

BOOK REVIEW

Warren, Meredith J.C., *My Flesh Is Meat Indeed: A Nonsacramental Reading of John 6:51-58* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015). 304 pp. Pbk. USD44.00.

Meredith J.C. Warren completed her doctorate in New Testament and Early Judaism at McGill University in 2013, was a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Ottawa, and is now Lecturer in Biblical and Religious Studies at the University of Sheffield. In this revised version of her doctoral dissertation, Warren examines Jn 6.51-58 from the view of the cultural expectation of cannibalism in the heroic tradition throughout Hellenistic literature in general and Greco-Roman romance novels in particular. The subtitle, 'A Nonsacramental Reading of John 6.51-58', suggests part of its aim. To counter the sacramental reading of scholars such as Rudolf Bultmann, Warren proposes a christological interpretation of Jn 6.51-58 'in light of the tension throughout the Gospel between the divinity and humanity of Jesus' (p. 2). Warren considers Greco-Roman romance novels 'as a window through which to view the *Weltanschauung* that to some extent shaped John's approach to identifying divinity in Jesus' (pp. 8, 246). Noting that these novels were probably composed after John's Gospel, Warren suggests that they

preserve a way of thinking about how divinity is conferred on extraordinary humans, a way of thinking that seems, from its prevalence dating back to the Homeric texts and continuing in popularity in the novels, to have survived and thrived through the time period in which John was writing (pp. 8, 246).

Warren examines the development of literary tropes for identifying divinity in Hellenistic literature and compares these tropes with Jn 6.51c-58. Complementing her approach with theological interpretation and cultural expectation, Warren argues 'Jesus' exhortation to consume his flesh and drink his blood represents the contemporaneity of literary

death and heroic cult *aition* in the same way that this reference to sacrificial death functions in the romances' (p. 248). Furthermore,

it is in this statement of consumption and death at God's behest that Jesus and God are identified, in the same way that first in the epics and later in the novels, the antagonistic gods become associated with heroes through the consumption of the cultic sacrificial meal (p. 248).

This book consists of an introduction, four main chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction includes four sections: aim, method, main themes, and outlines. Its method contains two assumptions. First, John's Gospel is a literary whole. And second, it is legitimate to compare the literary tropes and devices of John's Gospel and the texts produced in the Greco-Roman world, as they are all part of Hellenistic literature. A brief definition of four main themes follows (1) 'Ritual in Ink' refers to a ritual that exists in a text but is not a real historical event; (2) 'Contemporaneity' is a term used by Bultmann and picked up by Warren to describe 'the peculiar quality of Johannine time. John has no future: everything that occurs takes place in the present moment' (p. 10); (3) 'Simultaneity' is an ontological term proposed by Warren 'that points to the intersection of multiple identities within the same being' (p. 11); and (4) 'Cannibalism and Anthropophagy' usually describe 'the consumption of human flesh by other humans' (p. 13). Warren suggests that these themes 'serve as a demarcator of social boundaries between right/insider and wrong/outsider' (p. 13) but not of historical reality. The introduction ends with an outline of the book that is slightly different from the actual content. For greater clarity, it could have included an explanation of how the four main themes relate to each other and to the individual chapters.

Chapter 1, "'The Word Was Made Flesh" (John 1:14)', starts with a discussion of Jesus' divine and human identities and Christology in John, particularly in John 6, and narrows it to the controversial issues in 6.51-58 regarding whether the passage is an insertion and whether it is related to the Eucharist. Warren argues against both premises, opposing scholars such as Bultmann, Clark-Soles, Kümmel, Ruckstuhl and Dune. In view of Jesus' identity as Son of God, she proposes to compare the antagonistic relationship between Jesus and God and between human and divine identities with what is experienced by heroes and heroines in heroic literature. She quotes Gregory Nagy who says that 'antagonism between a hero and god in myth corresponds to the ritual requirements of symbiosis between hero and god in cult' (p. 60).

Chapter 2, ““Second Only to Artemis” (*Leucippe and Clitophon* 7.15)’, presents four relevant Greco-Roman romance novels: Chariton’s *Chaereas and Callirhoe*; Xenophon of Ephesus’s *An Ephesian Tale*; Achilles Tatius’s *Leucippe and Clitophon*; and Heliodorus’s *An Ethiopian Story*. Warren examines the development of the romance and the trope of divine epiphany to show how the heroines are described as goddesses in light of their associations with the classical heroes of the epics and the deity.

Chapter 3, ““Her Viscera Leapt Out” (*Leucippe and Clitophon* 3.15)’, elaborates Nagy’s understanding of the hero–god relationship in Homeric literature and cult. Warren argues that human sacrifice and cannibalism in the cultural imagination achieves the climax of the association between the heroines and the deity to realize the ultimate antagonism and the identification with the divine. Thus, the chapter’s content is formed by topics such as ‘antagonism between heroes and gods’, ‘sacrifice in Greek and Roman religion’, ‘the sacrificial meal’, ‘human sacrifice in the Greek imagination’, ‘the function of cannibalism in antiquity’, ‘human sacrifice and implied cannibalism in the novels’, and ‘sacrifice and simultaneity’.

Chapter 4, ““My Flesh is Meat Indeed” (John 6:55, KJV)’, concludes the findings from the previous chapters and argues further the identification of Jesus’ divinity upon the cannibalistic statement and the antagonistic relationship between Jesus and God. This antagonistic relationship is shown through the trope of antagonism, in that it was the intent of God to send Jesus down to earth to die on behalf of others. She borrows Lawrence Will’s literary comparison between *Life of Aesop* and John’s Gospel, which attempts to show the similarity between Aesop and Jesus regarding the pattern of alienation from the community, the expiatory death and the use of the antagonistic tropes (e.g. *pharmakos*), to demonstrate this antagonistic relationship. She concludes that Jesus’ divinity is identified simultaneously and contemporaneously in the conflation of Jesus’ literary death and God’s glory through the temporal convergence of Jesus’ literary death and cult *aition*, the anthropophagic statement. This statement also functions polemically as a boundary marker of factionalism but reverses the negative connotation of being barbaric (outsider) to being positive (insider), marking those who belong to Jesus.

In the conclusion, ““Equal to God” (John 5:18; Iliad 20.447)’, Warren introduces two books to sustain her argument. First is Wayne

Meeks's *Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and Johannine Christology*. Warren aligns her Hellenistic view of Jesus' dual characters, human and divine, with Meeks's Jewish view of Jesus as prophet and king, to point to John's Christology. However, this comparison seems misplaced. Besides the difference between characters, Meeks's Christology is drawn from Jesus' titles as prophet and king in the overall structure of the Gospel in Jewish tradition, but Warren focuses on Jesus' humanity and divinity corresponding to Hellenistic heroic tradition. Another book she uses is Kasper Bro Larsen's *Recognizing the Stranger: Recognition Scenes and the Gospel of John*. Warren associates her assumption with Larsen's that John participates in the literary world of the ancient Mediterranean, and they both endorse 'the interaction of Johannine Christology with the workings of the divine-mortal relationship in Greco-Roman religion' (pp. 251-52). These correlations, which seem to 'transfer' the possibility of using the trope of the recognition scene (recognizing God through Jesus) to the trope of sacrifice as a divinizing act (identifying Jesus' divine-mortal identity), are misguided. Even though Warren tries to benefit from Larsen's work that examines a popular trope that occurs in both Greco-Roman and Jewish literature and is discussed in Aristotle's *Poetics* (Larsen, pp. 20-21), their differences in function make their usage text-specific rather than general. Whereas the trope of the recognition scene unveils the hidden identities, sacrifice as divinizing act identifies heroic divinity. Even though both tropes are about identification, their characteristics do not allow 'transfer' overall.

The strengths of this book are several. Observed within the multicultural milieu of John's Gospel, Warren's attempt to deviate from both Christian and Jewish traditions and explore the human-divine relation through Hellenistic literature demonstrates her innovation in Johannine scholarship. Her investigation of tropes for identifying divinity from Homer to Greco-Roman romance novels arouses the awareness of a broad spectrum of religious texts in Hellenistic literature around Jesus' time. Her study of ritual function in literature widens our understanding of it in literary culture.

Several critiques need to be considered, however. One of the implied assumptions of the book is that all co-existing works of literature in the Greco-Roman world would be equally able to influence the development of John's Gospel despite disparate ages, accessibility, authority in public or religious education, genres (classic epic poetry,

entertaining romance novel, philosophy, etc.) and compatibility of belief (monotheism or polytheism). In fact, these constraints limit the influence of other works on the shape of the Gospel. The influence of Greco-Roman romance novels needs first to overcome these constraints to secure the assumption.

Another problem is the incongruity between the context of a Hellenistic sacrificial trope and the plot in John 6. Jesus' statement is proclaimed, while he is teaching in the Capernaum synagogue with the Jews. For several reasons, it is unlikely that John would communicate Jesus' divinity in this way as used in Greek heroines within a Jewish setting, or to expect the reader to retrieve its reference from a Hellenistic romance novel. First, it is uncertain whether John knew this Hellenistic trope because the plot of cannibalism as sacrificial meal occurs only in one novel among the four examined by Warren and is initiated by bandits portrayed as taking out Leucippe's viscera, but this ends up as a false-death (pp. 170, 190). Secondly, considering that Hellenistic sacrificial cult varied regarding localized heroes, communities and deities, it is more likely that even a Greek would associate Jesus, a Jew, with the Jews' deity in a local synagogue if sacrificial overtones were detectable. As indication of this, John also portrays some Greeks as wanting to see Jesus in Jerusalem on their way to worship God (Jn 12.20-21). Further, Jn 6.51-58 could hardly trace an antagonistic relationship between Jesus and God. Rather, Jn 6.57 shows Jesus' obedience to the Father. It would be too abrupt to interpret Jesus' statement as ultimate antagonism to God. Additionally, the quoted heroic literature lacks the 'life-giving' aspect found in Jesus' cannibalistic statement (Jn 6.51, 53-54, 57-58; cf. Jn 4.50-51, 53). More obvious is that there is no discussion of blood drinking, especially when blood in Judaism has the meaning of 'life' and when eating flesh and drinking blood are intertwined in this scene.

Lastly, the legitimacy of applying Bultmann's concept of contemporaneity to Jn 6.51-58 is doubtful (pp. 10-11, 227-30). Bultmann means by 'contemporaneity' the convergence of present and future time within an eschatological event according to the particular text. In Jn 4.31-38, Bultmann interprets the overlapping of '*waiting* for four months' and '*now* is ready for harvest' as '*seed-time*' and '*harvest*' happening at the same moment as an eschatological event. Similarly, in Jn 12.27-33, the past and future are bound together regarding '*now*' (v. 23) and '*hour*' (vv. 27, 31), both of which refer to the hour of death as

the hour of glorifying God occurring at the time Jesus calls *now*. However, Jn 6.51-58 does not indicate any convergence of time. Conversely, Bultmann, in his book *History and Eschatology*, discusses the eschatological present in John's Gospel and singles out some verses, such as Jn 5.28 and 6.51-58, as exceptions to traditional apocalyptic eschatology. Thus, Warren's application is probably flawed.

In conclusion, Warren's work demonstrates the horizon of heroic tradition from Homeric literature to Greco-Roman romance novels and the preservation of cultural heritage of deity and ritual. Its content puts more weight on examining Hellenistic literature than the Gospel. Some inconsistencies in names occur. Some arguments are subject to interpretation. This book would be one of the resources for those who are interested in heroic romance literature and John's Gospel.

Tat Yu Lam
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, ON