of course unthinkable without the crucial contribution of Marxism, and for almost three decades, Theissen has championed such an approach in New Testament criticism. For Theissen, who brings social psychology into the mix as well, the early Jesus movement was comprised of wandering charismatics and local sympathizers. Its success lay in dealing with a series of contradictions: socio-economic changes that exacerbated the tensions between rich and poor, socio-ecological tensions between city and country, socio-political problems in the debate over love for one's enemy and theocracy, and socio-cultural tensions between Hellenistic assimilation and a distinct Jewish identity (Theissen 1999).

In a similar vein, coming out of a long tradition of American Marxists, Horsley has been arguing for some time that we need to understand Jesus in the context of a militant and subversive Jewish peasantry in the face of a brutal Roman Empire. As a political criticism of the Roman Empire, Jesus performed the kingdom of God for the sake of re-establishing a covenant

community. This is of course another historical Jesus, but Horsley makes extensive use of Marxist methods and archaeological materials to reconstruct the socio-economic situation. In this respect, although the Romans imposed a slave-based mode of production in some towns, the overall model was still an Asiatic or tributary mode of production, with the exaction of murderous tribute on the peasants (the purpose of the famed Roman roads). The peasants suffered a double blow, since on top of the Roman taxes, the local rulers like the Herodian kings and Jerusalemite priests demanded their own taxes from the people, while trying to flatter and imitate Rome. Resistance took the form of peasant slowdowns, sabotage, prophetic and messianic movements, scribal writings, counter-terrorism and revolts (Horsley and Hanson 1985; Horsley 1989, 1992, 1995, 1996, 2002, 2003; Horsley [ed.] 1997). Quite clearly, Horsley takes issue with Theissen's wandering charismatics and Myers' nonviolent resistance, but even Horsley and Theissen succumb to the temptation to write new gospels, to present a Jesus who can be followed in the present world.

Somewhat different from Belo, Myers, Theissen or Horsley is the work of Moxnes and Økland, both deeply inspired by Marxist criticism. Rather than Jesus being a part of the village communities, Moxnes makes use of Marxist research on space, especially that of Lefebvre (1991) and Harvey (1989), to argue that Jesus broke from the central economic and political institution of the family, in order to set up an alternative community. This was the 'kingdom of God', glimpsed through the new social collective of the disciples. For Moxnes, this is the beginning of a new space, one in which the modes of family, gender, politics and economics begin to be transformed (Moxnes 1997; 2003; 2004). Like Moxnes, Økland (2005) also makes use of Marxist studies of space, in conjunction with feminist and ritual studies, to reconfigure the domestic politics of the Corinthian correspondence. Focusing on 1 Corinthians 11–14—the part that deals with ritual gatherings—Økland argues that Paul clearly demarcates the 'sanctuary space' of the *ekklesia* by means of a gender hierarchy of cosmic proportions, the model of the male body of Christ and women's dress and speech. She makes use of ancient literary texts, ritual materials, archaeological evidence on gender roles, as well as some sophisticated theoretical work in Marxism and feminist studies, to argue that such a 'sanctuary space' is distinct from the Hellenistic context of public and private space, that it is inescapably gendered, and that the Corinthian correspondence begins to mark a shift from gender segregation into a hierarchical integration in which the male was closer to the godhead. Økland's text is a materialist study of the first order.

### Concluding Questions

In a survey such as this, we begin to get an idea of the range of Marxist biblical studies. The greatest attention still lies with historical concerns, whether the focus is on the debate over modes of production in Hebrew Bible studies, or on the context and mission of a radical Jesus in the New Testament. While that work is a sign of the vibrancy of Marxist criticism in biblical studies, it also follows the traditional historical critical path of using the text as one source—less or more reliable—for a history that lies behind the text. As for attention to the text itself, Marxism has also supplied some of the more sophisticated theories of how texts work, particularly in the way texts respond in contradictory fashions to class conflict and economic tensions. One would expect this from a method that works holistically, rather than in fragmented form.

In closing, I have two observations. First, in a personal communication Gottwald mentioned to me that he sees a large level of implicit Marxism in biblical studies. What he meant was that many of the assumed categories, such as ideology, the disruption of the Jesus movement, economics and politics, the role of empires and resistance to them, come out of Marxism, but are not recognized as Marxist. Indeed, the point about the social sciences—that a significant part of their formation is Marxist—applies equally well to more recent developments. I think here of postcolonial criticism and its dependence on Gramsci's Marxist notion of hegemony and resistance (see Boer 2005a), as well as the influential works *Empire* and now *Multitude* co-authored by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000; 2003).

Second, 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, which remains enormously influential, for good or (all too often) ill, today? This task involves not merely the continuing task of historical reconstruction, but also reading and interpreting the texts themselves and accounting for their continued influence.

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