

Some Recent Biblical Re-writings in English and the Contemporary “Canonical” Images of the Bible

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on three contemporary Anglophone rewritings of the Bible (i.e., on Philip Pullman’s The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ (2010), Jeanette Winterson’s Boating for Beginners (1985), and on Jim Crace’s Quarantine (1997)) and contends that the rewrites can be read against the background of the late twentieth-century emergence of dominant understandings of the Bible: of the Bible as a cultural icon and of the Bible as an epitome of liberal/human values. Those dominant – or “canonical” – images of the Bible prefer either to foreground the role the Bible played in the formation of Western culture and democracy, and/or to play down the more scandalous, less palatable features of biblical texts. While the dominant images embody the currently most popular and culturally orthodox perspectives on the meaning of the Bible, other concerns and perspectives are relegated to the margins of interest. Seeing some parallels between such contemporary processes of marginalisation/promotion and the past mechanisms of biblical canon-formation, I argue that the recent biblical rewritings re-enact the process of forgetting, suppressing or proscribing alternative accounts of biblical events, and simultaneously, bring into sharp focus and problematize its twentieth- and twenty-first-century form of canonicity.

KEYWORDS

Bible, rewriting, canon, Pullman, Winterson, Crace, Jesus, democracy, culture, liberal values

The contemporary decline of biblical literacy is a widely acknowledged and incisively analysed fact.¹ The symptoms of the low levels of biblical knowledge have been described by a number of scholars. Timothy Beal, for example, writes that more than eighty percent of fervent believers claim that “God helps those who help themselves” is a verse in the Bible, that more than half of high school seniors say that Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife, and that some adults (not that many, but still) believe that Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife.² British scholars point out that people do not know that Jonah is in the Bible³ and are unfamiliar with the stories of Abraham, Joseph or of the Good Samaritan.⁴ And yet, it cannot go unnoticed that despite the growing biblical illiteracy, most (if not all) people in the West know what the Bible is and readily associate it with monotheistic religions, with moral teaching and with cultural traditions. The Bible – as Beal puts it – “appears to be the most revered book never read,”⁵ and – we could add – it figures as the most recognisable book whose conspicuousness derives from sources different than a thorough Bible education.

1 See, for example, the recently published collection *Rethinking Biblical Literacy*, edited by Katie B. Edwards. The volume shows biblical literacy as a multiple and complex term, which embraces many types, e.g., visual or popular literacy.

2 Timothy Beal, *The Rise and Fall of the Bible: The Unexpected History of an Accidental Book* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), 31.

3 In her book devoted to the cultural afterlives of the biblical book of Jonah, Yvonne Sherwood recounts a short dialogue between herself and a friend. “You’re working on Jonah?”, a friend of mine asked when this project was incubating, ‘is that in the Bible?’” Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives. The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 180, original emphasis.

4 Philip Davies, “Whose Bible? Anyone’s?,” *Bible and Interpretation*, July 2009. <http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/whose.shtml>.

5 Beal, *The Rise and Fall of the Bible*, 33.

The most prominent source of knowledge about the Bible today is popular culture, littered, as Andrew Tate puts it, with “half-remembered parables and scriptural figures [which] shadow dance in our shared but near amnesiac cultural consciousness.”⁶ Rehashed and cut down to the postmodern measure, the Bible keeps informing imaginative writing, visual art, film, music as well as political discourse. Most people are more likely to derive impressions of the Bible from these sources than they are from church teaching or actual reading. The paradoxical result of this dependence is that the popular understanding of the Bible – a chronologically earlier text – is actively shaped by its later revisions and appropriations. In other words, the Bible’s status depends on the mechanisms of what Mieke Bal calls “preposterous history,”⁷ where the meaning of what came first (pre-) becomes an after-effect of its later (post-) recycling. Thus, for a considerable group of contemporary people, the Bible is (or means) what the currently dominant cultural discourses determine it to be (or mean). Moreover, biblical material is recognisable to the extent that it is marked by, filtered through and organised by one of those discourses. To paraphrase the once famous title of a Stanley Fish’s text, people recognise the Bible when they see it through the selective lens of one of the discourses with which the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is well acquainted.

Predictably, not all contemporaries take the regulating presence of those discourses for granted and not all are satisfied with the spectral, truncated or merely allusive handling of the Bible. This paper will focus on three recent English novels which are full-length re-writings of biblical narratives and which critically explore the emergence and character of dominant images or understandings of what the Bible really means (or should mean), namely on Philip Pullman’s *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (2010), Jeanette Winterson’s *Boating for Beginners* (1985), and on Jim Crace’s *Quarantine* (1997). Drawing on James Crossley’s, Yvonne Sherwood’s and Jonathan Sheehan’s terminology, I will first discuss the four dominant ways of understanding the Bible today. Next, I will argue that to the extent these ways embody the currently most popular and culturally orthodox perspectives on the meaning of the Bible – ones which play down the currently less palatable features of biblical texts – their functioning resembles the functioning of canonical rules of reading. Seeing some parallels between such contemporary processes of marginalisation/promotion and the past mechanisms of biblical canon-formation, I argue that the recent biblical rewritings by Winterson, Pullman, and Crace re-enact the process of selecting, forgetting, suppressing or proscribing alternative accounts of biblical events, and simultaneously, bring into sharp focus and problematize its twentieth- and twenty-first-century form of canonicity.

The Contemporary Dominant Images of the Bible and their “Canonical” Status

According to James Crossley, there are four dominant understandings of the Bible, each deeply embedded in contemporary cultural and political discourses in Britain: the Cultural Bible, the Liberal Bible, the Neoliberal Bible, and the Radical Bible. The concept of the Cultural Bible was

6 Andrew Tate, “Postmodernism,” in *Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture*, ed. John F.A. Sawyer (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 517.

7 Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 7.

introduced in 2005 by Jonathan Sheehan, who argued that the Enlightenment produced a multi-strand understanding of the Bible, in which pedagogical, moral, historical and philological were foregrounded and theological concerns receded to the background. This post-theological Bible was legitimised by cultural practices and started to be seen “as the fountain of the literary, artistic, spiritual, jurisprudential, and moral virtues that infuse what we call Western civilization.”⁸ Today, treated as an English classic, as the most important resource of English language and literary imagery, the Cultural Bible continues to be seen as a “treasured heritage”⁹ of British culture. As Crossley observes, the literary merits of the King James Bible have been annexed and capitalised on by the implicit nationalism of the Cultural Bible, which now denotes English (and, in a more imperial vein, British) traditions and cultural values.

The Liberal Bible (the term coined by Yvonne Sherwood and traced back by her to the sixteenth and seventeenth century political traditions) connects biblical texts with democracy and its values. “The Liberal Bible,” argues Crossley, “is an understanding of the Bible as supportive of freedom of conscience, rights, law, government, and consensus [...]”¹⁰ Seen that way, the Bible is believed to strongly oppose tyranny, autocracy, terror and oppression. The Ten Commandments and the love-thy-neighbour commandment are treated as general legal underpinnings of social values, whereas Jesus’ quip about rendering unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s is read as the support of the distinction between the secular and the religious, between the public and the private. The liberal understanding of the Bible is predicated on the (largely wrong) assumption that tolerance, equality, emancipation of women and minority rights are directly derived from biblical texts.

Risking tautology, we can say that the Neoliberal Bible is the understanding of the Bible that makes it compatible with the ideas and values of neoliberalism: with the dominance of individualism over state, with the emphasis on property rights, with the belief in the economical grounding of social relations, and with the stress on the marketization of all areas of life. The Neoliberal Bible foregrounds the financial dimension of charity (as explained in Thatcher’s famous statement that the Good Samaritan had not only good intentions but also money), and makes the creation of wealth a Christian obligation (allegedly hammered home by Jesus in his parable of the talents). It makes salvation an individual responsibility, and self-help and proper attitude to work the basis of a more harmonious, giving society. To the extent that the Neoliberal Bible exists in countless forms which target specific audiences, it can be said to both acknowledge and produces multiples identities of its readers (or consumers). Re-packaged as *The Soldier’s Bible*, *The Teen Bible for Girls*, *Couple’s Devotional Bible*, *The Holy Bible Journal Edition*, *Fulfilled Devotional Bible for the Single*

8 Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 259.

9 James D. Crossley, *Harnessing Chaos. The Bible in English Political Discourse since 1968* (London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 12.

10 Crossley, *Harnessing Chaos*, 12.

Woman, Homeschool Mom's Bible,¹¹ *Curious Kittens Bible*¹² etc., this Bible functions like a fully marketable, audience-savvy commodity. As Crossley observes, “neoliberalism provides the ideal economic and ideological conditions for the idea that the actual contents of the Bible barely matter in understanding what the Bible ‘really means’, particularly in the idea of the importance placed on marketing and instant imaging.”¹³

An understanding of the Bible with a long and rich tradition, the Radical Bible is associated with challenging all sorts of authorities: ecclesiastical, economic, political, or imperial. Rooted in the radical critique of hierarchies and established social orders, the Radical Bible is often linked with socialism and Liberation Theology. Its most important themes are: “land and wealth redistribution, confronting power and wealth, communitarianism, egalitarianism, anti-clericalism and direct access to God, the importance of conscience and/or the Spirit, prophetic critique, and even ‘apocalyptic’ language, particularly with reference to a radical transformation of the social, economic, and political order.”¹⁴ Interestingly, Crossley argues that in Britain the Radical Bible “has had its sting removed”¹⁵ and its elements have been absorbed by other types of the Bible. He diagnoses this thinning of the Radical Bible on a number of examples,¹⁶ and shows that the class-confrontational and quasi-apocalyptic discourse is either abandoned, or preserved in the Cultural Bible, or used in line with the Liberal Bible and its emphases on rights, democracy, freedom and tolerance.¹⁷

Admittedly, these four labels for understanding what the Bible “really means” should not be taken as the only existing approaches to the Bible since even today some people still venerate it as the inspired word of God while others reject it as theocratic, anti-liberal or simply laughable. Rather, the four labels should be seen as “major trends [...] that] dictate some of the ways in which the Bible is understood, whether users know it or not or like it or not.”¹⁸ Moreover, the four modes of understanding the Bible should be treated as dynamic and interrelated traditions which overlap, coexist and influence one another. Most importantly, it cannot go unnoticed that the Liberal and Radical Bible often converge on the figure of Jesus, who is treated by both as the source of fundamental ideas. Thus, for the Liberal Bible Jesus is “tolerant, inclusive, and an all-round decent person”¹⁹ while for the Radical Bible Jesus is a revolutionary, a critic of the established religious

11 Offered by Zondervan publishing house, this Bible is designed for mother educating their children at home. It is meant to offer “heartfelt inspiration to revive, encourage and strengthen you as you juggle the needs caring for your family while striving to educate and instil your faith and values in your children” (<http://www.zondervan.com/bibles/devotional-bibles/niv-homeschool-mom-s-bible-compact>).

12 The quick review section for this Bible on Zondervan webpage informs a prospective customer that “If you love kittens, you will love this Bible! Inside you will find twelve colour pages of adorable kitten photos with inspirational thoughts that will encourage you day after day” (<http://www.zondervan.com/curious-kittens-bible>).

13 Crossley, *Harnessing Chaos*, 16.

14 Crossley, *Harnessing Chaos*, 18.

15 Crossley, *Harnessing Chaos*, 29.

16 Crossley discusses the biblical dimension of a Marxist historian Christopher Hill, whose historical analyses, he claims, are motivated by the growing sense of the current defeat of the characteristically English, Bible-based revolutionary tradition. Faced with the events of 1968 and its anarchic spirit, Hill imbued his writing on the seventeenth century English history with the idea of the weakening of radicalism and its survival in other, cultural forms.

17 As Crossley argues, “while the idea of facilitating the radical transformation was retained, it was now the radical transformation of other societies into one like ours” (Crossley, *Harnessing Chaos*, 233).

18 Crossley, *Harnessing Chaos*, 33 (my emphasis).

19 Crossley, *Harnessing Chaos*, 31.

order and its authorities, an advocate of equality and a spokesman of the poor and the oppressed. Interestingly, as Crossley argues, in contemporary Britain the Radical Bible is losing its clean-cut edge and its distinctiveness as it becomes gradually diluted and ingested by other discourses. On the one hand, its serious radicalism is sometimes subsumed by the playful, the ironic and the provocative, i.e., by what can be labelled the postmodern. On the other hand, its sharp emphasis on community and commonality has been gradually weakened and absorbed by the post-Thatcherite developments of the Liberal Bible.

Characteristically, the four understandings – or images – of the Bible are based on highly selective approaches to the biblical text. The Cultural, Liberal, Neoliberal and Radical Bibles subordinate the whole of the Bible's meaning to ideas and values they deem central, glossing over and suppressing anything that does not fit or that contradicts what they establish as the dominant meaning. Thus, the Cultural Bible must turn a blind eye on what biblical scholars call pornoprophetics,²⁰ which goes against its idea of pedagogical and moral text; the Liberal Bible may have problems with the Israelite slaughter of Canaanites, and with Jesus' intolerant response to the Syrian-Phoenician woman; the Radical Bible is troubled with St Paul's belief that all government is from God, as well as with the lordly God, whom Ernst Bloch dubs "On-high, the Up-there"²¹ and whom he makes the patron of all the powerful men on earth. Instead of the idea of the Bible as a multifaceted and deeply contradictory collection of texts, there emerges an image of the Bible as a unified and monologic book with one identifiable meaning. As Sherwood comments, with the consolidated images of the Bible like the Cultural and Liberal Bibles, "it never comes down to a frank discussion of good texts and bad texts, texts of redemption and 'texts of terror' [...]. The arguments are purified, the counter-texts occluded, and there is a strenuous avoidance of the idea of the ambiguity of the biblical/divine."²²

Disambiguated and subjected to "relative non-reading,"²³ the Bible comes to occupy a very special position. Though emulating the values of the secular society, the Cultural Bible, the Liberal Bible, the Neoliberal Bible and the Radical Bible seem to possess a uniquely modern, quasi-sacral status – they are respected as the repositories of *sanctified secular* values like beauty, hope, freedom, equality, well-being, or inclusivity. Insofar as these popular images of the Bible are construed as containing the ultimately significant ideas and values, they are treated as sacred icons of the secular world and tacitly – by implicit alliance of the society concerned with its traditions – protected against potential attacks (because it is generally acknowledged that the Bible is a culturally foundational document, to claim otherwise is to risk sounding uneducated or prejudiced). As Sherwood argues, "[r]estoring the once outré, exceptional sacred to the realm of

20 Coined by Athalya Brenner in 1995, the term "pornoprophetics" relates to those passages in the Bible in which sexual images of women are used to expose the iniquities of the chosen people, and to build a discourse in which God's violence and punishment for Israel's sins is communicated. The frequently used metaphor is the image of the gendered relation between the divine-husband and the erring-human-wife. In passages like Ezekiel 16 and 23, Jeremiah 2 and 3 and 13, or Zechariah 5:5–11, God is shown as a sexual perpetrator, threatening to rape and humiliate the cities of Israel and Judah, who are represented as female. For Brenner, such images are degrading to women and legitimate male power through the control of women's bodies.

21 Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity. The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom* (London and New York: Verso, 2009), 14.

22 Yvonne Sherwood, *Biblical Blasphemy: Trials of the Sacred for a Secular Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 331.

23 Sherwood, *Biblical Blasphemy*, 71.

law and usefulness constitutes a distinctly modern twist on sacralisation. Showing how the Bible is useful for public morality and the inculcation of good (law-abiding) citizenship, re-sacralises the text as cultural foundation and saves the jeopardised text.²⁴ In its re-sacralised forms, the Bible enjoys the position reminiscent of scripture, which – according to the sociological outlook of Wilfred Cantwell Smith – is a text a given community chooses to regard as authoritative and a text which consolidates this community in return. “[N]o text is a scripture in itself and as such,” Smith argues. “People – a given community – make a text into a scripture, or keep it scripture: by treating it in a certain way.”²⁵ As a de-transcendentalised concept,²⁶ i.e., a concept no longer rooted in the idea of revelation and divine origin, and as a “bilateral”²⁷ term, i.e., a term that captures a two-way relationship between a community and the text, scripture adequately describes the four understandings of the Bible discussed here. They are contemporary secular scripture in the sense that today’s British society confers on those Bibles the status of culturally authoritative texts, and in the sense that those Bibles chime with and reflect back on this society.

These selective understandings of the Bible retrogressively impose on the ancient text norms and expectation characteristic of modernity and postmodernity. While such an imposition is nothing unique or surprising, and may be seen as a necessary means of maintaining the Bible’s significance and validity, its effects should not be understood as simply and solely a partial or incomplete presentation of biblical ideas. Indeed, the fact that each of the four Bibles discussed here harnesses the biblical text with its own, anachronistic metanarrative tells more about those who propagate such understandings and about their late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century British context, than about the Bible itself, or even about parts of the Bible. As a matter of fact, there are two observations that can be made about the contemporary harnessing of the Bible to the dominant cultural and political discourses. The first is quite trivial and holds that today’s British society is willing to accept the presence of an essentially religious text on condition that it loses its religious, confessional or theological purport and starts to resonate with the current plurality of cultures. To assume that what the Bible “really means” is tolerance, inclusivity, Western democracy, beauty, moral life, individualism or hope for transformation, is to bend the Bible’s religious meaning to the purposes of the secular society, to de-theologise it and to re-universalise its ideas as humane and cultural values. The second observation, hopefully a more profound one, is that the contemporary making of the Bible in our current image and after our present-day likeness shows the deep and problematic enmeshment of the secular and the sacred, or the lack of a clear-cut separation between the two. As Sherwood notes, a phenomenon like the Liberal Bible – which “conjoins sources ‘secular’ and ‘religious,’ ‘human’ and ‘divine’ as sponsors and foundations of the separation of [...] ‘politics’ and ‘religion,’ ‘human’ and ‘divine;’²⁸ – is a symptom of our foundational (and still valid) fusions and confusions. Also, the existence and ubiquity of the four images of the Bible can be taken as another manifestation of the broader phenomenon described by Grace Davie, namely, of the simultaneous decrease in religious activity of British people and the growing significance of

24 Sherwood, *Biblical Blaspheming*, 73.

25 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What is Scripture?: A Comparative Approach* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 18.

26 Smith, *What is Scripture?*, 12.

27 Smith, *What is Scripture?*, 17.

28 Sherwood, *Biblical Blaspheming*, 331–332.

religion in public debate and cultural discourses.²⁹ A sign of the indifference to religion and of the related biblical illiteracy, the four types of the Bible are at the same time evidence of the unabated importance of things religious, here present in a paradoxical, secular sacred form.

Interestingly, the processes underlying the contemporary re-production and sustenance of the dominant images of the Bible resemble the mechanisms that used to regulate the so-called “canonical process” – a phenomenon understood as the journey of various literary texts produced within an Israelite/Jewish and Christian community “from the early stages when they began to be considered as somehow authoritative for the broader community, through the collection and endorsement process, to the final judgement concerning their inspired character as the unified and defined collection of scripture.”³⁰ As Bart Ehrman shows, in the case of the Christian canonical process, the development involved a fair amount of manipulation of the existing material and of selection from among different texts deemed authoritative by various communities. Determined by ideas which later solidified and formed orthodox Christianity, the selection effectively suppressed and removed from the broad circulation books which did not fit or disagreed with the dominant view. Admittedly, the proto-orthodox ideas, which emerged after the first Christian writings, were retrospectively applied to Jesus’ teaching, and with time, came to be treated as identical with it (i.e., “Jesus and apostles did not teach the orthodox view and did not transmit it to the church”³¹). In the end, a fraction of all Christian writings came to be regarded as scripture (“a collection of authoritative books”) and was finally incorporated into the fixed body of the canon (“an authoritative collection of books”). To the extent that the four contemporary understandings of the Bible are the effect of the selective endorsement of those parts of the Bible which dovetail with the dominant Western outlooks on politics, society and culture, and to the extent that those understandings have been re-sacralised as authoritative and determinative for the British culture, we can say that the Cultural, Liberal, Neoliberal and Radical Bibles have been generated and bolstered by mechanisms analogous to those of the early Christian canon formation.

Significantly, the four popular understandings of the Bible can be described as “canonical” provided one does not use this multifaceted and rather confusing term in the “technical”³² sense (meaning texts that belong to a fixed and closed list of sacred books), but in the sense of texts and traditions functioning authoritatively in a community, i.e., as a term pertaining to “the authoritative principles and guiding spirit which govern belief and practice.”³³ The Cultural, Liberal, Neoliberal and Radical Bibles are “canonical” insofar as they capture and express the defining principles and values which determine contemporary social, political and cultural ideas and practices. The four modes of understanding of the Bible seem to have something like the second-degree canonicity, related to what Bruce Metzger calls “the canon with the canon.”³⁴ According to Metzger, it is possible

29 Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 205, 232.

30 Eugene Ulrich, “The Notion and Definition of Canon,” in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 30.

31 Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities. The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford UP, 2003), 169.

32 Ulrich, “The Notion and Definition of Canon,” 28.

33 Ulrich, “The Notion and Definition of Canon,” 28.

34 Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 279.

to speak of the dominant ideas localisable *inside* the fixed collection of sacred writing (inside the canon), or of hermeneutical principles which enable to establish what is authoritative and what is not *within* the already existing closed collection of authoritative books. “In point of fact,” says Metzger, “in all ages of the Church certain key passages within each book, have been more beloved, and therefore more influential, than others.”³⁵ Operating on the established canon, the second-degree canonicity seems to be a device which helps to adjust the Bible to a given historical situation and to foreground those aspects of the Bible which best resonate with the currently dominant discourses. The four contemporary dominant images of the Bible can be understood as versions of this flexible, time- and community-dependent canon within the canon.

For the novelists whose biblical rewrites I will discuss in the rest of this paper – for Phillip Pullman, Jeanette Winterson, and Jim Crace, the canonical process and the emergence of the authoritative, scriptural texts are the subject of incisive and critical examination. In their rewritings, the novelists provide creative reconstructions of selected biblical narratives (with the exception of Winterson, these are the gospels), focusing on mechanisms that lead to the production of written accounts of important biblical events, and making those accounts look similar to one of the four dominant understandings of the Bible discussed above. Foregrounding the process of selection, the instances of manipulation and the reliance on ideological purposes in the making of scripture, the novelists expose the constructedness and limitations of both the Bible and of its contemporary images. They give special attention to the fate of the Radical Bible, which they represent as suppressed, weakened or at least vulnerable to reductive appropriation. All in all, the biblical rewritings discussed in this paper re-enact not only the process of forgetting, suppressing or proscribing alternative accounts, but also the process of enshrining and sanctifying the resulting narrative; simultaneously, they bring into sharp focus and problematize the twentieth- and twenty-first-century variants of the canonical process, which rely on roughly the same mechanism.

Canonizing the Liberal and Cultural Bible in Philip Pullman’s *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*

Philip Pullman’s *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (2010) concentrates on the process of the creation of the Liberal and Cultural Bible, which it puts in the context of the life of Jesus and of his alleged twin brother, Christ. Presented as diametrically opposed, the brothers remain in a deep ideological (and theological) conflict. Jesus is portrayed as a good and righteous person, who cares deeply for people, who acts and teaches out of compassion, and who in the course of the novel grows embittered with the silent, presumably indifferent God. He despises the idea of truth lying outside the material and bodily world and rejects the project of setting a church as the

35 Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 279. Metzger is not the only scholar writing on “the canon within the canon”. Eryl Davies, for one, observes that the principle of internal selection has been always employed in exegesis, and that actually, the approach can be traced back to the Bible itself (e.g., the Pentateuch is the case of the “canon within the canon” in the Hebrew Bible, while in the New Testament one can observe the writers’ predilection towards some Hebrew texts rather than others). As Eryl Davies claims, “During the twentieth century the ‘canon within the canon’ approach has been more influential in scholarly circles than is often realized, and it has proved a useful hermeneutical tool in the hands of both liberation theologians and feminist biblical critics” Eryl W. Davies, *The Immoral Bible. Approaches to Biblical Ethics* (London – New York: T&T Clark International, 2010), 65.

vehicle for the Kingdom he preaches. Christ, in turn, is shown as a diligent student of the Jewish law, a brilliant disputant, a clever observant and an obliging interpreter of events, always ready to implement ideas suggested to him by the Stranger – a character who seems to be a blend of Satan and God.³⁶ The Stranger instructs Christ about the necessity of reworking the story of Jesus' life and death in the light of the "spiritual", i.e., non-historical and largely fictitious, truth of "what should have been."³⁷ According to the Stranger the reassembled account of the events must contain the "inward" significance of everything that happened because on its own what actually did happen is too dark and bleak to attract and console people; "so, for example, when you look down on the story as God looks down on time, you will be able to have Jesus foretell to his disciples, as it were in truth, the events to come of which, in history, he was unaware."³⁸ As the Stranger tells Christ, "in writing of things as they should have been, you are letting truth into history. You are the word of God."³⁹ Jesus and Christ are supposed to function as complementary, with Jesus as simply a man and with Christ as the divine truth. Playing the part of "the missing part of Jesus,"⁴⁰ Christ first betrays Jesus (handing him – Judas-like – to the Jewish priests), next pretends to be the resurrected Jesus, and finally, writes down the story of his brother, determining the way both of them will be remembered.

In his biblical rewriting, Pullman weaves many aspects of the canonical process into the plot of his novel. First, he shows the alterations and manipulations of – as the novel has it – real events in Jesus' life, and explains how they found their way into the scripture. Pullman builds his novel of elements taken from both the canonical and non-canonical Christian literature. He employs not only the material known from the four biblical gospels, but also passages from texts which were not incorporated into the New Testament canon (for example, he borrows Jesus' childhood stories from The Infancy Gospel of Thomas, stories of Mary's pre-Jesus life from the Proto-Gospel of James, and the idea of Jesus' twin brother from the Coptic Gospel of Thomas). By putting the non-canonical material into his rewriting of the Bible, and by simultaneously foregrounding the conscious decisions of Christ as the scriptural author, Pullman brings forth the problem of the ideological background of all editing decisions. Because the mischievous and impulsive Jesus known from the Infancy Gospel and depicted by Pullman did not fit the idea of man-God, his

36 The Stranger never explains his identity. Christ first thinks he must be an important priest; then he believes him to be a member of the Sanhedrin (Philip Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2010), 75), a Greek philosopher (Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, 100) or an angel (Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, 126). At one point, the Stranger says he is not alone and that the others beside him are "a legion" (Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, 146), which is reminiscent of the passage in Luke 8:30, where demons reveal their name to Jesus ("Jesus asked the man, 'What's your name?' He answered, 'Legion,' because many demons had gone into him"). Later, however, the Stranger expressly denies that he is Satan (Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, 223), simultaneously displaying God-like abilities to appear and disappear at will and a supreme knowledge of the future. At the end of the novel, when he visits Christ for the last time and shares a meal with him and his wife, he eats all of their bread and drinks all of their wine, leaving them hungry. In a symbolic subversion of the newly devised Eucharist, the Stranger marks his influence on the life of humans with the sign of the empty wine-jar and no bread, which can be read as standing for lack, impoverishment, selfishness of the higher divine-demonic powers.

37 Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, 99.

38 Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, 124–125.

39 Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, 99.

40 Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, 225.

depiction was replaced with miracles and portents that allegedly accompanied his birth. Instead of the story about Mary being impregnated by a quite real young man, which Pullman weaves into his narrative,⁴¹ canonical gospels talk of the angel and the immaculate conception – elements far more becoming for the divine being that Jesus was supposed to be.

Moreover, in Pullman's novel, the canonical process is shown as manipulative on the textual level. Christ first records everything faithfully and then changes Jesus' words and manipulates the descriptions of events to make them more in keeping with what the Stranger said about the non-historical truth. Significantly, such conscious revisions were quite common in early Christianity. As Ehrman argues, falsifications of the existing sacred writings were an important strategy of Christian proto-orthodoxy (i.e., of those whose beliefs became orthodox and started to dominate). Words or phrases were changed to make texts clearly say what the falsifiers wanted them to say.⁴² In Pullman, Christ makes Jesus – a stark opponent of the institutionalised and hierarchized religion – proclaim the emergence of the church whose foundation is going to be Peter and his successors. He changes the account of the multiplication of bread, replacing the idea of the down-to-earth sharing, unselfishness and companionship with a miracle story, where human goodwill disappears. He tinkers with the Mary and Martha story, and has Jesus side with Mary and her spiritual choice. Jesus' actual encouragement of the kitchen cooperation of the two sisters, his insistence on their common commitment to worldly things, is superseded with a narrative which downplays the mundane and earthy concerns of people.

By reducing the importance of human partnership and collaboration, and by simultaneously giving priority to church authority, its hierarchic character and its institutionalized care for the poor, Christ moulds the Jesus story into a non-confrontational, non-communitarian and a rather deferential gospel. As the Stranger ascertains, "it would be unfortunate [...] if people came to read some of his sayings as a call to political action."⁴³ Revised to fit the Stranger's agenda of suppressing political meanings and strengthening hierarchies, Jesus' sayings are shorn of any radical potential, i.e., of its communitarian, anti-clerical and transformative dimension. While Pullman shows Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet who preaches the imminent end of the world and of its established order, and who cares for the impoverished and the hungry, Christ portrays him as God who concentrates on the immaterial and the spiritual. In other words, Christ makes his Bible anything but the Radical Bible, which he edits out through his manipulations and revisions. The novel emphasizes that for the Christ party Jesus' original teaching is too radical and too egalitarian⁴⁴ to

41 From the 2nd century CE, there appear stories that question the canonical gospel narratives about Mary's virginity and Jesus' miraculous conception. In *Contra Celsum*, Origen refutes and summarises such story, in which Mary commits adultery with a Roman soldier Panthera and is subsequently rejected by her husband. A similar story is recorded in a Jewish anti-Christian polemic *Toledoth Yeshu*. Pullman does not employ the character of the Roman soldier, but suggests that a man seduced a gullible Mary, who believed that he was an angel.

42 Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 215.

43 Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, 241.

44 During his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asks God to make the future church – if there needs to be one – "poor, and powerless, and modest" (Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, 199). He compares it to "a tree with its roots deep in the soil, that shelters every kind of bird and beast" (Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, 199) and that never denies its fruit or its shade to any creature. He expresses his fear that the church will be an oppressive, power-hungry and deeply cruel institution, bent on persecutions of anyone disagreeing with it and ready to take advantage of the weak and the poor.

be retained and passed on to people: the Stranger speaks of the need of “compromises [...] that look to the innocent eye like betrayal,”⁴⁵ and Caiaphas explains that Jesus must be dealt with to help the Jewish authorities “maintain a very difficult balance [...], to keep the body of the faithful together.”⁴⁶ Since Jesus’ absolute purity and radical ideas are unsuitable for average men, who – as the Stranger says – “can’t live at that pitch all the time,”⁴⁷ his unconventional teaching is replaced with Christ’s quietist, if not obsequious, scripture.

In *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, the eradication of the Radical Bible goes hand in hand with the creation of the Cultural Bible. By telling Christ that the greater good is to appear in the world thanks to his falsifications, the Stranger persuades Christ that it is necessary first to betray Jesus and later to impersonate his risen brother. For the Stranger, this greater good will lie in encouraging moral behaviour and in satisfying the deep human need of art and knowledge, both of which will be inspired by the story of a man who was both God and human, a man who died and was brought back to life. People will be willing to offer each other “sweet hymns and consolation and joy”⁴⁸ because they will know the story of the resurrected Jesus. Their morality will be shaped by the idea (dear to Christ, yet despised by Jesus⁴⁹) that God is just, and rewards virtues and punishes vice, a truth made evident in Jesus’ resurrection. For Christ, morality requires such legalistic approach, “or else why be virtuous?”⁵⁰ Because people “are not good for much,”⁵¹ they need an incentive to proper life, which Christ’s Bible – tacitly invested with the power to reform human morals – will provide.⁵² Also, as the Stranger says, “there is the desire for beauty and music and art. [...] The church [...] will inspire all these things, and provide them in full measure. And there is the noble passion for knowledge and inquiry, for philosophy, for the most royal study of the nature and mystery of divinity itself.”⁵³ Again, the specially moulded scripture will be a treasury and an inspiration for all types of creativity and investigation. Linking the story of Jesus with morality, with human cultural production and scientific research, the Stranger subordinates Christ’s Bible to the ideas characteristic of the Cultural Bible. He wants the scriptural account to function as the moral guidebook and as the fountain of artistic creativity and philosophical reflection.

45 Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, 171.

46 Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, 188.

47 Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, 225.

48 Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, 174.

49 For Jesus, “God is impulsive and arbitrary” (Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, 122), which means he rewards and punishes for reasons unknown to humans and incompatible with the human understanding of justice.

50 Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, 122.

51 Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, 225.

52 Pullman juxtaposes Christ’s understanding of biblical morality with a disquieting interpretation of goodness and evil in the Bible, proposed by one of the crippled beggars Christ meets shortly before he betrays Jesus. Reacting to a remark that murder is bad and forbidden, the beggar brings up a biblical example which proves just the opposite. “You’re ignorant. You don’t know the scriptures. When King Sennacherib was besieging Jerusalem the angel of the Lord came down [...] and slew one hundred and eighty-five thousand of his soldiers while they was all asleep. [...] It’s righteous and holy to slay the oppressor – always has been” (Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, 181). Pullman seems to remind his readers that the Bible is not a handbook of morality, but a collection of texts that take different – sometimes contradictory – stands about the problems of good and evil.

53 Pullman, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, 172.

Canonizing the Neoliberal Bible in Jeanette Winterson's *Boating for Beginners*

Jeanette Winterson's *Boating for Beginners* (1985) is a comic rewriting of the narrative of the Noah's Flood, in which the biblical world is represented as a version of the late twentieth century reality (complete with Cliff Richards, the Gaza Strip, hamburgers and film industry). In the novel, God is an accidental creation of Noah, who – working in a Frankenstein-like manner – brings to life a piece of defrosted dessert, which gradually becomes a self-conscious and all-powerful divine being. When Noah starts to make a film adaptation of Genesis, a book he wrote together with God, the Unpronounceable decides to make the otherwise fictional flood real. Noah, his family and animals survive the flood in a high-tech ship, and land on top of Mount Ararat, where they leave pieces of gopher wood to authenticate the Genesis version of the deluge.

The novel satirizes all four contemporary images of the Bible, but it reserves the greatest criticism for the Neoliberal Bible. Winterson's rewrite consistently links biblical texts produced by its characters with market transactions, individual entrepreneurialism and accumulating capital. The human co-author of the Book of Genesis (in the novel entitled *Genesis, or How I Did It*) has all the features of a wily entrepreneur and a ruthless anti-socialist. Noah is “right-wing [...] and totally committed to money as a medium for communication.”⁵⁴ He openly criticises all communal projects and scoffs at “wanton and ungodly spending”⁵⁵ that are implemented in Nineveh – a downright socialist place. God himself is no “namby-pamby socialist idol” but “Yahweh the Omnipotent Stockbroker and Yahweh the Omniscient Lawyer”, who reveals to his followers that “there is no fixed minimum wage.”⁵⁶ Genesis is authored by those two neoliberally-minded characters and becomes an instant success. After the publication his “blockbuster,”⁵⁷ which quickly acquires a label of an “extravagant bestseller,”⁵⁸ Noah becomes a tycoon and a celebrity. Advertised as an “inspired word of God [...] delivered to Noah in a mighty cloud of leaflets,”⁵⁹ Noah's Bible is subsequently seen as “good box-office material”⁶⁰ which will earn even more when turned into a “touring stage epic.”⁶¹ Winterson describes Noah's Bible in the language characteristic of the Neoliberal Bible: it is a marketable commodity, a re-packageable product profitable both as a book and as a film adaptation, a merchandise with an advertising campaign in the form of a special effects show staged by God himself. This Bible is designed to earn more and more money, and – being targeted to the whole of the heathen world – it is meant to become a successful product on the global market. Winterson's Neoliberal Bible is a parody of the commodification of the Bible, which reduces its text to a (re-)sellable product.

54 Jeanette Winterson, *Boating for Beginners* (London: Vintage, 1999), 69.

55 Winterson, *Boating for Beginners*, 14.

56 Winterson, *Boating for Beginners*, 30.

57 Winterson, *Boating for Beginners*, 12.

58 Winterson, *Boating for Beginners*, 69.

59 Winterson, *Boating for Beginners*, 52.

60 Winterson, *Boating for Beginners*, 15.

61 Winterson, *Boating for Beginners*, 20.

Boating for Beginners allows the Neoliberal Bible to dilute anything that smacks of the Radical Bible and to blend it with other types of the Bible. By making Noah's growing marketization of the Bible the reason of God's (i.e., the co-author's) malicious decision to make the biblical, made-up story real and flood the world, Winterson's novel gives a neoliberal twist to the otherwise apocalyptic turn of events. Even though the flood marks the end of the world and effects a fundamental transformation of the social order, its apocalyptic or radical potential is completely stifled by the fact that the deluge is part of the power game between two business partners – Noah and God. On learning about the film project, God attacks Noah: "I'd said I'd put my name to the books but we made no agreement about a film. I haven't got a contract, have I?"⁶² When Noah learns about God's plan, he cries hysterically (and equally unapocalyptically), "You'll be hearing from my solicitor!"⁶³ Also, far from being a transformation of the social and political order, the apocalyptic flood is treated as an opportunity for obliterating the memory of the fact that God was not there from time immemorial, but appeared "on the market" together with Noah's businesses. Says Noah, "If we've got a new world we can tell them anything. They won't have any memory, [...] any pressure groups or state-funded anarchy."⁶⁴ The apocalyptic event is not the moment of dramatic social transformation, but a favourable circumstance enabling the manipulation of the gullible and of the uninitiated, who do not belong to God's oligarchy. Additionally, since Noah and his family (a bunch of vain, materialistic people) are the only humans meant to survive the flood, it is their Neoliberal Bible that is going to be preserved. Although *Boating for Beginners* allows one more character to survive (Doris, a working-class woman, who is one of the few level-headed and clear-thinking figures in the novel), it does not leave any doubts that her potentially different, if not oppositional account has no chances to be treated seriously. At the end of the novel, we see two contemporary archaeologists discovering not only the remnants of Noah's ark, but also some technologically advanced objects that originally were on the ark, as well as a message written by Doris, which said she "made it,"⁶⁵ i.e., survived the flood. The message is treated as a cheap joke and fraud, and rejected. Thus, Winterson's novel suggests that in the long run, the oppositional voices like the one of Doris – the home-grown, folksy philosopher – are neglected, and that the canonical process leaves out any material incongruent with the dominant rule of faith.

Finally, the novel tacitly subordinates the radical potential of the Bible, discussed by an extradiegetic narrator in a narrative aside, to the logic of marketization. In a passage directly addressing the reader, the narrator identifies the unique power of the Bible with its romance-like excessiveness and folly, which feed passions, function like "heart-food" and the resource for poets, anarchists and "almost every other quasi-revolt."⁶⁶ But elsewhere in the novel the biblical heart-food is linked with the financially successful popular romances of Bunny Mix, a famous (if ridiculous) writer, who adapts *Genesis, or How I Did It* for the movies, and who is later expected to prepare the post-diluvian version of the first books of the Bible. Bunny is a grotesque character, made to resemble such absurdly prolific and totally predictable writers as Barbara Cartland or

62 Winterson, *Boating for Beginners*, 90.

63 Winterson, *Boating for Beginners*, 91.

64 Winterson, *Boating for Beginners*, 110.

65 Winterson, *Boating for Beginners*, 159.

66 Winterson, *Boating for Beginners*, 66.

Daniel Steele. She cleverly uses her talent for catering for human emotional needs to earn money and to become fabulously rich.⁶⁷ As she explains about her heart-food romances, “The important thing is to create for the people and then the people will buy it, which is what I do. It’s very selfish not to think of your reading public. I am rich because I provide valuable public service.”⁶⁸ Bunny’s instrumentalisation of the stories of extremities and passion, her manipulation of the human need of something bigger than reality, overshadows the Bible she helps Noah to revise. Commenting on her rewrite of the flood story, she says, “That’s very romantic. Readers will enjoy that,” and “If they’ve swallowed it this far [...], they’ll love the rainbow.”⁶⁹ Bunny and Noah produce another version of the Neoliberal Bible, one which will sell well for ages to come. If the canonical process involves the subordination of scriptural content to certain authoritative principles and guiding spirit, for Bunny and Noah the guiding spirit is a blend emotionalism, grandeur and mystery, all of which are meant to translate into the popularity of their Bible.

The fate of the Radical Bible is shared by the Liberal Bible, which is also subject to commodification. The egalitarian idea that “we’re all God’s children”⁷⁰ is used as a credo of the sex-change clinic run by Noah’s daughters-in-law. The clinic was so popular that they had to franchise it out, and now there is a whole chain of those places, which combine the good news of divinely inspired tolerance and acceptance of all types of sexuality with a handsome income. Also, the film adaptation of Genesis shows God destroying pagan deities, who were “undemocratic.”⁷¹ Later in the novel, in another ironic twist, the presumably democratic God democratically destroys all the humanity, drowning everyone who could challenge the truth of the Genesis rewrite and mar its market future appeal and success. He makes one exception, however, as he wryly observes, “I wouldn’t drown my own family, would I?”⁷²

The Complex Relationship between the Neoliberal and Radical Bible in Jim Crace’s *Quarantine*

Jim Crace’s *Quarantine* (1997) is a biblical rewrite which engages with the problem of selective images of the Bible in the most sophisticated and nuanced way. It reworks and expands the gospel story of the forty-day fast in the wilderness, putting Jesus next to a group of fictional characters: Musa, a peremptory, sadistic and clever merchant, accidentally cured by Jesus of a mortal disease; Miri, Musa’s pregnant wife; and a group of four pilgrims, who come to the wilderness to pray and fast for forty days. In the novel, Jesus undertakes a radical, total form of fast, refuses any food or drink from Musa, and dies before the end of the fast. In two highly ambiguous scenes, however, he

67 Bunny Mix is another anti-socialist character. She despises the poor and the uneducated, and always refuses to help anyone in need, telling them that their wretched condition cannot be alleviated “because it takes money to be young and beautiful” (Winterson, *Boating for Beginners*, 60). Also, she writes an article to a magazine “showing how the poor are ruining our environment because they use so much wood keeping their fires going” (Winterson, *Boating for Beginners*, 60).

68 Winterson, *Boating for Beginners*, 59.

69 Winterson, *Boating for Beginners*, 139.

70 Winterson, *Boating for Beginners*, 33.

71 Winterson, *Boating for Beginners*, 50.

72 Winterson, *Boating for Beginners*, 91.

is seen again by Musa and a woman pilgrim, Marta. He is alive but transformed into a translucent being. As the novel closes, Musa – by now dispossessed of all his merchant ware and abandoned by the maltreated Miri – sets his mind on selling to the world the story of the Galilean miracle-worker and rebuilding his wealth through this extraordinary tale.

By making the merchant the only character preoccupied with the creation of something akin to a biblical narrative, Crace gives precedence to the Neoliberal Bible. He characterises Musa as a merchant for whom “there was no merchandize which could not be mated and transmuted in his hands,”⁷³ a salesman who is wily enough to make the pilgrims pay for their cave “lodgings” and for muddy water from a half-dug grave. Musa is a “sorcerer with goods and prices,”⁷⁴ who first hopes to financially “resurrect himself”⁷⁵ with his preposterous fees imposed on the pilgrims, and who later plans to reimburse his store with the Jesus story. “[T]his would be his merchandize, something finer and less burdensome than even colour, sound and smell. [...] He’d trade the word. There was a man who had defeated death with just his fingertips. ‘I am the living proof.’ He’d travel to the markets of the world. He’d preach the good news.”⁷⁶ Compared to a “king-prophet come down from the hills” and to “Moses, with his prescriptions for the world,”⁷⁷ Musa assumes an air of authority and divine election. As a Moses-like figure, he poses for someone who merely passes on the sacred message while in fact, he is actively engaged in the canonical process, imposing his own interpretation on the highly ambiguous events and usurping the position of an apostle and the privilege of apostolic succession. Capitalising on the impression he usually makes, he starts to manipulate and inflate his story to attract more people willing to pay for his narrative. He even fantasises about striking up a bargain with the resurrected Jesus and about telling him, “we’ll go into business. I’ll make you richer than Tiberius.”⁷⁸ Thus, Musa’s Bible is a commodity, whose shape is tailored to captivate and satisfy the audience to which it is offered. Crace closes off the whole novel with this vision of the Neoliberal Bible, implying that whatever the truth of Jesus’ life and death are, it proves vulnerable enough to become a vendible at the hands of different Musas of the world.

However, in *Quarantine* the Neoliberal Bible is not allowed to completely suppress or absorb its alternative, which is represented by Jesus. In Crace’s novel, Jesus is an unwavering, if not tragically naïve believer, whose spiritual cravings are not satisfied by the standard religious behaviours and who wants to find God through the severe hardships of loneliness, cold and total fast in the wilderness. His uncompromising, extreme attitude is a challenge to God, who – as Jesus thinks – continues his creation at this “edge of [...] unfinished universe,”⁷⁹ and who can (re-)create him as well. Jesus hopes to become a preacher and a healer who works for all the “weak and blemished and imperfect by design.”⁸⁰ He starts to compose his future sayings for the

73 Jim Crace, *Quarantine* (London: Penguin, 1998), 28.

74 Crace, *Quarantine*, 28.

75 Crace, *Quarantine*, 32.

76 Crace, *Quarantine*, 242.

77 Crace, *Quarantine*, 240.

78 Crace, *Quarantine*, 242.

79 Crace, *Quarantine*, 77.

80 Crace, *Quarantine*, 151.

multitude, like “an empty purse is better than an empty pot, he’d say,”⁸¹ selects those aspects of the Jewish scripture and tradition which fit his situation (those about cleanliness), and reflects on God’s presence in the space in between letters on the page.⁸² To the extent that Crace’s Jesus is “guileless in his love of god, spontaneous and vulnerable in his beliefs,”⁸³ he is another instance of the phenomenon described by Crossley, a phenomenon which consists in singling out “the good man Jesus”⁸⁴ from the rest of the not-so-good Christianity. Spanning the Radical Bible and the Liberal Bible, the figure of “the good man Jesus” is evoked today as an antidote for the errors of organised religion or as the only saveable element of Christianity in the modern world. Crace’s Jesus is such a decent guy, concerned about the wretched and the weak, misunderstood by his own family and community, dissatisfied with the religious routine and norms. As such an inspirational and admirable hero, Jesus resists the influence of Musa, and the novel offers a vision of a tension – and of an unresolved struggle – between the two characters and between the two different Bibles they represent.

The first aspect of this tension comes to the fore at the beginning of Jesus’ quarantine. Jesus is pictured as resisting Musa, who plays the role of Satan tempting him in the wilderness.⁸⁵ Trying to lure Jesus out of his cave, Musa not only brings food but also announces that Jesus miraculously cured him and promises the miracle-worker a great and prosperous future. “I’ll make you rich,” cries Musa, “You are the healer. Come up. And heal.”⁸⁶ In a passage reminiscent of the gospel scene of expelling money-changers from the temple (Matthew 21:12–13), Jesus fantasises about driving Musa and his crew out of the scared place: “He’d turn their tables over, empty out their bags, drive off their animals.”⁸⁷ Admittedly, although Jesus’ immunity from the seductiveness of Musa Neoliberal Bible is perfectly in line with the values associated with the Radical Bible, the novel represents this intransigence as actually suicidal. To refuse the merchant’s nourishment is perhaps to keep radical ideas untainted, but it is also to perish. Disappointed that at death there is “no god, no garden, just the wind,”⁸⁸ Jesus becomes “a dry discarded page of scripture now. The wind embraced him, rubbed the words off him.”⁸⁹ Desiccated and empty, it seems no rival to Musa’s robust and boisterous message. Crace describes Jesus’ Radical Bible as unnecessarily heroic, as both pathetic and frightening.

However, the second aspect of the tension between Musa and Jesus, which develops after Jesus’ death, complicates the sceptical drift of the novel. There is more to the end of the novel than merely the appropriation of the extraordinary and transformative tale. Sighted by Musa

81 Crace, *Quarantine*, 129.

82 Crace, *Quarantine*, 135.

83 Crace, *Quarantine*, 75.

84 Crace, *Quarantine*, 29.

85 Jesus observes Musa and the pilgrims who keep calling at him, “It was not sinful to be fat. But he could tell the difference. Angels left you calm of spirit when they stepped into your life. Devils let you troubled. Here was a devil then, sent to the wilderness, with death and fever as his friends, attended by four mad, unbelonging souls, to be adversaries of god” (Crace, *Quarantine*, 112).

86 Crace, *Quarantine*, 148.

87 Crace, *Quarantine*, 152.

88 Crace, *Quarantine*, 193.

89 Crace, *Quarantine*, 193.

twice in the scrub, Jesus remains staunchly uninterested and unimpressed with Musa. He fails to acknowledge Musa's presence, or even notice his half-respectful posture and his near-deference. While Musa thinks Jesus has finally answered his summons ("He was rewarded for his tricks, no matter what he did. [...] He waited for the figure to come closer, oddly fearful of it but triumphant, too. Another victory"⁹⁰), he is "rebuffed"⁹¹ yet again because Jesus takes a lower path and goes a separate way. Similarly, when Musa sees Jesus the last time, he "raised his arm in greeting, but there was no response."⁹² As before, Musa's merchant skills and his half-imperious, half-respectful manner do not work on Jesus. Yet, more importantly, in his afterlife form, Jesus strikes Musa not only as indifferent, but also as "weightless and invincible."⁹³ He is the ever-receding horizon of Musa's neoliberal ministry, a point of reference at the outer limit of his vision, an incessantly fascinating key to his inexplicable healing. "He could expect to meet the man in Jericho [...]. Or in Jerusalem, Or Rome. Or in the [...] hill behind the hills, the village that you reached when all the villages had ended [...]."⁹⁴ Though under the impact of Musa's mercantile ruses "his [Jesus'] outline hardened and his body put on flesh,"⁹⁵ the novel suggests there is something about Jesus that does not yield to manipulation. In his preposterous behaviour, Jesus has "seen horizons on horizons without end. He was still there,"⁹⁶ not *entirely* up for grabs for Musa, or for anyone else for that matter. His "good man Jesus" Bible, like his spectral body, keeps "glowing blue and yellow, like a coal,"⁹⁷ tacitly resisting the solidification into a commodity.

Conclusion

Towards the end of his discussion of the four dominant images of the Bible, Crossley remarks that even though some scholars are worried about the declining knowledge of the Bible, biblical literacy has not completely evaporated, only changed its overall sense. For Crossley, today's biblical literacy means familiarity with the selective, cut-to-measure, "decaffeinated"⁹⁸ versions of the Bible. People in the West immediately recognise the Cultural and Liberal Bibles, their characteristic emphasis on culture, freedom, democracy and equality, or their focus on the good man Jesus – the misunderstood and misconstrued preacher. They may find the Radical Bible disconcerting and unfitting, and try to adulterate it by subordinating it to other understandings of the Bible, the tendency which to some extent is reproduced in the three novels discussed in this paper. Perhaps, such thinning of the Radical Bible is inevitable in the face of the dominance of equally decaffeinated

90 Crace, *Quarantine*, 205.

91 Crace, *Quarantine*, 206.

92 Crace, *Quarantine*, 243.

93 Crace, *Quarantine*, 205.

94 Crace, *Quarantine*, 242.

95 Crace, *Quarantine*, 243.

96 Crace, *Quarantine*, 220.

97 Crace, *Quarantine*, 206.

98 Crossley, *Harnessing the Chaos*, 235, 261.

or “disowned/impersonal beliefs”⁹⁹ because for people who believe only vicariously,¹⁰⁰ somebody who – in Slavoj Žižek’s terms – “really believes”¹⁰¹ and takes his beliefs *dead* seriously, cannot but be perceived as an unwelcome and incomprehensible phenomenon, as a discarded and empty page of obsolete scripture. Pullman, Winterson and Crace recreate those canonical processes understood as selection and suppression, but simultaneously, they revisit and reinstate the canon perceived as “a transhistorical textual community.”¹⁰² Alter argues that canons are not simply mechanisms of ideological coercion, but textual spaces where warring voices coexist, “bustling junctions of contradictory aims and values.”¹⁰³ The biblical rewrites by Pullman, Winterson and Crace provide their own imaginative space for ambiguous and overdetermined encounters between both decaffeinated and more combative images of the Bible.

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99 Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf. The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003), 7.

100 Davie, *Religion in Britain*, 6.

101 Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, 6.

102 Robert Alter, *Canon and Creativity. Modern Writing and the Authority of Scripture* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2000), 5.

103 Alter, *Canon and Creativity*, 60.

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