

“ATTEMPTING JUSTICE: LESSONS TO BE LEARNED FROM NORMAN GOTTWALD’S HERMENEUTIC OF SOCIAL CLASS”

MATTHEW J. M. COOMBER

PRESENTED AT THE SBL ANNUAL MEETING, NOVEMBER 2022

I. INTRODUCTION

Twenty years ago, this month—November 2002—I was a 1st-year seminary student at the Toronto School of Theology, and part of a coalition protesting the US’ march toward war in Iraq, and, failing that, demanding that Prime Minister Chrétien keep Canada out of it.

At a demonstration we’d organized in Queens Park, a friend was introducing me to their partner when I heard the shout: “Opium Peddler!” I turned to see a pair of accusatory eyes glaring at me from behind a black wool scarf, which I immediately recognized. They belonged to the leader of a local Trotskyite group who’d heard me talking about my seminary program, causing him to see me as a peddler of the *opium of the masses*. While I, perhaps a bit passive-aggressively, explained that I had also *co-peddled* the demonstration he was attending, I understood the foundations of his accusation.

For too much of Christian history, the Church has taken the side of power and advantage, and to great financial and political gain. From the Crusades to the Conquistadors—and in the nineteenth-century factory-towns where clergy assured their exploited flocks that their rewards would be in heaven—key biblical voices and themes of liberation which promote life *before* death have been silenced and kept safely out of polite conversation. These chasms that have existed between ongoing human concerns and biblical texts may go some way to explaining why so few understand just what it is we biblical scholars do.

Upon telling folks that I am a biblical scholar, I’m often met with looks indicating that either I’m peddling something—as my Trotskyite brother perceived—or that I’m a glorified Sunday-school teacher. Our field is misunderstood, whether by the hapless soul to whom we are introduced at a party, or by the administrator who decides whether or not to maintain our lines of funding. And if there’s one

thing that our friend Norman Gottwald sought to achieve, it was to draw the edges of the chasm between biblical scholarship and modern justice concerns closer together.

Norman was much more than an immensely impactful biblical scholar. Among other things he was a devoted person of faith and a Baptist pastor who did not flinch from speaking justice to power. But these aspects of Norman's life were not compartmentalized. They co-existed, as exemplified in his co-founding of the Center and Library for the Bible and Social Justice, of which I am a part, and also in his 1992 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature. As my co-panelists have made clear, his address has implications which extend far beyond the academy.

Gottwald's call for social class as an analytic and hermeneutical category in biblical studies reflects his roles in both facilitating solid biblical scholarship and also in building bridges to connect and collaborate with communities engaging in modern justice concerns. These bridges, supported both by his address on class and also in his subsequent work on the topic, can strengthen and encourage the efforts of those who seek to break patterns that place power and influence over community wellbeing. Today, I focus on how Gottwald's identification of subversive biblical voices helps to build bridges & light paths for those who would connect their academic work with ongoing struggles for a just world, and I will address some of the challenges involved in doing so.

II. CHALLENGES

As a graduate student, the further I progressed in my studies, the more I realized the challenges in confronting modern injustice through ancient biblical texts. Gottwald highlighted two such challenges faced by scholars, which are particularly relevant, here. First, he addressed how our academic training makes us naturally suspicious of being "involved" in our research. Having skin in the game by connecting our work with our passions for justice—an act he referred to as *going public*—can lead to

eisegesis and positivist readings. Exercising due caution in this matter is vitally important when wading into such waters. The ancients neither perceived nor engaged the world as we do, and failure to consider this leads to anachronistic and ethnocentric readings. But all-too-often these hazards result in anxieties that can make the waters appear too choppy to swim in at all, leading some who would otherwise engage in justice-oriented scholarship to stay back on safer shores.

Second, Gottwald highlighted how the Bible speaks in many voices. There neither was nor is a single biblical deliberation on social and political issues, either in the Bible or today. Complicating responses to drawing the Bible into justice concerns, there isn't an interpretive consensus on how these texts should be read or applied. This creates vulnerabilities for scholars, and especially those of junior status. As Gottwald wrote, "the biblical scholar who 'goes public' also 'goes out on the limb'" "...When we 'go public'"... we remove any 'cover' behind which we can hide our own intellectual and moral responsibility for how we read the biblical texts as contemporary resources." Such a challenge can deter a scholar from engaging justice-oriented conversations, whether for those who seek their own communities' liberations from exploitative histories and systems, or for those who are disgusted by such exploitations but do not directly suffer (and even benefit) from the systems as they stand.

Now, not all biblical scholars' academic interests are geared toward the study of social-justice concerns. And not all academics' struggles for justice are going to directly connect to their research. What concerns me, and something I believe Gottwald's work on class can address, is how these challenges have the potential to dissuade scholars interested in going public (whether graduate students or professors) from entering the waters at all. But as my fellow panelists have displayed, connections between ancient text and modern concerns are possible and can be effective. And Gottwald's address on class helps light the path between pie-in-the-sky eisegesis and cynical views on the Bible's ability to speak to today.

One aspect of class to which Gottwald spoke is the aforementioned current of subversive voices woven throughout the Bible. In light of recent psychological research, this current may have more in common with modern justice issues than previously considered.

III. SUBVERSIVE TEXTS

Throughout much of Gottwald's later work, he displayed how class is, itself, a bridge between biblical worlds and our own. While the ancient systems through which class structures arose and sustained themselves may be vastly different from our own, most any society can relate to dominant groups extracting from exploited groups. Also relatable is a desire among the exploited to push back, rise up, and overthrow. Gottwald found such sentiments in what he referred to as the Bible's counter-ideas.

In stating the benefits of incorporating class as a hermeneutical tool, Gottwald identified these counter-ideas, which pushed back against those dominant-ideas that justified elites' superior wealth and power. Arguing that these counter-ideas are much more present in the Hebrew Bible than in contemporaneous religious literature, Gottwald perceived an ethical stream that expressed itself by the "outright accusation that their rulers were in fact parasitic," "...providing [only] illusory social harmony that masked injustices," while "falsely claiming approval by the gods." My co-panelist, Gale Yee, has also explored this current of voices in her work drawing out marginalized perspectives beyond the "biblical triad" of foreigner, widow, and orphan to extend recovery efforts to peasants, corvée laborers, foreign women, slaves, and other impoverished folk. Within Gottwald's address, he offered examples of these subversive texts, as found in the secession of the northern tribes, Josiah's reformation, Isaiah 3's spoiling of the vineyard, and Deutero-Isaiah's treatment of the leadership in restored Judah. In further writings, Gottwald expanded the idea to explore an ethos of community responsibility for the individual's wellbeing, also known as the ethos of the Common Good.

With all due deference to the great variety of ethoi collected and compiled within the Hebrew Bible, the thread of the ethos of the common good surfaces and resurfaces throughout. Biblical authors—who, themselves, were separated by culture, location, theology, and time—wrote stories and oracles that condemned the use of status to extract land, goods, and autonomy from one’s neighbors. Legal texts were composed, which would stem stratification and abuses employed by the privileged through debt forgiveness and land protections: and were supported by narratives, psalms, and wisdom texts. But whether laws like Sabbatical & Jubilee were enacted to protect vulnerable families, reclaim lands for elites after the Babylonian exile, fulfil cultic functions, or were simply written to signal virtue, they *are* present, a part of biblical tradition, and are referenced time and again. When considered through the lens of inter- and intra-class relations, these subversive texts reflecting an ethos of the common good resonate with numerous modern concerns, from predatory lending and wage theft to the rise of food deserts in rural areas and impoverished urban neighborhoods. And what’s more, modern biblical scholars are not pioneers in drawing these texts out of earlier contexts and into their own. Biblical authors, themselves, did just that, as seen in intra-biblical conversations pertaining to class-based abuses.

Consider resurfacing themes of land protections in legal texts, prophetic oracles, and wisdom writings that were separated by location, culture, and time, yet found common concern and echo one another. Leviticus 25’s taboo on permanent land transfers take on narrative form (or perhaps the other way around) in Naboth’s fatal response to King Ahab’s request to acquire his land: “The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.” The cross-cultural relatability of this sort of inter-class violence has escaped the biblical world’s orbit on numerous occasions. St. Ambrose, for example, brought Naboth’s story into his 4th-century Milan to admonish the upper-classes, whose addictions to wealth were killing Roman peasants.

Interestingly, current psychological research may help explain why these stories connect so well to different cultural contexts across time and bolster Gottwald's argument on class' importance in biblical interpretation, possibly offering a thread between the Bible's current of subversive voices and their later receptions.

IV. PSYCHOLOGY OF CLASS

Paul Piff, Stéphane Côté, and Michael Kraus—who are among those who research the effects of privilege on the human brain—reveal that class-standing uniquely shapes our feelings, unconscious thoughts, and actions. While Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx observed how status effects behavior, this current research probes deeper to ask how class status shapes our basic psychological processes.

Numerous experiments—ranging from class-simulations to observing the driving behaviors of those in high-end cars—draw the same general conclusion: people of higher class-standing tend to display contempt for those of lower status, and have a propensity for engaging in unethical behavior toward their perceived inferiors (think Ahab & Jezebel's treatment of Naboth). The fact that these traits are rooted at the neurological level, rather than driven solely by social or cultural conditioning, makes such studies of particular interest to biblical scholarship. In conversations with Piff, he expressed to me that while cultural norms can enhance or mitigate responses to class standing, similar effects would be expected in ancient and modern subjects, alike. This has the potential to offer valuable tools for those interested in exploring connections between biblical texts and class-related injustices, today. Furthermore, the apparent timelessness of this psychological trait—also found in non-human primate communities—could serve to narrow that chasm between the challenges faced by biblical authors' communities and our own.

V. CONCLUSION

For much of Christian history liberative biblical voices have been ignored or silenced in pursuit of courting political power, financial advantage, and other forms of status. And it must be stated that the academy, which is itself a center of many types of power, is not always receptive to such voices. Gottwald's call for class as an analytic and hermeneutical category in biblical studies doesn't solve the complexities involved in relating ancient texts to modern calls for justice, but it does provide timber with which to build sturdy bridges. Gottwald's emphasis on class highlights the role that class and sub-class rankings play in our lives and accentuates those subversive biblical voices that connect to a recurring ethic of the common good and—in particular—the timelessness and cross-cultural relevance of class-based abuse. These factors provide numerous points of connection from which to consider how sound biblical scholarship can reach beyond the academy and encourage scholars to connect with and learn from communities who struggle for a more just world.

With rising religious nationalism around the globe, Gottwald's 1992 address is particularly pertinent to the year 2022. As the Bible is increasingly used to promote individualistic theologies that champion ethnic exceptionalism and profiteering—over care of neighbor—Gottwald's work provides an important resource for scholars who are interested in *going public* and engaging with ongoing conversations on the issues of our time, which are taking place in tandem with the Bible, whether or not we—as biblical scholars—choose to take part.