Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door: The Bible and Popular Culture
Roland Boer
Routledge, London/NY, 1999
ISBN 0415194113

Reviewer: Alan Cadwallader, lecturer in New Testament, Adelaide College of Divinity

The first efforts at colour television in the late 1950s were marked by an insipid three-band wash of pastels across the screen. There was a fleeting fascination with tricoloured bodies and faces. But then followed the dampening realisation that the view had not been enhanced. The technique was simply a diversion, drawing attention to itself rather than the presentation. Before long, the glass that had promised a window of entry into another world had become a barricade resisting any engagement with the characters and stories beckoning from the other side. All we really encountered was the method.

The picture theatres’ distribution of cheap spectacles threatened the same disappointment. Certainly a one-eyed viewing yielded nothing more than another wash—a red or green hue cast across a distant wall. But with a two-eyed viewing something unexpected, enthralling and disturbing happened. The story reached back from the projection and involved you. The barrier that prevented participation in the story was revealed as a protection, a prophylactic against infection by the trivial or tragic. But the movie, ironically accessed through a pseudo-visor donned especially for the occasion, lost its distance. It was up close and personal.

Roland Boer’s new work brings us into a private viewing and offers us not a (white-) wash of the biblical text but a rugged, raunchy and racy, almost 3-D liaison with the Hebrew Scriptures. It is part of a welcome series from Routledge that acknowledges Foucault’s tutelage to explore the limits of Bible. But Boer has some personal debts to cancel as well. He avows his infatuation with ‘popular culture’: the identification with defenders of the right (‘action heroes’) counterpointed by the anarchism of heavy metal, the Hitchcock cinematic capture of society’s complicity in the violence it abhors, the flights of science fiction partnered with the mundane realities of McDonalds, the materialistic celebration of bodily materiality in pornography combined with the wisdom that flows from the prostitute person, female or/and male. These are the life-companions which have finally forged a connection with his life-work.

Perhaps two more should be added—not muses for the chapters themselves but threads that tack them all together. One is overt: a pulp-fiction detective story that interrupts the scholarly enterprise at salient places. With none-too-thinly disguised allusions to biblical characters and contexts, a private dick’s investigations into a ‘whodunit’ murder (of the biblical text?) provides both light relief and succinct commentary for the flow of argument in the essays. In a sense, the self-contained but unresolved paper trail functions like a Shakespearean ‘play within a play’, although Boer would disdain such an elite-canonical allusion!

The second is covert, and may in part be lost to those unfamiliar with an Australian context. A Sydney geopolitical and religious ethos acts as a gossamer veil over the whole work. The clue of course comes from the references in the whodunit. The formative role of corruption, anti-authoritarianism, sub-cultures, anarchic idols, and sexual ambiguities in Sydney’s (and Australia’s) history exert a profound influence on the work. The
statement ‘. . . as for me any drive to outsmart the Censor is worth the effort’ (p 55) recognises the private dimension of the public debt to be paid in the work. That censor, most markedly in Sydney, is closely aligned with the church—and it is this censor that Boer in many ways seeks to bypass (p 151).

Boer argues that post-Enlightenment study of the Scriptures has been severed from the very disciplines it has spawned: historiography, sociology and so on (p 4). However, this has not only resulted in a certain anaemic quality to Scripture and its study but has also aligned Scripture with those censorious forces that arraign themselves against the very aspects of society that those orphaned children now freely study—working-class (popular) cultural manifestations. Marxism in Ezekielian dress informs much of this project.

Not only is Boer committed to the reconnection of biblical study with its orphaned and ostracised children, but he is actually reviving his Protestant roots, much as Helmut Koester, from an historicist methodology, avows his life’s work in the postscript to his own festschrift. This Protestant sensibility is now turned against Protestant markers such as inherent human sinfulness, and sacrificial violence. Here he unmasks the hegemony of an ideological system in which ‘propitiation, while trying to render such a God predictable, recognises by its very structure the arbitrariness of the deity’ (p 43, cf p 29).

Boer recognises that there is a bleak prospect for such a subversive and marginal practice unless an alternative culture can be established where nourishment can be found (p 107). The irony (to this reviewer at least) is that the author, who wrote in the setting of the United Theological College (as noted on the fly-leaf), now has shifted to the secular university (Monash). The political dimensions/costs of this work ought not to be underestimated, especially in the myopic, provincial atmosphere that characterises too much of Australian ecclesiastical relationship with learning.

The difficulty, however, of engaging popular culture is twofold. Definition is one thing, but the choice of aspects of popular culture to bring into engagement with the Bible will always be the test of how ‘popular’ the cultural enterprise is which has been enlisted. A Sydney context certainly invites the engagement with queer theory, which prompts a reinterpretation of the David-Jonathon relationship. Boer’s portrayal of David is striking—the passive almost asexual partner in the relationships he has. The action-hero is not merely depilated but ambiguous in gender identification—tailor-made for the collision of Scripture and Mardi Gras. In fact, this chapter (‘Queer Heroes’) ought to be re-read after exposure to the metaphor hypersensitivity in the chapter on Song of Songs. A return to the imagery rather than the narrative of bows and arrows is actually suggested in the books of Samuel by David’s own curse on Joab’s house (‘one who holds a spindle’, 2 Sam 3:29). Military euphemisms are as much the stock-in-trade of pornography as the pastoral. Perhaps this is implicit in the bridge chapter, ‘Hitchcock and Biblical Dismemberment’, where the central place of violence in the construction of society, gender identification and roles is exposed—on screen, as it were. Prostitution as a cultural phenomenon lending itself to the obfuscation of distinctions between Lady Wisdom and the Strange Woman is patently a candidate for ‘popular culture’. Even heavy metal might find a place. And no-one, I suspect, could argue with ‘Maccas’.
However, right at the point where one might have acceded to the inclusion of science-fiction as another aspect of popular culture in engagement with the Bible, Boer introduces the Russian sci-fi writers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky. He acknowledges that holdings of their writings are virtually non-existent in public libraries (p 112) and justifies their inclusion as an escape from American global dominance (p x). Certainly the familiar Censor invites Boer’s selection, not only in the fraught existence that their works had with the Soviet thought police but also in their almost complete isolation from Western collections. US sci-fi counterparts offer nothing of their critique, which, for Boer, centres on the Western preoccupation with utopianism (the hope of capitalism?). The conjunction between the Strugatskys’ writing and the book of Lamentations is built on the absence of utopian aspirations. Boer argues that utopian imagination in fact erodes any realistic possibility of utopia. Rather, any possibility of utopia can only arise where utopia is denied, either by complete subjugation of a population or by the affirmation that utopia is no longer necessary or by the ‘dystopian images of destruction and desolation’ (p 123). The analysis is consistent with the perceptiveness of the whole work. However, the point of access is decidedly elitist. One wonders what possibilities might have opened if the gambling culture—the ‘Lotto jackpot’—became the springboard for the analysis.

This jarring in the flow of the work unlocks a minor though real concern about the whole. However much an Australian flavour is discernible, though largely unnamed, in the work, one wonders how much popular culture consumers within Australia would recognise the selections as familiar. For example, an overt Australian selection might look to sport, drugs and alcohol and the car as prime exemplars of popular culture. Even the surfing sub-culture, with everything from Gonad-man to contesting hierarchies in wave-selection, could rival urban pornography as a template for the Song of Songs.

Of course, such suggestions do not dispute Boer’s fundamental desire to repay bad debts. It simply asserts that there are further accounts to be settled (implicit on page 150). Along the way, some dangerously elusive elements will need to be pursued—the role of the hegemony to turn popular culture to its own advantage and aggrandisement, not merely in constructing the outlaw over against which it preserves its own righteousness but also in the massive infrastructure which it provides for these aspects (with suitable financial compensation). Boer is alert to this issue (pp 104f), at least in the discussion of whether and how much rock music is subversive. Any subversion must operate in connection with, and even draw power from, that hegemony which it repudiates. Of course, the issue of complicity and incorporation remains for the prophet, just as the conflicting operations of toleration and oppression remain for the hegemonist.

For all that Boer is familiar with feminist arguments (such as for and against pornography) and is committed generally to a liberationist perspective (if only of popular culture!), there is a decided absence of feminist perspectives in the analysis. Even Lady Wisdom and the Strange Woman yield their place to the male god, albeit a Yahweh who delights in young men and seduces them into his house. The figure of Yahweh, of course, filters in and out of each story. There are implications for the representation of the character of Yahweh that inevitably flow from the various engagements. What is notable, however, is that these new projections onto the Yahwistic screen remain a counter-reading of the elitist canonical authority—the Hebrew Scriptures. The canon itself is an act of censorship and acts as Censor. In this sense, Boer requires the canon to remain in
(exalted) place for his subversive reading. However, the hidden apocryphal writings (and artefacts) themselves may afford a further (popular?) element that relativises the hegemony that Boer’s method seeks to expose (on this, see Mark Taylor’s *About Religion*). In this, the cultural phenomenon of writings intersecting with the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, against the accepted and acceptable ideologies of interpretation, is itself worthy of incorporation into this project. Again this has an Australian edge, for it is here that the writings of Barbara Thiering and John Shelby Spong gain a substantial audience.

Nevertheless, these are little more than invitations to further exploration and the expression of a desire that Roland Boer will pursue his theme. The reader will be amply rewarded as it is, not only by his grasp of theoreticians from the cultural critic de Certeau to the Marxist Gramsci but also by his transparent ability to handle the Hebrew text without being conformed either by its scribes or its subsequent ideologues. The yield is a fuller-bodied, more fully embodied text, and one which thwarts the attempt to erect a defensive barrier against engagement. Boer may well have demonstrated that, instead of having to receive different-coloured lenses to enter the world of the projection, we should never have been without them in the first place.