Journal of American Studies of Turkey
29 (2009): 123-124

Peter Goodwin Heltzel. *Jesus and Justice: Evangelicals, Race and American Politics.* New Haven, MA: Yale UP, 2009. 259 pp.

William Jones

Much has been written about the role of evangelical Christians in contemporary American politics. Usually in these discussions, the term "evangelical" is synonymous with the white, conservative, "born-again" Christians who formed the bedrock of George W. Bush's electoral victories in 2000 and 2004. There is also a black evangelical tradition in the United States, however, and Peter Heltzel's *Jesus and Justice* traces the history and theology of both of these evangelical streams from their origins in the eighteenth century to their tentative merging in the twenty-first. According to Heltzel, white conservative evangelical Christianity with its strong Southern roots was complicit in defending slavery, in accepting segregation and not protesting lynching. It is a religious movement with a history of being blind to white racism and white privilege, and all too eager to conflate patriotism and capitalism with religion. The black evangelical tradition, born out of the suffering of slaves, out of being marginalized because of skin color and the yearning for freedom in a racist society, is the tradition that produced Martin Luther King.

The "Jesus" in *Jesus and Justice* refers to the very different ideas of Jesus from which each of these evangelical movements draws its spiritual strength. Jesus, for white conservative evangelicals, is both healer and lord of creation, and the most fundamental order of creation is the family. Their emphasis is on individual salvation through conversion, through accepting Jesus as Lord and, in movements such as "Focus on the Family," healing the nation through protecting and strengthening the family. Hence their political emphasis on repealing Roe v. Wade, blocking homosexuals' right to marriage, and their hostility towards the feminist movement.

For black evangelicals inspired by Martin Luther King, Jesus is the Jesus who redeemed mankind through his suffering and death. For King, "to suffer in a righteous cause is to grow to our humanity's full stature" (MLK, "Strive toward Freedom"). Rather than a Jesus who was triumphant in the past, King's Christ is a "suffering prophet" [Heltzel 206]. King and those black evangelicals in the King tradition also believe in personal conversion, but "a conversion marked by

a life converted to the cause of peace and justice in the world" [Heltzel 57]. The difference resulting from these two conceptions of Jesus is profound, Heltzel argues. White conservative evangelicals' emphasis on individual salvation and Christ as triumphant Lord has prevented them from developing a theology that can adequately address racism, war and poverty as institutions, whereas the black evangelical identification with the suffering of Jesus has led to a focus on confronting the institutional roots of evil in the world.

Peter Goodwin Heltzel is an evangelical minister as well as an historian, and *Jesus and Justice* is both an analysis of the two streams of evangelicalism in the United States and a passionate argument. For Heltzel, black Christianity "has continually induced a prophetic transformation of American evangelicalism from within," and "for evangelicals to move ahead religiously and politically in the United States, whites must open themselves up to [this] prophetic manifestation." Heltzel believes this transformation is taking place today in American evangelicalism. The evidence he offers in his final chapters convincingly shows some white conservative evangelicals are indeed opening up to the black evangelical theology of social justice. How profound a change this will bring about remains to be seen, but for anyone who wants a deeper understanding of evangelicalism in America, *Jesus and Justice* is highly recommended.