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The Rorschach Messiah: Imagination, Eisegesis, and Hermeneutics

Dedication

On July 16 and 17, 1942, at the behest of the Nazis, Parisians rounded up more than 13,000 Jews—mostly women and children—and crowded them into the Vélodrome d’Hiver for five days of hell: no toilets, no water, no food. And so began their journey into the hands of the Germans, from which few survived. In the book and movie, *Sarah’s Key*,¹ the story is remembered through the fictional life of ten-year-old Sarah Starzynski. A happy Jewish child, she locks her baby brother in a hidden cupboard for safe keeping as she and her mother are whisked from their apartment by the authorities, naively believing they will be right back. Although they meet up with her father on the way to the Vélodrome, none but Sarah is eventually (weeks later) able to escape and return. When she shows up with the key, her brother Michel is dead. Her parents are killed in the camps, and she lives a life of overwhelming grief and guilt. This is much more than fiction. It is a literary and cinematic taste of the poison of human history—and our understanding of God. As we enter this



As portrayed in movie

¹ Tatiana de Rosnay, *Sarah’s Key* (French: *Elle s’appelait Sarah*) (Paris: France Loisirs, 2006) and *Sarah’s Key*, directed by Gilles Paquet-Brenner (Hugo Productions, 2010).

essay dealing directly with biblical hermeneutics, it would be wise to remember the words of Rabbi Irving Greenberg: “no theological statement should be made that could not be credible in the presence of burning children.”² Therefore, I dedicate this essay to the memory of our Jewish sisters and brothers.

A Survey of Hermeneutics

The gospels of Matthew and John make it very clear that “the Jews” are responsible for Jesus’ death,³ but John Shelby Spong will not stand for the misinterpretation that extends this to all Jews. As we recall two-thousand years of Christian complicity in “anti-Semitism that expressed itself in torture, murder, inquisitions, expulsions, ghettoizations and ultimately the Holocaust,” we should feel “a deep sense of shame and guilt.”⁴ In his book on the Fourth Gospel, he writes that “‘the Jews’...did not mean the ethnic Jews, for that would have included the community itself.... If we were to translate the words ‘the Jews’ as ‘the orthodox party that ruled the synagogue,’ we would be far more accurate historically.”⁵ Historical accuracy is critical in any study and interpretation of ancient texts, especially those of ultimate importance. Spong comes from the historical-critical tradition of biblical interpretation and, though he is often vilified by fundamentalists and conservatives, offers insights that I find helpful. In his study of John’s gospel, for example, he explains his use of three “interpretive tools” that act as carefully chosen premises for his conclusions: first, John is written from a Jewish perspective; second, Jewish mysticism has

² A paraphrase by Richard Kearney in *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 60.

³ Cf. esp. Matt. 27:25 and John 19:15.

⁴ John Shelby Spong, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 17.

⁵ Ibid.

shaped its message; and third, the thrust of the book is against literalism.⁶ In other words, Spong is aware of his exegetical presuppositions and willing to share them with his readers. Call him a humanist and/or a heretic, he does not hide behind “neutrality.” And in good faith to our Jewish (religious) ancestors, his books are a constant reminder to “develop Jewish eyes” in order to combat the eisegetical distortion and anachronistic errors of reading Scripture through post/modern (individualistic, consumeristic, etc.) lenses.

Gordon J. Spykman addresses this same issue in his discussion on hermeneutics in his *Reformational Theology*: “in searching the Scriptures we all wear ‘glasses’ of one kind or another—moralistic glasses, allegorical glasses, historical-critical glasses, kerygmatic glasses, historical-redemptive glasses, or glasses of some other kind. The question is not whether we wear some such hermeneutical glasses, but what sort of glasses we wear”⁷—and, Spykman continues, whether those glasses are “true to Scripture.” But then we must ask, Which view is true? Spykman admits, “We cannot rise above our creatureliness to reach some supracreaturely vantage point.”⁸ There is no God’s-eye point of view available to us. Those who would argue that Scripture *is* God’s point of view have not understood that God’s Word is inscripturated using historically situated languages and decoded by different historically situated readers/hearers. Spykman is well aware of this hermeneutical conundrum which he traces to “the radical shift during the past two centuries toward anthropological theologies, accompanied by an almost obsessive concern with epistemological problems....”⁹ If God’s Word is mediated by human

⁶ Ibid., 31.

⁷ Gordon J. Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 121.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 119.

writers and yet again by human readers/hearers (not to go into translational issues) each with their own individual biases and cultural contexts, how can we ever hope to hear that Word clearly? I recall an answer from my Sunday School days: the Holy Spirit shepherds the Truth to our ears. But if that is the case, why so many different (even opposing) interpretations (and denominations)?

For Spykman, as a representative of the Reformed tradition, the correct approach is to assure the unity of God’s Word as the unfolding dramatic narrative: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. Or put differently: “creationally based, conventally focused, kingdom-oriented, Christ-centered.”¹⁰ These underlying *norms* (unified in Christ) are historically unfolded in various *forms*. He calls this a “confessional hermeneutic” because it is “more in line with the biblical worldview [i.e., the unfolding drama of salvation history], the Reformed confessions, and Christian philosophy.”¹¹ I am not convinced. It seems to me that Spykman’s assumption of Scriptural unity (and Christocentrism, which will be addressed below in our exploration of the multiple concepts of Messiah) is an eisegetical overreach, i.e., an attempt to force-fit the Scriptures’ many narratives (and other genres) into a single mold. The many canonical and extra-canonical literatures of both the Jewish and Christian traditions offer a rich collage of God-experiences, of attempts to “eff” the ineffable. There is no denying that the Reformed formula—creation, fall, redemption, and consummation—is a prominent theme in many of the extra/biblical writings, but we should beware of reducing all of reality to a single metanarrative.

¹⁰ Ibid., 127.

¹¹ Ibid., 129.

According to Graeme Goldsworthy, this makes me a liberal on at least three accounts. First, “the unity of the Bible...is an article of faith.”¹² For him, “the theological plurality of the Bible must be carefully assessed in the light of the fact that not all the data are available to us.”¹³ I am unsure what additional data he seeks, but his presupposition of unity is, in his own words, not based on “empirical observation, but...the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.”¹⁴ So the “data” is not empirically collected, yet it is evident in the Christian texts? And which texts might those be? The varying accounts of the resurrection? The varying accounts of Jesus saying he is God and is not God? The varying emphases on faith or works, or earth or heaven, or the eschaton impending or not? Second, according to Goldsworthy, theological liberals “assert that finite human language is incapable of expressing the infinite.”¹⁵ Here I am guilty as charged, but at least I stand in good company, from the ancient Israelites to Meister Eckhart and John of the Cross to the entire apophatic tradition (which would rather stay silent than commit perjury by falsely representing the Infinite in the finite) to the lineage of artists who have gone beyond words to allude to the Other to the entire postmodern critique of the limits of language. Third, liberals treat and interpret the Bible like any other human book. Goldsworthy, to his credit, admits that “the Bible is still a human book exhibiting human language, thought forms and culture,”¹⁶ but wants to guard its “divine nature and origins.” I believe what he is after is what Spykman calls a shift to anthropological theologies over the past two centuries where hermeneutical issues have

¹² Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 193.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 193-4.

¹⁵ Ibid., 34.

¹⁶ Ibid., 126.

become central.¹⁷ This is undoubtedly the case as modern science has called into question much of the invisible world (spirits, angels, etc.) that was once assumed to be real. My concern is with Goldsworthy's use of the term "divine nature" to describe the Bible. It is a part of creation as are all writings and uses of language and to believe otherwise, to make it divine, is to be guilty of bibliolatry.

Goldsworthy presents evangelical hermeneutics as "reading and understanding the Bible [in order]...to know God and his will for our lives."¹⁸ It is part of the sanctifying/renewing of our minds, developing right understanding, and, in the tradition of Protestant and Reformed Christianity, is founded on the assumption of Scripture's essential clarity. This latter point is a clue that Goldsworthy has not shaken off the rationalism (Enlightenment legacy) that he seems so keen to critique. Invoking the Reformers, he says they "recognized the thematic clarity of the person and work of Christ," and that they saw "the natural or literal meaning of the text [as] normative."¹⁹ The Protestant scholastics taught that "no necessary doctrine is obscure" and that "God...can only speak clearly and understandably."²⁰ God may speak clearly—a belief that modernists share about nature—but human understanding cannot be and never will be monolithic. Any pretension to that end deserves to be fought against (as the Reformers did against Rome). Goldsworthy does not disagree. For him, Scripture is neither "totally perspicuous [n]or...totally indeterminate."²¹ And yet he cannot tear himself away from the rationalist/modernist dream of all theological systematizers, that "a process of abstraction from the

¹⁷ Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, 119.

¹⁸ Goldsworthy, *Hermeneutics*, 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 196.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 197.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 198.

individual data of exegesis” makes “the unity underlying the diversity of texts...perceptible”²²— and that this abstracted unity can be “crystallized” (fossilized?) into church doctrine. Goldsworthy correctly observes that post/modern hermeneutics has moved from focusing on author to text to reader, but, his approbatory scraps tossed to the higher-critical dogs under the table notwithstanding, he remains firmly premodern in his continual reference to God’s essential being and rational nature.²³ God’s essence, being, rationality, and nature are mere (multivalent) metaphors for an experience of the Other that we boldly call “God,” an experience that encompasses the “horrors of warfare and famine,...AIDS, the terrorism of 11 September 2001, the tsunami of 26 December 2004,” and the Holocaust.²⁴ I envy Goldsworthy his clarity, systematics, and doctrine, but his list of horrors leaves me with more questions than answers.

Walter Brueggemann describes my impression of Goldsworthy when he writes that due to “confessional closure”²⁵ “church teaching...too often has become thin and arid,” and he tickles my fancy when he quotes Raymond Brown as saying, “in the Scriptures we are in our Father’s house where children are permitted to play.”²⁶ In *An Introduction to the Old Testament* Brueggemann does not describe his hermeneutics as such, but he and second-edition co-author Ted Linafelt briefly outline an approach they call “imaginative remembering”: “What we have in the Old Testament, rather than reportage, is a sustained memory that has been filtered through many generations of the interpretive process, with many interpreters imposing certain theological (and

²² Ibid., 265.

²³ Ibid., 47, 51, 53, 54, 55, 84.

²⁴ Ibid., 182. Goldsworthy also lists Auschwitz and Hiroshima (speaking of burning children) but disappointingly and vaguely says that our “responses must be biblical” (182).

²⁵ Walter Brueggemann and Tod Linafelt, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and the Christian Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 15.

²⁶ Walter Brueggemann, “Preface to the First Edition” in Brueggemann and Linafelt, *Introduction*, xi.

other) intentionalities on the memory that continues to be reformulated.”²⁷ Nonetheless, all of these layers of interpretations do not necessarily lead to the skepticism that grows out of modernist positivism. For Brueggemann and Linafelt, “the traditioning process of retelling does not intend to linger over old happenings, but intends to recreate a rooted, lively world of meaning that is marked by both coherence and surprise in which the listening generation, time after time, can situate its *own* life, rather than gaining direct access to a world long past.”²⁸ “Scripture is a relentless act of imagination.... [It] does not merely describe a commonsense world; it dares, by artistic sensibility and risk-taking rhetoric, to posit, characterize, and vouch for a world beyond the ‘common sense.’”²⁹ It is here that they bring in YHWH, the character that can only be “captured” textually in the fleeting glimpses of imaginative writing, “the inscrutable God...[who] does not fully conform to any of our certitudes, even those of the most settled orthodoxy.”³⁰ For Brueggemann and Linafelt, ideology—“an attempt to pass off a partial claim of reality as a whole”³¹—is an important, if frustrating, reality to keep before us as we deal with any (biblical) text. The Scriptures are both “*inspired by God* and *permeated with ideology*, two claims that live in deep and inescapable tension.”³² There is an ideology that a biblical author brings to the text and an ideology that a reader/hearer/interpreter brings; therefore, both textual formation and interpretation require a living community of faith, a community of trust/truth that provides the space, the openness, to “play in the Father’s house.”

²⁷ Brueggemann and Linafelt, *Introduction*, 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 10 (emphasis original).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 11-12. And, I would add, beyond language.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 437.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 435.

³² *Ibid.*, 436 (emphasis original).

“The most important thing I learned from hermeneutic philosophy is that interpretation goes all the way down. Nothing is exempt. If the Word was in the beginning, so was hermeneutics.”³³ That is Richard Kearney, an Irish Catholic-Protestant who has spent a lifetime meandering the ever-widening circles of interfaith discovery and dialogue. For him, “Hermeneutics is a lesson in humility (we all speak from finite situations) as well as imagination (we fill the gaps between available and ulterior meanings).”³⁴ It is this imaginative dimension that I find so interesting. My own experience has, like Kearney, taken me in ever-widening circles of religious discovery beyond the bounds of Christianity, yet the Ariadne’s thread that led me back was/is imaginativity. In Kearney’s words, “any religious hermeneutics worth its salt needs art if it is to be true to faith.... [R]eligions are imaginary works, even if what they witness to may be transcendent and true.”³⁵ This is where someone like Gerard Manley Hopkins helps us to recreate the sacred in the carnal by poetically “brush[ing] normal language against the grain.”³⁶ “Poetics, in short, makes us strangers to the earth so that we may dwell more sacramentally upon it.... Without sundering, no arrival. Without dispossession no return.... The shortest route from wonder to wonder is loss.”³⁷ Loss is something I can relate to—and also, to a much greater extent, the people of God affected by the Holocaust. Where, in the face of such horror, words (and faith) may fail us, Kearney turns to Bonhoeffer, who writes, “It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular world.”³⁸ Kearney’s

³³ Kearney, *Anatheism*, xv.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

hermeneutics, his “anatheism,” is a return to belief after atheism; i.e., after the hermeneutics of suspicion strips away the illusions of religion, after the God of theodicy dies in Auschwitz, then a postreligious theism is possible. “So much depends, of course, on what we mean by God,” Kearney writes. “If transcendence is indeed a *surplus* of meaning, it requires a process of endless interpretation.... The absolute requires pluralism to avoid absolutism.”³⁹ Kearney’s conclusion captures my experience well: “It is when our inherited conditionings have been shed in favor of genuine not-knowing that we can return to faith anew (*ana*).”⁴⁰ He ends his book with a wager: “in surrendering our own God to a stranger God no God may come back again. Or the God who comes back may come back in ways that surprise us.”⁴¹ And, indeed, I have been surprised again and again.

One such curiosity is contemplative (nondual, mystical) Christianity. An array of writers and schools of thought might fall under this wide umbrella, but Bede Griffiths is representative when he writes, “The world in a real sense is the ‘becoming’ of God.”⁴² This awakening of Deity through creation—all matter/energy is consciousness—is a common starting point for a mystical hermeneutics. “With consciousness,” Griffiths continues, “Nature, the Mother, awakens to a new mode of being, and begins to discover, to be conscious of, her meaning and destiny.”⁴³ And what does this have to do with Christianity?

The doctrines and sacraments of the Church are human expressions or signs of the divine reality, which are...destined to pass away. So also Christ himself...is the sign of

³⁹ Ibid., xiv (emphasis original).

⁴⁰ Ibid., 170.

⁴¹ Ibid., 181.

⁴² Bede Griffiths, *Bede Griffiths: Essential Writings*, ed. Thomas Matus, OSB Cam (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 81.

⁴³ Ibid.

God's grace and salvation...and this sign also will pass, when the Reality, the thing signified, is revealed. Finally God himself, insofar as he can be named, whether Yahweh or Allah or simply God, is a sign, a name for the ultimate Truth, which cannot be named. Thus the [seeker] is called to go beyond all religion, beyond every human institution, beyond every scripture and creed, till coming to that which every religion and scripture and ritual signifies but can never name....⁴⁴

Cynthia Bourgeault is a prolific proponent of what she calls the Christian Wisdom Tradition. She uses the idea “that the Kingdom of Heaven is Jesus’s own favorite way of describing a state we would nowadays call a ‘nondual consciousness’ or ‘unitive consciousness.’”⁴⁵ For Bourgeault, nonduality is critical to understanding (interpreting) Scripture and is the ground of Jesus’ two core teachings: no separation between God and humans, and no separation between human and human. The first teaching she finds in John’s Gospel in Jesus’ talk of vine and branches and his oneness with the Father.⁴⁶ “We flow into God—and God into us—because it is the nature of love to flow.”⁴⁷ An example of the second teaching is the wording/meaning of the familiar maxim, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Not “*as much as yourself*,” Bourgeault points out, but “*as yourself*,” i.e., “as a continuation of your very being,”⁴⁸ like “two cells of the one great Life.”⁴⁹ As Beatrice Bruteau writes, unlike eastern mysticism which tends to remove us from this world, “Incarnational mysticism enables us to realize that God is thoroughly present as world, as everything that happens in the world, and that we ourselves are members of that God.”⁵⁰ So,

⁴⁴ Ibid., 97-98.

⁴⁵ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind—a New Perspective on Christ and His Message* (Boston: Shambhala, 2008), 30.

⁴⁶ John 15 and 10:30.

⁴⁷ Bourgeault, *Wisdom*, 31.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 32.

⁵⁰ Beatrice Bruteau, *God’s Ecstasy: The Creation of a Self-Creating World* (1997; repr., New York: Crossroad, 2014), 177.

“Rejoice in the cosmos. In spite of all its hurtful ways, look at what it has done, is doing, is capable of doing.”⁵¹

This brief survey of a handful of hermeneutical approaches is intended to set the stage for my own hermeneutics, which is, admittedly, a work in progress. Spykman represents the Reformational (Dutch Calvinist) theology of my upbringing with its biblical narrative (creation, fall, redemption, and consummation) that emphasizes the goodness of creation and our task in helping to build the Kingdom of God. This creational, “this-worldly,” priority shaped my early imagination and continues to play a central, guiding influence in my life. Goldsworthy represents a period in my late twenties when certainty (in all things, especially theology and “creation science”) became an idol, when I felt the need to be a Bible Answer Man in my own community. I followed the Christian Reformed Church through its split and sided with doctrinal “purity” at the expense of personal relationships. My overconfident presumption of “doing God’s will” led to an interpersonal catastrophe in my mid-thirties—and a lengthy prison sentence—that shattered my trust in God. Ironically, the very theologian we demonized at Westminster Theological Seminary, John Shelby Spong, helped me to keep my eye on Jesus, the Jewish teacher, when my sense of the supernatural disappeared. I continue to find that his “secular” (naturalist) hermeneutics offers a refreshing and surprising perspective. Postmodern theology, represented here by Kearney, ministered to my existential struggle with nihilism as I felt my life slipping away. Whereas Spong appealed to my “scientific” side, postmodernists (e.g., John Caputo) gave me permission to “let go” and “fall into the abyss.” Though each postmodernist is different, they all helped me laugh—and cry—with their imaginative antics. They literally saved my life. Returning to a sense of “God” did not mean returning to historical, orthodox Christian doctrine. I still felt/

⁵¹ Ibid., 179.

feel very much the leper on the edge of the crowd calling out, “Jesus, have mercy on me!” and wondering if he even heard/hears me. The Christian contemplative (mystical) tradition, represented here by Griffiths, Bourgeault,⁵² and Bruteau, continues to nudge me toward the trust (faith) that Jesus is here, albeit in completely unexpected (and traditionally unrecognizable) ways. Finally, Brueggemann is an unforeseen boon.⁵³ His “imaginative remembering” approach, the traditioning process of retelling, is a wonderful way to make historical criticism bend the knee before the mystery of YHWH. I offer this personal reflection because hermeneutics is not a mere intellectual tool; it is the intimate communion between two (or more) people via a text and is grounded in our bodily-affective, experiential ways of knowing.

Imaginative Hermeneutics

It is James K. A. Smith who has developed an affective, embodied anthropology by aligning the work of contemporary cognitive science with a biblical (Reformational) way of understanding our world.⁵⁴ In a direct attack on the intellectualist anthropology that shows up in both rationalist (idea-centric) and worldview-thinking (belief-centric) approaches, he follows Heidegger in “shift[ing] the center of gravity of the human person from the cognitive to the noncognitive..., from the cerebral regions of the mind to the more affective region of the body.”⁵⁵ Smith says “[w]e are essentially and ultimately desiring animals.... [I]t is what we love that defines who we

⁵² Cynthia Bourgeault wrote to me last year: “It’s a very black irony, under the circumstances, but that staunch teaching of the Desert Fathers still holds true—maybe especially, literally so, in your case: ‘Sit in your cell and it will teach you everything’” (March 29, 2014).

⁵³ “Surprise” seems to be a theme during this part of my life—a stark contrast to the (supposed) “control” theme of my pre-prison days.

⁵⁴ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Cultural Liturgies, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009) and *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Cultural Liturgies, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013).

⁵⁵ Smith, *Desiring*, 49-50.

are.... [W]e are talking about *ultimate* loves—that to which we are fundamentally oriented, what ultimately governs our vision of the good life, what shapes and molds our being-in-the-world....”⁵⁶ In fact, it not only governs our vision of the good life but also our vision (and all our senses) in general. Not even our sensory impressions are neutral. We frame and categorize and assign importance to (i.e., pre-judge) our environment according to both inborn (genetic) predispositions and previous life experiences—all this *before* we analyze/theorize/reflect on it.⁵⁷ And even the style of our theoretical thinking—realist, idealist, nihilist—is chosen by what “makes sense” to us, which depends upon, once again, the ongoing interactions between our predispositions and life experiences. And round and round we go, in a feedback loop typical of such complex systems. All of which is recognized by Spykman when he says we all wear different “glasses,” and Kearney when he says it is hermeneutics all the way down, and Brueggemann when he reminds us that both writer and reader bring an ideology with them, and Spong when he guides us in interpreting texts that reveal ultimate desires (loves).

From such an embodied, visceral anthropology we can derive an epistemology of desire, an “erotic comprehension.”⁵⁸ “*Eros*,” writes James H. Olthuis, “not as the urge to unite, but as the urge to connect...., as the passion for mutuality and right relation.”⁵⁹ Our bodily desire to comprehend the other (person or text) is, of course not always right or pure, as Olthuis recognizes: “Tragically, such spaces [of connection] are often the abysses of the wounded, the

⁵⁶ Ibid., 50-51 (emphasis original).

⁵⁷ “Perception is already an evaluation that then primes me to act in certain ways, depending on the formation of my character and my ‘passional orientation’” (Smith, *Imagining*, 34).

⁵⁸ Ibid., title of ch. 1. Smith credits the term to Maurice Merleau-Ponty (126).

⁵⁹ James H. Olthuis, “Crossing the Threshold: Sojourning Together in the Wild Spaces of Love” in James H. Olthuis, ed., *Knowing Other-wise: Philosophy at the Threshold of Spirituality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 248 (emphasis original).

labyrinths of the lost. But they can also be places of healing and meeting. Tears, no doubt, but also laughter; tears, but also mending.”⁶⁰ Such a way of knowing is risky—a beautiful risk⁶¹—because not all acts of love are returned in kind. It is tempting, out of self-defense (“Do unto others before they do unto you”), to reach out and grasp (prehend) the world of knowledge for the sake of control (*scientia est potentia*). But rather than a desire for power-over, as if we could autonomously impute meaning to the world (the dream of modernism), or the resignation of absurdity (the nightmare of postmodernity), Jesus, as I read/meet/stand-under him, encourages us to reach out together (com-prehend), to find meaning by “dancing in the wild spaces of love.”⁶² This ecstatic, centrifugal dance (of two giving birth to a third)—if it is risked—is the font of overflowing, extravagant love/desire/eros⁶³ found in our own betweennesses: “between instinct and intellect, between reflex and reflexivity.”⁶⁴ Biologically, this is neither “hard-wired” genetics nor reflective intellection but the habituated inclinations or dispositions, the embodied traditions, one’s “second nature” that is formed over a lifetime by a thousand daily acts that form “common sense.” It is social, it is inherently pragmatic, and it molds one’s (pretheoretical, prereflective, pre-analytic) imagination. Smith, after Seerveld, sees human understanding as fundamentally aesthetic, i.e., “meaning is primarily metaphorical for us.”⁶⁵

Because we are bodily, affective, and imaginative “before” we are cognitive or theoretical, “We are narrative animals whose very orientation to the world is fundamentally shaped by

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ James H. Olthuis, *The Beautiful Risk: A New Psychology of Loving and Being Loved* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001).

⁶² Ibid., 236.

⁶³ Do we create the love or does the Love flow through us or is this yet another co-creating dance?

⁶⁴ Smith, *Imagining*, 58.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 126. Regarding Seerveld: 126n43.

stories.... We're less convinced by arguments than moved by stories; our being-in-the-world is more aesthetic than deductive, better captured by narrative than analysis.... Narrative is the scaffolding of our experience."⁶⁶ This is, for me, the core of my hermeneutics. Our (habituated) bodies resonate with Scripture (or not) and that resonance forms the scaffolding (pardon the mixed metaphor) upon which we build our analytical interpretations. With metaphor at the root of our concept-building, hermeneutics might better be called poetics, or at least draw from the imaginative disclosure of (nonpropositionalist) "story logic."⁶⁷ The way story works, its inner logic, the way it imparts truth is not "in the way that a newspaper article or surveillance video may be 'true'"⁶⁸—not representational or correspondent. Its own irreducible mode of truth is contained "in the unique affect generated by its cadences and rhythm, in the interplay and resonances of the imaginative world it invokes, in the metaphorical inferences that I 'get' on a gut level."⁶⁹ This is in direct contrast to the intellectualist reading of stories that sees them as mere "containers or conduits for information."⁷⁰ We are talking here about the qualitative difference between reading a novel that "gets under our skin," whose characters become our "friends" and haunt us for years to come, and the Cliff's Notes (outline) version. The Cliff's Notes can be valuable when, for instance, one is comparing the plot development of two or more novels by the same author. But only the reading/hearing of a novel in its fullness will offer the risky opportunity to dance—the author, text, and reader joining hands—into truth, into an aesthetic

⁶⁶ Ibid., 108.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 134. Smith borrows the concept of "story logic" from David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

⁶⁸ Ibid., 134.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 132.

deepening, an imagination/affect/body-changing experience of healing and wholeness (shalom). Or, because of the risk, into untruth and brokenness. “Be careful little eyes what you see....”

In summary, allow me to sketch my hermeneutics in terms of three traditional categories: ontology (What am I? What are we? What is my/our place in this world/reality/cosmos/creation?), epistemology (How do I/we know?), and ethics (How should I live my life? What am I trying to accomplish?). Already assumptions are being made. I believe that created reality (*ontos*) precedes human consciousness (*episteme*). This is based mainly on the scientific views of evolutionary cosmology. I may be wrong, perhaps consciousness preceded matter/energy, but I certainly have no memory of it. Also, I believe that human life (and the creation in general) has a *telos*, a purpose, or at least many interrelated purposes (*teloi*), and that human lives are woven into that teleological tapestry.

I cannot begin the simple task of interpreting a text without bringing with me a lifetime of bodily experience; there is no neutral, transcendent, objective (disconnected) chair into which I can climb to get a “God’s-eye view.” God, or the Ultimate noncreational Other to which the word “God” points, does not invite me to sit in the *Cathedra* but rather, remarkably, forms an ever-evolving creation that is constantly symphonizing its intimate dependence on the Creator⁷¹—for those who have ears to hear. For me, God is far more tangible in and through the sensuous creation than as a Greek Idea (*eidos*) of perfection, omnipotence, omniscience, and all sorts of other superlative extrapolations of humanness. The Creator-creation distinction need not be breached, but a shift of the emphasis from knowing the Creator as Ultimate Perfection to knowing the Creator as (behind/in) the soft breeze on your cheek, the dazzling glow of the

⁷¹ As a small child, I had heard the word “Dooyeweerd” often in the presence of my loving grandfather, Glenn A. Andreas. Once, as we walked hand in hand to the local duck pond (in my other hand was a bread bag full of stale bread crumbs), I asked him what a “Dooyeweerd” was. Grandpa said, “He’s a man who tells us that all of creation—like those tulips there—are shouting, ‘God made us!’”

sunset, the detail of an infant's fingernail, etc. would do much to help us live in a loving balance (shalom) with creation instead of destroying it. This is risky; it is dangerously close to pantheism (cf. panentheism), but after two millennia of the ancient-middle-eastern-potentate narrative—descending to earth to rescue us from this pitiful existence and then whisking his [*sic*] faithful ones back to heaven—I think all of creation (and the Creator) would be better served by listening to its rhythms, observing its patterns, and leaning into (i.e., trusting) them with our lives. Evangelicals like Goldsworthy say we should study Scripture to “know God and his will for our lives.”⁷² I could not agree more, but God and God's will are also known via creation. The Reformers spoke of Scripture interpreting Scripture; I say, Scripture interprets creation which interprets Scripture etc. Or, better, Scripture is a part of creation, so creation interprets creation. We should not fear but embrace the theories of modern science (e.g., evolution, climate change, etc.) as they unfold the infinite mysteries of creation—every planet, mountain, and Higgs boson displaying unending creativity. Finally, I find the Jewish autonym for God, YHWH, to be a brilliant way to refer to the Divine without the all-too-human (and modernist) tendency to grasp/define It. YHWH, the word and concept, is wonderfully allusive: a verb with multiple simultaneous tenses, akin to nouns like “being” and “existence,” all revealed in the rich imagery of fire and (plant) life, and handed down in the apophatic tradition of silence. Is there any better way to perceive/conceive the imperceptible/inconceivable?

Knowing (*episteme*) is part of being (*ontos*) so its separateness here is really an analytical artifice. Evan Runner said life is religion, i.e., being is knowing/connecting to Being/Other/YHWH in and through our burning-bush creational experiences. As we share these experiences, knowing becomes communal, historical, and traditioned. Meaning arises in the inbetween spaces

⁷² Goldsworthy, *Hermeneutics*, 16.

of the dance of the Creator and creation (both human and other-than-human). Together, we discover norms like love, justice, mercy even as we reify such abstractions in everyday contexts. Whether or not YHWH “is” or “holds” those norms in some transcendent fashion, we must strive to act them out with our neighbors. We feel our way into those norms/truths via communities of trust (troth). As Smith articulates, it is from the body up, or natural inclinations trained by communal habits (*habitus*), that the imaginative basis of our cognition guides our (often unconscious) perceptions and our (analytical, hermeneutical) conceptions. Our *ratio* is a powerful tool, but we must wield it with humility, realizing our preconceptions, presuppositions, and prejudices. I approach a biblical text borrowing trust from my religious community, a trust that authenticates that this author’s burning-bush experience rings true—all the while being aware that the author(s) had his/her/their own *habitus*. This is not a postmodern infinite regression but an interaction of creational contexts. We should not fear but embrace the theories of modern archeology, anthropology, and mythology that attempt to recreate the story of the origins of religion. All religious prophets worth their salt point beyond themselves to the deeper meaning of life. The Jewish tradition, our (pre-Christian) tradition, is, thanks to my upbringing, the story I know and love best. Its truths make guest appearances in Buddhism, Taoism, and even Neopaganism, to name but a few,⁷³ and in the portions of Christianity that remain true to early Judaism’s earthy roots and avoid Hellenistic transcendentalism. Jesus is, I believe, a true son of that creation-celebrating Judaism. His parables, for instance, are models of imaginative (allusive, aesthetic, poetic, bodily) knowing—and evidence of a oneness with YHWH.

Our historic creeds, as necessary as they may have been in their day, do a great disservice by ignoring the life and teachings of Jesus. His life of extravagant, wasteful love, of an “erotic

⁷³ That I have studied in recent years.

comprehension” of creation and the Creator, should be our daily recitation, our daily infusion of *habitus* (re)forming our most basic desires, motives, and pretheoretical thinking. Our job is to bring shalom—love, justice, mercy, healing—to a broken world, to the real-life Sarah Starzynskis we meet. These are the *habitus*, the life experiences, and the loves that form my hermeneutics, that I bring to bear on any (religious) text that I am fortunate enough to dance with. It can be outlined as follows:

- YHWH permeates creation as Spirit and participates in creation as Christ; therefore, all language and text are part of the unfolding of this God-structured creation.
- Humans are spiritual, imaginative animals interconnected with YHWH and the rest of creation via communal knowing that is bodily before it is analytical; therefore, all language and text are traditioned, embodied, and contextual.
- Because we have broken trust/truth with YHWH and creation, our *telos* is the work of shalomic healing; therefore, all language and text are open to criticism to determine its healing value.

The Messianic Concept

One cannot have a messianic concept without first having a messianic intuition, i.e., a gut-level, communally-shaped impression of a Messiah. Gerard Van Groningen admits as much when he writes, “The biblical idea of revelation should be the basic concept that pervades and colors all messianic presentations,” and names his study *Messianic Revelation in the Old Testament*.⁷⁴ Of course, Van Groningen’s statement begs the question of what lies behind his concept of revelation, but that reveals itself in good time. He begins his study by defining narrower and wider concepts of

⁷⁴ Gerard Van Groningen, *Messianic Revelation in the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (1990; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 11.

Messiah: narrower referring specifically to an anointed King, and wider to additional aspects such as other means or nonroyal persons of salvation.⁷⁵ His preference is for the wider use and he demonstrates how Scripture applies the anointing designation to prophets and priests as well, hence the common messianic formula: prophet, priest, and king. Even so, he is careful to differentiate his “historic Reformed conception of the Bible” from three other positions: (1) the Bible as a supernatural book, (2) the Bible as a compilation of ancient human writings, and (3) an intermediate view that is held in dialectical tension.⁷⁶ In contrast, the Reformed position, according to Van Groningen, has four major tenets.

First, the Bible is a record of the verbal communications of God either explicitly or implicitly captured in a variety of genres by a variety of authors writing “in journalistic fashion.”⁷⁷ I find this difficult to separate from position (3) above, and I must question his usage of “journalistic.” Does he intend to (anachronistically) import our modern fact-checking style of journalism—or perhaps he refers to editorializing?

Second, the Bible is a record of God’s revelation (uncovering, opening up, making available) of God’s “intentional, intelligible, and teleological activity.”⁷⁸ The words may be directly from God’s mouth (e.g., Gen. 1) or from others, but ultimately the Bible is “the divinely controlled recording of actual events.”⁷⁹ I find this to be a mere restatement of the first tenet.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 19-20.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 56-57.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 57.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 58.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 59.

Third, the central motif of the Bible is that it “is the permanent record of God’s covenantal relationships with mankind throughout the ages.”⁸⁰ The covenant, says Van Groningen, is really about the Kingdom of God, about God as King and humans as vicegerents over creation. Our creation mandate is to cultivate and develop creation, and, because we are covenant breakers, our redemptive mandate is to, first, submit to Jesus Christ and, second, help others to do the same. I agree that we are covenant breakers. Our vicegerency “over” creation has brought us to the point of no return regarding anthropogenic climate change and species extinction. This is obviously not the context of the Scriptures but it describes our current predicament well. I cannot help but wonder if the whole vicegerent concept, a blessed-sounding promise to an agrarian society, has not outlived its usefulness.

Fourth, the Bible’s message is unified, integrated, and progressive (unfolding). In other words, the unifying creation-covenant theme is held together by several parts (e.g., creation, fall, redemption) that are disclosed over time. As such, Van Groningen believes it is uniquely God-breathed, inerrant, infallible, and utterly accessible (not esoteric). In light of modern scholarship, I find it naive to continue to believe that there are no literal/literary errors in Scripture. There are plenty. But not a single one of them need dissuade us from the aesthetic, ethical, and other norms/truths that are contained within its covers.

In sum, Van Groningen’s messianic concept, based on his concept of revelation, is based, in turn, on the historic Reformed hermeneutics of the Bible’s creation-fall-redemption metanarrative unfolding into the person of Jesus Christ. I believe it would serve us well to consider a few other conceptions of Messiah.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Like Van Groningen, Randall Price sees “the messianic idea...expanded [throughout Scripture]...in accord with the hermeneutical principle of progressive revelation.”⁸¹ He traces the use of *mashiach* (“anointed”) throughout the Old Testament and its usage in reference to kings, patriarchs, foreign rulers, the nation of Israel, priests, and prophets. Pre-exile, the Messiah is one to smite Israel’s enemies, and post-exile to rebuild the Temple. Tracing the concept through the intertestamental period via Jewish apocryphal and pseudepigraphical apocalyptic literature, Price remarks that the “messianic anticipation became even more pronounced with the loss of Jewish sovereignty through the Roman conquest (63 B.C.) leading to the expectation of a national king who would affect political and spiritual redemption.”⁸² This, of course, leads to the messianic fulfillment in Jesus.

Reza Aslan, in his controversial book *Zealot*, picks up on that messianic fervor and makes it the centerpiece of his study. Before, during, and after Jesus’ time, Messiahs were everywhere. He was merely one name in a long Roman list of executed troublemakers. “The first century [CE] was an era of apocalyptic expectation among the Jews of Palestine.... Countless prophets, preachers, and messiahs tramped through the Holy Land delivering messages of God’s imminent judgment.”⁸³ Hezekiah the bandit chief, Judas the Galilean and his grandson Menahem (leader of the Sicarii), Simon son of Giora, Simon son of Kochba, the prophet Theudas and his 400 disciples, “the Egyptian” and his desert army, the shepherd Athronges who crowned himself the King of the Jews, “the Samaritan” who was crucified by Pontius Pilate, Simon of Peraea—all met tragic ends at the hands of the Romans. There were other Jewish miracle workers like Rabbi

⁸¹ Randall Price, “The Concept of the Messiah in the Old Testament,” *World of the Bible*, accessed September 9, 2014, <http://www.worldofthebible.com/resources.htm>.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Random House, 2013), xxiii.

Hanina ben Dosa who lived near Nazareth and the famous Apollonius of Tyana who “healed the lame, the blind, the paralytic. He even raised a girl from the dead.”⁸⁴ There were other exorcists like Eleazar and Rabbi Simon ben Yohai. Jesus was not alone. Messianism was in the air and, unfortunately, “to call oneself the messiah at the time of the Roman occupation was tantamount to declaring war on Rome.”⁸⁵ The military-savior definition of Messiah was dominant and, as we all know, it did not work out well for Jesus of Nazareth either.

John Shelby Spong recognizes this: “The disciples of Jesus had to deal with the hard facts that the one they called messiah had been crucified; that did not fit into any part of the traditional expectation.”⁸⁶ Nonetheless, something about Jesus “transcended every limit of death and defeat,” enabling his followers to “discover love without limits and to understand being without status,” as well as “redefin[ing] messiah not as a warrior in victory, but as something that can be found in losing, in dying, in powerlessness and in living for another.”⁸⁷ For Spong, the messianic concept is not about supernatural, spiritual salvation but rather the person of Jesus inspiring us to be fully human.

Spong’s humanistic conception is shared by Reform Judaism. David S. Ariel describes the Reform messianic concept as one of “longing for universal brotherhood within the context of ethical monotheism,” that is, “a messianic age without a Messiah,” “an age in which the religious

⁸⁴ Ibid., 106.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 19.

⁸⁶ John Shelby Spong, “Part XXXI Matthew—Peter: A Symbol—The Wobbling Rock at Ceasarea Philippi,” posted October 9, 2014, accessed October 9, 2014, <http://johnshelbyspong.com/2014/10/09>.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

and ethical teachings of the Torah will become universal.”⁸⁸ The long and bitter history between Jews and Christians makes it painfully difficult for Jews to discuss Jesus with any sense of equanimity, but Rabbi Hilda Abrevaya once called Jesus the first Reform rabbi.⁸⁹

Finally, for John D. Caputo (reading Jacques Derrida), the Messiah is ever-coming, never arriving. “The ‘second coming of Christ’ is not a ‘when’ to be calculated but a ‘how’ to be lived....”⁹⁰ He is “the Messiah who never shows up.... We spend our lives, or so we should, hoping, dreaming, sighing for the event, praying and weeping over the event, praying for the coming of the event. For the event does not quite, never does really—*exist*.”⁹¹ What could this mean—for Jew or Christian? Are the promises of Scripture a lie? “The Scriptures are true,” Caputo writes, “but their truth is poetic not propositional.”⁹² In contrast to Greek philosophy, with its eye on the really real in the great Beyond and the exemplars of perfection (*arete*) in the here-and-now, Caputo’s eye, like Jesus’, is cast down, finding “the lowliest and most unsightly.”⁹³ This is a theopoetics of creation, of connection to all that is earthy and soiled, and of bringing healing/shalom with dirty hands. “In the biblical tradition, God is not the object of a speculative mysticism that sweeps us up into an eternal now where we are one with the One, but the one who comes knocking at our door dressed in rags in search of bread and a cup of cold water.”⁹⁴

⁸⁸ David S. Ariel, “Modern Jewish Messianism,” My Jewish Learning, accessed September 9, 2014, http://myjewishlearning.com/beliefs/Theology/Afterlife_and_Messiah/Messianism/Modern_Messianism.shtml.

⁸⁹ Personal conversation, c. April, 2009.

⁹⁰ John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 140.

⁹¹ John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 58.

⁹² John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 118.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 263.

I believe it was William James who once said that we choose our philosophies based on our personalities. Not only does this ring true—a century later—in light of Smith’s description of the *habitus* that underlies our theoretical thinking, but our brief survey above of various concepts of Messiah makes me wonder: are we merely projecting our desires onto Jesus, imag(in)ing him like some kind of Rorschach Messiah? If so, I move forward into a hermeneutics of Messiah with fear and trembling. What will my interpretations reveal about my hopes, dreams, and desires?

Interpreting Messiah

For Christians, Jesus’ messiahship is, of course, beyond dispute, and, as a Christian, I have no reason to question that designation. Nonetheless, I find several historical aspects of messianic interpretation puzzling and intend to use the final portion of this paper to wrestle with them.

The traditional starting point, at least for Reformational Christians, is with the concept of covenant history. “Covenant,” says Spykman, “is the very foundation and framework for all biblical religion,”⁹⁵ and the covenant is fulfilled in Christ (*christos/mashiach*). The covenant relationship between YHWH and humans is, in other words, the metanarrative overlay, the lens through which we read the Hebrew Scriptures. Relationality/interconnectedness defines our very creaturely existence, so there is no other way for the Creator to interact with the creation except interpersonally. And all gods are covenantal—or so they pretend to be. Bow down to Progress and you will be filled with hope: technology will find a way. Bend the knee to Entertainment and you will laugh all your troubles away. Pledge your allegiance to Might and it will keep you safe. All counterfeit covenants from phony gods. YHWH also makes promises about hope and troubles and safety, but something about shoehorning the splendid diversity of the Hebrew Scriptures into

⁹⁵ Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, 359.

a single metanarrative—trifolding covenant history (creation, fall, redemption)—seems facile, or worse, foreign to the *mélange* of Semitic spirituality.

Sh'ma Yisrael... (“Hear, O Israel...”). Hebrew spirituality is primarily aural. Incline your ear to the word/work (*dabar*) of YHWH and respond in kind (i.e., like kin, the children of YHWH). Perhaps this comes from the lifestyle of desert nomads where shifting sands change the sights but different animals and humans are identifiable by the sound of their voices. Whatever the case, sound is experienced *in here*, inside our heads; it is an intimate thing. By contrast, the Greeks propounded a vision-oriented *worldview*, a metaphor that still dominates our ideas (Gk: *idein*, “to see”), if you *see* what I mean. This difference is significant. There is an old rabbinic saying “that on Mount Sinai, each one of the Israelites who had been standing at the foot of the mountain had experienced God in a different way.”⁹⁶ The Hebrews were more comfortable with different experiences and interpretations of the Divine than the Greeks. The Hellenistic tradition emphasizes (visual) perfection. Greek art—sculptured bodies—must have been just as intimidating to the average citizen as today’s supermodels and professional athletes are to us. Of the various religious expressions throughout Greek history, I am concerned here mainly with Platonism and its influence on Christianity—and the (neo)Platonic Christian reading of the Messiah in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Look, for instance, at the book of Genesis. In his article, “The Torah Is a Braid,” Richard Trudeau examines the various authorial traditions via literary criticism. He concludes, “For P, God is remote, the dominator of nature, a lawgiver and harsh judge, and available to humans only through religious officials. For J, God is more like Father Nature—molding humans and

⁹⁶ Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 73-74. Armstrong continues, similar to William James, “Each individual would experience the reality of ‘God’ in a different way to answer the needs of his or her own particular temperament” (74).

animals out of dirt, planting a garden for humans to till, walking with us on the earth, and available to everyone behind every tree and on top of every hill.”⁹⁷ This type of analysis is not new; “higher” criticism has been around for about 150 years. The point here is that the editor(s) of the Torah in his/her/their wisdom kept the different perspectives alive, sometimes even weaving them side-by-side. There is no Hellenistic drive to *unify* and *perfect* YHWH, only the desire to preserve our diverse experiences of the Divine. All of this makes me wary of attempts to unify (reduce) any concept (like Messiah) in the Hebrew Bible let alone throughout the entire Christian Bible.⁹⁸

Brueggeman writes that “the taproot of messianic thought in the Old Testament” is found in the oracles in the books of Kings and Chronicles.⁹⁹ The whole idea behind the Messiah, the “anointed,” is the *chosen one*—chosen to speak on YHWH’s behalf (prophet) or act as YHWH’s mediator (priest) or rule as YHWH’s vicegerent (king)—and the model Messiah is David. It is Saul who is first anointed as king (1 Sam. 10:1), receives the spirit of YHWH, and prophesies in an ecstatic frenzy (1 Sam. 10:10). Yet when he attempts to play the role of priest, he is rejected by YHWH (1 Sam. 13:8-15). This seems counter to the usual movement of differentiation. Were not Moses and Samuel types of a tripartite proto-messiah? Van Groningen describes Moses as a “messianic agent in three ways: as prophet, priest, and king,” and Samuel as prophet, judge, and priest.¹⁰⁰ Yet Saul and the kings after him are only kings—until Jesus, who is

⁹⁷ Richard Trudeau, “The Torah Is a Braid,” *The Fourth R* 27, vol. 6 (November-December 2014), 18. P stands for “priest,” and J for “Yahwist” (originally from “Jahveh” in German).

⁹⁸ Although I do not contest the faith and devotion of those involved in choosing the New Testament canon, I suspect that (Hellenic) unity played a larger role than (Hebraic) diversity. Nonetheless, willy nilly, the New Testament itself contains a wonderful variety of experiences of God and Messiah.

⁹⁹ Brueggemann and Linafelt, *Introduction*, 171.

¹⁰⁰ Van Groningen, *Messianic Revelation*, vol. 1, 205 (Moses) and 274-5 (Samuel)

said to be in the Davidic line of kingship but is actually more in line with Moses and Samuel.

The explanation seems specious. Allow me to put it differently:

1. Saul is YHWH's Messiah as only a king (1 Sam. 24:6 *et passim*).
2. David is YHWH's Messiah as only a king (1 Sam. 16:6, 12-13 *et passim*).¹⁰¹
3. The future Messiah is a Davidic Messiah (i.e., king only).
4. Jesus, being crucified, fails as a Davidic king (overthrowing Rome).
5. Jesus is declared Messiah anyway by redefining the concept in two ways:
 - a. broadening it to include prophetic and priestly roles, and
 - b. making his kingdom “not of this world.”
6. The Hebrew Scriptures are mined for prophet/priest/king models—like Moses and Samuel—who are then declared to be prototypical of Christ.

This is not just a modern, higher-critical interpretation but also a fairly standard Jewish interpretation, the latter being dismissed far too easily by Christians, especially considering the source material is *Jewish*. I am not saying that Jews are right and Christians are wrong. I do not believe it is so black and white. I would suggest the standard Christian interpretation makes both too much and too little of Messiah.

Christians make too much of Jesus' messiahship when they naively assume that the Jews were awaiting a singular person. Although some Jews were (and still are) caught up in that romantic myth, Messiah is less a “man” than a milieu.¹⁰² The popular Jewish belief may have been that another (idealized) David could achieve such fantasies against the superpowers of their day (Babylonians, Assyrians, or Romans), but any knowledgeable, realistic Jew would know that Messiah is embodied (incarnated) in any number of forms, from foreign rulers (like Cyrus, the Persian king: Isaiah 45:1) to YHWH's people in general (1 Chr. 16:22)—all involved in bringing

¹⁰¹ Does dancing before the ark make David a de facto priest? Does composing psalms make him a prophet? I would argue these are qualitatively different than Samuel's priestly duties or Isaiah's prophecies.

¹⁰² Leila Leah Bronner, “The Jewish Messiah: A Historical Perspective,” *Bible and Jewish Studies*, accessed September 9, 2014, <http://www.bibleandjewishstudies.net/articles/jewishmessiah.htm>.

about a restorative (Davidic kingship) and/or utopian (peace and prosperity) kingdom. Open-minded Jews readily admit that Jesus offered *spiritual* peace and prosperity, but everyone agrees he did not reestablish a Davidic kingdom in a literal, secular sense. Hence the need for a second coming, i.e., Jews and Christians are now in the same situation of still awaiting the coming of the kingdom. Some, like Christian postmodernists and liberal Jews and Christians, espouse a messiah that is ever coming but never arriving, i.e., the breath of YHWH ever inspiring YHWH's people to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with YHWH. We make too much of Jesus' messiahship when we eisegete (domesticate!) the Hebrew Scriptures by taking its diverse experiences of YHWH and various meanings of Messiah and force-fit them to match the interpretive/midrashic elements of the Christian New Testament. It is unfair to the richness of Jewish history and an overanalysis of the wonder-filled and allusive concept of messiah.

Paradoxically, Christians also make too little of Jesus' messiahship when they hastily spiritualize it. Quite typically, all three synoptic Gospels leave Jesus rather laconic in the face of Pontius Pilate's question, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus replies something like, "Whatever you say."¹⁰³ It is John—mystical John, of the mysterious "Logos" opening, of the characteristically unJewish "I AM" sayings—who has Jesus reply to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world..."¹⁰⁴ I find John's midrashic interpretation of Jesus to be fascinating but mourn the loss of meaning when Jesus' words are read, "not of this physical reality" implying some heavenly/ethereal/supernatural realm. We might as well crown Plato as Messiah and go from there—as too much of Christianity has. No, we must read Jesus' words to mean "not like this imperial world at all," but rather a world where YHWH has (re)infiltrated (remythologized,

¹⁰³ Matt. 27:11; Mark 15:2; and Luke 23:3.

¹⁰⁴ John 18: 36 (NKJV). The NRSV says, "...not *from* this world..." (emphasis added).

resacralized, reenchanting) every aspect of our secular lives—hence the powerful imagery in Revelation of the New Jerusalem here on earth. In such a world there is no longer any discrimination based on race (Jew or Greek), sex (male or female), or economic status (slave or free). These are radical, liberating ideas—not in some ethereal realm but here amidst the laughter, tears, and sensuality of our earthly existence. “My kingdom doesn’t look like Rome [or USA] at all!”

So when I read a messianic passage like this—YHWH says: “Here is my servant, . . . my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my breath into him; he will bring forth justice to the nations . . . a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench . . .” (Isaiah 42:1, 3)—I join my Jewish brothers and sisters, the Sarah Starzynskis of the world, in yearning for the return of the Messiah, for a better time, for justice and peace/shalom, for living in proper reciprocity with the earth, and I do not wait passively to be rescued (saved, set free, healed). I strive to inhale the breath of YHWH and further the building of the “kingdom” here and now. *Maranatha. Mashiach* come quickly.

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