

Touchstone

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Editorial

In July, 2021, a video circulated on the internet of one Dr. Laura Pressley addressing a Texas State Senate Committee on the topic of “election security”—a notorious euphemism for sowing doubts about the legitimacy of the 2020 Presidential election. Dr. Pressley argued that efforts to safeguard elections are “God’s work” and offered 2 Peter 1:10 as a scriptural justification: “*Brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure; for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall.*” In response, the following comment appeared on Twitter, “Someone never had to take hermeneutics.”

Hermeneutics is the study of the principles and methodology of interpretation. It seeks to understand how we understand texts and distinguish legitimate and flawed readings of those texts. Serious readers of the Bible from all theological camps were united in condemning Dr. Pressley’s use of Scripture as far wide of the mark.

This issue of *Touchstone* is devoted to different ways in which we interpret the Bible. Whenever we say, “This is what the Bible means,” we are engaging in hermeneutics. We draw on a complex range of principles, premises, and assumptions to arrive at a justifiable interpretation, at times without being consciously aware of what we are doing. Hermeneutics seeks to make the process of interpretation explicit, to answer the question, “*How we come to say with confidence, ‘The Bible says ...’*”

Biblical interpreters have always followed rule-based methods, whether it is rabbinic midrash, medieval allegory, Renaissance philology or modern historical criticism. Modern biblical hermeneutics, is closely tied to the emergence of historical consciousness, that peculiarly modern sense that, as historian David Lowenthal put it, “the past is a foreign country.” Bridging what G. E. Lessing termed “the ugly broad ditch of history” is like learning to speak a foreign language, not just the words, but the habits of thought and practice which that language brings to expression.

Context is key. Hermeneutics takes for granted that all human discourse is situated historically in particular cultural, social, political and religious environments, and that understanding these contexts is an essential condition for grasping the meaning of a text. Multiple contexts are at work in the interpretive task: the context of the original text (with its own history of transmission and reinterpretation), but also the context of the interpreter, the presuppositions, prejudices and experiences he or she brings to the task. Interpretation requires an awareness of contextual difference; but also a sense for those points of similarity that makes meaning possible.

In this issue of *Touchstone*, five serious readers of Scripture look at the task of biblical interpretation from different perspectives.

William P. Brown explores the relationship between the Bible and science. Nothing distinguishes modern from pre-modern worldviews more than the extraordinary explanatory power of scientific method. In the view of many, science and religion are mutually exclusive and radically incompatible paradigms. Science probes a dis-enchanted universe which, many would argue, leaves no room for divine intervention in either human or natural realms. Needless to say, this view has major implications for biblical interpretation.

Bill Brown makes a persuasive case that science provides an important “lens” for reading the Bible. If, as St. Anselm said, theology is “faith seeking understanding,” then science should not be seen as the enemy, because the God of the Bible is the creator of the world whose wonders science seeks to unravel.

Daniel Driver takes up the important topic of how Scripture makes use of Scripture. He uses the cryptic reference in the Gospel of Mark to Jesus being “with the wild animals” in the wilderness as a case study of biblical intertextuality—one part of the Bible interpreting another. Daniel’s essay is a model of detailed and imaginative exegesis and an example of reading the Bible as an interconnected whole.

Christians in the West are becoming increasingly aware of Christianity’s global reach. Eurocentric readings of Scripture no longer have a privileged, normative status. The richness of Scripture is expanded as we learn how the Bible is read and interpreted in different cultural contexts.

Hye-Ran Kim-Cragg explores the promise of intercultural biblical interpretation for preaching. Using sermons as examples, she illustrates three hermeneutical tasks that she calls the “behind,” “between” and “before” of interpretation. Faithful reading involves engaging with the social, political and historical reality behind the text. It pays close attention to the literary nuances within the text that is illuminated by knowledge of the original languages. And it is open to insights made possible by the lived context and experience of contemporary interpreters, particularly those whose voices have often been overlooked or silenced by mainstream interpretation.

Mitzi Smith offers a Womanist approach to biblical interpretation, from the perspective of a Black woman. The historical experience of enslavement becomes a key hermeneutical principle in unlocking the liberating voice of Scripture. Womanist interpretation seeks both to uncover oppressive readings and open up the power of the Bible to speak

to contemporary situations of injustice and oppression.

Martin Rumscheidt reminds us that the Bible is heard not only through formal exegesis and preaching but through cultural traditions of art and music. He traces the journey of one biblical text Luke 2:12—from the Gospel of Luke to a Christmas hymn of Martin Luther to a cantata by Felix Mendelssohn, by way of the composer's grandfather, the Enlightenment philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. Through his use of the two Mendelssohns—philosopher and composer, Martin reminds of the importance of attending to Jewish modes of listening to the Bible.

Betsy Anderson has contributed a fascinating profile of Kathleen Bliss, a pioneer of the ecumenical movement and key leader in the formation of the World Council of Churches. Born in England, Kathleen Bliss advocated for a vision of the church engaged in the well-being of the world and championed the leadership of women and the vocation of the laity.

In our “From the Heart” section, Bill Thomas offers a personal reflection on his encounter with the writings of controversial megachurch pastor Mark Driscoll. Bill prompts us to remember the importance of the value of engaging with those who see the world and the Gospel in ways very different from our own in clarifying our own convictions.

As usual, this issue of *Touchstone* includes four interesting and helpful book reviews.

Touchstone is committed to providing a forum for theology conversation that will continue to shape Christian witness in the United Church and beyond. We are grateful to our readers, subscribers, contributors, and supporters. I hope that readers will find the discussion of biblical interpretation in this issue thought-provoking and helpful.

Paul Miller

THE BIBLE AND SCIENCE: A NECESSARY DIALOGUE

By William P. Brown

The Bible and science: What could they possibly share in common? Put another way (with apologies to Tertullian): What has MIT¹ to do with Jerusalem? Why, then, should readers of Scripture even bother with science? The Bible is not a scientific text, and because science and biblical interpretation are so far afield from each other as separate disciplines, any kind of interaction might seem well-nigh impossible.

Nevertheless, I find hosting such a dialogue to be necessary both hermeneutically and theologically. Allow me first to give a hermeneutical argument about how science provides a crucial “lens” through which one reads the Bible. To call science a “lens” is to acknowledge the many lenses through which one can read the biblical text, all contextually based and heuristically oriented. One of the challenges in theological education today is to foster greater “cultural competence,” namely the capacity to engage in dialogue with others of different backgrounds, perspectives, and interests in an informed and appreciative way. Being appreciatively informed by science is part of being culturally competent. According to Martin Rees, a noted British astronomer, science is “the one truly global culture.”² As imperialistic as that may sound, acknowledged is the fact that science constitutes a complex and globally pervasive culture with its own discourse, methods, and interests. That in itself qualifies as an important interpretive lens for reading Scripture. We invariably look at the world through science. Why not also the world of Scripture?

As for the theological argument, I refer to St. Anselm (1033-1109). If theology is “faith seeking understanding”³ and science is a form of understanding seeking further understanding, then theology has nothing to fear and, in fact, much to gain from science. To be sure, theology cannot advance the scientific quest to understand the underlying constituents of matter and the physical nature of causation. Science, in turn, cannot lay claim to know God and God’s purposes, let alone prove or disprove God’s existence. Both disciplines represent independent fields of inquiry. But, I ask, does their independence preclude constructive, mutual dialogue? Because both seek truth, because each discipline is driven by an

¹ The acronym for Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge.

² Martin Rees, “Pondering Astronomy in 2009,” *Science* 323 (January 16, 2009): 309.

³ *Fides quaerens intellectum*, the original title to Anselm’s *Proslogion*.

“ontological thirst, by the thirst to know reality as it is,”⁴ theology can learn much from science. If theology is about relating the world and all therein to God (cf. Ps 24:1) but does not take into account the world as known through science, then it fails.

There is also, I would add, the incarnational argument. Faith in the incarnate God calls us to know and honor the physical, fleshy world in all its aspects, including its delicate balances and indomitable dynamics, its life-sustaining regularities and surprising anomalies, its remarkable intelligibility and bewildering complexity. Such is the world “made flesh,” and faith in the “Word made flesh” acknowledges that the very forces that produced you and me also produced microbes, bees, and manatees. As much as we cannot ignore the incarnate God, we cannot dismiss the discoveries of science. Theologically, there is no other option. Faith in such a God calls people of faith to understand and honor creation, the world that God has not only deemed “very good” (Gen 1:31) but saw fit to inhabit in Christ (John 1:14). The God in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28) has all to do with the world in which we live and move and have our being.

Ways of Relating Science and Religion

Contrary to rampant misconception, there are actually several ways in which science and theology (or religion) have encountered each other. Ian Barbour describes them in a simple fourfold typology: 1) conflict, 2) independence, 3) dialogue, and 4) integration.⁵

1. Conflict. Antagonism seems to be the popular conception regarding the relationship between faith and science. For certain biblical literalists and certain atheistic scientists, religion and science are simply incompatible at best and enemies at worst. One is considered an impediment to the other, and each is prone to caricaturizing the other. Some consider religion simplistically as superstitious. Others see science as a threat to their faith in God, eroding humanity’s nobility created in God’s image. Conflict inevitably emerges, for example, in discussions about God and evolution that are cast as a debate rather than as a mutually respectful discussion.

⁴ Ted Peters, “Introduction: What Is to Come,” in *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, ed. Ted Peters et al (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), xiii.

⁵ Ian G. Barbour, *When Science Meets Religion: Enemies, Strangers, or Partners?* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), 2-4.

2. *Independence.* Alternatively, religion and science are considered independent realms of inquiry that have (and should have) nothing to do with each other. They are, in the words of the biologist Stephen Jay Gould, “non-overlapping magisteria” (NOMA).⁶ Because of their different modes of discourse, there is no possibility of mutual dialogue, much less collaboration. Conversely, there is no possibility of conflict either. On the one hand, science asks how things work and deals with objective facts. Religion, on the other hand, deals with matters of value and ultimate meaning. One asks “how”; the other asks “why.” Or as Galileo himself famously popularized, “The intention of the Holy Ghost is to teach us how one goes to heaven, not how heaven goes.”⁷

3. *Dialogue.* While this model acknowledges the differences between science and religion, it does so in such a way as to make possible dialogue over issues worth talking about from both disciplines. They can be held as complementary disciplines that have particular points of contact or intersections. Call it TOMA or “tangentially overlapping magisteria.”⁸ While Stephen Jay Gould is famous for his NOMA typology (see above), largely overlooked is his remark on the need to “unite the patches built by our separate magisteria into a beautiful and coherent quilt called wisdom.”⁹ And wisdom is something sorely needed for both scientist and believer alike.

4. *Integration* locates itself on the other end of the spectrum, the opposite of “conflict.” This can take the form of reformulating theological tenets in the light of scientific understandings or drawing direct theological implications from the findings of science. For example, some theologians with a scientific bent regard the “finely-tuned” universe, the precisely “set” variables by which the universe evolved to produce intelligent life, as evidence of divine providence. Others harmonize the biblical text to align itself with science by, for example, identifying the Big Bang with God’s creation of light in Gen 1:3. Theologically, this could include revising the theological notion of divine omnipotence in light of the contingencies of existence as observed by science (i.e., “chance” and “mutation”) or lodging

⁶ Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine, 1999), 5, 49-67.

⁷ Galileo, “Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina,” in *The Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo*, tr. Stillman Drake (New York: Anchor Books, 1957), 186.

⁸ William P Brown, “From NOMA to TOMA: Bible, Science, and Wisdom,” *SciTech* 18/2 (2009): 1, 4. Published by the Presbyterian Association on Science, Technology, and the Christian Faith (PASTCF).

⁹ Gould, *Rocks of Ages*, 178.

the “causal joint” of divine action in the indeterminate realm of quantum mechanics. I find potential here theologically, but I’m reluctant to let science entirely determine the course of theological discussion or vice versa. Indeed, an extreme form of this is to argue that science and religion are ultimately two sides of the same coin, with one (take your pick) completely overlapping the other. The problem with this is that it leads ultimately to the erasure of all differences between science and religion. Call it COMA, “completely overlapping magisteria.”

How to relate two very different discourses, one theological and one empirical, one with longstanding ancient roots and one that is thoroughly modern, is a perpetual challenge. But it is a necessary one. We live in an age of science, and the ways in which science and religion have engaged each other in the past are numerous. But the possibilities for the future are manifold.

Science and Scripture

As for biblical interpretation in particular, I consider dialogue to be the best and most interesting option simply because it is the most open-ended and the results are not predetermined. I begin by simply asking the question, with apologies to Karl Barth: What is it like to read the Bible in one hand and the journal *Science* or *Nature* in the other? In my own hermeneutical quest, I have found that science holds the promise of deepening the Bible’s own perspectives on creation. Astronomy, geology, and biology have put to rest all *unbiblical* notions that the world is a static given, a ready-made creation dropped from heaven. Nature has its own story to tell, and one needs to know it, if only to talk more comprehensively about the story of God’s work in the world and to counter the woefully narrow view that treats the world as merely the stage for humanity’s salvation. As astrobiologist Lucas Mix states, “As a Christian, I think of astrobiology as a way to better understand how God created the world.”¹⁰

Precedence for reading Scripture and creation together is, in fact, deeply rooted in Christian tradition, which has at times regarded both as God’s “two books,” a conceptual motif that began at least with John Chrysostom (ca. 347-407) and Augustine (354-430) and extends to Galileo (1564-1642).¹¹ Augustine, for example, refers to creation as God’s “great

¹⁰ Lucas John Mix, *Life in Space: Astrobiology for Everyone* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 6.

¹¹ For a concise historical survey of this notion, see Peter J. Hess, “‘God’s Two Books’: Revelation, Theology, and Natural Science in the Christian West,” in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Cosmology and Biological Evolution*

big book, the book of created nature.”¹² He goes on to say, “Look carefully at it from top to bottom, observe it, read it. . . . Observe heaven and earth in a religious spirit.”¹³ That “religious spirit,” however, does not mean rejecting the findings of science in favor of, say, the three-tiered model of the universe presupposed in Genesis. To the contrary, Augustine found it shameful for Christians to make empirical claims about creation by spouting Scripture (*De Genesi ad lit.* I.xix.39). It is, thus, a hermeneutical duty that God’s “two books” be read together, for God is the author of both. Biblical precedence can be found in a certain psalm that begins with “the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” and concludes with reflections on God’s Torah: “The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes” (Ps 19:1, 7-8). Psalm 19 binds together creation and Torah, God’s world and Word, into an inseparable whole.

Critical to me as a biblical interpreter is the exegetical payoff that results from enlisting the understandings of science in the hermeneutical (ad)venture. Rather than trying to prove or disprove the veracity of Scripture, reading the Bible through the lens of science highlights certain aspects of Scripture’s discourse that might otherwise be overlooked. Moreover, engaging the Bible and science dialogically poses fascinating (and, I submit, necessary) theological questions and offers important theological insights that otherwise would be lacking.

Genesis 1

Science may not be helpful for interpreting every biblical text, but it becomes critically pertinent for texts that address the nature of creation and human identity. Case in point: Genesis 1. According to best-selling author Marilynne Robinson, Gen 1:1-2:3 is the Bible’s closest thing to a “scientific” account of creation: “If ancient people had consciously set out to articulate a worldview congenial to science, it is hard to imagine how, in terms available to them, they could have done better.”¹⁴ Is Genesis 1:1-2:3 scientific? Certainly not by any modern standards. Nevertheless, of all the creation accounts of the ancient Near East, Genesis 1 seems to be

(Australian Theological Forum Science and Theology Series 2; Hindmarsh, Australia: Australian Theological Forum, 2002), 19-51.

¹² Augustine, “Sermon 68,” in *The Works of Saint Augustine: Sermons Part III (51-84)*, tr. Edmund Hill (Augustinian Heritage Institute; Brooklyn, NY: New York City Press, 1991), 225.

¹³ Augustine, “Sermon 68,” 226.

¹⁴ Marilynne Robinson, *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 39.

the most naturalistic by comparison. Compared to the rough-and-tumble, theogonic world of the Babylonian Epic of Creation (*Enuma elish*), Genesis 1 reads like a treatise, a rigorous exercise in mythological reduction. It reflects a literary austerity and methodical sensibility that avoids the fray of epic conflict as reflected in other ancient Near Eastern accounts. Genesis 1 attempts to systematically recount the establishment of creation's structure and the formation of life, with each "day" building on the previous one. Genesis depicts the cosmos as dynamic and differentiated and does so without making dramatic recourse to the gods, or to God.

I am not, however, interested in demonstrating how proto-scientific Genesis 1 is. Many of the claims made by the Priestly author of Genesis simply cannot be reconciled with modern science. What I want to do, however, is read Genesis through the lens of science and see what happens dialogically. The distinction may seem overly subtle, but here is what I mean. Reading Genesis "scientifically" does not treat the ancient text as scientific so that its claims about the natural world are forced to either "prove" or "disprove" the claims of modern science. This kind of reading relies on a rigid view of biblical authority and collapses the dialogical space between the text and its reader. Call it hermeneutical reductionism. In sharp distinction, reading Genesis through the lens of science acknowledges that science resides with the interpreter's context and begins in the spirit of open dialogue.

So much has been written about the resonance between the Big Bang and God's first act of creation in Genesis, the creation of light (Gen 1:3), that it does not bear repeating. I would simply note that modern readers have a hard time *disassociating* God's first command with the primordial "explosion" of energy that birthed the cosmos, engendering both time and space.¹⁵ Reading Genesis 1 with some familiarity of the Big Bang lurking in the background does underline the *dramatic gravitas* of God's first command, and that is not a bad thing. What becomes more problematic is the attempt to harmonize creation completed in seven "days" in Genesis with the scientific understanding of cosmic evolution, which traces the origins of the universe back to 13.81 billion years (and counting). It simply does not work. To do so would be to assign wildly different chronological values for each "day" in creation as laid out in Genesis, which was understood by the ancient authors within a 24-hour

¹⁵ For detailed discussion, see William P. Brown, *The Seven Pillars of Creation: The Bible, Science, and the Ecology of Wonder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 49-78.

timeframe, as denoted by the alternation of “evening” and “morning” (Gen 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31). Consider the scientific reconstruction of the origins and formation of the universe

1. Big Bang - 0 seconds (13.81 billion years ago)
2. Fusion stops - nuclei form; 3 minutes
3. Formation of atoms - 380,000 years
4. Onset of darkness - 1 million years
5. First stars - 400-600 million years
6. Sun - 8.7 billion years; (5 billion years ago)
7. Earth - 4.55 billion years ago
8. Microbial life on Earth - 3.85 billion years ago
9. Photosynthesis developed by cyanobacteria - 2.7 billion years ago
10. Multicellular organisms - 1.7 billion years ago
11. Cambrian explosion (invertebrates) - 540 million years ago
12. First (jawless) fishes - 510 million years ago
13. Land colonized by algae and insects - 500 million years ago
14. Plants with seeds, first forests - 408 million years ago
15. Land colonized by animals - 370 million years ago
16. Trees, ferns, reptiles - 345 million years ago
17. Dinosaurs, mammals - 230 million years ago
18. Extinction of dinosaurs - 65 million years ago
19. *Homo sapiens* - 300,000 years ago

Note that the twenty-four hour day is nowhere a factor in the astronomical and geological scale of evolution. Rather, the temporal scale of cosmic evolution swings wildly from minute fractions of a second to millions and billions of years. In addition, the order of cosmic evolution is strikingly different from what one finds in Genesis 1. Consider the milestones identified in the Genesis account in their order of presentation:

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-------|
| 1. Light | Day 1 |
| 2. Firmament | Day 2 |
| 3. Oceans and Land (or “earth”) | Day 3 |
| 4. Plants | Day 3 |
| 5. Sun, Stars, and Planets | Day 4 |
| 6. Aquatic and Avian Life | Day 5 |
| 7. Land Animals | Day 6 |
| 8. Human Beings | Day 6 |

As one can readily see, what is particularly problematic for harmonizers is the order of creation. On the one hand, the earth and the creation of plants occur *prior to* the sun, impossible from a scientific standpoint.¹⁶ On the other hand, human beings are considered the latest lifeform created, a claim that is consonant with science. On the one hand, the “firmament” according to Genesis 1 is a hard metallic-like shield that prevents the cosmic “waters above” from inundating the land (cf. Gen 7:11b). Scientifically speaking, there is no such firmament, nor is interstellar space filled with water. On the other hand, the atmosphere that blankets Earth does shield its inhabitants from harmful ultraviolet rays, and water is actually quite prevalent in our solar system. One could go on alternating between “on the one hand” and “on the other hand.” Collisions and consonances are deeply intertwined throughout the Genesis narrative in dialogue with science.

For this essay, however, I want to highlight a particular consonance between the ancient cosmogonic text of Genesis and biological evolution, namely the creation or emergence of *Homo sapiens* (aka *'ādām* in Genesis). Both the Genesis biological accounts identify humanity as the latest major lifeform to exist on the planet. Created on the sixth day after the land animals, *'ādām* is created in God’s “image” and tasked with exercising dominion over the rest of creation (Gen 1:26-28). It doesn’t take much science to know that *Homo sapiens* is today the most powerful species on the planet, capable of destroying the planet, whether quickly (nuclear holocaust) or slowly (ecological degradation).

Constructive dialogue between the ancient cosmogonist and the evolutionary biologist can unfold on the common ground of humanity’s late arrival in creation. On the sixth “day” of creation, humanity is created. As the dominant species on the planet, *Homo sapiens* is a latecomer who emerged about 300,000 years ago, according to latest estimates. The evolutionary journey of our species began between six and seven million years ago when two primate lineages began to branch out, one of them leading to the development of our species (*Homo sapiens*), and the other to our nearest contemporary great ape cousins (chimpanzees and bonobos). Our lineage successfully made the transition from the wooded environment to the arid savannah in Africa, eventually populating the entire planet. In the process, our ancestors became bipedal, shed fur, shared food, created

¹⁶ For a solar system to form, the star comes first. Its gravitational force jump starts and sustains planetary formation, beginning with the amalgamation of interstellar dust, a process called “accretion,” of which our ancient authors were utterly unaware.

social networks, and traded tools, all the while “our” brains tripled in size. For a time, our species shared the planet with others, including *Homo neanderthalensis* and *Homo floresiensis*. We are related to at least nineteen other hominin species (so far discovered), all of whom are our relatives, either ancestors or cousins. Although we are the last bipedal species standing, we nevertheless carry within our anatomy and our genome the legacies of our evolutionary relatives, including for many a percentage of genomic material from our Neanderthal cousins, the result of interbreeding. If anything, the story of human evolution is complicated, if not downright messy.

Such messiness is not a hallmark of humanity’s creation described in Genesis 1, but perhaps a hint of such is given in Genesis 2 in light of *’ādām*’s development from a single-tasked individual (Gen 2:15) to a human being reaching full consciousness (3:7). But that is another story for another essay. Here, I want to explore the theological significance of humanity’s late “arrival” on the planetary scene. To put things in perspective, if Earth’s history of 4.55 billion years were reduced to one hour, the appearance of the modern human would occur at the final one-tenth of the last second (59:59.9), with the first sign of life clocking in at 13:04, the first dinosaur at 57:01, the first mammal at 57:07. Note the longevity of life on Earth from early on in contrast to the lateness of human life.

Or if Earth’s timeline were recorded on a roll of toilet paper consisting of 400 squares, with each square representing 12.5 million years, the dinosaurs would have gone extinct by square 394 while *Homo sapiens* would have appeared at 1 millimeter from the end of the last square. (The first sign of life in the form of the prokaryotic cell would have appeared on square 120.) Or perhaps put more pointedly: If my Bible, with its 1300 pages (very small print), were to account for the creation of life on Earth “in the beginning” in true chronological fashion, the history of humanity, Israel, Jesus, and the early church (Genesis 1:26-Acts 28:31) would have to be summarized in the final sentence!

The lateness of humanity’s appearance is simply staggering in the context of life’s evolutionary journey(s), which began relatively early in the course of Earth’s geological history. What are the theological implications of humanity’s lateness in conjunction with the early foothold of life that resulted in a living, biologically diverse planet? From the ancient Priestly perspective, the creation of humanity marks the culmination of life’s development from the creation of plants on the third “day” to that of land animals on the sixth, following the creation of aquatic and avian creatures on the fifth. In its own way, the Genesis account

proceeds from simplicity to complexity in the creation of life, concluding with a lifeform created uniquely in God's own "image." Such is one of the defining movements of evolution, as Darwin himself pointed out. One might infer from the methodical narrative movement of Genesis 1 an unfolding of what medieval theologians called the *scala naturae* or "the great chain of being," in which humanity becomes the crown of creation, to which the rest of life is hierarchically related (see also Ps 8:5-8).

For the biologist, however, there is plenty of wonder and awe to be had in all the lifeforms *preceding* the emergence of *Homo sapiens*. Think of the dinosaurs or the woolly mammoths in North America. Think of the dramatic emergence of aquatic biodiversity during the Cambrian "explosion" ca. 540 million years ago, "the most significant event in Earth evolution," according to the paleobiologist Guy Narbonne.¹⁷ What was God doing before humanity's emergence? Certainly more than simply waiting around. Was God less involved in creation until humanity came upon the scene? Humanity's lateness in the Genesis account might imply that the pinnacle of creation had been reached, thereby launching the unfolding drama of God's redemptive work. So would begin the "greatest story ever told," the story recounted in Scripture of humanity's redemption. But everything that is covered in Genesis 1 *prior* to humanity's creation (1:26-28) comprises the vast majority of the planet's evolutionary history, including the history of life, not to mention the billions upon billions of years of creative work beginning with the Big Bang, not to mention the trillion galaxies that populate the universe as we know it. But back down to earth: the story of planetary life chronologically outweighs humanity's story over ten-thousandfold. "In the beginning" in Genesis lasted a lot longer than human history. Was God simply waiting all that time for humanity to emerge before becoming intimately involved with creation?

The evolutionary biologist would remind the Priestly author that God took a vast amount of time creating and sustaining life prior to humanity's creation, indicating a serious investment on God's part in fashioning creation. Such a cosmic, evolutionary perspective induces a healthy dose of humility regarding God's relationship to humanity in creation, balancing the Priestly author's ringing endorsement of humanity as the culmination of creation. Indeed, one need not offset or minimize the other, as if God's investment in creation were a zero-sum game, pitting humans and animals against each other vying for God's attention. To the

¹⁷ Quoted in Douglas Fox, "What Sparked the Cambrian Explosion," *Nature* 530 (February 16, 2016): 268. Accessed at <https://www.nature.com/articles/530268a>.

contrary, humility and awe over humanity in relationship to the natural world can peacefully co-exist. Cannot one celebrate how “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps 139:14) while doing the same for the rest of creation?

The evolutionary biologist J. B. S. Haldane (1892–1964) was asked what biology could say about God. He allegedly replied, “I’m really not sure, except that the Creator, if he exists, must have an inordinate fondness of beetles.”¹⁸ Indeed, beetles, with their 400,000 species, make up close to 25% of all known animal species.¹⁹ God’s “fondness” for beetles *and* human beings reveal that God’s love is inexhaustible. God, both science and the Bible reveal, is at heart biophile, a lover of all things living.

¹⁸ Quoted in David Beerling, *The Emerald Planet: How Plants Changed Earth’s History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), vi.

¹⁹ Beerling, *The Emerald Planet*, vi.

JESUS WITH THE WILD ANIMALS AND DISCIPLES: AN ORGANICALLY FIGURAL READING OF MARK 1:13b¹

By Daniel Driver

Introduction

An Old Testament scholar today may, perhaps, prove little better than a casual reader of the New Testament. Recalling Augustine's warning that "casual readers are misled by problems and ambiguities of many kinds, mistaking one thing for another," I acknowledge the risk of getting waylaid by one of the Bible's "obscure phrases."² Yet I find myself drawn to just such a phrase in the Gospel of Mark's prologue. What is the meaning of Jesus's presence "with the wild beasts" when he is tempted by Satan in the wilderness (Mk 1:13)? I approach this question unguardedly because it lies outside my area of specialization. At the same time, I draw comfort from Augustine's confidence that the Bible's interpretive difficulty "is all divinely predetermined, so that pride may be subdued by hard work and intellects which tend to despise things that are easily discovered may be rescued from boredom and reinvigorated."³ To speak in Augustinian terms, I explore an obscure phrase in this essay as a remedy to some of the "lethargy" that readers can experience before certain parts of Christian Scripture:

Those who fail to discover what they are looking for suffer from hunger, whereas those who do not look, because they have it in front of them, often die of boredom. In both situations the danger is lethargy. It is a wonderful and beneficial thing that the Holy Spirit organized the holy Scripture so as to satisfy hunger by means of its plainer passages and to remove boredom by means of its obscurer ones. Virtually nothing is unearthed from these obscurities which cannot be found quite plainly expressed somewhere else.⁴

My aim is to let Scripture interpret Scripture such that obscure

¹ A version of this essay was presented at the Vital Church Maritimes Conference on "Wilderness Calling: Trusting in Jesus" (Truro, Nova Scotia; October 14, 2021). Scripture translations are from the NRSV, except where noted. I use the term "Old Testament" as an indication of my ecclesial location and context in interpreting Christian Scripture, Old and New.

² Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 32 (Book II.10).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 33 (Book II.14–15).

things might be illuminated by things that are clear, and so to prove again the sufficiency of Scripture to feed intellectual and spiritual appetites. To that end, I argue that the wild animals with Jesus in his initial temptation anticipate, in figure, the disciples with Jesus in Gethsemane. The disciples show themselves to be like beasts in the wild at the apex of temptation, and Jesus is with them. My case turns on the prevalence of wilderness in Mark's account of the good news of Jesus Christ.

The argument has two main elements. First, I characterize wilderness in Mark as a certain kind of place. It can be challenging for modern readers to locate it in the right way, without overdetermining its geography in irrelevant ways. In support of the suggestion that recourse to Scripture is the best way to map it, I highlight some of Mark's resonance with the Old Testament. Second, I ask what it means for Jesus to be with the wild animals in the wilderness. I consider and reject a recent suggestion that they represent the beginning of the peaceable kingdom, and then propose an alternative connection between the animals and the disciples in Gethsemane (14:32–52). An opaque phrase at the beginning of this Gospel may be understood better in view of its conclusion. Taken together these elements show how, in the context of Christian Scripture, Mark's prologue looks both forwards and backwards.

Jesus in the Wilderness

Why does Jesus enter the wilderness? What does it mean for him to accept John's baptism and endure Satan's temptation there? In contrast to the other canonical gospels, the Gospel of Mark situates the person and work of Jesus in the wilderness. There is no genealogy. There is no well-ordered deference to eyewitnesses. There is no philosophical meditation on how the Word was in the beginning. Instead, Mark opens with an epigraph synthesized from the Scriptures of Israel. The composite quote features a verse from Isaiah 40:3 about a herald of the good news, "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord'" (Mk 1:3). Right away John the Baptist appears, dressed like a wild man, eating locusts and wild honey, preaching repentance. He prepares the way, and people respond. Crowds descend from the southern heart of Israel, coming down into the Jordan Valley from Jerusalem and the Judean countryside, exiting cultivated territory to enter a place wild, inhospitable, and threatening. It resembles the exodus and conquest of Israel in reverse. Jesus of Nazareth comes down, too, on his own, entering the wilderness from Nazareth of Galilee. According to Mark, the good news begins under a word from Isaiah as John draws people of Israel and Jesus through arid land to the banks of the Jordan. Signal events in the life of Jesus, including

his baptism and temptation, are subordinated to the governing motif of wilderness.⁵

Geographically, it is somewhat open to question whether the Jordan region counts as wilderness, though in Mark's understanding it almost certainly does.⁶ John belongs to the wilderness, and the Jordan is his domain. Historical geographers might puzzle over what itineraries may be in view. Since Mark describes travel from Judea and Jerusalem by the people, and from Nazareth in Galilee by Jesus, the people and Jesus must find John somewhere along the lower Jordan. While the western hill country in that part of the Great Rift Valley is parched because it lies in a rain shadow, the Jordan's flood plain supports more life.⁷ Some Old Testament texts refer to the area as luscious but dangerous, the haunt of lions and roaring beasts (Jer 12:5; 49:19; 50:44; Zech 11:3). Should both desert and jungle be called wilderness? Mark shows little interest in maintaining distinctions of that sort. Rather, he reports how Jesus, having been baptised by John in the Jordan, arises (*anabainōn*) from the water as the Spirit descends (*katabainon*) on him (1:10), only to be cast by the Spirit "out into the wilderness [*eis tēn erēmōn*]" (1:12). The point is not that the Jordan and the wilderness are different ecological niches. Mark's landscape is far more theological: a prophetic word, John, the people, Jesus, a heavenly voice, and the Spirit converge in the wilderness, where the Jordan River is, as on so many other occasions in Scripture, a spiritual threshold. Crossing it, Jesus is ejected by the Spirit into a fraught place where Satan tempts, beasts prowl, and angels attend (1:13).

It is hard to say if imprecision about physical geography is something the synoptic tradition seeks to correct. Matthew puts John the Baptist "in the wilderness of Judea" (3:1); Luke puts him in the "whole region around the Jordan" (3:3). It would be better to say that geography plays a distinctive theological role in Mark, with subtle scriptural links. Events in the wilderness frame scenes in Mark that might more productively be mapped to Psalm 42, for example. The psalmist walks with a joyful crowd at the

⁵ Ulrich Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness: The Wilderness Theme in the Second Gospel and its Basis in the Biblical Tradition*, SBT 39 (London: SCM, 1963), 97, develops this point, which he credits to a footnote in Martin Dibelius, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1959), 129.

⁶ C. Clifton Black, *Mark* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2011), comments: "Considered theologically, *the wilderness* is a multivalent term" (53).

⁷ Or at least it did in the past. The lower Jordan has been steadily drying up since the 1950s and 60s, when a series of controversial engineering projects began to divert the water above it on an industrial scale.

house of God, but then is isolated and assailed by the Jordan. “My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me” (42:6–7). The passage is an apt reminder not to let the affirmation spoken directly to Jesus overshadow the hardship he takes on by submitting to John’s baptism in those waters.⁸ The people come *en masse* from the south. Jesus comes alone from the north. For Mark, the power of God’s son emerges as he enters the wilderness alone, accepts the baptism proclaimed to the public, seemingly in public view, and returns alone to the wilderness for forty days. Mark’s account is spare, but it is not too much to say that, by accepting John’s baptism for the forgiveness of sins, he accepts it on behalf of the crowd.

Other Scriptures pertain to the events of Mark’s prologue, too, including Psalm 2 and Genesis 22. By receiving God’s sonship and Spirit, Jesus receives an inversion of the messianic pronouncement of Psalm 2. “You are my son” (2:7)—but declared so first in the depths of the Jordan, not up on Zion, driven out into the wilderness rather than installed on God’s holy mountain, and destined not to smash the plotting “peoples” (2:1) but to be broken and “perish in the way” (2:12). In Mark, the one who is addressed as “son” is also *ho agapētos*, “the Beloved” (Mk 1:11). Insofar as this designation recalls the Akedah (cf. Gen 22:2, 12, 16), there is here already something of death and resurrection. Mark’s prologue is brief, but Christ’s vocation there is not small.

The wilderness motif extends beyond Mark 1:1–15. Indeed, it seems to accompany Jesus even after his return to Galilee. In 1:35, by which time healings and exorcisms have already made him a local sensation, Jesus retreats for prayer before dawn “to a deserted place [*eis erēmon topon*].” Simon and the others come looking for him. They find him and say that everyone else is looking for him, too. Leaving the crowd behind, Jesus directs them to move on to other towns in the area. By 1:45, the commotion is such that Jesus is compelled to stay “out in desolate places [*exō ep’ erēmois topois*]” (the NRSV’s “out in the country” is unfortunate). The feeding of the five thousand takes place after people find

⁸ Mark 1:11 and Luke 3:22 have the divine pronouncement in the second person (“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased”), whereas Matt 3:17 has it in the third person (“This is my son...”) and John 1:32–34 presents it as public testimony. Black sees “no suggestion in Mark that anyone other than Jesus heard his heavenly acclamation” (Black, *Mark*, 59).

Jesus and the disciples at a desert retreat (6:31–32, 35). With understated significance, Jesus arranges them in groups on “green grass” (6:39) before blessing the loaves and fish. It is truly a wilderness miracle (cf. 8:4). To this we should add the sea crossings, since the sea is another danger zone that Jesus traverses and masters, as well as the mountain scenes, from “the mountain” (3:13) where Jesus calls the twelve, to the mountain where he prays alone before walking on water (6:46), to the mount of transfiguration (9:2), complete with appearances by two great mountain men, Moses and Elijah, and a variation on the divine proclamation over Jesus in the Jordan. In Mark, the wilderness is practically everywhere.

Jesus with the Wild Animals

In Matthew 4 and Luke 4 one can speak of a temptation narrative, but Mark recounts the episode in just one verse: “He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him” (1:13). Three things are reported without detail. Jesus is tempted by Satan, present with the wild animals, and cared for by the angels. Satan and the angels are clear enough; they are doing what one might expect. The animals, standing in the middle, present an old puzzle. Which animals are these, exactly? What purpose do they serve? Are they dangerous, neutral, or friendly? In what sense is Jesus “with” them? The clause, just four words long in Greek (*ēn meta tōn thēriōn*), does not provide enough information to answer such questions easily.

The obscurity of 1:13b provokes shrugs from the most cautious exegetes. Mark does not permit us to be too precise. We are told *that* Jesus was with the beasts, but not why. What does he do with them? Do they threaten him? Satanic activity in a wilderness setting, considered alongside other sources that link wild animals and demons, makes them seem likely to be fell beasts. Wilderness is the sphere of predators. Does Jesus make peace with them? If so, does peace have the character of a rebuke, like the silencing of wind and sea (4:39), or is it more tender, like the word spoken to Jairus’s daughter (5:34)? The phrasing (“with”) makes it seem unlikely that a curse has been spoken, as to the fig tree (11:14). Jesus is not obviously against them. However, in the encounter with the Gerasene demoniac who lurks “among the tombs and on the mountains” (5:5), Jesus is not distinguished for his prevention of animal cruelty. When unclean spirits beg him “not to send them out of the country” (5:10), they are allowed to possess a herd of unclean animals. The pigs plunge to their death in the sea. Does Jesus feed the beasts in 1:13, or arrange them in groups like the people on “green grass” (6:39)? Is anything spoken or done with the animals at all? We are simply not told. Nevertheless, given the

pointed brevity of Mark's prologue, the animals must be significant. Mark surely does not include them just to illustrate how far away Jesus got from civilization, as if he has gone on safari.

Surveying the exegetical options, Richard Bauckham recognizes that the wild animals are not neutral, but either dangerous or friendly.⁹ Either they are aligned with Satan's attack, or else, Satan having been overcome, a glimpse of Edenic paradise restored. He argues at some length in favor of seeing them brought to the side of the angels. Bauckham connects Mark 1:13 to an impressive range of early Jewish sources. For example, several passages from the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* state that the righteous will find their virtue confirmed when the devil flees from them, animals fear them, and angels support them (*T. Iss.* 7:7; *T. Naph.* 8:4–6; *T. Benj.* 3:4–5; 5:2). The parallels to Mark 1:13 are striking. Or again, Jesus there seems to secure what is spoken of by Eliphaz, in words of false comfort to Job: "For you shall be in league with the stones of the field, and the wild animals shall be at peace with you" (Job 5:23). Perhaps the most significant parallel belongs to the prophet invoked in Mark 1:2–3. Isaiah 11, after describing a spirit-filled figure from the root of Jesse (vv. 1–5), envisions the wolf living with the lamb, and young children with serpents: "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (v. 9). The vision is recapitulated in Isa 65:25. According to Bauckham, Mark has Jesus inaugurate the peaceable kingdom.

Bauckham's ecological vision for exegesis appeals on many levels, but his reading Mark 1:13 has two liabilities. First, it minimizes contrary evidence from relevant sources. Animals in *T. 12 Patr.* tremble in fear or are subdued before the righteous. They are hardly restored to Eden. And Eliphaz's words to Job are ambiguous because they ring hollow. Isaiah's agrarian vision of peace, too, is equivocal. The prophet speaks of the coming of the day of the Lord in terms at least as bleak as beatific. "Streams" are "turned into pitch," and "soil into sulfur" (34:9). The void of uncreation returns, and wild animals take over abandoned palaces. "Wildcats shall meet with hyenas, goat-demons shall call to each other; there too Lilith shall repose, and find a place to rest" (34:14; cf. 13:21). Wasteland prevails. Animals and demons actively displace the rest promised to Israel. Comfort will indeed come to Zion and "all her waste places," and the Lord "will make her wilderness like Eden" (51:3), but the

⁹ Richard Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 113–16.

Lord's power to save is predicated on an ability to make and unmake the world. "With a mere rebuke I dry up the sea, and turn rivers into desert" (50:2). In the Book of Isaiah, weal and woe are mixed from first to last. Eden remains on the horizon, and it promises to remain there as long as zoos have bars.¹⁰

Second, Bauckham discounts Mark's geography. He claims that Jesus "establishes [messianic peace with wild animals] only representatively, in his own person, and so the objection that a restoration of paradise should not be located in the wilderness is beside the point."¹¹ As we have seen, however, the wilderness is very much to the point. Its prevalence makes it hard to claim that the wild animals "are enemies of whom Jesus makes friends."¹² The stilling of the storm and the cursing of the figs are enough to show how misaligned the "natural" world remains after the temptation event, and how much spiritual conflict persists. It oversteps the evidence to say that "Jesus in the wilderness wins the fundamental victory over satanic temptation which he can then carry through against the activity of Satan's minions in the human world later in the Gospel."¹³ In contrast to Matthew 4:11 and Luke 4:13, Mark reports no end to the event. Contests with and about spirits carry over into the public teaching ministry (Mark 1:27–27, 32–34, 39; 3:11, 22–30). As Ulrich Mauser observes in an older study that remains topical, "a temptation in the sense of a test is not reported in Mark... In the prologue, the Evangelist simply sets the stage—Jesus and Satan are going to be the main actors in the commencing drama and their encounter alone is the fact emphasized in 1:13."¹⁴ Thus there is less victory in this verse than Bauckham supposes. It signals the beginning of conflict with spiritual forces in wilderness settings, which is characteristic of the entire Gospel.

¹⁰ Credit for this aphorism belongs to Christopher Seitz. More formally, see his comments in *Isaiah 1–39, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 105: "The proclamation of chapter 11 speaks of an age yet to come, when a king shall rule with a 'spirit of wisdom and understanding' (11:2), when 'the wolf shall live with the lamb' (11:6), and when the dispersed of Israel are finally gathered (11:12). It is in precisely this spirit that both church and synagogue have looked to Isaiah as the prophet who spoke a word of salvation to the future."

¹¹ Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures*, 130.

¹² Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures*, 117.

¹³ Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures*, 117.

¹⁴ Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 129–30.

Wild Animals in Gethsemane

What are the wild animals, then? Mauser connects the initial temptation beyond the Jordan to its culmination in Gethsemane (14:38), which “displays an understanding of temptation as the time and the realm in which Satan reigns.”¹⁵ He explains:

Jesus’ way from the beginning of his ministry to Gethsemane is depicted in the Second Gospel as an uninterrupted confrontation with the devil’s might. His way is, indeed, a way of temptation and the statement of the prologue is verified—he is driven by the spirit into the wilderness, tempted by Satan. This whole way is characterized by Christ’s victory over evil, but at the end the confrontation assumes a deadly aspect. The hour has come when the Son of man falls into the hands of sinners and is thus handed over to the power of evil, when his crucifixion seems to be triumphant over him. The way through the desert seems to come to an end in a grave, as did the march of the rebellious Israel in the wilderness.¹⁶

This conclusion has good textual support. Just as Jesus “tempted [*peirazomenos*] by Satan” (1:13), he urges the disciples in his hour of need to wake “and pray that you may not come into the time of trial [*eis peirasmon*],” or, perhaps better, “into temptation” (14:38). Mauser does not extend this insight to the riddle of the animals, which he regards as inscrutable. Yet the link between temptation at the beginning and end of Mark suggests a plausible reading of Mark 1:13b.

What are the wild animals who are caught with Jesus between Satan and the angels? They are figures of the disciples in Gethsemane who cannot keep awake. Jesus and those “with him” (14:33) are at risk of spiritual defeat. The grave threat calls for prayer (cf. 1:35; 6:46; 9:29), but they are in a torpor. They fail to wait on him as the angels do. In Gethsemane, Jesus withdraws a step further to plead with the Father for another way (14:35), using words that echo the initial descent of and expulsion by the Spirit: “the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (14:38). But the way is fixed as the deadly one prepared by John the Baptist. Jesus must be “handed over.” This is the wild and dangerous Gospel in which an ear is cut off but not healed (cf. Luke 22:51), and the assailant is not reprimanded for resorting to violence (so Matt 26:52–54) or obstructing God’s mission (so John 18:11). At the hour of trial, all the disciples run away in terror, including “a certain young man [*neaniskos*]”

¹⁵ Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 129.

¹⁶ Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness*, 132.

stripped naked (14:51–52). They spook and flee like wild animals.

Rare indeed are the times when Mark depicts people at peace and in their right minds.¹⁷ When Jesus silences storms and demons, observers typically respond with dismay. “Why are you afraid?” Jesus asks the disciples on the boat. Residents from around Gerasa beg him to leave. In the Gospel’s shorter ending, infamously, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome respond much as those residents do when they see the formerly possessed tomb resident “clothed and in his right mind” (5:15). At the end, the women likewise encounter “a young man [*neaniskon*], dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed” (16:6). Presumably this is the same one who dropped his tunic in Gethsemane. He is sitting not just among the tombs but in one. He tells the women that Jesus is going ahead toward Galilee, as promised (14:28), but they flee in silence (16:7–8).

This is not to say that the disciples of Jesus are, in Mark, witless. Rather, they are creatures tossed between powerful forces in conflict. That conflict spans the entire Gospel: the wilderness, the Jordan, the crowds, the baptism, the temptation, the confrontation with demons and disease, the disputes with religious leaders, the sea crossings, the stilling of the storm, the demoniac, the mountains, the tombs, the rebuke of Peter as Satan, the rebuke of a fruitless fig tree, and so on to Gethsemane, the midnight arrest, the chain of custody through handing over, the cross, and the tomb of Jesus itself—all these elements speak to a turbulent world in which spiritual wilderness predominates. Yet the young man sitting in the empty tomb, arrayed like a martyr, is no longer running wild. He tells the women that the good news is still in motion as Jesus returns to the region from which he came, where now “he is going ahead of you” (16:7). Having passed through death on the way back to Galilee, the Son of God is still in the vanguard, at war with forces opposed to God’s reign.

Conclusion

Augustine delights in the explication of Christian truth through allegory. He finds it superior, for himself and his audience, to contemplate the church as it “is addressed and praised like a beautiful woman” in the Song of Solomon instead of in the abstract. Probably not many modern

¹⁷ In contrast to the before and after states of the demoniac of the tombs (Mark 5:2; 5:15) and that “certain young man” (14:51; 16:5), Peter and other disciples persist in stupefaction from Caesarea Philippi (8:33) and the mount of transfiguration (9:6) to the Mount of Olives (14:27–31) and Gethsemane (14:40).

readers will experience the same reflexive “pleasure to contemplate holy men when [they] see them as the teeth of the church tearing away men from their errors and transferring them into its body, breaking down their rawness by biting and chewing.”¹⁸ One does not have to go as far as Augustine, however, to recognize that something like allegory belongs to the world of Scripture. To say that the animals in the wilderness of Mark 1:13 are, in figure, the languorous disciples in Gethsemane, is not to enter the feral wilds of casual interpretive speculation. Animal allegories are known in early Jewish literature: witness the Animal Apocalypse of 1 Enoch. Moreover, as I have argued, disciples bewildered by Satan are more closely related to Mark’s vision of the cosmos than Isaiah’s vision of a child playing near an asp. The figural reading is not only possible but, on balance, more plausible than the ecological one advanced by Bauckham. Interpreters like Augustine might well say that *both* readings are welcome if they edify the church. I would gladly concede the point. If it were allowed, I would still contend that seeing the animals as disciples is more “literal” in the sense that it is more organically related to the Gospel of Mark. Jesus could then be said to abide with the wild animals as sign of Eden’s restoration in anagogical sense.¹⁹ When using clearer texts to illuminate obscure ones, multiple possibilities emerge. Careful readers will want to discriminate between them, but they should not despair if no single meaning carries the day. Augustine’s counsel about obscurities in the Bible is prudent: seen rightly, they can spur intellectual and spiritual renewal by curbing lethargy.

¹⁸ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 33 (Book II.11–12).

¹⁹ Intriguingly, Bauckham’s reading closely resembles one advanced by Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*, trans. Donald H. Madvig (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 98–99. For Goppelt, Mark 1:13 is part of an Adam-Christ typology whereby paradise is restored eschatologically. Like Bauckham, he sees that “Christ is with the wild beasts after overcoming temptation” (98). In contrast, I follow Mauser’s point that the temptation in Mark does not end in the prologue but culminates in Gethsemane.

INTERCULTURAL BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION FOR INTERCULTURAL PREACHING

By HyeRan Kim-Cragg

Introduction

The United Church of Canada (UCC) has underscored the importance of Scripture and its interpretation as a touchstone for its theology and ethics throughout its history. Scripture and its interpretation remain central for intercultural preaching as well. This article first revisits the 1992 report of the General Council of the UCC on the interpretation of the Bible, and then offers an operative definition of “intercultural” to set the groundwork for a discussion on intercultural biblical interpretation for intercultural preaching as a particular form of ministry within the United Church. The article uses this groundwork to introduce a tripartite lens useful for the intercultural interpretation of the Bible. Use of the Behind, Between, and Before approaches, the so-called “3B” hermeneutical principle will be exemplified with a sermon so that readers can get a sense of how intercultural preaching can be done. As a conclusion, the article will consider priorities to guide intercultural interpretation and preaching into the future. It will circle back to the notion of “culture” in “intercultural” and explore its etymological roots in the concept of cultivation. A further task is derived from this exploration for intercultural preaching, namely the call to address the environmental crisis as one of the most urgent tasks intersecting with the ministry of intercultural biblical interpretation and preaching.

The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture (AIS): A Historical and Contextual Review

Exactly 30 years ago, in 1992, the General Council of The United Church of Canada received and endorsed a report that supports the centrality and authority of Scripture. The Report stated the following:

- 1) God’s historic self-revelation in Jesus Christ is crucial in establishing what has legitimate authority in Christian community;
- 2) Legitimate authority, in every case, enhances community of the whole created earth;
- 3) The Word of God, in every case, is larger than the text of the Bible¹

¹ *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture: A Statement of The United Church of Canada* (Toronto: The United Church Publishing House, 1992), iv.

The Report provides presuppositions and principles of how Scripture is viewed when interpreting it for the United Church people. For Christians in general and reformed Christians in particular, Scripture is regarded as the most authoritative text when it comes to God's revelation. In the Methodist tradition, Scripture is not the only source of truth. Although it is the primary one, it is joined by tradition, reason and experience, three other sources that serve as aids in the interpretation of Scripture.² The third statement, "The Word of God, in every case, is larger than the text of the Bible," demands special attention for the purpose of this article. It distinguishes the Word of God from words in the Bible. It cautions against biblical literalist positions and contests the infallibility of the Bible. This caution is noteworthy when we look at the context out of which this report was presented. The initial report was included in the 1988 General Council but unintentionally excluded (buried/absorbed) by the heated debate surrounding the topic of human sexuality and the vote on whether sexual orientation was a barrier to ordination.³ The AIS report drew much attention in the subsequent years, however, in part because of the General Council's decision taken in 1988. While many enthusiastically endorsed the report, not everyone was happy about it. The National Alliance of Covenanting Congregations (NACC), for example, made an official statement, expressing the view that "the document [is] not only lacking but destructive in matters that are central to our faith."⁴ Both its vigorous endorsement and rejection indicate the importance of this topic for people in The United Church of Canada. Those who are keenly aware how the Bible's authoritative place in the life of the church has been used to condemn sexual minority and justify various forms of oppressions (i. e., slavery and women), nonetheless agree that the Bible is authoritative. In short, biblical interpretation warrants knowledgeable and spiritual scrutiny and considered contextual analysis.

The Term, "intercultural"

The 2006 General Council again made a landmark decision when it voted to become an "intercultural" church. "Intercultural" was defined by the

² *Moving Toward Full Inclusion: Sexual Orientation in The United Church of Canada* (Toronto: The United Church of Canada, 2010), 8.

³ *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture*, 7.

⁴ HyeRan Kim-Cragg and Don Schweitzer, *The Authority and Interpretation of Scripture in The United Church of Canada: An Intercultural Adventure Part II* (Daejeon: Daejangan, 2016), 114.

United Church at that time to mean, “living together with a respectful awareness of each other’s differences.” The journey to arrive at this state of being was “by examining ourselves, building relationships, and distributing power fairly.”⁵ Underscoring the last point on distributing power, intercultural biblical interpretation is an interpretation that pays attention to the power differentials among and between different cultural groups. These power differentials are often established and perpetuated as a part of a postcolonial reality. Attention to power differentials for the sake of power-sharing is essential to any biblical interpretation because this postcolonial reality is also prevalent in the Bible. In fact, as the preacher Jeremiah Wright Jr, explained, “In biblical history, there’s not one word written between Genesis and Revelation that was not written under one of six different kinds of oppression.”⁶ These six oppressions can be identified as imperial powers: Egyptian, Assyrian, Persian, Babylon, Greek, and Roman. No twenty-first-century preacher who meditates on biblical texts every week for the sake of sharing the good news of the Gospel can escape the interplay between ancient cultures and empires embedded in these texts. That is also why, as I have said elsewhere, “every preacher who mounts the pulpit, or faces a congregation, or seeks to share in any venue the Word of God in the twenty-first century needs to be a postcolonial preacher.”⁷ Becoming an intercultural preacher and becoming a postcolonial preacher are closely related.

The hermeneutical tools necessary to confront issues of power related to empire and the residual effects of colonialism can be found in the so-called “3B, Behind, Between and Before”⁸ method of biblical interpretation. The 3 B interpretive tool is distinctive. Each B refers to a particular way to interpret the Bible. Yet, they do not exist in isolation. In fact, they often intermesh with one another in the actual process of interpretations. Preachers may use one B occasionally but often employ all three Bs in meditating on the given text and crafting a sermon. However, for the sake of clarity, we will examine each B and demonstrate with sermon examples. Biblical interpretation is as important to preaching as

⁵ <https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/being-community/intercultural-ministries/vision-becoming-intercultural-church>, accessed November 29, 2021.

⁶ Transcript, “Reverend Wright at the National Press Club,” *New York Times* April 28, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/28/us/politics/28text-wright.html>, accessed November 29, 2021.

⁷ HyeRan Kim-Cragg, *Postcolonial Preaching: Creating a Ripple Effect* (Lanham: Lexington, 2021), 106.

⁸ Kim-Cragg, *Postcolonial Preaching*, 112 and see chapter 6 on “Exegesis.”

the match is to a candle. Preaching without exegeting Scripture is like thinking that one can light a candle without the match. Analogically speaking, the 3B method reveals the matches that help to spark an intercultural interpretive flame.

3B—Behind, Between, and Before Intercultural Biblical Interpretation for Intercultural Preaching

Behind

The canonized Bible was written in the context of six different ancient Empires, from Egypt, to Assyria, to Babylon, to Persia, to Greece to Rome. Appreciating this imperial reality involves probing the *behind the text* to understand the impact of the Empire upon the story. This *behind* study, engaging the historical reality behind the Bible, its authorship, the author's intention, and its political context requires the preacher to consult various commentaries in order to educate and communicate this background reality to the gathered assembly.

Many biblical scholars who wrote commentaries have used historical criticism to draw the *behind* stuff out. To some extent, they are like archeologists, digging to find evidence that may help contemporary readers to obtain the crucial knowledge about the time and the place where the given text is written. Like archaeologists, preachers need to understand the cultural world behind the text but then take the extra step of connecting that culture with the cultural world of today. Don Wardlaw makes this point eloquently: "To speak in another's tongue [the voice of the preacher] is to be given the capacity to identify closely with the other person [biblical figures or biblical authors] and to find the sensitivity to be open to the other person's need."⁹ This capacity to speak in another's tongue is found in an inter-pathic reading, where biblical figures become alive through the voice of the preacher, as they are identified with people in our lives today. Intercultural interpretation requires of us as preachers who try to fully experience the world of the Bible, especially its contexts of empire so that we can speak to that context today.

In collaboration with a colleague whose expertise is the Hebrew Bible, I have creatively explored twelve biblical stories with an eye to the political context behind the biblical text. In these explorations we allowed

⁹ Don Wardlaw, "Preaching as the Interface of Two Social Worlds: The Congregation as Corporate Agent in the Act of Preaching," in *Preaching as a Social Act: Theology and Practice*, edited by Arthur Van Seters (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 83 (55-93).

twelve biblical figures to tell their story to us today so that we can closely appreciate the reality of migration and the inter-cultural settings in which they lived. These biblical figures included Hagar, Tamar, Gershom (Moses and Zipporah's son), Rahab, Ruth and Naomi, Servant Girl in Naaman's healing story, an Elderly Woman as a fictional character in the book of Jonah, the Family of Jesus, the Syrophoenician Woman, the Woman from Samaria in John 4, and Priscilla and Lydia in Acts.¹⁰ With the help of the expertise of the Hebrew Bible scholar, I was surprised at the degree to which I could begin to feel what we might call the colonial or postcolonial reality of our society today.

Womanist preacher Ella Pearson Mitchell also employs such an approach in her sermon "Were You There?" In this sermon she becomes Joanna from Matthew 21:6-11 and 27:19-26. The entire sermon is a monologue, a first-person narrative. As far as the biblical interpretation is concerned, Mitchell spends time describing the customs and cultures of that biblical time, drawing the *behind* stuff out, yet at the same time, she effortlessly moves from the biblical story to the contemporary story so that the hearers, people in the pew, encounter the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem as if it was unfolding in front of their eyes. In this regard, the retelling of a biblical narrative can help the preacher and the congregation participate in God's salvific drama.¹¹

Between

Biblical interpretation of the *between* for intercultural preaching largely has to do with examining the language of the Bible in a literary sense: 1) it draws insights from the original texts; 2) it compares the original text with the English translation; 3) it taps into wisdom of languages other than English that may shed light on theological meanings. Those preachers who know the original languages of the Bible often check certain terms. Some preachers take time to check the various versions of the English translation of these original texts and inquire if these languages which are often metaphoric and analogical embed particular meanings and shed light on them. This is what is involved in the *between* reading, and this approach can be very useful for raising and discussing intercultural topics.

¹⁰ HyeRan Kim-Cragg and Eunyong Choi, *The Encounters: Retelling the Bible from Migration and Intercultural Perspectives* (Daegjeon: Daeganggan, 2013). See Namjoong Kim's book review in *Homiletic* 40:1 (2015): 66-67.

¹¹ Ella Pearson Mitchell, "Sermon as Portrayal of a Biblical Character," in *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler*, Ron Allen, ed (St. Louis: Chalice, 1998), 124-130.

Anthony Bailey's sermon is the case in point. The text for his sermon is Hebrews 10: 19-25. He preached this sermon at the Lester Randall Preaching Fellowship Conference in Toronto, November, 2015.¹² Bailey probed the meaning of the word, "provoke," focusing on verse 24, "And let us consider how to *provoke* one another to love and good deeds." Bailey shifts the understanding of provoking others from something negative to something positive. Here he said, "provoking" others is "a particular way of calling people and calling the community to love and do good deeds, because they don't come naturally." Bailey provokes fellow preachers (conference participants, most of whom are preachers) asking these questions: "What is the fear that has gripped us so that we would not speak in provocative ways to love and good deeds? What are we shy of? Our retirement, our pension?"

Those preachers who have a grasp of multiple languages, especially less dominant languages, may take advantage of the ability to tap into these languages to communicate the Gospel message better. My own sermon, preached at a United Church congregation to mark the Asian Heritage month in May 2020 serves as an example.¹³ In that sermon, I introduced a Korean and Chinese idiom "가화만사성 家和萬事成" (Gahwamahmsasung), meaning "all will be well when family is well" that underscores the primary importance of "family" in East Asian contexts. I delivered the message of cultivating familial relationships with all of creation by lifting up this idiom compared with the text in John chapter 14. I employed the *between* interpretation here in order to shed light on the implication of being "orphaned" in the context of family when Jesus said, "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you" (John 14: 18). The Gospel of John (14: 15-21) refers to Jesus as the vine and his hearers as his branches which conjure up an image of the family tree, a bonded relationship of the realm of God. I said, "The Gospel of John speaks a language akin to the Confucian language of family. I can imagine John and Confucius over tea swapping ideas in conversation. John telling Confucius that his teacher, Jesus, called God *Abba*, an intimate father, parental figure, whose place as the progenitor of the whole family reaches us that we are all relations."

Before

The focus on what lies *before* of intercultural biblical interpretation for intercultural preaching highlights the importance of the readers. It has to

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fiakQxJFBxo&t=1470s>.

¹³ Kim-Cragg, *Postcolonial Preaching*, 99-102.

do not so much with what the Bible says as what the Bible means to those who are reading and hearing it. Attention to contemporary lived contexts takes priority in this interpretation. Current issues that impact readers and people in the pew become a central framework out of which the Bible is interpreted. The reader-response criticism in biblical studies can aid this *before* interpretation. The Bible needs to be interpreted in dialogue with the context where the stories, the histories, the traditions, language, and the identifies of the reader matter.¹⁴

The *before* interpretation of the Bible for intercultural preaching honors and recognizes the agency of those whose voices are historically silenced and suppressed. Intercultural ministry must involve addressing the power differentials among and between different cultural groups, as mentioned above. There are different ways to mark the agency of the readers which requires that the *before* reading be combined with the *behind* and *between* readings.

One of the postcolonial biblical readings conducive to intercultural biblical interpretation is the contrapuntal reading strategy suggested by the late Edward Said. He was a renowned literary critic and pianist and borrowed the term “contrapuntal” from music theory.”¹⁵ Contrapuntal reading strategy aims to crack open both the surface meaning of a text and the veiled colonial context. Said engages Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814) which features a family whose wealth derives from a sugar plantation in Antigua. A contrapuntal reading brings to consciousness what is happening in the faraway colonies as necessary context for interpreting the story.¹⁶ Integral to this reading method includes a reading that juxtaposes two scriptural texts and bringing the two into conversation. It also juxtaposes two interpretations, the familiar and the unfamiliar, on a particular text so that the agency of the readers and the wisdom out of their lived experiences are affirmed.¹⁷

The sermon of Pablo Jiménez, a pioneer in postcolonial preaching and intercultural preaching from Latinx cultural perspectives may be a good example. The text he uses is Matthew 13: 45-46 on the parable of the kingdom of heaven. To illuminate this text, Jiménez juxtaposes it with another parable, the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15. He does so in order to contest the familiar interpretation of God as the shepherd who

¹⁴ Hans G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1989).

¹⁵ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 51.

¹⁶ Kim-Cragg, *Postcolonial Preaching*, 112.

¹⁷ Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon, “Scripture and Scriptures in Worship Space,” *Liturgy: Postcolonial Perspectives* 34: 2: (2019): 16 (12-21).

rescues his flock every time they stray. He raises questions regarding who the shepherd was in the world of the Bible. Jiménez writes, “We must bear in mind that most shepherds were not the owners of the sheep.”¹⁸ Jiménez’s listeners are landless peasants. He thus reveals the hidden issue that is intermeshed in the gospel story’s entangled colonial and master-slave relationships behind the Bible as much as before the readers.

Contrapuntal reading strategy as a *before* biblical interpretation paradoxically helps readers and preachers expose what is hidden. What is unsaid speaks volumes. It encourages readers and preachers to search for people and things that are overlooked. Most of all it empowers them to witness how God is at work. Ironically, God’s presence is often found in God’s absence. To elaborate on this, it may be useful to take another sermon example. I was a guest preacher in May 2018 for the last Annual Gathering Meeting (AGM) of the Saskatchewan Conference of The United Church of Canada before the conference was dissolved and the church transitioned to a Regional Council structure. The gathering occurred in the Battlefords, where two years earlier a white farmer by the name of Gerald Stanley had shot and killed Colten Boushie, a young Cree man. Three months before the AGM, on February 9, 2018, Stanley was acquitted on the charge of murder. To the delegates to the AGM as readers of the text, this very place called in a big way for the *before* interpretation. The hearts of many in attendance had been shaken and disturbed by this brutal colonial history and its unjust reality in the present. The text used for this sermon was from Luke 19, the story of Zacchaeus. My interpretation focused on the repentance of Zacchaeus, and the power of a willing heart guided by the grace of God, a grace which is patient, never despairing, judging or forcing. The sermon, at the end, zooms in on the sycamore fig tree in the story, the tree that Zacchaeus climbed in order to encounter Jesus. This tree plays an important role in the story. Without it the amazing encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus might have not been possible. Most readers and preachers wearing the anthropocentric lens, however, would not have noticed it. I asked, “Is it possible to see and imagine the Grace of God in the tree?... [The Sycamore fig tree] is a large evergreen tree with large, low branches. It is a perfect tree to climb for short people like Zacchaeus. This tree also produces figs multiple times a year. It is a generous tree: in the time of Jesus, the poor and the colonized would have come and eaten from the tree when they couldn’t find anything else.... God is often found in the unexpected places and comes to us at an unplanned

¹⁸ Justo Gonzalez and Pablo Jiménez, *Pulpito: An Introduction to Hispanic Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 113.

Kairos time. Like the sycamore fig tree, God's presence is evergreen, and everlasting. God's self-giving love bears fruit that is accessible, generous, merciful, and just."¹⁹

A Final Probing instead of a Conclusion

The last sermon example turns our attention to non-human kin, and our lack of attention to the same in much of our preaching. There is an urgent need to interpret the Bible beyond anthropocentrism. Today we are being called to turn to a God whose voice and actions are seen and heard in the non-human world. Tackling climate crisis should be an essential part of any intercultural biblical interpretation for intercultural preaching. A closer look at the meaning of the word "culture" shows how these two are inter-related.

Postcolonial scholar Robert Young has uncovered some of the colonial assumptions embedded with the English word "culture" which comes from the Latin words, *cultura* and *colere*.²⁰ These Latin words are associated with farming, which is most obviously reflected in the English word, "agriculture." Agriculture is a combined word, "agri" meaning "a field" with "culture, meaning "tending." Taken together, agriculture means "tending the field for crops." By the 18th century, the word "culture" was closely connected with the idea of civilization and settler colonialism. It implied taking the land (of the indigenous people far away) to grow crops and raise animals. At the same time, culture became associated with the urban life in relation to education and class. A kind of cultural hierarchy was established as the project of national standard education was implemented. This implementation reached out to various British colonies including Canada where the residential school system separated indigenous children from their families and attempted to wipe out their distinctive language and culture.²¹ Yet, one should note that not all aspects of the notion of culture are negative and oppressive. In fact, the word "cultivate" derived from the "culture" implies otherwise. While it is clearly a farming language it suggests caring, and collaborating, learning, and growing in mutually respectful ways. There is even a theological and liturgical dimension with this word. To explore this dimension, we need to go beyond English and tap into such language as Spanish, French, and Italian. The term "culture" in these three European languages (*El culto, le*

¹⁹ Kim-Cragg, *Postcolonial Preaching*, 62-63.

²⁰ Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), 29-89.

²¹ Young, *Colonial Desire*, 52.

culte, and *il culto*) refers to worship and relates to cultivation of the earth and the nurturing relationships, which applies well to the way in which worship forms faith, fosters community, and grows relationships with God who is present in creation.²²

Moving forward to live into the second decade of the 21st century, what is needed to advance intercultural biblical interpretation for intercultural preaching is to embrace boldly non-anthropocentric ecologically conscious biblical interpretation which is directly related to decolonizing biblical interpretation and distributing power. In this difficult endeavor, a rediscovery and a nuanced appreciation of the term “cultivate” may be necessary as it assumes humility and promotes human’s symbiotic and interdependent relationships with nature, and our non-human kin.

²² Ruth Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 4.

A WOMANIST ACTIVIST APPROACH TO BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND JUSTICE

By Mitzi J. Smith

As a collection of ancient texts written within or by contextualized communities and/or individuals, addressed to individuals and communities for specific reasons, and/or thousands of years divorced from contemporary readers/interpreters, the Bible does not simply speak; it is translated or interpreted by flesh-and-blood readers. Contemporary readers cannot and should not make simple one-to-one correlations between translations-interpretations of biblical (con)texts and contemporary (con)texts. We can analyze, compare, contrast, and place ancient and contemporary (con)texts in critical dialogue while interrogating both. For oppressed individuals and communities, this respect for distance (historical and cultural), dialogue, and critical interrogation is crucial. Unless readers engage in critical interpretative, contextual, and dialogical work, we will likely create and reinscribe violence and burdensome and problematic readings, theologies, and expectations upon an already physically, socially, economically, theologically violated peoples. Most biblical texts, especially the New Testament documents, were written from elite male perspectives and not from the perspective of the least/vulnerable in Jewish and Greco-Roman societies, namely the poor and enslaved women, children, and men. We must read in ways that do not sacralize or normalize poverty, violence, and enslavement or reinscribe sexism, queerphobia, classism, ageism, ableism, xenophobia, racism, including anti-Jews rhetoric, and other forms of oppression. Thus, I choose, as a Black woman, to center and/or use contemporary justice issues and Black women's experiences, traditions, artifacts, concerns, epistemologies, and wisdom as a framework, dialogical partner, and/or starting point for doing biblical interpretation. As womanist Hebrew Bible scholar Renita Weems writes, we do not start with the biblical texts, "[r]ather, [we] begin with African American women's will to survive and thrive as human beings and as the female half of a race of people who live a threatened existence."¹

My expertise is close critical and contextual readings of biblical texts with an emphasis on justice. I interpret biblical texts from my cultural

¹ Weems, Renita J., "Re-Reading for Liberation: African American Women and the Bible," in *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Hermeneutical Reader*, ed. Mitzi J. Smith (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015); reprinted with permission from *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, Sylvia Schroer and Sophia Bietenhard, eds. London: T&T Clark, 2003. Kindle edition.

context as an African American woman. Of course, I do so also with attention to the historical and literary contexts of the ancient texts. I create a sustained dialogue between contemporary justice issues and the ancient texts and their contexts. I self-identify as a womanist biblical scholar, which also means I build upon the work of womanist and Black feminists who have preceded me. It is the labor our souls must do, as the late Dr. Katie Cannon famously stated. We bring to the interpretive task our community/people, our traditions, cultures, epistemologies, a shared history and experiences of racism, classism, sexism, and so forth, as well as the lived realities of our individual lives. Significant aspects of our common experiences and (pre)history are separation from the motherland of Africa, racism, enslavement, liberation from enslavement and the progeny of our historical enslavement and multiple manifestations of racism, including disproportionate unemployment, poverty, criminalization and the attendant school to prison pipeline and mass incarceration. Weems asserts that “reading the Bible for liberation is grounded in the acknowledgement and respect for the otherness of those whose otherness is silenced and marginalized by those in power.”² In America, we have been eyewitnesses of (through cell phone videos and bodycams) and/or experienced violence against Black people in the streets, in their neighborhoods, in parks, at public polls, on the grounds of educational institutions where they are enrolled or teach, in the apartment buildings where they live, in the living room while watching tv, while peacefully protesting the murder of other black people, sitting in their cars, standing on the street corner selling cigarettes, sitting in a secondary school classroom, or barbecuing in the back yard. As Weems states “we cannot unknow what we now know about police killings of black women and men, the rise of white supremacy, etc. There is no return to a precritical period of reflecting on the discipline, the Bible, and its use in the hands of extremists. We have the responsibility to think and teach better than we have been trained.”³

I was not trained as a seminary student or as biblical scholar to center my own experiences, justice, or the Black community and decenter ancient texts while doing biblical interpretation. I found my voice and particular womanist approach while I was teaching at Ashland Theological Seminary’s Detroit campus, where I taught for a little over thirteen years.

² Weems, “Re-Reading for Liberation,” 45.

³ Renita J. Weems, “‘To Think Better than We Were Taught’: Thirty Years Later,” in *Bitter the Chastening Rod*, eds. Mitzi J. Smith, Angela N. Parker, Ericka Hill Dunbar (Lanham, MD: Fortress Academic, 2022), 274.

When we complete our doctoral degrees and land our first teaching opportunity, we often teach the way we have been trained. It took me a few years to (re)discover how important justice is to me and the Black community. I could not responsibly do biblical interpretation and claim that God still speaks and cares about the vulnerable among us while marginalizing their oppression and violence in the world and ignoring cruelty and violence in the biblical text, and teaching students to do likewise. We are primarily trained to read biblical texts to unearth the historical truth or truths; any contemporary concerns and relevance are secondary and tangential. But God is a living God who continues to speak in the present to and through living readers and still intervenes to disrupt injustice through prophetic interpreters and interpretations of fallible human beings. As Brian Blount argues, God has not spoken a final word because “a last word is necessarily a dead word. It stops listening. It stops learning. It stops living!”⁴ Further, interpreting biblical texts should not be reduced to participation in an “archaeological dig.”⁵ I have argued that “[t]o expect communities most impacted by social injustice to ignore their oppressions in the process of interpretation places a greater and often unbearable burden on them as readers of sacred texts . . . [and] their voices are silenced and marginalized and [they] are often unwittingly taught to accept the imposed silence as a sacred obligation and sacrifice that God requires.”⁶

Reading or interpreting as elite ancient men and women or as elite privileged dominant white men or women, discourages, even forbids, critique of patriarchal, androcentric, ethnocentric privilege, dominance, violence, and injustices embedded in sacred texts and as the fabric from which images of God are constructed. As I previously stated “[s]acred narratives written and interpreted from the perspective of the winners have the power to further oppress and police the marginalized, minoritized and/or subordinated. . . and to persuade the latter to think and behave in ways that do not serve the interests of justice, equity, peace, and love in the earth.”⁷ Dissenters and disrupters of violent and oppressive sacred texts and contexts (e.g., Frederick Douglass, Nancy Ambrose, James Baldwin)

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, William C. Placher and Brian K. Blount, *Struggling with Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2022), 56.

⁵ Brueggemann, Placher and Blount, *Struggling with Scripture*, 56.

⁶ Mitzi J. Smith, *Womanist Sass and Talk Back: Social (In)Justice, Intersectionality, and Biblical Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 2.

⁷ Smith, *Womanist Sass*, 4–5.

necessarily exercised a healthy sacred suspicion of biblical texts and readings of biblical texts to free their minds, feet and hands from enslavement and for resistance, protest, and a quality of life. They were not simply recipients of deceitful propaganda, pre-masticated knowledge, and deleterious readings meant to persuade and cajole them into a stupor of hopelessness and resignation. Black people, the poor, the violated, the oppressed, the marginalized, and collaborators for freedom cannot afford to read or interpret biblical texts detached from their own lived realities, including the systems, structures, and policies that create and maintain the precarity of their existence.

Thus, my womanist hermeneutic privileges the injustices, voices, histories, experiences, epistemologies (ways of knowing or knowledge production), wisdom, and traditions of Black women and our communities for and while doing biblical interpretation. Our lived realities, experiences, improvisational skills, resources, and resourcefulness fuel the interpretative task. With our God-given curiosity, inquisitiveness, suspicious, and dis-ease with injustice, we interrogate and struggle with the Bible and the God re-presented in it and who exists beyond it. Enslavers deployed the biblical text as God's Word to support evil practices and as fodder for ideologies supporting the dehumanization and murder of Black peoples. Suspicious of the 'Word of God' that the enslavers and their intermediaries taught and preached because of a foundational cultural belief in a Supreme Being by multiple names, including Oladumare and Allah, who created all peoples equal, many of our African ancestors rejected certain biblical texts (e.g., Pauline letters) or the entire Bible, while others re-interpreted them from the perspective of God who created all humans equal and who is a liberator. Our bodies—our physiognomy, skin, hair, rituals and other religious expression, motherland, and mother-tongues—have been demonized and stigmatized to justify enslavement and post-emancipation systematic individual and state sanctioned violence. Amidst re-emergent attempts to revise the past and to whitewash the present, we cannot do interpretation or church without conscientization, critique of sacred texts that ignore or support violence, and a call to do justice, so that our words reflect and empower, and our actions coincide with a God who created and sustains a Universe that bends toward justice.

It is not enough to believe that God stands with or at the side of the oppressed. God has skin/flesh in the game. Thus, I take seriously Mary's self-identification as a *δοῦλη* (an enslaved female) in the birth narratives of the Gospel of Luke. Enslaved women birth enslaved infants,

not free born babies.⁸ From this perspective, Mary's son, God's beloved, Jesus was born an enslaved male and navigated life in stigmatized flesh from birth to crucifixion.⁹ Jesus lived a precarious existence always under the threat of violence and oppression, and eventually dying a death reserved primarily for the criminalized and enslaved, by crucifixion.¹⁰ It matters who interprets or translates sacred texts. The interpreter chooses what to prioritize, how to translate and when to translate (e.g., *δούλος/δούλη*, for example, as either *servant* or *enslaved male or female*), what or whose scholarship to engage, and whether to minimize or erase injustice and violence in sacred texts and in contemporary life. Traditional exegesis attempts to separate contemporary concerns and issues from the interpretive project, preferring the pretense of disinterested, objective, and scientific interpretation untainted by living breathing interpreters and their biases (i.e., racial, gendered, and so on), as if claiming to do so and ignoring or sidelining contemporary concerns and injustice immunizes the dying and lessens the blows. But this pretense comforts the oppressor, normalizes oppression, and demonizes the oppressed and others who challenge the deception of the objectivity. As Gloria Hull and Barbara Smith assert "'Objectivity' is itself an example of the reification of white male thought. What could be less objective than the totally white-male studies which are still considered 'knowledge'? Everything that human beings participate in is ultimately subjective and biased, and there is nothing inherently wrong with that. The bias of Black women's studies must consider as primary the knowledge that will save Black women's lives,"¹¹ and lives of other oppressed folk.

All reading is subjective, and appeals to sacredness or to the Holy Spirit, to inspiration, do not mitigate that fact. All interpretation begins

⁸ Mitzi J. Smith, "Abolitionist Messiah: A Man Named Jesus Born of a *Doule*" in *Bitter the Chastening Rod*, eds. Mitzi J. Smith, Angela N. Parker, Ericka Hill Dunbar (Lanham, MD: Fortress Academic, 2022), 51-68.

⁹ Smith, "Abolitionist Messiah"; Smith, Mitzi J., 'He Never Said a Mumbalin' Word'. A Womanist Perspective of Crucifixion, Sexual Violence and Sacralized Silence" in *When Did We See You Naked? Jesus as a Victim of Sexual Abuse*, eds. Jayme R. Reaves, David Tombs, and Rocío Figueroa (London: SCM Press, 2021), 46-66.

¹⁰ Smith, 'He Never Said a Mumbalin' Word.'

¹¹ Gloria T. Hull, Gloria T. and Barbara Smith, "Introduction: The Politics of Black Women's Studies" in *Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies, 2nd Edition*, eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott and Barbara Smith (New York: Feminist Press, 1982), Kindle edition.

with encultured flesh-and-blood readers impacted by origins, family, communities, education, religious commitments, racialization, etc. We cannot know all that influences or informs our hermeneutic, but we can strategically, openly and critically expose and deploy that of which we are aware toward justice and good news. Let me say here that I regard the project of deconstruction or exposure of time-honored oppression and violence uncritically and/or callously embedded and normalized in biblical texts (e.g., rape, genocide, and enslavement) as itself good news, especially for those historically, systematically, and perennially victimized by such violence or living under the constant threat of harm, and for those who care about them as their neighbors. It is good news that God and God's people are not oblivious to or supportive of the violence in the text or in life (of which the text reflects or imitates).

When I needed to critically address the senseless death of Black women in the places and spaces where citizens are supposed to be protected or safe, I selected that injustice as an interpretative framework and dialogue partner for reading biblical stories and texts. Sandra Bland's death changed me, in ways I cannot adequately name; it could have easily been me, one of my sisters, friends, and so forth. Her tragic death indelibly impacted Black women, the Black community, and others. How does a Black woman end up dead because she supposedly changed lanes without using a turn signal, something any driver knows is a commonplace, if irritating (and yes problematic), driving violation? If a police person stopped every driver who failed to use a turning signal, the courts and jails would be unable to handle the deluge of cases. How did failure to use a turn signal become a death sentence, for a Black woman? Too many people callously argued that if Sandra Bland had kept quiet . . . if she had just shut up . . . if she had not been so sassy . . . if she had ignored the violation of her rights and had accepted her ticket in silence . . . she would have survived. Respectability politics has seldom been a lifejacket or bullet-proof vest for Black women, men, and children. Silence has never guaranteed our survival, but it has guaranteed that harassment goes unchallenged, and violence unchecked. Audre Lorde famously wrote "My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you."¹² Sandra Bland's story is the impetus for my essay, "Race, Gender, and the Politics of 'Sass': Reading Mark 7:24–30 Through a Womanist Lens of Intersectionality and Inter(con)textuality."¹³ Mark 7:24–30 is the story of

¹² Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 41.

¹³ Smith, *Womanist Sass*, 38–39.

an anonymous Syrophenician woman living in the region of Tyre who is desperate to find healing for her daughter and who seeks and finds Jesus whom she likely heard had already demonstrated the power to heal persons like her child (cf. 3:8). In her despair, the only defence the Syrophenician woman had against Jesus's harmful words (i.e., "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," (7:27 NRSV) was her contextual resistance speech/talk back (λόγος or logos): "Lord/Master, even the pet dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (7:28). "Jesus invoked a text, an oppressive text," and the woman countered with her own text. I discuss the ways that Black women's agency and speech are demonized as annoying, disruptive and even emasculating, criminalized, and penalized; all are attempts to silence us. I theorize "sass" and "talk back" as resistance language, a mother-tongue and mothers' tongue. I create dialogue between biblical texts and contexts and contemporary narratives and settings. Black women were/are not supposed to talk back to or sass persons who view us as their inferiors and/or subordinates, including intimate partners, husbands, teachers, police officers, and white people generally. But for Black women and other marginalized persons, sass and talk back—as with Sandra Bland who knew and expressed her rights—is the "only means of agency, of being heard, of combating an other-imposed invisibility."¹⁴ Talking back, resisting oppression with our words and knowledge does not guarantee our survival, but "assures . . . an honorable sane life," as Ta-Nehisis Coates advised his son.¹⁵

In chapter 5 of my book *Insights from African American Interpretation* entitled "Dis-membering, Sexual Violence, and Confinement: A Womanist Intersectional Reading of the Story of the Levite's Wife (Judges 19),"¹⁶ I read the gang rape of the Levite's anonymous secondary wife to raise readers' consciousness about how Black women and other women are *dis*-membered from the moment they enter the world through the wombs of their disenfranchised and/or racialized mothers. *Dis*-membering is a process of social death predicated on the intersection of racism, classism, and sexism and characterized by the denial of access to the same rights and protections afforded dominant privileged members of society. The mutilation and death of the anonymous

¹⁴ Smith, *Womanist Sass*, 30.

¹⁵ Smith, *Womanist Sass*, 42.

¹⁶ Mitzi J. Smith, *Insights from African American Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), Kindle edition.

woman whom I name 'Ênmishpat or 'there-is-no-justice' constitutes the last stage of her *dis*-memberment. *Dis*-memberment—societal disenfranchisement—always leads to death. I read the biblical story of the gang rape of 'Ênmishpat in conversation with the incarceration of poor women, Black women, and women of color in our society with the help of Beth Ritchie's book *Arrested Justice*.¹⁷ I argue "[w]hen people live in societies that subordinate and oppress them because of their gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity and/or class, without the benefit of appropriate and equitable protections and just interventions, they live constantly with the threat and are subjected to polymorphic violence, mutilation and premature death."¹⁸ *Dis*-memberment is not a single event, but it is a "dynamic dehumanizing and disenfranchising process; it is an accumulative trajectory of assaults whereby basic rights and protections are violated or denied, inflicting and allowing for physical abuse, confinement, mutilation, and early death."¹⁹ It matters how we read and the dialogical frameworks we bring to the process.

In different ways I discuss the contemporary problem of sexual violence, for example, in conversation with the apocryphal story of Susanna and the crucifixion of Jesus. In my recent essay entitled "'He Never said a Mumbalin' word': Crucifixion, Sexual Violence and Sacralized Silence,"²⁰ I start with my own story of sexual violence. I raise questions about how liturgy, preaching, and biblical texts and interpretation can be complicit in the silencing of victims of sexual violence. Was Jesus silent or depicted as silent in the Gospels or elsewhere in the biblical texts? Where did the intersection of Jesus's crucifixion and silent suffering come from, if not from the Gospels? Interestingly, in the story of the meeting between the Ethiopian eunuch and the evangelist Philip, we see the hermeneutical connection between Jesus's crucifixion and silence. The eunuch is reading Isaiah 53:7–8: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his mutilation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." When the eunuch asks who the prophet speaks of, Philip answers that it is Jesus. Instructively, the eunuch is a man who has likely suffered in silence when he was castrated and without justice. Philip had just been forced out of

¹⁷ Beth E Ritchie, *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

¹⁸ Smith, *Insights*, 100.

¹⁹ Smith, *Insights*, 101.

²⁰ Smith, 'He Never Said a Mumbalin' Word'.

Jerusalem by persecution after his comrade Stephen's murder, and he has no justice and suffers it in silence. The eunuch has experienced sexual violence. I argue that Jesus likely suffered likewise. But it is difficult for us to accept or imagine God's son as a victim of sexual violence and even more so of castration. Black men and women do not find it so hard to envision, given our history of enslavement and post-emancipation. I ask, what kind of God spares his own human son from living at the bottom of the socio-economic scale and being subjected to the same kind of violence they suffer, but does not spare the masses?

Finally, it is impossible to read the New Testament without significant attention to the historical contexts of Greco-Roman and Jewish enslavement, as implied above. Just as enslavement of Black peoples is at the core and foundation of American slavery, so is Roman and Jewish enslavement a necessary context for understanding the New Testament.²¹

I assert that the enslaved and enslavement are central to the Jesus story and the narratives and teachings of the early Jesus movement and its development in the canon and beyond. We cannot responsibly read these texts without attention to the ancient context of enslavement. Otherwise, we are doomed to reinscribe, repeat, and insist upon ideas, images, teachings, and proclamations that favor the most privileged and do not bend with the universe toward justice.²²

²¹ Mitzi J. Smith, "Enslavement and the New Testament," in *Routledge Handbook of Marginalization in the Bible*, ed. Joel Baden, (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

²² Smith, *Enslavement*.

WHAT DOES A COMPOSER'S CANTATA HAVE TO DO WITH BIBLICAL EXEGESIS?

By Martin Rumscheidt

In this essay I make a plea that we incorporate works of composers as essential components into the exegesis and interpretation of the Bible, and that the gift of hearing given us become an essential aspect of reading the Scriptures.

Every Christmas the hymn *Vom Himmel hoch da komm ich her*—From heaven above to earth I come—was part of my family's celebration. Martin Luther's 1535 hymn, based on the Gospel of Luke's story of the birth of Jesus and set to music four years later by his friend Valentin Schumann, found its way into the church's hymnody worldwide. In the early 1830's Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy set Luke's story into a choral cantata that includes eight of Luther's original thirteen verses. In 1853, Catharine Winkworth translated the carol into English; *Voices United* has five of them (no. 72; with adaptations).

It is said that Luther wrote hymns—and sometimes the melodies for them—so that the substance of the faith of the church became available for “his beloved German people.” He had a knack of wording biblical texts and credal or doctrinal affirmations in such a way that “ordinary” women, men and children could understand them, make them their own and take them to heart. In the process, he inspired poets, painters and composers who in turn enriched the interpretation of biblical texts. Their creativity made colour, light, melody and orchestration, phrasing and emphasis, elements in the discernment of the mystery and awe characteristic of the stories of the Bible. The work of biblical exegesis and the widened access to sacred Scripture beyond traditional doctrine-guided interpretation would be blessed by this creative expansion of the hermeneutical process.

Felix Mendelssohn-Bartoldy's cantata on Luther's hymn is an example of how a musical composition gives insights into the meaning of a biblical story. My essay seeks to examine how Luther's poetry and Mendelssohn's music touches the exegesis of Luke 2:8-20.

Luther called his hymn “*Ein Kinderlied auf die Weihnacht Christi*” (a children's song on Christmas) and used the affectionate diminutive *Kindlein* and *Kindelein* of Luke 2:12 in the second verse of his hymn: *Euch ist ein Kindlein heut' geborn, von einer Junfrau auserkorn, ein Kindelein, so zart und fein, das soll eu'r Freud und Wonne sein.*

In the first verse of the hymn, the angel announces that much good news from heaven is to be made known, which is then spelled out in the second verse. The English text in *Voices United* reads as follows: “To you

this night is born a child of Mary, chosen virgin mild; this new-born child of lowly birth shall be the joy of all the earth." As I read the wording of that second verse—but also of all verses of the hymn—the intent is to affirm the *dogmatic* component of the Creed: Mary, a virgin, gave birth to Jesus, our Savior.

In a span of 3 minutes and 40 seconds, the opening chorale of Mendelssohn's cantata repeats *Euch ist ein Kindlein heut geborn* more than 20 times. In beautiful orchestration and through juxtaposition of choir and soloists, chorale and recitative, Mendelssohn makes what I think is a theologically significant point. What is in those words, "To you this night a child is born," that he repeats them again and again and again?

The Social History of Luke's Gospel

Luke is not the *author* of the Gospel that bears his name; rather, he is the *compiler* and *arranger* of narrative material from sources available to him in his time. His extensive use of First Testament tradition suggests that Jewish-Christian circles were his sources: The expectation that God's justice would triumph, the hope in the coming of the Messiah, the claim that in Jesus of Nazareth the reign of God has already begun, suggest that Luke had contact with Jewish prophetic-messianic liberation movements in Palestine under Roman rule.

The Lukan congregations were part of the Jewish prophetic-messianic liberation movements in the era of Roman rule. The experience of the first Roman-Jewish War of 66-73 C.E. culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 C.E. and the expulsion of Jews from their land in the Roman Province of Judaea, called for a different messianic expectation. The hope for the end of the century-old history of injustice and violence (see Lk 1: 46-55; 2:38) was completely dashed when Roman armies crushed all forms of resistance and Rome achieved total victory. It raised the anxious question whether Jesus was really the promised anointed Messiah of God who would bring all suffering to an end."¹

A quick look at the tumultuous history of the region is helpful in our attempt to understand something about the memories of the people on which Luke drew. In the year 63 BCE, Roman general Pompey the Great and his army besieged and eventually captured the city of Jerusalem during Yom Kippur. Twelve thousand Jews, including many priests, were killed in the Temple compound in open violation of the widely accepted principle that it was a place of sanctuary. John Hyrcanus was High Priest at that time

¹ Luzia Sutter-Rehmann, Introduction to the Gospel of Luke; *Bibel in gerechter Sprache* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), 1452.

(from 76 to 40 B.C.E.); in 67 he appointed himself ruler of Judaea. After three months of troubled reign his brother Judah Aristobulus ousted him, which resulted in a form of civil war. They appealed to Pompey to arbitrate in the conflict. Pompey banished Aristobulus and reappointed Hyrcanus as ruler and high priest. Two decades later, in 42 BCE, another Roman general, Mark Anthony, appointed brothers Herod and Phasael Tetrarchs as rulers of Judaea. Between 27 and 4 BCE, the year of his death, Herod went on a building-spree: Samaria was rebuilt and renamed Sebastia; Caesarea arose on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea; a palace and fortress called Herodium was built south of Jerusalem; in Jerusalem a castle close to the Temple was constructed and named after him; and in 19 B.C.E. Herod extended the Temple Mount site and the Temple itself.²

Throughout the events of those decades the people of Judah tell the story of a successful resistance against foreign rulers and their interference in the affairs of the Jewish people. In 167 BCE the Seleucids of Syria under the leadership of Antiochus invaded Jerusalem and desecrated the Temple. A man called Mattathias, subsequently renamed Maccabees, led an active resistance against the Syrians' program of the Hellenization of Judaea, that included sacrilege and radical secularization of the Jews' sacred traditions. After Mattathias' death, his sons Jonathan, Simeon, and Judas consolidated the resistance and recaptured Jerusalem in 164 BCE and immediately reconsecrated the Temple.³ The apocryphal books *First* and *Second Maccabees* tell the story of the clash between the Seleucids' hunger for domination and the Jews' desire for liberation. They became literary inspiration and motivation for the struggles a century later.

All this would have been on the minds of those who knew Jesus personally and on the minds of his followers in the years of Rome's brutal occupation and destruction of the people in the Province of Syria Palestine (their homeland renamed by Emperor Hadrian).

The commandment to *remember* the burden of oppression visited upon the descendants of the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel and the faithfulness of YHWH is what the Hebrew word *zachor* demands. The Gospels are made up of personal recollections of those who had known Jesus and were, by that time, quite old, as well as the collective memories of a greater diversity of subsequent followers of Jesus. It is important to keep in mind that the Gospels were not derived from audio or video recordings nor did they fall from the skies. Their interpretation draws on a

² The Temple Mount site is where Richard Strauss' opera *Salome* is set.

³ Georg Frideric Handel immortalized the latter in his oratorio *Judas Maccabeus* with the triumphant chorus "See the conquering hero comes."

variety of approaches: I think that compositions such as Mendelssohn's cantata should be part of them.

The Kingdom Belongs to Little Children

Jesus had anticipated that his teaching of a coming "kingdom of heaven" would arouse hostility among the occupying Roman forces and all those among his own people who cooperated with them: he would be arrested and killed. Jesus spoke often of the coming of a "new" kingdom, of a reign of justice that would replace the reign of the injustice that prevailed among his people at that time. Pilate's informers about the Galilean rabbi made him decide to execute Jesus for acting as "the king of the Jews."

In one particular episode recorded in the *Gospel of Matthew* Jesus connects the promised kingdom to children: "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of Heaven belongs. And he laid his hands on them." (NRSV Mt. 19:14-15) In the preceding chapter Jesus replies to the question "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" and, placing a child among them, says: "Truly, I say to you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (18:2-4).

In his book *Act and Being*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflects on this conjunction of the kingdom of heaven and becoming like children and concludes that "being in Christ" means becoming a new creature, a child. "The kingdom of heaven" is also referred to as "God's world of justice,"⁴ for there the will of God, done in heaven, will also be done on earth and become the world of God's justice, the "new creation of those who no longer look back upon themselves, but only away from themselves to God's revelation, to Christ. It is the new creation of those born from out of the world's confines into the wideness of heaven, becoming what they were or never were, a creature of God, a child."⁵ Being in Christ is a theological concept for looking forward to and acting on behalf of the world of God's justice. Bonhoeffer speaks of being in Christ like this: "The one . . . who became an exile and misery becomes a child at home. Home is the community . . . of Christ, always 'future', present 'in faith' because we are

⁴ The recent translation into German: *Bibel in gerechter Sprache* characterizes "kingdom of heaven" as the coming world of God's justice not in "heaven" but on earth, a reminiscence of the second petition of the Lord's prayer.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *Act and Being. Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, trans. Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 161.

children of the future.”⁶

That depiction and understanding of children of Jesus is present, not only in Christian tradition, but also in the Hasidic Jewish tradition in central and eastern Europe.

The Jews who, on the order of Ferdinand and Isabella were expelled from Spain, migrated to Central Europe where they encountered Ashkenazi Jews and their medieval exegesis of Scripture: The interpretation of the Talmud through Midrash. In that encounter Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) played a significant role. He came to be called “the third great Moses after the prophet and Maimonides,”⁷ insisting on integrating the traditional faith of Europe’s Jews with the prevailing concepts of the Enlightenment. In the view of many of his interpreters he was as great or even greater than the leading philosopher of the time, Immanuel Kant: Mendelssohn the German Socrates.⁸ “. . . Moses Mendelssohn took the first steps beyond the ghetto walls to join enlightened Germans in the pursuit of shared human concerns. Enlightened culture—guided by the ethic of *Bildung* (the educational ideal of self-cultivation)—inspired German Jewry”⁹ For German Jews this period was a time of emancipation; one step of which was joining the church. The oldest son of Moses Mendelssohn, Abraham, the father of Felix Mendelssohn, took that step; when his children Felix and Fanny were born, they were baptized. Abraham Mendelssohn was a very successful banker; like the *salons* in Paris at the time, his home became a hub for authors, professors, musicians and other, non-Jewish financiers, many of whom would also have been church-goers. There can be no doubt that the Christian religion was discussed at those gatherings and that music was a regular feature during them. The Mendelssohn families—as I see it—had embraced the Christian religion as an essential component of what Mendes-Flohr calls *Bildung*; it is not likely that they became “disciples” of the person and the ways of Jesus of Nazareth. But it is also essential to recognize that emancipation did not mean leaving behind the traditional faith of European Jews. The integration of the shared human concerns of

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Amos Oz and Fania Oz-Salzberger: *jews and words* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 11.

⁸ *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion*, R.J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder, General Editors (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 258.

⁹ Paul Mendes-Flohr: *German Jews. A Dual Identity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 2.

the “enlightened Germans” into Jewish life—the process is called *Haskalah*¹⁰—did not cause the Hasidic traditions, such as the ways of Midrash, to falter.

Mendelssohn's Spiritual Legacy

The question that keeps me riveted is this: Did the decision of his father to become “Christian” cause Felix Mendelssohn to lose his grandfather’s faith? Did he deny his legacy?¹¹ To explore this question, I would like to consider several representative examples of “Talmud-era midrashim” of medieval and early modern Jewish exegetes. I draw on two sources: *Jewish Christian Dialogue. Drawing Honey from the Rock*, by Alan L. Berger and David Patterson and *The Holocaust and the Nonrepresentable. Literary and Photographic Transcendence* by the latter. The authors address the term *Shekhinah* which seeks to affirm the *indwelling* of the divine presence in the world, of the Holy One’s palpable indwelling among humans.

If, as is written in the *Tikkunei HaZohar*, children are “the face of the Shekhinah”, it is because, gazing into the eyes of a child, we catch a glimpse of the Divine Countenance and the Commanding Voice . . . According to Jewish tradition . . . only the prayers of our children reach the ears of God, “for the outcry of children,” says Jacob ben Wolf Kranz (ca. 1740-1804), the Maggid of Dubno, is formed by the breath of mouths unblemished by sin.¹²

When reading Jesus’ teaching that the kingdom of God is made of the likes of little children... , a Jew cannot help but recall the midrashic teaching that only where there are children is there holiness.¹³

From a Jewish standpoint...children are not in need of redemption—they are the source of redemption, as the great sage of the

¹⁰ *The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion*, 176.

¹¹ I have recently had several discussions about the so-called Christian phase of Mendelssohn’s composition said to be represented in his oratorio *Paulus* (first performance in 1836) to be followed by a work in the more “Jewish” phase later in his other great oratorio *Elias* (first performed 10 years later). I am not at all persuaded by that bifurcation in light of what we know of the influence and legacy of his grandfather’s work and character.

¹² David Patterson, *The Holocaust and the Unrepresentable* (Albany: University of New York Press, 2018), 8-9. Patterson continues that sentence like this: “Because children are the Divine Presence, the Nazis rooted out that presence by creating realms that were void of children”. The aim was systematically to obliterate the Divine Countenance and the Commanding Voice of G-d.

¹³ Berger and Patterson, *Jewish Christian Dialogue*, 78.

eighteenth century, the Vilna Gaon, maintains...To be sure, all of creation, says the Talmud, is sustained, thanks to the breath of little children.¹⁴

Teachings such as these were a staple in the midst of Moses Mendelssohn's work of integrating modern European values into the life of Jews of his time and place. Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy's compositions may be heard as his intent to integrate into European values the wisdom of European Jews. The reception of his music in his life time and beyond was rejected only later in the nineteenth century by Richard Wagner, whose notions of Jews and especially the music they composed were embraced by the Nazis with deadly rigor: the first to be sent to the gas chambers were always the children.

Mendelssohn's twenty and more repetitions in just over 220 seconds: "*Euch ist ein Kindlein heut geboren*—To you this day a child is born" is a proclamation of the wondrous indwelling of the Shekhinah. But, more than that, it is a gift of the faith of Jews to the faith of Christians. For it helps the latter to know better the Jew from Galilee and to be followers of him whose life, as a faithful Jew, was guided by the Torah. Mendelssohn's music gives Christians joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world for a free, grateful service to all God's creatures.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

KATHLEEN BLISS: AN ECUMENICAL ANCESTOR

By Betsy Anderson



“We intend to stay together.” These famous words, attributed to Kathleen Bliss in the final statement of the inaugural Assembly of the World Council of Churches in August 1948 are evocative of the significance of this ecumenical leader and thinker. They sum up the commitment and the demanding work that lay ahead for this newly formed world church organization.

Kathleen Bliss came to my attention when as a University of Toronto undergraduate in the late 1970s I researched and wrote an essay about the role of women in the founding of the Student Christian Movement of Canada (SCM) for my feminist history class with Sylvia Van Kirk. This foray into the United Church Archives was the first of many. It also created an occasion to interview my parents, John and Muriel Anderson, on their experience in the SCM and inspired my mother to share a paper she had written in 1953 for the SCM’s graduate study group in Montreal on “The Woman Question.” I was fascinated to discover that two of her key sources were Kathleen Bliss’s 1952 World Council of Churches (WCC) *Study on The Service and Status of Women in the Churches*¹ and Frederik Engels’ “The Origins of the Family.” Since that time, my interest in the role of women in the Church and the vocation of the laity as well as the role of the SCM in the formation of leaders for the Canadian and global church and the ecumenical movement, has caused me to repeatedly encounter Kathleen Bliss.

At the last in-person Canadian Society of Church History (CSCH) meeting before the pandemic (2019), I presented a paper on “The Vocation of the Laity: Canada’s Contribution to the Ecumenical Conversation.”² Once again Kathleen Bliss’s name jumped out as a woman leader at the World Council of Churches’ second General Assembly in Evanston, Illinois, August 1954. She had helped prepare the main report, “Christ—the Hope of the World” and she chaired Section VI on The Laity, the only woman chair of six sections or any committees of the General

¹ Kathleen Bliss, *The Service and Status of Women in the Churches*. (London: SCM Press, 1952).

² Betsy Anderson, “The Vocation of the Laity: Canada’s Contribution to the Ecumenical Conversation,” in *Historical Papers 2019*, 19-35.

Assembly, and the only woman on the Message drafting group of nine members.

More recently, Covid-19 lockdowns in Toronto created time to sort through boxes of personal papers from my father and grandfather, both United Church ministers. Among the treasures was a set of the *Christian News-Letter* (sic) from 1941 to 1947. Published bi-weekly in Britain, 1939-1949, the *Christian News-Letter*, edited in its war years by J.H. Oldham, was an outlet for some of the leading thinkers at the time, many of whom were participants in Oldham's Moot, a think tank which included such influential thinkers as T.S. Eliot, Christopher Dawson, John Baillie, and a sprinkling of women, among whom was Kathleen Bliss. Bliss served as editor of the *News-Letter* from 1945 to 1949.

However, while well acquainted with Kathleen Bliss's name and having some sense of her significance in the ecumenical movement, I had not yet read any of her writing on women in the church and another of my keen interests, the role of the laity. What a treat it was to discover her work on these topics. When Keith Clements, J.H. Oldham's biographer, described Kathleen Bliss as "possessed of unusual organizing ability and given to decidedly pungent turns of phrase, a brilliant communicator, whether by voice or pen,"³ it was no exaggeration.

Biography

Kathleen Mary Amelia Moore was born in Fulham, London 1908. Her family were Baptists. She attended Girton College, Cambridge and was the only woman in her theology class. Active in the Cambridge SCM, she "retained a life-long zest for critical thinking and uniting Christians for service in the world."⁴ Many of her fellow SCM members became leaders themselves in the ecumenical movement in Britain and through the WCC. Following graduation in 1931, she married a fellow student, Rupert Bliss, and in 1932 they went to Tamil Nadu in South India with the London Missionary Society to work for the YMCA. Two of their children were born there. They returned to England in 1939 on furlough and remained there as the Second World War was breaking out.

Kathleen's connection with J.H. Oldham came about when his assistant at the time, Eleonara Iredale, recommended that Kathleen replace her. In the words of Keith Clements, it began "one of the most important

³ Keith Clements, *Faith on the Frontier – A Life of J.H. Oldham* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999), 403.

⁴ Martin Conway, "Kathleen Bliss:1908-1989" in *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol.42 (1) January 1, 1990.

colleagueships and friendships of Oldham's later life and was to introduce into the ecumenical movement in Britain and later into the WCC, one of its most dynamic and creative figures."⁵ Kathleen worked as Oldham's assistant for nine years and edited the *Christian News-Letter* from 1945-49. She connected with a wide range of contributors and achieved "recognition for the quality of her own thinking and writing."⁶ When the *News-Letter* ceased publication in 1949, buried in the cradle of her third child, as Kathleen put it, the University of Aberdeen recognized her contribution as editor by awarding her an honorary Doctor of Divinity.

While working as a producer for the BBC, 1950-55, Kathleen also wrote her first book, *The Service and Status of Women in the Churches*, published by the World Council of Churches in 1952. Two other books followed: *We the People: A Book about Laity* in 1963 and *The Future of Religion* in 1969. From 1954 to 1968 Kathleen was also at the heart of the central workings of the WCC. She taught for several years before her retirement in the religious studies department of the University of Sussex. Retiring in 1972 at the age of sixty-four, she turned her attention to an exploration of agriculture and environmental concerns, as well as the compiling of an archive on J.H. Oldham in preparation for writing his biography. Illness intervened and Keith Clements took up the torch following Kathleen's death in 1989.

In her contribution to the volume, *Ecumenical Pilgrims*, Janet Crawford points out that Kathleen Bliss was a *lay* Christian, and not just because in her lifetime the Church of England did not ordain women. With J.H. Oldham, Suzanne de Dietrich, Hendrik Kraemer and others, Bliss saw the role of the laity as a crucial matter of ecumenical concern if the church was to be present and relevant in the modern secularized world.⁷ "What makes the word 'ecumenical' so valuable today is that it holds together two things that must not be separated. It refers at once to the whole church and to the whole world,"⁸ she wrote.

The Christian News-Letter

J.H. Oldham was one of the ecumenical church's most influential

⁵ Clements, *Faith on the Frontier*, 402.

⁶ Susannah Herzel, *A Voice for Women – The Women's Department of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981), 16.

⁷ Janet Crawford, "Kathleen Bliss 1908-1989" in Ion Bria and Dagmar Heller, *Ecumenical Pilgrims: Profiles of Pioneers in Christian Reconciliation* (Geneva: WCC, 1995), 40.

⁸ Crawford, "Kathleen Bliss," 41.

lay people in the years leading up to the creation of the World Council of Churches. He established the *Christian News-Letter* as war was breaking out in Europe. Its aim, in his words, was “bridging the gulf which exists at present between organized religion and the general life of the community.”⁹ It was brief and compact, and while often the result of collective thinking, it arrived under Oldham’s signature, like a personal letter. Subscriptions reached 10,000 by 1940. One soldier observed he could carry it in his uniform pocket, and it gave him something to think about in long intervals. There were Supplements with each Newsletter written by such notables as George MacLeod, Barbara Ward, and Reinhold Niebuhr. Kathleen wrote several of these: “Sex Relationships in War-Time,”¹⁰ “War and the Family,”¹¹ “Houses,”¹² and “Part-Time Education.”¹³

World Council of Churches

Oldham had been part of the Provisional Committee for the World Council (in process of formation) since the World Conference of Life and Work and Faith and Order meetings in 1937, which finalized his intention to create a World Council of Churches. He could not attend the Provisional Committee’s 1946 meeting in Geneva and asked permission for Kathleen to attend in his place. She was then elected by the Church of England, which she had joined as an adult, as an alternate delegate to the Amsterdam Assembly of the World Council where she contributed the oft quoted words, “we intend to stay together” to the final message.

Bliss was elected to the Central Committee in Evanston and then elected as the first woman on the Executive Committee of the WCC. She chaired the Board of the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey and was a member of the editorial board of the *Ecumenical Review*. At the New Delhi WCC Assembly in 1961, she was elected chair of the Division of Ecumenical Action. Bliss was one of the chief authors of a study paper prepared for the Fourth Assembly at Uppsala in 1968, “Education and Nature of Man,” published as a Pamphlet by the WCC in January 1967. It formed the intellectual foundation for the Uppsala Assembly’s focus on being in

⁹ Clements, *Faith on the Frontier*, 392.

¹⁰ “Sex Relationships in Wartime,” *Christian News-Letter*, Supplement #184 (June 16, 1943).

¹¹ “War and the Family,” *Christian News-Letter*, Supplement #168 (January 13, 1943).

¹² “Houses,” *Christian News-Letter*, Supplement #236 (June 13, 1945).

¹³ “Part-time Education,” *Christian News-Letter*, Supplement #182 (May 19, 1943).

service to education. During roughly the same period she was General Secretary of the Board of Education of the Church of England, the first woman to serve a General Synod board.

Women's Pre-Assembly

As a feminist of the 1970s and 1980s, I was intrigued to discover that a women's pre-assembly was not something that grew out of second wave feminism, as I had experienced it in international meetings of the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) but was foundational to the forming of the World Council of Churches. As the movement toward establishing a World Council of Churches rolled ahead after the war, a number of women recognized that if women were to have an appropriate role in this new ecumenical entity, preparation and advocacy was needed. One of these was Mrs. Tilla Cavert. A member of the Board of the YWCA, USA, she travelled to Geneva with her husband, Samuel Cavert, who was a member of the WCC Assembly provisional committee, and took the opportunity to visit the YWCA there. This was the same meeting which Kathleen Bliss attended on behalf of Joe Oldham, and Kathleen noted that "this business of women came up."¹⁴

Tilla Cavert discovered that the YWCA had gathered materials on the place of women in the church but had not been able to work on them. She recognized that this exploration was the responsibility of the church and was encouraged by W.A. Visser't Hooft to mobilize. She made connections with Kathleen Bliss and Geoffrey Bishop in England as well as with Suzanne de Dietrich and Madeleine Barot in France.

The result was a questionnaire developed, translated, and distributed to key church women around the world over about two and a half years, starting in 1946. "Not since the Reformation had systematic attention been directed to gaining a picture of the life and work of women in the church as a *whole*, both professional and voluntary, evaluating it as it is and seeing the hopes for its future."¹⁵

Prior to the first WCC Assembly in Amsterdam, fifty women gathered at Baarn, Holland as the "Study Committee on Women" to review the results of this massive survey effort. The responses were impressive, with submissions from fifty-eight countries, often 50-100 pages or more in length. The Baarn Report was presented to the 1st WCC Assembly by Sarah Chakko, a Syrian Orthodox woman from India. In response the

¹⁴ Herzel, *A Voice for Women* 17.

¹⁵ Herzel, *A Voice for Women* 7.

Permanent Commission on the Life and Work of Women in the Church was formed with Kathleen Bliss as Secretary and Sarah Chakko as President. From its early days, the commission concerned itself with the issue of women-in-relationship with men and in particular with the connection between lay and women's involvement in the church.

Recognizing the wealth of information that had been collected, the WCC once again chose Kathleen Bliss to write what Martin Conway called the epoch-making book: *The Service and Status of Women in the Churches*.¹⁶ She accepted, noting that "having just had another child ... writing the book was the sort of job I could do while I rocked the cradle with one hand."¹⁷ Her skills as a clear and concise analyst and communicator are evident throughout the book but especially in its introductory and conclusion sections. On page 13 she says:

To say that women's powers to educate and to succour have found an outlet in an immense variety of ways is not the same things as saying that the Church has made use of even a tithe of the vast reservoir of talent and devotion which lay to hand in the person of its women members. Often a woman's zeal has been damped down, discouraged by the Church, her gifts and mind and spirit refused, her devotion and labour frittered away.¹⁸

And on page 199:

It is not in order to prove something to others, but as a matter of her own integrity that the woman who feels that she has God-given powers must prove them by exercising them. Society, the community outside the institutional Church (which is just as much the world for which Christ died as the Church is), lies open before her, and if she fulfills her calling by using her gifts there and obeys God in so doing, she *is* serving the Church. More than that, she is serving the Church in a way it particularly needs and a way that women especially have it in their power to serve.¹⁹

¹⁶ Kathleen Bliss, *The Service and Status of Women in the Churches* (London: SCM Press, 1952).

¹⁷ Herzel, *A Voice for Women*, 18.

¹⁸ Bliss, *Service and Status of Women*, 13.

¹⁹ Bliss, *Service and Status*, 199.

“This careful study, charitable and compassionate in tone, solidly rooted in concrete historical examples, has been credited with preparing the way for the rise of Christian feminism years later,”²⁰ Crawford notes.

Learning more about Kathleen Bliss has constantly reminded me that this church history is also my personal history. Bliss embodied two of my great passions in life with the church: the role of women and the vocation of the laity. It turns out that when they came together at a consultation on “The Renewal of the Church” at Yale, New Haven, Connecticut in 1957, so did a piece of my personal history. This pivotal meeting, sponsored by the Department on the Cooperation of Men and Women and the Department of the Laity, is the meeting that my mother attended when I was five years old. I have often heard the stories of what mischief we got up to when my mother left my brother and I with her mother on the farm in New Brunswick so she could attend this international meeting. In reviewing the folder my mother gave me with the essay she had written about “The Woman Question,” I found the preparatory documents for this meeting, her notes, including from a talk by Kathleen Bliss and her handwritten report to the SCM national meeting in Bala, Ontario, the following spring. The July 1957 Consultation on “The Renewal of the Church” was attended by about 120 delegates, of whom about fifty were women. My mother was one of fifteen Canadians, representing the Canadian SCM. In her written Report to the SCM National meeting the following spring she observed that rather than being a gathering of the laity, many of the delegates were “professional religionists,” holding full-time jobs in their denominations. She also observed that a number of men who thought they were attending a consultation on the role of the laity were a bit surprised to find themselves among so many women. Kathleen Bliss gave the keynote address on the “Role of the Laity.”

Among other things, Muriel reports that Bliss noted that the definition of laity established at the first WCC General Assembly was: “Laity, the people of God in the world.” But the church, living so much unto itself, has turned this into a clericalized laity, engaged in the life of the church, not the world. “There is no future for organizational churches unless they become listening churches—listen to the laymen and listen to the world,” Muriel reports Bliss as saying.

²⁰ Crawford, “Kathleen Bliss,” 38.

Reflections

Robin Wall Kimmerer's wonderful book, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*²¹ reminds us of the wisdom of our ancestors. Sometimes, to move forward and choose the right path, we need to return, to go back along the path we have come and pick up what our ancestors have left for us. Lifting up the life and contributions of Kathleen Bliss seems like an exercise in doing just that. As a United Church lay woman formed by so many of these early women leaders, I wonder what their insights and wisdom, emerging in such different times, can offer us as we seek to find the path of right relations with Indigenous people, seek to transform our relationship with the earth in order to have a future on earth, and seek to listen for God's spirit at work in God's world in new and continuing ways. The United Church General Secretary, Michael Blair, has reminded us that "It's not that the church of God has a mission in the world, but rather that the God of mission has a church in the world."²²

Kathleen Bliss put it this way in a conversation with former Archbishop of Canterbury Robert Runcie, days before she died on September 13, 1989: "God has opened so many doors to the Church. We need more courage to go through them."²³

²¹ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

²² A 9 October interview of Rev. Dr. Michael Blair by Karen Pascal on the Henri Nouwen Society's *Now and Then* podcast.

²³ Crawford, "Kathleen Bliss," 41.

FROM THE HEART

ENCOUNTERS WITH MARK (DRISCOLL)

I was introduced to Mark Driscoll in the spring of 2021. Of course, I had heard of the celebrity pastor and his multi-campus, Seattle mega-church called Mars Hill and, more recently, at The Trinity Church in Scottsdale, Arizona. But I had what I considered a healthy distrust of mega-churches and celebrity pastors. Driscoll and Mars Hill were irritants in my life in ministry as they were often held up by disgruntled congregants as an ideal to be strived for and a model to follow. But my response to those confrontations usually ended with an expression of disdain for Driscoll's theology and the corporate approach of Mars Hill to church growth and the practice of ministry.

When, last spring I enrolled in a course at Acadia University on The Books of Esther and Ruth in my pursuit of a Doctor of Ministry degree and, looking at the syllabus for the course, I was surprised to see one of Driscoll's sermons on Esther as one of the required components. Then, in an unrelated course entitled Ministry Mentoring, my mentor suggested that I read and reflect on a book written by Driscoll and his wife Grace as part of an assignment that challenged me to select a reading specifically related to (my) areas of ministry practice but, explicitly chosen because it comes from a culturally, ideologically, or contextually different perspective than my own. The book was *Win Your War: Fight in The Realm You Don't See For Freedom in The Realm You Do*. The reflections that followed both assignments form the content of this essay.

After reading *Win Your War*, I experienced a discomfort with the language and style of writing employed by the Driscolls. The language oscillates between that of corporate America and, as one might expect from the title, a very militaristic presentation. Throughout the book God is presented as the CEO, and leaders, both human and angelic, meet with God in the divine boardroom. God has staff and calls staff meetings. The Driscolls offer a very anthropocentric understanding of God who, it appears has modelled heaven on the image of a very well-run corporation or military unit. Theirs is a God that operates in the boardroom and on the battlefield. And, not to dwell on this aspect of the writing but I cannot leave the incongruency I felt between this book and my own beliefs when I read that the Bible [is] our field guide for war.

This is one of the many points of dissonance I experienced while reading this book and watching some of the interviews, sermons and presentations by Driscoll available on YouTube. While watching his

sermon on Esther, I was struck by his very negative assessments of Mordecai as both a bad Jew and a bad uncle/parent. Esther was portrayed as prostituting herself in service to the king. Driscoll then turns his assessment into a condemnation of both fathers who don't physically get rid of their daughters' wanton boyfriends, and women who parade themselves in front of potential suitors. But, the most disconcerting part of my encounters with Driscoll was that, on some level, at the beginning of his presentation, I found myself agreeing with him—my head nodding in affirmation of what he was saying. I resonated with his key words and his upholding of the gospel. But, then came a point where he began to ascribe different meanings to familiar words and phrases. This led me to consider our language, understanding and use of words, and I realized the necessity to be clear about what we are talking about when we use certain terminology and the challenge of responding to people who come to me seeking a relationship with God but who have been taught through their interactions with “the church” that they are unworthy.

People outside of the church often make the assumption about people inside the church that we are somewhat homogeneous. This assumption goes further, to the point that it is expected that because we share a common lexicon, we all mean the same thing when we use specific words. So, when in the course of a conversation I reveal that I am a Christian, people will make assumptions as to what Christian means and they will ascribe certain beliefs and practices to that self-identification. This is even more pronounced when people know that I am a minister in a mainline Christian church. It is somewhat ironic that, within church circles, when colleagues become aware that I am a minister within The United Church of Canada they may question whether or not I am truly a Christian but, for people outside of the church, there is a sense that Christians are all the same.

While reading *Win Your War*, I encountered many familiar words, phrases and concepts. The Driscolls write about faith and salvation. They address the realities of sin and redemption. They warn against idolatry and temptation. And they proclaim Jesus as Lord and Saviour. All of these terms, the words on the page are familiar to me and, in principle I agree. In the course of my own ministry I have used these words, I have preached on their meanings and I have encouraged people to grow in faith and seek redemption while steering them away from sin, idolatry and temptation. Indeed, these will certainly be central themes in the coming months as the church makes its way through the season of Lent. However, the meanings that are attached to these words are far from universal. It is not possible in a reflection of this nature to do proper justice to the implications of these

disparities, but I will focus on just a couple of the words mentioned and the challenges that I face in my current ministry at The Embrace Centre, a drop-in centre, and social outreach advocacy ministry in the heart of Fort Erie, Ontario.

What do we mean when we use the word idolatry? Merriam-Webster defines idolatry as the worship of a physical object as a god or an immoderate attachment or devotion to something. I have preached on the subject of idolatry, and the holding of things up as in the place of God. When leading Bible studies I have used Jesus' teachings on serving God and mammon as referencing idolatry in our lives and challenged participants to consider what they might esteem in their lives to the point of making an idol of it. In *Win Your War*, the Driscolls suggest that such things as a woman choosing to work outside of the home is a form of idolatry. The desire for safety or comfort is presented as a form of idolatry. They continue in their argument stating, "Pagan practices have never really been updated because they remain constant best sellers —*sex, money, power, fame, beauty, comfort* and the like, never really go out of demand." Many who come through the door of The Centre carry the weight of these kinds of judgments on their shoulders. Women who have chosen to leave abusive relationships but have been told that they should have borne the discomfort and violence. Youths who felt unsafe in their homes who were subsequently told that they had sinned by dishonouring their parents and thereby dishonoured God. Parents who express concern and anxiety about their inability to provide the basic necessities for their children. In all of these instances, I have been told, "I must not believe enough," or, "I am not praying enough," or, "Why am I being punished in this way?"

It is the absoluteness and the binary delineation between right and wrong that, in my estimation, is so problematic. Who am I, or who is Driscoll, to tell somebody what the idols in their lives are? It may be true that I have made safety an idol in my life and the thousands of dollars I might spend on closed circuit TVs and alarm systems and a panic room might be evidence of my idolatry. But, to name the desire for safety as idolatrous does a disservice to those struggling with their faith.

Reading *Win The War* led me to question who gets to name what is idolatrous or sinful, or faithful or redemptive in another's life. My ministry is one of accompaniment as people make the journey of faith, hopefully guiding them on the right path. Part of that ministry is assuring people that they are indeed loved by God. The preaching and teaching of pastoral leaders like Mark Driscoll and their very narrow definition of who is a part of God's family and the way to "earn" your way into that family, necessitates my having to introduce a new understanding of who God is

and new definitions for familiar words.

It is somewhat ironic that many of those coming in to talk to me often love the old Gospel hymns, the words and content of which convince them that they are unworthy of the relationship they so desire with God. They are unable to see themselves redeemed or even worthy of redemption. Again, through the course of conversation it becomes apparent that they have been told by a Christian priest, pastor or minister that because they are divorced, gay, trans, addicted, etc. they are outside of God's love. To which I answer, Romans 8: 31-39 as assurance alongside much of Jesus' teaching in the Gospels.

At the end of the semester and those two courses I was glad to have encountered Driscoll in a more immersive way. It challenged me to not only think about the terminology I use but to consider how I define the words of faith and justify those definitions through Scripture and the traditions of the church. In fact, I went on to listen to the podcast, *Who Killed Mars Hill*, and to read another of Driscoll's books. It was eye-opening, but it is not a world or a theology that I want to live in and I don't anticipate returning to in the near future.

Reading In-Between: How Minoritized Cultural Communities Interpret the Bible in Canada

**Nestor Medina, Alison Hari-Singh and HyeRan Kim-Cragg
(Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2019). Pp. 147.**

In this book Medina *et al* aim at highlighting new reading methodologies that are unique to minoritized readers in the Canadian context. They write that, “the contributions in this book were not to be exegetical papers or explorations and adaptations of other biblical approaches” (e.g., liberationist, postcolonial, historical-critical, etc), but that the contributors aim to make explicit the ways in which their ethnocultural community approaches the biblical text and how this reflect their narrativial hermeneutic.

The book has six articles, each offering a unique minoritized reading, and two review articles. Alan Ka Lun Lai’s article offers a general overview on the histories of Chinese people in Canada. He explores a history marred by racism and outright discrimination that has followed the Chinese immigrants to Canada since they began settling here as railway and mine workers in the mid-nineteenth century. Chinese-Canadians bring these historical experiences and their own cultural experiences into their Bible-reading. Lai writes, “Coupled with strong Confucian emphasis on morality and self-improvement, Chinese Canadians continue to find the Bible to be a great source of inspiration for individual growth. They tend to read the Bible through the lens of morality . . . When the Chinese read the Bible, it is essentially a cross-cultural experience” (34).

Barbra Leung Lai offers an example of Chinese-reading of the Bible. Her important contribution here is what she calls a “cross-graining” hermeneutic of Ecclesiastes. She writes, “like the production of plywood, with wood grains running against each other (cross-graining), putting the two conflicting ideologies together has a potential of coming up with a more enriched, multi-layered meaning-significance of the collective message of the book of Ecclesiastes. As a Chinese reader in diaspora, I have made my interpretive choice: life is complex, and the plurality of existing dialectic tension is simply part of life’s reality. They are ‘givens.’ Embracing tension gives diction to ‘How to live’” (48-49).

HyeRan Kim-Cragg offers a Korean-Canadian reading of the Jephtha’s daughter story with a group of Korean women ministers now in Canada. She problematizes the traditional reading of this story including its exclusion from the lectionary. Informed by their contextual histories of militarism and colonization in Korea, Kim-Cragg and her group reads Jephthah’s daughter’s virginity and her communal mourning with her

companions as liberating and anti-patriarchal.

Nestor Medina offers a Latina/o reading which he argues is a communal activity. In reading the Bible the Latina/o find themselves in it. Latina/o hermeneutics “is intimately connected to their very real, day-to-day material context and lived experiences” (78).

Alison Hari-Singh offers an Indian reading which she argues can be seen as *Bhakti*-influenced. She specifically deals with the influence of a Christian *Bhakti* called Sadhu Sundar Sing. Hari-Singh contends that for Indian Christians in Canada, “the art of reading Scripture lies not in taking a ‘step back’ from the text or being ‘objective’ about what is read, but through reading (i.e., entering the biblical story), we encounter God and thereby find ourselves” (95).

Ray Aldred and his daughter Catherine Aldred-Shull offer something different. They address the issue of Bible translation from a Canadian Indigenous perspective. Ray challenges the previous European-North American translation of the Bible to the First Peoples’ languages. He proposes different kinds of translations. “Such translations will have to go beyond linguistic and technical matters and include the cultural and socio-historical understanding of Indigenous peoples” (100).

In the review section, Gosnell L. Yorke sees this book as a counter-narrative to Canadian multi-culturalism which only sees two dominant Euro-Canadian communities (English and French) to the exclusion of other communities. To add to Yorke’s critique, I suggest interculturalism could be a remedy for the failures of multiculturalism in Canada.

Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng’s review notes the importance of this book in identifying the difference between the minoritized communities in Canada and the USA (126). She raises a few issues that need to be navigated by the minoritized readers of the Bible. She asks three questions that minority readers need to note: where and when are we doing these readings? who is doing these readings and with whom? where do minority readers engage the Bible?

As an African living in Canada, I can relate to many points raised in this book. However, I must point out that this book has no voices from Afro-Canadians. The reasons given for this are not convincing enough for me. That notwithstanding, this book is an important addition to the diversity dialogue and especially for a church that wishes to be intercultural.

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Following: Embodied Discipleship in a Digital Age**Jason Byassee and Andria Irwin. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021. Pp. 208.**

First: a confession. I am an overwhelmed emailer, a reluctant Linked-In participant, have no Facebook presence, and have never tweeted in my life. And while I initially thought it might be fun to write this review as a series of tweets, even the new higher limit of 280 characters per tweet doesn't feel "fun" anymore as I sit down to the task.

I am also the Lead Minister of a congregation whose experience with and use of technology during the pandemic closely reflects many of the narratives shared in this book. I have experienced many of the shifts Byassee and Irwin describe, and feel internally the conflict between my own convictions regarding incarnated presence and relationship, and the world's increasing devotion to online experience. The pull of ease and the cost of discipleship. The desire to "meet people where they are" and offer authentic relationship. How to do it all, in person and online? How to integrate one community from the "hybrid" experience of worship and communal life, is a big question of the post-COVID era.

This is an important book. It is a dialogue between the two authors, one a digital native, and one an immigrant; both are articulate and faithful. They take on the assignment seriously, and with humour. From the opening words of the introduction, which describe a DM (direct messaging) conversation between the authors at a workshop for clergy on use of Social Media, the reader is drawn into the dynamic question of the text. What is the way to keep these all-consuming, distracting devices in their place as "tools" to be used by the church in mission rather than either elevating them to near-divine status, or rejecting them as purveyors of the fruits of the evil one?

Implicit in that story of the workshop is the context of the mainline churches out of which both authors write: they are both younger than the average age of both the leaders who serve, and the people in the pews. The conversation about "relevance" is not just theoretical: for digital natives like Irwin, the choices mainline churches make with regard to technology and its use will determine who can "find" them at all.

It helps that the authors complexify their dialogue, sometimes agree to disagree (can churches offer communion to remote participants online with theological integrity? See chapter 7 for that conversation) and keep their eye on the big picture. Their insistence that the Christian church has always had some members who have separated themselves from the world to devote themselves to prayer, service, and holiness offers one way

to understand the “Luddites” in our midst. However, their approach is generally more mainstream: they want to assist the Christian church in finding a hopeful, positive, and disciplined way to embrace technology for the purposes of the Gospel.

Along the way, they treat such topics as identity (including avatars and other multiple versions of identity online), personal vs. congregational social media accounts for clergy, technology and the family (including a realistic look at how addicting devices are and a helpful emphasis on Sabbath-keeping), what it really means to “friend” someone in both the technological and the theological sense, the above-mentioned conversation about holy communion, as well as a chapter devoted to preaching on-line. These discussions are learned, coherent, and easily followed for a theologically educated reader. And for readers lacking in a theological education, the occasional repetition of material offers a helpful opportunity to take a second look at (for instance) Gnosticism and Manicheism.

From the first chapter to the last, Irwin and Byassee take the discussion of technology out of the realm of cliché and meet the reader at the crossroads of church and culture in which faithful ministry is always carried out. That they hold the attention of a self-confessed “reluctant” user of technology is an accomplishment. They persuade me that “Christian faith is endlessly mediated. It has fingerprints all over it” (164). And more importantly, they invite me to consider more deeply the grounds for choices that I have made lightly, rather than intentionally, and about how I will use technology as a medium for the Gospel.

Here’s my 280 character tweet, in conclusion: Devices may threaten to master us, but Irwin and Byassee invite Jesus-followers to use them as a means to the end of the reign of God. Online relationship will not replace embodied, but Christianity has ever used epistolary address across physical or temporal distance. So can we.

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Christ, Creation, and the Fall: Discerning Human Purpose from an Evolving Nature

Simon R. Watson. Lanham, MD: Fortress Academic, 2021. Pp. xxvi +154.

Over the last few centuries the age-old question of the relation between faith and reason has taken the sharper focus of that between faith and science. And in the last several decades the interest of theologians in

science, and particularly with biological evolution, has been increasing. Simon Watson's book is an essay in the genre. Watson describes his work as a "theology of nature," distinguishing it from a "natural theology," because it begins not with scientific data and reason to find evidence of God's existence and purposes in nature, but from a basis in faith, seeking to reformulate doctrine in the light of contemporary science.

Watson aims to explore how belief that humanity as made "in the image of God" can cohere with the scientific knowledge that human nature is itself evolving in an evolving universe. Indeed, how does God act in our creation and in the universe generally? Watson approves the conclusion of Denis Edwards: "God acts in and through the known and unknown laws of nature" (xiv).

In a world where the "arms race" of natural selection operates universally, the question arises as to how the summons to compassionate love can have arisen. Watson sees an immanent Sophia-Christ active in the emergence of all life (like the Logos of John 1), one who also becomes incarnate in Jesus, who is "the goal and model of what humans made in God's image are capable" (xii). This includes the capacity for self-denial in a world where only the fittest survive. As Philip Hefner (to whom Watson devotes his chapter three) argues, Jesus' sacrificial death is a paradigm in which we can see that self-negation for the sake of others is "an assertion and fulfilment of self, not a destruction" (68).

Even acknowledging the emergence of self-giving love, natural events can bring to individuals suffering and loss that are experienced as wasteful and cruel. There is "an *apparent* gap between the divine intention as humanly conceived and the reality of the natural order experienced *subjectively* by its victims" (xiii). Watson uses the language of the fall to interpret the condition of human brokenness caused in a world that can be anything but benign. This is to speak of an "existential fall," identifying the fall with what most of us would call natural evil in distinction from moral or humanly chosen evil.

With this framework in place, Watson unpacks four meaty and closely argued chapters. In the first he contrasts William Paley's watchmaker God with J. D. Hall's God of the *theologia crucis*. Paley's is a natural theology in which the universe is seen as "rationally comprehensible and governed by God's moral, aesthetic and intellectual design" (21)—even in its social structures. Watson prefers Hall, who maintains that in the context of a suffering world only a focus on the cross of Jesus can offer an understanding of divine agency in the world.

In the second chapter Watson introduces us to ruminations of Charles Darwin about how altruistic decisions and actions can arise in the

context of biological evolution. The “golden rule” may arise because a self-sacrificing individual survives when the group for which he sacrifices thrives. This chapter also introduces Asa Gray and Aubrey Moore, two nineteenth century scholars who saw in the Darwinian theory of evolution the secret work of God. Said Moore, “the facts of nature are the acts of God,’ such that the antithesis of the natural and supernatural is a false one” (53).

In chapter three Watson focuses on the work of Philip Hefner, who maintains that, because God is the Creator of all things, the creation itself should be a “resource for understanding the character, presence, and agency of God” (65). For Hefner, this means that God wills the emergence of humans as “created co-creators” and also the holocaust of destruction that attends biological evolution.

In his final chapter Watson highlights two theologians espousing a Sophia Christology and emphasizing creaturely participation in the work of Sophia-Christ. Elizabeth Johnson and Denis Edwards see God enabling the natural processes of the universe and also giving these processes freedom of self-development. Both see the emergence of human freedom as sufficient to justify the costly freedom that God allows in the evolutionary process. This is the “free process defence” against the charge that God’s working in love through the natural order cannot be squared with the amount of suffering, death, and waste of life entailed in evolution. Watson concludes that there is no intellectual answer to this conundrum—only the practical response of aligning ourselves with the vulnerable and available presence of God in the universe, exemplified by Jesus.

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Jesus and Elvis: Creative Resources for Schools and Churches

**Edited by John McTavish. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020.
 2nd edition. Pp. 170.**

I knew I would dislike this book before I even cracked the cover. The title alone triggered my disdain. Elvis is SO last-century. Why not ‘*Jesus & Gaga?* Or, for Canadian content—“*Jesus & The Biebs.*”?

And to publish creative resources with paper and ink? C’mon! Haven’t they heard of the internet? It’s all there!! Why print something to collect dust on a shelf, when you can ride a pristine ‘search engine’.

So I picked it up, and skimmed the back-cover, and the first reviewer’s endorsement opened my mind; “...*search engines make*

everything ever written available. What we need is someone we trust to filter...to find the most brightly shining stars." BINGO!

And this volume of creative resources is certainly full of brightly shining stars. Classic pieces from theological and literary giants (Barth, Bonhoeffer, Updike). And multiple contributions from folk who, (in my 40 years of ministry) I would consider the United Church's "all-star team"—Jim Taylor, Harold Wells, Bill Fennell, Paul Scott Wilson, Klusmeier & Farquharson, and many more.

Categories include poems, plays, hymns, prayers, a communion service, participatory readings, and essays. The theological messages are mainstream progressive Protestant. Again, I started off resisting, prepared to dismiss Ann Weems' poetry as flighty and flakey and limited to references of "rainbows, balloons and butterflies". But she challenges, with the reality that life is hunger and misery and hate-filled red faces, calling for "discipleship that means a driving rain in my face."

Sometimes it was the introduction & commentary, rather than the poem itself which advanced my thinking. The introduction to the anonymous poem 'The Women' gave the best explanation I've seen to Jesus' seemingly shocking prejudice toward a Canaanite woman (Mark 7: Here is an explanation that makes sense—tying Scripture to Scripture—Jesus "grew in wisdom" (Lk 2: 52).

My only lingering criticism of the 50 pages of poetry is that it could have been presented in 40 pages. Three line introductions, followed by a blank page left me with a pinch of irritation.

The section of prayers by Harold Wells and Judith Brocklehurst brought true sparkle and verve to a variety of invocations, confessions, intercessions and more. These prayers brought a relevance and reality, while also using surprisingly traditional labels and nomenclature—there seemed no fear or resistance to the use of Father, Lord, and Saviour.

Judith's prayers can be "cheeky" (*Well, here we are, God. You've got 58 minutes*); she can also be devoutly traditional, as she was, praying at the graveside of a young friend (*Help us to grieve, with sadness indeed but without anger or bitterness. Help us, in the face of things we do not understand, to trust your never-failing love*).

At the section of "Dramatic Readings" I found myself moved by the Advent Readings patterned after Dr Seuss. I swallowed a lump in my throat, as I scribbled *worth the price of the book* in the margin.

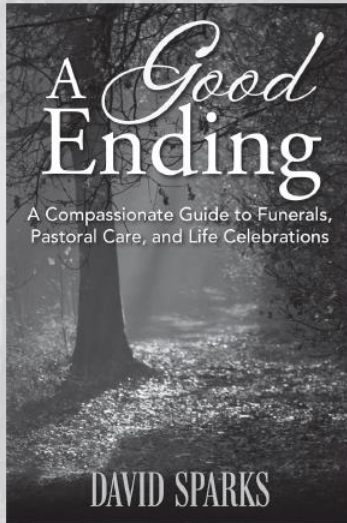
The sections on Music and Hymns give a blend of new advice to replenish old music. We are re-introduced to old classics such as 'Abide with Me', and 'The Lord's My Shepherd', and directed toward music that will re-invigorate our experience...even if we adopt the music from the

BBC's 'Vicar of Dibley'.


And our author/editor John McTavish shares some very practical advice toward getting the best and the most from our music in church. (*For music to be good, it is not enough for it to be good. It also has to be heard ... Carpet bedrooms, not Churches!*)

So I've been won over to the relevance of this book. Long past grudging acceptance, I can happily recommend *Jesus and Elvis* to those of us who seek to prepare creative communication, and enhance our worship.

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Everyone deserves love and compassion all the way to the end. Support is also needed for those around them. *A Good Ending* gives practical advice for supporting the dying person, planning a funeral, life celebration, or memorial, and being with those left to mourn. Whether you're a Minister in training or seasoned worship leader, if you're looking for fresh insights or ideas, you'll find this an indispensable resource.

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