

# CANADIAN-AMERICAN THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

*A Journal of Theology, Scripture, and Culture*

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CANADIAN-AMERICAN  
THEOLOGICAL  
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## Foreword

In this issue of *Canadian-American Theological Review* we are pleased to publish the 2021 presidential address for the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies given by J. Richard Middleton, who served as the society's president from 2019–2021. Following the address, Dudley Brown explores the role of the Holy Spirit and Trinitarian doctrine in the African American/Canadian Church. Next, Jackson Reinhardt investigates the depiction of Hades in the early Syriac literature. Our fourth article is a comparative reading of the book of Esther and the short “Local Egg” from the anthology film *Ten Years* by Xenia Ling-Yee Chan. Rounding out this issue, John L. McLaughlin probes the question of whether the God of the Exodus should be identified as El or Yahweh.

*Christopher Zoccali,  
Editor-in-Chief*



## Beyond Eurocentrism: A Future for Canadian Biblical Studies<sup>1</sup>

J. Richard Middleton  
President, Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, 2019–21

*For David Jobling, CSBS/SCÉB President 1992–93*

### Abstract

The history of Canadian biblical studies, like biblical studies south of the border, has been defined by the attempt to protect academic study of the Bible from religious and ecclesiastical control. Although legitimate in its time, this has resulted in the fictitious ideal of an academic discipline uncontaminated by the contemporary contexts of the interpreter. Not only is such an ideal unattainable (since everyone brings their contexts, explicitly or implicitly, to their academic work), it is ethically problematic, since it has legitimated the Eurocentric orientation of the field as normative, resulting in the marginalization of alternative voices and perspectives. Thankfully, biblical scholars have begun to take cognizance of how we read the Bible in terms of existential questions arising from our social and ecclesial locations. Besides many publications on the subject of contextual biblical studies over the past thirty years (perhaps beginning with *Stony the Road We Trod*), the Society of Biblical Literature sponsored two seminars in 2020 called “#Black Scholars Matter.” Canadian biblical scholars, however, have been slower than our American counterparts to recognize the importance of the interpreter’s context for our field. The question this essay raises is whether we can envision a future for Canadian biblical studies beyond Eurocentrism.

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It has been an honour to have served as the president of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies / Société canadien des études Bibliques (CSBS/SCÉB) for the

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<sup>1</sup> \* This essay was presented as the 2021 presidential address for the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, at the virtual annual meeting, May 31, 2021.



past two years (2019–21).<sup>2</sup> The CSBS/SCÉB has the distinction of being the oldest Canadian academic society in the humanities. Established in 1933, it predates the creation of the Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion (CCSR), the umbrella organization created by federal charter in 1970 to further the study of religion in Canada. When the Corporation was launched the following year and began publishing its interdisciplinary flagship journal *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses (SR)*, the CSBS/SCÉB became one of its founding members.<sup>3</sup>

On the occasion of the fifty-year anniversary of the official launch of the CCSR and *SR*, the CCSR invited representatives of all its member societies to write a short reflection on the state of their academic field, to be published in a theme issue of *SR*. Although I was invited to reflect on the state of biblical studies, my presidential address was considerably too long for their purposes.

Nevertheless, given this milestone anniversary of fifty years, I have taken the opportunity to reflect in my presidential address on the state of biblical studies in Canada, with a look to the future.

This milestone anniversary comes at a particularly momentous time in our world, which disrupts the possibility of unvarnished celebration. Just as we might want to focus on the achievements of the Corporation and its member societies (including CSBS/SCÉB), we are reminded that academic discourse does not take place in a social vacuum, but is promulgated by actual people in the context of a real world, often characterized by extreme hardship and suffering. Although the COVID-19 pandemic was new to North America in 2020, the physical and emotional suffering it caused was exacerbated by long-standing racial and economic disparities in our societies. And these disparities, especially evident in the violence perpetrated on Black and Brown bodies (and souls) in the USA, have erupted into plain view for all to see. So it is well nigh impossible to simply celebrate the achievements of the CCSR without some critical analysis of our social context.

Various events of the last year have also found their way into the business of the executive committee of the CSBS/SCÉB. Over the last twelve months, the executive was asked to respond to each of these events:

- The closing of a religion department and cutting of tenured faculty.

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2 It is because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in the cancellation of the CSBS/SCÉB annual meeting in 2020, that I have continued as president for a second year, something unprecedented in the history of the Society.

3 The following are the dates of establishment of the current member societies of CCSR: Canadian Society of Biblical Studies / Société canadienne des études bibliques (CSBS/SCÉB): 1933; Canadian Theological Society (CTS); 1955; Société canadienne de théologie (SCT): 1963; Canadian Society for the Study of Religion / Société canadienne pour l'étude de la religion (CSSR/SCÉR): 1965; Canadian Society of Patristic Studies / Association canadienne des études patristiques (CSPS): 1975. The Canadian Society of Church History (CSCH), established in 1960, has been (but is not currently) a member of CCSR.

- Donald Trump's use of military force to facilitate a photo-op using a Bible as a prop.
- The violence of white supremacy and the residual racism in the CSBS/SCÉB.
- The conviction of a biblical scholar for possession of child pornography.

For those of us on the executive, the requests for comment raised the question of the basis upon which we would be speaking for the Society. In what way are events and concerns like these intrinsic to our identity as an academic society that studies ancient texts and societies? Could we articulate some principles of our Society in a way that would allow more meaningful responses in the future? And, finally, could we clarify our purposes as an academic society in a way that might even be appropriately proactive rather than reactive?<sup>4</sup>

This discussion within the CSBS/SCÉB executive has stimulated my own thinking on the state of biblical studies in Canada. However, my reflections here do not represent a formal position statement of the Society; rather, they are in the nature of a personal opinion piece. I will draw on my own experience as a lens to analyze the history of Canadian biblical studies and to envision some possibilities for the future.

Having decided to reflect on the state of Canadian biblical studies, I find that I am at something of a disadvantage. Although I have presented seventeen papers at CSBS/SCÉB meetings since I became a member in 1992 (with a total of twenty-eight papers at five Canadian learned societies over the years), I am an outsider to formal biblical studies in Canada.

Despite completing both masters and doctoral degrees at Canadian institutions, I am a Jamaican by birth and ethnicity, having begun biblical studies on the political and scholarly periphery of North America, in what is today called the Global South or the Majority World (we called it the Third World when I was an undergraduate). I emigrated from Jamaica to Canada only after my formative studies for a BTh degree at Jamaica Theological Seminary. And my immersion in graduate biblical studies took place in the USA, between my two Canadian degrees. To complicate matters further, I have not lived in Canada for the past twenty-five years, since obtaining a faculty position in Rochester, NY.

Although my home is within two hours drive of the Canadian border, I have

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4 I am thankful to Colleen Shantz (newly elected president of CSBS/SCÉB) for initiating the discussion of the basis on which the Society might address such issues. The previous two paragraphs are adapted from her insightful framing of the issues and questions raised in our executive committee discussion and sent (when she was vice-president) to the Society membership in an email on April 16, 2021. It was the executive's intent that this discussion be expanded to include the entire CSBS/SCÉB membership.

been living and teaching in a cultural context quite different from the Canada I came to know and love. That cultural difference is emphasized every time I cross the border to attend the Congress of Humanities and Social Sciences (and, before that, the Learned) or to visit relatives in the Toronto area.

So, while I am no stranger to Canadian biblical scholarship, and have interacted extensively with Canadian biblical scholars at the Congress / Learned for nearly thirty years, my reflections will inevitably be colored by my outsider status.

### **Subjectivity, Embodiment, and Resistance in Caribbean Biblical Studies**

Perhaps an account of my initial theological and biblical—indeed, socio-cultural—formation in Jamaica might be helpful, since it is foundational to how I see both the development and possible future of biblical studies in Canada.

I grew up in Kingston, the Jamaican capital, a fourth-generation Jamaican on my father's side, with my mother's side going back considerably further, to Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition centuries earlier. In later life, I have come to understand that I was profoundly shaped by my experience of coming to adolescence in postcolonial Jamaica, a nation just beginning to break out of British cultural influence, with the increasing reach of American economic hegemony and cultural globalization.<sup>5</sup> Becoming an adolescent in a “conscious” Jamaican culture in the sixties and seventies, influenced by the rise of Black Power and the growing popularity of Rastafarianism, it was impossible not to be exposed to suspicions of the cultural and economic imperialism of the West.<sup>6</sup> This suspicion would ultimately ground my search for an alternative to a Eurocentric reading of the Bible.<sup>7</sup>

I was first exposed to the Bible in my teenage years through my participation in the Jamaican church. My interest in the Bible led me to enroll in a program of undergraduate theological studies, where I was immediately confronted with the problem of contextualization: How did the work of theologians and biblical scholars from North Atlantic countries relate to the postcolonial conditions of Caribbean life? Although Jamaica Theological Seminary (JTS) was relatively conservative theologically, especially when compared to our sister institution, the United Theological College of the University of the West Indies (UTC-UWI),

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5 Jamaica gained independence from Britain on August 6, 1962; I still remember the celebrations, despite being only a young child at the time.

6 The term “conscious” is often applied to reggae music to mean that the song in question addresses matters of justice and self-knowledge, and is not just for entertainment.

7 The critique of *Eurocentrism* proposed in this article is not intended as a slur against persons of European heritage or a blanket condemnation of matters European. It arises from the resistance of Caribbean peoples to the totalizing imposition of an alien culture and values by the European conquerors and colonizers of the region.

my fellow JTS students and I avidly read Gustavo Gutiérrez's *A Theology of Liberation* when it was published in English and interacted with chapel speakers who addressed the relationship of theology to racism, colonialism, and capitalism.<sup>8</sup> We did not shy away in our courses from questions of political theology, hermeneutics, the intersection of faith and philosophy, or historical-critical matters. We could not afford to; living in a postcolonial situation, on the margins of the American empire, forces one to become critically informed and engaged.

Despite the differences between my "evangelical" seminary and the "main-line" theological college of the University, there was (and still is) no Caribbean tradition of a discipline of "biblical studies" separate from praxis, especially the training of ministers for the church. This was true of both JTS and UTC, the two oldest undergraduate degree-granting theological institutions in Jamaica, and it is true of the more recently founded Caribbean Graduate School of Theology, also in Kingston, and the many Bible Colleges and Institutes that have sprung up around the island (many of which are now accredited to offer Bachelor's degrees).

Not only is the Bible never interpreted in isolation from life (even when critical biblical scholarship is considered), but the Caribbean has an important undercurrent of oral folk traditions, inherited from the African slave experience, that can interact profoundly with biblical thinking among church people. Admittedly, these folk traditions have often been eclipsed by an otherworldly theology inherited from European missionaries; and this otherworldly faith is itself being eclipsed today by the prosperity gospel exported from the USA, as many Caribbean Christians swing from a stance of world-aversion to uncritical world-embrace.

It was the otherworldly theology of escape that permeated the Jamaican church in my adolescent years. This theology downplayed the importance of earthly life vis-à-vis heaven and "spiritual" realities and excluded, in principle, the so-called "secular" realm from impact by the gospel. This otherworldly theology, which also denigrated the body in contrast to the "soul" (the interior life), was aided and abetted by a spirituality of passivity and subservience, evident in some sectors of the Jamaican church, both towards God and religious authority. This subservience could be understood as the religious correlate to the slave mentality absorbed by so many Jamaicans of African heritage. Garnett Roper and Erica Campbell have analyzed the impact of slavery on the low self-esteem and identity problems that

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8 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. by Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973). One of the speakers who made a significant impression on me was Puerto Rican theologian Orlando E. Costas, who had just published *The Church and Its Mission: A Shattering Critique from the Third World* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1974).

continue to plague Jamaican society today.<sup>9</sup> I myself, as a Caucasian (not White) Jamaican in a largely Black nation and church, struggled both with my own cultural and religious identity and with this inherited otherworldliness throughout my adolescence and young adulthood.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps a clarification of my racial/ethnic identity is here warranted. While the term *Caucasian* might refer to my phenotypical features, I do not identify as White, which is a cultural/ethnic construct with a specific meaning rooted in European colonialism, as Willie Jennings has persuasively argued.<sup>11</sup> Rather, my ethnic identity is Jamaican; or, to be more precise, given the hybridity that comes from having lived in three different cultures, I am *Jamericadian* (a term my wife and I often use in self-description).<sup>12</sup>

Given the otherworldly faith I experienced in the Jamaican church, combined with a stance of passivity and subservience towards the status quo, it is no wonder that the imperative of contextualization led me as an undergraduate theology student to explore the power of creation theology as both an affirmation of the body and a critique of the current social order, emphasizing God's desire for the flourishing of the world.<sup>13</sup>

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9 These are the opening essays in Garnett Roper and J. Richard Middleton, eds, *A Kairos Moment for Caribbean Theology: Ecumenical Voices in Dialogue* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013). Garnett Roper, "The Caribbean as the People of God: Prophetic Possibilities for an Exilic People," 3–19; Erica Campbell, "Language and Identity in Caribbean Theology," 20–39. Also relevant is Roper's published doctoral dissertation, *Caribbean Theology as Public Theology* (Kingston, Jamaica: Jugaro, 2012).

10 My attempt to address the issues of otherworldliness in the church generated my first published book, written when I was working on my MA in philosophy at the university of Guelph: Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1984); this trajectory culminated in a more recent book, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014). I explicitly addressed the otherworldly theology of the Caribbean church in my essay "Islands in the Sun: Overtures to a Caribbean Creation Theology," in *A Kairos Moment for Caribbean Theology*, 79–95; this essay is reprinted in *Islands, Islanders, and the Bible: Ruminations*, ed. by Jione Havea, Margaret Aymer, and Steed Vernyl Davidson, *Semeia Studies 77* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015), 115–34.

11 Willie J. Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*; Theological Education between the Times (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020). Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021). For a nuanced analysis of "whiteness" in relation to biblical studies, see Wongi Park, "Multiracial Biblical Studies," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 140, no. 3 (2021) 435–59. Park uncouples whiteness from the specifics of biology or "phenotypic traits," noting that "race is a social construct that has no physical, genetic, or biological basis in human blood or DNA" (Park, "Multiracial Biblical Studies," 443).

12 This is not to deny that I have benefitted from "white privilege," which has accrued to me simply by virtue of my skin color. But White has never been my internalized identity—not when I lived in Jamaica, nor since I moved to North America. It is becoming increasingly recognized in the critical literature that race and ethnicity are not intrinsically linked to skin color; this linkage is a social construction of recent vintage, rooted in colonialism and the African slave trade. The decoupling of race/ethnicity and skin color was brought home to me vividly when a young African American man, with whom I had many conversations, recently asked me, "Richard, what race are you?" Reflecting on that incident, I came to realize that he asked because I did not present as White.

13 I found this positive theology of creation "revolutionary," a term I used in an article critiquing

But beyond the otherworldliness and correlative subservience of many Jamaican Christians, there was (and still is) a contrary tendency in Jamaican society to be suspicious of those who wield power. This tendency is rooted in the slave experience of resistance. Jamaicans are typically aware of the heritage of the Maroons, escaped slaves who (beginning in the mid-seventeenth century) lived in free communities in the mountainous Cockpit Country in the interior of the island, and who received treaty rights from the British for autonomous governance of their own lands. Besides these specific communities of resistance, there was a general tendency of resistance among many enslaved Africans, sometimes coming to the fore in explicit slave rebellions, though this resistance was often of a more covert variety.<sup>14</sup> The resistance theology derived from the slave experience is what motivated the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865, led by the Black Baptist preacher Paul Bogle, in protest of injustice by the British ruling class, which had continued after the formal emancipation of slaves in 1838.<sup>15</sup>

One of the wellsprings of this resistance was the folk tradition of Anansi, which the slaves brought from Africa. Anansi the spider is the infamous trickster figure (inherited from West African folklore), who has to negotiate his relationship with the larger (and more dangerous) animals of the jungle. Whereas the African American stories of Brer Rabbit are an amalgam of Native American and Central African (Bantu) folktales, the Jamaican stories of Brer Anansi derive from the Ashanti peoples of West Africa, who were transported to the Caribbean through the Middle Passage of the slave trade (and there are various overlaps between these stories).

Most Jamaicans, especially in earlier generations, and particularly in the rural areas, grew up with a treasure trove of Anansi stories, concerning how Anansi outsmarted tiger, snake, John Crow, and many other animals—even including one story of how Anansi got his name associated with *all* folktales; all West African and Jamaican folktales, whether or not they figure the infamous spider/spider man, are known today as “Ananasi stories.”<sup>16</sup>

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Walter Brueggemann’s largely negative view of creation theology: Middleton, “Is Creation Theology Inherently Conservative? A Dialogue with Walter Brueggemann,” *Harvard Theological Review* 87, no. 3 (1994): 257–77. I also found this creation theology “liberating,” a term that found its way into the title of an essay on the *imago Dei* and then a book on the same topic: Middleton, “The Liberating Image? Interpreting the *Imago Dei* in Context,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 24 (1994): 8–25; and Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005).

14 For historical examples of resistance in Jamaican history, see Roper, *Caribbean Theology as Public Theology*, 37–53.

15 This rebellion is immortalized in a reggae song entitled “1865: 96 Degrees in the Shade,” by the Jamaican band Third World. I was privileged to attend secondary school (Jamaica College) with two of the founding band members, Stephen “Cat” Coore and Michael “Ibo” Cooper.

16 For an excellent analysis of the figure of Anansi in Jamaican culture, see Hugh Hodges, “Speak of the Advent of New Light: Jamaican Proverbs and Anancy Stories,” chap. 3 in Hodges, *Soon Come: Jamaican Spirituality, Jamaican Poetics* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008),

I myself grew up with Anansi stories, many told by my father, others narrated on the radio (before TV came to the island) by Ranny Williams and Louise Bennett.<sup>17</sup> While Anansi was not always morally upright, and often was downright lazy, he was the hero of many tales because (as I would put it today) he refused to accept the power structures of the jungle as legitimate (note that *Dungle* was the name of an area in the slums of Kingston).<sup>18</sup> Instead, he always found an angle to work, from which he could dissent from the status quo or even (in limited or temporary ways) overturn it.<sup>19</sup>

As the introduction to a reprint of *Jamaica Anansi Stories* puts it:

Anansi is the spirit of rebellion; he is able to overturn the social order; he can marry the Kings' [sic] daughter, create wealth out of thin air; baffle the Devil and cheat Death. Even if Anansi loses in one story, you know that he will overcome in the next. For an oppressed people Anansi conveyed a simple message from one generation to the next:— that freedom and dignity are worth fighting for, at any odds.<sup>20</sup>

The figure of Anansi is so central to the cultural traditions of Jamaica that even when many young people today are unacquainted with the range of Anansi stories, they have been influenced by the Anansi mindset. This is the mindset of resistance that contributed to the founding of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) by Marcus Garvey in 1914 and gave rise to the trade union movement, with the push for universal adult suffrage, in the 1930s.<sup>21</sup>

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61–80. Hodges, who is currently chair of the Department of English and Cultural Studies at Trent University, Peterborough, ON, studied Caribbean literature with Jamaican poet Lorna Goodison for his PhD at the University of Toronto.

- 17 Louise Bennett-Coverley later immigrated to Canada and lived in Scarborough, ON for the last decade of her life until her death in 2006. She made a significant impact on the Caribbean cultural and literary scene in the Toronto area, and there is a large collection of her archival photographs, recordings, and other material housed in the McMaster University Library.
- 18 This area (essentially a slum surrounded by a garbage dump) was later bulldozed and replaced with a housing development called Tivoli Gardens. Orlando Patterson's classic novel, *The Children of Sisyphus* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2011; repr. Hutchinson, 1964), describes what life was like in the Dungle. It is possible that the name *Dungle* is derived from *dunghill*, but it was associated in the mind of many Jamaicans with *jungle*.
- 19 Hugh Hodges develops an ethical version of the power reversals typically associated with Anansi, in order to explicate the spiritual vision of Bob Marley, while making it clear that this is a selective reading of the trickster motif; Marley himself dissented from anything underhanded. See "Walk Good: Bob Marley and the Oratorical Tradition," chap. 7 in Hodges, *Soon Come*, 153–72.
- 20 From the publisher's Preface to Martha Warren Beckwith, *Jamaica Anansi Stories* (n.p.: Forgotten Books, 2007; repr. New York: American Folklore Society, 1924), vii (available at: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/afr/jas/>). The stories in this volume were collected from oral interviews between 1919 and 1921. For an even earlier collection, see Walter Jekyll, *Jamaican Song and Story: Annancy Stories, Digging Songs, Ring Tunes, and Dancing Tunes* (London: Dover, 1966; repr. London: Folk-Lore Society, 1907).
- 21 Trade unions became the basis for the first two national political parties in Jamaica—the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) and the People's National Party (PNP). In 1944 the Jamaican Constitution granted the right to vote to all Jamaican citizens 21 years and older (without regard to race or



It was a combination of this stance of resistance, linked with the Bible and an affirmation of Africa, that epitomized the Rastafari movement, originating in the slums of Kingston during the 1930s, as a protest of the racism embedded in Jamaican society and the brutality of the continuing colonial system of governance. Yet beyond protest, Rastafari was from the beginning grounded in a positive assertion of Black dignity, drawing extensively on both the Bible and African culture (pointing especially to the crowning of Ras Tafari Makonen as Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia, in 1930) to articulate a worldview alternative to that of mainstream society.<sup>22</sup> Based on my respect for Rastafari (rooted in my street conversations with Rastas when I was a teenager), I later came to explore the subversive power of the Rastafarian use of the Bible, evident in the music of Bob Marley and the Wailers, in an essay called “Identity and Subversion in Babylon.”<sup>23</sup>

What these Jamaican political and religious movements have in common is a suspicion of claims to legitimacy on the part of those with power and the desire to take the side of the “sufferer” (to use a common Jamaican term for the disenfranchised). It was precisely this suspicion that I could tap into for my reading of the Bible against Eurocentrism.

### **Looking Back: The Development of “Biblical Studies” in Canada**

I have tried to sketch something of my Jamaican cultural context because I have come to understand that this context undergirds and constrains my approach to biblical studies, whether in Canada or elsewhere. I will shortly bring this context to bear on my evaluation of the present state and (possible) future of Canadian biblical studies.

But first, a look back is necessary, in order to see how we got to where we are. In preparing for this assignment I had the advantage of consulting a number of helpful historical works, beginning with John Macpherson’s 1962 CSBS/SCÉB

gender). The first election was held on December 14, 1944, with a voter turnout of nearly sixty percent.

22 Legend has it that in 1927 or 1928 Marcus Garvey said: “Look to Africa, when a black king shall be crowned, for the day of deliverance is at hand.” When Ras Tafari Makonen was crowned Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia in 1930, many in the various black millenarian movements that had been growing in Jamaica hailed Selassie (the new ruler of the only African nation that had never been colonized by Europe) as the second coming of the Messiah. Thus was born the religion of Rastafari. The news of the coronation was especially publicized in a now-famous article, accompanied by color photos: W. Robert Moore, “Coronation Days in Addis Ababa,” *National Geographic* 59, no. 6 (1931): 738–46. Also in this issue was Addison E. Southard, “Modern Ethiopia: Haile Selassie the First, Formerly Ras Tafari, Succeeds to the World’s Oldest Continuously Sovereign Throne,” 679–738. Multiple copies of this issue of *National Geographic* were not only bought by Rastafarians, but sold or distributed by them on street corners in Kingston; and many Rastas to this day proudly own a copy. I have my own copy.

23 Middleton, “Identity and Subversion in Babylon: Strategies for ‘Resisting Against the System’ in the Music of Bob Marley and the Wailers,” chap. 9 in *Religion, Culture and Tradition in the Caribbean*, ed. by Hemchand Gossai and N. Samuel Murrell (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 181–204.



presidential address, entitled “A History of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies.”<sup>24</sup> This informative, if brief, survey of the history of the Society from its founding in 1933 to Macpherson’s presentation in 1962 was printed in a mimeographed volume a few years later (with some other essays), to mark Canada’s Centennial in 1967; it can now be found, with an introduction by Peter Richardson, on the CSBS/SCÉB website.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond Macpherson’s account (which focuses specifically on CSBS/SCÉB), we have Charles Anderson’s more broadly envisioned *Guide to Religious Studies in Canada / Guide des sciences Religieuses au Canada* (published in 1969 by the Corporation for the Publication of Academic Studies in Religion in Canada, the precursor of CCSR), which was revised and expanded in 1972.<sup>26</sup> Before the second edition was published, the CCSR, in conjunction with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), commissioned a series of volumes that would provide snapshots of the state of religious studies in Canada, region by region. In order of publication, these include studies of Alberta (1983); Quebec (1988); Ontario (1992); Manitoba and Saskatchewan (1993); British Columbia (1995); and Atlantic Canada (2001).<sup>27</sup> These state-of-the-art reviews (written by different authors) are helpful in parsing many of the details of the field of religious studies (including biblical studies) found in different universities and colleges of the region in question, noting the range of programs, courses, faculty, research areas, etc.

But the two most illuminating volumes interpreting the history of Canadian biblical studies are the books by John Moir (1982) and Aaron Hughes (2020), especially since they cover the material from such different points of view.

Moir’s account, entitled *A History of Biblical Studies in Canada: A Sense of*

24 I want to thank three past presidents of CSBS/SCÉB—Willi Braun (2016–17), Wayne McCready (1996–97), and Peter Richardson (1984–85)—who pointed me to the historical sources listed here.

25 John MacPherson, “A History of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies” (1962 CSBS presidential address; 2017 update of 1967 printing) Available at: [http://csbs-sceb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/A\\_History\\_of\\_CSBS.pdf](http://csbs-sceb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/A_History_of_CSBS.pdf)

26 Charles P. Anderson, *Guide to Religious Studies in Canada / Guide des sciences Religieuses au Canada*, 2nd ed. (n.p.: Corporation for the Publication of Academic Studies in Religion in Canada, 1972; orig. 1969).

27 Ronald Neufeldt, *Religious Studies in Alberta: A State-of-the-Art Review*, The Study of Religion in Canada 1 (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1983); Louis Rousseau and Michel Despland, *Le sciences religieuses au Québec depuis 1972*, The Study of Religion in Canada 2 (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988); Harold Remus, William Closson James, and Daniel Fraikin, *Religious Studies in Ontario: A State-of-the-Art Review*, The Study of Religion in Canada 3 (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992); John M. Badertscher, Gordon Harland, and Roland E. Miller, *Religious Studies in Manitoba and Saskatchewan: A State-of-the-Art Review*, The Study of Religion in Canada 4 (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1993); Brian J. Fraser, *The Study of Religion in British Columbia: A State-of-the-Art Review*, The Study of Religion in Canada 5 (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1995); and Paul W. R. Bowlby, with Tom Faulkner, *Religious Studies in Atlantic Canada: A State-of-the-Art Review*, The Study of Religion in Canada 6 (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001).

*Proportion*, was specifically commissioned by the CSBS/SCÉB.<sup>28</sup> This volume helpfully places the development of the Society in the broader context of biblical studies in Canada (beginning in the 1880s); it is, however, somewhat outdated, being now nearly forty years old. While not as disciplinary specific as Moir, Hughes's volume, *From Seminary to University: An Institutional History of the Study of Religion in Canada*, admirably addresses biblical studies in the context of the development of theology and religious studies in the Canadian context.<sup>29</sup>

To a great extent, the accounts of Moir and Hughes corroborate each other. They both recount the beginnings of biblical studies in Canada as an aspect of theological study of the Bible in seminaries and theological colleges (associated with specific Christian denominations), founded primarily for the training of clergy, but also to propagate Christian religious values in the colony. This confessionally-oriented approach to the Bible came into some tension with the "academic" study of the Bible, conceived as a historical-critical discipline, which began in Europe in the nineteenth century. This historical study focused on the ancient languages and contexts relevant to understanding the Bible. Interestingly, the early focus in Canada was on Hebrew, the ancient Near East, and the Old Testament (the term Hebrew Bible was not typically used), while research on the New Testament, Koine Greek, the Mediterranean social context, and Greco-Roman literature came later. The debated question, over which there was much disagreement, was whether one could hold to a historical approach to the Bible and yet treat the text as a normative theological and ethical source for living.

There was also a shift from denominationally-oriented theological colleges and seminaries to ecumenical consortia of such colleges in various parts of the country (including British Columbia and Atlantic Canada), but especially important was the founding of University College in 1853 as part of the newly established University of Toronto. Precisely because University College was intentionally unaffiliated with any specific Christian denomination, its early detractors called it a "godless" institution, even though the biblical and theological courses being offered were generally from the perspective of Christianity.

Finally, as an outcome of the Quiet Revolution in Quebec and the policy of multiculturalism by the Canadian government, along with increased immigration to Canada, the new discipline of religious studies emerged, formally de-coupled from explicit religious affiliation and with non-Western religions included in its purview. Beginning with McMaster University in 1960, departments of religious studies were established at various Canadian universities throughout the sixties

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28 John S. Moir, *A History of Biblical Studies in Canada: A Sense of Proportion*, Biblical Scholarship in North America 7 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982).

29 Aaron W. Hughes, *From Seminary to University: An Institutional History of the Study of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020).

and seventies, housed in faculties of the Arts or Humanities. The result is that biblical studies could now be found both in the religious studies departments of the provincial university system and in theological colleges with varying degrees of religious or denominational affiliation.

Although there is a great deal of overlap between the historical accounts of Moir and Hughes, they diverge significantly in the angle of vision through which they view this history. Moir's perspective is more muted and restrained; on the surface one might almost think he was giving a simple, annalistic account of developments (with an endless list of names, accomplishments, faculties, publications, etc.). But a closer reading shows affinities with a reserved, Anglo-Canadian (even quintessentially British) point of view. This can be seen in the book's subtitle, "A Sense of Proportion," which suggests that the history of Canadian biblical studies epitomizes the Aristotelian golden mean—an emphasis on being balanced, eschewing extremes. Moir's approach also shows up in several chapter titles, which are quotes taken from various Canadian figures in his history. Thus his chapter on Canadian biblical studies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is entitled "A Sane and Tactful Course"; his chapter on the impact of historical criticism on the Canadian scene is called "Frank, Scientific Discussion"; and his final chapter, which recounts Canadian biblical scholarship in an international context since the Second World War, concludes that this scholarship has achieved "No Mean Place," which is a somewhat self-deprecating way of acknowledging importance.

None of this, in itself, is a criticism of Moir. There simply is no neutral historiography; every historian has an angle of vision and not only selects the data but construes this data in light of their point of view.

Aaron Hughes's point of view is much more explicit. He introduces his book by highlighting his overall argument, namely, that both theology and religious studies (this includes biblical studies, whether conceived confessionally or "scientifically") have been defined and developed in Western countries to serve national interests; the study of religion in all its modern forms is grounded in the cultural and political values of the nation state.<sup>30</sup> Although Hughes uses Canada as a case study, he suggests that his analysis could be applied to other nations as well.<sup>31</sup>

Hughes's explicit approach to his study is commendable, in that it recognizes that we all stand somewhere, located in and shaped by our existential contexts and the communities of discourse that we participate in. There simply is no view from

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30 This may shed light on the fact that a printed edition of Macpherson's presidential address was produced for Canada's 1967 Centennial celebrations. And Richardson's 2017 introduction was written for Canada's Sesquicentennial anniversary.

31 Hughes, *From Seminary to University*, 4–5.

nowhere; we have no access to any god’s-eye perspective of anything, including the object of our study, whether that is religion or the Bible or the history of “biblical studies.” The very stance of “objectivity” is a subjectively chosen position (distant from everyday life), which attempts to hold in abeyance the assumptions and commitments of the interpreter, with the idea that we can somehow attain to “truth” uncolored by our context. But this modern Eurocentric ideal is an illusion.

Granted, we need to treat the object of our study justly and fairly, respecting its integrity and otherness, not twisting our subject matter to conform to either our preconceived commonsense notions or our scholarly paradigms. Yet the very ideal of justice or fairness, rooted in respect for otherness (which I affirm), is itself a subjectively chosen stance. There is no neutral point of view available to anyone, including scholars.

The history of biblical studies in Canada (though not only in Canada) has been decisively shaped by the attempt to construct and define an academic discipline in such a way as to separate it from the subjectivity of theological and ecclesial commitments and contexts. Yet as Hughes’s study shows, even if those particular commitments and contexts could be held in abeyance, there will inevitably be other contexts and interests that constrain the discipline.

### **The Challenge of Contextual Biblical Studies in Canada Today**

Whether intentional or not, the historical accounts of both Hughes and Moir reveal that the development of Canadian “biblical studies” was motivated by the modern Eurocentric problematics of the bifurcation between scholarship (as objective or neutral) and lived contexts (as subjective or partisan). This bifurcation holds not just for those formulating or developing the discipline of biblical studies in time past (the contested context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Canada). It holds also today for many who participate in the discourses of biblical studies in the twenty-first century. I say “discourses” intentionally, since any notion that there is one singular hegemonic discourse of “biblical studies” is an illusion—and the hope for such a discourse is a thinly veiled aspiration to recapture the monologic claims of Eurocentrism in academia.

This, of course, should not need to be said in our contemporary setting, since more and more scholars of religion (including biblical scholars) are becoming aware of the role of subjectivity and context in academic discourse. Indeed, as one who has participated for three decades in both the CSBS/SCÉB and the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) in the USA, I have discerned a sea change among many biblical scholars in recognizing the essentially contextual nature of all interpretation.

This recognition has especially been articulated by those from minoritized or marginalized cultures, ethnicities, and genders, evident in monographs and

collections of essays on contextual biblical interpretation. This began in the 1990s with volumes such as *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (1991); *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (1995); *Reading from This Place*, vols. 1 and 2 (1995); *Santa Biblia: The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes* (1996); and *What Has Jerusalem to Do with Beijing?: Biblical Interpretation from a Chinese Perspective* (1998).<sup>32</sup>

The following decade saw the publication of volumes such as *Decolonizing Biblical Studies* (2000); *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading: Asian American Biblical Interpretation* (2006); *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (2007); *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics* (2008); *Democratizing Biblical Studies* (2009); and *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism* (2009).<sup>33</sup>

A sampling of the most recent books on the subject would include *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora* (2010); *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretation* (2012); *The Future of Biblical Studies: Envisioning Biblical Studies on a Global Key* (2012); *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics* (2014); *Toward a Latino/a Biblical Interpretation* (2017); *Reading While Black* (2020); *African American Readings of Paul* (2020); *Minoritized Women Reading Race and Ethnicity* (2020); *Grounded in the Body, in Time and Place, in Scripture* (2021); and “Bitter the Chastening Rod”: *Africana Biblical Interpretation after Stony the Road We Trod in the Age of BLM, SayHerName, and MeToo* (2021).<sup>34</sup>

32 Cain Hope Felder, ed., *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006 [orig. 1995]); Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., *Reading from This Place*, vol. 1: *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Segovia and Tolbert, eds., *Reading from This Place*, vol. 2: *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Justo L. González, *Santa Biblia: The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996); K. K. Yeo, *What Has Jerusalem to Do with Beijing? Biblical Interpretation from a Chinese Perspective*, 2nd ed., *Contrapuntal Readings of the Bible in World Christianity 2* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018 [orig. 1998]).

33 Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000); Mary F. Foskett and Jeffrey Kah-Jin Kuan, eds., *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading: Asian American Biblical Interpretation* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2006); Brian K. Blount, ed., *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007); Tat-Siong Benny Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics: Reading the New Testament*, *Intersections: Asian and Pacific American Transcultural Studies* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Democratizing Biblical Studies: Toward an Emancipatory Educational Space* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009); Randall C. Bailey, Tat-Siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia, eds., *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, *Semeia Studies 57* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009).

34 Hugh R. Page Jr. et al., eds., *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010); Musa W. Dube, Andrew M. Mbuvi, and Dora Mbuwayesango, eds., *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations*, *Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship 13* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012); Roland

These works, some already classics, others recently penned, represent voices from the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Pacifica, which make the argument that it is not only appropriate, but ethically important to bring the biblical text into conversation with our contemporary contexts and existential concerns. And, thankfully, many biblical scholars who are not from minority groups are beginning to recognize the validity of this approach.<sup>35</sup> For this reason, the SBL sponsored two online symposia (in August, 2020) with the title “#BlackScholarsMatter,” where biblical scholars of African descent (including one Canadian) spoke about their experience in the biblical studies guild and offered their perspectives.<sup>36</sup>

The question is whether such a contextual approach to biblical studies will find a place in Canada. A step in that direction is the recent job posting at the University of Toronto for a position in “Ancient Christian and Jewish Texts and Their Reception.” The posting looked for candidates who “demonstrate a considered and long-term engagement with . . . the study of ancient Christian and Jewish texts (early Christianity and/or Second Temple Judaism) and their reception, including within Black communities of interpretation in the Americas.”<sup>37</sup>

Another important step is the collection of essays by Canadian biblical

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Boer and Fernando F. Segovia, eds., *The Future of Biblical Studies Past: Envisioning Biblical Studies on a Global Key*, Semeia Studies 66 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012); Francisco Lozada, Jr. and Fernando F. Segovia, eds., *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics: Problematics, Objectives, Strategies*, Semeia Studies 68 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2014); Francisco Lozada, Jr., *Toward a Latino/a Biblical Interpretation*, Resources for Biblical Study 91 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2017); Esau McCaulley, *Reading while Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020); Lisa M. Bowers, *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance, and Transformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020); Mitzi J. Smith and Jin Young Choi, eds., *Minoritized Women Reading Race and Ethnicity: Intersectional Approaches to Constructed Identity and Early Christian Texts*, Feminist Studies and Sacred Texts (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2020); Jill Firth and Denise Cooper-Clarke, eds., *Grounded in the Body, in Time and Place, in Scripture: Papers by Australian Women Scholars in the Evangelical Tradition*, Australian College of Theology Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2021); and Mitzi J. Smith, Angela Parker, and Erica Dunbar, eds., *“Bitter the Chastening Rod”: Africana Biblical Interpretation after Stony the Road We Trod in the Age of BLM, SayHerName, and MeToo* (Lanham, MD: Lexington/Fortress Academic, at press).

35 An important early example is Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995). More recently, evangelical Old Testament scholars Brittany Kim and Charlie Trimm have begun compiling bibliographies of publications by Old Testament scholars of color, including Arab, Black, Asian, and Latino/a scholars on the Every Voice website. They will be expanding this to include other disciplines beyond Old Testament. As Kim and Trimm explain: “Our hope is that these sources will not be . . . contrasted with an objective interpretive and theological tradition, but that they will be viewed as part of the great historical tradition of interpreting the Bible and articulating theological ideas from within various contexts” (<https://everyvoicekingdomdiversity.org/database/>).

36 “#BlackScholarsMatter: Visions and Struggles,” August 12, 2020; “#BlackScholarsMatter: Lessons and Hopes,” August 13, 2020. Accessible at: <https://www.sbl-site.org/meetings/black-scholarsmatter.aspx>

37 University of Toronto (2021) job posting at <https://jobs.utoronto.ca/job/Toronto-Associate-Professor-Ancient-Christian-and-Jewish-Texts-and-their-Reception-ON/545690217> (accessed 26 March 2021).



scholars entitled *Reading In-Between: How Minoritized Cultural Communities Interpret the Bible in Canada*.<sup>38</sup> This volume was originally conceived as an exercise in narrative hermeneutics, linking personal and cultural narratives to biblical interpretation by scholars of the Bible who had immigrated to Canada.

I myself was invited to write an essay for the volume, but needed to withdraw when the focus for the volume changed somewhat and I was unable to re-do my piece in the time constraints required for publication. But I am grateful to the editors for the initial invitation, which forced me to reflect in a systematic and intentional way on how my Jamaican context contributed to my approach to biblical studies.<sup>39</sup> I initially presented these reflections to the Canadian Theological Society in 2015.<sup>40</sup> And I was able to draw extensively upon this material for the account of my Jamaican context in this presidential address.

It may be significant that I gave my 2015 paper in the Canadian *theological* rather than biblical society, even though the latter is where I have presented most of my Congress papers over the years. At the time I discerned greater interest among Canadian theologians than biblical scholars in addressing the contextual nature of our scholarship. This is not to say that such interest has been entirely absent from the CSBS/SCÉB.

For example, Hebrew Bible scholar Wes Bergen wrote a fascinating book

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38 Néstor Medina, Alison Hari-Sing, and HyeRan Kim-Cragg, eds., *Reading In-Between: How Minoritized Cultural Communities Interpret the Bible in Canada* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019).

39 But praxis precedes reflection. I had been drawing explicitly upon aspects of my Jamaican context in various writings on the Bible for two decades prior to being prodded to think systematically about the subject. See Middleton, “Is Creation Theology Inherently Conservative,” 227; Middleton, “Identity and Subversion in Babylon,” 198; Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 11–14, 202; Middleton, “Islands in the Sun,” in *A Kairos Moment for Caribbean Theology*, 79–80, 83–85, 93–95 [= “Islands in the Sun,” in *Islands, Islanders, and the Bible*, 115–16, 119–21, 129–32]; Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, 9–10, 29–30.

40 Middleton, “Faith Seeking Understanding: Reflections on Narrativial Biblical Hermeneutics from a Canadian Immigrant Perspective,” paper presented at the Canadian Theological Society annual meeting, University of Ottawa, 1 June 2015. This paper went beyond reflecting on how my Jamaican context affected my reading of the Bible and addressed my Canadian immigrant experience as well. The fact that I came to Canada as a young adult, followed by fifteen years of living, studying, working, and raising a family in Southern Ontario (Toronto, Guelph, and St. Catharines)—all the while coming to understand this new cultural context and grappling both existentially and intellectually with life after modernity—could not but affect my reading of Scripture. So I also brought this new cultural context (including the music of Bruce Cockburn) into dialogue with my work on the Bible and the postmodern condition, especially (though not only) in co-authored works with Canadian theologian Brian J. Walsh. See Middleton and Walsh, “Theology at the Rim of a Broken Wheel: Bruce Cockburn and Christian Faith in a Postmodern World,” *Grail: An Ecumenical Journal* 9, no. 2 (1993): 15–39; Middleton and Walsh, “Facing the Postmodern Scalpel: Can the Christian Faith Withstand Deconstruction?” in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1995), 132–225; Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1995); and Middleton, “From the Clenched Fist to the Open Hand: A Postmodern Reading of the Twenty-Third Psalm,” in *The Strategic Smorgasbord of Postmodernity: Literature and the Christian Critic*, ed. Deborah C. Bowen (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 307–25.

called *Reading Ritual*, on Leviticus in a postmodern context, addressing contemporary ethical issues in conversation with this ancient text.<sup>41</sup> Haitian Canadian Ronald Charles has more recently written on his experience of bridging multiple languages and cultures as an act of decolonization in New Testament studies.<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, it has often been members (past or present) of the CSBS/SCÉB executive committee who have done this sort of work. Past president Christine Mitchell (2017–18) gave her presidential address on reading biblical conquest stories in light of the rights of indigenous peoples.<sup>43</sup> Past president Marion Taylor (2011–12) and current programme coordinator Agnes Choi co-edited and contributed essays to the *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*.<sup>44</sup> Mark Leuchter, current executive secretary, who was simultaneously the 2019–20 president of the Mid-Atlantic Region of the SBL (illustrating the typical border crossing of Canadian biblical scholars), gave a powerful and timely presidential address that insightfully drew on contemporary politics in the age of Trump to read the figure of David in 1 and 2 Samuel.<sup>45</sup>

My earliest exposure to a Canadian biblical scholar bringing contemporary context into conversation with a biblical text was David Jobling. His 1993 presidential address, entitled “Hannah’s Desire,” was given during the second CSBS/SCÉB meeting I attended. Having asked what the character of Hannah (in the narrative of 1 Samuel 1–2) wanted, what the narrator wanted, and what various readers wanted, Jobling concluded by asking (and answering), “What do I want?”<sup>46</sup> This concluding section of the paper anticipated the more fully developed argument in his monograph on 1 Samuel, the first chapter of which is subtitled, “An Autobiographical Essay on Method.”<sup>47</sup>

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41 Wesley J. Bergen, *Reading Ritual: Leviticus in Postmodern Culture*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 417 (New York: T&T Clark, 2005).

42 Ronald Charles, “Reading Romans in Greek: Translating It and Commenting on It in Haitian Creole,” in “*Bitter the Chastening Rod*,” and Charles, “Moving in-between Places and Academic Disciplines,” in *#Black Scholars Matter*, ed. Gay L. Byron and Hugh R. Page Jr., Biblical Scholarship in North America (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, in preparation).

43 Published as Christine Mitchell, “What to Do with All These Canaanites?: A Settler-Canadian Reading of Biblical Conquest Stories,” chap. 2 in *Honouring the Declaration: Church Commitments to Reconciliation and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, ed. Don Schweitzer and Paul L. Gareau (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2021), 31–52.

44 Marion Taylor and Agnes Choi, eds., *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters: A Historical and Biographical Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

45 Mark Leuchter, “Reading David in the Age of Trump,” Mid-Atlantic Region-Society of Biblical Literature 2020 Presidential Address, presented online, 15 March, 2021.

46 Jobling, “Hannah’s Desire,” Canadian Society of Biblical Society 1993 Presidential Address, *Bulletin of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies* 53 (1994):19–32, here 29–32.

47 Jobling, “Samuel’s Book, My Book, Me, and You: An Autobiographical Essay on Method,” in Jobling, *1 Samuel*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 3–27. Jobling’s transparency influenced my analysis of the positive role of subjectivity in relation to the givenness or otherness of a text (Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 36–38).



These examples of Canadian biblical scholars illustrate the growing interest in bringing the specificity of contemporary context and lived experience to the academic table in order to engage the biblical text dialectically—both interrogating the text *from* the interpreter’s context and asking how the text may speak *to* that context.

Yet not everyone is comfortable with the explicit starting point of lived experience. Whereas biblical scholars have no problem affirming the importance of ancient contexts for the study of the Bible (indeed, this is an essential aspect of the discipline), there is often an effacing of the subject (to use an apt Derridian phrase) when it comes to recognition of one’s own context. There still remains a scholarly unease about acknowledging subjectivity, a remnant of what has colourfully been called “Cartesian anxiety.”<sup>48</sup> But, as I explained in an earlier work:

The admission of subjectivity does not disqualify one’s interpretation, as if there were some other (more viable) hermeneutical alternative waiting in the wings. To treat subjectivity *per se* with suspicion would betray what Richard Bernstein calls “Cartesian anxiety,” the residual (perhaps unacknowledged) nostalgia for the sort of objective certainty Descartes aspired to achieve in the *Meditations*. This aspiration, though now widely recognized as unattainable (and illegitimate), still exercises a profoundly unsettling influence over the sense of epistemic security among many scholars across a wide spectrum of disciplines in the contemporary academy.<sup>49</sup>

I propose it is time that Canadian biblical studies gets past its “Cartesian anxiety.” This will require us to deborder the discipline, bringing what sometimes seems like a hermetically sealed (and protected) field of study into conversation with our own subjectivity and contexts; it will require us to take seriously the embeddedness of biblical studies (and all academic discourses) in the complexity of the real world. Not only does all scholarship arise out of concerns, interests, and questions that come from our contexts, but our scholarship has the potential of speaking powerfully to our contexts, in a world often characterized by suffering and injustice.

This is not the place to provide an exhaustive listing of the forms of suffering or injustice that afflict the peoples of the world today. But we can think of humanly-generated climate disaster and ecological degradation, war and terrorism, sex trafficking and slavery, domestic violence, police brutality; and underlying much of this suffering are the ideologies of racism, sexism, rapacious capitalism, and various forms of nationalism and identity politics, which absolutize the subject

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48 Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 16–20.

49 Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 37.

(identified with an in-group), while demonizing others—typically in the name of some ideal. None of these realities are extraneous to the lives of biblical scholars (or of scholars in any discipline), if they are open to the pain of the world in which they live.

Earlier I characterized my outsider status vis-à-vis the Canadian academic scene as a disadvantage. But perhaps this disadvantage is an advantage in disguise, in that it enables me to envision a future for Canadian biblical studies beyond a Eurocentric model.

Based on my theological formation in the Caribbean context, which grounded my later graduate studies, I do not find it possible to practice biblical studies (or any scholarly activity) independent of, or unaffected by, contextual, existential, even ethical matters. This was how I approached my graduate work in philosophy, and it is how I approach biblical scholarship today.

This does not mean that biblical scholars (or any scholars) need always to make explicit their contextual interests or conceptual paradigms—I certainly do not always find that necessary. Indeed, it can be tiresome to focus constantly on method and prolegomena. My own predilection is to get down to the actual work of interpretation, with a robust discussion among those with different starting points, while noting my own context only when necessary for clarification. In contrast to a Eurocentric privileging of a supposedly neutral and objective approach, the diversity of perspectives and contexts brought to the same subject matter is not an impediment, but can positively enhance and enrich the discussion of any topic—if there is genuine openness to alternative positions.

Having had to negotiate a complex sense of identity in my adolescence, based on my skin colour among darker-skinned friends, church, and family, I then became starkly aware of cultural differences since immigrating to Canada and more recently to the USA, and intersecting all this was my crossing of disciplinary boundaries from theology, to philosophy, then biblical studies. The result is that I have never been able to conceive of academic work (whether giving papers, writing books and articles, or teaching) as anything other than a conversation among those with different points of view. Indeed, this conversation has never been simply interpersonal; it is also profoundly *intra*-personal.<sup>50</sup>

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50 Justo L. González's description of Augustine as *mestizo* (negotiating his Roman and African identities, the heritage of his father and mother, respectively) could be applicable to my sense of identity. González suggests that Augustine's restlessness, which he describes in the *Confessions*, was not due only to his sense of distance from God, "but also to the inner struggle of a person in whom two cultures, two legacies, two world visions clashed and mingled—in short, of a *mestizo*." González, *The Mestizo Augustine: A Theologian between Two Cultures* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 9. But in my case, there were more than two cultures or legacies at work. The result is that I was intensely aware of my own hybridity long before I ever heard of the seminal work of Edward Said or Homi Bhabha. See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994).

## David Jobling's Model of Biblical Scholarship

In many ways David Jobling (to whom this essay is dedicated) has been a model for the practice of biblical studies. Beginning with my very first CSBS/SCÉB paper presentation in 1992, and continuing for the next number of years, Jobling was my foremost interlocutor, interacting with my papers and raising critical questions, while also giving the encouragement a young scholar needed, at a time when imposter syndrome was at its strongest. Indeed, Jobling spent an entire evening with me, for supper and informal conversation, at the start of the 1994 Learned's in Calgary—a gift I will never forget.

This suggests that there is a need for the mentoring of new graduates and junior scholars by those more established in the field, both for simple encouragement and for guidance in navigating biblical studies today. Perhaps the CSBS/SCÉB might develop a method of linking up interested biblical scholars for this purpose.

Although never a formal mentor, David Jobling has embodied for me the sort of biblical scholarship towards which I aspire. His interdisciplinary breadth has been exemplary; he has interacted with literary theory, theology, and philosophy, including structuralist and poststructuralist approaches, ideological criticism, and global readings of the Bible. Such interdisciplinary openness is reflected in the essays and tributes in the Jobling Festschrift, entitled *Voyages in Uncharted Waters*.<sup>51</sup> In a *Semeia* article on the Bible and literary criticism, Jobling acknowledged how rare this interdisciplinary approach was: "There is still some professional reluctance to let such breadth of reading define the discipline of 'biblical studies.' But *Semeia* exists to force such a redefinition, and that is why I am its General Editor." He continued by noting "the failure of biblical studies to engage seriously, at least until recently, with anything outside which threatens to transgress its disciplinary boundaries. This has been particularly true of biblical studies in Canada."<sup>52</sup>

51 Wesley J. Bergen and Armin Siedlecki, eds., *Voyages in Uncharted Waters: Essays on the Theory and Practice of Biblical Interpretation in Honour of David Jobling* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006). An example of Jobling's boundary crossing is his programmatic exploration of the relationship of deconstruction to liberation theologies for their relevance to an ethical-political reading of the Bible, "Writing the Wrongs of the World: The Deconstruction of the Biblical Text in the Context of Liberation Theologies," *Semeia* 51 (1990): 81–118.

52 Jobling, "Biblical Studies on a More Capacious Canvas: A Response to Joe Velaidum and James M. Kee," *Semeia* 89 (2002): 139–46, here 142. Evidence that this situation is changing is that Colleen Shantz (newly elected president of CSBS/SCÉB) has explored the intersection of Paul's ecstatic experience with contemporary neurobiology; see Shantz, *Paul in Ecstasy: The Neurobiology of the Apostle's Life and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Shantz, who holds a faculty position at the Toronto School of Theology (TST), notes (in a personal communication) that the last three dissertations she directed at TST were interdisciplinary, using anthropology to understand the conditions for stability in new religious movements, cognitive linguistics (conceptual blending) to analyze Paul's developing language about resurrection, and political theory to understand Christian origins. This reflects the fact that TST (with an annual cohort of 25–30 PhD students) has revised its doctoral program to encourage interdisciplinarity. Shantz also notes that

But beyond interdisciplinarity, Jobling embodied a version of Antonio Gramsci's notion of the "organic intellectual." Although this term is more well-known in North America through the writings of Cornel West, who applied it to Martin Luther King, Jr., Gramsci originally used it to describe those who are members of a subaltern group suffering injustice, and who engage in the intellectual enterprise for the sake of, and in relationship with, this group.<sup>53</sup>

I understand that not all Canadian practitioners of biblical studies are part of a subaltern community. But, as Jamaican theologian Garnett Roper explains, this is not strictly required. What is required is that scholars care about those who are suffering and listen to their questions. In his proposal for the future of Caribbean theology (which has relevance, *mutatis mutandis*, for Canadian biblical studies), Roper noted that Caribbean theology envisions two changes from "the Western European tradition" of theologizing—namely, a shift in the questions being asked and a shift in those asking the questions.<sup>54</sup>

Concerning the latter point, Roper notes that the dialogue partners of Caribbean theology "are not armchair secularists or academics, but are those from below and they are interested in questions of *justice*." Specifically, these dialogue partners are "the poor and marginalized, along with the pastors and intellectuals who share an organic connection with the marginalized or a commitment to and solidarity with them."<sup>55</sup>

While the phrase "organic connection" alludes to Gramsci's notion of the "organic intellectual," Roper's mention of "commitment and solidarity" that intellectuals may share with the marginalized suggests that it is possible for scholars to have a profound sense of connection with people who are different from themselves. Jobling has consistently attempted to address the conditions and concerns of "the wretched of the earth" (to use Franz Fanon's phrase).<sup>56</sup>

But Roper also notes that the very questions we ask after Eurocentrism may be different: "Caribbean theology is not interested in an armchair discussion about metaphysics or ontology [that is, whether God exists], but rather poses questions

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she co-directed two interdisciplinary dissertations in the University of Toronto religion department, which used neuroscience in a study of music in early Christianity and cognitive science to analyze prophecy. But Shantz points to the problem of new scholars trained in this way applying for jobs that are still defined by traditionally defined specializations. So while faculty and students are becoming more interdisciplinary, many institutions have not yet figured out what this looks like in the structuring of faculty positions.

53 Cornel West, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Prophetic Christian as Organic Intellectual," in West, *Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1988), 3–12. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Noel Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), esp. the section entitled "Problems of History and Culture."

54 Roper, "The Caribbean as the People of God," 3.

55 Roper, "The Caribbean as the People of God," 3–4; his emphasis.

56 Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. from the 1961 French ed. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2004).

that are both ethical and existential. It wants to know *what kind of God* is the God that exists.”<sup>57</sup> By analogy with Roper’s description here, I propose that it is not enough to study the Bible and its historical, cultural, and literary contexts at arms length, as an artifact from the past; nor is it enough to bring biblical studies into interdisciplinary dialogue with other academic fields, since this can serve to keep biblical studies artificially in the realm of the theoretical. Rather, we need to bring biblical studies also into intentional conversation with our present social and religious contexts, exploring how we might address contemporary concerns of ethical significance.

This will require spreading the table of biblical studies widely enough to welcome scholars who bring such concerns to their scholarly work. It will mean hosting a conversation among those of diverse starting points and positions, without intellectual snobberty. Jobling himself has embodied this sort of hospitality toward scholars with whom he disagreed (even profoundly), and it is precisely this sort of posture that I envision for the future for Canadian biblical studies after Eurocentrism.

It is significant that while some biblical scholars are becoming more open to ideological-critical readings of the Bible, this openness is not always directed towards readings that are grounded in a stance of trust. Yet among the positions that some scholars bring to the field are their ecclesial commitments and theological perspectives, which may include taking the Bible as a positive resource for faith. I was, therefore, struck by Aaron Hughes’s avowed intent to be even-handed in his historical account, *From Seminary to University*: “I treat theological and academic approaches to religion equally, and while I certainly favour the inclusivity and historicity of the latter, I have no intention of denigrating the former.”<sup>58</sup>

Hughes is more self-aware than most scholars, yet the very language of “theological and academic approaches” suggests that the theological is somehow distinct from the academic, which continues to perpetuate the implicit bias of the Eurocentric scholarly mindset. I am profoundly glad that as an ecclesially-grounded scholar, who cares about the theological and ethical relevance of the Bible, I have experienced only welcome and engaged, respectful discussion from David Jobling.<sup>59</sup>

Jobling has been one of the most incisive proponents of an ideological-critical reading of the Bible in Canada, often reading against the grain of the text, articulating a critique of patriarchy or ethnocentricity in Scripture. Yet Jobling has

57 Roper, “The Caribbean as the People of God,” 3; emphasis original.

58 Hughes, *From Seminary to University*, 13.

59 On those rare occasions where I have experienced condescending attitudes at CSBS/SCÉB meetings (toward myself or others), I have been able to respond respectfully, yet forthrightly, challenging such attitudes, and sometimes bringing the question of perspective explicitly to the fore of the discussion, to cut off the implicit claim to an essentially privileged position or methodology.

admitted that: “The powerless, and those who write out of experience shared with them, are not prepared to give up the power of the Bible. They need to draw on the Bible’s power in empowering ways.”<sup>60</sup> Jobling notes that it is those like himself, “socially invested with power, . . . who are inclined to assert our power *over* the Bible through a very skeptical critique.” While continuing “to think that such critique of the Bible is utterly necessary,” he admits: “I have begun to worry that, as I help my students to take power *over* a Bible which has disempowered and oppressed them, I am denying them access to power *through* the Bible, of which they are so much in need.”<sup>61</sup>

Similar thoughts have been expressed by Christine Mitchell on the inadequacy of a hermeneutics of suspicion, which simply exposes or critiques problematic aspects of the Bible. She suggests the need also for a “reparative reading” of the Bible, which may engender the sort of personal and communal formation that is able to resist injustice and sustain alternative identities in the context of the present world.<sup>62</sup>

### Canadian Biblical Studies—Quo Vadis?

Although this article had its origins in the invitation to take stock of Canadian biblical studies on the fiftieth anniversary of the CCSR, the particular thrust and focus of the article was prompted by recent conversations within the CSBS/SCÉB executive committee, as we responded to contemporary ethical concerns that were brought to our attention.

The conversations we had were only preliminary. Rather than attempt to formulate particular proposals about how we might address these (and related) concerns, the executive decided that the best course would be to engage the full membership of the CSBS/SCÉB in an open-ended discussion over the next couple of years, with a view to clarifying our *raison d’être* as an academic society. This open-ended discussion would give all interested members a voice in contributing to the future of the Society, and might at some point lead to a formal statement of the purpose.

Whether or not such a formal statement is the outcome of future discussions, I suggest that biblical studies cannot continue with business as usual, ignoring the wider world and the pressing ethical concerns of our times. Any biblical scholar

60 David Jobling, “Experiencing the Many: A Response to Camp, Mack, and Wimbush,” in *Power, Powerlessness and the Divine: New Inquiries in Bible and Theology*, ed. Cynthia L Rigby, Scholars Press Studies in Theological Education (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 281–89, here 283.

61 Jobling, “Experiencing the Many,” 283–84.

62 See the section “Hermeneutics of Suspicion or Reparative Reading?” in Mitchell, “What to Do with All These Canaanites?,” 45–48. Mitchell here (45–46) draws here on the important essay by queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick called “Paranoid Reading or Reparative Reading, or You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is about You,” in Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). 123–52.

who engages in serious self-reflection will realize that their own scholarly work derives from, and is motivated by, various assumptions, questions, and agendas that shape their interest in the subject. This realization is not just a matter of epistemic honesty, requiring a forthright admission of the contextual nature of all study of the Bible. It is fundamentally an ethical issue, requiring us to take seriously both the needs of our social and ecclesial contexts and the voices and contributions of those scholars who articulate such needs as an intrinsic aspect of their scholarly work.

It is my hope that Canadian biblical studies will be able to move beyond the Eurocentric bias of the past and begin to bridge the gap between the traditional study of the Bible in its ancient contexts and the pressing needs of the contemporary world

# Holy Spirit and the Trinity in the Black Church

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## Abstract

Communion with the Holy Spirit forms a major part of the worship traditions of the black church. The Spirit experientially and conceptually exercises a strong influence in black American religion and culture. Like the breath of God in Scripture, His power makes the slave song and gospel hymns, the extemporaneous and unrehearsed prayers of the unsophisticated, along with the written liturgical prayers of the more sedate congregations all bear witness to the centrality of the Spirit in the African American/Canadian church and the Holy Spirit's occupation of every aspect of black culture. How this distinct pneumatological focus potentially speaks to the realization of an African American/Canadian Trinitarian ideology cannot be ascertained without first looking at the reasons behind the black church's focus on the Spirit. This would include looking at the origins of slave theology, the black church, and Black Theology. By understanding the evolution of the black church, and its focus on the Spirit, one can then begin to assess the prospects of an African American/Canadian Trinitarian ideology. Ultimately, this paper seeks to answer the question: does the African American/Canadian church—and its protest arm, Black Theology—have a Trinitarian ideology?

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## Introduction

Communion with the Holy Spirit forms a major part of the worship traditions of the black church. Worship is subject to the “moving” of the Spirit. The constant use of terms such as “getting the Spirit,” “sensitivity to the Spirit,” and “the filling of the Spirit,” all bears witness to the centrality of the Spirit in the African American/Canadian church.<sup>1</sup> The Spirit experientially and conceptually exercises a strong influence in black American religion and culture. Like the breath of God

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<sup>1</sup> Beckford, Robert, *Dread and Pentecostal: A Political Theology of the Black Church in Britain* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000), 6.



in Scripture, His power is present in the slave song and gospel hymns, the rhetoric of the black preacher and even the black trickster, the extemporaneous and unrehearsed prayers of the unsophisticated and the written liturgical prayers of the more sedate congregations. In short, the Holy Spirit occupies every aspect of black culture.<sup>2</sup>

Questions regarding the origins of the black church's distinct pneumatological focus are of paramount concern because they speak to the realization of a Trinitarian ideology. Pursuant to this concern, it would be prudent to look at the reasons behind the black church's focus on the Spirit. This would include looking at the origins of slave theology, the black church, Black Theology, and finally assessing the prospects of an African American/Canadian Trinitarian ideology. Ultimately, this paper seeks to answer the question: does the African American/Canadian church—and its protest arm, Black Theology—have a Trinitarian ideology? We will begin by looking at the pneumatological focus of slave theology and the origins of the black church.<sup>3</sup>

### Why a Pneumatological Focus?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was the first—and, for a least 40 years, the only—theologian who saw the political and theological relevance of the spirituality of black churches. Bonhoeffer was surprised by the black church's "ability 'to smile' in the face of life's difficulties when filled with the Holy Spirit."<sup>4</sup> The active presence of the Holy Spirit in the black church is consciously engaged, waited upon, expected, and welcomed. Its roots reach back beyond the arrival of enslaved Africans on

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2 Thomas, Linda E, "The Holy Spirit and Black Women: a Womanist Perspective," in *Christian Doctrines for Global Gender Justice*, ed. Ji-Sun Kim, Grace, and Jenny Dagers (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 79; McGann, Mary E, "Let it Shine: The Emergence of African American Catholic Worship (NY: Fordham University Press, 2008), 58; Rivers, Clarence R. J., *The Spirit in Worship* (Cincinnati: Stimuli, 1978), 37.

3 Discussing slavery, segregation, and discrimination in North America inevitably brings up issues of race and the terms used to describe each phenotype. To add clarity to my paper and eschew offense, I have opted to use black Canadian and African Canadian interchangeably to denote the group of people that belong to the Negro race; and white or European Canadian interchangeably for those belonging to the Caucasian race. However, every term is problematic, these included. In the Canadian context 'black' and African Canadian, and 'white' and European Canadian are widely used by advocacy groups, governments, and scholars. In this particular case using African Canadians as opposed to African Americans shows the distinction between two different cultural groups of the same Negro race—where only using the term 'black' would promote confusion. Also, I have chosen to utilize a lower case 'b' when using the term black. Many scholars of black history capitalize the 'b,' however, because blacks are a diverse group, whose distinctions go well beyond racial uniformity, I believe that doing so unnecessarily distinguishes blacks from the other groups of people this dissertation discusses.

4 Price, Lynne, *A Theological Biography of Walter J. Hollenweger* (New York: Sheffield, 2002), 80; Hollenweger, Walter J., *Pentecost, Mission, and Ecumenism: Essays on Intercultural Theology* (New York: Peter Lang 1992), 29; McGann, *Let it Shine*, 13.

American soil, beyond their encounter with Christianity, and therefore, with the biblical narrative.<sup>5</sup>

In traditional African religion, “the heritage of our foreparents, the main thrust of religious practice, is to achieve harmony with and empowerment by the spirits.” This cultural orientation prepared black communities in America to recognize in the Bible a God who brings life, energy, and power through His Spirit.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the reasons for the black church’s pneumatological focus have both African and American origins. Let us first venture into the African aspect of African American pneumatology by looking at African spirit worship and ancestry.

### *African Ancestry*

Kwesi Dickson and Benezet Bujo, among other scholars, emphasize the importance of the role of ancestors in representing the sense of community and the “concept of corporate personality”—a theme that is also part of the Israelite faith in the Old Testament.<sup>7</sup> Ancestors (as well as those not yet born) are regarded as part of the community. They are called upon during the important parts of life and the spirits of the ancestors use their power for the well-being of the community.<sup>8</sup> Not all the dead represent ancestors. Rather, ancestors are those who had led a virtuous life and served as leaders of the community;<sup>9</sup> they are lower in status than God but higher than humans.<sup>10</sup> Bujo states that in Africa the *gesta* (manifestations) of ancestors are constantly reenacted through ritual; this enables Africans to recall these *gesta* and conform their conduct to them.<sup>11</sup> Bujo sees Christ in this manner; he is considered a Proto-ancestor, the source of life, and the model of ancestorship. In African religion, it is a legitimate way to bring home the central idea of the eternal Word becoming flesh (John 1:14).<sup>12</sup> Let us now look at how the role of ancestors in African religion helped frame African American slave theology.

### *Conflation of the Spirit*

Africans from various cultures lived with elaborate cosmologies that included a high god, lesser divinities, and ancestors across the centuries.<sup>13</sup> The movement

5 Thomas, “Holy Spirit,” 78–79; McGann, *Let it Shine*, 58; Rivers, *The Spirit in Worship*, 37.

6 McGann, *Let it Shine*, 58.

7 Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 359; Bujo, Benezet, *African Theology in the Social Context* (Translated by John Donohue. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 79; Dickson, Kwesi A., *Theology in African* (London, UK: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984), 172–74.

8 Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 69.

9 Fulljames, Peter, *God and Creation in Intercultural Perspective: Dialogue Between the Theologies of Barth, Dickson, Pobee, Nyamiti, and Pannenberg* (London: Peter Lang, 1993), 47.

10 Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 69.

11 Bujo, *African Theology*, 79.

12 Bujo, *African Theology*, 79.

13 Thomas, “Holy Spirit,” 77.

of the various understandings of spirit among Africans born in Africa and those born in North America gave rise to an expression of the Spirit that is now found in African American/Canadian churches.<sup>14</sup> Enslaved Africans brought to the new World were mostly adults. These adult slaves brought with them their African religion and religious notions of the spirit (ancestors).<sup>15</sup> Historian Lewis Baldwin notes that African religious “notions were blended with Christian conceptions” (most notably the Holy Spirit) and as the “number of American-born slaves began to outnumber African-born slaves,” exposure to white Christian teachers (slaveholders, missionaries, and white preachers on plantations) increased considerably and cosmologies were intertwined.<sup>16</sup>

These diverse elements—African religion and white Eurocentric Christianity—were folded into a new religion;<sup>17</sup> one where the importance of the felt presence of the Holy Spirit was quickly embraced by slaves, because it harkened back to their African religious origins.<sup>18</sup> Most notably, notions of the Spirit were revealed in the “invisible institution”—the progenitor of the black church.<sup>19</sup> During the “secret meetings” of the slaves, the Holy Spirit moved among them and through them, as it did their African ancestors. The Spirit possessed them until one or another’s body moved in response to the Spirit’s call.<sup>20</sup> In slave theology,

14 Thomas, “Holy Spirit,” 77; Callahan, Allen Dwight, *The Talking Book: African America and the Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), xii.

15 Thomas, “Holy Spirit,” 77; African scholar John Mbiti asserts that when Africans move intra and intercontinentally, “they take their religion with them.” Moreover, “even if converted to another religion, like Christianity or Islam, they do not completely abandon their traditional religion, it remains with them for several generations and sometimes centuries.”

16 Thomas, “Holy Spirit,” 77; Callahan, *Talking Book*, xii; Harris, J. William, *The Making of the American South: A Short History, 1550–1877* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 44; Eltis, David, et al., eds., *The Cambridge World History of Slavery: Volume 3. AD 1420–AD 1804* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 490; MacRoberts, Iain, “Black Roots and White Racism of Early Pentecostalism in the USA,” in *Pentecost, Mission and Ecumenism: Essays on Intercultural Theology: Festschrift in Honour of Professor Walter J. Hollenweger*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 10.

17 MacRoberts, Iain, *Black Roots and White Racism of Early Pentecostalism in the USA* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 10.

18 Hopkins, Dwight N., *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 16; Pinn, Anne H., and Anthony B. Pinn, *Fortress Introduction to Black Church History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 29; Bennett, Robert A., “Biblical Hermeneutics and the Black Preacher,” *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Centre*, no. 2 (1974): 39; Glenn, N.D., “Negro Religion and Negro Status in the United States,” in *Religion, Culture and Society: A Reader in the Society of Religion*, edited by Louis Schneider (New York: John Wiley, 1964), 628; Montgomery, William E., *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South 1865–1900* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 23.

19 It was called the “invisible Institution” because of its desire to remain hidden from the view and hearing of the slavemaster. The slaves would worship God through dance, song, the shout, and spirituals; Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 16; Thomas, “Holy Spirit,” 77–78; Callahan, *Talking Book*, xii; Smith, Robert London, *From Strength to Strength: Shaping a Black Practical Theology for the 21st Century* (Peter Lang: New York, 2007), 94.

20 Glenn, “Negro,” 628; Pinn and Pinn, *Black Church*, 29; Manis, Andrew M., “Birmingham’s Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth: Unsung Hero of The Civil Rights Movement,” *Baptist History and Heritage*, no. 35 (2000): 75–76; Montgomery, *Fig Tree*, 23–24.

Jesus is a fellow sufferer and liberator. However, the Spirit gave hope, determination, and—more importantly to the slave—daily empowerment and replenishment of the body and spirit.<sup>21</sup> It is important to note that slavery in North America was a self-contained system of daily human domination and denial of personhood and dignity.<sup>22</sup> The day-to-day survival issues of both the slave and today's free African Americans/Canadians are likewise based on the empowerment and replenishment of the Holy Spirit, with the result that the Holy Spirit has become a constant companion and a focus of worship in the black church.

But how was this slave religion transmitted from plantation to plantation and slave to slave? Let us now seek to understand how the Spirit's centrality, in slave theology specifically, was transmitted, and how it ties into Black Theology and eventually a Trinitarian ideology.

### *Communication: Praxis before Theology*

The cornerstone of slave theology was God's liberating message. The emancipation of the Hebrew slaves and the sending of His Son for the liberation of all peoples showed that Yahweh continuing to act in human history, siding with the oppressed.<sup>23</sup> However, for the slave, this was only communicated in conversation, song, and spirituals; the slave and slave-priest (progenitor of the black pastor) were often illiterate,<sup>24</sup> and therefore their theology was not written down or codified.<sup>25</sup> The slave-priest often committed large portions of the Bible to memory. Cato Carter, a slave, stated: "In the chapel some slave mens [sic] preached from the Bible but couldn't read a line no more than sheep could." Although African American literacy rates increased through Emancipation and Jim Crow segregation eras, a codification of black slave theology was not pursued. It was not until the civil rights era that we would see a change in this trend.

Without the tools and impetus to systemize black slave theology, African American religious institutions were not engaging in biblical scholarship but practical theology—a black praxis predicated on an eschatological view of freedom

21 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 71.

22 Hicks, H. Beecher Jr., *Images of The Black Preacher: The Man Nobody Knows* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1977), 27–28; Shenton, James, "Slavery as an Institution," in *From Freedom to Freedom: African Roots in American Soil*, ed. Bain, Mildred and Ervin Lewis (New York: Random House, 1977), 130, 134–35.

23 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 21–22; Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 155.

24 It was illegal for slaves to learn how to read or write, in some places, under penalty of death or some close approximation; Rogers Albert, Octavia V., *American Slaves Tell Their Stories: Six Interviews*, (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2005), 77; Allen, Marlene D., and Seretha D. Williams, eds., *Afterimages of Slavery: Essays on Appearances in Recent American Films, Literature, Television and other Media* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1997), 173.

25 Rawick, George P., "From Sun Up to Sun Down: The Making of the Black Community," in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Vol 1* (Westport, CN: Greenwood, 1972), 35; Glenn, "Negro," 628.

from slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and later systemic racism. Joseph Washington contends that the “Negro institutions were not established to propound theology or liturgical matters.” He believed the harmful impact of Christian white supremacy and the evils of segregation forcefully kept blacks out of many aspects of the church, most notably theology. He goes on to say that “the central theological questions of faith, particularly the teachings of the church on social issues, have not entered the religious realm of the Negro.”<sup>26</sup> As mentioned earlier, black religious organizations of the 1950s and 1960s were in fact institutions of justice and liberation—praxis for surviving life as an African American/Canadian in North America. As Gustavo Gutierrez states, “theology is a reflection . . . a second act . . . that comes after action.” That is, “it is not the role of theology to tell us what to do or provide solutions for pastoral action. Rather, theology follows the pastoral action of the church and is a reflection upon it.”<sup>27</sup> This was very true for slave theology. Moreover, a modern Black Theology arose, in part, as a systemic investigation, development, and creation of a Christian theology for black people moving towards liberation.<sup>28</sup>

Let us now look at how Black Theology became a response to African American religious institutions’ lack of theological scholarship, i.e., a study and codification specifically centred on viewing the gospel through the lens of the black experience.

### **Why A Black Theology?**

After Reconstruction (1877), what was seen as a white southern backlash to Emancipation and Reconstruction was galvanized in the election of Rutherford B. Hayes. Jim Crow segregation resulted, and with it the systematic repeal of any social, political, and economic gains made by blacks due to Emancipation and Reconstruction. At this time, while blacks died in the streets, theologians were engaged in intellectual conversations unconcerned with God’s relationship to the survival and freedom of black humanity. During the civil rights movement and the aftermath of Martin Luther King’s assassination, riots in 130 US cities ensued (mainly in the ghettos). What was seen as a white backlash to the civil rights movement was galvanized in the election of Richard M. Nixon, resulting in a systematic repeal of civil rights gains by African Americans in the 1960s. Here as well, while African Americans died in the streets, theologians remained engaged

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26 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 31; Washington Jr., Joseph R., *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Boston: Beacon, 1966), 255.

27 Hennelly, Alfred T., *Liberation Theologies: The Global Pursuit of Justice* (S.J. Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1995), 12.

28 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 32.

in conversations unconcerned with God's relationship to the survival and freedom of black humanity.<sup>29</sup>

Black Theology arose because African American scholars believed traditional white theology was part of the problem. In the sixties, Allan Boesak (who popularized the term "black consciousness"),<sup>30</sup> Malcolm X (a black polemicist), and later James Cone (the father of Black Theology), along with others, saw the need to resurrect the black subjugated consciousness. They believed it needed to be awakened to allow African Americans to actively participate in their liberation.<sup>31</sup> This conviction stood in agreement with Jürgen Moltmann's contention that all liberation theologies follow a similar praxis: initial separation from the oppressor, then (as Boesak, X, and Cone expressed) liberation from the psychological oppression to facilitate the discovery and development of the consciousness of the oppressed, and finally integration through mutual recognition.<sup>32</sup>

Corresponding to this theological development, while Cone argued for Jesus' literal blackness,<sup>33</sup> Dwight Hopkins, Deotis J. Roberts, and other black scholars asserted that the notion of Christ's blackness served psychocultural needs, i.e., low self-esteem due to psychological damage of slavery and traditional, white-centred theology.<sup>34</sup> Hopkins argued that mainstream white theology did not accurately reflect the Bible or human social relationships. In fact, in the case of African Americans, it solidified institutions dominated by racism.<sup>35</sup> For example, during the time of slavery, "after sitting in the segregated areas of white churches listening to sermons, slaves were admonished not to steal and to serve their white masters as best as they could, so that they might find salvation."<sup>36</sup> In response, slaves would steal away in the evening into the woods to have *their* church—an invisible institution.<sup>37</sup> The white community not only passed laws to prevent slaves from receiving unsupervised religious instruction but also sought to whip and kill slaves who met secretly to praise God. Yet the "invisible institution" continued

29 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 54–55.

30 Boesak, Allan, *Farewell to Innocence: A Social-Ethical Study on Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1977), 138–42. "Black consciousness" was a spiritual reawakening of black pride in self and a reaffirmation of black culture and humanity in North America.

31 Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, 9; Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 8.

32 Moltmann, Jürgen, *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 191–96.

33 Cone, James H., *God of the Oppressed* (New York, NY: Seabury, 1975), 135–37. Cone states that Christ is black because he enters and converges with black oppression and black struggle; Schultz, *Religion*, 28; Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 58.

34 Roberts, Deotis J., *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1971), 43; Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 63; African Americans/Canadians felt little worth when they saw white Christians offering a white Christ as a true picture of Jesus and a God that did not resemble them but was painted white like the slave-master.

35 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 82–83.

36 Smith, *Strength to Strength*, 94; Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 20.

37 Smith, *Strength to Strength*, 94; Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 20.

and became the crucible in which slave theology, the black church, and Black Theology would ultimately be forged.<sup>38</sup>

In 1966, the NCNC (National Committee of Negro Churchmen) published a full-page article in the *New York Times*. The article espoused the notion that “Black Power” ideology was “rooted in (and a response to) the ongoing gross imbalance of power and conscience between Negroes and white Americans”—it was an attempt by African America to relate the Gospel of Jesus to the black community’s need for power.<sup>39</sup> Three years later, during the Civil Rights Movement, James H. Cone published his classic book *Black Theology and Black Power*. Black Theology would be codified in a document that was inserted into American society during a tumultuous period.<sup>40</sup> “Black Theology believes that liberation is not only ‘part of’ the gospel or ‘consistent with’ the gospel, but is the content and framework of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>41</sup> Both the NCNC and Cone were the first attempts at systemizing the gospel from a black perception.<sup>42</sup> From a Gutierrezian perspective, codification helped African Americans/Canadians see the particularity of their ideology and praxis. Due to their social context, theirs’ would necessarily be a unique Trinitarian ideology. But it would be helpful to ask here to what extent African ancestry bore any influence on the development of this ideology.

In addressing this question, we must first determine if an African Trinitarian view even existed; one that may have survived the Atlantic voyage to North America and contributed to the African American/Canadian Trinitarian ideology.

### African Trinitarian Ideology

Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen states that Trinitarian ideology in Africa is marginalized and even eschewed due in part to the fact that as a doctrine based on Hellenistic metaphysics it is very difficult to understand.<sup>43</sup> It uses the non-African term “person” and it has no practical nature, which is a key component in African American/Canadian theology.<sup>44</sup> It is important to note that Kärkkäinen’s perspective on Afri-

38 Hopkins, Dwight N., *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narrative* (Maryknoll, New York, NY: Orbis, 1991), 9; Hicks, *Black Preacher*, 29.

39 Schultz, Jeffrey D., et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of Religion in American Politics. Vol 2* (Phoenix: Oryz, 1993), 28; Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 8–9.

40 Lincoln, Eric C., *The Black Church Since Frazier* (New York, NY: Schocken, 1974), 125.

41 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 355.

42 Bradley, Anthony B., *Liberating Black Theology: The Bible and the Black Experience in America* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 57. Cone argues that to understand Jesus outside of his identification with the poor is to distort his person and work. Jesus was born into an oppressed community identified with the poor and to whom he ministered. Jesus was a victim of social and structural oppression by the cultural elite, died, and was resurrected to reveal that God is present in all dimensions of human liberation.

43 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 356.

44 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 356; Mugambi, Jesse N. K., *African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity* (Nairobi, Kenya: Longman, 1989), 75.



can Trinitarianism concerns the present time. We cannot state with any certainty that African Trinitarian ideology today resembles that of the period of the Atlantic slave trade—a period which spawned the syncretic events that led to the creation of an African American slave theology. However, if we take into consideration John Mbiti’s assertion regarding the immutability and retention of African religious traditions, then African Trinitarian ideology should have remained largely constant over time. In any case, notwithstanding Kärkkäinen’s view, most African Trinitarian reflections represent instead the social analogy—the primacy of communion in general and family community in particular; “family” in Africa meaning extended family, consisting of both the living and the dead (i.e., ancestorship).<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, ancestorship is a legitimate way of espousing the Trinity in an African context. Scholarship tells us: “The Father has the fullness of eternal life and begets the Son. Their love for each other is in a total and vital union; the vital power goes out from the Father to beget the Son and finally returns to the Father—this vital union that produces the interaction between Father and Son is nothing other than the Holy Spirit, the bond between the Father and Son.”<sup>46</sup> African religion—and later slave and Black Theology—realized that the doctrine of God (Godhead) is a relational dynamic concept.<sup>47</sup> In traditional African terms, a “vital union” may characterize the mutual-reinforcing stream of energy that results in the building-up and binding of community. This union produces the interaction between a father and son or mother and daughter, and that which constitutes the bond between them is nothing other than the divine power that, being within the Godhead, takes actual form and is identified as the Holy Spirit. It is a phenomenon that may be traced back to Jesus, raised up by the Father as proto-ancestor and thereby becoming the final source of life. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus becomes the vehicle of a new life-energy, the Spirit, who unites the new tribe and community.

Since the idea of “the Spirit play(ing) an active role in defining the identities of the Father and the Son”<sup>48</sup> was in fact embedded in African religious thought, and

45 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 356.

46 Bujo, *African Theology*, 86; Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 156; Pinnock, Clark H., *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 21–22, 40; Stuebaker, Steven M., *From Pentecost to the Triune God: A Pentecostal Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 106–107. This is an ideation shared by Stuebaker and Pinnock. Stuebaker states, “the Father who is in loving communion with the Son, is only Father as such by the Holy Spirit who facilitates their fellowship and completes the triune community.” Pinnock concurs by stating, “the Spirit bonds the Trinity by being the witness to the love of the Father and Son, by entering into it and fostering it, and by communicating its warmth to creatures.”

47 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 155.

48 Stuebaker, *Pentecost*, 93–94. The economic work of the Spirit—liminal, constitutional, consummational or eschatological—reveals the Spirit’s immanent identity. In short, only in the Holy Spirit does the triune nature of God find the fullness of fellowship—only in the subsistence of the Holy Spirit does the Godhead cross the Trinitarian threshold and “becomes” the fellowship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.



now has primacy in African American/Canadian theology, it may be questioned why a Trinitarian ideology did not, then, organically developed from African American slave theology.

### **Why Scholars Believe Contemporary African American/Canadian Christianity Does Not Possess a Trinitarian Ideology**

If the Spirit is the lynchpin of the Godhead, then, as Kärkkäinen postulated, African Americans/Canadians should have a vibrant Trinitarian ideology. This should have been due, in no small part, to the function of the Holy Spirit in the Godhead and the deep and complex ways African American/Canadian Christians understood Him. That is, this dynamic understanding should have naturally and inexorably progressed into a deep and complex understanding of the Trinitarian relationship. However, Kärkkäinen argues that, with a few exceptions, it did not. I contend that the reason may not be the absence of a Trinitarian ideology but a lack of a more holistic understanding of the history of black religion and theology.<sup>49</sup>

Like Kärkkäinen, Anthony Reddie remarks, “relatively little work has been done on the Trinity in Black Theology.” Reasons for this vary, including the argument that many black Christians belong to the “Oneness Tradition” that eschews any notion of the Trinity as having any probative functionality within the Bible.<sup>50</sup> Another reason is, again, the intense metaphysical and philosophical understanding demanded of those seeking to explore the complexities of the “immanent” and “economic” Trinity.<sup>51</sup> Reddie comments that for many black theological scholars there has been a preference for understanding practical forms of discourse around which most black people can cohere, as opposed to more speculative forms of scholarship that might divide the African American/Canadian community.<sup>52</sup> While these are legitimate observations, they fail to view black theological history and black religious institutions from their historical foundations, and in doing so miss how they evolved and are communicated<sup>53</sup>—first by word of mouth and then, in time, being codified. A more holistic view of black Trinitarian history is required for a more robust understanding of the unique African American/Canadian Trinitarian ideology.

The Christianity of the North American slave was one of practicality; it possessed an eschatological view, namely, delivery from slavery. It was not a theology that was written down or codified; as Joseph Washington stated, black religion was not set up that way. However, the black pneumatological focus—argued by

49 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 356.

50 Reddie, Anthony G., *Working Against the Grain: Reimagining Black Theology in the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 75.

51 Reddie, *Against the Grain*, 75.

52 Reddie, *Against the Grain*, 75.

53 MacRoberts, “Black Roots,” 77.

Karkkainen and others—coupled with Steven Studebaker and Clark Pinnock’s ideas surrounding the vital role the Holy Spirit plays in the Trinitarian relationship—as a conduit to the fullness of fellowship that is the Trinity—should have engendered a Trinitarian ideology. In fact, it did, just not one systematized. Rather, as typical of slave theology, it was practical, a lived Trinitarian view. Kärkkäinen goes on to state that although black theologians have contributed significantly to the doctrine of God they have not felt the need to reflect on the Trinity<sup>54</sup>—at times being quite doubtful about the whole doctrine. Kärkkäinen cites, for example, James H. Evans Jr.’s book, *We have been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology*, as the example of a widely used manual that hardly mentions the term Trinity even though there is a chapter on the doctrine of God.<sup>55</sup> He then goes on to say that there is much in the heritage and agenda of Black Theology that leans toward a relational and dynamic understanding of God.<sup>56</sup> In this, I agree. But I disagree with his assessment of black theologians’ reflection on the Trinity.

I will attempt to give a much different take on this issue by first sharing the Trinitarian views of a few notably African American theologians, and then taking a slightly different approach to black Trinitarian understanding.

### **Black Trinitarian Ideology: A Holistic View**

The patristic fathers of Black Theology<sup>57</sup> tacitly spoke to the Godhead by directly defining each persona’s role in black liberation. They saw the Spirit, Father, and Son perform much of the same tasks, alluding to their interconnectedness in the African American/Canadian consciousness. This view lends itself to Hopkin’s statement that Trinitarian language was ever-present even though Kärkkäinen argues that the Trinitarian view in Africa was minimal if not eschewed. But it existed and enough of it was embedded in African religious thought to make its way to North America.<sup>58</sup>

Cone’s doctrine of the Trinity—expressed (in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement) in terms of God’s essential blackness<sup>59</sup>—states

that as Creator, God identifies with oppressed Israel and participated in the forming of that people; as Redeemer God became the oppressed one so that all may be free from oppression; as Holy Spirit, God

54 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 157.

55 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 157.

56 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 157.

57 James H. Cone (considered the father of Black Theology), J. Deotis Roberts, Gayraud S. Wilmore, and Charles H. Long.

58 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 156; Bujo, *African Theology*, 86.

59 Cone, James H., *A Black Theology of Liberation and God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1970), 135–37. Cone states that God is, in fact, black because God has made the oppressed condition his condition; as Jesus was an oppressed Jew he is, in turn, an oppressed African-American; Bradley, *Black Theology*, 56.

continues the work of liberation. In North America, the Holy Spirit aids blacks in making decisions about their togetherness which means making preparation for an encounter with whites.<sup>60</sup>

Hopkins (a generation removed from the Civil Rights Movement) states, “Black Theology claims that the God of liberation witnessed to in the Bible, decisively revealed in the living presence of Jesus Christ, and offered today as an empowering Spirit is the same God who desires the divine will be located amidst the plight and struggle of the black poor.”<sup>61</sup> He goes on to say, “God is never positioned so high that the divine Spirit couldn’t be bestowed on the human predicament”; lastly, Hopkins asserts that “the Spirit of hope, determination, and liberation continues to move African America.” Black Theology’s concept of the Godhead understands the divine-human relationship as dynamic and relational. He is not only out there, but also involved with our history here. This is exemplified by Jesus’ resurrection, which made it evident that God’s liberating work is not only for Israel but also for all enslaved humans.<sup>62</sup>

Early African American writers and preachers assumed the triune nature of God.<sup>63</sup> Trinitarian language has existed since slavery, where the Trinity was “real in the daily practice of religion and not dogma and doctrine.” They saw Jesus as another form of God, not the abstract second person of the Trinity.<sup>64</sup> However, the traditional doctrinal perspective posed serious problems for enslaved and marginalized Africans who were immediately confronted with the question of God’s righteousness in light of the evils of slavery.<sup>65</sup> Christian ideas about the Godhead needed to be applied to and exercised in the context of their life circumstances. That is, they needed to be practical, along the lines of the belief in the appearance of God’s Word in the form of the human Jesus, which symbolized precisely the divine being becoming poor to bring about suffering humanity’s liberation—in this case the black slave.<sup>66</sup> Lastly, but more importantly for the black praxis, is the idea that the Holy Spirit dwelt within Jesus to bring forth justice even when it meant his living with suffering and struggle.<sup>67</sup> The existence of these ideas

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60 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 156.

61 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 27–28.

62 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 27–28.

63 Arvyabwile, Thabiti M., *The Decline of African American Theology: From Biblical Faith to Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2007), 64.

64 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 79.

65 Arvyabwile, *The Decline*, 64. This dilemma was not completely resolved with the abolition of slavery; new evils, such as Lynch laws and Jim Crow, emerged to challenge the belief in the inherent goodness of God. A high view of God’s sovereignty allowed early black Christians, despite the horrors of slavery, to trust that God had the necessary power to deliver them from oppression.

66 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 19.

67 Thomas, “Holy Spirit,” 79.

intimate that a lived Trinitarian view may have superseded ideological formulations or at least account for their absence.<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

What Kärkkäinen, Reddie, and others seem to overlook is the significance and intensity of the day-to-day struggles of the life of the average African American and African Canadian. Blacks in North America are forever cognizant of the fact that God acts in human history to liberate the oppressed. The Word in human form who walked in the shoes of the oppressed identifies with this very struggle, and the Holy Spirit was thus sent as a source of daily empowerment and replenishment for the oppressed. The ancestors of enslaved Africans knew the Godhead in deep and complex ways—an understanding that has a significant impact on African American/Canadian Trinitarian orientation if not a codified ideology.<sup>69</sup>

Brian Bantum, like Gutierrez, cites Long's assertion that "even if one is to have a theology, it must arise from (practical) religion, something that is prior to theology."<sup>70</sup> African Americans/Canadians live the Trinity daily; it is embedded in their praxis and is a prosaic part of their consciousness. It may not be systematized but, like black slave theology, it exists in a very practical sense.<sup>71</sup> This is summed up by Hopkins when he states, "the God of freedom, Jesus the liberator, and the empowering Holy Spirit are manifest in what it means to be black and Christian today."<sup>72</sup> In short, the black Trinitarian ideology is an embedded aspect of the daily life of African Americans/Canadians. However, this does not mean that scholarship on the Trinity among black theologians should not be pursued or prioritized.

### *Work on a New Black Theology of Liberation and Trinitarian View*

Kärkkäinen argues that, while acknowledging the presence of African theology with prayers, hymns, and other forms of spirituality, theologies (specifically, black) need to move beyond these towards building a systematic theology from an African perspective.<sup>73</sup> This echoes Hopkins's concern for an African American/Canadian theology of liberation. Hopkins, Gayraud Wilmore, Robert London Smith, and other scholars question many aspects of Black Theology. This includes gaps between it and the ideology of the black church, black suffering as redemptive, Black Theology's hyper-focus on reform, its masculine proclivity, and

68 MacRoberts, "Black Roots," 77.

69 Thomas, "Holy Spirit," 77.

70 Bantum, Brian, "Black Theology or Black Religion? Discipleship as a Theological Method," *Black Theology*, no. 8 (2010): 177.

71 MacRoberts, "Black Roots," 77.

72 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 202.

73 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 360.

lack of focus on the poor. Hopkins then poses the question, “is Black Theology serving the black community today?”<sup>74</sup> Like most black theologians I disagree with Washington’s assertion that black people must merge with whites and adopt white theology—one that has been historically repressive to African Americans/Canadians—to foster their own growth.<sup>75</sup>

Reddie, like Hopkins, Smith, and Wilmore, offers a “Theo-educational polemic” for a new model of Black Theology (one for the 21<sup>st</sup> century); one focused on black liberation but with a new ideal and methodology that includes using the black experience at every level of life and encompasses the gospel of good news for a broken humanity.<sup>76</sup> Hopkins furthers this proposal by specifying that a more vibrant and nuanced Black Theology needs to reflect black culture, look back at its African origins and ancestry, be attentive to the black poor, and incorporate the thoughts and aspirations of black women, who comprise 70% of the black church. This can only help form a Christology that is principally African in origin and African American/Canadian in its formulation. Hopkins argues this will create a more vibrant and cohesive Black Theology of liberation,<sup>77</sup> one without influence from white European Christianity, allowing for the formulation of a truly unique black Trinitarian ideology that contributes to the doctrine of God.

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74 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 122. Hopkins argues that black political theologians waste time waging war on white racism while using a white theological framework. A new and more sophisticated theology is needed, one that encompasses the gospel of good news for a broken humanity, and a radical restructuring of American political economy.

75 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 32; Washington, *Black Religion*, 255.

76 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 94–96; Reddie, *Against the Grain*, ix.

77 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 94–96; Reddie, *Against the Grain*, ix.

## “The Outskirts of Paradise” Depictions of Hades in Early Syriac Literature

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### Abstract

This paper examines the depictions of Hades/Sheol in three of the earliest examples of Christian Syriac literature: *The Odes of Solomon*, *The Acts of Thomas*, and the authentic corpus of Ephrem the Syrian. This paper intends to fulfill two purposes. First, it serves as a beginning attempt in filling the lamentable gap of English-language scholarship concerning early Syriac eschatology. Second, it seeks to make explicit the noticeable unity and disunity these depictions share, contending that the latter diversity is a mark of the imaginative theologizing in which these Syriac works engaged. The paper concludes by suggesting further research in this area and theological attitude.

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### Introduction

In this paper, I examine the depictions of Hades/Sheol in the earliest Christian Syriac literature, with particular emphasis on three influential sources from the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries CE: *The Odes of Solomon*, *The Acts of Thomas*, as well as both the poetical and prose writings of Ephrem the Syrian. There is a dearth of material on Hades, and eschatology more generally, in English-language Syriac academic discourse.<sup>1</sup> Frequently, discussions on the posthumous state are examined through the prism of Christ’s *descensus ad infernos*—his preaching of the Gospel to the Old Testament Saints and their deliverance into Heaven. Over the past several decades, there have been several monographs and dissertations that study Christ’s

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1 The broadest discussion I have found is Ute Possek, “Expectations of the End in Early Syriac Christianity,” in *Apocalyptic Thought in Early Christianity*, ed. Robert J. Daly, Holy Cross Studies in Patristic Theology and History (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 160–74. However, much of Possek’s discussion is limited as she attempts to incorporate as many sources and authors as possible.

descent in Ephrem, *The Odes*, and other early and medieval Syriac literature.<sup>2</sup> Yet, there is little explicit surveying on the role of Sheol beyond this (now) obscure theological doctrine.

This paper attempts primarily to provide analysis and elaboration on Hades' location, inhabitants, function, and greater cosmological-eschatological significance in the early Syriac tradition. I contend these presentations do possess noticeable, but basic, commonalities about Hades, such as belief in its existence and some comparable conceptual ideations about the location's appearance or inhabitants. In this sense, there is consensus on aspects of Hades among these sources. Yet simultaneously, there exists a real theological diversity in these *Sheolic* portrayals, as these sources go beyond their shared commonalities and engage in an active, imaginative theologizing that results in each work featuring distinct and creative depictions of Hades.

### The Odes of Solomon

*The Odes of Solomon*<sup>3</sup> are a collection of forty-two psalms pseudepigraphically attributed to the eponymous Israelite monarch. Since their more extensive discovery in 1909 by J. Rendell Harris, the provenance of the *Odes* has been a source of much scholarly debate. Yet even though there are a lack of concrete answers to the multitude of questions regarding the text's origins, certain statements can be made about the *Odes* with some surety. It was most likely an original Syriac text, written in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> to early 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE, and even though Jesus Christ is not mentioned by name, the *Odes* are "undeniably a Christian work," influenced by Christianized readings of the Hebrew Bible and the Gospel of John. The hymnbook is filled with beautiful and theologically rich imagery, with one scholar noting that the "overwhelming sentiment of the *Odes* is one of exuberant joy, praise, and thanksgiving."<sup>4</sup>

Due to the *Odes*' joyful attitude, as well as the limited amount of material with explicit mention of the posthumous state, it is harder to construct a thorough depiction of Hades to the same extent as the works below. Additionally, the *Odes* engage in paradoxical, poetic descriptions of the nature and inhabitants of Hades.

2 See Adrienne L. Jervis, "O Death, Where Is Thy Victory? A Study of Christ's Descensus Ad Infernos in the Odes of Solomon," PhD diss. (University of Edinburgh, 1995); Richard Edward McCarron, "The Appropriation of the Theme of Christ's Descent to Hell in the Early Syriac Liturgical Tradition," PhD diss. (Catholic University of America, 2000); and Thomas Buchan, "*Blessed Is He Who Has Brought Adam From Sheol*": *Christ's Descent to the Dead in the Theology of Saint Ephrem the Syrian*" (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2004).

3 Translations of the *Odes of Solomon* are from either James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Odes of Solomon: The Syriac Texts*, trans. James H. Charlesworth, Texts and Translations 13 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977); or Jervis, "O Death." Each citation will indicate which translation is utilized.

4 Ute Possekkel, "The Emergence of Syriac Literature to AD 400," in *The Syriac World*, ed. Daniel King (New York: Routledge, 2018), 311.

Nonetheless, the *Odes* frequently mention Christ's underworld descent, along with his actions therein, which allows for a sufficient depiction to be possible.<sup>5</sup>

Sheol in the *Odes* is a landscape of watery pits, or a "plurality of abysses,"<sup>6</sup> filled with disparate bones and shadowy beings. There is no "life" in Sheol,<sup>7</sup> but there is a kind of disembodied, pitiful existence. In fact, one of Christ's many seminal acts in his descent is performing an Ezekiel-esque action in which he "took dead bones and covered them with flesh."<sup>8</sup> The realm is ruled over by the personified Death, who is frequently portrayed as equivalent to the "Evil One" and/or "Sheol" itself. Death is a chaos monster: a seven-headed dragon who vociferously devours all who descend into his realm.<sup>9</sup> Death is also a jailer, as Sheol is surrounded by a gate of iron, with the dead held in chains.<sup>10</sup> One may notice mixed descriptions about the state of the dead in Hades throughout the corpus. For example, in Ode 22, the dead are truly in "graves" within Sheol,<sup>11</sup> while Ode 17 features the dead enchained and existing as cognizant (spiritual, but non-corporeal) beings in the afterlife. There is no mention of explicit punishment, but the Odist does not portray this posthumous state as anything *but* miserable.

Regardless of pictorial ambiguity, the *Odes* appear quite clear on what happens to Hades when Christ descends into it: he empties it and destroys its power to consume any more deceased humans.<sup>12</sup> In Ode 22, Christ is said to have "defeated"

5 I primarily rely on Jervis's "O Death" due to the serious lack of scholarly material investigating this question (in English, of course). The closest article I found to addressing this topic is William Romaine Newbold, "The Descent of Christ in the Odes of Solomon," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 31 (1912): 168–210. Yet, since over a century has passed since publication, the article is extremely dated. His primary argument is that the *Odes of Solomon* were written by "Bardaisan of Edessa," and this is deduced via a comparison of the hymns to Zodiac and Greek astrology. Little is discussed concerning the form, function, and ultimate purpose of Hades.

6 Ode 24:5. Jervis remarks that Sheol is sometimes described as "subterranean, [and] at others it is subaquatic." "O Death," 340–41.

7 Ode 42:14 states that Christ, in his descent, made a "congregation of the living among . . . [the] dead." Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*, 145.

8 Ode 22:9. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*, 90.

9 Ode 22:5. Jervis makes the unpersuasive attempt to connect the depictions of Death *qua* dragon to the ancient Canaanite legends of Ba'al, Yam, and Mot. This is an incident in which a similar concept does not, at all, imply any sort of mythopoetic mimesis. "O Death," 340.

10 Ode 17:10. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*, 75.

11 Ode 22:8. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*, 90.

12 The earliest scholars of the *Odes* appear to agree to the hymnbook's universalism. In J. Rendell Harris' first translation of and commentary on the Syriac *Odes of Solomon*, he writes that the Odist is "exultant in his universalism." In Ode 6, "the stream of living water has gone out into all the earth: thirsty souls everywhere have been refreshed by it: dying souls have been revived." *The Odes and Psalms of Solomon: Published from the Syriac Version* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913), 13. Later authors are more ambivalent to the claim of universalism, however. Jeffrey A. Trumbower denies any potential for a universalist reading of the *Odes*, remarking that the various hymns (particularly 42) indicate that not only did not every inhabitant leave with Christ, but also the descending Lord seems to have "let go" of Sheol/Death after holding them down, implying a resumption of function. *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 98–99.



the seven-headed dragon: he “obliterated [the beast’s] evil venom” and “destroy[ed] [its] seed.”<sup>13</sup> Adrienne Jervis contends this passage demonstrates “the complete reversal of fortunes of Death and his cohorts.”<sup>14</sup> Death has tasted “true life” (i.e., Christ), and it is unclear whether he will ever possess the same appetite for the dead again. Ode 42, following this metaphor, states that Christ was like a toxic ipecac: “I have been vinegar and bitterness to [Sheol],” which not only led Death to “[eject] me and many with me”<sup>15</sup> but also shattered the power of this subterranean realm. Ode 17 details the utter destructiveness of Christ’s descent to the whole physical geography of Sheol: “I shattered the bars of iron, for my own shackles had grown hot and melted before me.”<sup>16</sup> All that was closed becomes open, those who were bound are untied, and the dead are given the living knowledge of the “resurrection through [his] love.”<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the *Odes of Solomon* cast Christ’s descent as an extremely disruptive moment in eschatological history. Jervis writes that it signals “the totality of [Death/Sheol’s] defeat,” as Christ’s salvific descent is “comprehensive, final, and definitive.”<sup>18</sup> The Odist “emphasizes . . . universality . . . [and] the finality of [Christ’s] victory” in which “not a trace of Death or his loathsome abode is allowed to endure.”<sup>19</sup> Jervis argues that this is not “an improvement of the existing scheme, but a complete overturning of everything that had gone before.”<sup>20</sup> The power of Death to hold the dead in his realm was totally devastated by Christ.<sup>21</sup>

Yet, we must be careful drawing any too fine of conclusions. The *Odes* feature varying depictions of Hades, seemingly in conceptual conflict with each other as noted. Attempting to construct any systematic theological conclusion from this hymnbook may be unwise. Nonetheless, the *Odes* frequently portray this ghastly, watery location as having been weakened, destroyed, and/or reduced to emptiness after the descent—it thus seems reasonable to conclude that Hades plays little to no role in the posthumous existence of not only believers, but also *all* people post-descent. Whether this implies any sort of soteriological universalism seems impossible to firmly determine based on merely what is in the *Odes* themselves.

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13 Ode 22:5, 7. Jervis, “O Death,” 106.

14 Jervis, “O Death,” 342.

15 Ode 42:12, 11. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*, 145.

16 Ode 17:10. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*, 75.

17 Ode 17:13. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*, 75.

18 Jervis, “O Death,” 341.

19 Jervis, “O Death,” 341.

20 Jervis, “O Death,” 342.

21 It is rather enigmatic, but Ode 24:10 also mentions that “the Lord destroyed the devices of those who had not the truth with them,” possibly a reference to the obliteration of Death and his carceral mechanisms. Charlesworth, *The Odes of Solomon*, 98.

## The Acts of Thomas

The *Acts of Thomas* is a New Testament apocrypha detailing the missionary exploits of Judas Thomas Didymus—the twin brother of Jesus Christ—who was the apostle to the East (i.e., contemporary India). The provenance of the material is Syriac (although there is some debate),<sup>22</sup> with one scholar contending that it “was composed in the Edessene area in the first half of the third century [CE].”<sup>23</sup> The work was popular in late antiquity, finding support among both the “orthodox” and Manichean Christians, the latter of which primarily valued the narrative’s ascetic teachings.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the theme of asceticism is heavily apparent within the *Acts*, as Thomas calls upon recent converts to live a life of bodily rejection and celibacy. Throughout the narrative, the apostle breaks up weddings, commands chastity, and encourages extreme frugality, thrift, and charitable giving. Sebastian Brock frames the asceticism within the *Acts* as dualistic and oriented towards the salvation of the participant. He writes,

The basis of [the *Acts*’] teaching consists in the contrast between the corruptible body (not, however, in itself evil) and the soul, alone capable of incorruptibility. All that pertains to the body is to be rejected on the grounds that such things, being corruptible, are liable to hinder the soul in attaining its goal of incorruptibility. The ascetic life thus becomes an essential step on the road to salvation.<sup>25</sup>

The asceticism that dominates the theology of this apocryphal history provides an essential context for understanding the portrayal and function of Hades within the text. It is those that have unrepentantly corrupted their souls through carnal sins who are doomed to vile torment and annihilation.

The depiction of Hades within the *Acts of Thomas* is far closer to notions of hell that populate the Western consciousness, theological or not.<sup>26</sup> The description

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22 Due to the existence of *Acts* manuscripts in both Greek and Syriac, some have argued that the former was the text’s original language of composition. Yet the scholarly consensus is still firmly in support of the latter. For an overview of these questions, see Harold W. Attridge, “The Original Language of the Acts of Thomas,” in *Of Scribes and Scrolls: Studies on the Hebrew Bible, Intertestamental Judaism, and Christian Origins*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, John J. Collins, and Thomas H. Tobin, College Theology Society Resources in Religion 5 (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), 241–50.

23 McCarron, “The Appropriation,” 79.

24 Susan E. Myers, *Spirit Epicicles in the Acts of Thomas* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 2.

25 Sebastian P. Brock, “Early Syrian Asceticism,” *Numen* 20 (1973): 8–9.

26 The Greek translation includes a longer tour of Hades, with more explicit and gruesome torments along with the punishment of non-sexual sins. These additions were added possibly under the influence of the apocryphal *Apocalypse of Peter*, one of the earliest non-canonical Christian depictions of hell, to expose the torment that occurs to other evil actions like murder, etc. Martha Himmelfarb, “Tours of Hell: The Development and Transmission of an Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature,” PhD diss. (University of Pennsylvania, 1981), 25–31.

begins in the work's sixth act, entitled "The Young Man who Killed the Girl."<sup>27</sup> The apostle Thomas is asked to investigate the case of a man whose hands mysteriously dried up, prohibiting him from taking the Eucharist. The youngster reveals that his girlfriend was trying to copulate with him, even though he desired to live chaste and pure. After falling to the temptation of the woman, he kills her, admitting that it was "because I could not bear to see her while she was having intercourse with other men."<sup>28</sup> Thomas goes to the corpse and, after performing a long supplication to Jesus, is able to resurrect the girl.

Afterward, the apostle asks the maiden what she experienced in her posthumous state, to which she responds with a long, elaborate digression on the inner workings of Hades. She first meets a man who was "hideous . . . [with a] black body . . . [and] his clothes filthy."<sup>29</sup> This strange character takes the girl to see "a place full of pits, and a stinking smell . . . in its midst." The first pit is full of blazing fires, which smolders a multitude of bodies. The black figure<sup>30</sup> remarks to the girl, "into this torment are destined to come those souls which transgress the law, which change the union of intercourse that has been appointed by God."<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere in the hellish landscape, there are those "be[ing] given over to evil spirits, and shall be for mockery and a derision, and retribution shall be (extracted) from them."<sup>32</sup> Some transgressors<sup>33</sup> have sinned so mightily that they "shall go into another torment, which is worse" than burning or demonic irritation.<sup>34</sup>

After touring these tortures, the black man takes the girl to a dark, foul-smelling cavern. In the cave is "the prison of . . . souls. . . . When the chastisement of each of them is finished, another cometh in its place."<sup>35</sup> Some of the prisoners are "utterly consumed," while others are "handed over to other tortures."<sup>36</sup> Some of the demonic torturers ask for the black man to hand over the girl to them for torment, but the guide remarks, "I will not give her to you, because I am afraid of Him who

27 William Wright, trans., "The Acts of Judas Thomas (or the Twin) the Apostle," in *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2 (London: Williams and Northgate, 1871), 190.

28 Wright, "The Acts of Judas Thomas," 191.

29 Wright, "The Acts of Judas Thomas," 195.

30 This black demonic figure has intrigued many scholars. According to David Brakke, demonic beings were frequently cast as possessing black skin in Patristic-era writings, particularly by those in the Coptic tradition. David Brakke, "Ethiopian Demons: Male Sexuality, the Black-Skinned Other, and the Monastic Self," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10 (2001): 501–35.

31 Wright, "The Acts of Judas Thomas," 195.

32 Wright, "The Acts of Judas Thomas," 195.

33 The girl remarks on several examples: "those men who leave their own wives, and have intercourse with the wives of their fellows; and women, who go beyond intercourse with their own husbands; and youths, who do not keep their laws but wantonly indulge themselves with harlots in their lust . . . and maids, who have not kept their state of virginity." Wright, "The Acts of Judas Thomas," 195–96.

34 Wright, "The Acts of Judas Thomas," 195.

35 Wright, "The Acts of Judas Thomas," 196.

36 Wright, "The Acts of Judas Thomas," 196.

delivered her to me, and I was not ordered to leave her.”<sup>37</sup> The girl is then taken back to the entrance of Hades, where the black man says, “she is one of the sheep that have gone astray.”<sup>38</sup> After hearing the narrative, Thomas speaks to the amazed crowd: “Ye have heard, my children, what this woman hath said. . . . There are not these tortures only, but also others, which are much worse. . . . Unless ye are converted to this truth which I preach, and restrain yourselves from evil deeds . . . your end will come to these torments.”<sup>39</sup> With that impromptu sermon, the masses repent and begin to believe.

In the *Acts of Thomas*, Hades is thus a place of punishment for earthly, temporal, almost entirely sexual wickedness. It is divided into sections that perform various types of torment for, it is implied, differing degrees of sin. Contrary to later Occidental, Medieval conceptualizations, the torment in this hell is not eternal. While it can last some time, one assumes, eventually the sufferer is “wholly consumed.” However, this does not seem to imply a “purgatorial universalism,” in which the tormented soul is then brought to Heaven after a cleansing of their soul by fire and torture. Instead, they are completely destroyed and consequently miss out on the possibility of the resurrection and/or Heavenly communion with the Godhead.<sup>40</sup> It is unknown what role God has within the torment inflicted. When the black man speaks of “Him,” who gave the girl, he might be designating merely God’s role in allowing this tour rather than *His* involvement in the types of torment administered. Regardless, the fact that the location is primarily filled with men and women who have sexually “transgressed the laws” demonstrates the great importance of ascetic practice. As Brock noted, the more corruptible (and frequent) the bodily acts on earth, the more corrupted the soul becomes. The individual then, in turn, loses their salvation. This tour of hell has a moralistic, didactic purpose—the girl’s narrative is so grisly and discomfiting that it should drive any right-thinking person to avoid all forms of sexual impurity lest they are sent to the same locale!

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37 Wright, “The Acts of Judas Thomas,” 196.

38 Wright, “The Acts of Judas Thomas,” 196.

39 Wright, “The Acts of Judas Thomas,” 197.

40 While never a dominant position, purgatorial universalism was an eschatological option within ancient Eastern and Syriac Christianity. As E. H. Plumptre wrote, “Diodorus of Tarsus taught that the penalty of sin is not perpetual, but issues in the blessedness of immortality, and was followed by Stephanus, bishop of Edessa, and Solomon of Bassora, and Isaac of Nineveh.” *The Spirits in Prison and Other Studies on the Life After Death* (London: Wm. Isibister Limited, 1884), 141. Richard Bauckham denies any real prevalence of the universalist position—in whatever form—but does admit that there “were some who believed that the wicked would be finally annihilated (in its commonest form, this is the doctrine of ‘conditional immortality’).” “Universalism: A Historical Survey,” *Themelios* 4 (1978): 47. It is impossible, based on the brevity of the text and seeming disinterest in more abstract matters of eschatology, to lump the *Acts* within either stream. But, surely, it does not teach eternal conscious torment.

## Ephrem the Syrian

Ephrem the Syrian (306–372 CE) is a monumentally influential figure within the Syriac Christian tradition and beyond.<sup>41</sup> He was born in Nisibis, where he served as a Deacon, before moving to Edessa due to the Persian exile of Christians. Through his poems (in the form of *madrashē* and *memre*) and prose writings (mostly letters and biblical commentaries), Ephrem theologized in a manner that employed “symbol, type, and paradox, qualities that convey the nuanced texture of meaning and an emotive immediacy.”<sup>42</sup> This is noticeably distinct from the type of theological engagements seen in the Greek and Latin traditions. Robert Murray declared him to be “the greatest poet of the patristic age, and perhaps, the only theologian-poet to rank beside Dante.”<sup>43</sup> He is the foremost figure within early Syriac theology and spirituality, whose manifold writings (and false attributions) have been sources of inspiration throughout Eastern Christianity.<sup>44</sup> The following analysis will focus on Ephrem’s Nisibene Hymns and Letters to Publius.

To Ephrem, Sheol exists outside the temporal and physical spatial realm—it is a liminal space located beneath the pillars that uphold the terrestrial earth.<sup>45</sup> Sheol is the abode of the dead: all humans, prior to the resurrection, will be sent there. Only have Enoch and Elijah passed over habitation in Sheol and ascended straight to the Heavenly realms.<sup>46</sup> It is due to Adam’s first sin that all humans are forced to descend to this place. As Thomas Buchan puts it, “Adam alienated himself and all his descendants from the divine source” through his transgression, thus initiating a process whereby there would be “subsequent human physical decomposition”

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41 Ephrem the Syrian is “by far the most important figure in early Syriac literature. . . . [His] writings are extensive even when the large number of works falsely attributed to him is excluded.” Sebastian P. Brock, “Ephrem and the Syriac Tradition,” in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, and Andrew Louth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 363.

42 Possekel, “The Emergence,” 319. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Ephrem’s material are from Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *A Select Library of the Christian Church: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Part II Gregory the Great, Ephraim Syrus, Aphrahat*, vol. 13, Second Series (New York: Christian Literature, 1894). Henceforth S&W.

43 Quoted in Joseph P. Amar, “Christianity at the Crossroads: The Legacy of Ephrem the Syrian,” *Religion & Literature* 43 (2011): 2.

44 For an overview on Ephrem’s (typically translated) legacy, see Ephrem Lash, “The Greek Writings Attributed to Saint Ephrem the Syrian,” in *Abba: The Tradition of Orthodoxy in the West [Festschrift for Bishop Ware]*, ed. John Behr, Dimitrie Conomos, and Andrew Louth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 81–98.

45 According to Thomas Buchan, Ephrem’s conception of Sheol arose from “three interrelated sources: Scripture, his Mesopotamian cultural milieu, and many of the physical aspects of death and the human experiences of practices related to it.” Buchan argues that all three sources share a common feature: “practices of burial and the decomposition of the body,” which “contributed to the [general] habit of thought which located Sheol under or within the earth.” Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 54.

46 “Yet were there two men (that I lie not) whose names have escaped me in Hell. For Enoch and Elijah came not to me.” Nisibene Hymns 36:7. S&W, 196.

at death.<sup>47</sup> Through putrefaction, “the return of humanity’s dust to its earthly source . . . [imitated the] prospects of death and descent to Sheol.”<sup>48</sup> Once Cain killed Abel, Sheol became a place for the death to reside: “Cain with his sword overthrew the gate of Sheol, for it was closed . . . before the time he first opened it.”<sup>49</sup>

The physical dimensions of Sheol in Ephrem’s thought are cavernous and blackened. The place is “cold and dark,”<sup>50</sup> full of disparate bones piled up across the hypogeal hellscape.<sup>51</sup> It is surrounded, like in the *Odes of Solomon*, by a large, impenetrable, and black gate, that only Christ has been able to break open during his exit with the dead after his descent.<sup>52</sup> The law of Sheol is “to keep silent,”<sup>53</sup> indicating that its inhabitants are speechless, seemingly because this is the very characteristic of Death itself (both as personification and process): “be like me who am so silent, in the midst of Sheol.”<sup>54</sup> The dead may also be silent because they are sleeping. As F. Gavin notes, Ephrem frequently “compares death to sleep. . . . The resurrection is being waked out of sleep.”<sup>55</sup> Ephrem writes, “behold, sleep shows us how temporary is Sheol, for the morn awakes the sleeper.”<sup>56</sup> In many instances, Ephrem depicts Sheol as a giant cemetery, full of not only decaying skeletal remains but also “graves”<sup>57</sup> and “gloomy sepulchers.”<sup>58</sup> It is thus presumed that the dead “sleep” in these graves, awaiting their resurrection peacefully.

Throughout his prose and poetic writings, Ephrem mentions numerous inhabitants of Hades, particularly those from biblical history,<sup>59</sup> yet he also gives great attention to its overlord(s). The ruler of the location is the personified Death. Ephrem describes both that Death has a throne in Sheol and that Sheol functions

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47 Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 55.

48 Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 55.

49 Nisibene Hymns 69:11. Quoted in Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 55.

50 Nisibene Hymns 36:11. S&W, 196.

51 Nisibene Hymns 37:4. S&W, 198.

52 Nisibene Hymns 37:9. S&W, 199.

53 Nisibene Hymns 65:15. S&W, 217.

54 Nisibene Hymns 66:1. S&W, 217.

55 F. Gavin, “The Sleep of the Soul in the Early Syriac Church,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 40 (1920): 105. Gavin notes that in “Syriac Christianity, from the fourth century on, there appears with more or less consistency and in much the same outline a curious teaching as to the state of the dead,” that being a posthumous slumber until the resurrection. Yet Gavin arbitrarily begins in the fourth century, when earlier Syriac material, as shown, had depictions of posthumous existence that was not a kind of sleep. Additionally, he gives little discussion on Sheol and the role of these sleeping corpses in that realm. Regardless, Ephrem does regularly view the human inhabitants of Hades as being asleep.

56 Quoted in Gavin, “The Sleep of the Soul,” 105.

57 Christ, in his descent, “burst the graves one by one.” Nisibene Hymns 36:11. S&W, 197.

58 Quoted in Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 56.

59 For a partial list containing many biblical characters referenced as inhabiting Sheol, see Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 58–59.

as Death's stomach. The role of Satan, and his relationship to Death, is more ambiguous. Ephrem is not clear on whether Sheol is Satan's continual abode and what his role and function there are exactly. It appears that the "Evil One" resides primarily in Gehenna but is able to transverse across the visible and invisible cosmos, with the possible exception of Heaven.<sup>60</sup>

The ambiguity concerning Satan appears to leak into Ephrem's characterization of Death. In some locations, Death is Satan's ally: together they "rejoice," while the former provides "counsel" to the latter in moments of nefarious plotting.<sup>61</sup> As Buchan remarks, Ephrem sees "Satan, Sin, Sheol, and Death as equally complicit in the exploitation and oppression of humanity."<sup>62</sup> Elsewhere, however, Death seems opposed, even hostile, to the machinations of Satan. In the dialogue between Death and Satan, the former states: "I am he that rescues from thee [The Evil One] the sons of men."<sup>63</sup> Later in the Nisibene Hymns, Death questions why humans even "weep" over their dead, when he has provided the deceased "rest from sorrows and sins."<sup>64</sup> Death is frequently portrayed as a just, impartial, "guileless" consumer, who only takes what is rightfully given to him.<sup>65</sup> Thus, Ephrem's depiction of Death vacillates from co-conspirator against the Lord's reign to one who "hast gotten thy might . . . from God."<sup>66</sup>

Related to the occasionally redemptive attitude toward Death, the most distinct element of Ephrem's concept of Hades is how positive he casts the posthumous realm. While his physical descriptions appear quite gloomy, putrid, and miserable, the place is nonetheless one of restful slumber, tranquility, and general egalitarianism. There is no hierarchy or societal distinctions: from the loftiest king to the poorest pauper, most deviant scoundrel to holiest of saint—all are sent to Sheol upon death where they sleep peacefully until the final resurrection. No one individual receives greater or lesser comfort. A refrain in the Nisibene Hymns is "Happy are ye silent dead, how tranquil are ye" as they are "freed from the misery" and "there is no iniquity."<sup>67</sup> Most shockingly is Ephrem's comparisons of Sheol to *Heaven!* He writes, "it is Sheol and Heaven alone, that are removed from all sins; this earth that lies between, in her iniquity dwells."<sup>68</sup> He contends that regardless of which spiritual path one will go on in this life, they should not fear the next: "he therefore that is prudent will either go up into Heaven, or, if that be too hard,

60 Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 323. An example of this trans-cosmic movement is Satan's Sheolic and Earthly appearances, evidently the temptation of Jesus Christ in the wilderness.

61 Nisibene Hymns 41:15. S&W, 205.

62 Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 175.

63 Nisibene Hymns 55:7. S&W, 209.

64 Nisibene Hymns 64:1. S&W, 217.

65 Nisibene Hymns 52:17. S&W, 207.

66 Nisibene Hymns 52:7. S&W, 206.

67 Nisibene Hymns 38:4. S&W, 199.

68 Nisibene Hymns 38:4. S&W, 199.



will go down to Sheol which is easy.”<sup>69</sup> While Ephrem’s Sheol is not a picturesque locality, it is free of torment, suffering, and the challenges that make earthly living arduous.

Yet, Sheol is only populated during temporal history. In the final resurrection, the dead will physically depart from their entombed slumber in Sheol, leaving the entire realm empty.<sup>70</sup> After this general resurrection and judgment, the unrepentant sinners are sent to *Gehenna*. Torture of the damned is reserved for Gehenna in Ephrem’s eschatology rather than Sheol,<sup>71</sup> which Buchan remarks as “*the difference between [Hades] and Hell.*”<sup>72</sup> In his Letter to Publius, Ephrem, with constant biblical allusion and reference, describes the torment that befalls the unregenerate: weeping and wailing, gnashing of teeth, chained sinner, and continually burning fire.<sup>73</sup> The fiery tortures are reiterated in the Nisibene Hymns, in which “floods of fire be stirred against thee, in the resurrection . . . fire mayest thou justly burn.”<sup>74</sup> Stones are also heaped on sinners as the smoke from the smoldering fire burns eyes and throats.<sup>75</sup> All this imagery reads as reminiscent of the visceral depictions in *Acts of Thomas*.

Also somewhat like the *Acts*, Ephrem describes the punishment in Gehenna as only *potentially* eternal. While the inhabitants in Sheol are dead/asleep and thus lack a conscious will (hence Ephrem does not believe those in Sheol can repent<sup>76</sup>), those in Gehenna are awake—resurrected—thus possessing a degree of freedom. In Ephrem’s theology of Gehenna, then, there is “the possibility of repentance and restoration.”<sup>77</sup> This possibility is seen throughout Ephrem’s writings. In the Nisibene Hymns, he writes, “hell in mercy, shall be emptied.”<sup>78</sup> Elsewhere, in his commentary on the Diatessaron, he notes that “when one will have made retribution in Gehenna, [God] will reward him for this in the Kingdom.”<sup>79</sup> It appears then that inhabitation in either Sheol or Gehenna, to Ephrem, is only a temporary “waiting-room” until entrance into paradises, yet the latter appears to be a state in which one has the choice to leave.

## Conclusion

As shown, *The Odes of Solomon*, *Acts of Thomas*, and the work of Ephrem all

69 Nisibene Hymns 38:5. S&W, 199.

70 McCarron, “The Appropriation,” 129.

71 Although on a few occasions Ephrem does categorize Sheol as a type of punishment, it appears that it is not as direct, active, or miserable as Gehenna.

72 Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 67, *supra* 104. Emphasis original.

73 See Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 343–44.

74 Nisibene Hymns 57:11, 20. S&W, 210–11.

75 Nisibene Hymns 57:22. S&W, 211.

76 Cf. Nisibene Hymns 36:16. S&W, 197.

77 Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 350.

78 Nisibene Hymns 59:9. S&W, 212.

79 Quoted in Buchan, *Blessed Is He*, 349.



feature various common aspects in their depictions of Hades. Each source presents Sheol as real and existing, home to the dead and located beneath the earth. All mention Christ's descent into Hades and bringing out of dead with him.<sup>80</sup> Also, each source mentions a figure or figures who control the regular happenings of the abode, such as accepting the newly deceased. Most eschatologically notable is that Sheol does not seem to be an eternal "resting" place, for the dead at least. In the *Odes*, Christ's descent destroys the power of Sheol; the tormented are eventually obliterated in *Acts of Thomas*; and Hades is emptied at the resurrection in Ephrem. Yet, beyond these elements, there is little by way of consensus among the sources. Active torture plays no role in the Sheol of Ephrem or the *Odes* like in the *Acts of Thomas*. Further, only the *Acts* clearly indicates that the inhabitants of Hades are conscious of their new residence. While Ephrem sends all pre-final judgment humans to Sheol, the *Odes* send none (post-descent), while only the wicked go in *Acts of Thomas*. The *Odes* and Ephrem portray a desolate graveyard Hades, while the former and *Acts* envision Sheol as full of pits, with water and fire respectively. No source agrees on who *exactly* controls Sheol, with each work giving very different answers: (potentially) God himself, the Evil One, or Death personified.

It appears that every work agrees on the foundational elements of Hades—its location, entrance by Christ, and temporality—which may itself constitute a basic consensus on the doctrine. Yet, there rarely is any commonality concerning Sheol's broader function and greater eschatological significance. The sources feature elaborate and distinct theological and pictorial imaginative creations regarding Sheol's inhabitants, inner workings, visuality, and rulers. These diverse engagements with Hades indicate that early Syriac theology—even when sharing ideational commonalities and potentially being conditioned by general doctrinal consensus and/or cultural contexts—was nevertheless able to conceptualize the manifold potentialities and possibilities, freely and poetically, of a given theological notion. Future research may examine if this diversity, and theological attitude towards consensus doctrines, continues in later depictions of Hades by other influential Syriac theologians.

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80 I did not discuss this explicitly in my section on the *Acts of Thomas*, but the text makes frequent reference to the descent: "Thou didst descent into Sheol with mighty power." Wright, "The Acts of Judas Thomas," 288.

# The Book of Esther and Ten Years’ “Local Egg” A Comparative Reading on Power and Empire

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## Abstract

This paper offers a decolonial reading of Esther through the lens of the short “Local Egg” from the anthology film *Ten Years*. The film, composed of five shorts, depicts a dystopian Hong Kong set in 2025. “Local Egg” is the last short. This short portrays the story of a father and his son who are both navigating the dynamics of living under an oppressive regime as ordinary citizens. Adopting Edward Said’s definition of imperialism, the two texts—the book of Esther and “Local Egg”—will be evaluated on their own terms, followed by a discussion on decolonial themes. Finally, we will conclude with a brief discussion regarding decolonisation arising from these two texts.

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## Introduction

The book of Esther invites its readers to consider life in the Jewish Diaspora, where, as a settled people in a land and empire not their own, they lived tangibly under the direct threat of elimination. From the start, questions of power and powerlessness are raised, yet the book does not yield easy conclusions as to its purpose. Is it a comedy, or does it present some sort of theology of leadership? Or perhaps, does it take wisdom literature and detail a story wherein wisdom is appropriated? Like the rest of the Hebrew Bible, the richness of the text provides an opportunity for a “poly-commentary, multi-voiced, indeterminate, divergent, suggestive, and limitless.”<sup>1</sup> This paper seeks to add to that poly-commentary by reading Esther comparatively with the short “Local Egg” (本地蛋), directed by Ng Ka-Leung (吳家良), in the film *Ten Years* (十年) (2015), drawing out key post-colonial<sup>2</sup> themes via postcolonial scholar Edward Said’s definition of imperialism.

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1 David J.A. Clines, “Esther and the Future of the Commentary,” in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*, ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon and Sidnie White Crawford (London: T&T Clark International, 2003), 21.

2 The terms postcolonial and post-imperial will be used interchangeably.

The paper will begin with a brief introduction of the two texts, which will then be followed by a discussion of the postcolonial themes. They are as follows: first, the totalising force of imperialism and second, methods of non-resistance and resistance. Finally, the paper will conclude with a discussion of what decolonisation might look like from these two texts.

## The Two Texts

Certainly, there are differences between the texts: language, culture, and place in time being the most obvious ones. For the purposes of this paper, there are two key differences: first, Esther occurs in the very centre of imperial power, while Hong Kong, though still a major economic centre, is on the fringes of power, far from Beijing and from the West. Second, the book of Esther is a text with the diasporic community as protagonist, whereas *Ten Years*' protagonists remain in their own land. However, both texts have diasporic dimensions.<sup>3</sup> Esther speaks to those dispersed, where *Ten Years* speaks to the imminent destruction of the homeland, both in the homeland and in the diaspora. But, whether in the diaspora or remaining in the homeland, the hegemonic imperial framework remains the same, though there are different nuances to the lived experience. This section will endeavour to set the two texts on their own terms before turning to an analysis of the book of Esther through "Local Egg."

### *The Book of Esther*

The book of Esther is a complicated text. It is the story of a threatened minority people living in the heart of the Persian Empire who rose to power, came to be feared by other peoples of the Empire, and had one of their own prominent leaders rise to become the second-in-command of all the empire. It is also the retelling of a young woman who steps forward despite her powerlessness to intervene for her people's survival. It is the story of a people wrestling for identity and wondering how to remain the people of God with the threat of not only death but also assimilation hanging over them. At the same time, it is a comedy where buffoons get their comeuppance. This text is largely driven by narrative, with "less . . . quoted speech than most comparable biblical material."<sup>4</sup> Per Jon Levenson's proposed structure, the text is understood as framed in a chiasmic structure that indicates a series of reversals, in ways that largely seem too improbable to be historically

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3 Defining the diaspora: Following Kim Butler's summarization and characterization of diasporas: Dispersal to two or more locations; collective mythology of homeland; alienation from hostland; idealization of return to homeland; ongoing relationship with homeland; ethnonational consciousness; existence over at least two generations (Kim D. Butler, "Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse," *Diaspora* 10 [2001]: 191–93).

4 Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 1.

factual.<sup>5</sup> However, what is important for this paper is the way this text has been received and how it has impacted the community of faith. Thus, the final canonical form will be considered here: largely, the Hebrew text will be examined, with the English primary translation as the New Revised Standard Version.

### *Ten Years* (十年)

When the film *Ten Years* (十年) was released in 2015, Hong Kong received it with great fanfare among those in the pro-democracy movement. The film is composed of five shorts, each envisioning potential horrors a decade in the future.<sup>6</sup> Capturing the insecurity of living in the “One Country, Two Systems,” the film deftly illustrates the pro-democracy movement’s pre-National Security Law *zeitgeist* thirst for change. The fear elaborated is not simply oppression but assimilation and erasure such that the Hong Kong identity is no different than that of the mainland. As pointed out by scholar Justin K. H. Tse, the inscription of Amos 5:13b–14a<sup>7</sup> at the end of the film—along with the statement “Already too late” fading out and replaced with “Not too late”—at the very least suggests there may be theological intention behind the film, though there is no other explicit mention of religion or of God. Moreover, as Tse deftly illustrates, the protest movement itself is deeply theological, and so to understand the film in that vein would not be a far stretch.<sup>8</sup>

“Local Egg” is the last short of the film. It opens with Sam, a small shop owner, receiving a call that the last chicken farm in Hong Kong—where he gets his supply of eggs—will be shut down shortly. Sam, deciding to visit one last time, is gazing over the farm when he encounters Cheung, the farm’s owner, who is on his way to bring the last batch of eggs to Sam. Cheung tells Sam that he is being forced to close the farm, despite his compliance with the government’s increasingly restrictive rules.

Returning to the store, Sam is visited by the Youth Guards—youngsters dressed in uniforms not unlike those of the Cultural Revolution’s Red Guards, and of which Sam’s son (Ming) is one. They tell him that they will be writing him up for using a censored word, “local,” in labelling his eggs. After several terse

5 Levenson, *Esther*, 9; however, it has been noted that this book has recorded features with significant detail and accuracy.

6 This is particularly resonant in the aftermath of the implementation of the National Security Law, with Hong Kong coming to terms with its merging back into China proper.

7 The inscription reads: 「時勢真惡。」—預言者阿摩司寫於公元前800年—「你們要求善，不要求惡，就必存活。」 (“It is an evil time.”—The prophet Amos wrote this in 800 BCE—“Seek good, and not evil, that you may live”) (*Ten Years*, directed by Ng Ka-leung, 2015 [Hong Kong: Ten Years Studio/Netflix, 2019], Netflix).

8 Justin K. H. Tse, “Introduction: The Umbrella Movement and Liberation Theology,” in *Theological Reflections on the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement*, ed. Justin K. H. Tse and Jonathan Y. Tan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 37–44; many of the producers and directors of the film have connections to the Hong Kong Protestant movement, including executive producer Andrew Choi, who is Dr. Philemon Choi Yuen-wan (蔡元雲), a significant leader in the Hong Kong church.

conversations with Ming, Sam later encounters Ming with other Youth Guards, throwing eggs at a closed bookstore. Shortly, Sam finds out that Ming has been sneaking lists of censored items to the bookstore owner, Lam, to protect the bookstore and the books. Together, they walk to the apartment where all the censored books have been hidden, where Sam, reassured that he has not lost his son to the Youth Guards, exhorts Lam to never be accustomed to suppression. The film ends with Sam and Ming, mutually agreeing on the ridiculousness of government restrictions as Ming reads a banned manga—Doraemon.

### **Imperialism and Post-Imperialism**

Since it has been established that both texts deal with the problem of empire, it is important that imperialism is identified: what it is and how it is enacted. Per scholar Edward Said, imperialism can be defined in the following ways. Imperialism is the “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory.”<sup>9</sup> This is manifest in several ways. The first is through land acquisition and seeing the conquered peoples as “subject races,” “subordinate peoples,” or “inferior.”<sup>10</sup> Second, imperial rule is marked by tension, inequality, and injustice, where the bounds are clearly set by the ruler to the ruled.<sup>11</sup> Third, the imperialists’ system creates a dependency on—and even veneration for—the imperialists by the conquered.<sup>12</sup> This dependency is created when the imperialists incentivise dependency by rewarding adherence to the imperial system.<sup>13</sup> Lastly, the imperialists disregard the memory and history of the conquered, effectively gaslighting the conquered and re-creating them into the imperialists’ image.<sup>14</sup> The following themes do not fit neatly into each of the descriptors of imperialism, though they certainly do overlap.

### **The Totalising Force of Imperialism**

Though non-exhaustive, this section illustrates the immersion and totality of the imperial complex by examining instances of how violence legitimises the bounds of empire and self-identification.

#### *Boundaries, Force, and Legitimacy*

The empire asserts its authority via force, and its legitimacy is upheld in its *perception* of legitimacy or to the extent that the population within the state is willing

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9 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 9.

10 Said, *Culture*, 9.

11 Said, *Culture*, 11.

12 Said, *Culture*, 20.

13 Said, *Culture*, 147.

14 Said, *Culture*, 105–109.

to recognise this legitimacy.<sup>15</sup> The law creates the bounds of the state—what is acceptable and what is not—and protects the empire itself. In “Local Egg,” this relationship is illustrated in a few ways. First, Cheung, speaking to Sam, illustrates the way in which he has attempted to abide by the bounds of empire, to little avail:

CHEUNG: Sam, it’s not that I want to close the farm. . . . I’m being forced to. They’re saying that we’re using the farm against the government. . . . My father’s heart desire was simple. Local chicken for Hong Kong people to eat, so we can eat our own food. For years, they’ve been saying “build this,” “tear down that.” We’ve been messed around with for years . . . only to realise they were gradually killing us off.<sup>16</sup>

Cheung leaves for Taiwan but only because there is nothing left for him in Hong Kong. He leaves to keep some of his father’s desire alive though now planted in a different place; he has effectively been exiled.

The second illustration of this relationship is the presence of the Youth Guard, who hyper-examine every detail, looking for the slightest step out of line (which includes the necessity of hiding certain texts). This, coupled with the attack on the bookstore, serves to act as censorship: as George Orwell writes, “if liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.”<sup>17</sup> Yet, Sam, Lam (the bookstore owner), and the people on the streets have accepted their legitimacy of force (or at least become resigned to it)—likely because these Youth Guards are their own children.<sup>18</sup> On the Youth Guard’s banned list is the word “local,” and coupled with the closing of Cheung’s farm and the egging of Lam’s bookstore, it can be concluded that the HongKonger identity is no longer one that is acceptable to empire. Also significant is that in Chinese civil society, legality (法) is always the last resort—when legalistic measures are “employed by the state, it is not interpreted as the normal functioning of civil society, but as the workings of a paternalistic system of punishment.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, the sense of wrongness

15 Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” in *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 34.

16 *Ten Years*.

17 George Orwell, “The Freedom of the Press,” *The Orwell Foundation*, accessed June 26, 2021, <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/the-freedom-of-the-press/>.

Also see Alex W. Palmer, “The Case of Hong Kong’s Missing Booksellers,” *New York Times*, April 3, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/03/magazine/the-case-of-hong-kongs-missing-booksellers.html>.

18 This motif recalls the 2012 protest against the proposed imposition of “moral and national education” in schools. Cf. Juliana Liu, “Hong Kong debates ‘national education’ classes,” *BBC News*, 1 September 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-19407425>.

19 Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 238.

is heightened and emphasises an authoritarian regime that cares very little for *its own norms* and only seeks to control.

Similarly, the Jewish Diaspora has quietly settled into life in the centre of imperial power (2:5–7) and has largely accepted the use of force of the empire as legitimate. This is evidenced in the following ways. When Esther is taken, Mordecai makes no effort to stop her from being taken or perhaps feels that he cannot, likely because of the felt futility of such an action (2:8). Ancient historian Herodotus recounts Xerxes’s famous cruelty in the story of Pythias of Lydian, whose five sons were conscripted for the Persian Wars. Pythias, wanting an heir to care for him in his old age, asks that his eldest be released from the army. Xerxes, outraged at Pythias’s presumption that Xerxes’s campaign might not be successful, removes the eldest son from the ranks and splits him in two, and then marches his army between the two sections of the corpse left on the side of the road.<sup>20</sup>

At his place in the gate, Mordecai foils the assassination of the king (2:19–23), actively supporting the structures of the empire. And Esther, in her plea for her people, emphasises that she would not have spoken out if the decree had only issued the enslavement of her people and not the elimination of them (7:3–4). Accepting slavery as conventional,<sup>21</sup> this situates her and her people’s predicament in transactional terms, adhering to the imperial (objective) gaze of the conquered as subject who exist to prop up the empire. With regards to the rule of law, a member of one oppressed group petitions for the full elimination of another oppressed people group; the impression is given that this system fully relies on violence to enforce its boundaries and that its security is found in how oppressed peoples police themselves.

### *Conforming to Colonial Systems*

The protagonists in both texts personally conform to the colonial value systems and embed themselves within the imperial hierarchies. Ming is an obedient Youth Guard member. In Ming and Sam’s second interaction, there is a sense of fear as Ming tells his father that the Youth Guard commander is no longer required to disclose to Youth Guard members’ parents what the Youth Guard activities will be. This, coupled with Ming’s reticence to talk to his father, builds tension, and Sam is visibly shaken as he attempts to talk some sense into his son. As for Esther, she ingratiates herself to the eunuchs and gains favour with all; moreover, she uses her charm to become queen (2:9). Mordecai is also part of the system, moving from

20 Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus*, vol. 3: *Books V-VII*, trans. A. D. Godley, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 7.38–39.

21 Marion A. Taylor, *Ruth, Esther: The Story of God Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 176.

the gate in the beginning of the narrative (2:19)—where he is both outsider and insider in the liminal space—and finally, into the inner court of the king (10:3).

Similarly, the antagonist in “Local Egg” is a local Hong Kong boy who has fully bought into the role of the Youth Guard, blindly obeying without thinking. In the book of Esther, the antagonist is pointedly *not* King Ahasuerus, but a man from another colonised nation, the Amalekites/Agagites: Haman.<sup>22</sup> He is fully embedded in the system, and from his request to eliminate the Jews in chapter 3, it is likely that he is part of the mechanics of force. Simultaneously, that Haman the Agagite is seen as the threat, and not the Persians, speaks to the colonised mindset of the text. The great imperial dream, then, is not simply imposed from the outside, but also “cultivated in the local milieu . . . [is the] longing to become an . . . imperial subject.”<sup>23</sup>

### *Clothing*

Clothing plays a part in illuminating imperialism in these narratives. The first overt sense of imperialism’s encroachment in “Local Egg” is the Youth Guard’s uniforms. These uniforms are like the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the short deliberately echoes the horror of this memory of the worst of authoritarian rule, made even more horrible as they are worn by elementary-aged children. A more subtle nod to previous encounters with imperialism is Ming’s school uniform: a stereotypical British school uniform that was adopted in Hong Kong.

Similarly, upon winning favour, Esther is adorned in the harem. It might be assumed that all the women have been given similar treatment. But the repeated pronominal suffixes in Esth 2:9, along with the extra cosmetic treatments and food given to her (את־מְרוֹקִיָּה ואת־מְנוֹתָה לְתֵת לָהּ), set her apart as distinct and as receiving a possible edge to win the queenship.<sup>25</sup> Mordecai is later given the king’s finery, being recognised for his role in saving the king (ch. 6). This clothing change triggers the beginning of the reversal of fate, where Haman is foretold his doom and Mordecai and Haman are rewarded and punished within the same imperial grid that entraps them both. By the end of the book, Mordecai is clothed in royal robes and honour, seemingly having exchanged Jewish autonomy for imperial—normative—measures of success (6:11; 8:15; 10:2).

22 Cf. Discussion on the Amalekites/Agagites in Timothy K. Beal, *Esther*, BOS (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999), 44–46; Taylor, *Ruth, Esther*, 127; and especially for midrashic and aggadic discussion in Erica Brown, *Esther: Power, Fate and Fragility in Exile*, Kindle edition (New Milford: Maggid, 2020), §3.3.

23 Chen, *Asia as Method*, 171.

24 Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 602–609.

25 Frederic Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1996), 364.



### *Behavioural Cues*

The behavioural cues in “Local Egg” indicate too how far imperial reach goes. In Sam’s conversation with Cheung, he reflects that compliance or non-compliance have the same net result: Cheung’s farm is still being shut down regardless. This reflection is done in quiet resignation, if in disbelief. Yet, despite Cheung’s invitation to join him in Taiwan, Sam is hesitant to leave—though the audience is not given a reason why. Second, the Youth Guard are seen as a normal part of daily life: Sam’s reaction to the Youth Guard is shock, not at their appearance, but that they are taking photos *again*.

Esther and Mordecai are portrayed with similar behavioural cues that indicate the imperial infiltration into their own lives. Levenson notes in Esth 2:5 that **אִישׁ יְהוּדִי** (“a Jew”) is a reference not to the Palestinian “Judean” community but to the Judean diaspora—those who have chosen not to return to the area around Jerusalem. And coupled with Esth 8:17, where Persians became Jews (the denominative verb **מִתְיַהֲדִים** [“to become a Jew”]), self-understanding has shifted such that identity is no longer tied to the land.<sup>26</sup> There is now a sense of openness as the Diaspora creatively engages with—but also to some degree adapts to—the bounds that the Persian Empire has set.

That whole descriptor of Mordecai (2:5–6) is intriguing: though he bears a non-Hebrew name and is a citizen of Susa, “his patronym is three generations long. . . . He is a Jew and a Benjaminite, identifiers that are tribal, cultural and political. . . . He is in a sense introduced as a multihyphenated character, a ‘Benjaminite-Judean/Jewish-Persian.’”<sup>27</sup> Pertinent to the conversation too is that the Judean/Jewish identity may be an ethnic identity “that is constructed from the outside, by other nations, who lumped all those tribal differences into one group identity—namely, those exiled from Judea.”<sup>28</sup> Though the tribal identity remains (highlighting the particular), multi-hyphenation betrays an identity textured by his social location as a subject in the empire. Further, this identity is distinct from those who have returned to the land, though related—Esther and Mordecai have remained in the Diaspora, though the option to return has been opened.

Moreover, Mordecai warns Esther not to disclose her ethnic identity, and while Esther has a Jewish name (Hadassah), she goes by her Persian name, allowing her to “pass as a citizen of the empire.”<sup>29</sup> Moreover, it was likely that she did not—or could not, given that she is the object of the verbs (2:7–9)—abide by the norms of

26 Jon D. Levenson, “Scroll of Esther in Ecumenical Perspective,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 13 (1976): 450.

27 Jeffrey Kah-Jin Kuan, “Diasporic Reading of a Diasporic Text: Identity Politics and Race Relations and the Book of Esther,” in *Interpreting Beyond Borders*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 169.

28 Beal, *Esther*, 27–28.

29 Brown, *Esther*, §2.2.3.

her people. With regards to sexuality, there is little doubt she would have had sexual intercourse with the king. There is sensuality infused in the text: the motif of “giving the cosmetics” occurs three times (2:3, 9, 12), the oils and perfumes meant to make the women more attractive, the explicit naming of the king taking pleasure from each of the women (2:14), and the threefold repetition of women going *into* the king (2:13–14). Scholars also identify Esther’s name with Ishtar, “the principal goddess of the ancient Near East . . . associated primarily with love, eroticism, and sexual power. In this light, Esther’s name may be interpreted with a connotation of goddess-like sexual power.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, at the banquet thrown in her honour, she would have been unable to abide by Jewish dietary laws, lest she give away her Jewish identity (2:18).<sup>31</sup>

### *Death*

Finally, the overlaying sense of death is present in both texts. In “Local Egg,” the lists the Youth Guards carry around banning certain items as well as the closing of Cheung’s farm create the sense that Hong Kong’s identity is being erased. Moreover, the word “local” is seen as seditious, which gives a sense that the particular is no longer welcome. Only the hegemonic remains. Further, the plot of “Local Egg” is driven by Sam and Ming’s relationship, and Sam’s worry is palpable as he considers losing his son to the imperial system. Finally, the nod to the Cultural Revolution via the Youth Guards reminds the viewer of the worst of the imperial regime and the consequences of standing up to empire.

Similarly, Esther is known by her Persian name, and her eager rush to give clothes to Mordecai may indicate that she is “no longer sensitive to the Jewish language of ritual and loss. She now sp[eaks] the Persian king’s language of rules and royalty.”<sup>32</sup> Might it be possible that Mordecai thinks he is losing his ward to the false identity he told her to adopt? While the threat of death for the Jews in Esther 3 is a visible threat with physical dimensions, the threat of erasure for HongKongers in the short is primarily metaphysical and psychological (with an indirect threat of the physical). In both cases, the weight of the empire is behind this threat of death.

Significantly, it has been noted that God and land are not mentioned in this text, and given that God and land are central to the identity of the Jewish people, the question of God without land is a significant question—especially for the Diaspora.<sup>33</sup> Scholars like Levenson have surmised that this is simply the expansion of the exodus motif, though nuanced differently than in other post-exilic literature

30 Beal, *Esther*, 28.

31 Carey A. Moore, *Esther: A New Translation with Introduction and Notes*, AB (Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), 22.

32 Brown, *Esther*, §4.3.2.

33 Cf. Levenson, “Scroll of Esther,” 445–46.

(particularly Second Isaiah).<sup>34</sup> Still, there is a sense of danger, loss, bewilderment, and uncertainty as the people of God begin to chart their way anew—all this amidst figuring out how to survive in the face of a hegemonic entity that threatens to swallow them whole.<sup>35</sup> But perhaps this section might be better articulated in this way: will Sam lose his son? Will they lose sense of who they are as Hong-Kongers? Will Esther remember who she is? Who are the Jews in a land not their own? Where is God in this story, especially outside of the promised land? Will God let his people die?

## **Resistance or Compliance?**

Imperialism creates conditions where a parasitic relationship forms between the conquered and the imperialists, and adherence to the imperial system is rewarded with privilege within the system—though this comes at a cost to their fellow conquered peoples. Yet, compliance is not the only response, nor is there a single way to resist. In this section, we will explore the different types of compliance, as well as the different shades of resistance exemplified in this text.

### *Types of Compliance*

There are different types of compliance, stressing here that though the totalising force of imperialism might compel one to comply, compliance is not merely an automatic response. The response has some agency in deciding to side with the powers that be. The first is full compliance, where members of the oppressed people groups fully buy into the imperial system in return for privilege. In the case of the leader of the Youth Guard, he speaks Cantonese, not Mandarin, which means he is a local boy. His tone is supercilious—if even rude in speaking to an elder (Sam). Further, the confidence with which he issues commands with the whistle hanging around his neck indicates familiarity and comfort in his role. Moreover, when Sam questions the logic of the command issued to the Youth Guard leader and asks the boy to think for himself, the young Youth Guard is unwavering in his dogmatic obedience: “I don’t know. Anyway, I’m going to record anything against the rules.”<sup>36</sup> This dogmatism likely has lent to his current position as the leader of his Youth Guard posse.

Likewise, Haman the Agagite has climbed to the very top of the imperial structure, with others bowing down and doing obeisance to him (3:1). There is no real justification for his promotion, nor is there a specific title given for his new position. Additionally, he approaches the king without requesting an audience, is immediately trusted with the king’s signet ring, and is told that he can “do with

34 Levenson, “Scroll of Esther,” 449.

35 Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 314.

36 *Ten Years*.

them as it seems good to you” (3:11 NRSV). However, for all his prestige, power, and privilege, he remains *the Agagite*, not the Persian—he is still an outsider to the system for all that he has ingratiated himself to it.<sup>37</sup>

Mordecai’s level of compliance might find an equivalence in the character of Sam. Like Sam, Mordecai makes the best living he can in Persia. Sam minds his own business—for the most part—tending to his little shop in the plaza but also desiring local products for his neighbours. He also keeps close tabs on his son, Ming, and frustratingly can get no details about the banned list. Correspondingly, Mordecai has largely kept his Jewish identity and has made no large effort to counter the empire—even actively assimilating by suggesting that Esther hide her identity and by saving the king (2:10, 19–23). He would walk around in front of the court of the harem every day to learn how Esther was and *what was being done to her*. Timothy Beal suggests this might indicate that his concern is not solely his ward’s welfare but also “his investment in her for his own self-interest . . . as Mordecai’s link with the central Persian politics.”<sup>38</sup>

Ming, Sam’s son, is analogous to Esther. As a child, he is powerless; in the Youth Guard, he is not among its leadership. He goes along with his posse after school, inspecting alongside them; he also holds the carton of eggs as the rest of the Youth Guards throw the eggs at Lam’s bookstore. When his father chases the rest of the posse away, he says to his father: “I didn’t throw anything. I wasn’t allowed not to come. I didn’t know what I could do.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Esther is a pawn in the political game, and as a woman who is *acted upon*, she has had very little agency and power up until this point, beyond her charms. When confronted by Mordecai who asks her to intervene on behalf of the Jews, she responds that she cannot go to the king for fear of her own death (4:10–11). She does not directly say that she does not want to intervene but merely says that this plea from Mordecai is out of the realm of reasonable possibility for her. In both Ming’s and Esther’s cases, that which is reasonable seems to be staying in one’s own lane, though both indicate that there is willingness to act (and in both cases, they *do* act).

Finally, Sam articulates the catch-22 of compliance in response to Cheung’s comments on being forced to close down his farm: “Huh? No way. You and your father did whatever they asked. So, complying or not complying, you’re doomed either way.”<sup>40</sup> Similarly, the Jews seem to have adapted and conformed to life in

37 There is something to be said that the presence of Haman and his ensuing conflict with Mordecai (and secondarily Esther) emphasises the traditional enmity between the Israelites and the Amalekites.

38 Beal, *Esther*, 32.

39 *Ten Years*; The phrase is 「我唔知我可以點做」 which carries a semantic range of “I don’t know what I was supposed to do,” and “I didn’t know what I could do differently,” or “I didn’t know what else I could do,” as well as the above translation.

40 *Ten Years*.

Persia; significantly, “apart from fasting, no distinctively religious practices or concepts seem to be in the canonical version [of the book of Esther].”<sup>41</sup> Yet, this conformity does not save them; the edict issued brings to the very fore the fragility of being subject in the hegemonic imperial grid (3:15–4:3). Vashti is another example of this; though she held the role of queen, her disobedience costs her the queenship, if not her life (1:16–22).

### *Various Shades of Resistance*

The various shades of resistance are harder to identify, if only because resisting external forces is insufficient, given the reach and creeping in of imperialism to every facet of the subjects’ lives. The different types of resistance that will be discussed are the confrontations, the egg motif, humour, the use of space, and the role of memory and story in resistance.

*Confrontation: loud, direct gestures.* In “Local Egg,” there are two significant paralleling scenes that illustrate confrontation, both involving the main protagonist, Sam. In the first scene, Sam confronts the Youth Guard leader who has come by his shop to inspect it. At the end of the scene, Sam says to the Youth Guard, “If you don’t know, you should use your brain to think it through. Don’t just do exactly as you’re told.”<sup>42</sup> Similarly, in the second scene, Sam confronts his son, who he feels has been keeping secrets from him:

SAM: Ming, you’ve been eating eggs from Cheung-Gor’s farm ever since you were little. I don’t care what others say, or what that banned list says. There is nothing wrong with eating or selling his eggs. The ones who are in the wrong are those who accuse others for no reason. Do you understand?

MING: Yes.

SAM: Look at me for a minute. No matter what, don’t just follow others blindly. Think before you act. (Pause). OK?<sup>43</sup>

In a high-context culture, this direct confrontation is jarring and conveys Sam’s frustration and sense of trying to change things however he can. While Sam’s first confrontation likely changes nothing, the Youth Guard leader is given an opportunity to reconsider his position: that of a child soldier who answers to an invisible system that has no investment in him beyond his utilitarian value.<sup>44</sup> Yet, his second

41 Moore, *Esther*, xxxi-xxxii.

42 *Ten Years*.

43 *Ten Years*.

44 There is something to be said about this as an interaction where an elder is within his right to address a junior, but the rude response emphasises the wrongness of the interaction, and the unflinching matter-of-fact tone suggests that Sam is out of line in questioning this young Youth Guard (and thereby the system).

confrontation—no less jarring—is one based in trust and relationship, and his words do make an impact on his son, who later refuses to actively participate in the eggging of Lam’s bookstore.

Likewise, the character of Vashti has been lauded for her direct confrontation of her husband and her refusal to cede to his tyranny.<sup>45</sup> Her refusal illuminates the king’s excesses as well as his own impotence—his utter reliance on his advisors and his inability to manage his own household.

Mordecai also resists visibly three times. The first is his refusal to bow to Haman: he suggests to the king’s servants that he cannot bow to Haman because he “is a Jew” (3:5). Yet, there is nothing external to support this, given that Jews did obeisance to kings and other superiors (1 Sam 24:8; Gen 23:7, etc.).<sup>46</sup> Regardless, this is both very odd and very visible, given that he told his ward to hide her own identity. His tearing of his clothes and adopting the mourning ritual at the king’s gate are also very much visible and disruptive. But unlike his first action that brings doom for his people, this second action of tearing his garments communicates to Esther that “something had been irreparably ripped. . . . The tear is a primal gesture, connecting Mordecai to his grief, to his niece, to his people beside him, and to those long before him who also tore into garments to capture the pain that transcended words.”<sup>47</sup> The second action as a public gesture is for his ward Esther, to compel her to act on behalf of her people, but also for the world, that the “powerless must grieve, and then the powerless must fight.”<sup>48</sup> The third occurs in chapter 5, where Mordecai “neither rose nor trembled before [Haman]” (5:9). These two last gestures recall Mordecai and Esther to their roots and disrupt the hegemonic frame by their refusal to submit to this royal edict lying down, even to the oppressor’s very face.

*The egg motif.* Vashti might serve as a warning of how an individual’s effort has no effect on the hegemonic imperial frame. Yet, for all the seeming futility of small persons, the egg motif in “Local Egg” “pays homage to [novelist] Haruki Murakami’s manifesto about the egg that breaks against the high wall—a metaphor for the individual’s clash with the system.”<sup>49</sup> Specifically, Murakami writes,

45 Cf. Mmapula Diana Kebaneilwe, “The Vashti Paradigm: Resistance as a Strategy for Combating HIV,” *The Ecumenical Review* 63 (2011): 378–83; Madipoane Masenya, “‘Limping, Yet Made to Climb a Mountain!’ Re-Reading the Vashti Character in the HIV and AIDS South African Context,” in *The Bible and Feminism: Remapping the Field*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 534–47.

46 Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 379. The LXX, however, does suggest that he refused to bow down because Haman was not God (LXX addition C 13:12–14).

47 Brown, *Esther*, §4.1.2. Note that Esth 2:7 indicates that Esther is Mordecai’s uncle’s daughter.

48 Brown, *Esther*, §4.1.2.

49 Maggie Lee, “Film Review: ‘Ten Years,’” *Variety*, April 19, 2016, <https://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/ten-years-film-review-1201748166/>.

Between a high solid wall and an egg that breaks against it, I will stand on the side of egg. Yes, no matter how right the wall may be and how wrong the egg, I will stand with the egg. Someone else will have to decide what is right and what is wrong; perhaps time or history will decide. . . . What is the meaning of this metaphor? In some cases, it is all too simple and clear. Bombers and tanks and rockets and white phosphorus shells are that high, solid wall. The eggs are unarmed civilians who are crushed and burned and shot by them. . . . This is not all, though. . . . Each of us, is more or less, an egg. . . . And each of us . . . is confronting a high, solid wall . . . The System. The System is supposed to protect us, but sometimes it takes a life on its own, and then it begins to kill us and cause us to kill others—coldly, efficiently, systematically.<sup>50</sup>

Every little bit counts. Even if there is only one egg, that wall is left with egg on its face. For both Ming and Esther, their small status is what makes them improbable hero(ine)s, and their actions—Ming, slipping the banned list to Lam, and Esther, walking into the king’s court—both have the direst of consequences. Both step bravely forward, though not in the most conventional of ways. Ming sneaks, while Esther steps into her husband’s court, armed only with her charm and wit. Yet, Ming’s actions enable Lam and his patrons to squirrel away books in a secret apartment, a place where HongKongers can remain free. Esther, “only” a woman, is able to manipulate her husband into sympathy for *her* people’s plight and flips the tables on Haman, ensuring the survival of her people (Esth 7–8).

Yet, it is important to note the continuation of Murakami’s words in this same speech:

We are all human beings, individuals transcending nationality and race and religion, fragile eggs with a solid wall called the System. To all appearances we have no hope of winning. The wall is too high, too strong—and too cold. If we have any hope of victory at all, it will have to come from our own believing in the utter uniqueness and irreplaceability of our own and others’ souls and from the warmth we gain by joining souls together.<sup>51</sup>

Community *is* resistance. Ming might have stepped forward, but he is buoyed by the love and support of his father. Sam and Cheung too demonstrate resistance in their insistence for local eggs: Cheung, because his father wanted local things for

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50 Haruki Murakami, “Always on the Side of the Egg,” *Ha’aretz*, February 17, 2009, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/culture/1.5076881>.

51 Murakami, “Always on the Side of the Egg.”



local people, and Sam, for his care for his customers, only choosing the best for them, even if it costs him. Esther finds her place again, coming out as a Jew and reclaiming her people publicly (Esth 7–8). She also has the support of her uncle, Mordecai, along with all the Jews there who fast with her (4:16–17)—the act of resistance here is solidarity and robust relationship. In contrast, the Youth Guard leader is only surrounded by sycophantic followers; the king and Haman too are surrounded by incompetent, foolish, obsequious advisors—all of them are starkly alone with only institutional power to sustain them.

*Humour.* Humour and mockery as resistance have long been studied. Notable among theorizations of humour is M. M. Bakhtin’s description of carnival culture, though there are other more contemporary examples as well.<sup>52</sup> Among biblical scholars, Adele Berlin, Kenneth Craig, and the like have noted the carnivalesque nature of the book of Esther.<sup>53</sup> As Craig notes,

laughing at another’s discourse is a means of deflating authority, of drawing near what had been distant, of unmasking what had functioned as a veil. The carnival world is permeated with collective gaiety that destroys every form of authority, and communal laughter is fundamentally opposed to all hierarchies. This laughter is a subversive force, one which liberates victims from the restrictions of a prevailing order.

Based upon Arthur Berger’s list of what qualifies as humour, this next section will discuss the ways humour is used in “Local Egg” to illuminate insights in the Book of Esther.<sup>54</sup> In the third scene, when Sam’s shop is inspected by the Youth Guard, he is told that he has broken the rules.

SAM: Which rule did I break?

LEADER: Commander said all the words on this list need to be recorded.

SAM: Even selling eggs is illegal?

LEADER: No, selling eggs is no problem, but the word “local” is against the rules.

52 Cf. Eric Bentley, “The Psychology of Farce,” in *Let’s Get a Divorce and Other Plays* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958); M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); C. Powell and G. E. C. Paton, *Humour in Society: Resistance and Control* (London: MacMillan, 1988); S. B. Rodrigues and D. L. Collinson, “‘Having Fun’? Humour as Resistance in Brazil,” *Organization Studies* 16 (1995): 739–68; Arthur A. Berger, *Blind Men and Elephants: Perspectives on Humour* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1995); A. A. Berger, *An Anatomy of Humour* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1998).

53 Cf. Adele Berlin, *Esther*, JPC (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001); Kenneth Craig, *A Case for Literary Carnavalesque* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

54 Berger, *Blind Men*, 54–55.



- SAM: OK, let me ask you. What does “local” mean?
- LEADER: From Hong Kong.
- SAM: So, what does “local eggs” mean?
- LEADER: Eggs from Hong Kong.
- SAM: So, if I wrote “Hong Kong eggs,” would there be a problem?
- LEADER consults his list.*
- LEADER: Hong Kong . . . no problem.
- SAM (picks up an egg): This same egg . . . if it’s labelled “local egg” it’s problematic, but it’s fine when it’s a “Hong Kong egg”? Where’s the logic in that?
- LEADER: I don’t know. Anyway, I’m going to record anything against the rules.<sup>55</sup>

Sam exposes the absurdity through repartee that “local” is banned but not “Hong Kong”—when the two phrases in this context mean the same thing. Moreover, the Youth Guard leader is unreasonably rigid, understanding the point that Sam is making but sticking to his instructions literally and dogmatically. This is a point of unmasking: Sam exposes the system for its fixation on legality and punishment. The Youth Guard is also portrayed as a buffoon and is in some ways caricaturised: this is especially seen in his brusque manner, and his walk away from the shop is an ambling waddle, perhaps playing on the stereotype of corrupt officials as more rotund.<sup>56</sup> His movements also appear mechanised, which invites the audience to laugh (perhaps incredulously) and to note the absurdity of the entire encounter.<sup>57</sup>

The imperial complex in Esther is displayed in a similar buffoonish fashion. Though the audience is told of the greatness of the king through the sheer wealth of the empire on full display (1:1–4), the king himself is impotent. He is seen drunk, relying on sycophantic advisors, and unable to decide on his own without consultation. His folly is demonstrated not only in his reliance on his advisors, but also in making significant decisions drunk.

It is also absurd how much of his time is consumed by the decision to choose another wife, given that he has to choose himself based on his own pleasure (four years have passed between Esther’s crowning and the beginning of the story) (1:3; 2:16). As David Firth writes, “every attempt at shoring up power and prestige that does not exist shows how vacuous it is.”<sup>58</sup> Supporting him are advisors who are no

55 *Ten Years*.

56 Cf. Bradley S. Greenberg and et al., “Portrayals of Overweight and Obese Individuals on Commercial Television,” *American Journal of Public Health* 93 (2003): 1342–48.

57 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell (Kobenhavn: Green Integer, 1911), 32.

58 David Firth, *The Message of Esther*, BST (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010), 44.

better; one wonders how this empire ran at all given the incompetence of the king's advisors—particularly given Memukan's advice, which is based not on legal precedent but patriarchal precedent.<sup>59</sup> Haman, the one advisor at which we are given a closer look, is a raging narcissist who flies into infantile tantrums at Mordecai's refusal to bow down to him (3:5–6; 5:9–14).

Finally, the last interaction of “Local Egg” between Sam and his son Ming displays the ridiculousness of the rules. Taking place in the secret apartment where all the banned literature has been kept, Sam walks to the back of the apartment where Ming has seated himself, reading a comic book.

SAM: How can they think they can ban things from existence?

MING: Right? Even Doraemon is banned. Idiots!<sup>60</sup>

Doraemon is a popular Japanese manga and anime for children; it has been a quintessential part of multiple generations of Hong Kong childhoods and is embedded in Hong Kong culture.<sup>61</sup> Doraemon is an earless robot cat who is sent back in time to his master's ancestor, Nobita Nobi, in order to rescue him from his bullies, secure his future, and thus change the fates of his descendants. Nobita Nobi is unrelentingly mundane, and much of the joy derived from this manga is how ordinary its protagonists are (minus Doraemon) but also how much they just want to help the people around them and make things right.

Thus, Ming's reaction, 傻㗎 (*so4 gaa4*), which is translated as “Idiots!”, makes sense. But, more fully, 㗎 (*so4*) carries the semantic range of “foolish, silly, stupid, and nonsensical,” while the final particle 㗎 (*gaa4*) is used to indicate an assertion of emphasis. And Ming's tonality indicates that it is also a rhetorical question. Altogether, Ming's last exclamation rightfully points out the absurdity of the rules of the empire, stooping so low as to ban a children's cartoon that is about ordinary people given means to do extraordinary things, helping other ordinary people. It is also possible that this absurdity is what made Ming consider resisting in the first place, given his love for Doraemon.

Similarly, the issuing of edicts and the norms around this legality are farcical. First, the edict issued in Esther 1:21–22 is “unenforceable, if not downright silly, even a farce.”<sup>62</sup> The king cannot possibly enforce that a man be master in his own house. Haman's edict, Berlin argues, is equally ridiculous, given the “tolerance of the Persian empire.”<sup>63</sup> Finally, the rigidity of the king's decrees is absurd: how can

59 Taylor, *Ruth, Esther*, 107.

60 *Ten Years*.

61 “Hong Kong celebrates 100 years before the birth of Doraemon with exhibition,” *AP Entertainment*, August 14, 2012, <http://www.aparchive.com/metadata/youtube/52d64fe809ee193ecd56521bb7e7cd8d>.

62 Berlin, *Esther*, 20.

63 Berlin, *Esther*, 20.

a king have the power to issue but not retract an edict (8:7–8)? The inconsistencies jar the reader out of complacency with regards to the imperial complex and enable sympathising with the protagonists in their quest for liberation or, at the very least, survival.

*The use of space.* Whereas open, light spaces are often seen as safe, in “Local Egg” it is the dark and the enclosed, tucked away spaces that are safe and illuminating. Sam’s conversation with Cheung is in the open and in the light, though thrum with tension over Cheung’s farm’s closure, and similarly Sam’s confrontation with the Youth Guard ringleader, Ming’s posse inspecting the bookstore, and the egging of the bookstore all occur in the daytime. Ming makes sure that no one is around him when he sneaks the banned list into a comic book entitled, *The Prophecy of Death* (死亡預言). But the movement towards intimacy and freedom happen in the evening: Sam pleads with Ming to think for himself, and Ming looks with trust at his father (though certainly there is still ambiguity as to how Ming will respond). Finally, the secret library is seen as the ambiguous place on the way to liberation—where people are free to read and express their thoughts without fear of censorship and retribution, but where real fear of the outside remains.

In Esther, the upstairs/downstairs, inside/outside divide is worth paying attention to. First, the upstairs or the upper space seems to be reserved for those with power and authority—Haman is literally elevated above the other officials (3:1). The royal chambers cannot be entered without permission or unless one has special status (Esther in 4:11 versus Haman in 6:4–5). This power, however, is hollow; those with power have no restraint, and those supposedly powerless manipulate the powerful with ease. The inside of the palace is resplendent and is the centre of power. Yet the inside is contested; Esther’s position is tenuous while Haman is established. Esther has no access to news of the kingdom; Haman facilitates the events that stimulate news. The king makes no decisions of his own.

But the space that is most significant in the book of Esther is the in-between, the liminal space: the gate (which was most likely an “enormous thoroughfare separating the palace from the rest of Susa”<sup>64</sup>). Here, an assassination plot is foiled; it is where the conflict between Haman and Mordecai builds. It is a place where someone like Mordecai—who is both of the Persian Empire and also not—can exist; and it is also the place where the most promise for mobility upward as well as greatest danger occurs. Like the secret library, it is the place where one can make a play for liberation, even while the threat of imperial power is immediate.

*Memory and story as resistance.* One of the characteristics of imperialism is the unmitigated disregard for the memory and the history of the conquered, and

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64 Brown, *Esther*, §6.3.2.

the re-creation of the subject into the imperialist's image.<sup>65</sup> As such, texts, memory, and story are vital to the path of resistance. And when they are told, they particularise the context such that the hegemonic story is unveiled for the lie that it is—a particularisation that seeks to expand beyond its limits and devour all others. In “Local Egg,” the Youth Guard Commander's letter to parents attempts to break the story, telling them that they will not be informed by the Youth Guard Commander of their children's covert operations. This is a nod to life under authoritarian regimes, where children report on their parents, breaking the ties between generations and reshaping children into the empire's image while the parents are discarded. But Sam and Ming have a strong bond, and Ming still listens to his father, while Sam trusts his son with the wisdom he is disclosing.

The secret library cannot be glossed over; the banned texts—including Doraemon—remind HongKongers who they are. The director of the short was intentional, too, about signalling text as resistance with posters of Che, Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, Stanley Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange*, and a yellow umbrella. Also in the secret library, Sam tells Lam, “Please, never get used to [oppression]. It's precisely because our generation got used to it that you have to live like this now.”<sup>66</sup> Yet, there is incredible hope because the next generation holds on—from Lam and other patrons opening a secret library to Ming clutching his Doraemon comics, recognizing that they indeed are “living in an evil time” and choosing to be the (ordinary) people, given extraordinary means, stepping up for such a time as this.

As for the Book of Esther, there was previous discussion about multi-hyphenation as bowing to the imperial, but simultaneously, it is also resistance because it actively defies assimilation, signalling that one's identity is not entirely subsumed into the imperial complex. Similarly, Esther's name (אֶסְתֵּר) might be read to mean “I will hide” or I am hiding” if following the Talmud; אֶסְתֵּר could be translated as the first person *qal* imperfect form of the verb “to hide.”<sup>67</sup> This might be interpreted hopefully, as an indicator that God is indeed behind the coincidences and working behind the scenes. Erica Brown also interprets the hiddenness motif (continued in Mordecai asking Esther to conceal her identity) as a deliberate act in order to “reveal the real relationship between God and the Israelites when they are not dependent upon God for every need . . . [as well as] Mordecai . . . asking her to embody as a leader, the condition of her people in exile.”<sup>68</sup> Further, this act of concealment might serve to help differentiate who one truly is and make possible “a confrontation with the inner self.”<sup>69</sup>

65 Said, *Culture*, 105–109.

66 *Ten Years*.

67 Beal, *Esther*, 30.

68 Brown, *Esther*, §7.2.4.

69 Brown, *Esther*, §7.2.4.

But for all that the land motif and God are not mentioned, the book of Esther is replete with imagery that draws from the larger Jewish tradition—the nod to the historical enmity between the Israelites and the Amalekites, establishing Mordecai as of King Saul’s line, as well as other hints of the Deuteronomistic tradition (1 Sam 15; Deut 21:22–23; Josh 8:29, 10:26–27, etc.) As Levenson indicates, this text might also serve to expand the exodus motif such that any rescue from empire can be seen as an exodus and introduces the concept that “shrewd statesmen were at least as essential to survival as were prophets.”<sup>70</sup> This text, in other words, carves out a new theology for the Jewish Diaspora as they contemplate what promise there can be outside of the land of Israel.

The temple, too, looms large in the text. The first is in the description of the palace, recalling the reader to the splendour of the temple and the visible reminder of the temple’s absence. But this absence creates an important contrast to the palace, reminding the people of God that Ahasuerus, for all his wealth and splendour, is not God. The second is the participial noun complement and the absolute noun following, שַׁמְרֵי הַסֶּף (“who guarded the threshold”), which is most often used in reference to the temple (Esth 2:21, 6:2; cf. 2 Kgs 12:9, 22:4, 23:4, 25:18; Jer 52:24; 2 Chr 34:9). Finally, meta-textually, Purim holds the book of Esther at the very centre of its celebration; and the command is not to remember the conquering of their enemies but to celebrate in gladness and joy (Esth 9:18–19). The re-telling of stories is powerful because it reminds a people that the imperial complex cannot rob them of their joy, so long as they remember who they are.

### **Decolonising: Towards or Away from Empire?**

The danger occurs when power is mistaken for liberation—and the postcolonial trajectory often results in, yes, decolonisation, but also re-colonisation or neo-colonisation.<sup>71</sup> This happens because there is insufficient critical reflection on decolonisation, but also because it fails to take seriously the ideological hold the imperial complex has on subject peoples. Put another way, the aspiration of empire does not topple empire; it merely moves another empire into its place, and imperialism occurs all over again. And, as evidenced by the texts, there is no one way forward to decolonisation.

Indeed, while the efforts of Mordecai and Esther ensured the survival of their people, they took on the same power of the imperial complex that previously had been used to oppress them. Rather than overturning the imperial complex, they used imperial power to suppress another colonised people’s machinations within that same system, thereby committing the very same destruction that was almost

70 Levenson, “Scroll of Esther,” 449.

71 Chen, *Asia as Method*, 63.

committed against them (8:11–13; 9:1–17). By becoming part of the system, they have become part of the oppressive structures.

Perhaps “Local Egg” might offer a possible way forward towards decolonisation. The resistance posters in the secret library serve to remind HongKongers that they are not alone in their resistance. This film also strangely forecasts the Milk Tea Alliance with the nod to both Cheung moving to Taiwan as well as Sam looking to replace his local eggs with Thai eggs.<sup>72</sup> And while HongKongers have been accused of appealing to the West for help, this film draws from the strength of Japanese pacifism—Haruki Murakami and Doraemon, formed in the post-war era as the Japanese people came to grips with their involvement in World War II—that has seeped into the very fibre of Hong Kong culture.

In sum, the way forward lies not in buying into imperial power but in creating alliances with other colonised peoples and locating the new narrative by re-drawing the map, centring and privileging colonised people’s stories. This is the work of community as resistance. It also means that colonised peoples have the hard work of lessening the imperial desire, so that reconciliation, integration, and independence might be possible.<sup>73</sup> This might be done, as it is in Esther and in “Local Egg,” by celebrating and revelling in the particular and resisting the urge to universalise and gain imperial power for themselves.

## Conclusion

In sum, “Local Egg” brings a contemporary example to bear of a context currently dealing with the present danger and uncertainty of living in an imperial world, and thus illuminates the book of Esther by drawing out key postcolonial themes. Conversely, the book of Esther speaks back into “Local Egg,” showing ways forward of surviving amidst empire while tangibly warning of the danger of becoming part of the imperial complex. This paper has discussed the totalising force of imperialism, the types of compliance and resistance, as well as a possible way forward in decolonisation. It also has concretely illustrated that the scriptures still have something to say today and perhaps are more pertinent now than ever. Finally, just because God is seemingly hidden, it does not excuse our inability to act. Perhaps, like Ming and Esther as well as Sam and Mordecai, in evil times, the ordinary people are not powerless but are called to intervene in bringing about justice and shalom in their contexts.

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72 Laignee Baron, “‘We Share the Ideals of Democracy.’ How the Milk Tea Alliance Is Brewing Solidarity Among Activists in Asia and Beyond,” *TIME*, October 28, 2020, <https://time.com/5904114/milk-tea-alliance/>.

73 Chen, *Asia as Method*, 198.

## Who was the God of the Exodus: El or Yahweh?

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### Abstract

Some scholars claim that 1 Kgs 12:28 and Exod 32:4 plus Num 23:22; 24:8 indicate that El rather than Yahweh was originally considered the god of the Exodus. I evaluate this claim from a variety of perspectives: (1) El and Yahweh as separate deities; (2) their distinct geographical areas of activity; (3) their direct differentiation in some biblical texts; (4) the content of 1 Kgs 12:28; Exod 32:4; Num 23:22; 24:8; and (5) the implausibility of Yahweh replacing El if the latter was the original god of the Exodus.

Yahweh is commonly understood to be the God of the Exodus. Anyone with a passing familiarity with the First Testament knows the basic elements: the divine name Yahweh was revealed to Moses at Mt. Sinai, where Yahweh commissioned him to lead the enslaved Israelites out of Egypt. Yahweh inflicted ten plagues on the Egyptians until Pharaoh finally released the Israelites, then Yahweh drowned the pursuing Egyptians at the Reed Sea so that the Israelites could escape completely. After this Yahweh provided food and water in the desert and handed down the Covenant regulations that would structure their religious and social lives from that point forward. Regardless of its historicity, this is the story that most people know.

However, some scholars have challenged Yahweh's role in the Exodus on the basis of the Golden Calves narratives and the Balaam oracles. In Exodus 32, when the people see the calf that Aaron made they shout, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt" (Exod 32:4). Jeroboam makes the same pronouncement with respect to the calves he made for the sanctuaries at Dan and Bethel (1 Kgs 12:38). Some link the calves in both narratives to El, in which case he would be the one who "brought you up from the land of Egypt," instead of Yahweh. In addition, the Balaam Oracles include the statement that the one who "brings them out of Egypt is like the horns of a wild ox for him" (Num 23:22; 24:8). The phrase is preceded by the Hebrew word *'el*, which can mean either the common noun "god," or the divine name "El." Once again, some link the bovine imagery ("a wild ox") in the second part of the phrase to El, and



therefore translate *'ēl* as the divine name, making El, not Yahweh, the one who “brings them out of Egypt” in Num 23:22 and 24:8 as well.

## I. El and Yahweh as Separate Deities

Before examining those texts more closely, it is first necessary to consider the relationship of El and Yahweh, specifically whether they are simply different names or titles for a single deity, which would remove any real contradiction. Exodus 3:15–16 identifies Yahweh with “the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (see also Exod 6:3) but careful examination of the Patriarch narratives in Genesis in light of extra-biblical evidence shows that the deity in those stories is El, not Yahweh.<sup>1</sup> There are three singular instances in Genesis where the Hebrew word *'ēl* is followed immediately by a specific noun or adjective, namely *'ēl ro'î* (Gen 16:13), *'ēl 'ōlām* (Gen 21:33) and *'ēl bêt-'ēl* (Gen 35:7); see also *'ēl bērit* in Judg 9:46.<sup>2</sup> While these could indicate either “god” or “El” plus an attribute, the latter formulation predominates at Ugarit,<sup>3</sup> resulting in “El who sees,” “El the eternal one,” “El of Bethel,” and “El of the covenant” respectively. Of these epithets, *'lm* is linked to El at Ugarit in KTU 1.4.IV.41; 1.10.III.5 and possibly 1.108.1, echoing his aged appearance in, e.g., KTU 1.3.V.38; 1.4.IV.41, and his title “the father of years” in KTU 1.17.VI.49; 6.VI.26 (cf. “the Ancient of Days” [NRSV: “an/the Ancient One”] in Dan 7:9, 13, 22).<sup>4</sup>

Taking these verses as single El epithets is supported by *'ēl 'elyôn* in Gen 14:18(2x), 19, and 22.<sup>5</sup> Since *'elyôn* indicates elevation, the full phrase is

- 1 See further, *inter alia*, John L. McLaughlin, *What Are They Saying About Ancient Israelite Religion?* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2016), 1–8; Theodore J. Lewis, *The Origin and Character of God: Ancient Israelite Religion Through the Lens of Divinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 83–109.
- 2 Gen 21:33 also refers to Yahweh, but most consider that secondary; see, e.g., Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 46, nn. 11–12.
- 3 Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 50. Excavations at the ancient city of Ugarit in northern Syria have unearthed a number of clay tablets, including mythological texts dealing with the Canaanite gods El, Ba'al, Asherah, etc. These texts are collected in *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places (KTU 3)*, Third, Enlarged ed., ed. Manfred Dietrich, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquín Sanmartín, AOAT 360 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2013) and are cited as KTU, which derives from the title of the 1st edition, which was in German: *Keilalphabetische Texte aus Ugarit*.
- 4 Against Cross' reading of “El” plus “the eternal one” in Arslan Tash I.9-11 and Sinai 358 (Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 17, 19), see Dennis Pardee, “Les documents d'Arslan Tash: authentiques ou faux?” *Syria* 75 (1998): 18; P. Kyle McCarter, “An Amulet from Arslan Tash,” in *The Context of Scripture. II. Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World*, ed. William W. Hallo (Leiden/New York/Cologne: E. J. Brill, 2000), 223; Blane W. Conklin, “Arslan Tash I and Other Vestiges of a Particular Syrian Incantatory Thread,” *Bib* 84 (2003): 90 and Meindert Dijkstra, “El 'Olam in the Sinai?” *ZAW* 99 (1987): 249–50 respectively.
- 5 For the following details see Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 50–52; Eric E. Elnes and Patrick D. Miller, “ELYON עֵלְיוֹן,” in *DDD2*, 293–99; John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan*, JSOTSup 265 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 20–21; Lewis, *The Origin and Character of God*, 86–95.



traditionally rendered as “God most High.” However, the adjective is linked with El in *KAI* 222.A.11 (ʿl wʿlyn), and El plus ʿly are found together in some South Semitic inscriptions, which suggests that ʿel ʿelyôn in Genesis 18 means “El, the Most High.” Moreover, ʿel ʿelyôn is called the “creator/owner of heaven and earth” (*qōneh šāmayim wā ʾāreš*) in vv. 19 and 22, echoing “El, creator of the earth” (ʿl qn ʿrš) in *KAI* 26 A III:18 and 129:1, as well as [ʿl] qn ʿrš) in an 8th-7th century inscription from Jerusalem, plus the divine name <sup>4</sup>*El-ku-ni-ir-ša* (Elkunirša) from a Hittite myth.<sup>6</sup> Finally, Elyon is in parallel with Shadday, an El epithet, at Num 24:16; Ps 91:1.

The El epithet šadday occurs forty-eight times in the First Testament. Thirteen times it is in parallel with ʿel and eight times is part of the phrase ʿel šadday. Significantly, six instances of ʿel šadday occur in Genesis (see Gen 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; plus Exod 6:3; Ezek 10:5), which are antecedents to Yahweh’s equation with the god of the patriarchs in Exod 3:15–16 and especially Exod 6:3. While traditionally translated as “God Almighty” (cf. the Greek translation as *pantokratōr* and the Latin *omnipotens*), šadday is more likely a dual noun meaning “mountains” (cf. Akkadian šadû, “mountain”).<sup>7</sup> The name El Shadday occurs at Ugarit in KTU 1.108.12 (ʿilšdyšd, “El Shadday is hunting”),<sup>8</sup> and El is elsewhere called “the one of the mountain” (ʿil pbnḥwn; KTU 1.128.9) and dwells atop the cosmic mountain (e.g., KTU 1.4.IV.23; cf. “the mountains of El” [*harērē-ēl*] in Ps 36:7). This and other factors point to translating ʿel šadday as “El of the mountains.”

El also appears in Gen 49:24–26.<sup>9</sup> Verse 24c mentions ʾābîr ya ʾāqōb, often rendered as “the Mighty one of Jacob.” However, changing the vowels and pointing (which were only added in the Middle Ages) in the initial term ʾabbîr produces “the Bull of Jacob,”<sup>10</sup> echoing “Bull El” (*tr ʾil*) at Ugarit (KTU 1.3.IV.54; V.35; 1.4.IV.47; etc.). This is supported by ʿel ʾābikâ in v. 25a. The *NRSV* translates this as “the God of your father” but the phrase is paralleled with Shadday (*NRSV* “the

6 For the restoration of ʿl at the beginning of the Jerusalem ostracón see Patrick D. Miller Jr., “El, the Creator of Earth,” *BASOR* 239 (1980): 42–46. ʿlqwnrʿ in a 1st C. CE Palmyrene inscription and ʿlqnrʿ are similar but not identical.

7 Cf. the review of three possible etymologies in Lewis, *The Origin and Character of God*, 102–5; he declines to decide among them.

8 For arguments against reading ʾlšdy in JSTham 255, a Thamudic B inscription from Taymaʿ, see Michael C. A. MacDonald and Geraldine M. H. King, “Thamudic,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 10, 2nd ed., ed. P. J. Bearman, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 437; Aren M. Wilson-Wright, “The Helpful God: A Reevaluation of the Etymology and Character of (ʿel) Šadday,” *VT* 69 (2019): 150–51; cf. Édouard Lipiński, “Shadday, Shadrappa et le dieu Satrape,” *ZAH* 8 (1995): 248. My thanks to Aleksander Krogevoll for these bibliographical references.

9 See Matthias Köckert, “MIGHTY ONE OF JACOB יַעֲקֹב אֲבִיר,” in *DDD2*, 573–75; Day, *Gods and Goddesses*, 38, 41; Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities of Canaan*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 48–52. Cf. already much earlier, Bruce Vawter, “The Canaanite Background of Genesis 49,” *CBQ* 17 (1955): 10–17.

10 In an unvocalized Hebrew text “mighty one” and “bull” would be identical: אֲבִיר.

Almighty”) in v. 25b.<sup>11</sup> This, combined with the cosmic aspects of “the blessings of your father” in v. 26, indicates that 25a refers to “El, your father.” El not only fathers the gods in the previous KTU citations, but “Bull El, your father” is also linked to King Kirtu in KTU 14.II.6, 20; IV.5; etc. In addition, “the blessings of the breasts and the wombs” in v. 25e probably alludes to Asherah, El’s wife. On their own, each point is inconclusive, but collectively the references to “bull,” “El, your Father,” “(El) Shadday,” “blessings of breasts and womb” (Asherah) and “blessings of your father,” with their clear echoes of Ugarit texts, point to El as the central deity in this text.

Finally, and most conclusively, El is twice explicitly identified as Israel’s God. In Gen 33:20 Jacob erects an altar outside Shechem and names it “El, the god of Israel” (’ēl ’ēlōhê yiśrā’ēl), while in Gen 46:3 God (’ēlōhîm) says to Jacob, “I am El, the god of your father” (’ēl ’ēlōhê ’ābîkā). While ’ēl in both texts could be the common noun “god,” it is immediately followed by the plural bound form of the same noun (’ēlōhê), and this latter form can only mean “god.” It is unlikely that two forms of the same noun would be used one after the other (i.e., “god, the god of Israel/of your father” instead of just “the god of Israel/your father”). In particular, since ’ēl can also indicate the divine name El; the two forms side by side would only create confusion, especially in a later monotheistic context. Therefore, the initial ’ēl in Gen 33:20 and 46:3 must indicate El, who is identified as “the god of Israel” and the “god of your father” respectively. In keeping with this, in Exod 6:3 Yahweh says that he had revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shadday.

The preceding demonstrates that the “god of the fathers” in Genesis was El. Nevertheless, Frank Moore Cross considers Yahweh part of a title for El.<sup>12</sup> The initial *yod* in Yahweh suggests a 3rd masculine singular verbal form, and the vocalization *yahwēh* points to the causative form derived from the Hebrew root *hwh* (later *hyh*): “to be.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, *yahwēh* alludes to creative activity. Cross links this to the phrase *yhwh šēbāōt*, which he renders as “he brings into being the armies.”<sup>14</sup> Cross considers this phrase part of a longer sentence reflecting El’s creation of the divine beings: *il ǝu yahwī šēbāōt* (“El who creates the [heavenly] armies”). For Cross, over time *yahweh šēbāōt* was separated from El, was

11 Some Hebrew manuscripts and the Samaritan Pentateuch, the LXX and the Syriac presuppose *wē’ēl* rather than MT *wē’ēt*, yielding “El Shadday” rather than just Shadday, but the point remains without the emendation.

12 For the following see Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 60–75.

13 Appeals to the Arabic root *hwy*, meaning “to fall” (as in lightening), “to blow” (as in wind) or “to love/be passionate” can be rejected.

14 Cross reasonably takes the insertion of ’ēlōhîm between the two words as a later addition to solve the grammatical problem of a name in a construct chain. The shorter form occurs 261 times against the 18 instances of the longer form.

subsequently shortened to just Yahweh, and eventually replaced the name El as the primary designation for Israel's God.

A number of arguments can be mounted in support of Cross' proposal, which still finds great support among scholars today. First, El and Yahweh share many characteristics, such as wisdom, kindness, great age, a cherubim throne, rule over the divine council, Asherah as a consort, etc.<sup>15</sup> Related to this is the absence of any polemic against El in the First Testament, in contrast to the extensive and extended opposition to Ba'al. The lack of opposition to El could be because El and Yahweh were the same deity, so there was no need to oppose El.<sup>16</sup> One can also point to traditions of astral armies fighting on behalf of the Israelites and/or at the command of Yahweh in Judg 5:20; Josh 10:12 and Hab 3:11. Similarly, both Joshua (Josh 5:13–15) and Elisha (2 Kgs 6:16–17) encountered elements of the heavenly "army of the Lord."

However, in my opinion there are far stronger arguments against Cross' identification of the name Yahweh as part of a title for El. The first is that the full formula is unknown in the Bible or the extra-biblical literature, inscriptions, etc. Moreover, the shorter formula, "Yahweh Sabaoth," first appears in connection with Samuel in the late pre-monarchical period and, while not decisive, the temporal gap from the patriarchal period should at least be noted. Second, references to El creating in both the Bible and the Ugarit texts use either *qnh* or *kwn* but never *hyh*. Third, Yahweh as a creator is a later tradition, in contrast to the earliest presentations of him as a warrior god. Fourth, when El creates the divine beings, there is no indication of the warfare that is reflected in *yhwš šēbāôt*. In fact, war is not one of El's usual activities. In the Ugarit texts, battle is the purview of Ba'al, the storm god, just as Yahweh is frequently accompanied by the thunderstorm (see, e.g., Deut 33:2; Pss 29; 68:7–8; 97:2–4; 104:7; Hab 3:4); note also the theophany at Sinai. Similarly, Yahweh's victory over the sea (e.g., Exod 15:8,10; Pss 74:13–15; 89:10–11; 93:3–4; Job 26:12–13; 7:12; 38:8–11; Isa 27:1; cf. Isa 51:9–11) parallels Ba'al's defeat of his enemy Yam. Fifth, Yahweh and El have different geographical spheres of operation.

## II. Geographical Distinctions between El and Yahweh

Ancient deities were often thought to be restricted to the territory of the nation

15 Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 141–42.

16 Some appeal to Jeffrey Tigay's collocation of names in Israelite inscriptions: 557 with Yahweh, 77 with El, but only a "handful" with Ba'al and none with Asherah or Anat as evidence that Yahweh and El were the same. See Jeffrey H. Tigay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in Light of Hebrew Inscriptions*, HSS 31 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986); cf. the discussion in Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 141. But Asherah is not a component of names at Ugarit, where she played a major role, and there is good evidence that she was a major part of Israelite religion as well.

for which they were the chief god, and after the settlement in Canaan, Yahweh's influence is sometimes described as restricted to Israel. For instance, Jephthah asks the King of Ammon, "Should you not possess what your god Chemosh gives you to possess? And should we not possess everything that Yahweh our God has conquered for our benefit?" (Judg 11:24). Similarly, David claims that if Saul exiles him from Israel then David would have to serve other gods (1 Sam 26:19), and after Elisha heals Naaman of leprosy, the latter asks to take two mule loads of Israelite soil, the earth where Yahweh is god, so that he might worship Yahweh back home in Damascus (2 Kgs 5:1–19). In the same way, El's appearances in connection with the patriarchs are restricted to the area of Canaan, and when the text uses specific El epithets most are linked to precise locales within that territory.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast, Yahweh's *origins* are south of Canaan.<sup>18</sup> First of all, the name Yahweh or versions thereof are not attested in Northwest-Semitic pantheons. Second, Yahweh first reveals himself to Moses at Sinai in the south (cf. "the one of Sinai" in Judg 5:5). Some four centuries later Elijah makes a pilgrimage and encounters Yahweh there. In addition, the "War Theophanies" continued to call for Yahweh to come and fight from locations far south of Israel, despite the tradition that Yahweh dwelt in the Jerusalem temple. For instance, in Ps 68:18 Yahweh starts out from Sinai, while Deut 33:2–3 mentions Sinai, Seir (southern Edom but earlier considered Midianite territory) and Mt. Paran (in the Sinai), in parallel with each other. In Judg 5:4–5 Yahweh comes from Seir, Edom and Sinai,<sup>19</sup> and Hab 3:3 names Teman and Paran. This last text calls to mind "Yahweh of Teman" in an 8th Century BCE inscription from Kuntillet 'Ajrûd, whose invocation alongside "Yahweh of Samaria" shows that Yahweh's southern associations survived long after the settlement in the north.

Building on this, some scholars have argued that Yahweh was originally a Midianite deity.<sup>20</sup> Moses first encounters Yahweh while tending the flocks of his

17 'ēl 'elyôn ("God/El Most High") is associated with Jerusalem (14:18–22), 'ēl rō'i\* ("God/El Sees") with Beer-lahay-roi (16:13) and 'ēl 'ōlām ("God/El Eternal") with Beersheba (21:33).

18 For fuller presentations of the following see Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis Revisited and the Origins of Judah," *JSOT* 33 (2008): 131–53; McLaughlin, *What Are They Saying About Ancient Israelite Religion?* 13–20; Lewis, *The Origin and Character of God*, 271–86.

19 Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 145 notes additional southern/Kenite connections in Judges 5. In addition to the locales in the theophany of vv. 4–5, the rain echoes flash floods in desert regions, while there are also references to "Ephraim . . . , whose roots are in Amalek" (v. 14) and Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite (v. 24). Smith builds on the work of J. David Schloen, "Caravans, Kenites, and *Casus Belli*: Enmity and Alliance in the Song of Deborah," *CBQ* 55 (1993): 18–38.

20 A few go so far as to identify Yahweh explicitly with the Edomite deity Qos (John R. Bartlett, *Edom and the Edomites*, *JSOTSup* 77 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989], 187, 194–200; Nissim Amzallag, "Yahweh, the Canaanite God of Metallurgy?" *JSOT* 33 [2009]: 387–404; Justin Kelley, "Toward a New Synthesis of the God of Edom and Yahweh," *AntOr* 7 [2009]: 255–80) or as an Arabian (Midianite) volcano deity (Jacob E. Dunn, "A God of Volcanoes: Did Yahwism Take Root in Volcanic Ashes?" *JSOT* 38 [2014]: 387–424).

father-in-law, “the priest of Midian,” and that mountain is designated “the mountain of God” before he even has the encounter (Exod 3:1), which suggests it was already a holy site.<sup>21</sup> In addition, Moshe Weinfeld notes that the verb *qrh* in Exod 3:18; 5:3 is used of revelation to foreigners, namely Balaam, in Num 23:3–4, 15–16.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, after the Exodus itself, it was Jethro, the priest of Midian and not Aaron, the high priest of Israel, who presided over the celebratory sacrificial meal at Sinai and praised Yahweh for delivering the Israelites from Egypt (Exod 18:9–12)

To this we can add points of contact between Midianite and Israelite religion, reflected in the Midianite occupation of an Egyptian copper mine at Timna, 30 km north of Eilat on the gulf of Aqaba, ca. 1150 BCE (it contained “Midianite” pottery). In an accompanying shrine, the existing images of Hathor were defaced, suggesting an opposition to images similar to that in the Ten Commandments. At the same time a tent shrine and a copper snake were installed, which recall the “tent of meeting” and the snake Moses erected in the wilderness; the latter was preserved in the Jerusalem temple as “Nehushtan” (see Exod 26; 40; Num 21:8–9; Num 21:6–9; 2 Kgs 24:8).<sup>23</sup>

This constellation of elements that are also known from Israelite religion is suggestive. It does not prove Midianite influence on the Israelites, since the reverse process or independent traditions are both plausible alternate interpretations, but some elements of the Midianite tribes, the Kenites, are said to have accompanied them to Canaan and lived among them (see Num 10:29–32; Judg 1:16; 4:11; 1 Sam 15:6–7).<sup>24</sup> If they are to be identified with the Rechabites (thus 1 Chr 2:55) then they co-existed as a conservative element among the general population, preserving ancient traditions (see 2 Kgs 10:15–27; Jer 35:1–11).<sup>25</sup> Combined with the other points above this supports the proposal that Yahweh was first encountered as a Midianite deity far from the land of Israel, which is consistent with the fact, noted earlier, that the name Yahweh is not found in any form in any North-West Semitic pantheon.

21 On the other hand, the phrase could simply convey the narrator’s assessment of its sanctity after the fact.

22 Moshe Weinfeld, “The Tribal League at Sinai,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick D. Miller Jr., Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 304.

23 However, a tent is not unexpected in the desert, and snakes were common iconography. Moreover, the date is later than the Exodus, after the Israelites would have passed through Midianite territory.

24 Weinfeld, “The Tribal League at Sinai,” 307–08 also notes Deut 33:2–3 where God is called “lover of nations” (*hōbēb ‘ammīm*). Not only does this not fit the context, but the verb only means love in Aramaic and Arabic. He revocalizes the phrase as *hōbāb ‘imām* (“Hobab was with them”), evoking Hobab the Midianite, Jethro’s son, who accompanied the Israelites along with the “myriads,” who are also mentioned in Num 10:29–36 (*rbbwt* in both).

25 The positive presentation of Midianites in Exodus is unlikely to have been invented later when Israel was at odds with them (cf. 1 Sam 15:7).

### III. Textual Differentiation between El and Yahweh

In addition to their separate initial spheres of operation, Yahweh and El are clearly distinguished in a few biblical texts. In Ps 82, God (*'ēlōhîm*) is present in the council of El. As with Gen 49:24–26 previously, the presence of two different words that can be translated as “god” indicates that *'ēl* is the divine name El, in keeping with the El title *'elyôn* in v. 6. At the same time, *'ēlōhîm* in v. 1 is accompanied by singular verbs, indicating a single deity, widely understood to be Yahweh. This distinction between El and Yahweh is explicit in the earliest preserved versions of Deut 32:8–9. The Masoretic Text (using the Leningrad Codex from ca. 1008 CE) reads, “When Elyon apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel; {9} Yahweh’s portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share.” However, instead of “the sons of Israel” at the end of v. 8, the Dead Sea Scrolls (4QDeut), which predate the MT by a millennium, along with the LXX, Symmachus, and the Old Latin read “the sons of God,” i.e., the divine beings. The plain reading of this earlier variant is that Elyon, i.e., El, distributes the various nations among the divine beings, and Yahweh, one of those assembled “sons of god,” receives “Jacob” from Elyon.

But what of Exod 3:6, where Yahweh equates himself with the God of the patriarchs in his words to Moses: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?” The element of innovation this entails is evident in v. 13 when Moses asks what name he is to use when communicating with the people in Egypt, after which Yahweh directly connects the tetragrammaton with the God of the Patriarchs (v. 15). However, if those people were well acquainted with the God of the Patriarchs then there would be no need to request a name. If the God of the Fathers is in fact El, then they would know him by the various El epithets contained in those stories.<sup>26</sup> Or if that deity was known not by name but only through association with the patriarchs, then the lack of a name reflected in those traditions would not have been an issue, and in fact any name Moses could give would be meaningless to them. This means they were not familiar with that deity, but at the same time the revelation of the name itself is a new revelation. In other words, this welds together two separate traditions, arising from different groups, namely the revelation of the divine name as part of the Exodus experience and the stories of individual revelations to the three patriarchs.<sup>27</sup>

26 Otherwise we would be at a loss to explain their survival in the texts.

27 This union of the two streams is also found elsewhere in the equation of Yahweh with the “god of Jacob” (Pss 20:1; 24:6; 46:7,11; 84:8; 94:7; 114:7; 146:5; Isa 2:3; Mic 4:2), “the Mighty One of Jacob” (Ps 132:2,6; Isa 49:26; 60:16; cf. Isa 1:24) and “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Israel” (1 Kgs 18:36; 1 Chr 29:18; 2 Chr 30:6).

This sheds light on the Priestly tradition concerning the revelation of the tetragrammaton. In Exod 6:3 we find the statement, “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as *’ēl šadday* [God Almighty], but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them.”<sup>28</sup> This is part of the over-arching biblical identification of Yahweh with El. But just as the connection between Yahweh and the god of the fathers in Exod 3 is an artificial and secondary one, so too is the connection between Yahweh and El here. This is confirmed by a glance at the priestly writers’ use of the title *’ēl šadday* elsewhere in the First Testament: apart from Exod 6:3 the two names occur together in P only at Gen 17:1,<sup>29</sup> where Yahweh calls himself El Shadday. The editorial nature of this link is evident in the fact that Yahweh is absent from the rest of the story, and the general noun *’ēlōhīm* is used instead throughout the chapter. The same pattern can be noted with respect to the other El epithets that occur in the stories of the Patriarchs.

Taken together, the preceding discussion indicates that Yahweh was initially considered separate and distinct from El. Yahweh was introduced into Canaan by groups arriving from the south, and he was initially understood as subservient to El. However, it is clear that Yahweh supplanted El as the primary deity among those who eventually constituted Israel, assimilating most of the latter’s characteristics along the way. Yahweh’s position as the head of the divine council, his cherubim throne and tent shrine, his wisdom, kindness and age, and especially his role as creator can all be paralleled in El. That this was considered a legitimate identification is evident from the lack of a polemic against El, in contrast to the polemic directed toward Ba’al in the Deuteronomistic history. This suggests that El’s assimilation into Yahweh occurred very early in the development of Israelite religion.

The fact that Yahweh and El were initially considered separate deities is important for the identity of the god of the Exodus in the Golden Calves texts and the Balaam Oracles. If those texts do identify El as the deity who liberated the Israelites from slavery that cannot be explained away as simply different names for the same god. It remains, therefore, to examine the texts in question to see if they support the scholarly claims concerning El’s agency rather than Yahweh.

#### IV. 1 Kings 12:28

In 1 Kgs 12:28, Jeroboam makes two golden calves, one each for the northern sanctuaries at Dan and Bethel, and proclaims to the people: *hinnēh ’ēlōheyka yisrā’ēl ’āšer he’elūkā mē’ereš mišrāyīm* (1 Kgs 12:28). Since *’ēlōhīm* can refer

28 God appears under the first name in Gen 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3, and the two names are explicitly equated in Gen 17:1.

29 The two are also connected at, e.g., Pss 68:11,15; 91:1–2; Ruth 1:2–21; Isa 13:6 (=Joel 1:15); Ezek 1:20; 10:5; (see also the connection implied by the juxtaposition of Yahweh in the prose and *šadday* in the poetry of Job).



to either one or multiple deities, and in the case of the former can take a singular or plural verb, this can be read as either “Here is your God . . .” or “Here are your gods who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.”<sup>30</sup> Two questions present themselves here, the first being whether the calves actually represent deities, and secondly, if so which one. Many commentators explain the calves not as images of a deity but, in keeping with ancient Near Eastern iconography, as a pedestal on which the deity stood.<sup>31</sup> In this view, Jeroboam would be referring to an unseen deity on top of the calves, which suggests the prohibition against representing Yahweh by an image; thus, the calves replace Yahweh’s cherubim throne over the Ark of the Covenant in the Jerusalem temple. Others insist that the calves do represent a deity, but the association of calves and bulls with a variety of ancient Near Eastern deities as a symbol of strength and power means there are a number of possible candidates. Early proposals included the Babylonian moon god Sin, linked to Aaron’s calf at Sinai, the Egyptian Apis bull and the Canaanite god Ba‘al.<sup>32</sup> But these suggestions are rejected by most contemporary commentators due to the lack of opposition to the calves by early Yahwists, even within the Deuteronomistic History, which regularly denounces Jeroboam’s sin. For instance, in the very next chapter (1 Kgs 13) the unnamed “man of God” from Judah denounces the altar at Bethel but not the calf. Similarly, Jeroboam’s calves are not mentioned in the Elijah and Elisha narratives, Jehu does not remove them during his purge of Ba‘al worship and the prophet Amos does not oppose them. In light of Elijah’s slaughter of 450 prophets of Ba‘al (1 Kgs 18) and Jehu torching the Ba‘al temple in Samaria with Ba‘al’s worshipers inside (2 Kgs 10), this is telling, especially since in the case of Jehu, immediately after the editorial note that Jehu did not eliminate Jeroboam’s calves, Yahweh pronounces that Jehu has “done well in carrying out what I consider right” (v. 30). A principled opposition to the northern calves first appears with Hosea, most likely because by his time they had become erroneously linked to Ba‘al. So, since Jeroboam’s calves were considered acceptable by such staunch Yahwists as Elijah and Jehu, the calves must have initially been considered a legitimate element of Yahweh worship, and therefore neither Sin nor the Apis Bull nor Ba‘al were linked to them.

This leads some scholars to turn to El as the deity associated with Jeroboam’s calves, and indirectly through his proclamation, with the Exodus itself. El’s links to bull imagery in the Ugarit texts were reviewed above and need not be repeated here. However, as part of Yahweh’s assimilation of El, the former took over most

30 See GKC §145i for the grammar involved, although it rejects the former reading here.

31 E.g., Jerome T. Walsh, *1 Kings*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1996), 172; Marvin A. Sweeney, *1 and 2 Kings: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 177. Cf. the broader discussion and references in Lewis, *The Origin and Character of God*, 318–20.

32 See the review of scholarship and references in Day, *Gods and Goddesses*, 35–36.



of the latter's characteristics and associations, including links to bulls and bull-calves.<sup>33</sup> If this merger of the two deities occurred quite early, as most scholars think, then it would have been completed by Jeroboam's time and the calves would have been associated with Yahweh rather than El independently. A connection between Yahweh and a calf as a symbol of divine vigour is found in the name *Egelyo* ('*glyw*; "Yah[weh] is a calf") found on an 8th century Samarian ostrakon.<sup>34</sup> In addition, Yahweh is called the "Bull of Israel" in Isa 1:24 and the "Bull of Jacob" in Isa 49:26; 60:16; Ps 132:2, 5. Thus, Yahweh is an equally plausible referent for Jeroboam's calves.

In order to determine whether Jeroboam is proclaiming Yahweh or El as the god of the Exodus, let us consider which would be the more plausible candidate within the king's historical context. Most scholars, including those who think Jeroboam is referring to El in 1 Kgs 12:28, agree that the first northern king would have been unlikely to introduce new ideas at the beginning of a revolt, especially in the realm of religion where people are especially sensitive. Rather, there is widespread agreement that Jeroboam merely sought to provide an alternative to the Jerusalem-based cult by appealing to ancient traditions at Dan and Bethel.<sup>35</sup> Those who argue for El in this context see Jeroboam appealing to the El-cult reflected in the patriarchal narratives through the image of a calf. But that fails to account for the innovative aspect of attributing the Exodus to El. As outlined previously, those El narratives in Genesis all take place within the land of Canaan, and El does not act outside that territory, nor did the people who initially preserved those traditions participate in the Exodus. Instead, escaped slaves from Egypt brought their stories of liberation by Yahweh to Canaan and united with the El devotees who had always lived there, as suggested by the artificial connection of El and Yahweh in Exod 3 and 6. The Exodus traditions, firmly linked to Yahweh, became the dominant paradigm for the nation's origins and was shared by all, regardless whether their ancestors had directly participated in it or not. As such, for Jeroboam to attribute the Exodus to El rather than Yahweh would be exactly the kind of religious innovation rejected by the majority of modern interpreters in this context.

## V. Exodus 32

Nevertheless, proponents of El as the god of the Exodus point to Exod 32 for support. There, in response to the people's challenge, Aaron constructs a golden calf, to which the people respond, 'ēlleh 'ēlōheyka yīsrā'ēl 'āšer he'elūkā mē'ereš mišrāyīm ("These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up from the land

33 For calf/bull iconography for Yahweh see Lewis, *The Origin and Character of God*, 317–22.

34 Klaus Koenen, "Der Name '*glyw* auf Samaria-Ostrakon nr 41," *VT* 44 (1994): 396–400.

35 Day, *Gods and Goddesses*, 36.

of Egypt”). The parallels with Jeroboam’s actions and proclamation are obvious. However, the plural demonstrative “these” (’ēlleh) makes no sense in reference to a single golden calf, indicating that this passage is based on the Jeroboam narrative with its two calves. Thus, the arguments against seeing El in the earlier text apply even more to a later text that is even further removed from the date of the supposed events.<sup>36</sup> Wyatt departs from the consensus concerning Exod 32’s dependence on 1 Kgs 12 by removing the vowel letters from the former to produce what he considers an earlier form of the text: ’l ’lhk yśr’l ’śr h’lk m’rş mşrym. While he acknowledges that this could legitimately be translated as most do based on the MT, he reads it as “El is your God, Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt,” making the connection with El explicit.<sup>37</sup> However, this fails to take into account v. 5, where Aaron announces that the next day will be a “festival to Yahweh.” Furthermore, Janzen has correctly linked Aaron’s calf with the “divine warrior” of the Exodus, the one who “brought them out of Egypt” by defeating the Egyptians.<sup>38</sup> As noted above, it is Ba’al, not El, who functions as a warrior god at Ugarit. But the former has already been ruled out in connection with Jeroboam’s calves, and must be here as well. Thus, even if we accept Wyatt’s hypothetical reconstructed text that can be read in more than one way, since the larger literary unit refers to Yahweh<sup>39</sup> it makes better sense to read it in keeping with MT, i.e., “these are your gods” and to take this as referring to Yahweh.

## VI. Numbers 23:22 and 24:8

Some scholars also appeal to the Balaam oracles as support for an early tradition that El was the God of Exodus.<sup>40</sup> Numbers 23:22 and 24:8 read ’ēl mōšī’ām mīma mişrāyīm kētō’āpōt rē’ēm lô, which can be translated as either “God . . .” or “El, who brings them out from Egypt, is like the horns of a wild ox for him.” Those who prefer the latter option point to the bovine imagery in the second half of the line, which they connect to El, resulting in an explicit identification of El as the

36 Neh 9:18 avoids this problem with the singular demonstrative “this” (*zeh*) and a singular verb.

37 Nicolas Wyatt, “Of Calves and Kings: The Canaanite Dimension in the Religion of Israel,” *SJOT* 6 (1992): 79.

38 J. Gerald Janzen, “The Character of the Calf and Its Cult in Exodus 32,” *CBQ* 52 (1990): 599–600.

39 The great majority of commentators take Exod 32:1–6 as a unified passage. Noth is a rare exception, dividing vv. 1–4 from v. 5: Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 244–45.

40 For the Balaam narrative as indicative of a continued cult of El in light of the Deir ‘Alla inscription see Baruch A. Levine, “The Balaam Inscription from Deir ‘Alla: Historical Aspects,” in *Biblical Archaeology Today: Proceedings of the International Congress on Biblical Archaeology, Jerusalem, April 1984*, ed. Janet Amitai (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1985), 326–39; Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 21–36: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 4A (New York/London/Toronto/Sydney/Auckland: Doubleday, 2000), 230–34, 263–75. In addition see Wyatt, “Of Calves and Kings,” 83–84; Smith, *Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 146–48; R. Scott Chalmers, *The Struggle of Yahweh and El for Hosea’s Israel*, HBM 11 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 57–67.

god of the Exodus. And since the Balaam oracles are among the oldest poems in the First Testament, they predate the Golden Calf texts, so the reservations about innovation there would not apply. Thus, Wesley Toews has claimed on the basis of the Balaam oracles that, “at least some components of earliest Israel could confess that it was El who had brought Israel out of Egypt.”<sup>41</sup>

However, this depends on linking the bovine imagery with El exclusively, and we have already seen that Yahweh is also linked elsewhere to calves and bulls.<sup>42</sup> The parallelism between Num 23:21b and 22 suggest that is the case here as well. In Num 23:21b Yahweh, his god (’ēlohîm) is with him (i.e., Jacob), just as “’ēl brings them out of Egypt” in v. 22, and each line is followed by a metaphor for the deity’s actions in relationship to the nation, either as a king or a wild ox. Thus, the horns of a wild ox in 22b are those of the deity mentioned in 22a, and that deity is named as Yahweh in 21b. Those who advocate for El in v. 22 reject this connection by taking v. 22 as an insertion duplicated from the parallel in 24:8. But not only does this fail to account for the structural parallels between the two verses,<sup>43</sup> it also discounts the explicit parallel identification of the term ’ēl with Yahweh in Num 23:8. A few try to negate this as well by pointing to the El epithets “Shadday” in parallel with El in Num 24:4 and “Elyon” and “Shadday” in parallel together with El in Num 24:16 and arguing that all instances of El should be treated the same. But those latter texts constitute Balaam’s self-identification as a seer of El, not the identification of the god of the Exodus, which must be done on the basis of Num 23:22 itself, where he is paralleled with Yahweh in v. 21b.

## VII. The Attraction of Yahweh’s Role in the Exodus

Finally, if Toews is correct that the El-worshipping portion of early Israel attributed the Exodus to El, what was the attraction of Yahweh, such that he eventually replaced El, but not before taking over El’s characteristics and qualities?<sup>44</sup> Yahweh must offer something to the El-worshippers that El did not, namely the idea of a god who intervenes for slaves to set them free. But if the numerically superior El-group thought that El rather than Yahweh liberated the slaves, why would they accept Yahweh as their chief deity? It would make far more sense, in that scenario, for Yahweh to be sublimated to El. Yahweh replaced El as the national deity

41 Wesley I. Toews, *Monarchy and Religious Institution in Israel Under Jeroboam I*, SBLMS 47 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 46. He acknowledges, however, that “there can be no doubt that from very early times the god who brought Israel from Egypt was revered under the name Yahweh,” before adding that some “revered *this* god under the name El” (emphasis added).

42 Albright connects the ox reference in the second half of the verse to Jacob, which is appealing in light of the references to Jacob in vv. 21a and 23, as well as Joseph being described with “the horns of a wild ox” in Deut 33:17, albeit with different Hebrew words than here.

43 Hedwige Rouillard, *La péricope de Balaam (Nombres 22–24): La prose et les “Oracles”*, ÉBib, Ns 4 (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1985), 286, 291, 374.

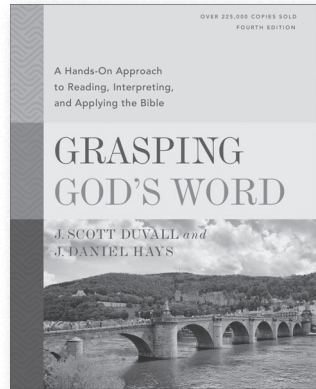
44 Cf. independently Lewis, *The Origin and Character of God*, 117.

precisely because the Exodus story became the dominant paradigm for the nation that emerged from the combination of those two groups. But if the Exodus, the very action that differentiates Yahweh from El, was just as easily attributed to El, there was no need for Yahweh. The fact that Yahweh did become dominant in ancient Israelite religion indicates that he, not El, was always and everywhere considered the God of the Exodus.

## BOOK REVIEWS

J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays. *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*. 4th ed. Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2020. ISBN: 978-0-310-10917-4. Pp. 592. Hardcover. \$109.99 (USD).

Applying oneself wholly to the text of the Bible (and applying the text of the Bible wholly to oneself) is paramount in a Christian's life. The Bible, however, is a complex and in some ways a foreign book. Veritably, effective biblical interpretation is no easy task: "The whole earth is covered by a flood . . . fire and brimstone rains down on cities . . . the mighty river Nile turns blood red . . . this is strange stuff indeed!" (i). Enter *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, authored by J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays—now in its fourth edition.



Duvall and Hays state that the intended goal of this text was to provide readers with a “resource that combines reliable hermeneutical theory with clear, practical explanations and interpretive examples from the Bible” so as to help “serious believers (especially college and beginning seminary students) learn how to read, interpret, and apply the Bible” (see xii and xiv, respectively). Though succeeding in this matter, to what degree does the fourth edition of this volume differ from the previous versions and in what capacity do the authors utilize and/or leverage some of the most recent resources that are available? Before answering these questions in this review, it may be helpful to first provide a general orientation to the textbook as a whole.

*Grasping God's Word* is divided into five main parts: (1) “How to Read the Book- Basic Tools,” (2) “Contexts-Now and Then,” (3) “Meaning and Application,” (4) “The Interpretive Journey-New Testament,” and (5) “The Interpretive Journey-Old Testament.” Aside from a thorough set of indices (scripture, subject, and author), the volume also includes three useful appendices: “Inspiration and Canon,” “Writing an Exegetical Paper,” and “Building a Personal Library” (more

on this later). *Grasping God's Word* is organized “pedagogically rather than logically” (xv). That is to say, generally speaking, Duvall and Hays “begin with practice, move to theory, and then go back to practice. We have discovered in our teaching that after students have spent some time digging into the process of reading the Scriptures closely, they begin to ask more theoretical questions. We are extremely encouraged by the positive reception our students have given to the pedagogical arrangement” (xv). Each chapter begins with an attention grabbing “hook” followed by a non-technical presentation of the topic. After the conclusion, several assignments appear that are designed to help students apply the content of each chapter.

As noted above, it is beyond question that Duvall and Hays have succeeded with *Grasping God's Word* in producing a book that helps to “bridge the gap” between “popular guides to understanding the Bible” and so-called “graduate-level hermeneutics texts” (xiv). The pedagogical sensitivity that the authors have given throughout the text to “plain-language explanations” is highly commendable as is the strong emphasis on the Bible being “more than a deposit of static truth that must be manipulated. It is God’s great story that is understood and lived out. Our approach underscores careful reading and wise interpretation, culminating in commitment to apply what we know (John 14:21). A person who truly grasps God’s Word will find that Word grasping them” (xiv).

The layout and presentation of *Grasping God's Word* is also quite pleasing and user-friendly. There is ample white space, wide margins, and clear graphics, diagrams, charts, and graphs throughout. The stories and illustrations are also quite poignant and “pitched just right” for most students. Its length is also a boon as few instructors would feel that a student was arduously burdened even in assigning a supplementary text (or two). Mention should also be made of the excellent supplementary resources that are also available, such as the Workbook, Laminated Sheet, and Video Lectures (Zondervan).

In light of these strengths, though, it pains me to state that unlike the fairly substantial and rather innovative changes that occurred between each of the prior editions of *Grasping God's Word* (for example, it was only in the third edition that “consulting the biblical map,” i.e., the fourth step of the interpretive journey, appeared), most of the changes that occur in this fourth edition are fairly uninspiring.

To illustrate, Duvall and Hays have changed some of their pop culture references from Lady Gaga to Carrie Underwood and from Jason Bourne and Chuck Norris to Iron Man and Captain Marvel (see 141–42). Alongside this, Assignment 11-2 “Using the ESL Bible Code” has also been deleted (see chapter eleven, “Levels of Meaning”).

Likewise, in their listing of various volumes pertaining to historical-cultural

contexts (see 122–33) and “Building a Personal Library” (see 509–46), certain new books do appear (and a few old ones have also been removed). Such routine changes, however, though expected (and welcome) remain fairly inconsequential in the whole, as most specialist in various fields will undoubtedly still note the conspicuous absence of notable volumes throughout each of these sets of list(s). For example, throughout *Grasping God’s Word*, the *Biblia Hebraica Quinta*, Cline’s Hebrew dictionary (Sheffield, 1993–2016), and HALOT are all not mentioned.

One will also notice the thorough absence of annotations. This loss makes each of the above-mentioned listings—particularly those that are marked with an asterisk in the text as being “especially recommended” (see 509)—far less useful than if the authors had made extended comments about their decision-making processes and rationale. Perhaps reference(s) to specialized volumes in that area, such as John F. Evan’s superb (and affordable) volume, *A Guide to Biblical Commentaries and Reference Works 10th ed.* (Zondervan, 2016), would have helped alleviate some of these problems.

In addition to the above, other (fairly minor), changes also include the fact that the Christian Standard Bible (CSB) and the Common English Bible (CEB) are now both briefly mentioned in the first chapter on “Bible Translations.” That being said, however, it is lamentable that there is still no clear discussion of the “New World Translation” by the Jehovah Witnesses or any other “sectarian” translation(s), such as those works of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), or even the increasingly popular “Passion Translation.” Alongside this, most of the references about the venerable KJV still need to be significantly bolstered to reflect more up-to-date content and academic scholarship, as does the overall discussion of the Septuagint/Old Greek and the Apocrypha, particularly in light of the fact that the appendix “Inspiration and Incarnation” remains largely unchanged since its introduction in the second edition.

Alongside the above, it is also disappointing that *Grasping God’s Word* continues to inordinately refer to the Bible’s original languages as being Hebrew and Greek, with very little reference being made to the not insignificant role of Aramaic (see, for example, 4, 8, 166, 174, 176, 178, 186; cf. 6). It is also sad to see the consistent lack of attention that is given to the genre of Old Testament apocalyptic, as the only reference in the subject index to “Apocalyptic Literature” actually pertains to the book of Revelation (see 151, 555; cf. 325–50, 435–62). In brief, is it not reasonable to assert that these not inconsequential matters ought to have been effectively addressed by this fourth edition?

The most substantial (but not necessarily the most welcome) change of the fourth edition of *Grasping God’s Word* involves chapter nine: “Word Studies.” To be clear, unlike the previous three editions where students were shown



step-by-step how to use a basic hard-copy concordance and certain other lexical tools, Duvall and Hays now recommend using the STEP tool (Scripture Tools for Every Person) developed by the scholars at Tyndale House Cambridge (see 176). To be clear, while STEP is, indeed, fantastic and the specific implementation of this particular resource in *Grasping God's Word* is a fine decision, the author's failure to provide readers with detailed explanations as to how to also properly use hard-copy concordances (Hebrew and Greek) categorically mars this otherwise excellent add-on.

What truly compounds the problem, though, is this: Duvall and Hays explicitly state, for example, that "G1377 . . . is the concordance number . . . but you don't need to worry about that for now" (see 177) and yet, despite this assertion, nowhere in the entire chapter (unlike the previous three editions) is a student actually given clear directions (or a specific tutorial) as to how a concordance number should be used. In point of fact, Duvall and Hays still retain a full-page facsimile from the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Abridged Edition*, edited by Verlyn D. Verbrugge (Zondervan, 2003) and still encourage all students to "check their work" using that particular resource but without the assistance of the accompanying tutorials, graphs, charts, and guides (see 186–87). To this end, I am persuaded that it is prudent for those things pertaining to doing actual hard-copy concordance work (both of the Old and New Testaments) to be retained and even expounded on at length. Even if only for the sake of better orientating those who may be uninitiated to the subject, in general, and to better facilitate engagement with the resources to which they are coded.

Irrespective of these things, it remains inexplicable why (in light of Verbrugge's volume still being present) why the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* 2nd ed., edited by Moisés Silva (Zondervan 2014), fails to make an appearance, not to mention, his *Biblical Words and Their Meaning* (Zondervan, 1995), which, in my estimation, at least, ought to be required reading in any course on effective biblical interpretation, alongside Benjamin L. Baxter's *In the Original Text It Says* (Energion, 2019). Lastly, one regrets that there still remains no effective discussion about how the field of linguistics influences and effects exegesis. As such, true discourse analysis (involving register, field, tenor, mood, etc.) is brushed to the side (cf. 81).<sup>1</sup>

To summarize, despite the (not insignificant) dearth of similar, evangelical, up-to-date, resources currently available on the topic and despite the remarkable benefits that Duvall and Hays have provided to all beginner-intermediate students of the Bible with the initial and subsequent publications of *Grasping God's Word*, the need for further specificity, substance, clarity, and nuance in not a few key

1 Minor errata (mostly typographical and bibliographical in nature) do appear throughout the volume (see 5, 17, 59, 111, 126, 132, 147, 156, 242, 271, 307, 409).



areas, make it something of a challenge to wholly commend this new fourth edition release. One can only hope that a future edition might be able to correct some of these matters so that all serious students of Scripture can benefit as much as possible from Duvall and Hay's notable work.

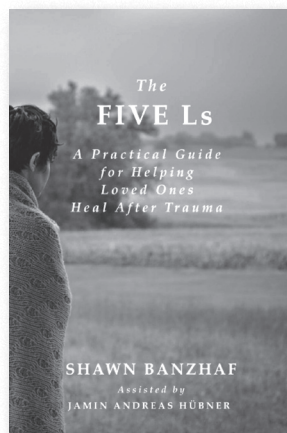
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*The Five L's: A Practical Guide for Helping Loved Ones Heal After Trauma.* Shawn Banzhaf. Rapid City: Hills Publishing Group, 2021. ISBN 978-0-9905943-7-6. Pp. 127. Paperback. \$11.99 (USD).

The *Five Ls* arrives at a critical moment in global history. First, we all battle grief. Grieving is not limited to the experience of death. As the world emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly all of humanity is dealing with some form of grief. Whether it is the loss of a loved one, the loss of some movement and other freedoms associated with the lockdowns, job loss, school closures, or anticipatory grief of what may come next, over the next few years people will be seeking help to navigate their grief. This book is a key tool that will help us prepare to navigate our own grief as well as help those around us wrestle through their own experiences. It is designed to serve as both a stand-alone book that anyone can read and as a group study book where many can come together and heal collectively.

Banzhaf is a National Guard veteran who has been caring for fellow veterans as they battle their grief. *The 5 L's* is a compilation of the most important lessons he has learned.

His guidance begins with love and the simple question of what can I do to help? This question “shows the heart of the person asking” (27). It opens yourself up to spending time and energy with the person and, potentially, on any actions that come from their answer. Banzhaf gives us a “bold and shameless challenge” (31) to love with reckless abandon. As he wrote, we need to “love like there is no tomorrow the people who are placed in your path” (31). He goes on to give us two key reasons why we should love those who are grieving. The first is that we love because we all need it. The second is because “healthier and happier people around us means we can be healthier and happier” (34). The world is now an interconnected community, and we cannot simply say that something is not our problem. We cannot separate ourselves from those around us who are grieving.



This may be the single most profound lesson we learned through COVID. There was hardly a country on earth that was not impacted.

Finally, we are reminded that love is active and selfless. Love is patient. Love is hard and can be dangerous at times. Banzhaf ends this section with a look at true forgiveness and a “word to Dudes” about toxic masculinity. Ultimately, he “can’t stress enough the importance of love in the process of healing for people in trauma” (51). Perhaps most important is his reflection that he doesn’t “think society’s problem is ‘too much compassion’” (47). Learning to truly love others is the starting point for grief recovery.

The remaining 4 L’s give practical steps to walking alongside those suffering from trauma or grief. These steps begin with listening. When we listen, we need to be focused on entering the experience of those talking rather than finding solutions as they speak. In sharing his own experience with trauma at the end of his tour of duty, Banzhaf lets us into his world to demonstrate the difference listening made in his healing. He speaks of how his wife listened to him while he wrestled with his grief caused by serving in the military. Her willingness to not offer solutions but to simply listen allowed him to process his grief, regardless of how long that took.

It is possible that the next section, learn, is the hardest one to accept. This is because it takes a lot of time to learn new things. Banzhaf sums up the need to learn as being to eliminate fear. In his words “understanding can dispel fear, because we fear what we do not understand” (72). In my experience, few people take the time to learn about both the trauma people endure or about the people themselves. Learning can be a burden as it takes time, and we are increasingly living in a world that is moving at breakneck speed.

Banzhaf offers that we all need to learn about trauma to help us better understand those who go through it. He reminds us that this is a balancing act between learning about trauma but not becoming so overconfident in our understanding of trauma that we are no longer able to learn about the experiences those around us are enduring. It is worth reading the entire chapter as he gives some great insight into the nature of trauma.

Chapter 4 guides us through the process of lessening the potential for our loved ones to be exposed to the triggers of their trauma. In relating his own story of how his wife did this for him, Banzhaf explains that we need to learn what triggers our loved ones and then work to lessen those triggers. This is entirely to protect and give space for healing. Often victims of trauma are not aware of when they are going through it again. Thus, the role of the caregiver becomes very important in offering this protection.

Banzhaf’s final L is to lead. He explains that this comes from doing the first 4 L’s. To lead means to bring order to the chaos. People dealing with trauma and

grief are living in chaos. By practicing the first 4 I's we naturally begin to remove the chaos from their lives. As he said in his concluding thoughts, this brings about hope for those who have been deeply wounded.

I am convinced that this book is a must read for everyone, especially those serving in leadership. As I said in the opening paragraph, the world is experiencing grief as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to bring illness and death across the globe. For those of us in the Western world, the process of grieving has been largely left to individuals to deal with on their own. This book makes it very clear that real healing will only happen when we as family, friends, and communities rally around those who have suffered trauma and are dealing with the grief that left behind. It is a great work, an easy read, and a profound contribution to the practical side of ministry.

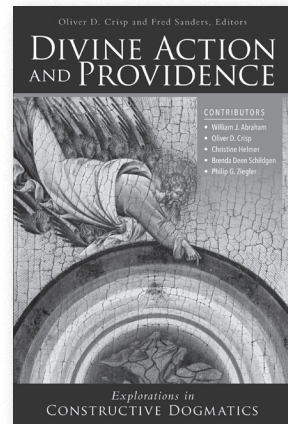
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*Divine Action and Providence.* Ed. Oliver Crisp and Fred Sanders. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2019. ISBN 978-0310106883. Pp. 239. Softcover. \$34.99 (USD).

Does God really do anything? And if so, how?

These questions have come under considerable scrutiny for the past quarter century—and recently, in the last few years.<sup>1</sup> Two theologians assemble together a collection of essays by various scholars addressing different angles on this subject of “divine action” and “divine providence.” The symposium was assembled from lectures given at the Seventh Los Angeles Theology Conference in early 2019.

The subject matter is fraught with complications. On the one hand, the religious claim of divine action (across traditions) is basic and essential to each faith: God is real, and “does stuff.” It therefore has to find some kind of articulation, even if extremely provisional, limited, and pragmatic. On the other hand, divine action and providence is perhaps the most speculative of all questions. It



<sup>1</sup> See, for example my reviews of William J. Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, volume 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) for *Reading Religion* (June 1, 2018); review of William J. Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action*, volume 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) for *Reading Religion* (April 11, 2018); review of Sarah Ritchie, *Divine Action and the Human Mind (Current Issues in Theology)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019) for *The Canadian-American Theological Review*.

requires much guess work and inferences based on layers of what sometimes amounts to little more than conjecture. Proof-texting within the Christian faith is never adequate and sells itself short, as is the case with other authoritarian moves.

Philosophical engagement is therefore a central approach of the essays. This also naturally requires historical re-positioning, which chapters 4–8 do quite well. Chapters 1–3 attempt to lay out some of the basic issues surrounding the subject, while the last chapters, 9–11, make specific arguments in developing the doctrine. For example, Jonathan Hill in “Should a Christian Be an Occasionalist?” is pure philosophical theology, arguing “yes” to strong occasionalism (God causes all physical and mental events, whereas “weak occasionalism” only affirms God as the causation of physical events). Similarly, Ziegler in “The Devil’s Work” attempts to reposit the doctrine of providence in terms of unmasking the evil one (185–86).

These types of essays are in response to more blunt and critical ones, like Christine Helmer’s “Providence.” Perhaps the most interesting and provocative of the book, she argues that the doctrine of providence has become a serious problem:

The crisis of modernity is evident around us. The avatars of death have charted the next phase in the linear progress narrative. With modern reality spiraling out of control, the doctrine that created it in the first place has become a theodicy. The doctrine once used to uphold God’s sovereignty has become misused to legitimate the progress of history with its nationalism, white supremacy, sexism, and economic colonialism. Providence has become dystopic, the final act of the human drama. (93)

Helmer finds an earlier critique in Martin Luther, for “Luther’s God is the one who unmasks providence as a theological delusion. The intervention we need to learn from Luther is that we need to get theologically real” (94). Also critical is the essay by Brenda Deen Schildgen (“Divine Providence”), which argues that “the idea of a providential theory of heaven on earth would have struck Augustine as perilous ground on which to stake one’s temporal or eternal felicity” (156).

In reading the book I was reminded of Gordon Kaufman’s reflections in his *In Face of Mystery* regarding theological breakdown.<sup>2</sup> The classical models don’t

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2 E.g., “Claims are often made, by both Catholic and Protestant theologians, that theological work must begin with Christian faith, that it is essential to accept the Bible as God’s revelation in order to do Christian theology, that the church’s fundamental affirmations must be regarded as authoritative for faith and life. I want to argue, however, that all such authoritarian moves actually express not the vitality of faith but its threatening breakdown. It is necessary to make an authoritarian demand of this sort only when a conceptual frame no longer makes sense of experience and has thus begun to seem useless or meaningless. Appeals to divine revelation as the ultimate authority in theology,

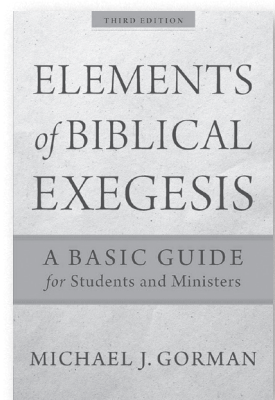
need a dust-off, but perhaps replacement. I was therefore somewhat disappointed that there was little discussion of mystery, and little to no engagement of the panentheist tradition (McFague, Moltmann, et. al) that (in my view) has some of the most compelling and practical models developed on this subject. There, the perspective is one of constructive theology—recognizing how metaphors work in theologizing, and how we have to ask what our metaphors are *doing* to those people who utilize them in life and prayer. This is particularly important given how prominent “providence” plays in the life of religious adherents and practitioners, and how prominent it has played in leading the modern world intoologies of escapism and complacency in the face of (for example) ecological disaster. Being steeped in Reformed theology and classical theism, however, most of the book unfortunately didn’t venture far in those directions. The kind of philosophizing in the book is not, in other words, like of that of the spirit of Cornel West and inspires people to hit the streets, but more of cloistered academics resolving medieval theological disputes.

At any rate, I think readers will find something interesting on this subject within the pages of *Divine Action and Providence*. The quality of the essays and writing are generally good, and never too long.

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Michael J. Gorman. *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, Baker, 2020.  
ISBN: 978-1-5409-6031-3. Pp. 352. Paperback. \$22.49 (USD).

Effective biblical interpretation plays a central role in the life of every believer. As disciples of Christ Jesus the Lord, those who are regenerate are not only commanded to teach others the life-changing message of Scripture and the Gospel (Matt 28:20) but to do so aright in a God-honoring, well-studied, judicious fashion (2 Tim 2:15). At the same time, however, whether one is reading the Bible for the first time or has been since early childhood, there are always those passages that seem “nearly impossible to understand” and also those passages that “you think you understand but that your instructors, classmates, fellow church members, parishioners, or friends from other religious traditions or cultures interpret quite



therefore, should be regarded as a warning flag: they are made when the theological conceptual frame is not working as well as it should.” Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

differently (3). Enter *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers* by Michael J. Gorman now in its third edition.

Although this (third) edition has much in common with the first (Hendrickson, 2001) and second editions (2009, Baker, 2010 Baker Academic edition) of *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, it is also quite different. According to Michael J. Gorman:

Every sentence of every paragraph has been reread and sometimes modified, either for greater clarity or to nuance what was there. New paragraphs and examples have been included on various topics, sometimes reflecting developments in the field or in my own thinking. The chapters with discussions of various interpretive approaches (including theological interpretation and missional hermeneutics), in particular, have been slightly revised and expanded. Furthermore, additional material on the importance of both the text's canonical context and the interpreter's social and ecclesial contexts has been included. In that regard, the book is more attentive to the global character of biblical interpretation. This focus is reflected in the inclusion, for the first time, of a sample paper from a student in the Majority World. Both this paper and a new sample exegetical summary page include theological and missional perspectives on the text. Finally, the section of resources for the various elements of exegesis has been updated and expanded, and it includes resources from the Majority World. (xvi)

That being said, it is also important to note that Gorman explicitly states that the purpose of this book (and its intended audience) remains the same, namely, to provide “students and ministers with an unapologetically practical approach to exegesis that is built on a strong theoretical foundation” (xviii). Unequivocally, Gorman succeeds! Prior to commenting any further, however, it is best to offer a general orientation to the text.

Aside from the preliminary acknowledgements and introduction(s), *Elements of Biblical Exegesis* is divided in three main parts: (1) Orientation, (2), The Elements, and (3) Hints and Resources. Four helpful appendices (Tables of Exegetical Method, Practical Guidelines for Writing a Research Exegesis Paper, Sample Exegesis Papers and Sample Exegetical Summary, and Selected Internet Resources for Biblical Studies) and a combined subject/author index round out the volume (there is no Scripture index).

Readers will notice that the bulk of the book is comprised of Part Two (seven chapters as compared to two chapters a piece for part one and part three). The length of the chapters also varies considerably in proportion to the nature of the topic under consideration (see xxi). For example, “Detailed Analysis” (109–37) is



substantially longer than the one entitled “Survey” (69–74). From a pedagogical perspective, students will surely appreciate the helpful ‘works cited’ bibliographies that are provided at the end of every chapter. This is not to mention the immensely clear ‘chapter summaries’ in addition to the ‘practical hints’ and ‘further insights and practice’ sections as well. The writing style throughout the volume is lucid and clear and the examples provided are appropriate for its target audience. With respect to this last point, one notes that *Elements of Biblical Exegesis* “does not require, nor does it preclude, knowledge of the Bible’s original languages” (xx). Penultimate, the text itself is also quite pleasing to the eye. There are ample tables/graphs/charts copious headings and subheadings, and an effective use of bold-face type and shading. The length itself will also prove most welcome for both students and instructors, as no one would feel it onerous to read the book in its entirety, even alongside other texts. Lastly, some mention should also be made here of *Scripture and Its Interpretation: A Global, Ecumenical Introduction to the Bible* (Baker Academic, 2017). To be clear, Gorman explicitly states that he had edited this particular volume, in part, as a companion to *Elements of Biblical Exegesis* (see xiii).

To critique, there is very little to quibble with in this book. Although some users may regret that there is little to no effective discussion concerning “true” discourse analysis (register, field, tenor, mood, etc.) or certain other aspects of linguistics, one must recognize that the text was made “*deliberately* basic, not to curtail further study but to stimulate it and, in the meantime, to prevent disaster in the classroom and the pulpit” (xxi; italics original). In this way, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis* was never “intended to replace more detailed books on interpretations of the Bible, on specific literary genres, or on hermeneutics” but rather “to help prevent exegetical illiteracy among everyday readers, teaches, and preachers of biblical texts” (xxi).

The final chapter, “Resources for Exegesis,” is worth the price of the book alone. Gorman’s lists are extensive and cover a wide variety of material. Of course, specialists are sure to find some not insignificant “gaps” within Gorman’s delineations, such as the conspicuous absence of Cline’s Hebrew dictionary (Sheffield, 1993–2016), Porter’s *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Bloomsbury, 1992), or various resources that pertain to the Dead Sea Scrolls (Qumran) or the LXX (Old Greek/Septuagint). One may also, perhaps, have wished that Gorman had pointed out some other sources of bibliographic information, at large, such as John F. Evan’s superb (and affordable) volume, *A Guide to Biblical Commentaries and Reference Works 10th ed.* (Zondervan, 2016),

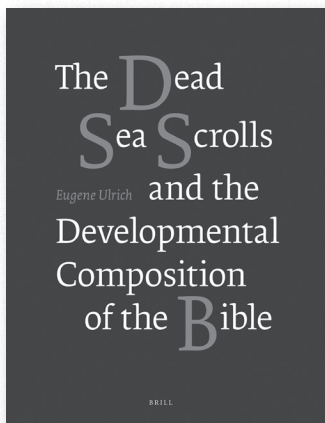
Clearly, though, the most welcome change of the third edition of this book is Gorman’s remarkably acute sensitivity to the “global character of biblical interpretation” and his extensive engagement with the Majority World, including

theological/missional perspectives (see xvi). While space precludes a full analysis, suffice it to say that Gorman's changes effectively "allow Western readers to benefit from Majority World perspectives while also helping Majority World interpreters do better work" (back cover).

To conclude, given the dearth of similar, up-to-date, ecumenical resources that are available, Gorman is to be especially commended for the outstanding service he has rendered to all beginner-intermediate students of the Bible with the initial and subsequent publication(s) of *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers*. The extensive revisions that were appropriated in this third edition make it easy to wholly commend this text even to owners of any of the first two editions. Highly recommended!

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Eugene Ulrich. *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Developmental Composition of the Bible*. Leiden: Brill, 2015. ISBN: 978-90-04-27038-1. Pp. 368 pp. Hardcover. \$143.18 (USD).



*The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Developmental Composition of the Bible* is written by Eugene Ulrich (O'Brien Professor emeritus of Hebrew Scriptures at the University of Notre Dame and Chief Editor of the Biblical Scrolls). This book is self-described as a sequel to Ulrich's work, *The Biblical Qumran Scrolls* (Brill, 2010) (xi), and serves as a summation of Ulrich's own understanding of what scholarship has learned from the biblical Dead Sea Scrolls concerning the development of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (hereafter HB/OT). The book is divided into four major sections comprising a total of

nineteen chapters. The introductory section (chapters 1–2) offers a "general map of the landscape," (15) concerning scholarly perceptions of the development of the text of the HB/OT.

In chapter 1, Ulrich writes that the "text of the Hebrew Bible is an abstract entity" (1)—it is not static, but pluriform. Ulrich identifies three reasons for this pluriformity, namely: (a) the adaptability of subject matter inherent in the texts themselves, (b) the problem of oral culture, and (c) the long periods of time between the transmission of the text from this oral culture into writing and the process of copying (see 2). Ulrich states: "the literature grew as community



literature” (5), being formed as a way to impact the nation of Israel throughout its history. As such, these works were not originally understood as “Scripture,” but rather as “national epics” (6). At some point in the Second Temple Period priestly narrative frameworks and divine commands were introduced into the texts, shifting the text into a new category from (merely) literature to Scripture. As Ulrich puts it, “in a sense, the word about God became the word of God” (7).

Chapter 2 deals with a paradigm shift that Ulrich labels “post-Qumran thinking” (15). Ulrich explores the need to rethink one’s modern notions concerning the HB/OT and the terminological imprecision or bias that proliferated early scholarship (16–18). In particular, Ulrich deals with the question of whether there was a “standard biblical text” in early Judaism (18). To be clear, the author notes that this very question poses troubling presuppositions in that it assumes that the existence of a category called a “standard text” that may not have actually existed during this period (21–24). Moreover, what does one mean by the word “standard”? Does one mean normative? Common? Ulrich is careful to remind his readers about the coincidental historical preservation of the MT over other text forms (24–25).

Section 2 (chapters 3–10) consists of a broad survey of the evidence from the biblical Qumran scrolls and how they contribute to our understanding the development of the Hebrew Bible. The evidence from Qumran supports Ulrich’s thesis that the HB/OT was, indeed, pluriform in early Judaism. These chapters are approached by four categories of textual variation, all of which occur on differing strata of the texts themselves: (a) variant editions, (b) isolated insertions, (c) individual textual variations, and (d) orthography (40).

Chapter 3 describes the developmental growth of the Pentateuch in the Second Temple Period. More than one hundred fragments from the Pentateuch survived at Qumran and, although early textual critics thought that the Pentateuch had become stable around the time of Ezra, the material at Qumran suggests this is not, in fact, the case (29). This chapter focuses on 4QPaleoExod<sup>m</sup>, 4QExod-Lev<sup>f</sup>, 4QNum<sup>b</sup>, 4QLev<sup>d</sup>, and 11QPaleoLev<sup>a</sup>, which are compared and contrasted with the MT, SP, and Old Greek/Septuagint, i.e., the LXX. Based on the evidence collected, Ulrich concludes that the text of the HB/OT was still very much in flux during the Second Temple Period and that differing literary editions of books of the Pentateuch coexisted and were circulated and accepted in Palestine.

This section is diverse in scope, dealing not only with the Pentateuchal texts, but also the book(s) of Joshua (chapter 4), Judges and Kings (chapter 5), 1–2 Samuel (chapter 6), Isaiah (chapters 7–8), and Jeremiah (chapter 9). Two chapters in particular are especially significant: chapter 4 deals with the three divergent locations for where the altar was supposed to be built in the book of Joshua: (a) Ebal (MT Joshua 8:30–35), (b) Gerizim (SP Deut. 27:4), or (c) Gilgal (4QJosh<sup>a</sup>).

Ulrich concludes that 4QJosh<sup>a</sup> presents the earliest and most natural reading, whereas the SP is driven by sectarian theology and the MT as an apologetic against the SP reading. In chapter 6, Ulrich examines a series of readings in which the LXX is faithful to a Hebrew text similar to 4QSam<sup>a</sup> that is “simply at variance with the MT” (80). He also demonstrates that a Hebrew edition similar to 4QSam<sup>a</sup> most probably lies behind the source for both Josephus and the Chronicler (80).

Section 3 (chapters 11–16) is a summation of sundry new shifts in post-Qumran thinking and addresses the terminology and conceptualization of the biblical Qumran scrolls. One important aspect of this work is Ulrich’s reaffirmation that no “sectarian variants” exist in the biblical Dead Sea Scrolls (chapter 11) and that many scrolls, such as 4QReworked Pentateuch and 11QPsalms<sup>a</sup>, that were originally labelled as “nonbiblical” in early scrolls scholarship, are now rightly to be viewed as Scripture (chapter 12). In this section, Ulrich reiterates the oft cited problem of a “rewritten Bible” and the unclear boundaries between Scripture and commentary (chapter 13). Additionally, he demonstrates the increased recognition of the Samaritan Pentateuch as not a “vulgar” (common) sectarian text, but as a common Jewish Hebrew recension (chapter 14). Furthermore, the Septuagint translators, whether through a strict or free rendering, were faithful to an edition of a Hebrew text no longer preserved (chapter 15). The final chapter of this section deals with the Masada scrolls, in which Ulrich argues that the fragmentary scriptural remains do not argue for or against any one edition, but that these correspond to both SP and MT readings.

Section 4 (chapters 17–19) is concerned primarily with the language and concept of a so-called “canon” in early Judaism. In chapter 17, Ulrich cites a variety of definitions for the word canon from theological dictionaries (270–72) and offers some important insights. Firstly, a book itself may be canonical in the sense of being authoritative, but its “textual form” is irrelevant to that work’s perceived authority (275). Further, a canon assumes a “closed list,” but since no evidence exists for canonical lists at Qumran or elsewhere, it must be assumed that the “canon” was open and that “as long as the list was open, there was a collection of authoritative books, a collection of Scriptures, but there was not yet an authoritative collection of books, a canon” (277). In chapter 18, Ulrich looks at how national literature became sacred Scripture by examining Genesis, Leviticus, Amos, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ezra, Daniel, Sirach, and Jubilees. He offers several suggestions for the shift from literature to Scripture: (a) Implicit references “(who but God could have provided the information on the creation of the world?)” (296), (b) explicit references (Jubilees), (c) direct or indirect revelation through angelic beings (Jubilees, Daniel) or human mediators (296), (d) Prophecy, and (e) “resignification” (297). In chapter 19, Ulrich explores the concept of “Scripture” despite the lack of a “canon.” He addresses the commonly made arguments for a

tripartite canon in early Judaism and deals at great length with a particular reading from 4QMMT, which mentions the law, the prophets, and a possible reference to David (300–304). The author concludes that the reading from 4QMMT requires significant reconstruction and interpretation to arrive at a reading for a tripartite canon. As evidence for the scriptural authority of a book, Ulrich gives “indicative evidence” including: (a) multiple copies of books, (b) citation formulae, (c) books quoted as Scripture, (d) commentaries on books of Scripture, and (e) translations of Scripture.

Ulrich himself admits that this work should not be considered the last word on the issue and in the preface notes that it will have served its purpose if it “provides a foundation for the next generation to build upon and envision the scriptural text more accurately” (xi). Since this book offers a broad overview, individual scholarly interpretations of scriptural passages are, for the most part, constrained. Despite this, bias is kept to a minimum and Ulrich approaches the data from a respectfully neutral and humble stance (e.g., 186 where Ulrich points out how his own interpretation of sectarian variants in the LXX may be mistaken but offers helpful criteria for future scholars to discover “true sectarian variants”). One of the major strengths of the volume is Ulrich’s clarity and presentation of material. Each section flows logically from one to the other with the main thrust of the raw data being supplied early on in section 2. The examples the author chooses as illustrations and the graphs and tables he supplies are pleasing to look at and sensible for the purposes of the given chapter (see, for example, the table comparing 2 Sam 24, 4QSam<sup>a</sup>, and 1 Chr 21 on 104). One minor point of criticism is that in some instances tables of Hebrew are given with full translation (147–48) but (inexplicably), elsewhere they are not (149).

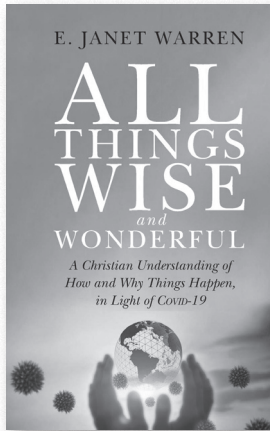
In terms of technical issues, this book, like many others of this nature, includes an index of ancient sources used, but unfortunately lacks a bibliography of any kind. The work is for the most part free of typographical and/or grammatical/spelling errors, though the title for chapter 14 “Rising Recognition of the Samaritan Pentateuch” is, in the header of the following pages, written as “Rising Recognition of the SP *and* LXX” (emphasis mine). The header seems to be correct, since the chapter contains an entire section dealing with the SP and LXX of Genesis 5 and 11. In the final sentence of the first paragraph on page 115, an indefinite article is missing from the sentence “rather they all witness to [a] single edition.”

Despite these minute issues, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Developmental Composition of the Bible* by Eugene Ulrich will easily become a standard introductory text on the issue of the development of the biblical text in early Judaism. The primary audience for this book is biblical scholars and the educated public, though it will also be of use to those interested in Christian origins and early

Christian scriptural interpretation as well as (to a lesser degree) theologians, and Bible translators.

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E. Janet Warren. *All Things Wise and Wonderful: A Christian Understanding of How and Why Things Happen, in Light of COVID-19*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2021. ISBN: 978-1-7252-9203-1. Pp. 212. Paperback. \$27.00 (USD).



The title of this book is brilliantly descriptive of creation that is ineffably intricate in the inter-relationships of its diverse elements. Humans are the most unpredictable and incomprehensible element; they do not know themselves. Their role in most of what happens has been the subject of intense dispute both philosophically and theologically. Warren provides a stimulating review of impenetrable human actions within complex causations, both in their intention and effect, from an unapologetically theological and biblical viewpoint.

God created 'adam male and female to represent him as his image to care for his garden, a place of mountains, streams, and trees for animals and birds, a garden satiated with life and produce for the work of 'adam (Ps 104:10–14). Humans observe the work of God as he continues to grant life to his creatures, breath by breath (v. 29). From a biblical point of view, there is nothing natural about life on earth. In Israelite confession, life emerges from the *holy*, a realm outside of the common, as testified in the representation of creation in tabernacle / temple ritual (Lev 10:9, 10). Maintaining the distinction between life in the common and its dependent source in the *holy* was the essence of the work of the priest. It was made evident in Israelite daily life. Ritually they distinguished clean and unclean, that which belongs to life and that which is destined to death. Hebrews had their own logical understanding of what moderns call nature. Warren draws on numerous Biblical references to affirm this fundamental confession.

Warren begins by showing that causal relations are complex (12–20), effectually beyond explanation. Actions are taken on the basis of partially observed causes and are often unhelpful or even harmful. Most Christians over-simplify the divine role in events (Part 1). Professing Christians tend to be deists in practice and irrational theists in thinking. As a psychotherapist Warren observes a woman in depression declaring that this is where God wants her to be, though she is

taking medication to help her deal with her condition (22). If depression is the will of God, surely medication is not. Such analysis is common, even in the counsel of pastors, reflecting an inadequate theology of God and a misunderstanding of concepts of causation. According to John Piper, “not one virus moves but by God’s plan” (47). Reducing concepts of sovereignty to such platitudes may be good rhetoric, but it is completely misleading in dealing with a pandemic.

In part 2 Warren describes some elements of how science analyses causation. The chapter on probability is an instructive introduction in statistics to the non-specialist, the majority of people who calculate possibilities every hour completely oblivious to the inadequacy of their methods. The chapter on science explains the limits of science and the random aspects of nature: “Quantum theory suggests that uncertainty is inherent in the universe, and that causation can occur at a distance” (101). Humans have learned to benefit immensely from observed order, but tend to forget that “free choice,” whether individually or collectively, is always very restricted (105–106). Outcomes emerge quite outside of human control or understanding. The most mysterious is the emergence of the mind: “If mental processes are determined wholly by the motion of the atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true . . . and hence I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms” (108; quote of neuroscientist Bill Newsome). There is a non-material world, not only a power of “mind over matter” as in biological systems, but the power of the Holy Spirit and a sovereign God.

At the level of decision making, part 3 may be the most important. Decision makers are oblivious to the multitude of limitations and controlling factors at work whenever a choice is made. As a functioning organ the brain is efficient and self-serving, often in defensive ways. Need for meaning, simplicity, and certainty serves to control thinking and behaviour, most often quite unconsciously. The brain determines what we see and how we see it (both literally and figuratively), creating illusions, biases, self-defence, and serving our desire to be right. This section concludes with some helpful guides for evaluating causation and the practice of true spiritual discernment in decision making. The reality is that there are no free decisions but there is accountability for every decision or human society could not function.

Sir Isaac Newton, principally in *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (*Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, 1687) revolutionized the world. Standing on the work of Galileo, Kepler, and the philosopher Descartes, Newton’s three laws of motion could precisely describe and predict planetary motion and the phenomena of gravity. It was assumed that observation and rational thinking were now the master predicting causation. The divine should be eliminated from understanding “natural” order, even to the point of its very

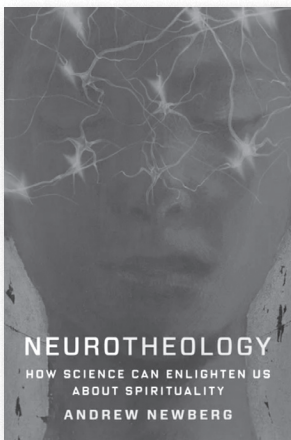
origins. What was deemed to be enlightenment became modernism which morphed into post-modernism. The pillars of epistemological certainty and determinism have proven to be both pathetically anaemic and horrifically destructive, but hubris has kept the spirit of enlightenment and modernism dominant in all areas of science and life. Sadly, Christians have shared in certainty of explanations, sometimes as ruthlessly as the Dawkins delusion.

The lucidity of this presentation of the most profound issues of science and theology masks the depth of research in this volume, which can be seen in copious footnotes and a diverse bibliography of 18 pages. The breadth of work in philosophy, science, and theology, along with many integrated examples from the practice of a medical doctor, psychotherapist, and theologian make every page both informative and interesting. Scholars will learn a lot from this book, including a lot about themselves, which will make them better people and scholars, but anyone literate will understand it and think about life a lot more clearly.

Life and the world are not determined in the way that the world presumes. God does determine the events and destiny of creation, but not in a way that theologians can explain because of human inability to understand causation, beginning at the sub-atomic level. It is good to rejoice in the mystery, but prudent to be less oblivious to the cavalier and often misguided way that decisions are made, even when they are made with great deliberation.

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*Neurotheology: How Science Can Enlighten Spirituality.* Andrew Newberg. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. ISBN 978-0231179041. Pp. 321. Hardcover. \$26.00 (USD).



Exactly ten years ago (in Fall of 2011), I was contemplating the subject of my seminary thesis. My first choice was “neurotheology,” a burgeoning new field that studies the intersection between brain science and theology. But before I could begin writing (and before enrolling in graduate courses in neurology at a local university), life interrupted those plans and altered the course of my research towards other things. In this review, I revisit this subject in what will likely become the standard introduction to the subject, *Neurotheology* by Andrew Newberg.

In Newberg’s analysis the “four foundational goals of neurotheology are as follows:



1. To improve our understanding of the human mind and brain.
2. To improve our understanding of religion and theology.
3. To improve the human condition, particularly in the context of health and well-being.
4. To improve the human condition, particularly in the context of religion and spirituality.” (41)

These are rather broad, but appropriately modest given the complicated nature of each field. This particular intersection has already become cramped with misrepresentation and over-belief (to borrow a phrase from William James) of the scientific kind. In any case, some of the questions to be explored in this field are, “Can we determine why some people are devoutly religious whereas others are complete atheists? What research can explain both the beneficial and detrimental effects of religion on the health and well-being of individuals, societies, and all of humanity? How can we explain the tenacity of religion in virtually every culture and age? . . . . What perspective can we take to understand the profound impact of spiritual and mystical experiences on a person’s life?” (1). Some of these questions are undoubtedly loaded, but Newberg’s tone and approach remains noticeably open towards possibilities and criticism in a way that isn’t characteristic of those entrapped in scientism/scientific reductionism. In his perspective, neurotheology expands—not limits—our understanding of spirituality (97), as well as religion and its evolution in general.

The first half of the book looks at introductory ideas about neurology, religion, psychology of religion, and the role of myth-making and rituals. Chapters 9–10 get more specific in linking the connections between religion’s traditional roles and functions and their role as scaffolding meaning. “One important way in which myth becomes connected to the body is through the process of ritual,” we read, “Rituals typically involve rhythmic and patterned activities performed using specific body movements and functions . . . rituals bring myths to life and greatly reinforce their power” (180). Newberg also here discusses all of the various methods of observing the brain (e.g., fMRI, electroencephalograms, BOLD fMRI, MRS, etc.). Research can “form the basis of an applied neurotheology subfield that may lead to a deeper understanding of how religious and spiritual practices affect humans along multiple dimensions. We might even find out which practices yield the most spiritual experiences” (223).

Newberg’s approach is always qualified, cautious, and (despite its incredibly clear prose) sophisticated. For example, he is careful to delineate the varieties of atheism (225) and between the “spiritual” and “religious.” He has no interest in showing how religious or non-religious brains (whatever this may mean) are intellectually superior or inferior. For “neurotheology strives to find a less biased

perspective and would acknowledge that believers and nonbelievers alike have certain flaws in their neurological systems that depend heavily on the overall beliefs they hold” (231). There are, nevertheless, cognitive distinctions between people who are highly religious and those who aren’t—at least in *some* research. But even there, “one system may not be inherently better or worse than the other; they simply process information about the world in different ways” (231). In the end, “the information we have about religious and nonreligious individuals is incomplete”; there is no “God spot.” In fact, “a neurotheological approach might conclude that the entire brain is the ‘God Spot’” (238).

After looking at freewill, the book examines mystical experience. Such experiences are typically characterized by five things—a sense of intensity, clarity, unity, surrender, and a “transformational effect” (267). Interestingly, “[t]hese experiences, which last just seconds to minutes, seem to rewire the brain completely in this very short period of time. It is remarkable that all the different ways a person thinks about the world can radically shift from a singular moment of mystical enlightenment” (275). This chapter is a much-welcome follow-up to the work of William James over a century ago.

The book’s conclusion attends to the concerns of religious fundamentalism and mass exodus of out of traditional religious institutions and forms, the nihilistic proposal, and the stubborn persistence of spirituality in our species.

If our brain is always trying to understand the world, and if we are trapped within our brain, then we will always create stories to explain the world. And since we struggle with understanding the universe, our brain acts as a belief-making machine. We have no choice but to generate ideas about all aspects of our universe. In doing so, we never know for sure if our ideas are accurate. Our ideas about God and religion may very well reflect the true nature of the universe, or they might be completely delusional. Our brain will never know. But because our brain will never know, the beliefs we hold become part of our reality. For some, that reality includes God, and for others, it does not. (283)

Neurotheology “represents an intriguing possibility as a middle ground between science and religion” (284) and may even serve as a metatheology—an approach to theology that can be applied to all theological systems. If so, such a metatheology must: (a) account for how and why “the foundational myths of any given belief system are formed” (285); (b) “describe how and why the foundational myths are developed into the complex logical systems of a theology”; and (c) “describe how and why the foundational myths are ultimately transformed into religious and spiritual practices and rituals” (285–86).



Whatever the case, two practical imports of neurotheology for religious practitioners is its ability to: (a) identify which rituals and religious practices and patterns can be more effective (i.e., spiritual and meaningful), such as the type of rituals, or how effective are certain kinds of prayers, etc.; and (b) identify the pathways (e.g., psychedelic drugs) by which people can have intense spiritual experiences. With the rise of “spiritual but not religious” populations, I think Newberg is right that this kind of work will be quite useful and relevant in the next century.

*Neurotheology* won't be satisfying for those who expect to find revolutionary discoveries about God, the meaning of the world, or religion by the study of the brain—nor will such readers find great apologetic material for either classical theism or atheism. Newberg is fully aware of how this field can be wielded by such ideologically-motivated enterprises. I was actually shocked by how anti-reductionistic and rigorously nuanced the book was. Even more so, it reads amazingly well and serves as an excellent introduction for those who have read little in either theology or neurology, which is quite a feat considering the subject matter.

I am thankful for the book, and all persons of faith should find it not only non-threatening, but as interesting and potentially useful as the field claims to be. Time, however, will tell how successful and useful neurology, as a field of study, will ultimately be.

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