

“THE PROPHETICAL PRIESTLY PERSPECTIVE FROM THE EXILE”:
A UNIVERSALIZING CATHOLIC / ORTHODOX APPROACH
FOR TEACHING THE BIBLE

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Abstract / Overview

The proposed project brings together the results of roughly five years of labor as a teacher/scholar devoted specifically to bridging the wide chasm that exists between the parish and the academy in regard to understanding the Hebrew Bible/Older Testament. The divide is caused by the fact that traditional historical-critical approaches to the Older Testament have unraveled the fabric of the Bible’s constituent strands to the point where one no longer has “Bible,” often leaving serious implications for faith largely unaddressed. Nowhere is this problem more acute than in our Catholic undergraduate Old Testament classrooms, in which either 1) some form of the traditional source critical approach is taught, leaving students to navigate any resulting cognitive dissonance in regard to faith on their own; 2) the class is taught as a kind of synchronous “Bible as Literature” class that avoids altogether the problems raised by historical critical investigation; or, 3) the subject is taught catechetically, that is packaged with little or no critical inquiry entertained.

As an Eastern Orthodox teacher/scholar laboring in the field of Jesuit and Catholic biblical studies, I have attempted to bridge this chasm by developing an approach to the Older Testament that meets the rigors of peer-reviewed historical and literary critical scholarship head on, while identifying elements in the dynamic interplay of biblical sources that affirm and are consistent with Jesuit and Catholic (and my own Eastern Orthodox) ideals and values. This approach, which I have dubbed “the Prophetic Priestly Perspective of the Exile” (PPPE), is currently being taught with great success in the classroom and various aspects of it have appeared in some of my recent articles and book chapters (see Section III below). However, due to constraints of time and money I have not yet been able to perform the necessary research or commit to the time that would allow me to pull it all together in any sort of comprehensive *opus*. The Faculty Research Fellowship Program would allow me to produce a supplementary monograph that engages critical study of the Older Testament in a way that also happens to serve Jesuit and Catholic principles, ideals and values; however, the product I envision would be equally attractive to any Christian community that values both intellectual inquiry and the enrichment of faith in its classroom. A portion of the research and writing will take place at the Tantur Ecumenical Institute, located just outside Bethlehem, Palestine. Founded by

Pope Paul V, but operating under the auspices of the University of Notre Dame, Tantur (Arabic for “hilltop”) possesses a well-stocked library of over 70,000 volumes and more than 400 journals. In addition to its vast resources, I will also have access to significant local libraries such as those of the École Biblique, the Albright and Rockefeller Archeological Institutes, and Hebrew University; thus Tantur offers itself as a most appropriate venue for undertaking this project. The incidental fact that the current rector, an Orthodox priest named Fr. Timothy Lowe, is a personal friend of mine ensures that I will receive additional care and attention.

I. Statement of Problem / Purpose

From its beginnings in the Enlightenment, modern critical study of the Bible has remained largely within the domain of Protestant scholarship. Then suddenly in 1943, Pope Pius XII issued the papal encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, a surprising turnabout of the Church’s previous stance that opened the way for Roman Catholic biblical scholars to begin applying modern critical methodologies for understanding the Scriptures.¹ Since that time Roman Catholic scholars have continued to make significant contributions to biblical studies, but for the most part have simply taken up existing (Protestant) scholarly assumptions and methodologies without ever having developed a clearly articulated, distinctively Catholic paradigm of their own.² The problem with assuming the traditional source-critical approach—an otherwise worthwhile scholarly endeavor which attempts to trace the Older Testament’s constituent sources to their ultimately unrecoverable origins—is that it leads ultimately to barrenness for the human soul in matters of faith in that none of these isolated strands approaches anything remotely akin to Bible *qua* Bible.³ Such efforts have contributed to the ever-widening chasm between parish and academy across a wide spectrum of Christian communities, in which both sides withdraw into their own respective sectarian conclaves and ivory towers, each dismissing the other as having nothing of value to present to the other.

My own developing approach, which I call the Prophetic Priestly Perspective from the Exile (PPPE), has been applied with success in my undergraduate and graduate classrooms. It meets the problem of the chasm between parish and academy head-on in that it boldly stands up to the rigors of peer-reviewed historical and literary critical scholarship on the one hand, while identifying elements arising from the dynamic interplay of the Bible’s sources that heartily affirm Jesuit and Catholic principles and values on the other. The latter include, but are not limited to explorations into: 1) the Hebrew Bible’s characteristic twin pillars of justice and

¹ Previously, Pope Leo XIII’s *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), strictly warned Roman Catholic biblical scholars against employing methods of higher criticism.

² For an evaluative response to the Vatican’s release of the report of the Pontifical Biblical Commission on “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” (1993), see P. Blowers, J. Levenson, and R. Wilken, “Interpreting the Bible: Three Views,” in *First Things: The Journal of Religion, Culture, and Public Life* (Aug/Sept 1994); available online at: http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=4484.

³ Even the so-called Father of the Documentary Hypothesis, Julius Wellhausen, resigned his position at Greifswald University in 1882, over a crisis of conscience that his own historical-critical approach to the Older Testament was undermining the faith of his Protestant ministry students.

righteousness (*mishpat ve-zedakah*) combined into a fundamental imperative for created human existence;⁴ 2) the question of what it might mean *ultimately* to be human (in contrast to what it means *merely* to be human), which acknowledges living for others, as well as surrendering to the sovereignty of God; and, 3) realizing that whatever being created in the *imago Dei* may mean, it also carries the serious implication that one is *not* God.

The PPPE is based on a critically-derived, historical and literary platform that asserts that the first major stage in the development of the Hebrew Bible occurred during the mid- to late 6th C BCE, within the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem's palace-temple complex (586 BCE) and the phased deportation of its social elite to Babylon. It argues that among the devastated refugee community a small gathering of people representing diverse and often conflicting priestly, royal, and aristocratic or popular groups standing at the end of their national history laid aside their petty social, political, and religious differences long enough to form a literary response to the question of what it was that had gone so terribly wrong. The answer to this ultimate question of course is no secret to attentive readers of the Bible. It is found in the amazingly unique, self-critical assertion that the Judahite nation had strayed from proper observance of the divinely-given instructive law (Torah) required of it; so that from the perspective of "ultimate" history it was not merely that Babylon had destroyed the nation, but that Judahites themselves had wrought their own destruction by provoking their national god YHWH to wrath and bringing Babylon upon them. The Babylonian god Marduk, they asserted, is not stronger than their own national god YHWH; so if Jerusalem and its temple lay in ruins, then it had to have been God himself who destroyed his own city and house. The primary editorial enterprise thus involves dealing with ultimate questions of how and why.

The product of the response from the Exile is arguably the first instance in which one can say that the Bible has come into existence as "Bible," albeit at a primitive stage, meaning that for the first time in history a multi-vocal collection of diverse genres was selectively brought together and edited in a coherent harmony of tensions rooted in questions of dire human ultimacy. This early stage would include the Pentateuch (also known as the Torah, or the Five Books of Moses), the so-called Deuteronomistic History (also known as the Former Prophets), most of the other prophetic books (*Nevi'im*), and a smattering of writings (*Ketuvim*), like certain proverbs (*mashalim*) and psalms (especially royal coronation psalms).

At this point in time I have traced the structure of the PPPE along the following lines:

⁴ In a future article I expect to assert that justice and righteousness are necessarily two sides of a single coin that keeps biblical human existence authentically in check; for righteousness without justice leads to self-righteousness, while justice without righteousness lacks mercy.

- its critique of Israel’s royal and priestly leadership;
- its critique of Israel’s reliance on its fortified cities;
- its critique of Israel’s reliance on human means of self-defense (e.g., iron chariots);
- its critique of the human tendency toward “individualism” (an anachronistic concept, of course, but hardly an anachronistic behavior);
- its critique of human desires and efforts to “be as God(s).”

The PPPE’s multi-pronged critique is based on 20/20 hindsight in that human beings and their institutions failed to prevent the final great catastrophe, and that reliance upon them is illusory and doomed to fail. Only God, as presented through the medium of true prophecy, can deliver people from their adversaries, supporting the overarching theme that runs like a crimson thread through the Hebrew Bible / Older Testament, namely “I Am [God] and you’re not!”

In sum, diachronous (historical) and synchronous (literary) interpretations are brought together in a way that respects the temporal and spatial distance of these culturally and socially anchored narratives and yet holds universal relevance for today’s faith concerns. The perspective that emerged from the initial Bible editors’ experience of standing at the end of their national history provides readers ancient and modern a rare and insightful opportunity to explore and consider what it might mean *ultimately* to be human—in contrast to what it means *merely* to be human. The end product of this inquiry is found to be antithetical to most modern western ways of thinking, especially its radical individualism, which may account for why understanding the Bible in this way has remained so elusive; however, one finds that the results of this inquiry resonate strikingly with Jesuit and Catholic ideals and values, especially *justitia, magis, and curia personalis*.

II. Significance of the Problem

I cannot imagine a more serious problem for any Christian institution of higher learning than to be faced with the widespread misperception that the inspired and inspiring nature of its sacred texts evaporates under the searing scrutiny of critical biblical scholarship. For us serious biblical teachers/scholars, Wellhausen’s dilemma (see fn 3 above) remains our challenge as well. The Pontifical Biblical Commission’s document, “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” (1993) maintains that the spirit of Roman Catholic biblical studies in that the Church must remain the foundational context for expounding sacred scripture. Even Protestants recognize the importance of interpreting scripture in a community of the living and the long dead, as leading Protestant theologian H. Richard Niebuhr has observed:

In Protestantism we have long attempted to say what we mean by revelation by pointing to the Scriptures, but we have found that we cannot do so save as we interpret them in a community in which men [sic] listen for the word of God in the

reading of the Scriptures, or in which men [sic] participate in the same spiritual history out of which the record came.⁵

If Scripture is in fact the “soul of theology,” as the Church’s “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation” (*Dei Verbum*, 1965) asserts, then keeping that soul healthy through critical study of the biblical text within a context of transcendent human values is essential for the overall health of the Body.

III. Summary of Pertinent Literature

A list of pertinent literature must first of all include the primary source and subject of this study itself, namely the Hebrew Bible, which first must be read critically as any other book, with an eye toward comprehensive inter-textuality resulting from editorial processes over time, an approach known in the field as “canonical criticism.” My reading is informed by a thorough knowledge of Levantine history in the Iron Age, including fifteen years of active involvement in the field of biblical archaeology, both as co-director of the Bethsaida Excavations Project in Palestine/Israel and, more recently, as co-director and researcher for the Virtual World Project.⁶ Whenever I encounter an apparent “discrepancy” between the hard science of archaeology and the text of the Bible, it forces me to struggle even harder to understand what may have been transpiring in the minds of the original author or editor and the ancient audience.

Relevant secondary sources include recent works that attempt to understand the effects of the Exile or try to bring this obscure period to light. These include especially D. Gowan, *The Theology of the Prophetic Books: The Death and Resurrection of Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998); D. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2002); and Jill Middlemas, *The Templeless Age: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the Exile* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007). Unfortunately, relatively little is known about the experiences of Judahites in the Exile, which likely has caused many scholars to overlook its monumental impact on the formation of the Bible.

My own publications on various aspects of this proposed project began in 2005, with an invitation to submit some of my strategies for teaching the Older Testament to an edited volume published by the Society of Biblical Literature, for which I submitted four: “The Conquest of Canaan” (pp. 137-38); “A Controversial King” (pp. 157-58); “The Siege of Jerusalem” (pp. 160-61); and “Striking Parallels (pp. 102-04),” in *Teaching the Bible: Practical Strategies for Classroom Instruction* (M. Roncace and P. Gray, eds.; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005). Each of these exercises compels students to read the biblical text critically in order to see for

⁵ *The Meaning of Revelation* (NYC: MacMillan, 1941; reprinted Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006) 27.

⁶ The Virtual World Project, which was founded by my colleague, Ron Simkins, in 2004, may be accessed online at <http://www.virtualworldproject.org>.

themselves that something besides the writing of actual-factual history is going on and that what was going on seemed to level a critical eye toward certain human institutions (see Section I: Statement of Problem/Purpose).

In an article on “Biblical Studies and the Eastern and the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Traditions,” co-written with V. Hovanessian, in *Journal for the Orthodox Center for the Advancement of Biblical Studies* 1.1 (2008), available online at www.ocabs.org/journal, I introduced for the first time in print my PPPE agenda, offering it as an example of critical biblical scholarship that avoids the dangers of the erosion of personal faith and in some ways may even enhance faith among the more scientifically minded and skeptical. The promotion of PPPE within Eastern Orthodox circles continued with my “Introduction” (pp. 1-7) to *The Old Testament As Authoritative Scripture in the Early Churches of the East* (V. Hovhanessian, ed.; New York: Peter Lang, 2010).

In 2008, my work on the PPPE’s critique of human reliance on fortified cities appeared as “Landscape of Shadows: The Image of City in the Hebrew Bible,” the lead chapter (pp. 11–21) in *Cities Through the Looking Glass* (R. Arav, ed.; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), which received many positive reviews.

Finally, my study of PPPE’s critique of Israel’s leadership, which carries implications for the critique of the ego-self, can be found in my book chapter, appearing in Romanian, entitled “În căutarea unei antropologii scripturistice autentice: două studii de caz” [“In Search of a Genuine Biblical Anthropology: Two Case Studies,”], pp. 180-192 in *Biserica Ortodoxă și Drepturile Omului: Paradigme, fundamente, implicații* (*The Orthodox Church and the Rights of Man: Paradigms, Foundations, and Implications*); Nicolae Răzvan Stan, ed.; Bucharest, Romania: S.C. Universul Juridic S.R.L., 2010). This chapter focuses on the biblical narratives of the Judah and Tamar episode (Gen 38) and the David and Uriah story (2 Sam 11) to argue that Israel’s leaders exploit for their own interests whomever they choose simply because they can, while the real heroes worthy of emulation are the marginalized, powerless, practically anonymous figures who understand far better what it means to respect the divine law that undergirds the social-cultural order and act responsibly and selflessly even under the threat of their own demise.

IV. Research Questions / Hypotheses

A. The basic research questions before me are as follows:

- to what extent can the case be made that that the historical context of the Babylonian Exile (6th C BCE) provided the setting for the first major stage in the formation of the Bible as Bible (i.e., the “where?” and “when?”)?
- who were the main players involved in responding to the crisis of deportation and Jerusalem’s destruction?
- what were their primary concerns?
- how were these concerns expressed?

- why are they important for modern readers of the Bible, especially our students?

B. The corresponding hypotheses are as follows:

- **Where and When:** The hypothesis finds analogy in the Barringer Crater in Arizona, a huge, bowl-shaped earthen structure measuring roughly three-quarters of a mile wide and some 600 feet deep, surrounded by an earthen rim some 200 feet high. This incredible geological phenomenon was regarded as taboo by indigenous local inhabitants millennia before the arrival of Europeans.⁷ Significant quantities of iron and nickel have long been extracted in and around the crater and speculation over the cause of this deep, ridged structure continued to provoke scientific debate from the late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. It is now generally accepted that the crater was in fact caused by the impact of a 63,000-ton meteorite striking the earth at 9 miles per second, sometime between 20,000 and 40,000 years ago, and that the tremendous impact caused the meteorite itself to disintegrate. The phenomenon itself remains a void—not unlike the historical void of the Exile—yet one may speculate about its cause in relation to its effects. In the Bible, overt concerns that address the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in prophetic literature, including prophecies *ex eventu*, lend this hypothesis a great deal of support.
- **Who:** The concerns expressed are primarily those of various priestly and prophetic groups, which also make use of materials from royal archives.
- **What:** Their overarching concern is over the question “What went wrong?”
- **How:** The response to the overarching question is multi-pronged, focusing on critiques of human institutions in hindsight, in which people placed misguided reliance on their failed royal and priestly leadership; their failed fortified city walls; their failed means of self-defense, especially their iron chariots; and the ego-self, in which the trend toward acting as an individual might act at the expense of others is viewed as the ultimate idolatry.
- **Why:** The response to the ultimate questions provoked by the Exile are also ultimate, thus they remain timeless and universal. Once identified and articulated, one gains a clearer view of the human condition, especially concerning the distinction between what it means merely to be human (i.e., whatever one can imagine a human doing naturally and without the aid of technology) and what it might mean ultimately to be human (at least from a Jesuit and Catholic perspective, e.g., loyalty, integrity, courage, altruism, responsibility, humility before God, etc).

V. Design and Methods

A-C. The proposed project arises from and serves the Humanities, thus it will build on historical and critical methods applied to primary and secondary sources and will be subject to peer review.

⁷ See O. R. Norton, *Rocks from Space*, Mountain Press, 1994.

D. Schedule for Completing the Project

The proposed project will begin immediately upon the end of the 2011 Spring semester (May 6) and continue until August 20, interrupted only by teaching in the May session and yearly responsibilities to the Bethsaida Project.

- **Week 1** (Omaha, May 8-14): Collection and organization of books, articles, and other resource materials.
- May 16-June 3: Teaching during May session
- **Week 2** (Omaha, June 5-11): Drafting of Project Introduction and Outline.
- June 12-25: I will travel to Israel/Palestine in fulfillment of my yearly responsibilities as Co-director and Supervisor for the Bethsaida Excavations Project.
- **Weeks 3-6** (Tantur Ecumenical Institute; Bethlehem, Palestine): Intensive research and writing. Some sections of the writing will involve reworking previously published articles in which only various aspects of the overall project were presented.
- **Weeks 7-10** (Omaha): Continued writing and revising with the goal of finalizing the manuscript.
- Sept 1-15, 2011: Submitting proposal and sample chapters to Paulist Press, following up on previous conversations about the project with publishers.
- Dec. 1, 2011: Final report to the Dean of the Graduate School.

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VI. Appendices

Appendix A: Biographical Sketch of Principle Investigator

As a Romanian Orthodox theologian professionally involved in biblical studies and Syro-Palestinian archaeology, I hold the Master of Arts in Theology from St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary (1989), where I studied under the academic and spiritual direction of Fr. John Meyendorff (memory eternal) and Fr Paul Nadim Tarazi, whose Festschrift I recently organized. Currently, I hold the rank of Associate Professor of Theology (Hebrew Bible/Older Testament) at Creighton University, where I have taught since 1999. I am past President (2007-2008) of the Rocky Mountain – Great Plains Region of the joint American Academy of Religion (AAR), the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), and the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR), and serve on the steering committee of the “Bible in the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Traditions” program unit at the national level of the SBL. In addition, I am a Board member for the Orthodox Center for the Advancement of Biblical Studies and serve as Senior Editor for its professional journal (*Journal of the Orthodox Center for the Advancement of Biblical Studies*, or *JOCABS*). For fifteen years I have co-directed the Bethsaida Excavations Project, a significant biblical archaeological site located at the foot of the Golan in Palestine/Israel. My Ph.D. was earned at the University of Iowa (1999) in the area of Judaism and Christianity in the Greco-Roman World, under the direction of George Nickelsburg. A portion of my doctoral program was devoted to tenure as Fulbright Scholar to Romania for the 1994-1995 academic year, where I completed my dissertation research, which resulted in a book, *The Romanian Version of the Testament of Abraham: Text, Translation, and Cultural Context* (Early Judaism and Its Literature series; Society of Biblical Literature, 2001). I have also produced an edited work titled *Words of a Shepherd: The Life and Writings of Protostavrophor Vojislav Dosenovich* (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery, 2006) and have authored several book chapters and journal articles. I am involved in international scholarship, having made presentations to academic and general audiences throughout the U.S., Romania and Israel, and in Vienna, Rome, and Berlin as well.

Appendix B: Budget Justification

Airfare to Palestine: N/A (Self-funded)

Requested direct costs: \$1200 USD (Justification: 4 wks at Tantur Ecumenical Institute)

Appendix C: Supporting Materials

“In Search of a Genuine Biblical Anthropology: Two Case Studies,” (“În căutarea unei antropologii scripturistice autentice: două studii de caz.”). Pp. 180-192, in *Biserica Ortodoxă și Drepturile Omului: Paradigme, fundamente, implicații (The Orthodox Church and the Rights of Man: Paradigms, Foundations, and Implications)*, Nicolae Răzvan Stan, ed., Bucharest, Romania: S.C. Universul Juridic S.R.L., 2010.

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“The Conquest of Canaan” (pp. 137-38); “A Controversial King” (pp. 157-58); “The Siege of Jerusalem” (pp. 160-61); and “Striking Parallels (pp. 102-04),” in *Teaching the Bible: Practical Strategies for Classroom Instruction*. M. Roncace and P. Gray, eds.; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005.