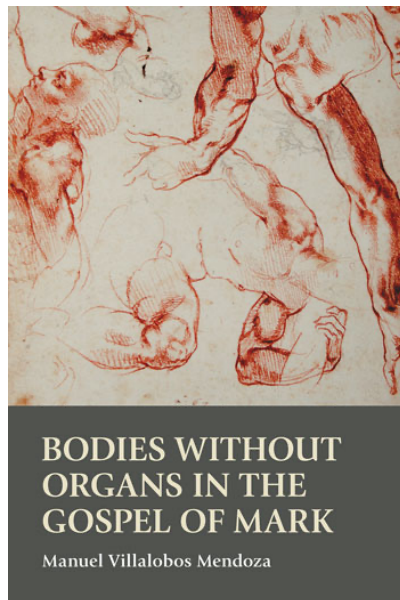


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**Manuel Villalobos Mendoza**

***Bodies without Organs in the Gospel of Mark***

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Over the last twenty years, the impact of Deleuzian philosophy on the academic study of theology has been considerable. A genuine encounter between them is now underway. However, the same claim cannot be made for the discipline of biblical studies, where an encounter with Deleuzian philosophy is only beginning. Indeed, Manuel Villalobos Mendoza's *Bodies without Organs in the Gospel of Mark* represents one of only three monograph-length studies on Deleuze and biblical studies, along with Bradley McLean's *Deleuze, Guattari and the Machine in Early Christianity: Schizoanalysis, Affect, and Multiplicity* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022) and Stephen Moore's *The Bible after Deleuze: Affects, Assemblages, Bodies without Organs* (Oxford University Press, 2023). Villalobos Mendoza, drawing inspiration from concepts elaborated in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, argues that the Jesus of the Gospel of Mark is probably "the first one to accomplish the Body without Organs" (xvii), which he defines as a body freed of oppression by priests, institutions, powers, and hierarchies (115). Villalobos Mendoza develops this thesis throughout his book through an examination of Jesus's relationships with individuals and with Jewish religious authorities.

In chapter 1, Villalobos Mendoza begins with an examination Jesus's relationship with what he terms Jesus's "dysfunctional family," which is a family incapable of embracing Jesus's message (Mark 3:20–35; 6:1–6). Villalobos Mendoza unexpectedly associates this family with the hierarchy of Jewish religious authorities in Jerusalem, who are, he asserts, "responsible for [Jesus's] death" (29), an assertion that seems anti-Jewish to me. In contrast to Jesus's "dysfunctional

family” and these Jewish religious authorities, Villalobos Mendoza argues that Jesus establishes a new, nonhierarchical “fatherless” family, one that is opposed to hierarchies and oppressive organizations. He asserts that this new family is a “fatherless family/assemblage” that has no place for a father (27), an assertion that seems exaggerated (cf. Mark 1:11; 9:7; 8:38; 11:25; 13:32; 14:36).

Chapter 2 turns to the subject of Jesus’s relationship with animals. Villalobos Mendoza argues that the binary category of human/animal is dismantled at the time of Jesus’s baptism (1:9–11). At the moment when the dove descends upon him, Jesus accomplishes “the Deleuzian process of becoming animal” (33), through which Jesus “debunked Western categories of thought that privilege humans at the expense of nonhumans” (57). The remainder of chapter 2 is devoted to a discussion of the special case of Jesus “becoming-rooster” (as a subtype of becoming-animal) in the passion narrative. Villalobos Mendoza argues that “Jesus learned to speak, write and feel like a rooster to invite all humans to be attentive and vigilant to God’s presence among us” (57). Jesus, like the rooster’s crow, announces liberation of humans and nonhumans.

Returning to the theme of Jewish religious authorities, chapter 3 discusses the challenging pericope in which Jesus curses a barren fig tree (Mark 11:12–20). Like chapter 1, this chapter seems to include some anti-Jewish elements. Villalobos Mendoza states that the fig tree “as a figure of Israel” symbolizes a “religious system” that “is sick to its roots” (15). Jesus reacts strongly to the barren fig tree because “it is associated with the temple, where everything is well stratified and organized” (77). Israel, symbolized by the barren fig tree, is under God’s judgment for abusing its authority and not serving as an instrument of God’s justice. Building on Louis Althusser’s theory of “Ideological state apparatuses” (73–74, 84), Villalobos Mendoza states that “the temple represents the ideology of power” (70). He concludes that the curse on the fig tree reflects “Jesus’ desire ... to deterritorialize the fruits for his starving community” (76). Through this curse, Israel is deterritorialized from a tree-like hierarchy (the temple) into a nonhierarchical rhizome (a “people-yet-to-come”).

Chapter 4 takes up the case of the mysterious young man who runs away naked during Jesus’s arrest, only to reappear later at the empty tomb (14:51–52; 16:5). Villalobos Mendoza detects tones of effeminacy in Mark’s description of this man who wears nothing but a luxurious linen cloth and chooses to run away naked instead of staying to fight. Villalobos Mendoza argues that this “*effeminatus* disciple who (dis)appeared during Jesus’s arrest” failed to live up to the standards of masculinity of his time. Villalobos Mendoza goes so far as to suggest that he may even have been in danger of being sexually “penetrated” (90, 100–103, 114). This young man’s “nakedness and Jesus’s naked and crucified body enter into an ethical bond of unmanliness, shame and pollution” that is not “shaped by toxic masculinity” (113). He concludes that this effeminate man, who remained faithful to Jesus until death, presents the reader with “a non-normative character of masculinity in an intimate relationship with Jesus” (114).

Chapter 5 focuses on Joseph of Arimathea's relationship with the body of Jesus (Mark 15:43–46). Villalobos Mendoza argues that Jesus's body had a profound impact on Joseph's understanding of God and Jewish law, resulting in his deterritorialization from the center of the Jewish religious hierarchy in Jerusalem—the Sanhedrin and law—to the periphery, the ritually impure site of Jesus's burial tomb. Through this deterritorialization from center to periphery, Joseph becomes a true follower of Jesus. Chapter 6 discusses the three women who, like Joseph, are also connected with Jesus's tomb (Mark 16:1–8). Villalobos Mendoza argues that, “by abandoning their Jewish theological idea of Jesus as the Davidic king and nationalistic messiah (138), they, too, are transformed into a “people-yet-to-come,” which is to say, a people characterized by the “eternal potentiality of becoming-other inherent in the present” (140). In conclusion, Villalobos Mendoza contends that the Gospel of Mark encourages its readers to become a body without organs, which is a body that is open to new and dynamic forms of religious expression.

As noted above, *Bodies without Organs in the Gospel of Mark* draws inspiration from several well-known Deleuzo-Guattarian concepts. Nonetheless, the argumentation of this book is only loosely connected with the Deleuzo-Guattarian philosophical project. This remark is less a criticism than a caution to readers who might approach this book in the hopes of familiarizing themselves with the basic features of Deleuzian philosophy. For example, Villalobos Mendoza's discussion of the fig tree in chapter 3 depends heavily on Louis Althusser's theory of “Ideological state apparatuses,” even though Deleuze and Guattari disavow completely “ideology” as a category of analysis. Likewise, in chapter 2, the “becoming-rooster” (animal) of Jesus, by which he learns how “to speak, write and feel like a rooster,” bears no resemblance to Deleuze and Guattari's nonimitative theory of becoming-animal (57).

It is also notable how effortlessly Villalobos Mendoza dismisses Deleuze's reputed hostility toward Christianity's God on the basis of a single essay (“Nietzsche and Saint Paul, Lawrence and John of Patmos”) in which Deleuze criticizes the theologies of apostle Paul and John of Patmos. On the basis of this single essay, Villalobos Mendoza argues that Deleuze “is not against God, but rather against the power and manipulation that religion, as an institution, exercises upon people in God's name” (xvii). Can Deleuze's purported atheism be so easily rejected? Needless to say, Deleuze's criticism of Paul and John does not amount to an affirmation of God, nor should we forget Deleuze's well-known definition of theology as “the science of non-existing philosophies.” Suffice to say that Deleuze's deontologized, de-Oedipalized “God” cannot be assimilated to the ontological God of traditional theology on the basis of a single essay, one that Deleuze wrote for his wife as the preface for D. H. Lawrence's *Apocalypse* (1978).

Likewise, Villalobos Mendoza's assertion that Mark's Jesus is probably “the first one to accomplish” the body without organs (xvii) is also highly problematic, for this claim contradicts Deleuze's insistence that the Body without Organs—a multiplicity formed without reference to a transcendental plane—is body of *unreachable limit* of intensity. Villalobos Mendoza's attempt to

turn Jesus into a perfected “Body without Organs” (a concept that Deleuze, notably, never capitalizes) risks transforming Jesus into the traditional transcendental Christ. But while *Bodies without Organs in the Gospel of Mark* does fall short of seriously dialoging with Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophical project, this book is nonetheless an imaginative and stimulating treatment of the Gospel of Mark.