What is Political Theology?

Mark G. Brett

Critical biblical scholars in modern Western contexts have often suffered from allergic responses to the idea of theology, for a range of very good reasons. The historic intervention of Baruch Spinoza *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670) notwithstanding, modern Old Testament theologies were often conceived with Christian assumptions, overtly aiming to reflect on the history of religion via organizing concepts derived from later doctrinal theology.¹ In opposition to such conceptual studies, Romantic historicist approaches in the nineteenth century endowed “religion” with great cultural significance, in contrast with theology, which was diminished as a derivative and legalistic form of reflection.² Biblical theology was partially revived for a time under the influence of the “dialectical” Christian theology initially formulated in the 1930s and ’40s and distinguished not only by its opposition to liberal theology but also to Nazism.³ Various attempts were made to revive the discipline of Old Testament theology in this mode, not least in the influential work of Gerhard von Rad, but even von Rad’s achievements remained entangled in underlying Christian assumptions.⁴

Any responses to this problematic history of Christian assumptions would need to tread carefully when attempting to reintroduce theology within studies

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of the Hebrew Bible. The category of “political theology” has come to the fore in recent interdisciplinary discussions, critically reflecting especially on the privatizing and secularizing tendencies of modernity, as well as on the Nazi legacies. The name of Carl Schmitt (“the German Hobbes”) casts a very long shadow in this connection, and his argument that modern politics rests on secularized theological concepts is a view that needs to be understood in its own historical context. It is not that Schmitt was simply diagnosing the disenchantment of the modern world in a general and descriptive way; on the contrary, he was pursuing a critique of modern secular liberalism, which he regarded as a degeneration of politics, and recommending a return to transcendent sources of authority. The capacity of the sovereign to proclaim a “state of exception” (for example, to suspend a nation’s constitutional provisions) is indicative of the transcendent power that can be marshalled by a charismatic authoritarian leader. The analogies between Schmitt’s philosophy and Thomas Hobbes’ Leviathan are well known.

Among the many discussions of Carl Schmitt, a recent essay by Yoav Schaeffer is illuminating for our purposes insofar as it provides an argument for thinking that Martin Buber’s Königstum Gottes (1932) was implicitly a reply to Schmitt. In the context of a declining faith in political liberalism, Buber sought an alternative foundation for Judaism while resisting the authoritarian alternative presented by Schmitt. Königstum Gottes advanced a reading of the Hebrew Bible that saw God as Israel’s exclusive sovereign, which by implication, diminishes

5 For an overview of specifically Jewish proposals, see especially Dalit Rom-Shiloni, “Hebrew Bible Theology: A Jewish Descriptive Approach,” JR 96 (2016): 165–84; ead., Voices from the Ruins: Theodicy and the Fall of Jerusalem in the Hebrew Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021), 43–67, defending once again a descriptive approach to the “talk to and about” God in the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh), and situating this emphasis within the distinctive contributions of Jon Levenson, Michael Fishbane, Benjamin Sommer, Marvin Sweeney, Marc Brettler, David Frankel, Matitiahu Tsevat, Moshe Goshen-Gottstein, and Isaac Kalimi.


the claims of any human king. The anti-monarchic tendencies in the biblical texts are given priority on this reading, and the movement towards monarchy is seen as “the first step towards the secularization of politics.” Israel’s kings were thus open to the charge of usurping divine authority, and they could only ever enjoy a derived measure of sovereignty under the rule of God.

Schmitt’s affirmation of transcendent leadership was thereby deconstructed in Buber’s theopolitics, along with any arbitrary forms of nationalism. Put positively, ethical nationalism was in his view characterized as a “Hebrew humanism” that rejected any attempt to “confine God to a circumscribed space or division of life, to ‘religion.’” On this point, Buber’s work intersects with the more recent research that interrogates the very category of religion, a task that has recently been undertaken by a number of influential philosophers and historians. Modern constructions of reality created the demarcations of economics, politics, science, law, as well as a secular space for civil society. In the ancient world, the dimensions of social life were tightly interwoven, and scholarly attempts to unpick the threads often reveal the unexamined modern assumptions of commentators. For example, many attempts to separate supposedly secular laws from covenant theology are vulnerable to this critique.

One might also identify a similar problem with Michael Walzer’s argument that politics is largely missing from the Hebrew Bible if—as is commonly assumed in modern times—the concept of politics needs to include public deliberation, disagreement, negotiation, and compromise. On Walzer’s account in his major work, In God’s Shadow, the absence of “politics” can be

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explained by the biblical emphasis on divine sovereignty, which is shared in
different ways across all the major traditions. Accordingly, one would have
to admit that if the covenantal or apocalyptic genres of biblical literature
were shaped historically by counter-imperial motivations (as they most likely were),
it does not follow that such motivations were political on this narrowed
modern definition, i.e., shaped by negotiation and compromise between the
leaders or representatives of social groups. Biblical theology would have been
asserted over against imperial impositions, often regardless of any opportunity
for negotiation.

With due respect to Walzer’s remarkable work, however, I have elsewhere
curated a number of arguments to the contrary, affirming, for example, that
the making of the Pentateuch was indeed characterized by a long history of
compromises. But biblical research on political theology can hardly exclude
counter-imperial motivations, so I also argued in Locations of God for a wider
definition of political theology that, at the same time, acknowledges Walzer’s
concern to highlight multiple and mutable perspectives on political life. A very
basic test for the presence of God-talk in the biblical texts (talk to, from and
about God or the gods) is clearly relevant, and when bringing the intersection
of theology and politics into focus, political theology or theopolitics in the
broadest sense could be defined as: “God-talk located in the context of mul-
tiple, often competing, perspectives on social life.” This definition is deliber-
ately vague in adopting the term “located,” since it means to include both
explicit and implicit engagement with the multiple perspectives within socio-
political life.

16 See, e.g., Eckart Otto, Das Deuteronomium: Politische Theologie und Rechtsreform in Juda
und Assyrien (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999); Anathea Portier-Young, Apocalypse against
Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).
17 Brett, Locations of God: Political Theology in the Hebrew Bible (New York: Oxford
University Press, 2019), 98–120, reflecting on many earlier studies that highlight the com-
promises between Deuteronomic and Priestly traditions, as well as Judean and Samaritan
perspectives, in the making of the Pentateuch.
18 Brett, Locations of God, xix. This formulation resiles from a Christian tendency to look for
thematic unities, overarching order, trajectories and metanarratives of salvation history.
It implicitly disagrees with the earlier work of Walter Brueggemann when he identified
an essentially binary opposition of socio-theological trajectories in the Hebrew Bible, a
binary that has also been characteristic of class analysis in liberation exegesis. Instead, I
affirm the greater measure of diversity described in Brueggemann’s major work, Theology
19 The notion of “location” here does not however require scholars to construct a detailed
social history of Israel and Judah, which in many cases is simply not possible to provide.
In this respect, my approach differs from Norman Gottwald’s ambitious attempt in The
The obvious threat in this definition is that it sets the parameters too wide, but the chapters in this volume arose from a conference in which there was a deliberate effort to keep the conceptual and methodological gates open and to approach our theme in a more inductive manner, examining the possible political implications in each case study. Naturally, the concern was expressed that while my own broad definition certainly covered the full scope of the topics discussed at the conference, it potentially leaves hardly any biblical text out of consideration. But precisely that concern might lead us to examine the possibility that the scope of political theology has been unhelpfully truncated in previous research, under the influence of the demarcations of modernity. Nevertheless, to mention one example, the book of Esther contains no God-talk, at least in its Hebrew version, and by implication no political theology—even on this broad definition. In her contribution to the volume, Rachelle Gilmour takes up this peculiarity in Esther by focusing on its politics of beauty in comparison with Samuel-Kings, where beauty is framed within a more explicit theopolitics expressed in narrative form.

Konrad Schmid’s recent work *Historical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* illustrates in some ways the limiting assumption that our volume seeks to overcome. If “political theology” earns itself a brief separate chapter in Schmid’s book, it is because religion interacts with politics in the ancient world, but this view of interaction implicitly reaffirms the essential separateness of the two domains. Thus, for example, the religious idea of covenant is understood to be derived from political practices of treaty making. The earliest form of Deuteronomy, in particular, expresses resistance to the Assyrian treaty genre precisely by adapting it to Yahwist purposes, and this kind of adaptation is

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*Tribes of Yawheh* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979) to reduce (emic) theologies to their (etic) material base within a critically reconstructed history. The approach recommended here is closer to Walter Brueggemann’s tendency in his later work to affirm multiple possible histories, rather than purportedly secure results of historical criticism. Similarly, Roland Boer’s nuanced Neo-Marxist model of ideology, does not imagine a mechanical correlation of each political theology with its very own social group—whether a priestly family or a scribal school who can only ever advance their own interests. Roland Boer, *Marxist Criticism of the Bible* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 24–26; Brett, *Locations of God*, 159–63. See also Jorge Pixley’s acknowledgment that liberation exegesis, especially in its lived engagement with the poor, needs to become less dependent on critical reconstructions of social history. Pixley, “Liberation Criticism,” in *Methods for Exodus*, ed. Thomas B. Dozeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 131–62, especially 148.

readily understood as political theology. The example reflects a widely-held view that Israel's theological vocabulary can be seen to be simultaneously absorbing and resisting the language and literary genres of imperial politics, yet the very intersection of the theological and the political seems to leave the modern demarcations essentially in place: religion, politics, economy, and law remain largely discrete, so their intersections become noteworthy peculiarities worthy of research.

One might still wonder, perhaps, why scholars should frame a more thoroughly interwoven dynamic as “political theology,” rather than say “political religion.” There are indeed conceptual problems here that need to be brought to the surface more explicitly, beginning with the concept of religion, as already noted. Most importantly, theopolitics can be concerned with a broad range of topics other than religion. But if the nature of divinity is indeed one of the potential topics, Hebrew Bible theology cannot be restricted to one version of religion, such as exclusive monotheism.

The influential Egyptologist, Jan Assmann, has distinguished between religion and political theology on the grounds that theology is “reflective” in a very particular sense that is inimical to his preferred concept of religion.

We must distinguish then between religion, which belongs to the basic conditions of human being, and theology, which came into existence as a reflexive form, claiming true worship in Israel and elsewhere, critical of other religions. Theology in this sense is the hallmark of secondary religion.

At first glance, this distinction, reminiscent of Romantic attitudes, might also be thought compatible with similar formulations proposed by Christian theologians for whom doctrine embodies a secondary kind of reflection in comparison with the primary elements of faith, such as prayer, the reading of scripture, and embodied practice. But Assmann’s intention is not so much to clarify the separable status of theological reflection in this way. Rather, he wants to describe the fundamental character of theology as inherently

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intolerant of alternative religious perspectives. Moreover, on Assmann's account, it is primarily a “Mosaic distinction” that is ultimately responsible for the construction of religious violence.

Among the many critical responses to Assmann’s sweeping argument about the origins of violence, several scholars have noted some ancient evidence to the contrary: the formation of much of the biblical literature took place when Israel’s life was sustained without the exercise of its own monarchical power, and accordingly, without the violence of its own military. This is the historical background that most likely accounts, for example, for the remarkable lack of focus on kingship within the Pentateuch: the Torah was finalized only after the demise of native kingship in Israel and Judah (which is generally not remembered for its monotheism). The state-sponsored violence at the time of the Pentateuch’s formation was generated by Persian and Hellenistic authorities, and not by the “Mosaic distinction” articulated in the Torah. So apart from examples like the Maccabean revolt in Hellenistic times, the nature of violence at issue in Assmann’s argument turns out to be apparently, at least in the ancient world, a discursive product of exclusive monotheism.

The contributions in this volume from Christine Mitchell, Petra Schmidtkunz, and Louis Jonker all illustrate, in their different ways, how the biblical literature of the Persian period has in some respects been accommodated to Achaemenid power—long after the time of Israelite and Judean kings—often by mimicking imperial literature.24 The traces of resistance and mimicry that we find in the Priestly literature, Chronicles, and Isaiah, are conceived in very subtle terms, but Jakob Wöhrle’s essay on Zechariah identifies a stronger element of discursive resistance to Persian rule. The condemnation of earlier empires—Egyptian, Assyrian and Babylonian—could in this late period be remembered and articulated quite overtly without any fear of reprisals. In short, Assmann’s “Mosaic distinction” does not adequately describe the complexity of the theologies in the Hebrew Bible.

1. Political Theology Beyond Religion

The present volume seeks to expand the category of political theology in part because the idea of theology as a reflective “critique of religion” is too narrowly conceived. As already noted, the idea of religion, which is often regarded today as a much richer organic category than theology, is itself a truncation of the lifeworld that was invented by modernity—leaving religion to wither away in its tiny corner, sustained by little more than Romantic invocations of the human spirit, or perhaps by a fragile concept of culture. By locating historical criticism within its own historical setting, a more self-critical practice of interpretation becomes possible. Thus, if commentators had been more aware of the modern demarcations of the lifeworld, they need not have rushed to the conclusion that a history of Israelite religion is likely to be a more critical enterprise than a history of political theology (and, by implication, more worthy as an academic activity within biblical studies).

It has long been recognized, for example, that the ownership and management of land in ancient Israel and Judah was understood in religious or theological terms, but discourses concerned with land do not easily fit within a “history of Israelite religion” when historians usually mean histories of cultic practices. Often far from any temple, allocations of land were construed in the biblical literature as gifts from the divine king, rather than from a Canaanite or imperial monarch. In Stephen Russell and Samasoni Moleli Alama’s contributions to this volume, the focus falls on the vocabulary of land tenure and borders, and they question whether distinctive patterns in the uses of such terminology might be correlated with particular schools of thought or social locations. Whatever the particular histories behind this terminology, however, it is clear that the economic realities of land use have been theologized.

The effects of a truncated understanding of religion are well illustrated in Petra Schmidtkunz’s contribution. She shows how the idea of “pilgrimage” to Jerusalem in a range of prophetic texts is still commonly rendered in scholarly discussions as a matter of religion, narrowly conceived. With a fresh review of the relevant texts, she finds that Zion is imagined, in effect, to be the center

of an empire. The activities envisaged in Jerusalem include trading, building, going to court, paying taxes or tribute, and worshipping at the temple—with YHWH presiding over all these activities and not just over the temple. In short, the God-talk in these so-called pilgrimage texts goes to all these areas of the lifeworld and not simply to matters narrowly conceived as religious under modern principles of social order.26 Similarly, Megan Warner examines the politics of the Joseph narrative in Genesis, which stretch across an astounding range of topics all permeated by God-talk: sibling rivalry, forced migration, sexual abuse, murder, intercultural marriage, ethnic prejudice, and imperial economics. Family life in Genesis is inherently political, and it has been so in most cultures before the modern invention of the Western individual.

In short, it is clear that the concept of political theology should be extended beyond the confines of religion—at least, if religion continues to be conceived in modern Western terms.27 Nevertheless, the task of clarifying an adequate definition of political theology is certainly not straightforward, especially if we are looking for cues in the biblical texts to assist with the task. Rather than begin with a prefabricated definition in advance of actual exegesis, the contributors to this volume took a more inductive approach and developed their preliminary research in ways that could then be compared and contrasted in conversation. The following discussion organizes the topics that emerged, roughly speaking, “from the top to the bottom” of the formations of social power.

We may begin as might be expected with an analysis of the idea of sovereignty—which commonly sits at the apex of any discussion of political theology—and then proceed through a list of key notions like empire, nationality, tribal kinship networks, leadership and peoplehood, before considering topics often considered less central to models of governance: gender and ethnicity (including the racialized receptions of biblical ethnoi). A comprehensive discussion would also need to include consideration of the inter-species

26 The political significance of pilgrimages is not, however, to be underestimated. See Peter Altmann’s comment on Deuteronomy’s festival traditions, “that they include all classes, genders, and ethnicities present in the society.” Peter Altmann, Festive Meals in Ancient Israel: Deuteronomy’s Identity Politics in Their Ancient Near Eastern Context, BZAW 424 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 153; more broadly, Mark R. Glanville, Adopting the Stranger as Kindred in Deuteronomy, AIL 33 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017).

27 See the critique in Richard King, Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and “the Mystic East” (London: Routledge, 1999).
relationships between humans and other animals, configured as "dominion" in Priestly tradition (Gen 1:28).28

2. Sovereignty and Nationalism

It must also be acknowledged that some of the most influential accounts of political theology in the twentieth century have focused somewhat obsessively on the idea of sovereignty, and especially on the idea of monarchs who make the law and its exceptions. The work of Dominik Markl in this volume throws fresh light on the relationship between the legal constraints framed in political constitutions and the "proto-national" social vision of Deuteronomy. As a number of studies have shown, the remarkable law of the king in Deut 17:14–20 may be read as a long-considered response to the overreach of kings in the whole of Israelite and Judean history, with the theological result that the role of monarchy is reduced to a mere constitutional possibility under the Torah.29 No leviathan invented by Hobbes or Schmitt would survive such strictures. But then a key question emerges as to whether such a constitutional idea had any practical political effects beyond the utopian aspirations of religious communities after the demise of native kingship in Judah.30 The Hasmoneans, for example, were bold enough to implement the possibility of priest-kings for a time, and Julia Rhyder’s study of Second Maccabees illuminates the political implications of theological discourse in that book.31 Beyond that brief history,

28 Annette Schellenberg has argued that human dominion over the animals is revoked after the flood and effectively replaced by warfare, since the discourse of “fear and dread” on the part of the animals in Gen 9:2 points to conditions of holy war rather than dominion. This hypothesis effectively dissolves the indication of kinship in biblical literature and gives no normative value to the original utopian conditions. Annette Schellenberg, Der Mensch, das Bild Gottes? Zum Gedanken einer Sonderstellung des Menschen im Alten Testament und in weiteren altorientalischen Quellen (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2011), 37–68. For a detailed discussion, see Mark G. Brett and H. Daniel Zacharias, “To Serve Her and Conform to Her: An Intercultural Reading of Gen 2:15,” forthcoming.


30 On the enduring construction of nationhood, beyond the state, see Jacob L. Wright, War, Memory and National Identity in the Hebrew Bible (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

the influence of Deuteronomy continued within communities that were not governed by kings. After two disastrous wars in 66–73 CE and 132–135 CE, most Jews embraced a life in diaspora.32

The history of Christendom, within which Deuteronomy also continued to be read, was characterized more by the overlapping sovereignties of popes and kings, rather than by constitutionalism.33 This was the case right up until the modern notion of sovereignty was reconceived as a social contract that binds the people as a whole. While many political theorists regard social contract theory as a secular enterprise, we find its beginnings already in the writings of Catholic lawyers in the seventeenth century.34 Around the same time, Protestant thinkers like John Milton were pondering the potential contributions of 1 Samuel 8 and Deuteronomy 17 to radically new conceptions of a republic.35 The description of this kind of comparative reception history now belongs squarely within the tasks of biblical scholarship. Hebrew Bible theology need not prescind from making comparisons with post-biblical times, and not just comparisons that fall narrowly within the history of religions. A comparison that notes similarities and differences is in no danger of imposing anachronisms on the biblical literature.

3. Leadership and Sub-National Polities

Varieties of nationalism enjoyed global circulation in the twentieth century, often yielding pain and suffering for minority groups who did not fit within the dominant discourses that sought to contain them. Even allowing for its multiple varieties, nationalism is almost always an ideological projection that serves the interests of dominant groups by attempting to incorporate the lower strata of a society. Especially in settler colonial contexts like the USA, Canada, South Africa, Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, the prior inhabitants of the land

33 Thomas Aquinas, for example, reiterated the standard medieval view that found no difficulty in principle with papal intervention, as required, in secular (temporal) affairs. See, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 201, citing the *Summa Theologicae* I1a-I1ae (60.6) and *Contra Errores Graecorum* (2.32).
were excluded from the over-arching political narratives. In most of its formulations, the colonial “doctrine of discovery” implicitly or explicitly invoked the Hexateuchal plot that affirmed a right of conquest, and the older Curse of Ham was ubiquitous in its oppressive effects in the Anglo world.\textsuperscript{36} Even within the United Kingdom, the Welsh and the Irish experienced patterns of exclusion and legally enforced oppression.\textsuperscript{37} With modern experiences of nationalism in mind, some scholars have been provoked to re-examine the biblical and archaeological data in search of minority groups whose assimilation to the national vision remains incomplete.

On the surface of the books of Samuel and Kings, it is not difficult to find evidence of inter-tribal conflicts and rivalries, not least in the stories that explain the succession of the Northern Kingdom from a so-called “united monarchy.” Nor should we assume that the power exercised by King Saul and King David could lay claim to a sovereignty that was higher than that claimed by the prophet/judge/priest named Samuel. We read in 1 Sam 16:13 that Samuel anointed David, while in 2 Sam 5:3 he is also anointed by the “elders of Israel” via negotiation of a covenant. Already in 2 Sam 2:4, David had been anointed by the “men of Judah” without need of covenant, perhaps because he belonged to that particular kinship group. These are the sorts of complexities that are explored in the contributions to this volume by Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer and Rachelle Gilmour, in which they trace interactions and tensions between the various roles—priest, prophet, king, queen—bearing in mind the backstories of distinct kinship groups, all under the shadow of the divine sovereign.

When a sacred written law finally makes an appearance in 2 Kings 22, the “high priest” and the scribe, Shaphan, turn to consult a woman on its meaning, Huldah the prophetess, rather than seeking out the Levitical priests who


\textsuperscript{37} See, for example, Theodore Allen, \textit{The Invention of the White Race, Vol. 1: Racial Oppression and Social Control} (London: Verso, 1994).
are the proper authority on the law according to Deut 17:14–20. The Levites are indeed conspicuously absent from all the key transitional events in Samuel-Kings, and this is a telling indication that these books preserve an older narrative world, even when they have been touched by a “Deuteronomistic” brush here and there.

When it comes to the literature of the Babylonian and Persian periods, matters of leadership are no less complex, although it is clear that the Levites have emerged in this later context as an influential group, reflecting Deuteronomy’s expectations. The memories of older tribal kinship groups are transformed within the newer polities constituted by waves of forced migration. The contributions from Dalit Rom-Shiloni, John Ahn and Tamara Cohn Eskenazi explore the profile of the communities in a variety of locations—Babylon, Samaria, Egypt and Judah—including the Yahwist communities on the move, each with prophets and scribes envisaging social boundaries in their own terms. The returnees to Judah are conceived as “children of the golah,” at the center of their own narrative, although this social vision apparently functioned over time as a kind of metanarrative for other groups as well. While the Samarians might well have been recognized as Yahwists, possessing their own temple already in the fifth century, from the point of view of the Judean leaders in the school of Ezra-Nehemiah, the northerners did not belong to the same ethnos. As Louis Jonker makes clear, Chronicles took a slightly different view, constructing its ethnos with more of an imperial logic of center and periphery.

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38 The idea of a pre-exilic “high priest” may be anachronistic, belonging more to post-monarchic times. See especially, Deborah W. Rooke, Zadok’s Heirs: The Role and Development of the High Priesthood in Ancient Israel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 76–78, 130. Significantly, Ezekiel envisages that a prince should preside over sanctuary offerings on the sabbath, without mentioning a high priest (Ezek 45:17; 46:12). In contrast, when Priestly literature describes the responsibilities of a high priest—but not of a prince or king—this may indeed reflect post-monarchic times.

39 On the complaint concerning non-Levitical priests in 1 Kgs 12:31, for example, see Brett, Locations of God, 22, 158–59.


repeatedly emphasizing the leadership of the Levites who are conspicuously absent from parallel narratives in Samuel-Kings.42

Standing at some distance from these complexities of leadership and sub-state polities, the book of Job adopts a remarkably skeptical perspective on social life, expressed through a pastiche of poetic and satirical genres. Against the suggestion that this book is “apolitical,”43 Katherine Southwood locates Job, along with some other literature, within a broader “cultural politics”—one that engages in debate at some distance from courts and temples. Adopting the foil of a foreign protagonist, Job offers an opportunity for robust debate. We find in this poetry a range of allusions to various traditions (Deuteronomic, Priestly and otherwise) and to the whole panoply of leadership models (Job 12 mentions counsellors, judges, kings, priests, elders, chiefs of the people of the land), all judged to be fallible in the long run. Any projection of moral order is found wanting, although the language seems to be avoiding a direct confrontation with particular religious groups. Nevertheless, this kind of literature can also be understood as a political theology in the broadest sense of “God-talk located in the context of multiple, often competing, perspectives on social life.”44 Indeed, it could be understood as theology in its boldest form: critique of divine governance.45

4. Gender and Intersectional Studies

Some scholars may be alarmed at a definition of political theology that can stretch even into the circle of family groups, but once again, we can take our cue from the biblical discourse itself. A keystone text is clearly the Eden narrative in Genesis. Here a curse on arable land is preceded by the puzzling explanation

43 E.g., Walzer, In God’s Shadow, 163.
44 Brett, Locations of God, xix.
that the man has “listened to the voice” of his wife (Gen 3:17), when there is no mention in the prior narrative of the woman verbally persuading the man to eat. That particular problem disappears if we infer from Gen 3:6 that the man was “with her” in the sense that he was present for the conversation between Eve and the serpent, but contributed nothing to the argument about Elohim’s expectations. The punishment for the woman is couched in fully political language: although the woman will be devoted to her husband, he will “rule” over her (משל in 3:16). Male dominance is thus a disruption in the gendered relationship, on a par with the disruption with the land, and both distorted relationships demonstrate the effects of alienation. Accordingly, readers of the Primary History are told to expect the rule of men in other biblical books, even if this was not part of the Edenic utopia.

Nevertheless, the Song of Songs can be read as a riposte from the point of view of erotic love. Couched within the interstices of patriarchy, this poetry nurtures the possibility of private exceptions to the general rule. In the book of Esther, on the other hand, the affirmation that each man should be prince of his household is stated in an absurdly public way, appearing in an imperial edict in Esther 1:22, but this is such an extravagant display of threatened masculinity that a suspicion of satire hangs over the text. In a few other examples in the public domain, it remains possible for women prophets to take the stage. Without a hint of irony, that state of exception breaks the surface even

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47 Cynthia R. Chapman has recently argued that gender hierarchy is constituted as the original norm in Eden, and it is simply reinforced in Gen 3:6. By implication, her argument suggests that only the man is divinely licensed to speak through the gift of the נשמה די in Gen 2:7. The implications of this textual detail resonate throughout the Hebrew Bible, on Chapman’s view, when she observes that in the canonical narratives women prophets are never explicitly commissioned to speak. Against such a wide-ranging inference, the curses or etiologies in Genesis 3 seem consistently focused on disrupted relationships, and elsewhere the נשמה די is shared with all creatures of flesh. In the immediate context, the creatures endowed with speech include the snake. See Chapman, “The Breath of Life: Speech, Gender and Authority in the Garden of Eden,” *JBL* 138 (2019): 241–62, especially 244. The absence of Huldah’s commissioning narrative in 2 Kings 22 does not seem to trouble the Deuteronomist.

at the apex of the so-called Deuteronomistic History, when in 2 Kings 22 the significance of the law book’s discovery is interpreted by a woman, Huldah the prophetess.\textsuperscript{49} Remarkably, the later scribes evidently restrained themselves from changing the text to include the Levitical priests required by Deut 17:18.

Among the women who are actually named in the Hebrew Bible, the overwhelming majority are the mothers or daughters of powerful men, and only occasionally do we hear of a prophetess who speaks for God in her own voice. Regardless of these variations, the fact that these characters are named can be readily related to their high status. The question of social rank also plays a role in the laws covering the women who belong to priestly families, even if this legal genre has no need to name names. The wives of priests have a higher status than wives among the laity.\textsuperscript{50}

The apparent exceptions to this, where low status women are named, are worth closer attention. For example, in the book of Ruth, we find that a foreign widow is expected by Boaz to be “a woman of valour” (אשת חיל in 3:11), and this wording is repeated in the public speech in 4:11 with reference the actions of Boaz in building up the house of Israel. As Laura Quick has pointed out, in most of the other references to acting valiantly, the action has a masculine martial connotation or it describes the action of God.\textsuperscript{51} But a close parallel is also found in Prov 31:29, where we find this note of praise of the אשת חיל: “Many daughters have done valiantly (עשה חיל), but you surpass them all.” The somewhat subversive suggestion in Ruth, it seems, is that a foreign widow could match the capacity of the ideal Israelite wife.

Quick argues that the particular power that is ascribed to Ruth relates ultimately to her genealogical capacity, which is revealed especially in 4:11. The people and the elders in the gate say: “We are witnesses. May YHWH make the woman who is entering your house like Rachel and like Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you do חיל in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem.” In effect, Ruth is absorbed into the story of Jacob’s two Aramean wives in Genesis, who also move across a social boundary from one kinship system to another. Remarkably, the wording associated with this boundary marking in Genesis invokes the rebel chants from 2 Sam 20:1 and


1 Kgs 12:16, when Rachel and Leah say to Jacob: “Is there still a portion and inheritance for us in the house of our father?" (Gen 31:14).52 To cut a complex story short, although Ruth enters the narrative as a low status foreigner, she emerges as a high status woman in a royal Judean lineage, having severed her earlier kinship ties, as did the foremothers Rachel and Leah.53 This example in the book of Ruth may be compared with a number of other traditions within which units of kinship are defined along maternal lines, notably in the books of Genesis and Samuel.54 As we might expect from the overture in Eden, these kinship groups subsist mainly inside the larger political formations maintained by high status males.

5. Ethnicity and Racialized Reception Histories

While Ruth stands as a potential example of successful integration into the *ethnos* of Israel, we have already noted a contrary example. The Samarians in the Persian period, whose Yahwist credentials were not sufficient to achieve full integration in the eyes of Ezra and Nehemiah, developed a parallel society over the subsequent centuries. The Samarians serve as a salutary example that ethnic plasticity may result in both ethnic fissure as well as ethnic fusion. It would be anachronistic to interpret such ancient antagonism in terms of race, but it will be necessary at this point to make some brief comments on the modern racialized ideologies that have drawn sanctions from the biblical discourses.

We can infer from some of the texts in Ezra and Nehemiah that the northerners did not measure up to required Judean standards. Whatever the complexities of the Persian period, it cannot be denied that this exclusivism has had devastating effects in the modern history of colonialism. Even in the

54  See especially Cynthia R. Chapman, *The House of the Mother: The Social Roles of Maternal Kin in Biblical Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016). For example, the mother unit of Rachel-Joseph-Benjamin would have had particular relevance early in the Persian period if, as it seems, Judean leaders wanted to draw a sharp distinction between Benjamin and Samaria. Wolfgang Oswald, *Staatstheorie im Alten Israel: Der politische Diskurs im Pentateuch und in den Geschichtsbüchern des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2009), 180–84.
twentieth century, shortly after the end of the Second World War, it was possible for a biblical scholar in South Africa, Evert P. Groenewald, to write in support of apartheid policies:

The Lord who willed the segregation of the nations, abundantly blessed the nations which respected His stipulation and also used them as a blessing to humanity in general ... To Israel the Lord instructs that there should be no mixing with foreign nations ... The Scripture views it generally as a deviation from the will of God when Israel allows that her sons and daughters marry with other nations. Such marriages let national differences grow faint and lead to undermining of the mother tongue. The result is a generation that does not honour or even know its own language, customs, religion and also nationality. So writes Nehemiah (13:23).55

While it might be tempting to draw a direct connection between this interpretation of Neh 13:23 and the ideology of whiteness, Ntozakhe Cezula notes that the interpretation of Nehemiah in South Africa has also been pulled in the opposite direction, in discussions of national reconstruction after apartheid. In short, histories of reception are rarely univocal and a homiletical tendency to skip from ancient texts to modern applications always needs to be informed by detailed historical research.

The construction of blackness, for example, has an older history than the fabrication of whiteness. In his remarkable work The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race, Willie James Jennings begins with an analysis of the theological vision of José de Acosta Porres, an influential Spanish Jesuit who first arrived in Peru in 1572.56 Jennings shows how indigenous and African peoples were configured on the basis of their skin color, rather than their attachments to particular cultures, languages and traditional territories—a severing of identities that clearly served colonial interests. But a number of historians have converged on the view that earlier hierarchies of difference

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were not crystalized into an explicit ideology of whiteness before the late seventeenth and eighteenth century. Race was constructed from a number of ingredients, most likely beginning with the idea of “purity of blood” (limpieza de sangre) that developed on the Iberian peninsula in the fifteenth century as part of a suspicious Christian response to conversions of Jews and Muslims. Early moderns developed the view that there were limits on the transformative potential of conversions and that those limits could be accounted for on the basis of genealogical histories. This view was then reiterated in settler colonial territories. In the course of time, racialized formations in the USA, South Africa, Canada, Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand created an imagined community of whiteness, which provided the lens for reinterpreting the Curse of Ham traditions. As W.E.B. DuBois wrote in 1910: “Wave upon wave, each with increasing virulence, is dashing this new religion of whiteness on the shores of our time.”

The Australian wave of identity was decisively shaped not as a nation, at first, but as one of the units of the British Empire just five years after DuBois wrote “The Souls of White Folk.” In particular, a fateful military campaign waged at the time on the shores of Turkey by the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (the “Anzacs”) would become the focus of a white national memory in subsequent years. The fusion of originally quite separate ethnicities—notably English, Scottish, Irish, and Welsh—was performed in battle on foreign soil, first in the name of empire and later in the name of nationhood. And as in

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the case of the rebel chants of 1 Kgs 12:16 and Gen 31:14, each of the British colonies would eventually cut their ties for the sake of a newly minted nation.63

The first pieces of legislation enacted by the newly federated Australian colonies in 1901 were overtly racialized, and a legally enshrined White Australia Policy persisted right up to 1973. This founding narrative has been minimized in the subsequent decades,64 and particularly in more recent decades, the legacies of whiteness have remained veiled in Australian biblical scholarship, as in other contexts.

6. Conclusion

Some scholars may be alarmed at the expansiveness of my redefinition of political theology: “God-talk located in the context of multiple, often competing, perspectives on social life.” At the very least, this formulation might be considered heuristically as an invitation to consider the diversity of topics covered in the present volume through a particular lens, a much wider lens than the modern category of religion would permit. At the same time, the definition provides the required breadth that can stretch from the capillaries of tribal kinship systems in ancient Israel to the effects of whiteness ideology on the history of biblical interpretation. The volume is not, however, focally concerned with modern politics. Only an ill-conceived homiletics would jump straight from ancient texts to contemporary aspirations, neglecting the myriad complexities of the traditions that carry the Hebrew Bible, and the varieties of social constraints that belong to public space. The essays in this collection are primarily concerned with ancient texts, history and culture. If there are comparisons at points with post-biblical times and topics, these may actually serve to highlight some unconscious anachronisms and to catalyze self-critical scholarly reflections.

63 The legacies of British rule in Asia have yielded quite different identity formations, as described for example by Lian H. Sakhong, “The Church after the Anglo–Chin War,” in In Search of Chin Identity: A Study in Religion, Politics and Ethnic Identity in Burma (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2003), 154–75.