

Beyond Eurocentrism: A Future for Canadian Biblical Studies¹

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For David Jobling, CSBS/SCÉB President 1992–93

Abstract

The history of Canadian biblical studies, like biblical studies south of the border, has been defined by the attempt to protect academic study of the Bible from religious and ecclesiastical control. Although legitimate in its time, this has resulted in the fictitious ideal of an academic discipline uncontaminated by the contemporary contexts of the interpreter. Not only is such an ideal unattainable (since everyone brings their contexts, explicitly or implicitly, to their academic work), it is ethically problematic, since it has legitimated the Eurocentric orientation of the field as normative, resulting in the marginalization of alternative voices and perspectives. Thankfully, biblical scholars have begun to take cognizance of how we read the Bible in terms of existential questions arising from our social and ecclesial locations. Besides many publications on the subject of contextual biblical studies over the past thirty years (perhaps beginning with *Stony the Road We Trod*), the Society of Biblical Literature sponsored two seminars in 2020 called “#Black Scholars Matter.” Canadian biblical scholars, however, have been slower than our American counterparts to recognize the importance of the interpreter’s context for our field. The question this essay raises is whether we can envision a future for Canadian biblical studies beyond Eurocentrism.

It has been an honour to have served as the president of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies / Société canadien des études Bibliques (CSBS/SCÉB) for the

¹ * This essay was presented as the 2021 presidential address for the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, at the virtual annual meeting, May 31, 2021.

past two years (2019–21).² The CSBS/SCÉB has the distinction of being the oldest Canadian academic society in the humanities. Established in 1933, it predates the creation of the Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion (CCSR), the umbrella organization created by federal charter in 1970 to further the study of religion in Canada. When the Corporation was launched the following year and began publishing its interdisciplinary flagship journal *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses (SR)*, the CSBS/SCÉB became one of its founding members.³

On the occasion of the fifty-year anniversary of the official launch of the CCSR and *SR*, the CCSR invited representatives of all its member societies to write a short reflection on the state of their academic field, to be published in a theme issue of *SR*. Although I was invited to reflect on the state of biblical studies, my presidential address was considerably too long for their purposes.

Nevertheless, given this milestone anniversary of fifty years, I have taken the opportunity to reflect in my presidential address on the state of biblical studies in Canada, with a look to the future.

This milestone anniversary comes at a particularly momentous time in our world, which disrupts the possibility of unvarnished celebration. Just as we might want to focus on the achievements of the Corporation and its member societies (including CSBS/SCÉB), we are reminded that academic discourse does not take place in a social vacuum, but is promulgated by actual people in the context of a real world, often characterized by extreme hardship and suffering. Although the COVID-19 pandemic was new to North America in 2020, the physical and emotional suffering it caused was exacerbated by long-standing racial and economic disparities in our societies. And these disparities, especially evident in the violence perpetrated on Black and Brown bodies (and souls) in the USA, have erupted into plain view for all to see. So it is well nigh impossible to simply celebrate the achievements of the CCSR without some critical analysis of our social context.

Various events of the last year have also found their way into the business of the executive committee of the CSBS/SCÉB. Over the last twelve months, the executive was asked to respond to each of these events:

- The closing of a religion department and cutting of tenured faculty.

2 It is because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in the cancellation of the CSBS/SCÉB annual meeting in 2020, that I have continued as president for a second year, something unprecedented in the history of the Society.

3 The following are the dates of establishment of the current member societies of CCSR: Canadian Society of Biblical Studies / Société canadienne des études bibliques (CSBS/SCÉB): 1933; Canadian Theological Society (CTS); 1955; Société canadienne de théologie (SCT): 1963; Canadian Society for the Study of Religion / Société canadienne pour l'étude de la religion (CSSR/SCÉR): 1965; Canadian Society of Patristic Studies / Association canadienne des études patristiques (CSPS): 1975. The Canadian Society of Church History (CSCH), established in 1960, has been (but is not currently) a member of CCSR.

- Donald Trump's use of military force to facilitate a photo-op using a Bible as a prop.
- The violence of white supremacy and the residual racism in the CSBS/SCÉB.
- The conviction of a biblical scholar for possession of child pornography.

For those of us on the executive, the requests for comment raised the question of the basis upon which we would be speaking for the Society. In what way are events and concerns like these intrinsic to our identity as an academic society that studies ancient texts and societies? Could we articulate some principles of our Society in a way that would allow more meaningful responses in the future? And, finally, could we clarify our purposes as an academic society in a way that might even be appropriately proactive rather than reactive?⁴

This discussion within the CSBS/SCÉB executive has stimulated my own thinking on the state of biblical studies in Canada. However, my reflections here do not represent a formal position statement of the Society; rather, they are in the nature of a personal opinion piece. I will draw on my own experience as a lens to analyze the history of Canadian biblical studies and to envision some possibilities for the future.

Having decided to reflect on the state of Canadian biblical studies, I find that I am at something of a disadvantage. Although I have presented seventeen papers at CSBS/SCÉB meetings since I became a member in 1992 (with a total of twenty-eight papers at five Canadian learned societies over the years), I am an outsider to formal biblical studies in Canada.

Despite completing both masters and doctoral degrees at Canadian institutions, I am a Jamaican by birth and ethnicity, having begun biblical studies on the political and scholarly periphery of North America, in what is today called the Global South or the Majority World (we called it the Third World when I was an undergraduate). I emigrated from Jamaica to Canada only after my formative studies for a BTh degree at Jamaica Theological Seminary. And my immersion in graduate biblical studies took place in the USA, between my two Canadian degrees. To complicate matters further, I have not lived in Canada for the past twenty-five years, since obtaining a faculty position in Rochester, NY.

Although my home is within two hours drive of the Canadian border, I have

4 I am thankful to Colleen Shantz (newly elected president of CSBS/SCÉB) for initiating the discussion of the basis on which the Society might address such issues. The previous two paragraphs are adapted from her insightful framing of the issues and questions raised in our executive committee discussion and sent (when she was vice-president) to the Society membership in an email on April 16, 2021. It was the executive's intent that this discussion be expanded to include the entire CSBS/SCÉB membership.

been living and teaching in a cultural context quite different from the Canada I came to know and love. That cultural difference is emphasized every time I cross the border to attend the Congress of Humanities and Social Sciences (and, before that, the Learned) or to visit relatives in the Toronto area.

So, while I am no stranger to Canadian biblical scholarship, and have interacted extensively with Canadian biblical scholars at the Congress / Learned for nearly thirty years, my reflections will inevitably be colored by my outsider status.

Subjectivity, Embodiment, and Resistance in Caribbean Biblical Studies

Perhaps an account of my initial theological and biblical—indeed, socio-cultural—formation in Jamaica might be helpful, since it is foundational to how I see both the development and possible future of biblical studies in Canada.

I grew up in Kingston, the Jamaican capital, a fourth-generation Jamaican on my father's side, with my mother's side going back considerably further, to Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition centuries earlier. In later life, I have come to understand that I was profoundly shaped by my experience of coming to adolescence in postcolonial Jamaica, a nation just beginning to break out of British cultural influence, with the increasing reach of American economic hegemony and cultural globalization.⁵ Becoming an adolescent in a “conscious” Jamaican culture in the sixties and seventies, influenced by the rise of Black Power and the growing popularity of Rastafarianism, it was impossible not to be exposed to suspicions of the cultural and economic imperialism of the West.⁶ This suspicion would ultimately ground my search for an alternative to a Eurocentric reading of the Bible.⁷

I was first exposed to the Bible in my teenage years through my participation in the Jamaican church. My interest in the Bible led me to enroll in a program of undergraduate theological studies, where I was immediately confronted with the problem of contextualization: How did the work of theologians and biblical scholars from North Atlantic countries relate to the postcolonial conditions of Caribbean life? Although Jamaica Theological Seminary (JTS) was relatively conservative theologically, especially when compared to our sister institution, the United Theological College of the University of the West Indies (UTC-UWI),

5 Jamaica gained independence from Britain on August 6, 1962; I still remember the celebrations, despite being only a young child at the time.

6 The term “conscious” is often applied to reggae music to mean that the song in question addresses matters of justice and self-knowledge, and is not just for entertainment.

7 The critique of *Eurocentrism* proposed in this article is not intended as a slur against persons of European heritage or a blanket condemnation of matters European. It arises from the resistance of Caribbean peoples to the totalizing imposition of an alien culture and values by the European conquerors and colonizers of the region.

my fellow JTS students and I avidly read Gustavo Gutiérrez's *A Theology of Liberation* when it was published in English and interacted with chapel speakers who addressed the relationship of theology to racism, colonialism, and capitalism.⁸ We did not shy away in our courses from questions of political theology, hermeneutics, the intersection of faith and philosophy, or historical-critical matters. We could not afford to; living in a postcolonial situation, on the margins of the American empire, forces one to become critically informed and engaged.

Despite the differences between my "evangelical" seminary and the "main-line" theological college of the University, there was (and still is) no Caribbean tradition of a discipline of "biblical studies" separate from praxis, especially the training of ministers for the church. This was true of both JTS and UTC, the two oldest undergraduate degree-granting theological institutions in Jamaica, and it is true of the more recently founded Caribbean Graduate School of Theology, also in Kingston, and the many Bible Colleges and Institutes that have sprung up around the island (many of which are now accredited to offer Bachelor's degrees).

Not only is the Bible never interpreted in isolation from life (even when critical biblical scholarship is considered), but the Caribbean has an important undercurrent of oral folk traditions, inherited from the African slave experience, that can interact profoundly with biblical thinking among church people. Admittedly, these folk traditions have often been eclipsed by an otherworldly theology inherited from European missionaries; and this otherworldly faith is itself being eclipsed today by the prosperity gospel exported from the USA, as many Caribbean Christians swing from a stance of world-aversion to uncritical world-embrace.

It was the otherworldly theology of escape that permeated the Jamaican church in my adolescent years. This theology downplayed the importance of earthly life vis-à-vis heaven and "spiritual" realities and excluded, in principle, the so-called "secular" realm from impact by the gospel. This otherworldly theology, which also denigrated the body in contrast to the "soul" (the interior life), was aided and abetted by a spirituality of passivity and subservience, evident in some sectors of the Jamaican church, both towards God and religious authority. This subservience could be understood as the religious correlate to the slave mentality absorbed by so many Jamaicans of African heritage. Garnett Roper and Erica Campbell have analyzed the impact of slavery on the low self-esteem and identity problems that

8 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. by Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973). One of the speakers who made a significant impression on me was Puerto Rican theologian Orlando E. Costas, who had just published *The Church and Its Mission: A Shattering Critique from the Third World* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1974).

continue to plague Jamaican society today.⁹ I myself, as a Caucasian (not White) Jamaican in a largely Black nation and church, struggled both with my own cultural and religious identity and with this inherited otherworldliness throughout my adolescence and young adulthood.¹⁰

Perhaps a clarification of my racial/ethnic identity is here warranted. While the term *Caucasian* might refer to my phenotypical features, I do not identify as White, which is a cultural/ethnic construct with a specific meaning rooted in European colonialism, as Willie Jennings has persuasively argued.¹¹ Rather, my ethnic identity is Jamaican; or, to be more precise, given the hybridity that comes from having lived in three different cultures, I am *Jamericadian* (a term my wife and I often use in self-description).¹²

Given the otherworldly faith I experienced in the Jamaican church, combined with a stance of passivity and subservience towards the status quo, it is no wonder that the imperative of contextualization led me as an undergraduate theology student to explore the power of creation theology as both an affirmation of the body and a critique of the current social order, emphasizing God's desire for the flourishing of the world.¹³

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- 9 These are the opening essays in Garnett Roper and J. Richard Middleton, eds, *A Kairos Moment for Caribbean Theology: Ecumenical Voices in Dialogue* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013). Garnett Roper, "The Caribbean as the People of God: Prophetic Possibilities for an Exilic People," 3–19; Erica Campbell, "Language and Identity in Caribbean Theology," 20–39. Also relevant is Roper's published doctoral dissertation, *Caribbean Theology as Public Theology* (Kingston, Jamaica: Jugaro, 2012).
- 10 My attempt to address the issues of otherworldliness in the church generated my first published book, written when I was working on my MA in philosophy at the university of Guelph: Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, *The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1984); this trajectory culminated in a more recent book, *A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014). I explicitly addressed the otherworldly theology of the Caribbean church in my essay "Islands in the Sun: Overtures to a Caribbean Creation Theology," in *A Kairos Moment for Caribbean Theology*, 79–95; this essay is reprinted in *Islands, Islanders, and the Bible: Ruminations*, ed. by Jione Havea, Margaret Aymer, and Steed Vernyl Davidson, *Semeia Studies 77* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015), 115–34.
- 11 Willie J. Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*; Theological Education between the Times (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020). Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021). For a nuanced analysis of "whiteness" in relation to biblical studies, see Wongi Park, "Multiracial Biblical Studies," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 140, no. 3 (2021) 435–59. Park uncouples whiteness from the specifics of biology or "phenotypic traits," noting that "race is a social construct that has no physical, genetic, or biological basis in human blood or DNA" (Park, "Multiracial Biblical Studies," 443).
- 12 This is not to deny that I have benefitted from "white privilege," which has accrued to me simply by virtue of my skin color. But White has never been my internalized identity—not when I lived in Jamaica, nor since I moved to North America. It is becoming increasingly recognized in the critical literature that race and ethnicity are not intrinsically linked to skin color; this linkage is a social construction of recent vintage, rooted in colonialism and the African slave trade. The decoupling of race/ethnicity and skin color was brought home to me vividly when a young African American man, with whom I had many conversations, recently asked me, "Richard, what race are you?" Reflecting on that incident, I came to realize that he asked because I did not present as White.
- 13 I found this positive theology of creation "revolutionary," a term I used in an article critiquing

But beyond the otherworldliness and correlative subservience of many Jamaican Christians, there was (and still is) a contrary tendency in Jamaican society to be suspicious of those who wield power. This tendency is rooted in the slave experience of resistance. Jamaicans are typically aware of the heritage of the Maroons, escaped slaves who (beginning in the mid-seventeenth century) lived in free communities in the mountainous Cockpit Country in the interior of the island, and who received treaty rights from the British for autonomous governance of their own lands. Besides these specific communities of resistance, there was a general tendency of resistance among many enslaved Africans, sometimes coming to the fore in explicit slave rebellions, though this resistance was often of a more covert variety.¹⁴ The resistance theology derived from the slave experience is what motivated the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865, led by the Black Baptist preacher Paul Bogle, in protest of injustice by the British ruling class, which had continued after the formal emancipation of slaves in 1838.¹⁵

One of the wellsprings of this resistance was the folk tradition of Anansi, which the slaves brought from Africa. Anansi the spider is the infamous trickster figure (inherited from West African folklore), who has to negotiate his relationship with the larger (and more dangerous) animals of the jungle. Whereas the African American stories of Brer Rabbit are an amalgam of Native American and Central African (Bantu) folktales, the Jamaican stories of Brer Anansi derive from the Ashanti peoples of West Africa, who were transported to the Caribbean through the Middle Passage of the slave trade (and there are various overlaps between these stories).

Most Jamaicans, especially in earlier generations, and particularly in the rural areas, grew up with a treasure trove of Anansi stories, concerning how Anansi outsmarted tiger, snake, John Crow, and many other animals—even including one story of how Anansi got his name associated with *all* folktales; all West African and Jamaican folktales, whether or not they figure the infamous spider/spider man, are known today as “Ananasi stories.”¹⁶

Walter Brueggemann’s largely negative view of creation theology: Middleton, “Is Creation Theology Inherently Conservative? A Dialogue with Walter Brueggemann,” *Harvard Theological Review* 87, no. 3 (1994): 257–77. I also found this creation theology “liberating,” a term that found its way into the title of an essay on the *imago Dei* and then a book on the same topic: Middleton, “The Liberating Image? Interpreting the *Imago Dei* in Context,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 24 (1994): 8–25; and Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005).

14 For historical examples of resistance in Jamaican history, see Roper, *Caribbean Theology as Public Theology*, 37–53.

15 This rebellion is immortalized in a reggae song entitled “1865: 96 Degrees in the Shade,” by the Jamaican band Third World. I was privileged to attend secondary school (Jamaica College) with two of the founding band members, Stephen “Cat” Coore and Michael “Ibo” Cooper.

16 For an excellent analysis of the figure of Anansi in Jamaican culture, see Hugh Hodges, “Speak of the Advent of New Light: Jamaican Proverbs and Anancy Stories,” chap. 3 in Hodges, *Soon Come: Jamaican Spirituality, Jamaican Poetics* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008),

I myself grew up with Anansi stories, many told by my father, others narrated on the radio (before TV came to the island) by Ranny Williams and Louise Bennett.¹⁷ While Anansi was not always morally upright, and often was downright lazy, he was the hero of many tales because (as I would put it today) he refused to accept the power structures of the jungle as legitimate (note that *Dungle* was the name of an area in the slums of Kingston).¹⁸ Instead, he always found an angle to work, from which he could dissent from the status quo or even (in limited or temporary ways) overturn it.¹⁹

As the introduction to a reprint of *Jamaica Anansi Stories* puts it:

Anansi is the spirit of rebellion; he is able to overturn the social order; he can marry the Kings' [sic] daughter, create wealth out of thin air; baffle the Devil and cheat Death. Even if Anansi loses in one story, you know that he will overcome in the next. For an oppressed people Anansi conveyed a simple message from one generation to the next:— that freedom and dignity are worth fighting for, at any odds.²⁰

The figure of Anansi is so central to the cultural traditions of Jamaica that even when many young people today are unacquainted with the range of Anansi stories, they have been influenced by the Anansi mindset. This is the mindset of resistance that contributed to the founding of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) by Marcus Garvey in 1914 and gave rise to the trade union movement, with the push for universal adult suffrage, in the 1930s.²¹

61–80. Hodges, who is currently chair of the Department of English and Cultural Studies at Trent University, Peterborough, ON, studied Caribbean literature with Jamaican poet Lorna Goodison for his PhD at the University of Toronto.

17 Louise Bennett-Coverley later immigrated to Canada and lived in Scarborough, ON for the last decade of her life until her death in 2006. She made a significant impact on the Caribbean cultural and literary scene in the Toronto area, and there is a large collection of her archival photographs, recordings, and other material housed in the McMaster University Library.

18 This area (essentially a slum surrounded by a garbage dump) was later bulldozed and replaced with a housing development called Tivoli Gardens. Orlando Patterson's classic novel, *The Children of Sisyphus* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2011; repr. Hutchinson, 1964), describes what life was like in the Dungle. It is possible that the name *Dungle* is derived from *dunghill*, but it was associated in the mind of many Jamaicans with *jungle*.

19 Hugh Hodges develops an ethical version of the power reversals typically associated with Anansi, in order to explicate the spiritual vision of Bob Marley, while making it clear that this is a selective reading of the trickster motif; Marley himself dissented from anything underhanded. See "Walk Good: Bob Marley and the Oratorical Tradition," chap. 7 in Hodges, *Soon Come*, 153–72.

20 From the publisher's Preface to Martha Warren Beckwith, *Jamaica Anansi Stories* (n.p.: Forgotten Books, 2007; repr. New York: American Folklore Society, 1924), vii (available at: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/afr/jas/>). The stories in this volume were collected from oral interviews between 1919 and 1921. For an even earlier collection, see Walter Jekyll, *Jamaican Song and Story: Annancy Stories, Digging Songs, Ring Tunes, and Dancing Tunes* (London: Dover, 1966; repr. London: Folk-Lore Society, 1907).

21 Trade unions became the basis for the first two national political parties in Jamaica—the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) and the People's National Party (PNP). In 1944 the Jamaican Constitution granted the right to vote to all Jamaican citizens 21 years and older (without regard to race or

It was a combination of this stance of resistance, linked with the Bible and an affirmation of Africa, that epitomized the Rastafari movement, originating in the slums of Kingston during the 1930s, as a protest of the racism embedded in Jamaican society and the brutality of the continuing colonial system of governance. Yet beyond protest, Rastafari was from the beginning grounded in a positive assertion of Black dignity, drawing extensively on both the Bible and African culture (pointing especially to the crowning of Ras Tafari Makonen as Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia, in 1930) to articulate a worldview alternative to that of mainstream society.²² Based on my respect for Rastafari (rooted in my street conversations with Rastas when I was a teenager), I later came to explore the subversive power of the Rastafarian use of the Bible, evident in the music of Bob Marley and the Wailers, in an essay called “Identity and Subversion in Babylon.”²³

What these Jamaican political and religious movements have in common is a suspicion of claims to legitimacy on the part of those with power and the desire to take the side of the “sufferer” (to use a common Jamaican term for the disenfranchised). It was precisely this suspicion that I could tap into for my reading of the Bible against Eurocentrism.

Looking Back: The Development of “Biblical Studies” in Canada

I have tried to sketch something of my Jamaican cultural context because I have come to understand that this context undergirds and constrains my approach to biblical studies, whether in Canada or elsewhere. I will shortly bring this context to bear on my evaluation of the present state and (possible) future of Canadian biblical studies.

But first, a look back is necessary, in order to see how we got to where we are. In preparing for this assignment I had the advantage of consulting a number of helpful historical works, beginning with John Macpherson’s 1962 CSBS/SCÉB

gender). The first election was held on December 14, 1944, with a voter turnout of nearly sixty percent.

22 Legend has it that in 1927 or 1928 Marcus Garvey said: “Look to Africa, when a black king shall be crowned, for the day of deliverance is at hand.” When Ras Tafari Makonen was crowned Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia in 1930, many in the various black millenarian movements that had been growing in Jamaica hailed Selassie (the new ruler of the only African nation that had never been colonized by Europe) as the second coming of the Messiah. Thus was born the religion of Rastafari. The news of the coronation was especially publicized in a now-famous article, accompanied by color photos: W. Robert Moore, “Coronation Days in Addis Ababa,” *National Geographic* 59, no. 6 (1931): 738–46. Also in this issue was Addison E. Southard, “Modern Ethiopia: Haile Selassie the First, Formerly Ras Tafari, Succeeds to the World’s Oldest Continuously Sovereign Throne,” 679–738. Multiple copies of this issue of *National Geographic* were not only bought by Rastafarians, but sold or distributed by them on street corners in Kingston; and many Rastas to this day proudly own a copy. I have my own copy.

23 Middleton, “Identity and Subversion in Babylon: Strategies for ‘Resisting Against the System’ in the Music of Bob Marley and the Wailers,” chap. 9 in *Religion, Culture and Tradition in the Caribbean*, ed. by Hemchand Gossai and N. Samuel Murrell (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 181–204.

presidential address, entitled “A History of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies.”²⁴ This informative, if brief, survey of the history of the Society from its founding in 1933 to Macpherson’s presentation in 1962 was printed in a mimeographed volume a few years later (with some other essays), to mark Canada’s Centennial in 1967; it can now be found, with an introduction by Peter Richardson, on the CSBS/SCÉB website.²⁵

Beyond Macpherson’s account (which focuses specifically on CSBS/SCÉB), we have Charles Anderson’s more broadly envisioned *Guide to Religious Studies in Canada / Guide des sciences Religieuses au Canada* (published in 1969 by the Corporation for the Publication of Academic Studies in Religion in Canada, the precursor of CCSR), which was revised and expanded in 1972.²⁶ Before the second edition was published, the CCSR, in conjunction with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), commissioned a series of volumes that would provide snapshots of the state of religious studies in Canada, region by region. In order of publication, these include studies of Alberta (1983); Quebec (1988); Ontario (1992); Manitoba and Saskatchewan (1993); British Columbia (1995); and Atlantic Canada (2001).²⁷ These state-of-the-art reviews (written by different authors) are helpful in parsing many of the details of the field of religious studies (including biblical studies) found in different universities and colleges of the region in question, noting the range of programs, courses, faculty, research areas, etc.

But the two most illuminating volumes interpreting the history of Canadian biblical studies are the books by John Moir (1982) and Aaron Hughes (2020), especially since they cover the material from such different points of view.

Moir’s account, entitled *A History of Biblical Studies in Canada: A Sense of*

24 I want to thank three past presidents of CSBS/SCÉB—Willi Braun (2016–17), Wayne McCready (1996–97), and Peter Richardson (1984–85)—who pointed me to the historical sources listed here.

25 John MacPherson, “A History of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies” (1962 CSBS presidential address; 2017 update of 1967 printing) Available at: http://csbs-sceb.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/A_History_of_CSBS.pdf

26 Charles P. Anderson, *Guide to Religious Studies in Canada / Guide des sciences Religieuses au Canada*, 2nd ed. (n.p.: Corporation for the Publication of Academic Studies in Religion in Canada, 1972; orig. 1969).

27 Ronald Neufeldt, *Religious Studies in Alberta: A State-of-the-Art Review*, The Study of Religion in Canada 1 (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1983); Louis Rousseau and Michel Despland, *Le sciences religieuses au Québec depuis 1972*, The Study of Religion in Canada 2 (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988); Harold Remus, William Closson James, and Daniel Fraikin, *Religious Studies in Ontario: A State-of-the-Art Review*, The Study of Religion in Canada 3 (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992); John M. Badertscher, Gordon Harland, and Roland E. Miller, *Religious Studies in Manitoba and Saskatchewan: A State-of-the-Art Review*, The Study of Religion in Canada 4 (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1993); Brian J. Fraser, *The Study of Religion in British Columbia: A State-of-the-Art Review*, The Study of Religion in Canada 5 (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1995); and Paul W. R. Bowlby, with Tom Faulkner, *Religious Studies in Atlantic Canada: A State-of-the-Art Review*, The Study of Religion in Canada 6 (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001).

Proportion, was specifically commissioned by the CSBS/SCÉB.²⁸ This volume helpfully places the development of the Society in the broader context of biblical studies in Canada (beginning in the 1880s); it is, however, somewhat outdated, being now nearly forty years old. While not as disciplinary specific as Moir, Hughes's volume, *From Seminary to University: An Institutional History of the Study of Religion in Canada*, admirably addresses biblical studies in the context of the development of theology and religious studies in the Canadian context.²⁹

To a great extent, the accounts of Moir and Hughes corroborate each other. They both recount the beginnings of biblical studies in Canada as an aspect of theological study of the Bible in seminaries and theological colleges (associated with specific Christian denominations), founded primarily for the training of clergy, but also to propagate Christian religious values in the colony. This confessionally-oriented approach to the Bible came into some tension with the "academic" study of the Bible, conceived as a historical-critical discipline, which began in Europe in the nineteenth century. This historical study focused on the ancient languages and contexts relevant to understanding the Bible. Interestingly, the early focus in Canada was on Hebrew, the ancient Near East, and the Old Testament (the term Hebrew Bible was not typically used), while research on the New Testament, Koine Greek, the Mediterranean social context, and Greco-Roman literature came later. The debated question, over which there was much disagreement, was whether one could hold to a historical approach to the Bible and yet treat the text as a normative theological and ethical source for living.

There was also a shift from denominationally-oriented theological colleges and seminaries to ecumenical consortia of such colleges in various parts of the country (including British Columbia and Atlantic Canada), but especially important was the founding of University College in 1853 as part of the newly established University of Toronto. Precisely because University College was intentionally unaffiliated with any specific Christian denomination, its early detractors called it a "godless" institution, even though the biblical and theological courses being offered were generally from the perspective of Christianity.

Finally, as an outcome of the Quiet Revolution in Quebec and the policy of multiculturalism by the Canadian government, along with increased immigration to Canada, the new discipline of religious studies emerged, formally de-coupled from explicit religious affiliation and with non-Western religions included in its purview. Beginning with McMaster University in 1960, departments of religious studies were established at various Canadian universities throughout the sixties

28 John S. Moir, *A History of Biblical Studies in Canada: A Sense of Proportion*, Biblical Scholarship in North America 7 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982).

29 Aaron W. Hughes, *From Seminary to University: An Institutional History of the Study of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020).

and seventies, housed in faculties of the Arts or Humanities. The result is that biblical studies could now be found both in the religious studies departments of the provincial university system and in theological colleges with varying degrees of religious or denominational affiliation.

Although there is a great deal of overlap between the historical accounts of Moir and Hughes, they diverge significantly in the angle of vision through which they view this history. Moir's perspective is more muted and restrained; on the surface one might almost think he was giving a simple, annalistic account of developments (with an endless list of names, accomplishments, faculties, publications, etc.). But a closer reading shows affinities with a reserved, Anglo-Canadian (even quintessentially British) point of view. This can be seen in the book's subtitle, "A Sense of Proportion," which suggests that the history of Canadian biblical studies epitomizes the Aristotelian golden mean—an emphasis on being balanced, eschewing extremes. Moir's approach also shows up in several chapter titles, which are quotes taken from various Canadian figures in his history. Thus his chapter on Canadian biblical studies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is entitled "A Sane and Tactful Course"; his chapter on the impact of historical criticism on the Canadian scene is called "Frank, Scientific Discussion"; and his final chapter, which recounts Canadian biblical scholarship in an international context since the Second World War, concludes that this scholarship has achieved "No Mean Place," which is a somewhat self-deprecating way of acknowledging importance.

None of this, in itself, is a criticism of Moir. There simply is no neutral historiography; every historian has an angle of vision and not only selects the data but construes this data in light of their point of view.

Aaron Hughes's point of view is much more explicit. He introduces his book by highlighting his overall argument, namely, that both theology and religious studies (this includes biblical studies, whether conceived confessionally or "scientifically") have been defined and developed in Western countries to serve national interests; the study of religion in all its modern forms is grounded in the cultural and political values of the nation state.³⁰ Although Hughes uses Canada as a case study, he suggests that his analysis could be applied to other nations as well.³¹

Hughes's explicit approach to his study is commendable, in that it recognizes that we all stand somewhere, located in and shaped by our existential contexts and the communities of discourse that we participate in. There simply is no view from

30 This may shed light on the fact that a printed edition of Macpherson's presidential address was produced for Canada's 1967 Centennial celebrations. And Richardson's 2017 introduction was written for Canada's Sesquicentennial anniversary.

31 Hughes, *From Seminary to University*, 4–5.

nowhere; we have no access to any god’s-eye perspective of anything, including the object of our study, whether that is religion or the Bible or the history of “biblical studies.” The very stance of “objectivity” is a subjectively chosen position (distant from everyday life), which attempts to hold in abeyance the assumptions and commitments of the interpreter, with the idea that we can somehow attain to “truth” uncolored by our context. But this modern Eurocentric ideal is an illusion.

Granted, we need to treat the object of our study justly and fairly, respecting its integrity and otherness, not twisting our subject matter to conform to either our preconceived commonsense notions or our scholarly paradigms. Yet the very ideal of justice or fairness, rooted in respect for otherness (which I affirm), is itself a subjectively chosen stance. There is no neutral point of view available to anyone, including scholars.

The history of biblical studies in Canada (though not only in Canada) has been decisively shaped by the attempt to construct and define an academic discipline in such a way as to separate it from the subjectivity of theological and ecclesial commitments and contexts. Yet as Hughes’s study shows, even if those particular commitments and contexts could be held in abeyance, there will inevitably be other contexts and interests that constrain the discipline.

The Challenge of Contextual Biblical Studies in Canada Today

Whether intentional or not, the historical accounts of both Hughes and Moir reveal that the development of Canadian “biblical studies” was motivated by the modern Eurocentric problematics of the bifurcation between scholarship (as objective or neutral) and lived contexts (as subjective or partisan). This bifurcation holds not just for those formulating or developing the discipline of biblical studies in time past (the contested context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Canada). It holds also today for many who participate in the discourses of biblical studies in the twenty-first century. I say “discourses” intentionally, since any notion that there is one singular hegemonic discourse of “biblical studies” is an illusion—and the hope for such a discourse is a thinly veiled aspiration to recapture the monologic claims of Eurocentrism in academia.

This, of course, should not need to be said in our contemporary setting, since more and more scholars of religion (including biblical scholars) are becoming aware of the role of subjectivity and context in academic discourse. Indeed, as one who has participated for three decades in both the CSBS/SCÉB and the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) in the USA, I have discerned a sea change among many biblical scholars in recognizing the essentially contextual nature of all interpretation.

This recognition has especially been articulated by those from minoritized or marginalized cultures, ethnicities, and genders, evident in monographs and

collections of essays on contextual biblical interpretation. This began in the 1990s with volumes such as *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (1991); *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (1995); *Reading from This Place*, vols. 1 and 2 (1995); *Santa Biblia: The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes* (1996); and *What Has Jerusalem to Do with Beijing?: Biblical Interpretation from a Chinese Perspective* (1998).³²

The following decade saw the publication of volumes such as *Decolonizing Biblical Studies* (2000); *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading: Asian American Biblical Interpretation* (2006); *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (2007); *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics* (2008); *Democratizing Biblical Studies* (2009); and *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism* (2009).³³

A sampling of the most recent books on the subject would include *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora* (2010); *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretation* (2012); *The Future of Biblical Studies: Envisioning Biblical Studies on a Global Key* (2012); *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics* (2014); *Toward a Latino/a Biblical Interpretation* (2017); *Reading While Black* (2020); *African American Readings of Paul* (2020); *Minoritized Women Reading Race and Ethnicity* (2020); *Grounded in the Body, in Time and Place, in Scripture* (2021); and "Bitter the Chastening Rod": *Africana Biblical Interpretation after Stony the Road We Trod in the Age of BLM, SayHerName, and MeToo* (2021).³⁴

32 Cain Hope Felder, ed., *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006 [orig. 1995]); Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., *Reading from This Place*, vol. 1: *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Segovia and Tolbert, eds., *Reading from This Place*, vol. 2: *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Justo L. González, *Santa Biblia: The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996); K. K. Yeo, *What Has Jerusalem to Do with Beijing? Biblical Interpretation from a Chinese Perspective*, 2nd ed., *Contrapuntal Readings of the Bible in World Christianity 2* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018 [orig. 1998]).

33 Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000); Mary F. Foskett and Jeffrey Kah-Jin Kuan, eds., *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading: Asian American Biblical Interpretation* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2006); Brian K. Blount, ed., *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007); Tat-Siong Benny Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics: Reading the New Testament*, *Intersections: Asian and Pacific American Transcultural Studies* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Democratizing Biblical Studies: Toward an Emancipatory Educational Space* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009); Randall C. Bailey, Tat-Siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia, eds., *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, *Semeia Studies 57* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009).

34 Hugh R. Page Jr. et al., eds., *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010); Musa W. Dube, Andrew M. Mbuvi, and Dora Mbuwayesango, eds., *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations*, *Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship 13* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012); Roland

These works, some already classics, others recently penned, represent voices from the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Pacifica, which make the argument that it is not only appropriate, but ethically important to bring the biblical text into conversation with our contemporary contexts and existential concerns. And, thankfully, many biblical scholars who are not from minority groups are beginning to recognize the validity of this approach.³⁵ For this reason, the SBL sponsored two online symposia (in August, 2020) with the title “#BlackScholarsMatter,” where biblical scholars of African descent (including one Canadian) spoke about their experience in the biblical studies guild and offered their perspectives.³⁶

The question is whether such a contextual approach to biblical studies will find a place in Canada. A step in that direction is the recent job posting at the University of Toronto for a position in “Ancient Christian and Jewish Texts and Their Reception.” The posting looked for candidates who “demonstrate a considered and long-term engagement with . . . the study of ancient Christian and Jewish texts (early Christianity and/or Second Temple Judaism) and their reception, including within Black communities of interpretation in the Americas.”³⁷

Another important step is the collection of essays by Canadian biblical

Boer and Fernando F. Segovia, eds., *The Future of Biblical Studies Past: Envisioning Biblical Studies on a Global Key*, Semeia Studies 66 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012); Francisco Lozada, Jr. and Fernando F. Segovia, eds., *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics: Problematics, Objectives, Strategies*, Semeia Studies 68 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2014); Francisco Lozada, Jr., *Toward a Latino/a Biblical Interpretation*, Resources for Biblical Study 91 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2017); Esau McCaulley, *Reading while Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020); Lisa M. Bowers, *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance, and Transformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020); Mitzi J. Smith and Jin Young Choi, eds., *Minoritized Women Reading Race and Ethnicity: Intersectional Approaches to Constructed Identity and Early Christian Texts*, Feminist Studies and Sacred Texts (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2020); Jill Firth and Denise Cooper-Clarke, eds., *Grounded in the Body, in Time and Place, in Scripture: Papers by Australian Women Scholars in the Evangelical Tradition*, Australian College of Theology Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2021); and Mitzi J. Smith, Angela Parker, and Erica Dunbar, eds., *“Bitter the Chastening Rod”: Africana Biblical Interpretation after Stony the Road We Trod in the Age of BLM, SayHerName, and MeToo* (Lanham, MD: Lexington/Fortress Academic, at press).

35 An important early example is Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995). More recently, evangelical Old Testament scholars Brittany Kim and Charlie Trimm have begun compiling bibliographies of publications by Old Testament scholars of color, including Arab, Black, Asian, and Latino/a scholars on the Every Voice website. They will be expanding this to include other disciplines beyond Old Testament. As Kim and Trimm explain: “Our hope is that these sources will not be . . . contrasted with an objective interpretive and theological tradition, but that they will be viewed as part of the great historical tradition of interpreting the Bible and articulating theological ideas from within various contexts” (<https://everyvoicekingdomdiversity.org/database/>).

36 “#BlackScholarsMatter: Visions and Struggles,” August 12, 2020; “#BlackScholarsMatter: Lessons and Hopes,” August 13, 2020. Accessible at: <https://www.sbl-site.org/meetings/black-scholarsmatter.aspx>

37 University of Toronto (2021) job posting at <https://jobs.utoronto.ca/job/Toronto-Associate-Professor-Ancient-Christian-and-Jewish-Texts-and-their-Reception-ON/545690217> (accessed 26 March 2021).

scholars entitled *Reading In-Between: How Minoritized Cultural Communities Interpret the Bible in Canada*.³⁸ This volume was originally conceived as an exercise in narrative hermeneutics, linking personal and cultural narratives to biblical interpretation by scholars of the Bible who had immigrated to Canada.

I myself was invited to write an essay for the volume, but needed to withdraw when the focus for the volume changed somewhat and I was unable to re-do my piece in the time constraints required for publication. But I am grateful to the editors for the initial invitation, which forced me to reflect in a systematic and intentional way on how my Jamaican context contributed to my approach to biblical studies.³⁹ I initially presented these reflections to the Canadian Theological Society in 2015.⁴⁰ And I was able to draw extensively upon this material for the account of my Jamaican context in this presidential address.

It may be significant that I gave my 2015 paper in the Canadian *theological* rather than biblical society, even though the latter is where I have presented most of my Congress papers over the years. At the time I discerned greater interest among Canadian theologians than biblical scholars in addressing the contextual nature of our scholarship. This is not to say that such interest has been entirely absent from the CSBS/SCÉB.

For example, Hebrew Bible scholar Wes Bergen wrote a fascinating book

38 Néstor Medina, Alison Hari-Sing, and HyeRan Kim-Cragg, eds., *Reading In-Between: How Minoritized Cultural Communities Interpret the Bible in Canada* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019).

39 But praxis precedes reflection. I had been drawing explicitly upon aspects of my Jamaican context in various writings on the Bible for two decades prior to being prodded to think systematically about the subject. See Middleton, “Is Creation Theology Inherently Conservative,” 227; Middleton, “Identity and Subversion in Babylon,” 198; Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 11–14, 202; Middleton, “Islands in the Sun,” in *A Kairos Moment for Caribbean Theology*, 79–80, 83–85, 93–95 [= “Islands in the Sun,” in *Islands, Islanders, and the Bible*, 115–16, 119–21, 129–32]; Middleton, *A New Heaven and a New Earth*, 9–10, 29–30.

40 Middleton, “Faith Seeking Understanding: Reflections on Narrativial Biblical Hermeneutics from a Canadian Immigrant Perspective,” paper presented at the Canadian Theological Society annual meeting, University of Ottawa, 1 June 2015. This paper went beyond reflecting on how my Jamaican context affected my reading of the Bible and addressed my Canadian immigrant experience as well. The fact that I came to Canada as a young adult, followed by fifteen years of living, studying, working, and raising a family in Southern Ontario (Toronto, Guelph, and St. Catharines)—all the while coming to understand this new cultural context and grappling both existentially and intellectually with life after modernity—could not but affect my reading of Scripture. So I also brought this new cultural context (including the music of Bruce Cockburn) into dialogue with my work on the Bible and the postmodern condition, especially (though not only) in co-authored works with Canadian theologian Brian J. Walsh. See Middleton and Walsh, “Theology at the Rim of a Broken Wheel: Bruce Cockburn and Christian Faith in a Postmodern World,” *Grail: An Ecumenical Journal* 9, no. 2 (1993): 15–39; Middleton and Walsh, “Facing the Postmodern Scalpel: Can the Christian Faith Withstand Deconstruction?” in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1995), 132–225; Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1995); and Middleton, “From the Clenched Fist to the Open Hand: A Postmodern Reading of the Twenty-Third Psalm,” in *The Strategic Smorgasbord of Postmodernity: Literature and the Christian Critic*, ed. Deborah C. Bowen (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 307–25.

called *Reading Ritual*, on Leviticus in a postmodern context, addressing contemporary ethical issues in conversation with this ancient text.⁴¹ Haitian Canadian Ronald Charles has more recently written on his experience of bridging multiple languages and cultures as an act of decolonization in New Testament studies.⁴²

Indeed, it has often been members (past or present) of the CSBS/SCÉB executive committee who have done this sort of work. Past president Christine Mitchell (2017–18) gave her presidential address on reading biblical conquest stories in light of the rights of indigenous peoples.⁴³ Past president Marion Taylor (2011–12) and current programme coordinator Agnes Choi co-edited and contributed essays to the *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*.⁴⁴ Mark Leuchter, current executive secretary, who was simultaneously the 2019–20 president of the Mid-Atlantic Region of the SBL (illustrating the typical border crossing of Canadian biblical scholars), gave a powerful and timely presidential address that insightfully drew on contemporary politics in the age of Trump to read the figure of David in 1 and 2 Samuel.⁴⁵

My earliest exposure to a Canadian biblical scholar bringing contemporary context into conversation with a biblical text was David Jobling. His 1993 presidential address, entitled “Hannah’s Desire,” was given during the second CSBS/SCÉB meeting I attended. Having asked what the character of Hannah (in the narrative of 1 Samuel 1–2) wanted, what the narrator wanted, and what various readers wanted, Jobling concluded by asking (and answering), “What do I want?”⁴⁶ This concluding section of the paper anticipated the more fully developed argument in his monograph on 1 Samuel, the first chapter of which is subtitled, “An Autobiographical Essay on Method.”⁴⁷

41 Wesley J. Bergen, *Reading Ritual: Leviticus in Postmodern Culture*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 417 (New York: T&T Clark, 2005).

42 Ronald Charles, “Reading Romans in Greek: Translating It and Commenting on It in Haitian Creole,” in “*Bitter the Chastening Rod*,” and Charles, “Moving in-between Places and Academic Disciplines,” in *#Black Scholars Matter*, ed. Gay L. Byron and Hugh R. Page Jr., Biblical Scholarship in North America (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, in preparation).

43 Published as Christine Mitchell, “What to Do with All These Canaanites?: A Settler-Canadian Reading of Biblical Conquest Stories,” chap. 2 in *Honouring the Declaration: Church Commitments to Reconciliation and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, ed. Don Schweitzer and Paul L. Gareau (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2021), 31–52.

44 Marion Taylor and Agnes Choi, eds., *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters: A Historical and Biographical Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

45 Mark Leuchter, “Reading David in the Age of Trump,” Mid-Atlantic Region-Society of Biblical Literature 2020 Presidential Address, presented online, 15 March, 2021.

46 Jobling, “Hannah’s Desire,” Canadian Society of Biblical Society 1993 Presidential Address, *Bulletin of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies* 53 (1994):19–32, here 29–32.

47 Jobling, “Samuel’s Book, My Book, Me, and You: An Autobiographical Essay on Method,” in Jobling, *1 Samuel*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 3–27. Jobling’s transparency influenced my analysis of the positive role of subjectivity in relation to the givenness or otherness of a text (Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 36–38).

These examples of Canadian biblical scholars illustrate the growing interest in bringing the specificity of contemporary context and lived experience to the academic table in order to engage the biblical text dialectically—both interrogating the text *from* the interpreter’s context and asking how the text may speak *to* that context.

Yet not everyone is comfortable with the explicit starting point of lived experience. Whereas biblical scholars have no problem affirming the importance of ancient contexts for the study of the Bible (indeed, this is an essential aspect of the discipline), there is often an effacing of the subject (to use an apt Derridian phrase) when it comes to recognition of one’s own context. There still remains a scholarly unease about acknowledging subjectivity, a remnant of what has colourfully been called “Cartesian anxiety.”⁴⁸ But, as I explained in an earlier work:

The admission of subjectivity does not disqualify one’s interpretation, as if there were some other (more viable) hermeneutical alternative waiting in the wings. To treat subjectivity *per se* with suspicion would betray what Richard Bernstein calls “Cartesian anxiety,” the residual (perhaps unacknowledged) nostalgia for the sort of objective certainty Descartes aspired to achieve in the *Meditations*. This aspiration, though now widely recognized as unattainable (and illegitimate), still exercises a profoundly unsettling influence over the sense of epistemic security among many scholars across a wide spectrum of disciplines in the contemporary academy.⁴⁹

I propose it is time that Canadian biblical studies gets past its “Cartesian anxiety.” This will require us to deborder the discipline, bringing what sometimes seems like a hermetically sealed (and protected) field of study into conversation with our own subjectivity and contexts; it will require us to take seriously the embeddedness of biblical studies (and all academic discourses) in the complexity of the real world. Not only does all scholarship arise out of concerns, interests, and questions that come from our contexts, but our scholarship has the potential of speaking powerfully to our contexts, in a world often characterized by suffering and injustice.

This is not the place to provide an exhaustive listing of the forms of suffering or injustice that afflict the peoples of the world today. But we can think of humanly-generated climate disaster and ecological degradation, war and terrorism, sex trafficking and slavery, domestic violence, police brutality; and underlying much of this suffering are the ideologies of racism, sexism, rapacious capitalism, and various forms of nationalism and identity politics, which absolutize the subject

48 Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 16–20.

49 Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 37.

(identified with an in-group), while demonizing others—typically in the name of some ideal. None of these realities are extraneous to the lives of biblical scholars (or of scholars in any discipline), if they are open to the pain of the world in which they live.

Earlier I characterized my outsider status vis-à-vis the Canadian academic scene as a disadvantage. But perhaps this disadvantage is an advantage in disguise, in that it enables me to envision a future for Canadian biblical studies beyond a Eurocentric model.

Based on my theological formation in the Caribbean context, which grounded my later graduate studies, I do not find it possible to practice biblical studies (or any scholarly activity) independent of, or unaffected by, contextual, existential, even ethical matters. This was how I approached my graduate work in philosophy, and it is how I approach biblical scholarship today.

This does not mean that biblical scholars (or any scholars) need always to make explicit their contextual interests or conceptual paradigms—I certainly do not always find that necessary. Indeed, it can be tiresome to focus constantly on method and prolegomena. My own predilection is to get down to the actual work of interpretation, with a robust discussion among those with different starting points, while noting my own context only when necessary for clarification. In contrast to a Eurocentric privileging of a supposedly neutral and objective approach, the diversity of perspectives and contexts brought to the same subject matter is not an impediment, but can positively enhance and enrich the discussion of any topic—if there is genuine openness to alternative positions.

Having had to negotiate a complex sense of identity in my adolescence, based on my skin colour among darker-skinned friends, church, and family, I then became starkly aware of cultural differences since immigrating to Canada and more recently to the USA, and intersecting all this was my crossing of disciplinary boundaries from theology, to philosophy, then biblical studies. The result is that I have never been able to conceive of academic work (whether giving papers, writing books and articles, or teaching) as anything other than a conversation among those with different points of view. Indeed, this conversation has never been simply interpersonal; it is also profoundly *intra*-personal.⁵⁰

50 Justo L. González's description of Augustine as *mestizo* (negotiating his Roman and African identities, the heritage of his father and mother, respectively) could be applicable to my sense of identity. González suggests that Augustine's restlessness, which he describes in the *Confessions*, was not due only to his sense of distance from God, "but also to the inner struggle of a person in whom two cultures, two legacies, two world visions clashed and mingled—in short, of a *mestizo*." González, *The Mestizo Augustine: A Theologian between Two Cultures* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 9. But in my case, there were more than two cultures or legacies at work. The result is that I was intensely aware of my own hybridity long before I ever heard of the seminal work of Edward Said or Homi Bhabha. See Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994).

David Jobling's Model of Biblical Scholarship

In many ways David Jobling (to whom this essay is dedicated) has been a model for the practice of biblical studies. Beginning with my very first CSBS/SCÉB paper presentation in 1992, and continuing for the next number of years, Jobling was my foremost interlocutor, interacting with my papers and raising critical questions, while also giving the encouragement a young scholar needed, at a time when imposter syndrome was at its strongest. Indeed, Jobling spent an entire evening with me, for supper and informal conversation, at the start of the 1994 Learned's in Calgary—a gift I will never forget.

This suggests that there is a need for the mentoring of new graduates and junior scholars by those more established in the field, both for simple encouragement and for guidance in navigating biblical studies today. Perhaps the CSBS/SCÉB might develop a method of linking up interested biblical scholars for this purpose.

Although never a formal mentor, David Jobling has embodied for me the sort of biblical scholarship towards which I aspire. His interdisciplinary breadth has been exemplary; he has interacted with literary theory, theology, and philosophy, including structuralist and poststructuralist approaches, ideological criticism, and global readings of the Bible. Such interdisciplinary openness is reflected in the essays and tributes in the Jobling Festschrift, entitled *Voyages in Uncharted Waters*.⁵¹ In a *Semeia* article on the Bible and literary criticism, Jobling acknowledged how rare this interdisciplinary approach was: “There is still some professional reluctance to let such breadth of reading define the discipline of ‘biblical studies.’ But *Semeia* exists to force such a redefinition, and that is why I am its General Editor.” He continued by noting “the failure of biblical studies to engage seriously, at least until recently, with anything outside which threatens to transgress its disciplinary boundaries. This has been particularly true of biblical studies in Canada.”⁵²

51 Wesley J. Bergen and Armin Siedlecki, eds., *Voyages in Uncharted Waters: Essays on the Theory and Practice of Biblical Interpretation in Honour of David Jobling* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006). An example of Jobling's boundary crossing is his programmatic exploration of the relationship of deconstruction to liberation theologies for their relevance to an ethical-political reading of the Bible, “Writing the Wrongs of the World: The Deconstruction of the Biblical Text in the Context of Liberation Theologies,” *Semeia* 51 (1990): 81–118.

52 Jobling, “Biblical Studies on a More Capacious Canvas: A Response to Joe Velaidum and James M. Kee,” *Semeia* 89 (2002): 139–46, here 142. Evidence that this situation is changing is that Colleen Shantz (newly elected president of CSBS/SCÉB) has explored the intersection of Paul's ecstatic experience with contemporary neurobiology; see Shantz, *Paul in Ecstasy: The Neurobiology of the Apostle's Life and Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Shantz, who holds a faculty position at the Toronto School of Theology (TST), notes (in a personal communication) that the last three dissertations she directed at TST were interdisciplinary, using anthropology to understand the conditions for stability in new religious movements, cognitive linguistics (conceptual blending) to analyze Paul's developing language about resurrection, and political theory to understand Christian origins. This reflects the fact that TST (with an annual cohort of 25–30 PhD students) has revised its doctoral program to encourage interdisciplinarity. Shantz also notes that

But beyond interdisciplinarity, Jobling embodied a version of Antonio Gramsci's notion of the "organic intellectual." Although this term is more well-known in North America through the writings of Cornel West, who applied it to Martin Luther King, Jr., Gramsci originally used it to describe those who are members of a subaltern group suffering injustice, and who engage in the intellectual enterprise for the sake of, and in relationship with, this group.⁵³

I understand that not all Canadian practitioners of biblical studies are part of a subaltern community. But, as Jamaican theologian Garnett Roper explains, this is not strictly required. What is required is that scholars care about those who are suffering and listen to their questions. In his proposal for the future of Caribbean theology (which has relevance, *mutatis mutandis*, for Canadian biblical studies), Roper noted that Caribbean theology envisions two changes from "the Western European tradition" of theologizing—namely, a shift in the questions being asked and a shift in those asking the questions.⁵⁴

Concerning the latter point, Roper notes that the dialogue partners of Caribbean theology "are not armchair secularists or academics, but are those from below and they are interested in questions of *justice*." Specifically, these dialogue partners are "the poor and marginalized, along with the pastors and intellectuals who share an organic connection with the marginalized or a commitment to and solidarity with them."⁵⁵

While the phrase "organic connection" alludes to Gramsci's notion of the "organic intellectual," Roper's mention of "commitment and solidarity" that intellectuals may share with the marginalized suggests that it is possible for scholars to have a profound sense of connection with people who are different from themselves. Jobling has consistently attempted to address the conditions and concerns of "the wretched of the earth" (to use Franz Fanon's phrase).⁵⁶

But Roper also notes that the very questions we ask after Eurocentrism may be different: "Caribbean theology is not interested in an armchair discussion about metaphysics or ontology [that is, whether God exists], but rather poses questions

she co-directed two interdisciplinary dissertations in the University of Toronto religion department, which used neuroscience in a study of music in early Christianity and cognitive science to analyze prophecy. But Shantz points to the problem of new scholars trained in this way applying for jobs that are still defined by traditionally defined specializations. So while faculty and students are becoming more interdisciplinary, many institutions have not yet figured out what this looks like in the structuring of faculty positions.

53 Cornel West, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Prophetic Christian as Organic Intellectual," in West, *Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations of the Crisis in American Religion and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1988), 3–12. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Noel Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), esp. the section entitled "Problems of History and Culture."

54 Roper, "The Caribbean as the People of God," 3.

55 Roper, "The Caribbean as the People of God," 3–4; his emphasis.

56 Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. from the 1961 French ed. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 2004).

that are both ethical and existential. It wants to know *what kind of God* is the God that exists.”⁵⁷ By analogy with Roper’s description here, I propose that it is not enough to study the Bible and its historical, cultural, and literary contexts at arms length, as an artifact from the past; nor is it enough to bring biblical studies into interdisciplinary dialogue with other academic fields, since this can serve to keep biblical studies artificially in the realm of the theoretical. Rather, we need to bring biblical studies also into intentional conversation with our present social and religious contexts, exploring how we might address contemporary concerns of ethical significance.

This will require spreading the table of biblical studies widely enough to welcome scholars who bring such concerns to their scholarly work. It will mean hosting a conversation among those of diverse starting points and positions, without intellectual snobberty. Jobling himself has embodied this sort of hospitality toward scholars with whom he disagreed (even profoundly), and it is precisely this sort of posture that I envision for the future for Canadian biblical studies after Eurocentrism.

It is significant that while some biblical scholars are becoming more open to ideological-critical readings of the Bible, this openness is not always directed towards readings that are grounded in a stance of trust. Yet among the positions that some scholars bring to the field are their ecclesial commitments and theological perspectives, which may include taking the Bible as a positive resource for faith. I was, therefore, struck by Aaron Hughes’s avowed intent to be even-handed in his historical account, *From Seminary to University*: “I treat theological and academic approaches to religion equally, and while I certainly favour the inclusivity and historicity of the latter, I have no intention of denigrating the former.”⁵⁸

Hughes is more self-aware than most scholars, yet the very language of “theological and academic approaches” suggests that the theological is somehow distinct from the academic, which continues to perpetuate the implicit bias of the Eurocentric scholarly mindset. I am profoundly glad that as an ecclesially-grounded scholar, who cares about the theological and ethical relevance of the Bible, I have experienced only welcome and engaged, respectful discussion from David Jobling.⁵⁹

Jobling has been one of the most incisive proponents of an ideological-critical reading of the Bible in Canada, often reading against the grain of the text, articulating a critique of patriarchy or ethnocentricity in Scripture. Yet Jobling has

57 Roper, “The Caribbean as the People of God,” 3; emphasis original.

58 Hughes, *From Seminary to University*, 13.

59 On those rare occasions where I have experienced condescending attitudes at CSBS/SCÉB meetings (toward myself or others), I have been able to respond respectfully, yet forthrightly, challenging such attitudes, and sometimes bringing the question of perspective explicitly to the fore of the discussion, to cut off the implicit claim to an essentially privileged position or methodology.

admitted that: “The powerless, and those who write out of experience shared with them, are not prepared to give up the power of the Bible. They need to draw on the Bible’s power in empowering ways.”⁶⁰ Jobling notes that it is those like himself, “socially invested with power, . . . who are inclined to assert our power *over* the Bible through a very skeptical critique.” While continuing “to think that such critique of the Bible is utterly necessary,” he admits: “I have begun to worry that, as I help my students to take power *over* a Bible which has disempowered and oppressed them, I am denying them access to power *through* the Bible, of which they are so much in need.”⁶¹

Similar thoughts have been expressed by Christine Mitchell on the inadequacy of a hermeneutics of suspicion, which simply exposes or critiques problematic aspects of the Bible. She suggests the need also for a “reparative reading” of the Bible, which may engender the sort of personal and communal formation that is able to resist injustice and sustain alternative identities in the context of the present world.⁶²

Canadian Biblical Studies—Quo Vadis?

Although this article had its origins in the invitation to take stock of Canadian biblical studies on the fiftieth anniversary of the CCSR, the particular thrust and focus of the article was prompted by recent conversations within the CSBS/SCÉB executive committee, as we responded to contemporary ethical concerns that were brought to our attention.

The conversations we had were only preliminary. Rather than attempt to formulate particular proposals about how we might address these (and related) concerns, the executive decided that the best course would be to engage the full membership of the CSBS/SCÉB in an open-ended discussion over the next couple of years, with a view to clarifying our *raison d’être* as an academic society. This open-ended discussion would give all interested members a voice in contributing to the future of the Society, and might at some point lead to a formal statement of the purpose.

Whether or not such a formal statement is the outcome of future discussions, I suggest that biblical studies cannot continue with business as usual, ignoring the wider world and the pressing ethical concerns of our times. Any biblical scholar

60 David Jobling, “Experiencing the Many: A Response to Camp, Mack, and Wimbush,” in *Power, Powerlessness and the Divine: New Inquiries in Bible and Theology*, ed. Cynthia L Rigby, Scholars Press Studies in Theological Education (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 281–89, here 283.

61 Jobling, “Experiencing the Many,” 283–84.

62 See the section “Hermeneutics of Suspicion or Reparative Reading?” in Mitchell, “What to Do with All These Canaanites?,” 45–48. Mitchell here (45–46) draws here on the important essay by queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick called “Paranoid Reading or Reparative Reading, or You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is about You,” in Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). 123–52.

who engages in serious self-reflection will realize that their own scholarly work derives from, and is motivated by, various assumptions, questions, and agendas that shape their interest in the subject. This realization is not just a matter of epistemic honesty, requiring a forthright admission of the contextual nature of all study of the Bible. It is fundamentally an ethical issue, requiring us to take seriously both the needs of our social and ecclesial contexts and the voices and contributions of those scholars who articulate such needs as an intrinsic aspect of their scholarly work.

It is my hope that Canadian biblical studies will be able to move beyond the Eurocentric bias of the past and begin to bridge the gap between the traditional study of the Bible in its ancient contexts and the pressing needs of the contemporary world