

## MARXIST CRITICISM OF THE BIBLE

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### INTRODUCTION: WHY MARXIST THEORY? By Roland Boer

Boer's concern is with the contribution of Marxist literary theory to biblical studies. Because Boer feels that this is one of the most neglected areas of biblical studies.

Why theory? According to Boer, biblical studies is in fact a subset of literary criticism, and the interpretation of the Bible is but part of a much larger discipline that is connected with the interpretation of texts. He argues that it is a necessary and valuable move for biblical studies to make (Boer P. 2). Thus, if biblical criticism can be seen as part of literary criticism, then the issue of theory, which is so important within literary criticism itself, especially under the influence of philosophy, is also one that becomes important within biblical studies (Boer P. 3).

Why Marxist theory? Apart from the point that Marxist criticism has a distinct place in literary criticism as 9 authors showed in the book, Boer claims the most obvious reason is the sparseness (희소한, 빈약한) of Marxist literary criticism in biblical studies. Although sporadic studies in selected areas of the Bible have dealt with Marxist issues, there has been no sustained consideration in biblical criticism on Marxism. Boer seems to introduce Marxist criticism of the Bible in order for biblical critics to be able to use, or at least be aware of, various elements of Marxist criticism in their critical task (Boer P.4). I feel that Marxist criticism would be helpful to interpret socio-economic context of the New Testament

Boer also points out that using Marxist criticism as an approach is often criticized for bringing everything down to the 'ultimately determining instance' of economic, explaining all that goes on in a text in terms of a certain political and economic theory. Boer points such criticism as a sign of ignorance of Marxist literary theory in biblical studies, for Marxist approaches enable the opposite, namely, **the inclusion** of a host of questions normally **excluded** or compartmentalized in biblical studies (such as confining or limiting texts to individual, personal, spiritual interpretation). Boer asserts that Marxism includes questions of literary form and content, detailed analysis of texts, in conjunction with wider issues of thought and belief, especially of a religious kind in regard to the Bible, or society and social interaction and conflict, of history, politics and economics (Boer P. 5). I like this part because I can't find such insight to the texts from any other commentaries

The issues Marxist criticism deals with as we read text are: the nature and function of dialectics; ideology and its construction; the understanding of culture; literature and aesthetics in the light of ideology; the nature and role of commodification; economic value; reification; the superstructure; social class and class conflict; the concept of mode of production, particularly as that has a bearing on interpretation of ancient documents

and on the dynamics of history, with one aim being the relativizing of the mode under which they have done and do their work, capitalism. Boer adds that Adorno, Althusser, Benjamin, Bloch, Eagleton, Gramsci, Jameson and Lukacs debates some or all of these problems with specific reference to questions of literature or culture (Boer P. 6).

## CHAPTER 1. THE DIFFICULT BIRTH OF ISRAEL IN GENESIS

Louis Althusser:

In Chapter 1 Boer focused on Louis Althusser's most famous essay – 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' where he argues for the central role of institutions in the production and reproduction of socio-economic relations. For him, the family is the most powerful ideological state apparatus. The term itself designates the role of such institutions, especially religion and the family, in ensuring the perpetuation of ideologies that secure the perpetuation of the socio-economic system. However, such state apparatuses are also the sites of profound ideological conflict and tension, where opposing ideologies continually work against each other. Since written texts and other cultural products are prime sites of ideology, as well as being the products of the institutions to which Althusser refers, the application of his methods has become very common in literary and cultural theory. The reason for focusing on Genesis is that its major concerns are 'family,' religion and the state. However, the collective entity of 'Israel' only appears at the division of the books between Genesis and Exodus. Althusser's approach stresses that ideological state apparatuses are sites of ideological tensions, and the tension in this text concerns the perpetual delay of the birth of a people. While other nations arise, often through names themselves, the repeated promise of a people is held off until the next book. If family and religion are crucial aspects of the 'state,' why is Israel's emergence as a 'state' held back? Given the importance of the family in Genesis, Boer analyzes Gen. 25, arguing that the tensions may be found in the birth narrative of women. The maternal body of Rebekah becomes a site of the most profound tensions in Genesis, for here all of the ideological state apparatuses (여러기관의 종합, 기구) comes together in a contradictory effort to bring about the 'birth' of Israel (Boer P. 7).

## CHAPTER 2. THE EMERGENCE OF THE 'PRINCE' IN EXODUS Antonio Gramsci

Antonio Gramsci's work has become very influential in such areas of postcolonial criticism, cultural criticism, feminism and so on, particularly through the widespread use of the term 'hegemony.' Apart from his deepening of Marxist categories of ideology and class consciousness in terms of hegemony – the revolutionary struggle over the ruling ideas of an age – Gramsci also contributed to understanding the role of intellectuals, ideology, the state, politics, civil society, the philosophy of praxis, reformation and revolution. These ideas were generated in the tension between the Marxist tradition, Italian fascism and the overwhelming presence of Roman Catholic Church. In this case, it is Gramsci's reflection on the state and ideology that provide a continuation of some of the concerns of Boer's reading of Genesis with the help of Althusser. In particular, it is his reflection on Machiavelli's *The Prince* that Boer developed for an understanding of a the figure of Moses in Exodus. In *The Prince* Boer found the literary construction of a 'state' and a focus on Moses as leader, one of Machiavelli's own major examples of the ideal Prince. Given that hegemony is always a contested zone, attempting to deal with opposition, the stories of revolt or opposition become crucial, for they indicate not merely a textual nervousness about the uniformity of an ideological position, but also a more complex strategy of incorporating opposition within such an ideology. For this reason the key text will be the story of the golden calf in Gen. 32 (Boer P.7-8).

## CHAPTER 3. THE CLASS STRUGGLES OF RUTH: Terry Eagleton

### **Boer's Introduction of Chapter 3:**

Terry Eagleton, the concern of Chapter 3, has been a major figure in transmitting continental Marxism to the English-speaking world. Some of the key terms Eagleton's work include the engaged intellectual and the consequent interaction of theory and practice, the reassertion of traditional categories of Marxists analysis, such as class, revolutionary transformation, ideology, mode of production and politics. Eagleton's encyclopaedic critical work has engaged with Althusser, Benjamin, postcolonialism, feminism, novels, plays and major critical works. In this chapter, Boer tried to pick up a particular insistence of Eagleton on the various strategies found in literature in order to efface the presence of class, class struggle and gender. The text Boer considered was the Rape of Clarissa, an effort to bring together Marxism, feminism and psychoanalysis in the interpretation of Samuel Richardson's novels, and 'Heathcliff and the Great Hunger', a study of class and ethnicity in *Wuthering Heights*. Boer argues that Eagleton provides a way of interpreting Ruth. Boer claims that in reading the Book of Ruth, these three areas (class, gender and ethnicity) enables an ideological solution to the problem of succession, with the pernicious result that the ruling class becomes the Israelites, that Ruth's foreignness, gender and class status all contribute to her cooptation and effacement in the text. In other words, it is precisely in texts featuring women that sexual difference is avoided: a text like Ruth in fact functions to remove women from the story by the very means of making them central to the story (Boer P. 9).

Eagleton is a Marxist, coming from dirt poor Catholicism, with a solid dose of Irish genealogy, Eagleton came to Cambridge and then to Oxford. He is known as a Catholic Left. His Marxism insists on the central questions of class, ideology and ideology critique and above all, a revolutionary politics. His political activism ranges from protests in the Catholic Left, through university politics to political interventions in the Irish republican struggle through plays.

### **Class and Gender**

Boer used Eagleton to focus on a particular issue within the catholicity of his work; the intersections between class, gender and ethnicity. His work on class and gender, or class conflict and sexual warfare – in his book, the book of Ruth becomes an extremely interesting text (Boer P. 66).

Boer claims that Eagleton insisted that Marxists keep the question of class in the foreground, particularly in light of attempts to shift the focus to various political –groups that operate in terms of identity politics – gender, race, sexuality, indigeneity, religion, ecology and so on (Boer P. 67).

Eagleton's emphasis on class operates at a number of levels:

**First**, the fundamental division between the bourgeoisie and the working class is part of the structure of capitalism. This particular **division of labor** is crucial for the operation of capitalism, based as it is on the rational organization of the means of maximizing profit. A more specific description is **between those who work and those who do not work but live off** what is known as **the surplus labor of the workers**. The system can operate only if workers are not paid the full value of their work: there is something left over, a certain amount of labor power (which the worker sells to the employer), that is then appropriated by the employers so that they themselves can live (Boer P. 67). Surplus labor has a material existence (surplus value) in the commodities the worker makes; when sold the worker receive only a portion of the money, much of it goes to the employers, wholesalers and retailers. Hence the notion of 'surplus value' in a myriad complex of overlays, on which capitalism relies. But such division of labor also relies on a number of other divisions, many of which are older than capitalism; between manual and intellectual labor (the first 'real' division for Marx and Engels), between country and city, or rural and factory work, and between male and female. **The division of labor according to gender is the crucial division for discussion, particularly because Marx and Engels identify it as the primary division (Boer P. 68).**

Eagleton's insistence on class, then, is inseparable from the notion of division of labor and surplus labor/value. Therefore, political work against capitalism must take place within the context of the working class, creatively mobilizing the deep, inchoate rage of this class against systematic exploitation (Boer P. 68).

Eagleton's insistence on class may also be seen as the result of his living and working in the same society that was the basis for Marx's analysis in *Capital*, albeit some 150 years later. For here class is an obvious feature of social relations, marked out sharply in terms of language, culture, politics, and above all in working conditions (Boer P. 68).

### **The effacement (말소, 소멸) of Women in Ruth**

**Ethnicity:** Ruth's ethnicity was Moabites. The Moabites are, for the Hebrew Bible, the descendants of Lot and his first-born daughter (Gen. 29:32-3, 37). In this denigrating table the Ammonites come from Lot and his younger daughter (Gen. 19: 34-36, 38). Ruth is therefore one of this incestuous brood, a secondary part of the lines that tie with Abraham. Ruth and Orpha are Moabite wives of now-dead Israelite men, Mahlon and Chilion. Ruth, whose Moabite identity is so much part of her character that it becomes an epithet, (별명, 통칭) follows Naomi back to Judah, but is she who marries Boaz and produces a child in the curiously 'impure' genealogical line that leads on to David (Boer P. 78).

**Class:** Class is one of a cluster of terms in Marxist theory that explores the relations between productive and non-productive labor; those who control the means of production extract, in order to live, the surplus product, or value, from those who work for them but do not own the means of production (Boer P. 78).

The return of Naomi and Ruth to Bethlehem takes place at the ‘beginning of the barley harvest’ (Ruth 1:22), a crucial temporal marker that sets up the sequence that follows. Ruth begins, at her own suggestion, the task of gleaning after the reapers of the harvest. In the hierarchy of labor she is a long way from the wealthy Boaz, owner of the means of production; between them come the young man in charge of the reapers and the reapers themselves. Ruth follows the reapers in the field (Ruth 2:3) (Boer P. 78). As far as the story is concerned, there is but one field in which the reapers work, for the text mentions that part of it belonged to Boaz. There were female workers in the field. Ruth 2:23 suggests most clearly that the **young women glean rather than reap**. For this story the **women workers occupy the lowest rung** in the work hierarchy. As for **Ruth, she is one of the laborers but one step down from the lowest group**, a female servant who is not like one of Boaz’s female servants (Boer P. 79).

**Boaz controls the means of production and for whom the rest labor**. His wealth, the public activities of commercial exchange at the ‘gate’ (4:1), his eating and drinking at the threshing floor (3:3-7), and the instructions given to his reapers as to how they should work (2:15-16), all indicate a man in charge of the means of production and labor. Only in this context can he utter pieties – ‘Yahweh bless you’ (2:4) or ‘May you be blessed by Yahweh’ (3:10). But the most obvious signal is that nowhere does Boaz engage in any work as such, nowhere is he involved in the production of the necessary items for human existence. In other words, **he lives off the surplus labor of those who do work**. The only thing he does is tell others what to do (Boer P. 79).

Naomi is then most like Boaz in this story, for she also does no work; She controls Ruth’s actions, directing her to go out and glean, seduce a man on the threshing floor and bear a child. This legitimate Judahite is another who lives from the surplus value of those who work (Boer P. 80).

Naomi does domestic work. Naomi cares for the son after he is born. Boaz, however, controls the means of production to which and to whom Naomi herself is subject (Boer P. 80).

Ethnicity, class and gender – all draw together. Ruth remains a foreign body within Israel, so much so that despite of all her protestations of loyalty (1:16-17), she cannot be the mother of the son. In the narrative Obed belongs to Boaz and Naomi; Ruth is merely the vessel by which the son is born (Boer P. 85).

Ruth is seen doing more and more work which appeared to be an exploitation. And Naomi and Boaz have multiple ties, in terms of kinship, economic exchange and the exploitation of labor. Ruth marries Boaz and bore a son (Boer P. 84). Ruth worked hard on the field and gave birth to a son too (Boer P. 85).

In the economic picture in the book of Ruth, the Israelites – Naomi and Boaz – are those who do not work, who exploit and live off the surplus labor of others.

Boer concluded that Ruth is both a text of an ideological status quo and that it also sees the emergence of an ideological position that identifies Israel's superior status, as 'chosen people,' in terms of class (Boer P. 86).

#### CHAPTER 4. THE PRODUCTION OF SPACES IN I SAMUEL

##### Henri Lefebvre

Boer reports that Lefebvre worked in a whole range of areas, such as Marxist activism, philosophy, urban and rural sociology, geography, emergent cultural studies, but he is most well known for his work, as Boer reports, for his work on the production of space and the fundamental role of the dialectic. The production of space and the fundamental role of the dialectic. The production of space has some profound consideration for the reading of biblical texts, particularly due to the grand scale of Lefebvre's theoretical and practical work on this question. A reading open to the production of space and the way it marks sexual, social and political and economic codes has implications not only for the traditional spatial disciplines, such as archaeology and geography, but also for areas such as hermeneutics, religion and sacred texts. Linked with this is his major work on the practice of everyday life, where the quotidian appears as major category of analysis. Rather than select an obvious spatial text, such as the tabernacle or temple instructions/descriptions in Exodus, I Kgs, I Chron. or Ezekiel, or the distribution of land in Joshua, Boer focused on I Sam. 1-2, a somewhat inconspicuous text that relates more to Lefebvre's lifelong concern with everyday lived life. In particular, the opposition between the overt space of the shrine at Shiloh stands over against the covert womb of Hannah. However, in a series of dialectical moves Boer argues that the shrine at Shiloh is itself marginal in comparison to Jerusalem, which then becomes marginalized comparison to the imperial centre of Babylon or Egypt. In the end, what appears to be a possible source for an alternative reading – Hannah's womb – becomes the key through which the 'sacred economy' of the text can operate.

## CHAPTER 5. THE CONTRADICTORY WORLD OF KINGS

### Georg Lukacs

Georg Lukacs is literary critic, philosopher, political commentator and activist. What interested Boer was not only Lukacs' exercise of the dialectic, but also some key ideas and their influence on the understanding of the Bible and biblical studies itself. Lukacs' literary work included the following interests: the yoking together of analysis and evaluation, and of the text and the social situation to which it responds and speaks (not necessarily that of its original production), a dialectical approach to genre and a commitment to historicism. He also insisted on key historical moments for making transitions, the traces of socio-economic period emerging in the form of the literature it produced, as well as the function of an all-pervasive reification and class consciousness in capitalism. Boer's concern with two of Lukacs' works, *Theory of the Novel* and *The Historical Novel*, particularly his discussion of genre, its distinctive features and modes of characterization, as well as contrast with other genres. Most notably Lukacs develops a dialectical theory of genre that Boer applies to *Kings*, where he (Boer) offers a reading of the tension between prophetic and royal narratives in I and 2 Kings. Boer traces the tensions in these narratives between the prophetic material that dominates in I Kgs 17-2 Kgs 9.10 and the narratives about kings that dominate the remaining material. Focusing on the questions of narrative rhythm, life and death and characterization Boer closes by asking what is going on with the strange ideological world of *Kings*, specifically in terms of mode of production (Boer P. 9-10).



## CHAPTER 6. ANTI-YAHWEHISM IN EZEKIEL

### Ernst Bloch

Ernst Bloch actually used the Bible as one of his main sources for the ideas, language and the concept of utopia itself. Concerned to understand the importance of the Bible for the rural and urban working classes, Bloch's work is notable for the way his vocabulary and syntax are shaped by the Bible itself. Although his work is the source of the widely used hermeneutics of suspicion and recovery, what interests Boer is the way Bloch develops his utopian hermeneutics. With his search for buried and repressed traditions, Bloch traces the way the language of protest in the Bible has at heart the challenge against Yahweh as ruler and overlord: in other words, there is a deeper logic of protest against Yahweh in the Bible. However, the way Bloch becomes interesting for biblical studies is in the notion of a logic of anti-Yahwism in the texts and their study. Such texts as Ezek. 16 and 23 have featured in recent feminist debates, although Boer notes that time and again such studies avoid the logical outcome of their arguments, preferring to argue that the representation of Yahweh in Ezekiel is problematic and therefore should be discarded or deconstructed in order to remove its misogynist power. Yet there is a noticeable move in studies of such texts that develops an implicit protest of such texts as Ezek. 16 and 23. Boer then argues that this interpretation cannot avoid the role of the text in producing its own interpretations, especially where it seems to support the overt ideology. Such an implicit criticism appears in Ezek. 20:1-38, where the impossible words of Yahweh emerge from Ezekiel's mouth. Here Yahweh gives laws that are not good, that can only produced sin (Ezek. 20:25), ending with an enforced return from exile and obedience to the covenant (Boer P. 10).

## CHAPTER 7. THE LOGIC OF DIVINE JUSTICE IN ISAIAH

### Theodor Adorno

Although Adorno made major contributions to musicology, philosophy, and sociology, psychoanalysis and literary criticism, Boer is interested in his method of interpreting texts, namely, an immanent dialectical criticism. Rather than importing criticisms from outside, this dialectical approach seeks the contradictions of the text through its own narrative patterns and conceptual arrangement. For Adorno, the most rigorous critique is one that emerges from the text under analysis. The example Boer provide is Adorno's critique of Kierkegaard. In this light Boer consider Isa. 5, the so-called parable of the vineyard, and arguing within the terms of the text itself that a series of paradoxes emerge –between the social criticism of the ruling classes and the conservative model of society envisioned, the love of the prophet for Yahweh and the justification for punishment, the responsibility of Yahweh for the 'sour grapes', and the complete ideological inversion of the themes of cultivation and wildness – that renders any connection between divine and social justice impossible (Boer P. 11).

**CHAPTER 8. THE CONTRADICTIONS OF FORM IN THE PSALMS**  
**Frederic Jameson**

Engaging with a whole range of contemporary methods, from linguistics to architecture, film theory to Russian formalism, Jameson has carried on a programme that both incorporates these methods within Marxism and advocates Marxism's power as an interpretive and political method. He takes Marxism as a set of problems that require constant reworking and is ever open to new developments while always holding to Marxism itself. In this book, Boer's interest is in his continual concern with form and its function in a dialectical method that comes from the Heglian – Marxist tradition. The study of this body of material in the Hebrew Bible maybe divided into two major categories: those concerned with the content of the Psalms, whether in devotional, historical or thematic terms, and those concerned with form. In fact, the latter category has dominated Psalms research, in themes of form criticism and the effort to make some headway on the question of Hebrew poetry. However, even the text exhibits a similar tendency, seeking to organize the Psalms in five books, or as the psalms of David, the sons of Korah, Asaph, Solomon or Moses, or in terms of 'musical' directions, or even aligning some of them to moments in the life of David. It seems as though there is an overdetermination of form, so much so that contradictions start to appear. By focusing on Psalms 108, a double over with Pss. 57.7-11 and 60::5-12, as well as I Chron. 16:8-36, which overlaps with Pss. 105:1-15, 96:1-13 and 106:47-48, the overdetermination is exacerbated, not only in terms of the repetition of the content, but also in the categories from the superscriptions and those of form criticism (Boer P. 11).

CHAPTER 9. THE IMPOSSIBLE APOCALYPTIC OF DANIEL  
Walter Benjamin

Like Bloch, Benjamin referred to the Bible extensively in his work, although he made use of it in order to develop a method of philosophy and literary criticism that was opposed to the classicism of German theory. Boer outlines his work on both allegory and language in order to raise the question about the tension between the overt political use of language and the blockage to such use that Benjamin himself theorized. Boer traced a similar tension in the apocalyptic material of Daniel. Working with Dan. 7-12, a tension appears between the allusive and metaphorical language of the vision and a desire both by the text and subsequent scholars to fix the references this material to particular historical events and times. Moving from Benjamin's positions on language and allegory, Boer argues that apocalyptic language is anti-referential, a closed system from a very different socio-economic system that is finally undecipherable. However, the dialectical point is that such an anti-referential function is marked by the precise effort to make the referential move. This also puts a question to Benjamin, for whom allegory provided an alternative opening to the future blocked by history. For the effort by apocalyptic language to imagine a future is itself foreclosed by the nature of that language itself (Boer P. 12).

The focus on major Marxist critics and the sampling of texts from one end of the Hebrew Bible to the other serves an introductory function with a critical bent, for Boer wanted to argue for the viability of Marxist literary criticism in biblical studies across a range of texts. The result is series of studies that form some of the pieces of what may be termed the ideological structures of the dominant modes of production under which the Hebrew Bible was written. In Marxist terms the question of history operates primarily at the level of what has been called mode of production. Boer suggest to move the discussion a little further by reflecting on some current work in Marxist economic theory, especially regulation theory, in which the whole question of mode of production becomes one that needs to be rethought for such a different political economic and cultural formation as the one we find in the Hebrew Bible.

## CONCLUSION: ONE THE QUESTION OF MODE OF PRODUCTION

By Roland Boer

### JEAN KIM'S REFLECTION

Reading this books was like reading 10 books or at the least 10 articles including the one written by Boer himself because he was critiquing theories written by 9 authors and he himself wrote the Introduction and Conclusion of the book as well as his critiques of each of these 9 authors.

Reading this book desensitized about Marxism. Because I have been raised, educated and trained in a culture that forced us to feel resentful and restricted anyone's reading about Marxism as if it was the national enemy. Yes, it was South Korea's enemy. Therefore, people living in South Korea learned to feel allergic reaction or automatic mental reflex as soon as we hear about Marxism. Legally we were condemned, if not arrested, tried and indicted to life term prison sentence. Because studying, talking about or liking Marxism were interpreted betrayal and capital crime that endangering national security. Because we have had North Korea that was ruled by Marxist's ideology and there has been constant threat to invade South Korea militarily and ideologically.

Reading this book enhanced my understanding the Marxism ideology, its criticism of the Bible, and learned Marxism criticism became one of the important and significant tool for biblical criticism. But generally speaking, the book was very hard to read. My interest in Biblical criticism helped me endure the hardship of reading such a book.

Reading Boer's introduction, especially his summary of 9 authors was very helpful to understand each chapter although some chapters were very hard to understand. To enhance my understanding of Marxism's criticism first before I move onto the authors' use of Marxism, I began to read chapter 3 and 4 because I expected both authors who are Marxist will write something about Marxism. Chapter 3 was very helpful but Chapter 4, I could hardly understand.

On the back cover it says: This is the first large-scale critical introduction to a significant area of contemporary cultural and literary theory, namely Marxist literary criticism, as applied to the Bible. The book comprises studies of major figures in the tradition, specifically Althusser, Gramsci, Eagleton, Adorno, Benjamin, Bloch, Lefebvre, Lukasc and Jameson. Throughtout, the aim is to show hos this materials is relevant to biblican criticism, in terms of both particular approaches to the Bible and the use fo htose approaches for interpreting selected texts from Genesis, Exodus, Ruth, 1 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Psalms and Daniel.