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Theology and The Arts: What Can the Arts Teach Us about God?

Jonathan Blackmon

This issue of *Intégrité* features an outstanding array of articles, book reviews, and poetry related to the theme “Theology and the Arts: What Can the Arts Teach Us about God?” The essays explore the interaction between theological inquiry and artistic expression. Articles include theological reflections on various aspects of the arts, explorations of how the arts inform theology and vice versa, historical surveys of music and other arts as theological expression, and more. I am grateful to John J. Han, editor of *Intégrité: A Faith and Learning Journal*, for proposing this special topic issue and inviting me to guest edit it.

The essays in this issue proceed from theological reflection on the arts as instruments of culture care to case studies related to various art forms in conversation with theology. The articles are arranged in a roughly thematic manner, moving from a focus on visual arts toward literary and then musical forms. Three of the earlier articles feature a religious studies and/or a comparative religions approach, although all of the articles in some sense deal with how the arts can function as Christian theological inquiry in a pluralistic world. Some of the studies deal with challenging themes, such as the problem of evil or lessons Christians can derive from non-Christian sources. One of the strengths of this special topics issue, I believe, is located in the broad range of backgrounds and disciplines represented among the various contributors. The authors featured in this issue live and work in settings around the world, including in Asia, Africa, South America, Europe, and North America. They also come from a variety of denominational backgrounds and theological perspectives, which further strengthens the issue as a contribution to faith and learning—and demonstrates the value of *Intégrité* as a faith and learning journal.

There has been growing attention over the past several decades to the interrelatedness of theology and the arts, which has led to a number of fruitful conversations across various theological traditions and academic disciplines. For example, Diarmaid MacCulloch, who teaches history at Oxford, begins his history of the Reformation with a discussion of carved figures in the chancel area of a church in the English countryside (MacCulloch 1-7). The history of those figures tells something about how people have thought about God, the church, and worship over the centuries. Clyde Kilby and Leland Ryken, both professors of English at Wheaton, have examined extensively the relationship between theology and the arts, especially through the media of literature and poetry. Numerous scholars have explored the relationship of theology and the arts more generally from a broad range of philosophical perspectives. Jeremy Begbie furnishes an interesting, albeit somewhat technical, introduction to the topic in *Voicing Creation’s Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts*. Begbie opens with an intriguing overview of the topic, because he deals with some important Protestant voices from the past, including Paul Tillich and Abraham Kuyper, before articulating his own vision of a theology of the arts. Building on the groundwork he laid in *Voicing Creation’s Praise*, Begbie has gone on to explore the connection between music and theology in several subsequent books. Nicholas Wolsterstorff, William Dyrness, Frank Burch Brown, and
Makoto Fujimura, among many others, represent recent inquiries into the discipline that most people would find engaging and accessible.

Scholarly organizations provide another forum for exploring theological aesthetics. For example, the Society of Biblical Literature, American Academy of Religion, and Evangelical Theological Society all have program units devoted to various approaches to the subject. Organizations with a more focused approach to the topic include The Society for the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies, Christians in the Visual Arts, and The Hymn Society. The International Council of Ethnodoxologists demonstrates a particularly interesting example of engaging theology and the arts, because ethnodoxology combines ethnographic inquiry with theology, missiology, and artistic communication. The aforementioned groups all have a web presence, so readers of *Intégrité* who are interested in learning more can do so by visiting the websites of these organizations.

Exploring the relationship between theology and the arts also presents numerous challenges, however. The cross-disciplinary nature of the project makes it difficult to do research in isolation. Not many people have the kind of academic training in multiple disciplines that enables them to be conversant with the leading scholarship across diverse fields of study. Those who do may still have difficulty communicating their findings in an accessible manner, especially to a lay audience. Yet a growing body of research is making the conversation between theology and the arts increasingly possible and profitable. The current issue of *Intégrité* represents an important voice in the conversation.

The first article, my own, argues for the arts as an instrument of cultural transformation, bringing a theological framework to bear on artistic endeavors and their connection to creation, culture, and Christ. In the next article, Erhard Gerstenberger, an Old Testament scholar of major importance, compares healing prayer rituals in Navajo and Babylonian contexts with similarly worded examples in the Hebrew Psalter, showing how prayer and art often coalesce when people have need of healing from pain, disease, or affliction. The essay that follows also takes a comparative approach, drawing as it does on the dissertation research of sculptor and religious studies scholar, Patrick Beldio. Based on a large-scale commission he received, Beldio shows how Christians can come to a deeper understanding of their faith in Christ through the creative process, even (or especially) when it brings them into contact with other faith traditions. Tom Hobson also takes a comparative approach in his article on the Hebrew Psalter. Hobson compares the language of the Psalms to other religious lyric poetry in the Ancient Near East and draws conclusions about the uniqueness of the lyrical vocabulary of Israel. The final two articles draw on the emerging field of ethnodooxology, a cross-disciplinary field that combines biblical theology, missiology, ethnographic studies, anthropology, ethnoarts, and ethnomusicology. Stephanie Biggs, from Tanzania, and Elsen Portugal, from Brazil, provide case studies for how music and theology interact in missional settings. Biggs examines praise and worship music currently en vogue in Pentecostal settings, while Portugal provides a historical overview of the musico-theological dialogue among Baptists working with the Xerente people.

One of the many challenges to a cross-disciplinary study such as this one involves terminology and key concepts. Since the articles in this issue cover a wide range of academic territory, it may be helpful for the reader to know some of the signposts that can help guide them on the journey. As readers make their way through the articles, it would be helpful to have a Bible at hand, especially when authors deal with specific passages and this may be particularly true for those without formal theological training. When reading the article on Navajo chants, some familiarity with ritual studies, prayer, and worship would be helpful. Ronald L. Grimes has some
helpful introductory books on ritual studies, while Robert Webber and James F. White both have helpful books that introduce worship studies. For a primer on liturgical studies, Frank Senn’s *Introduction to Christian Liturgy* would be a helpful place to start. One of the key things to remember when studying worship is that people tend to define worship in one of three ways: according to belief, ritual, or experience. The three ideas are certainly interrelated, but in definitions of worship one concept will tend to dominate. Knowing this can help the reader navigate discussions of theology and the arts in worship.

Another challenge to the study of theology and the arts resides in the barriers the reader must cross. The articles by Gerstenberger and Hobson deal with ancient languages, ritual practices, and artistic communication. The studies by Beldio, Biggs, and Portugal all involve significant cultural and linguistic differences. Fortunately, however, all of these articles begin with either an abstract or an introduction, which gives the reader some familiarity with the topic at the outset. The essays also engage with markedly different art forms, but each of the authors takes time to explain them in accessible terms.

As mentioned above, Biggs and Portugal take an ethnodoxological approach to their studies. Ethnodoxology is a term first coined in 2003 at the Global Consultation on Music and Missions. Since then, an entire movement of scholars and practitioners has collaborated on numerous projects to advance the discipline. Methodologically, ethnodoxology seeks to understand and identify with local cultures in an effort to facilitate the use of local arts in Christian worship and mission. The work of James Krabill, Brian Schrag, and Robin Harris (among others) has been instrumental in developing the field. Essentially, ethnodoxology helps people to engage with God and neighbor using their own artistic “heart language,” whatever that may be, so they can experience God at the deepest possible level. In one sense, ethnodoxology describes what all of the authors are doing in this issue and what theology and the arts are really about in the first place. The arts are metaphorical communication that express meaning at a deeper level than words alone, so using forms that reach the deepest part of a community’s mind and heart help them to see truths about God they would otherwise miss.

What can the arts teach us about God? The articles, book reviews, and poetry that follow all seek to answer that question. I invite you to engage in the conversation with the lively, creative, and thoughtful group of scholars who have contributed to this issue of *Intégrité*. 
Theology, the Arts, and Cultural Transformation

Jonathan Blackmon

Introduction

Theology and the arts need each other, because God has a design for the universe that he wants proclaimed and the message so transcends the human mind that words alone cannot do—it requires the multiplication of his image. Recent studies show an increased awareness of the ways in which thinking about God can and should be intertwined with the communicative power of the arts. When the two are brought together in ways that are biblically rooted and contextually situated, the arts have transformative power. Although theology and the arts have had a long and fruitful conversation in many respects, the Church has always had a rather tenuous relationship with the arts.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, for example, both the Mosaic Tabernacle and Solomon’s Temple resulted from the work of skilled craftsman and contained elaborate works of artistic design, but the Torah also forbade making any representation of God (Exod 20:4). First there was the golden calf incident, in which the High Priest helped the people to break the second commandment before God had even finished giving it (Exod 20:4; 32:1-35). Later, Moses fashioned a golden serpent on a stick to avert a plague (Num 21:4-9), but subsequent generations named it “Nehushtan” and worshiped it, so Hezekiah destroyed it as part of a series of worship reforms (2 Kgs 18:3-6). The Old Testament contains a number of similar stories in which art ends in idolatry. Gideon, for example, started out as God’s worship warrior, tearing down the altar of Baal and destroying its accompanying Asherah pole, but in the end, he constructed a golden ephod that became an object of false worship (Jgs 6:25-27; 8:22-27). Given the tendency to venerate artistic creation and the fact that scripture everywhere attests to God’s demand for exclusive worship, perhaps it is little wonder why the Church’s leaders have often felt uneasy about art. Although Israel embraced the arts, prophetic voices within the community repeatedly offered corrective lenses when the people’s artistic vision went askew.

Early Christians had similarly mixed sentiments about the arts in general and especially within the life of the Church. On the one hand, Christianity was birthed in song, as the four Lukan Canticles demonstrate (Lk 1:46-55, 67-79; 2:14, 29-32) (Westermeyer 59). On the other hand, music’s association with pagan ritual and its use as propaganda by various heretical sects made Church leaders wary of its potential dangers (Routley 55). The general consensus of the early Church fathers seems to have been that music serves as an especially fitting vehicle for the praise of God, but it should be vocal, unaccompanied, doctrinally sound, and unassuming (Routley 45-60; Westermeyer 59-73). Visual art was another matter. The earliest examples of extant Christian art date from roughly the beginning of the third century (González 117; Ferguson 167). Early Christian art was highly symbolic in nature; its use of image intended to represent established Christian teaching (Ferguson 167-68). Symbols such as the fish, dove, or anchor encapsulated the Church’s message about Christ, the Holy Spirit, and faith in God (Ferguson 167-68; González
It seems likely that early Christian sensibilities about visual art grew out of the practice of norina sacra, the visual abbreviation of certain words in the biblical text (Hurtado 138-40). The chi-rho symbol for Christ represents one such example. Since the Church focused its attention on the reading and teaching of scripture right from the start, it should come as no surprise that its art was formed and informed by the biblical text (see discussion in Hurtado 105-18). Both aurally and visually, then, the arts have played an important role in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but the Church’s leaders have always been concerned to keep the arts tied to scriptural teaching and to avoid potential abuses.

The arts, however, have something to teach us about God and about our place in the universe. All creation bears witness to the glory of God, the arts included (Ps 19:1-6). Through form, light, and color, God communicates something about himself to the world he made (Calvin I: 52-54, 58). If, as John Webster has argued, the task of theology resides in the sphere of human inquiry about God and his works, then art, as a profound expression of that inquiry, has something to say about the God Christians worship and about how we relate to the world around us (see Webster 57). Theology begins with God, takes place in the context of community, reflects on who God is from the perspective of his self-revelation in history, and moves toward praise, prayer, and proclamation (Webster 57-58). As a product of human creativity, the arts relate to God no less than the rest of creation and their meaning, like all human communication, is socially located. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to show how the arts, in conversation with theology, can help to fulfill the cultural mandate. In other words, the study will attempt to construct a theological framework in which the arts can function as an instrument of cultural transformation.

Created for Life with God

God created the universe and everything in it with a specific design and for a particular purpose—after its own kind. Creation certainly includes everything in the material world, but its reach actually extends much further than that. The created order encompasses ethnicity, geography, and history, as Paul declares to the Athenians (Acts 17:24-28). It covers all forms of government (Rom. 13:1), family and social order (Mk. 10:2-9), God’s chosen people (Eph 2:4-10), work and Sabbath rest (Exod 20:8-11; Mk. 2:23-28), and everything else the mind can conceive (Isa. 44:24-45:18). Albert Wolters observes, ‘‘creation’’ has a scope much broader than common usage gives it. … There is nothing in human life that does not belong to the created order’’ (Wolters 24-25).

God made all things in the material, temporal, and spiritual realms and they derive their purpose and value from him.

God’s evaluation of his handiwork has significant implications not only for the conversation between theology and the arts, but also for how we view the role of the arts in culture care (a term to which we shall return later). Creation has intrinsic value because of God’s Word—the creation account specifies that he spoke it into existence and proclaimed its worth. He saw all that he had made and called it good, because it was good (Gen 1:31). What God calls good, therefore, let no one denigrate.

Inasmuch as the arts take the materials of creation and use them for communication, for beauty, and for enjoyment, they glorify God, because the original Artist designed them for such use (Kuyper 155). In creating the cosmos, God employed both representational and abstract design. Human beings, for instance, are the original representational art—the product of God’s artistry—because he made us in his image (Eph 2:10). However diverse the messages of art may be across
time, geography, and so forth, the fact remains that art communicates something by intention (see Rookmaaker 9-11; Kuyper 156-57). Even though their meaning may not always be understood, visual, literary, and performing arts all have a sense of the rhetorical: they capture the imagination and fire the emotions for a reason. Even in a world tainted by sin and beset by false representations of God, the arts continue to manifest God’s glory since they form part of the natural world and are products of human creativity (Kuyper 158).

New creation forms a major theme in biblical theology, because it serves as the goal for God’s plan of redemption (Beale 22). A new humanity marks the center of God’s work of recreation, accomplished through resurrection (Beale 23). To be in Christ is to be a new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). When a person becomes remade into the image and likeness of Christ, ethnicity, gender, and other social constructs no longer count for anything, at least not in terms of one’s standing with God. Instead, the objective is union and communion with God through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit (Eph 1:3-14). As such, redemption and reconciliation form twin themes in the New Testament picture of what it means to be a new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17-21; Eph 2:11-22; Col 3:10-11). That was God’s plan for humans and their environment in the first place (Waltke 209).

God designed creation to be in harmony with itself and its Maker. One of the marks of sin that grieved God’s heart was the violence and dissonance that spread throughout the earth after the fall (Gen 6:11-13). The logical coherence of the universe, and even its existence, stem from the sacrificial love of a self-giving God (Begbie 170-71). The new humanity that God creates in Christ retunes the symphony of his handiwork, restoring the euphony in which God created the world (2 Cor 6:14-18). As Allen Ross argues, “the goal of creation and redemption is communion with God” (Ross 82). To be truly human means to live in fellowship with God and to fulfill his purposes for human existence in the universe, which makes harmony an integral component to daily life (Waltke 209-111).

In the beginning, the created order experienced shalom, the peace and wholeness that characterize a world devoid of fear, violence, and greed. Living beings who bear God’s image reflect both his nature and his ethics, with the result that creation experiences a particular kind of rest (Waltke 219). He gives people a passionate vitality that enables them to work, rest, and live with a sense of completeness (Waltke 224). For something to exist implies it has a particular function (Walton 22). God created everything in the universe not only as a unity, but to experience the fullness of life that comes from being in communion with him and in harmony with the world around us.

Light also plays a prominent role in the creation account. God speaks light into existence and uses it as the basis for life on earth (Gen 1:3, 14-18). It even creates colors and enables us to see form. In the Garden of Eden, and later in another garden, God irradiated the world with light (Gen 3:8; Jn 1:4-5, 9-13). God created the universe with a physical and spiritual luminescence, diminished through sin, which he restores in Christ. Essentially, creation is God’s cosmic temple, a place God made to display his glory, and which he will restore to its intended purposes in Christ (Walton 81-84). Through Christ, all of creation will once again experience the wholeness, harmony, and radiance—the beauty—of life with God.

When Adam sinned, death entered the world and the entire creation felt the effects of God’s covenant curses (Rom 5:12; 8:20). In Augustinian terms, God creates and rules all things, but of sin he is only the ruler (Augustine 53). Tragically, sin deforms the beauty of God’s creation, although sin itself is not a “thing.” As an illustration, many years ago while in graduate school, I was moving choral risers through a small vestibule outside a performance hall. While attempting
to open the next set of doors, the risers slipped from my hands and fell over, gashing a valuable painting in the process (much to my horror). The gash in the painting was not a “thing,” but a disfigurement of the artist’s work. Sin is like that: it is the gash in God’s painting. It not only mars humanity, but it deforms everything else God made as well. God, however, will not allow the curse brought about by human disobedience to have the last word toward his creation (Carson 69-70).

The Gospel of Jesus extends to the whole of creation (Mk 16:15; Rom 8:18-24). God sustains and orders that which he fashions (Ps 33:6-11; Mt 6:25-32; Acts 17:25; Heb 1:3), so the cosmos will reach the end for which God made it (Beale 19, 22). Contrary to the worldview of western culture, the universe is not a machine, but a living organism in the providential hand of God (Wilkinson 220-23). In a sinful world, God accomplishes his work neither through total destruction nor starting over, but through the artistry of new creation.

Redemption extends much further than to individual converts. New Creation surely includes persons who experience new birth (Jn. 3:3), but it also encompasses a new community (Eph. 5:25-32) and a new cosmos (Isa. 56-66; Rom. 8:18-25). It begins with a new heart, but ends with a new order (Jer. 31:31-34). Thus, the Gospel promised by the prophets and realized in Christ extends from the innermost part of human beings to the outermost reaches of the universe (Beale 27). As Aquinas pointed out, “grace does not scrap nature but brings it to perfection” (Aquinas ST 1a.1.8).

Harmony, wholeness, and radiance all characterize the initial state of creation, but they also typify the new humanity that Christ is bringing about through his life, death, and resurrection. God created the universe in harmony with itself and with him. He gave it the kind of shalom, or wholeness, that only Christ can restore. When sin entered the world, he sent Christ to enlighten everyone to the knowledge of the truth. Humanity and indeed the entire universe were made for life with God. The beauty of the Gospel lies in Christ’s restoration, through his own dying and rising, of the harmony, wholeness, and radiance with which God created the world. If theology has to do with human inquiry about God and his works, then human artistry, as a product of God’s own artistic design, can contribute to the conversation. Through light, form, and rhythm, the arts have something to say about God and everything else in relation to God.

The Cultural Mandate

God gave Adam and Eve a cultural mandate, a commission to develop the natural resources in the garden and to extend his image throughout the earth (Gen 1:26-28). He blessed them with fruitfulness and vocation so that they, and by extension everything around them, might flourish. While some would argue that a cultural mandate no longer exists (see Van Drunen, for example), such a position ignores God’s repetition of the mandate to Noah in Genesis 9. In fact, each time God covenants with his people and commissions them, he renews the call to cultural transformation. After Christ inaugurated the promised new covenant, for example, he commissioned his followers to be fruitful and multiply by making disciples of all the earth, extending his image—and therefore his cosmic temple—to the ends of creation (Mt 28:18-20; Mk 16:15).

The Church has always struggled with how it should relate to culture, however, which in turn has been reflected in its music and art (Edgar 54-55; Hurtado 87-89). Culture involves every aspect of human life and humanity’s place in the world, because it “takes the raw materials of nature and creates an environment” (Keller 90). As Cornelius Van Til put it, “Culture … is any
and all human effort and labor expended on the cosmos, to unearth its treasures…” (quoted in Keller 110). As such, artists and their creative endeavors form the mulch of society, not just providing decoration or diversion, but also enriching the soil of civilization in a way that contributes to human flourishing (Barzun 67-68).

God’s work of renewing culture centers on the incarnation of Jesus Christ, since he is the firstborn of the new creation (Col. 1:15). The new humanity he is creating consists of people from all ethnic backgrounds (Eph. 2:15; Rev 5:9), who find their new identity in the one who died to redeem them. Jesus accomplished the work of redemption at the cross, but he brings it to completion only at the last day (Phil. 1:6). God’s act of creating new people, therefore, has both “already” and “not yet” components to it. Christians are in the process of daily renewal, taking a lifetime to be recast into the image of Christ (Col. 3:9-10), but they rest assured in the hope that God always finishes his work. He completed the work of creation (Gen 2:2-3; Heb 4:3), he accomplished the work of redemption (Mk 16:19; Heb 1:3, 10:12), and he will fulfill his promise for a new creation as well (Phil 1:6; Rom 8:23-25): “The entire scheme of the Bible is structured around the movement ‘from creation to new creation by means of divine redemptive interventions’, climaxing in Christ’s death, resurrection and second coming which concludes all things” (Beale 22). God performs his work, but he calls believers to join him in the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18), to proclaim the Gospel to all creation (Mk 16:15), and to spread the fragrance of Christ everywhere (2 Cor 2:15). God’s people serve as the secretaries of God’s praise, working for the transformation of a disordered world by giving themselves in love with the strength that God supplies (Begbie 174-75). God will ultimately unite all things in Christ (1 Cor 15:24-28). Until the last day, Christians are called to season the world around them by their worship, ethics, and even their art (Bonhoeffer 115-16). Christians, in other words, have a cultural mandate to bring the world into greater conformity with God’s design.

As ground zero for God’s new cosmic temple, the Church offers spiritual sacrifices and sings a new song (1 Pet 2:5; Ps 33:3; Isa 42:10; Rev 5:9). Jesus transformed communion with God from a localized event to a spiritual reality that transcends time and place, located instead in the overlapping spheres of spirit and truth (Jn 4:19-26). In the new temple, Jesus remakes the worship and witness of his people from disordered chaos into holistic peace—both with God and others (Begbie, 175-76; Beale, 23-25, 33). In other words, he brings reconciliation that will culminate in all the earth becoming God’s temple once again (Wilkinson 264). As Jeremy Begbie states, “the redemption of creation entails transformation. …to be drawn in the Spirit through Christ into God’s own life will inevitably carry with it an obligation towards the created order, to bring creation to praise its Maker” (Begbie 175, 78). Becoming part of God’s new temple brings with it a cultural responsibility—the commission to “weep, pray, think, and work” for the renewal of creation and society (Rookmaaker 23).

The cultural mandate calls Christians to help shape culture and to care for creation through the right use of means, including the arts (Harbinson 12). As Makoto Fujimura puts it, “Culture care is to provide for our culture’s ‘soul,’ to bring to our cultural home our bouquet of flowers so that reminders of beauty—both ephemeral and enduring—are present in even the harshest environments where survival is at stake” (Fujimura 22). For without a biblically rooted and theologically-oriented conception of beauty, the Church will have nothing of value to say to the world and no God we can love (Harries 5-6).

Culture care involves “generative” ways of thinking and living that make the world more solicitous, and therefore more whole (Fujimura 24). The ministry of reconciliation to which
Christians are called brings about peace with God, each other, and creation (2 Cor 5:14-21; Col 1:15-20). It brings harmony to disordered civilizations and to all creation through the light of Christ. “The good news of the Bible is that in Christ we are journeying toward ultimate wholeness, integration, and well-being. We are becoming more fully what we were made to be, to the benefit of all creation” (Fujimura 27). The arts can help us do that, because the artist has a priestly function to see with the eye of imagination and to capture through rhythm, form, and radiance what God has told us through nature (Kuyper 164). The arts can help Christians fulfill the cultural mandate by bringing beauty to a fallen world. In this time between the times—the already, but not yet of Christ’s kingdom—Christians can work toward human flourishing and the good of creation by demonstrating through art the principles of harmony, wholeness, and radiance that God intended all along.

The Craftsmanship of Artistic Communication

The function and place of the arts in cultural transformation lies not so much in their nature, as in the manner in which they exist. As Hume rightly saw, it is a logical fallacy to reason from “is” to “ought” (quoted in Frame 60). The fact of existence does not imply a particular ethic (Frame 49, 60). So what the arts ought to do cannot necessarily be deduced from what they are. Like ethics more generally, the fundamental question of the role of artistic endeavors should not begin with what they should do, but with what they (and we) have been given (Bayer 447-48). The arts are a gift from God, and he has endowed them with certain qualities and potential (1 Cor 4:7).

If we assign to the arts the task of participation in the ministry of reconciliation, then we are saying that God has given them the gift of communication. This should come as no surprise, since the entire universe is God’s gift, the “spectacle of his glory,” through which he communicates his divine nature and eternal attributes (Rom 1:19-20) (Calvin I:58). The biblical conception of creation views the entire cosmos as an unconditional giving and receiving from God’s open hand (Bayer 452). God takes the stuff of earth and says, “take and be nourished, this is for you” (Bayer 452-53). The reception of God’s gift enables the “counter-gift of the creature,” in which sentient beings communicate back to God—and in turn to their neighbor—what they have learned from their Maker (Bayer 450, 458-59).

The arts play an important part in cultural transformation, moving from creation to new creation, precisely because they are a form of metaphorical communication (Begbie 247-48). They point to a reality beyond ordinary vision by communicating truth through beauty. Keep in mind, however, that the arts do not serve as a mere embellishment or decorative element to dress up a message (Begbie 248-49). As Begbie shows, “Whatever meaning is disclosed in a piece of art is given in and with the work itself, not as an ingredient to be distilled out, but as a total impact which claims our attention and involvement (Begbie 249). In other words, works of art communicate beyond the denotative information of words through the use of emotive elements that engage the imagination (Westermeyer 27-28; Begbie 249).

The arts, as metaphorical communication, have the potential to transform individuals, societies, and creation. Like other forms of communication, the arts—whether visual, literary, or performing—do not merely say something, they also do something. Sociolinguists have long recognized that linguistic forms do not just carry meaning, but in many respects the form is the meaning (Fishman 4). In other words, the configuration, or shape, of language has meaning because language is socially located (Fishan 4-5). Speech-act theory has subsequently led to the
realization that locution (what is said) causes an illocution (what the words accomplish) that results in a perlocution (how the hearer responds) (Brown 33). Within a given context, words have both intended and actual consequences, because the speaker has an intent for their communication that the hearer may or may not receive. Brown has argued that speech-act theory should inform the field of biblical hermeneutics, because it is the only approach that does justice to author, text, and reader (Brown 34-35). What holds true for linguistics and theology also applies to the arts. If God has given to and through the arts the gift of communication, then receiving that gift entails an awareness of God’s perlocutionary intent.

Like language, the arts are socially and culturally located (Begbie *Music, Modernity, and God* 2-3). Music and other art forms are not merely situated within a particular cultural setting or even so much socially constructed, however, because they have shaped virtually every culture around the world (Begbie *Music, Modernity, and God* 2). The power of art to sculpt societies grows out of its ability to transform minds. As with all communication, forms of language (artistic or otherwise I would argue) constrain and configure human cognition (Fishman 156-59). The structural features of the arts make them a particularly effective instrument through which people can see reality with renewed vision.

The communicative power of the arts hinges on their engagement with reality through the medium of beauty. Beauty draws us out of self-absorption to something above and beyond us—it captivates our imagination and opens us up to transcendent realities (Weigel 200-01). It links us to the Christian faith, because in contrast to the illogical aesthetic relativism of western modernist thinking, beauty’s meaning does not lie in the eye of the beholder but in the transcendent reality of God (Weigel 202-03; cf. Harries 34). As Harries argues,

The fact is that God is beautiful and the church is hiding this … but it is central to Christianity, properly understood, that there is a resemblance, a relationship, between the beauty we experience in nature, in the arts, in a genuinely good person and in God; and that which tantalizes, beckons and calls us in beauty has its origin in God himself. (Harries 6)

Because they communicate through the medium of beauty, the arts represent a “permeable border” between heaven and earth, through which the glory of God shines into human hearts and minds (Weigel 198).

The arts have the potential as a tool for cultural transformation because even at their most chaotic, they demonstrate a certain kind of wholeness, harmony, and radiance—which Aquinas referred to as the three elements of beauty (Aquinas ST 1a:39.8, quoted in Harries 20). If Aquinas is right, then we can say that beauty is the product of craftsmanship. Creation itself results from God’s craftsmanship, because achieving the elements of beauty requires wisdom and skill (Ps 19:1, 139:14; Prov 35:19; Eph 2:10; cf. Exod 35:30-35). Made in the likeness of God, the artist often sees correspondences between the natural world and ineffable realities and then communicates them through form, light, and rhythm (Kuyper 164). Although Christian truth does not depend on art or beauty, artistic design has a unique ability to fire the imagination and touch the heart (Harries 13-14; cf. McGrath 46-47). McGrath rightly argues that theology—the study of God and all things in relation to God—is about “discernment” (McGrath 46). Since beauty is as fundamental to God’s character as truth and goodness, theology needs a positive conception of beauty in order to discern rightly (Davis 58-59; Harries 6). The arts belong in conversation with theology, because through beauty, they help people to discern truths about God and the world around us that we might
otherwise miss.

Beauty also has the remarkable ability to last. Styles and tastes may change based on geography, ethnicity, sociology, time period and a host of other factors, but something that is truly beautiful establishes itself as such over time (Harries 25). That gives beauty, and therefore the arts, an ontic weight that befits the gravitas of God. Davis argues that ontology includes four criteria that mark something as more or less real: logical coherence, durability, causal efficacy, and accessibility (Davis n19 on 24). That means the arts can be particularly effective agents of cultural transformation, since the ones that possess true beauty (the logical coherence of harmony, wholeness, and radiance) seem to transcend cultural barriers (they are accessible), they last over time (durability), and they shape the way people think and feel (causal efficacy). The beauty of art, like the beauty of nature, calls us to something beyond itself. The ontic weight of the arts enables them to serve as a kind of window between heaven and earth, transforming cultures by displaying the realities that God communicates in and through them.

Using the arts as a tool for cultural transformation does not belong only to a guild of specialized artists and craftsmen, however. As Fujimura argues, “Culture care is everyone’s business. … To make culture inhabitable, to make it a place of nurture for creativity, we must all choose to give away beauty gratuitously” (Fujimura 27). The arts are a gift. Beauty is a gift. God gives them generously to all without reproach, so that we might use them for his intended purposes, according to his creational design.

The Bible begins with a garden, but it ends with a city, which illustrates the Church’s call to engage in culture-making (what Fujimura refers to as generative) activities (Keller 101). Christian contextualization is not only necessary, but also inevitable, because our own cultural blinders prevent us from seeing the full horizons of either scripture or culture (Keller 101). Arts that are theologically grounded and culturally situated can provide a bridge for two-way communication between scripture and context, enabling the kind of cultural transformation that demonstrates love for God and his world (See Keller 101). This means that Christians need to engage with culture through the arts both “sympathetically” and “respectfully,” so they can approach culture care as friend and neighbor (Keller 119). Thus, the arts have great potential as tools through which Christians can work for the good of their context (Jer 29:7) (Keller 143).

As mentioned earlier, the incarnation of Jesus inaugurated a new kingdom, in which God began his work of renewing creation. Through Christ, God will renew the cosmos, redeem people, and accomplish his telos for history. Creation itself groans with eager longing, waiting for the day when Christ makes all things new (Rom 8:19). The renewal of creation and the call to cultural care are therefore inextricably intertwined (Beale 21-22). The arts provide a way for the Church to bring its “bouquet of flowers” to its culture, to work to reorient the disorder of a broken world toward the peaceful rest of communion with God, so that people experience the harmony, wholeness, and radiance that God intended.

Conclusion

The arts have something to say about God and how things relate to God. As part of the created order, the arts enable people to experience the joy of beauty. They are God’s gift of love that form a permeable barrier between the grittiness of earth and the transcendent realities of heaven. Through harmony, wholeness, and radiance, the arts remind people that something exists beyond. It beckons us to recall a certain garden, where we had unbroken communion with God,
each other, and the world.

The world may be disfigured by sin, but God has not given up on it. Instead, he intends to renew it and he calls his followers to engage in the task of cultural transformation. God has given human beings a cultural mandate to work for human flourishing, creational wholeness, and to extend his image throughout the earth. The arts can help Christians fulfill their vocation of culture care, because art is a form of metaphorical communication that expresses truth through beauty. Its beauty has a role to play in the ministry of reconciliation with which Christians ought to be involved.

In the end, the arts are about seeing what is there and expressing it in ways that fire the imagination and move the heart. Through an active engagement with the artistic forms of its culture, the Church becomes the kind of neighbor that shows others the face of God. Individuals and institutions may not last, but beauty does. Beauty is a gift to be received and given and part of its enjoyment lies in that exchange. Works of art teach us about the values of creativity and craftsmanship in a way that points to something else. The arts, therefore, represent a generative type of acting and living that points people to the beauty and majesty of the original Artist.

Works Cited


Navajo Chants, Babylonian incantations, Old Testament Psalms:  
A Comparative Study of Healing Rituals

Erhard Gerstenberger

Introduction

Prayer may be studied from different angles: as a purely personal expression of individual faith or a collective effort to approach the divine; as predominantly verbal articulation of sentiments or as part of a ceremonial whole; as poetic effusion or magical incantation. No doubt, different kinds of prayer do provoke various approaches. When it comes to curative supplications, however, widely used over historical times and across cultures, the questions of individual vs. communal, emotive vs. liturgical, aesthetic vs. performative functions become more succinct and also more important. There certainly always have been, in the history of prayer, ad hoc supplications of endangered persons borne out of despair and severe frustrations, but prayers formulated carefully to meet the needs of patients and transmitted in the public realm (as e.g. the individual complaints of the Biblical Psalter) have been preserved and used for more than one sufferer. In this case the query should be whether or not the words of such prayers originally had been part and parcel of concomitant rites. With good reasons, anthropologist Gladys A. Reichard affirms in her classic study that “the subject of prayer” [may be] “treated separately from the general discussion, but it must at no time be thought that it is independent of the ceremonial or religious whole” (Reichard 1944, 3).

Ritualization of vital human (but also animal) interactions has long been recognized as a very important feature in many areas of life. The “Myth-and-Ritual” school in the forties to sixties of the past century (e.g. Samuel H. Hooke; Aubry R. Johnson; Aage Bentzen; Geo Widengren; Sigmund Mowinckel) focused on cultic ritual around sacred kingship in ancient Middle Eastern cultures. More recently, ritual research became a distinct branch of behavioral, anthropological, sociological, and cultural disciplines, very important also for arts and religion (e.g. cf. Bell 1997, 1-22; Grimes 2014). Nowadays it is common belief that rituals permeate life and faith in all cultures. This does include healing procedures. In fact, there may be traceable developments or connections from ancient practices to our modern medical treatments, in spite of considerable changes wrought by modern science and technology. Of course, the comparability of rites has to remain a matter of debate. There should not be hasty identifications of cross-cultural traits, but analogous performances are well to be noted and evaluated on the basis of sociological equivalences.

My proposition, then, is this: since ritual healing is a peculiar and wide-spread medical practice, it should be possible to look for analogies in ceremonial procedure and specifically to do a comparative study of the patient’s prayer in the middle of such performances. I have chosen, from scores of existent examples, the well-documented Navajo chants as a starting point. I move towards antiquity, selecting the Babylonian incantations, best documented of their kind, for a second steppingstone. Last but not least, I present my research on Old Testament complaints of
the individual in the light of the former healing rituals. Prayers embedded in ceremonial procedure require a keen attention to a host of circumstances, personnel, and paraphernalia of the pertinent rites that can be done only in a shortened, condensed way. However, theological as well as esthetic dimensions of ritualized prayer must not be ignored.

Navajo Ceremonials

1. Healing Chants

Vast anthropological research on ritual shamanic healing in general has been going on for some decades (cf. Bell 1997, 115-120; Futterknecht 2013). Numerous cultures and religions around the globe have been using ceremonial prayer to combat evil powers and restore well-being to patients from diverse ills. Navajo healing practices are outstanding in their well-researched quantity of recorded specimens (cf. Wyman 1938; Kluckhohn 1940). Navajo life as a whole has been saturated with shorter or longer rites for many areas of activity (agriculture, husbandry, hunting, rites of passage, home-building, and so forth). Night-long chants (or “sings”) are major efforts to procure well-being, ban the evil, recover health; they require a fully educated, expert “singer.” Wyman and Kluckhohn, on the basis of Navajo testimony, grouped dozens of ceremonials into six categories: Blessing Way (the most prominent chant, preserved in at least four local variants, cf. Wyman 1970), Holy Way, Life Way, Evil Way (they split up in numerous components to be performed in their own right), War Ceremonials, and Game Way (both all but extinct already in the thirties, cf. Wyman 1938). Each chant predominantly—because of proven effectiveness—but not exclusively, served determined purposes. Thus, for example, some chants of group II (Holy Way) were administered in the following cases: “Hail Way” “for persons injured by water, for frozen feet or parts, for muscle soreness, tiredness, lameness” (Wyman 1938, 22); “Water Way” “for producing rain, for paralysis, for resuscitation from drowning, deafness” (22); “Shooting Way, Male Branch” “to cure prenatal effects of an eclipse, any disease caused by lightning, e.g., colds, fevers, rheumatism, paralysis, abdominal pain” (24); “Mountain Top Way, Male Branch” against “porcupine sickness”, constipation, anuria, gall bladder trouble, internal pains, ‘bear sickness’, mental disease” (25). As is to be expected, there always has been, in strictly oral Navajo tradition, a great flexibility and interchangeability of words, songs, and rites at the discretion of the singer and also their clients.

Navajo medicine men, still procured by a good percentage of the native population, are being trained through personal apprenticeship in some of the approximately 30 one-to-nine nights rituals, performed in a Hogan (traditional log cabin; admitted are only family-members or close friends). The patient sits on a sand-painting depicting holy yeibeshe beings or holy plants, while medicine men are performing acts of purification and exorcism, as well as narrating texts of Navajo sacred myths. Prayer-sticks (see below) and prayers, spoken by chanter and patient, hold vital roles in the ceremony. A public, nightly dance, a real social affair lasting into the early hours of the new day, completes the rites. (cf. Kluckhohn 1940; Reichard 1990, 279-353; Faris 1990, see index “dancers”; “dances”).

Navajo chants have been, as mentioned before, under intense study for more than one hundred years. Ever since Washington Matthews (1843-1905), a U.S. medical doctor with a South-West army detachment, started to dedicate time and energy to learn the native language and explore Navajo traditions (cf. Matthews 1995, XLVII.), interest of the white man has been great in all their lore. Matthews himself published the first comprehensive report about a Navajo ritual in 1902
Since then, numerous editions of a considerable number of Navajo chants have appeared, in English translation and also partially in the native tongue (cf. Haile 1979; Wyman 1970; idem 1975; Luckert 1977). These publications constitute a valuable treasure of sources. Yet, one has to be aware of what kind of sources they represent: White anthropologists persuaded Navajo medicine men to break their absolute discretion in regard to the holy tales and rites. They dared to narrate the full content of a given ceremony, night by night; some were mechanically recorded (cf. Faris 1990, 6-24). What we have, however, are hardly the complete rituals but verbal narratives, told to white (and very empathic) scholars. They, in turn, translated the Navajo narration into English, trying to make accessible indigenous world-views and faith-patterns to American minds. Interpretations of rites, religious concepts and feelings, sacred time, space and equipment, works of art, dresses, gestures, and so on are helpful instruments in this task of comprehension. And some rare films of complete ceremonials are valuable avenues to understanding. Therefore, we should not only rely on verbal communications. All the knowledgeable details about performers, situations, and paraphernalia, in particular, for the matter of prayer, sand-paintings, and prayer-sticks, need to be taken into account. Still, for “westerners” the Navajo world is an alien one, and the greatest experts who submerged themselves into their spiritual universe readily confess to have remained strangers in it. This is true for about every instance of transcultural understanding.

2. Prayer in the Center

Even with these shortcomings in mind, a very noteworthy phenomenon with Navajo healing chants is indeed the position and function of prayer in the pertinent rituals (e.g. some most famous ones: Nightway; Beauty Way; Shooting Way, male and female branch, etc.). As a rule, the verbal parts of any healing ceremony consist of mythical narrations or episodes, in prose or poetic form, and outright prayers/supplications, all chosen by the medicine man and the patient for the particular occasion. In general, the mythical texts give information about how the rituals were created or composed by divine beings and what their effects were like for suffering people. The prayers are inserted into the ceremony by the shaman. They carry some, perhaps much, of the burden to accomplish betterment, restoration of health, and good standing among the people. Berard Haile (quoted by Faris 1990, 63) described praying in the ceremonial this way: “… as a rule the singer says the prayer in a singing tone and pauses briefly after a clause to allow the patient to repeat it.” This means the sufferer’s supplication occurs under the supervision of the shaman; he is responsible for its precise recitation, because the text, in ultimate analysis, is a gift to the healer, most likely received in a vision, of the holy ones. But the patient has to pronounce the words himself (cf. Babylonian: “let him recite”) in order to make them truly his own concern and articulation. Ceremonial songs, on the other hand, need not to be repeated by the patient, even if they carry similar power as prayers (cf. Reichard 1944).

To give a concrete example of prayer in a Navajo ritual: Father Berard Haile of the St. Michael’s Franciscans gathered information about the Waterway chant in 1929 from a medicine man named Black Mustache Circle. The narration was published in 1932 and reprinted much later (see Haile 1979, with an appendix by Karl W. Luckert, op.cit. 135-152). “Waterway” was used originally against “venereal and skin diseases” (op. cit. 135). One prayer, spoken by the healer to the patient in a conjuring mode, runs this way:

Water monster of the Water-bottom White spot, Young Man Chief, I have made your sacrifice, I have prepared your smoke. / This very day your power, which you
may exert over him, you will remove from him! You have removed your power from him. / You shall carry it far away from him! You have carried it far away from him! Far away you will return with it! Far away you have returned with it!/ May he nicely recover this very day! May the pains in him nicely cool off this very day! / May sickness nicely move away from him! May he nicely walk about! / May he walk about with his body thoroughly cooled! May he go about with his body thoroughly lightened! / May he go about full of energy! May he go about with no sickness on him! May he go about immune to sickness! / With his front in nice shape, may he go about! With his back in nice shape, may he go about! / With all below him in good (nice) shape, may he go about! With all above him in nice shape, may he go about! With all his surroundings in nice shape, may he go about! With his speech always pleasant, may he go about! / As one who is Long-life Happiness One may go about! Pleasant it has become again (four times). (The prayer then is repeated to 21 other Holy People). (Haile 1979, 64)

The author remarks on the same page: “The informant has given the text of the prayer as recited for the patient. Actually, the prayer is repeated word for word by the patient and throughout the prayer the I-form must be used …” (Haile 1979, 64 note 70). We recognize some elements known from OT complaints: Address to the divine people, strong wish forms for good health, affirmations of confidence that relief has been granted. Astonishing is the all-inclusive view of health and well-being: body, mind, and surroundings are meant to improve and gain a wholesome status.

Gladys A. Reichard, who not only took part in the non-public sections of healing rituals but also several times assumed the role of the “sung-over-patient” (cf. Reichard 1944, 2), describes the forms, functions, and inner meanings of Navajo prayer. It is her ambition to synthetize the elements into a symbolic network of religious performances interacting with the divine beings (cf. Reichard 1950): “Prayer, like sand-painting, is a fundamental feature of the ritual. It must of course be looked at as a part of the whole to which it belongs, but it may also be considered by itself, because it richly demonstrates all that a Navajo does in his ritual, his fears, his aspirations, and his attainment” (Reichard 1944, 3). Formally, the prayers expose elements similar to those known from Babylonian and Hebrew supplications. Reichard’s prime example is the lengthy prayer of Male Shooting Way comprising 399 lines, organized in litany-structure and five main parts (Reichard 1944, 58-93; Navajo and English version). The first four open with invocations of Holy Man, Holy Woman, Holy Boy, Holy Girl (lines 2. 78, 163, 247) preceded by reference to a local “At Rumbling Mountain,” an important “geographic symbolism” difficult to decipher (Reichard 1944, 26). The fifth segment (lines 326-399) is sort of the anticipation of being cured, comparable with some Hebrew psalms (cf. Ps 22). Invocation of the Holy Ones is followed by a self-presentation and pleas for protection:

Line 1: At Rumbling Mountain, 2: Holy Man who with the eagle tail-feathered arrow glides out, 3: This day I have come to be trustful 4: This day I look to you (for help) 5: With your strong feet rise up to protect me, 6: With your sturdy legs rise up to protect me, 7: With your strong body rise up to protect me, 8: With your healthy mind rise up to protect me, 9: With your powerful sound rise up to protect, 10: Carrying the dark bow and the eagle tail-feathered arrow with which you transformed evil…. (Reichard 1944, 59)
The battle against evil powers molesting the patient can only be won by being close to the benevolent healing forces and by identification with the Holy Ones (line 22: “your child I have become”; line 34: “Just as you are the one who is holy because of these things”; line 35: So may I be holy because of them” (61). Evil has to be banned from individual parts of the sufferer’s body (“from the tips of my toes,” “the tips of my body,” “the tips of my fingers,” “the tips of my speech,” lines 15-18 Reichard 1944 59). The wrestling with bad forces, in conjunction with the Holy Ones, we may rate as plaintive supplication (lines 11-36, 59-61). After this, the prayer more and more speaks about a successful termination of the ritual. Evil sorcery has gone (lines 37-44 Reichard 1944 61). “Behind you I survive” (line 45 on 61). The affirmations of lines 37-69 certainly still have a conjuring undertone, but they aim at restoration of former health or “beauty” (wholeness, happiness, order, health etc.). The final lines (70-76 Reichard 1944 63, 65) of the first prayer-section are fully confident of victory (parts 2 through 4 follow a similar setup, part 5 = lines 326-399 is a powerful song of praise on recovered “beauty”):

Line 70: My mind is safe. 71: My mind is safe. 72: Restoration-to-youth According-to-beauty I have become again. 73: Restoration-to-youth According-to-beauty, 74: Natural Boy I have become again, 75: It has become beautiful again, 76: It has become beautiful again.

So the sequence of elements in this prayer—invocation, self-presentation as supplicant, initial plea, plaintive supplication or entreaty, affirmation of confidence (praising anticipation of success)—are quite comparable to the structure of individual complaints in the OT Psalter. Reichard has the following main divisions: Invocation—petition—benediction (Reichard 1944, 41-49), with intricate subdivisions in forms of repetition, summary, increment of line-couplets and strophes, ditto: unnumbered appendix of 25 structural analyses.

Being an empathetic eye-witness and active participant in Navajo ceremonies, Gladys Reichard observed and interpreted a host of particularities in ritual performance and worldview, always admitting Western preconceptions potentially to bar a full understanding of Navajo thought and feeling. Thus, for example, she tries to explain their vision of good and evil: Navajo duality is not a separatist but an inclusive antagonism. “Good is evil, and evil is good,” depending on “presence or absence of control.” Likewise, “That which harms a person is the only thing which can undo the harm” (Reichard 1944 5). In consequence, the evil powers first have to be called and identified with before they can be driven out and dismissed. In this context, the rite of “tying knots represents the ‘tying in of evil’” (Reichard 6). Prayer, according to Reichard, has an important place in ritual; it is an extraordinary part, indeed. Words are an essential form, but they are often identified with thought and deed and also with sand-paintings, prayer sticks, strewing of pollen (9s; cf. a layman’s simple prayer: pollen plus a muttered “may it be beautiful,” Reichard 13). Prayers must be recited correctly, word by word; otherwise, the supplication could cause damage instead of wellbeing. With their endless repetitions (or variegated litanies) memorization is a very difficult task. One of the prayers observed by Reichard lasted for one hour and 40 minutes (12, 14s). Two basic intentions of prayer may be distinguished: Type I being a call for protection, good luck, sustenance, fortune etc. and Type II imploring the holy ones for deliverance from evil, always connected with exorcistic pleas and actions (13s, 15s, 22s, 31-33: “Prayers to get a person out of danger, that is, exorcistic prayers, and those to deities most difficult of persuasion seem to have the greatest elaboration,” (41). The number of symbols used in ceremonials for Reichard is astounding. Numbers do play a role, for example, measuring out the frequency of repetitions (46);
colors have a deep meaning for identifying beings, human and divine, and forces like weather phenomena, mountains, waters, sounds of words (prayer as poetry) and winds, geographical places (of the Navajo territory!), directions of the wind-rose, animal potencies and so forth are all integrated into the world vision which guides prayer performance (cf. Reichard 26s; 29s, 36s, 46 etc.). It is small wonder that each ceremonial in itself, as well as the interconnections of songs, and their local variations seem inexhaustible.

3. Implements of Prayer
The conjuring tone of the prayer may call the attention of modern readers. The magic notion is increased when the ritual performance is taken into account. Navajo medicine men concentrate not only on the wording of prayer and songs, but have to fabricate special “prayer-sticks” (Navajo: kethawn; spelling according to Mathews 1995) for each occasion to accompany the rites. These symbols of power consist of little pieces of reed or wood, adorned and empowered by various effective additions, feathers, pollen, colors, and little stones. Researchers have listed a large number of forms and meanings of these sticks (cf. Franciscan Fathers 1929, 396-398; Matthews 1995, see index p. 323 sub Kethawns; Reichard 1990, 301-313). The prayer quoted earlier in context is introduced like this: The healer takes

one stick at a time, he sprinkles the full length of it, saying: ‘From now on may you nicely do restoring. May you do restoring this very day.’ At once he applies it to the person for whom the ceremony is held, from his soles up to the top of his head. Some he puts into his mouth, some he sprinkles out, and this is done that he may continue to walk on it. Then he (the singer) puts the prayer-stick into his hand. The one first in rank one places at the bottom. After which, placing them one on top of the other, that last (prayer-stick) comes uppermost. Then there, facing the (patient), he sits down and speaks. (Haile 1979, 63; immediately followed by the prayer cited above)

Prayer-sticks, it seems, are enhancing the spoken words; this can be observed in various situations of the ritual. Gladys Reichard, for her part, emphasized the “invocatory” and “talking” functions of the implement. The first one in her sight “carries a compulsive invitation to the deities to attend the ceremony. If the sticks are made properly and deposited according to deific decree, and if the prayer is repeated without a mistake, the gods cannot refuse to come.” (Reichard 1990 XXXV). Magic object and spoken words do complement each-other. Does this conjunction devaluate the spoken prayer?

A similar attention in regard to performed prayer should be paid to the sand paintings of the medicine man. They are prepared with utter care and concentration, representing holy people who are asked to assist in healing viz. in the neutralization of evil powers. Materials used (colored dusts and powders, including pollen), techniques of fabrication, time and persons adequate for execution, figures and scenes depicted, behavior of the medicine man are all minutely regulated, although healer and patient do have some liberty to choose from many models. Since the painting, worked out on the floor of the ceremonial hut, serves as a sitting ground for the patient (the sing is being performed “over him or her”) has to be destroyed after finishing the ritual and carried away into desert or running water to eliminate the evil absorbed by it, there exist only photographs and (water colored) copies of such works (cf. Matthews 1990, 34-36; Franciscan Fathers 1929, 398-399; Reichard 1990, 694-717: reports on sand-painting and prayer performances; Faris 1990,
Distrust of copying the sacred paintings was particularly strong among Navajo medicine men. In 1963, a film was produced of a whole ritual and three persons of the inner circle of those in charge died within the following year, rumors stated that the holy people had taken revenge for the disclosures. Still, much information of ritual sand-painting has been gathered. Navajo supplicatory prayers are also intimately connected to the art of creating non-sustainable but energy-laden pictures of the Holy Ones, an art taken up by many a Navajo brush and chisel artist like Carl Gorman (1907-1999; cf. Greenberg 1996), whom I interviewed in 1963. Musical expressions (intonation; rhythm; syllabic differentiation; instruments etc. cf. Reichard 1999, 279-284) would be worthwhile to be investigated.

4. Myth, Song, and Prayer

Another remarkable feature of Navajo chants is the overwhelming mass of mythical narration filling ritual space. The medicine man recounts episodes and stories of the Holy People, who, in ultimate analysis, were the inventors of ritual and the first composers of pertinent sacred songs and prayers. They, in turn, instructed human healers to use the text materials and taught them to tell abundant tales of the divine world. Katherine Spencer in her doctoral study of Chantway myths gives, among other things, the compact mythical plots of 17 complete rituals (Spencer 1957, 100-218), among them the Waterway ceremony (107-116), from which the prayer above was taken. (Spencer distinguishes three different versions; we stay with the Haile edition). One main line of the narration tells about a hero under the care of two old grandmothers, who is being ridiculed by the people because of a disfiguring skin disease. He takes revenge by seducing married women, has to flee from Dark Thunder, “visits super-naturals in the sky and elsewhere and learns the ceremony.” (108). The long-winded tales punctuated by differing motives fill hours of ritual performance. Sacred songs and prayers and possibly ritual acts stand out from this flow of words.

Songs in the Navajo culture accompany all sorts of human activities. Those pertinent to ceremonial chants possess a special holy quality (Reichard 1999, 279-300); they derive from mythical episodes where they frequently are compositions of the gods, handed over to adorants. “In myth an ever-recurring theme is loneliness. Crying originated in loneliness and from crying came a song.” (284). “The primary function of song is to preserve order, to co-ordinate the ceremonial symbols; a secondary purpose must be enjoyment …” (288). Songs have much in common with prayer, but they are less significant and less “dangerous” in that they are not direct communicative instruments between humans and divine beings. In any case, songs also create a “zone of protection that gives comfort” (288). Songs possess various properties and they are considered forms of wealth if owned by families or the community as a whole (289s). As far as healing rituals are concerned, they support the aims of the whole performance: “Songs of exorcistic rites express strong emotion—vengeance, triumph in victory, retribution” (292).

5. Medicine Men, Chanters

Elaborate healing rituals like the Navajo chants cannot be mastered by everyone. Like in many other cultures, the office of “healer” requires long years of preparation and final recognition by the community he or she wants to serve. “The term hatqáli, chanter, implies that the bearer of this title is conversant with one or more of the chants, its prescriptions, songs and requisites. … Persons of an especially retentive memory and natural alertness are selected as pupils by an elderly shaman.” (Franciscan Fathers 1910, 381; cf. Underhill 1965, 224-240). “The chanter studies with his teacher for many years, learning by rote every tiny detail. Meantime, he collects a bundle of
sacred objects: special prayer sticks, herbs, and the Navaho ‘jewels’ of turquoise, white shell, abalone, and jet. He finally is graduated in an impressive ceremony and begins practice for himself.” (Underhill 1965, 228). Experienced diagnosticians, consulted by patients and working with different divinatory means, propose adequate curing rituals. On request of the patient’s clan, the chanter then agrees to payment offered for his service and determines an opportune date for the treatment. The only conclusion: Sophisticated rituals like Navajo curing chants can be performed only by well-prepared experts. This truism is valid for all medical care through ages and cultures, and it is well attested also in Babylonian sources from the second and first millennia.

To summarize: Curing rites and the expert personnel who have been observed in real life, the performers of which have been interviewed by researchers, open up wide horizons transcending those offered by the study of ancient manuscripts. Thus the Navajo example tells us vividly how healing has been and is being done, in the cultural and natural environment of the “people” (Navajo: diné) who, according to their “emergence myth,” once upon a time came up to their sacred lands, marked by four holy mountains in Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. Patients in need of expert treatment undergo a diagnostic procedure, are being recommended an appropriate “chant” against the evil of their illness or else for their general well-being, and the curer takes action observing all the intricate rules of his profession. The ritual unfolds, after purifications, in three to nine nights of preparing prayer sticks and sand-paintings, chanting, rattling, bathing, tying knots, drumming, story-telling, singing, offering, and praying. The carefully formulated prayer, gift of the gods and property of the expert, is the central part of the whole. Interestingly the Navajo concept of “beauty” (xójóni), meaning a comprehensive state of well-being and happiness, is the declared goal of most prayers (cf. Reichard 1944, 31s; Wyman 1957). Prayers have a decisive place in the performances comparable to the patient’s supplication in Babylonian incantation rituals. Magical components should not block comparisons with Biblical prayers and rites, because, after all, Gladys Reichard may be right: Prayer is always “the Compulsive Word” (Reichard 1944).

Babylonian Incantations

Inner-biblical evidence of shamanic healing is interesting and alerting, but all by itself cannot establish the origin and further use of shamanic supplicatory procedures in Israel. External evidence does perhaps help a little. First of all, the existence of numerous cuneiform petitionary texts (of collections called e.g. šuilla, eršaḫunga, eršemma, dingir-šadibba, ki-utu, maqlu, namburbi, šurpu, etc., cf. Maul 1994; Cunningham 1997; Heeßel 2000; Lenzi 2011; Frechette 2012, etc.) proves beyond doubt that on the Sumero-Babylonian side professional rites for the treatment of many different disorders were common. Quite often, a supplicatory (and incantational) prayer, with very analogous elements over against OT complaints of the individual (invocation; praise; affirmation of confidence; lament; petition, vow etc.), was a central piece in the ceremony. The leader of the performance always was a trained specialist, called mašmaššu; āšipu; kalu (cf. Lenzi 2011, etc.). We have to be aware, however, of the fact that ancient Mesopotamian societies were different from tribal social organisms. Sumerians and Akkadians formed the first urban, class-structured, highly diversified, trade-ridden, empire-oriented and anonymous commonwealths.
1. **Fighting Ominous Evils**

Stefan M. Maul, for example, describes carefully and in great detail the ritual of the Babylonian series *namburbi* (Maul 1994, 37-113). This incantation series is dedicated to the “dispersion of ills, which are threatening by bad omens” (*namburbi* = “its dispersion”). An extensive Sumerian and Akkadian literature of evil portents and deep-seated anxieties looms in the background of such healing rituals. After a thorough diagnosis of the patient’s afflictions and the expert’s suggestion of a relevant cure (cf. Heeßel 2000), the incantation expert (*āšipu*) as well as the sufferer had to undergo a period of purification and “sanctification” by taking ablutions and obeying dietary rules forbidding determined dishes (Maul 1994, 39-41). During the night before the ritual was staged, the *āšipu* prepared the “holy water” (*agubbû*) for ablutions using intricate ingredients (41-46). A prayer for its effectiveness was in order (45). A specialty of the *namburbi*-ritual was the formation of an image (a figurine) being able to substitute for that object which had shown the evil portent to the patient (46-47). The healing ceremony itself started with a sacrifice to three highest gods (Ea; Šamaš; Asalluḫi) who were to be entreated to undo the bad omen (48-57), a very complicated procedure involving a small altar (*paṭiru*), a choice of incenses on a special stand (*nignakku*), and sacrificial materials, prayers and magic formulas. Interestingly, this sacrifice at the home of the patient, consisting of vegetables and drinks, “always occurred at early dawn” (48; cf. Ps 5:4: “O Lord, in the morning hear my voice, in the morning I sacrifice to you [*‘e’erak leka = I arrange for you*] and watch out for you”; small altars have been found in many old Israelite homes). The offering-site was fenced off and imagined evil persons were admonished: “Wicked tongues shall turn away” (55; a direct address of potential enemies, also found in Pss 4:3-5; 6:9; 52:3-7; 58:2-3; 62:4, 11). After the sacrifice had been accepted, according to Maul’s interpretation, and the high deities had assembled (perhaps represented by statues), the decisive part of the ritual began, a “juridical fight” before Šamaš, sun-god and judge (60-71). In Maul’s understanding the conjurer (*āšipu*) and the patient fight against the object which carried the evil portent, pleading for a reversal or dispersion of its destructive power. The patient had to approach the sacred sacrificial site, stepping on to a carpet of garden-herbs (*šammū kirî*) with their purifying capacities (61-66). They, so to speak, sucked in the evil powers threatening the patient. But an essential part of the “law-case” was the verbal petition for liberation from bad portents spoken by patient and conjurer (67-69). This liturgical, fixed prayer “in many rituals first was spoken by the conjurer for the patient. The latter, then, had to recite it after the conjurer” (67). Those fixed “sacred” words (which were thought to be the gift of the gods) “were then repeated three, sometimes seven times. But in addition, the affected person had the opportunity [according the ritual instructions] to articulate his or her personal affliction, pleas and wishes before the divine judge. … Such a ‘free prayer’ certainly did have a liberating effect just like the oral confession in the catholic church” (69). An elaborate discussion of the “transfer of evil to the substitute figure” (72-84), the “removal of the substitute,” which now is the carrier of the evil (85-93; cf. Lev 16:5-22), and final purifications of patient and his environment (94-100) as well as re-integration of the saved one into his social group and further prophylactic measures (101-113) constitute the rest of Maul’s treatise.

The supplication, spoken by conjurer and patient, had a central place in all the concomitant rites and words. One example of a *namburbi*-ceremony must suffice:

1) Incantation: Šamaš, king of heaven and earth, 2) lord over right and justice, 3) lord over the Anunna-gods, lord over the spirit of the dead, 4) whose “Yes” no other god 5) can change and whose decree 6) cannot be altered. 7) Šamaš, to revive the deadly ill, 8) to free the bound one, 9) is in your power! Šamaš, 10) I, your servant
11) N.N. son of N.N. whose 12) gods are Marduk (and) 13) Zarpanitum, 14) am standing before you now, yes, you. 15) I hold on to your seam. 16) Because of that evil which came out of the snake appearing in my house. 17) It did catch a prey. 18) I did see it. 19) Therefore I am afraid, terrified 20) and constantly put into panic. Let me pass 21) this evil, then 22) I shall always praise your great deeds, 23) and extol you! 24) People who shall see me 25-26) shall eternally praise you! Text of the incantation. (Maul 1994, 297: my translation from the German edition)

The structural elements of the prayer are clearly visible: Praise of Šamaš (lines 1-9), selfpresentation (10-14), affirmation of confidence (15), complaint (16-20a), petition (20b-21), vow to praise (22-23), witness to others (24-26a), scribal note (26b). With some particularities standing out (denomination as “incantation”; praising invocation; insertion of personal name; scribal note; lack of imprecations), the elements and their arrangement correspond to the ones found in Hebrew complaint psalms. Other Babylonian petitioner rituals, like šuilla, eršahunga, eršemma, and so on, show very similar prayers of the patient/conjurer in the center of the healing ceremony (cf. Cunningham 1997; Lenzi 2011; Frechette 2012).

2. Priests and singers

Babylonian society, as mentioned before, was based on urban literate and administrative tradition. Written documents almost exclusively came to us through scribal schools of royal and temple administrations reflecting principally, as it were, the social structures, habits and beliefs of urban classes. There has existed, since Sumerian times, a very elaborate system of liturgical ceremonies, dedicated, most of all, to the preservation of dynastic power. Priests, singers, and composers of hymns were employees of the urban or territorial ruler; the sacred place was the state-temple, grandiosely exemplified by a hymn of Šulgi, second king of the third dynasty of Ur (2094-2047 B.C.). Astounding is the richness of (mostly unidentified) liturgical genres which permits conclusions as to the wealth of ritual performances!

Line 14: I, Šulgi, the king whose name is suitable for songs, 15: intend to be praised in my prayers and hymns, …21: At the command of my sister Ĝestin-ana, 20: my scholars and composers of … have composed 22: adab, tigi and malgatum hymns … 17: about how wise I am in attending upon the gods … 29s: they have composed šir-gida songs, royal praise poetry, šumunša, kunгар and balbale compositions. 38/31: They composed for me gigid and zamzam songs about my manual skill … (ETCSL 2.4.2.05)

Royal ceremonial art was temple- and palace-bound and has to be distinguished from the patient-oriented activities of the afore-mentioned “incantation-experts,” the professional curer and diagnostician. mašmaššu; āšipu; kalu were long-trained professionals, in possession of the proper healing rites, powerful implements and conjuring texts, and ready to serve—for adequate remuneration—those people in need for medical and magical help. Both aspects, physical and mental health in antiquity always went together. Various types of incantations already have been alluded to (cf. Abusch 2016; Cunningham 1997; Frechette 2012; Heessel 2000; Lenzi 2011; Maul 1994). Each conjurer may have been specialized in one or a few kinds of ritual, because—just like in the case of Navajo chanters—there were numerous details to know and perform carefully. Little is known about the relationship of healers with the temple staffs. Presumably the fields of curing
people and keeping up public order are wide apart, although there may have been points of contact, possibly in the area of receiving visions or auditions from the deities. Since private homes of “conjurers” have been discovered by archaeologists the possibility of free-lance healers has been debated anew. In any case, the professional curer of pre-historic times apparently had survived in Mesopotamia even within urban bureaucratic societies.

3. **Prayers of the Patient**

All known Mesopotamian rituals concerned about individual well-being, be they of the protection (prophylactic) or the curing type, cherish a personal prayer, sometimes with personal name of the supplicant to be inserted at the beginning. The rites as a whole carry determined purposes, of course. They have been fashioned and tested by the enchanter specifically to ward off certain dangers caused by evil powers or to heal well-defined ills of a person. To give one more example of personal prayer, besides the Namburbi one cited above, a specimen of the Šuilla-series directed towards the healing goddess Gula may be quoted:

1: O Gula, most exalted lady, merciful mother, who dwells in the pure heavens, 2: I call out to you, my lady, stand near-by and listen to me! 3: I seek you out, I turn to you, as the hem of my god(‘s) and my goddess(‘s) garment, I lay hold of your (garment’s) hem, 4: Because judging the case, handing down the decision, 5: Because restoring and maintaining well-being are within your power, 6: Because you know to save, to spare and to rescue. 7: O Gula, sublime lady, merciful mother, 8: Among the myriads stars of heaven, 9: O lady, to you I turn, my ears are attentive to you. 10: Receive my flour offering, accept my prayer. 11: Let me send you to my angry (personal) god (and) my angry (personal) goddess, 12: To the god of my city who is furious and enraged with me. 13: On account of oracles and dreams that are hounding me, 14: I am afraid and constantly anxious. 15: O Gula, most exalted lady, through the word of your august command, which is supreme in Ekur, 16: And your sure approval, which cannot be altered, 17: May my furious god turn back to me; may my angry goddess turn again to me with favor. 18: May the god of my city who is furious and enraged with me, 19: Who is in rage, relent; who is incensed, be soothed. 20: O Gula, most exalted lady, who intercedes on behalf of the powerless, 21: With Marduk king of the gods, merciful lord, 22: Intercede! Speak a favorable word! 23: May your wide canopy (of protection), your noble forgiveness be with me. 24: Provide a requital of favor and life for me, 25: That I may proclaim your greatness (and) resound your praises! 26: It is a wording of a lifted hand [šuilla] to Gula. 27: It’s ritual: You prepare an assemblage of offerings in front of Gula … you libate first-rate beer. You recite this incantation three times and the supplicant’s (lit. his) prayer will be heard. (Lenzi 2011, 254)

Like many other prayers in the Mesopotamian tradition, this šuilla has a scribal colophon (l. 26) and a short ritual prescription (l. 27-28) indicating rites to be performed and words to be spoken. The addressee of these last two lines may be the conjurer. “You recite” then suggests his letting the patient repeat the prayer line by line. The body of the prayer shows the familiar structure of invocation and initial plea (l. 1-3) – affirmation of confidence (l. 4-6) – adoration and praise (l. 7-10) – petition (l. 11-12) – complaint (l. 13-14) – invocation (l. 15-16) – petition (l. 17-24) – vow
to praise Gula (l. 25). In comparison to Navajo prayers, the šuilla to Gula may put more emphasis on lauding the deity, asking for mediation between gods of different rankings, and emphasize a little harder the ailments of the sufferer, but the basic scheme of a patient’s prayer is visible. In conjunction with overwhelming evidence for expert performance of healing rituals in ancient and present-day cultures, we may consider this ceremonial system a fairly constant anthropological feature.

Old Israelite Healing

The biblical Psalter offers a good number of “individual complaints” which on first sight already seem to fall into the pattern of “patient’s prayer” studied in the foregoing sections of this paper. Whether or not these outside or “alien” analogies can have any bearing on the interpretation of the relevant psalms depends firstly, on inner-biblical evidence and secondly, on the admission of foreign “proof” or better, intercultural comparability.

1. Personnel and Rites

Hebrew Scriptures house a good number of names for persons dedicated to the mediating office between humans and the divine. Most impressive is the list of Deut 18:10-11, containing eight or nine (as it were: banned) professions: ma’abir beno ubitto ba’ez (one “who makes a son or a daughter pass through fire” – probably later addition); qosem qesamim (diviner /by arrow-shots? Lot-casting?!), me’onen (soothsayer, magician /by observing clouds?), menaheš (diviner /by observing oil on water?), mekaššep (sorcerer /by which means?), ḥober ḥaber (spell-caster /from ḥbr = bind together, ban), šo’el ’ob (necromancer), jidde’oni (spirit of divination, / jd’, to know/), doreš hammetim (consulter of the dead /coincides with šo’el ’ob?). The names suggest a plurality of mediating functions, the exact connotations of which remain in the dark. We are, apparently, in the middle of spiritual (in the original meaning) strategies. Did the transmitters of the text still understand all the names and implications? Mantic and magic functions are in the foreground; they probably belong in a wide sense to the curing profession. There are no extensive narrations about curers (but see Elijah and Elisha below). The most detailed story about a “cursor” of enemies is that of Balaam Num 22-24. A direct professional identification, however, is lacking. The vocabulary of Deut 18 only dimly echoes in this tale (Num 23:23: nahaš and qesem). Shamanistic traits appear most of all in Num 24:3-4, 15-16: Balaam hears and sees God and future events and thus is able and commissioned to give oracles (mašal; ne ‘um) to his client. Any specific or general label for curer, doctor, therapist, however, is not at hand. “Doctor,” often used for Hebrew rope’ is inadequate. The verb rp’ means “restore” and not “be erudite.” From Ex 15:26; 2Chr 16:12; Gen 20:17-18; Pss 41:5; 103:3 etc. one cannot deduce that only YHWH himself was considered the healer. Professional curers in all cultures perform their work in collaboration with the deity. Akkadian asūm, perhaps “bandager,” “curator of wounds” and āšipum, “conjurer” (Sumerian loanword: mašmaššu) are different medical experts, often working together (see above 3.2).

Narrative and prophetic literatures offer, however, some illuminating evidence. The Elijah/Elisha cycles contain on the one hand the Deuteronomistic vision of early prophets fighting vigorously for YHWH, the exclusive God of Israel. On the other hand, they preserve some older strata of two “men of God,” apt to deal with spiritual powers, also and particularly in favor of afflicted people. Elijah’s engagement for the “widow of Zarephath” is typical and legendary
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(1Kings 17:8-24). The “man of God” (‘iš [ha] ’elohim; in later tradition transformed into nabi’) provides miraculous sources of flour and oil for the starving widow and her son. The second part of the story tells the wondrous resurrection of the dead boy. Here we have, with some Yahwistic overpaint, the authentic figure of itinerant helpers and curers, true mediators between humans and the divine. The grateful widow recognizes Elijah’s identity: “Now I know that you are a man of God” (1Kings 17:24). The subject of helping and curing ills in a shamanic way is pursued through the Elisha legends (cf. 2Kings 2:19-22; 4:38-41, 42-44; 5:1-19; and in particular 4:18-37—re-animating the dead boy—the motif of which has been copied and elaborated from 1Kings 17:8-24, or vice versa). In Isaiah we find an episode showing the prophet curing, alongside his word-mediating prophesy, by a “lump of figs” to be applied to Hezekiah’s boil (Isa 38:21). Job 33:23-26 features a mal’ak, a “messenger and mediator (mēliṣ)” who visits the sick bringing relief through intercession and prayer. All these passages offer hints of healing practices in ancient Israel, but only dimly so. There is no full-fledged report on curing a patient: The healing of Naaman, the Syrian general, (2Kings 5) and the priestly incantation over a wife suspected of adultery (Num 5:11-28) offer but fragments of ceremony. Interestingly enough, the frustrated Naaman spells out what he had expected from a healer: “I thought that for me he surely would come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord (yahweh: textually uncertain) his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and would cure the leprosy” (2Kings 5:11).

Even less leader-focused narrations about healing cannot do without mentioning the experts in the field. Thus 1 Kings 14:1-18 involves the blind prophet Ahijah who is expected to give a diagnosis from the distance and perhaps suggest a curing treatment for Jerobeam’s sick child. The payment for good counsel is considerable (v. 3). But contrary to expectations the prophet, visualized in a Deuteronomistic messenger profile, pronounces a harsh verdict over Jerobeam, the child, and Israel (vv. 6-16). In a slightly different vain 2 Kings 1:2 tells of injured king Ahaziah seeking divine support from Baal-Zebub, the Philistine God of Ekron. Certainly, intermediation of some priest or holy man is presupposed, but not explicitly mentioned. The theological framework again is Deuteronomistic (cf. 2Chr 21:15, 18-19, containing a rare description of illness: cancer?). Lev 14:3-7 has a priest interacting with the patient, obviously for purity reasons and diagnostics. Isaiah is involved with Hezekiah’s illness also as a prophetic messenger (2Kings 20:1, 4-5 // Isa 38:1, 4-5). Various texts mention sickness just in passing (cf. Gen 48:1; 1Kings 15:3; Dan 8:7 etc.); others emphasize empathy with the patient including visits and presents to the sufferer (cf. 2Chr 22:5-6; 2Kings 20:12). In short, narrative and prophetic literatures indicate the gravity of disease and loss of strength for somebody, but do not focus on those situations and the desired cure and rehabilitation. What, then, can we glean from these texts in regard to general attitudes over against the impact of illness, its causes and desirable cures, and the professional healer?

2. Complaint Psalms and Their Origin

We turn to individual ailments and their contextual frame in the Psalter (cf. Gerstenberger 2009; Maul 1994). Treatments or cures of sickness viz. psychic or social disorders are never described in full in the Hebrew Scriptures. Narrators and transmitters were not interested in details; they did not intend to compose handbooks for medicine men or women. More by chance we learn that wounds were bandaged after perhaps receiving some cleansing and herbal coverage (cf. 2Kings 8:29; Isa 1:6; Jer 51:8; Ps 147:3; Sir 27:23). Compressions were applied (Isa 38:31), meals and drinks prescribed (Ex 32:20; 2Kings 2:19-22; 4:41). Occasionally, a given passage will mention ritual procedure, mostly prayer (“crying out to the Lord”: cf. Ps 5:2-4; 22:2-3; 39:13;
The involvement of spiritual forces and deities in all dangerous, life-threatening situations was quite natural in ancient times. They, in ultimate analysis, did cause illness and misfortunes, and this fact made incantations and prayers necessary. We gleaned (see above ch.s 2 and 3) from the more extensive medical literature of ancient Babylonia as well as from Navajo tribal ceremonies that curing by ritual power was widespread and, in most cases, the only relief for sufferers (cf. Faris 1990; Maul 1994; Lenzi 2011; Futterknecht 2013).

The most important inner-biblical evidence of shamanic rituals, then, could, in fact, be the “laments” or “complaints of the individual” or “prayers of personal supplication.” Form-critics count 30 to 40 specimens of this category in the Psalter (cf. Gerstenberger 1988 and 2001). Although no ritual prescriptions have been preserved alongside OT psalms, we still may look for some indirect evidence of liturgical embedding, per se indicative of a specialist’s participation. Three selected complaints/supplications of the individual may serve as examples for the testimony of the Psalter:

a) Psalm 38, often designated a “prayer in grave illness,” paints quite a complex picture of the patient’s suffering (cf. Gerstenberger 1988, 160-165). Physical decay is threatening (vv. 4-5), “wounds grow foul and fester” (v.6), social ties have broken down (vv. 12-13), and the analysis of these ills (which may go back to an anterior evaluation of a diagnostician) clearly states, that the patient had committed sins over against his deity (vv. 4-6). In fact, the introit of the psalm (vv. 2-3) is of unusual urgency, omitting a formal invocation! It does start abruptly with an admission of guilt:

O Yahweh, do not rebuke me in your anger, / or discipline me in your wrath.
For your arrows have sunk into me, / and your hand has come down on me.
…. because of your indignation. (vv. 2-3; 4b)

This prayer is to be followed by a formal statement to be guilty:

I confess my iniquity; / I am sorry for my sin. (v. 19)

The structure of the poem, its theological depth, analytical oversight, profound knowledge of human anxieties, and literary language all point to a professional author, not to a layman’s hasty composition. Have temple-singers like Asaph or Korah (cf. 1Chr 15; 16; 25 etc) been dealing with cures of sick? We do not know. Interestingly enough, the language of entreaty and imprecation is carefully chosen (vv. 2-4, 10, 16-17, 22-23; note the direct addresses: yahweh, ‘adonaj, ‘elohaj and the condemnatory wish in v. 17). Also, the variety of symptoms (vv. 4-6, 12-13) suggests that this prayer was used for multiple cases of severe disorder, all laden with the verdict of “sin.” Only repeated practical use would explain such a feature. Likewise, the repeated use of one prayer would testify to the origin and handling of the text by a professional healer. In the same vain the theological insight into the intricacies of sin and punishment and the nature of God’s indignation, retaliation, and forgiveness lead to an expert’s reflection and composition. Again, recognition of misconduct (“sin”) in regard to the deity did require, and would have been in this case, a professional diagnosis and verdict previous to the healing ritual (cf. Lev 13:7-8).

b) Psalm 55 is a supplication in the midst of social mobbing (cf. Keel 1969; Fortune 1963). There is no inkling of guilt or remorse, neither of physical illness in this prayer. Instead, the well-known “enemies” in the Psalms are blamed for the supplicant’s mishap/bad luck/deep
consternation (e.g. ‘awān; ‘emot mawāt, cf. Keel 1969: he identifies more than 90 different designations of destructive agents). The evildoers are likened to wild animals (v. 11; cf. Ps 22:13-14, 17; 59:7, 15-16) or outright demons (cf. Ps 91: “terror of the night,” “arrows that fly by day,” “pestilence that stalks in the darkness,” “destruction that wastes at noonday,” vv. 5-6) which kill people. And, more serious still, the allegation is that close friends joined their ranks (Ps 55:13-15), a motif of utmost forlornness. If diagnosis of the ailments of a sufferer got to this point, attributing the whole situation to hostile people (remember medieval accusations of witchery in Europe! Cf. Seybold 1978; Schmitt 2004; Otto 2005), certainly an expert in exorcisms was necessary to counteract this evil. To my mind a prayer of people haunted by unnamed and diabolized enemies clearly needed expert assistance. The affairs presupposed, which are close to open ostracism (that is, they are public events), require a publically acknowledged treatment. Also, curses against the originators of evil (Ps 55:10, 16, 24; 109:6-20) have to be handled with utmost care, comparable to dealing with dangerous modern medicines, so that they may be harmless to the supplicant himself. Indeed, the presumed “Sitz im Leben” (life-situation, cf. Gunkel 1932) of OT complaint psalms as well as form and content of the relevant prayers are significantly marked by ceremonial healing practices conducted by expert curers.

c) Psalm 88 seems to be a very special case of a desperate call from the abyss (cf. Barth 1947). Leaving aside the question of whether or not the complaint is fragmented (note the abrupt ending of v. 19: “my companions are in darkness”) it seems to wrestle, in a Jobean way, with God himself, who is directly accused of having caused the supplicant’s trouble: “You have put me in the depths of the Pit …” (v. 8); “you have caused my companions to shun me …” (v. 9). The very heart of the matter is uncertainty about the reason of the estrangement: “Why do you hide your face from me?” (v. 15; cf. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Ps 22:2). Not the supplicant’s errors, nor the evil minds of enemies or demons, caused the calamity at hand, but God himself. The motivation to pray, then, is to appease an angry deity (like in a series of Mesopotamian supplications), a rather risky task which presupposes much experience and prudence in dealing with the divine. The situation of this type of suppliants is dreadful because they combat the Deity him- or herself. In our Christian understanding such a struggle is near impossible in itself. Antique experiences were different, as stories like that of Jacob in Gen 32:23-32; the prophet Jeremiah in Jer 12:1-4; 15:10-18; 18:19-23; 20:7-18; some psalmists like those in Ps 44, and the exemplar sufferer in the book of Job abundantly demonstrate. Yahweh could be contested or even accused. Nevertheless, the direct confrontation with Him was audacious and highly risky. Therefore, it required the skills and experiences of a healer or shaman-type professional.

The prayers of our OT Psalter, as mentioned, do not clearly indicate professional authors of psalms and rituals or leaders of ceremonies. Could lamnasseeah (cf. Ps 4:1; 5:1; 6:1; 8:1; 9:1 etc. = 55 times in the Psalter; NRSV translates: “to the leader”) hide a reference towards a shamanistic curer? Or does it mean “choirmaster” indicating a conjuration by music (cf. ThWAT vol. V, 569; instruments; melodies etc.)? The profiles of sufferers in the psalms certainly do not preclude a congenial interpretation in the light of Mesopotamian petitionary prayers embedded in concomitant ritual (see below, cf. Gerstenberger 2009). A brief look at the superscriptions of the OT psalms does not help any further in determining original uses of OT complaint psalms of the individual, save perhaps Ps 102:1: “A prayer of one afflicted, when faint and pleading before the LORD” (yahweh), which seems to allude to a temple-situation (cf. 1Sam 1:9-18, Hanna praying at Shilo). Allusions to situations of utmost danger and in some “biographical” references to the David story (cf. Pss 3:1; 18:1-2; 34:1; 51:1-2; 52:1-2; 54:1 etc.) presuppose a personal, more
informal entreaty before the divine far from any sanctuary. Present Hebrew “headlines” of psalms in their majority seem to integrate, by their main contents, wording, imagery, and the pertaining text into some temple-setting. The same intention can be found in 1Kings 8:31-53, a lengthy (exilic in origin) treatise about prayer and temple in Jerusalem. Privately and congregationally, Israel is supposed to direct its requests to Yahweh’s abode in Jerusalem, on the spot or from afar. In some layers of tradition, the temple therefore has become a “house of prayer” (cf. Isa 56:7 – quoted in Mc 11:17, etc.).

3. Complaints in the Canonical Psalter

The arguments for a liturgical and expert of the “individual complaints” may sound somewhat convincing to many readers. Do they suffice, however, to explain these prayers or songs in their present context, a written and canonized Book of Psalms? Have these psalms of suffering people in their written form, integrated into a “prayer book,” become autonomous, or better, the property of a faith community which no longer admitted conjurers and healers with their modes of approaching deities? Did these prayers turn into meditative literature instead of performed incantations? Can we imagine an early Jewish community that incorporated, on the basis of a strict monotheism, every sign of heterodoxy into their patterns of service to Yahweh alone, be it in congregational worship or new forms of casual celebrations or religious education? These and other questions are widely debated nowadays in Old Testament scholarship.

Answers to these queries should be well thought and critical. The Psalter surely has suffered some reworking and accretion in the name of Yahweh, the exclusive God of emerging Judaism. Notable are the Torah Psalms 1, 19, 119; the Yahweh-kingship and Zion songs; or some history and Hallelujah poetry. But the bulk of prayers and songs in the Psalter has remained more or less untouched. In particular, the large group of complaints of the individual is still recognizable as supplications of the distressed and marginalized. The name of Yahweh is used hesitantly e.g. in Pss 42-83; enemies and evildoers often muster demonic traits. In short, the minimum which can be stated is this: Probably, complaint psalms in the Hebrew Psalter were used as petitionary prayers also in later times, when emerging Judaism used the Book of Psalms in their weekly synagogue services. Perhaps congregational leaders and early rabbis had taken the place of ancient exorcists and conjurers.

Outlook

The study of Navajo songs and Babylonian incantations has brought to light some cultural, religious, and spiritual dimensions in which curing the sick and endangered has taken place. Seriously sick or distressed persons in all probability cannot take care of themselves. Over against mostly unseen potencies of destruction, they need expert assistance from someone who knows how to deal with those evil powers in order to regain their health and good spirits. Prayer (agnostics possibly substitute it by meditation and debate within oneself) serves to clarify human position and purpose in this world, becomes a central event for corporal and spiritual rehabilitation. The prayers studied in this paper, coming from distant ages and cultures, all speak vehemently about the anxieties of humans in regard to deadly dangers and painful living conditions. Ceremonial experts lead the patient’s prayer; there may be room for individual outpourings of grief and hope.

The goal of a guided prayer in line with the whole ceremony is to be saved from the abyss, to reach a happy state of mind and physical well-being. Navajos frequently call it life’s xójóní
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(“beauty,” “harmony,” “good order”), Babylonians salîmu (“peace”) or šintu damiqtu (“good fate”), Hebrews šālōm (“wholeness; wellness, peace”). It can best be realized in a common effort by all people concerned in case of illness or disorder, by medical and spiritual experts within the community of friends, relatives, supporters; that is, in the solidarity of good will and self-understanding. The common goal of ritual prayer, then, seems to be identical or at least comparable in all the three cultural realms studied above. Take the Navajo attitudes towards the desired state of wholeness as an example, because testimonies are so overwhelmingly numerous, having been recorded and interpreted by hosts of deeply interested and empathic observers. (Clear enough is also the fact that these observers unequivocally are wearing the glasses of Western cultural experiences and values, but most of them have been conscious of this unavoidable situation (cf. Faris 1990, 11-16).

The Navajo world was (and is, although in modes of change) an infinitely complex organism of living beings and powers collaborating, ignoring, and feuding with each other. From time immemorial this has been the state of affairs as the emergence-myths of the “People” (dine) from the netherworlds tell. The much-desired condition, naturally, would be that of a calm, well-provided, happy life of individuals, clans, and people, but evil powers constantly would disrupt the good order devised and communicated by the Holy People. Good and evil, for their parts, were not separated into fixed beings (with the exception of primordial Monsters, killed by warrior gods) but persisted gradually and variably in all kinds of beings (cf. Reichard 1950, 4-7): “… few things are wholly bad; nearly everything can be brought under control, and when it is, the evil effect is eliminated. Thus evil may be transformed into good; things predominantly evil, such as snake, lightning, thunder, coyote may even be invoked. If they have been the cause of misfortune and illness, they alone can correct it” (Reichard 1950 6). The chant-ceremonials given or inspired by the Super-Naturals, are probate means to counteract evil, restore harmony and beauty, and drive away damaging spirits. Humans, under the leadership of ceremonial experts, are co-agents with helping powers. They have a part in causing the calamities by disturbing malevolently or unwittingly good order and they actively engage in repairing the situation in prayer and ceremonial practices.

… the causal factors which bring about a violation of established order and beauty are very much a human affair. In the attempts to re-order, there are supplicating features addressed to Holy People, of course, but their attendance at the healing ceremonies is, if such ceremonies are done properly, very compelling—indeed, they cannot resist attending. And if all is done properly, this attendance and this healing and this blessing and these offerings and these expressions of rigid propriety, beauty, and order bring about and restore a condition of hózhó, literally, holiness that is the harmony sought—a beauty, a balance in an order set out in Navajo history and recapitulated in ceremony. (Faris 1990 15)

Keeping in mind the overall vision of “beauty, harmony, order” to be attained in ritual and prayer, we have to evaluate all the ceremonial activities of medicine men and participants as expressions of carefully dedicated art. Every rite, beginning with all preparatory actions, has to be executed in awe and utmost diligence over against the wholeness of being. Outstanding examples of this attitude include the production of the sand-paintings and prayer-sticks: The sacred actions involve, as all the rest of the chant performed, powerful materials, holy words, ceremonial outfits and implements, deep knowledge, clean conscience, proper time and space, traditional (inspired) songs
and narrations, rhythm and music, and participation of a friendly group. The patient’s prayer is the
topping middle-section of the whole performance, and all together the chant is truly a work of art,
an intricate spiritual edifice surpassing our individualistic and mainly esthetic understanding of the
term.

It would be worthwhile to investigate Babylonian and ancient Israelite healing ceremonies
on account of such inclusive vision of wholeness to be aspired in salvation and rehabilitation of
suffering patients. For the Babylonian incantations we may point at the meticulous care required
of the ritual expert when executing his tasks (cf. Maul 1994, 37-156). Israelite Psalms quite often
refer to “fullness, joy, beauty, happiness, integrity” of life to be re-gained by supplication and
salvation through the grace of the lord Yahweh (cf. Pss 4:7-9; 5:12-13; 11:7; 13:6; 16:2-11; 17:15;
14; 59:17-18; 62:6-9, etc. Some passages come close to describing even God in terms of “glamour”
and “beauty” (cf. Exod 24:9-11; Pss 50:2; 104:1-2; Isa 60:1-3; Ezek 1:26-28; Hos 6:3).

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The Creative Process: The Trouble with Mediating Divine Presence in Matter

Patrick Beldio

Introduction

The experience of earning a Ph.D., while concurrently sculpting a monumental work of art from 2007-2016, informs this article. The doctorate, which was in Religion and Culture at Catholic University in Washington, D.C., involved researching the use of the arts and the creative process in religious contexts. The sculpture project, entitled The New Being, was created for the faith community, Sufism Reoriented, which recently completed a new sanctuary in northern California (See Figure 1 above). The very practical experience of fabricating the sculpture with others helped

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1 Sufism Reoriented was chartered in 1952 by the Indian spiritual teacher Meher Baba (1894-1969) as a spiritual school for American aspirants from any or no religious background, who seek to love God and to serve the world in active ways from the heart. The school is guided by a spiritual director who is called “Murshida,” which is a title
to interpret more meaningfully the dissertation research, while the research revealed many interesting dimensions of growth in the creative practice. This, however, signals too sanguine a reality, for these projects were filled with trouble.

This article will not explore the usual theological troubles, objections, and reservations to do with visual images and the creative process. These are well-known in Jewish and Christian scripture and commentary (Pattison 2007: 91-98 and 237-63). It has been well established that even Protestants practice very full forms of what David Morgan calls “visual piety,” using images as means for spiritual practice, identity formation, and social cohesion (Morgan 1998 and 1999). I will assume this religious studies and theological scholarship that defends creative practice and the need for visual literacy as a crucial form of knowledge and experience for integral human development (Pattison 2007).

The focus here correlates critically the dangerous, or “troubling,” aspects of the creative process that relate primarily to subjective experiences of limitation and limitlessness with a theological reflection on Biblical stories that exhibit a “troubling” theme of growth fueled by opposition. Sculpting The New Being is the case study for this analysis. In keeping with the theme of this issue of Intégrité, the general focus is: What can the creative process teach us about God? The thesis is that the creative process is an effective way to negotiate oppositions for the purposes of psychological and/or spiritual growth and mastery, which shines a light on the important theme of opposition and growth in the stories of the Bible. This theme highlights the Biblical nature of creativity, that it is through adversity that God creates the universe, his nation Israel, and now, accomplishes his supreme task of re-creation or salvation, which he promises will manifest his kingdom by creating a new world culture that advances integral human development, a “new humanity” in a “new creation.”

Creativity in Service to Beauty

This article explores a creative practice in service to beauty, one that aspires to express the divine attribute of beauty in physical qualities any given community may sanction as “beautiful” for their time and place. In other words, it is a creativity that strives to express the truth and goodness of divine beauty, beautifully. The art world is not typically interested in beauty, however, either as an inner spiritual value or an external aesthetic quality. In fact, religion and beauty have a complex and oftentimes troubled relationship with Western cultural trends in the modern and postmodern periods (Hickey 1993, Scarry 1999, Steiner 2001, Danto 2003, and Elkins 2004). I suggest this is because creating art in service to beauty is dangerous. What do I mean?

that means “teacher” or “guide” in Arabic. Most scholars and laypeople alike connect Sufism exclusively to Islam, though there is growing, albeit limited, recognition of the complex nature of Sufism’s history and its reception in the Western Hemisphere as something beyond these limited boundaries (See Dickson 2015 and Sedgwick 2017). Meher Baba teaches that Sufism exists at the heart of all sincere love of God no matter the religious affiliation or lack of one. For more information, see http://www.sufismreoriented.org/about.html. The sanctuary project can be seen here: http://www.sufismreoriented.org/sanctuary.html and the sculpture project can be seen on my business website: https://www.reunionstudios.com/work#/thenewbeing/; all accessed 4.6.18.

2 One finds these terms and their equivalent in many places of the New Testament. See Paul’s letter to the Romans, especially chapters 5-8.

3 Western aesthetic thought on beauty often makes a distinction between what might be called a theoretical notion of beauty that scholars construct of mental ideas and words on the one hand, and physical qualities of beauty on the other that artists/craftspeople physically construct of matter for a specific community that values those physical qualities as beautiful. Therefore, we can discuss both interior and exterior notions of beauty. See Danto 2003.
Forms are beautiful in one context but not necessarily in others, which makes understanding the social construction of beauty very important. For instance, qualities of beauty of marble sculpture in the High Renaissance period of Florence are quite different from qualities of beauty in the bronze sculptures of the Chola Dynasty in southern India. In the first instance, the Florentine community valued physical mimesis (imitation of nature) to demonstrate a mastery of matter (Tausig 1993), while the latter South Indian community valued a depiction of a spiritual body (called the “subtle body” or sūkṣma deha in Sanskrit) composed of flexible and elegant forms that appear enlivened by unseen divine energy, multiplying limbs in some cases to channel this surfeit of power. The goal in this latter pursuit was to demonstrate a mastery of spirit (Kramrisch 1983). These differing values motivated creative pursuits in their social contexts leading to very distinctive outcomes that are differently beautiful.

The danger here is the temptation of judging one community’s sacred art by the standards of another. Such limited judgement leads to making local standards of beauty into a global norm, as when the British Empire used Renaissance aesthetic ideals inflected by Victorian sensibilities to dominate Indian education and culture (Mitter 1994). William Archer, a British intellectual of the early twentieth century, spoke for many British of the time when he described Indian sacred sculptures that adorn Hindu temples as “Mumbo-Jumbo,” “colossal, contorted forms, looming menacing through the gloom—everywhere a riot of violent, often sensual, imagery, nowhere one touch of nature or point of rest” (Archer 1917: 199). This kind of sentiment functioned to colonize not just the land, but the minds and hearts of Indians. Educational programs motivated by such thought-forms wounded the Indian sense of self and restricted Indian creative impulses in order to graft British world views that were often anglicized versions of Christian belief and practice (Kopf 1969, Belting 1987, and Mitter 1994). This difficult history is why beauty can be a dangerous aesthetic quality and why contemporary artists are usually suspicious of its use in postcolonial contexts—especially its Christian use. The question always has to be, who does this style of beauty potentially include or exclude? What power structures are perpetuated/glorified and what people are kept on the margins by them (Vrudney 2016)? Further, what places and processes in the natural world, species in nature, or artifacts of material and visual culture are made voiceless—or even invisible—by these qualities of beauty?

The inspirational source of beauty as an attribute of the divine, a principle of creation, or a value in life related to ethics is a more slippery phenomenon to define, though it too can be studied as a social construction of words, images, or behaviors that seek to define or perform it in time and space. The same danger remains of weaponizing one’s value of beauty by making it a universal norm. This, too, was part of the colonial project that accomplished its goals on psychological levels, and why beauty as a value or divine attribute can be suspicious for secular artists who are motivated to expose injustice and/or lift up disenfranchised people, creatures, or the environment. In this creative context, artists logically create forms that are difficult, conflictual, transgressive, or purposefully ugly to express and expose injustice. Even artists with a spiritual quest use these strategies to wrestle with questions of ultimate meaning (Arya 2016 and Wuthnow 2001).

By mentioning its socially constructed nature, I am pointing out that beauty—when pursued in service to hastening the kingdom of God in integral human development—is

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4 Stephen Pattison writes, “Perhaps one should be cautious about characterizing visual artifacts as voiceless and so necessarily ‘victims.’ As we have seen elsewhere, turning visible objects into words is one way of ignoring their own visual reality. Perhaps invisibility is a better category for describing their marginalization—this is also a quality of poor and oppressed people who are looked through and past by others and thus confined to a realm of shame and non-participation” (Pattison 2007: 262).
fundamentally a social project that is highly difficult to master owing to its being an attribute of
the divine. The trouble is that individuals and communities will most likely fail to express the
divine attribute well, because—and this is the necessary correlate—we will most likely fail to
express it in qualities that are socially, politically, and culturally inclusive, as God in human form
demonstrates. Jesus dined with religious and social pariahs (New American Bible Revised Edition,
Mk 2.13-17), and Paul maintained this standard when he admonished his followers that “[t]here is
neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you
are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3.28). More importantly, the difficulty is that we may fail to
express beauty in qualities that are ennobling of the divine dignity that shines inviolable in every
form and creature.

There is a value to failure, however, because one can use it as a reliable means to break
open a closed circle of care so that people might repent, reform, and reunite to include a
progressively larger circumference. In other words, failure is the very means to make the universal
attribute of divine beauty progressively more universal in physical qualities of beauty as long as
we are faithful to the process of first, risking ourselves, and second, repenting (metanoia in Greek
or shuv in Hebrew) when error or “missing the mark” (hamartia) inevitably occurs. I use “repent”
in the Pauline sense, which keys on the connotation of “turning” (metanoia) the whole being in a
new direction of growth, surrendering to right alignment to the divine nature within oneself and
within others. As an example, Paul writes, “I rejoice now, not because you were saddened, but
because you were saddened into repentance [metanoian]; for you were saddened in a godly way,
so that you did not suffer loss in anything because of us. For godly sorrow produces a salutary
repentance without regret, but worldly sorrow produces death” (II Cor 7.9-10). A sense of sorrow
for sin (hamartia) that leads to growth is difficult to appreciate, as the word “sin” now gets
burdened with cultural and psychological baggage of self-shame and shaming others (what Paul
calls a “worldly sorrow [that] produces death”). In ancient usage, (in Homer and Aeschylus, for
example) hamartia meant “missing the mark” in the sense of an archer missing the target with an
arrow. “Hitting the mark” in the Christian sense is challenging, for it means turning one’s
aspiration away from the ubiquitous target of the false self and in the direction of the scarcely
noticed target of the divine Father’s perfection (Mt 5:43-48). Given human nature as it is, failing
to hit fully the mark of God’s beauty (kalós) is to be expected, and as such, highlights divine
beauty’s perfect and integral “call.” It also highlights the corresponding spiritual capacities of
perfection within the human being and beauty’s purpose to awaken them. In terms of a creative
process that serves God’s beauty, we do not need to wait for the world (and more importantly,
ourselves) to be perfect before we make art in service to divine beauty, beautifully. We help to
make the world (and ourselves) perfect, “as our heavenly Father,” by staying true to the process of
making art in service to the highest forms of beauty that we can achieve in matter. How else will
we get to the crucial business of salutary failure and repentance without regret, so we might make
forms that build a more godly, beautiful world?

God’s Hardening: The Law of Resistance and Reaction

The role of failure to strengthen successful expression of beauty might be described in
Christian terms as the role of the crucifixion to achieve the resurrection. Jesus’ life is an experience
of incredible growth through impossible oppositions, which is the lens through which we can
interpret the troubling theme of God’s “hardening” in the Bible, of God’s responsibility for both
light and dark, peace and “woe.” The Prophet Isaiah writes, “I form the light, and create the darkness, I make weal [šālōwm] and create woe [rā’]; I, the LORD, do all these things” (Isa 45.7). The Hebrew word rā means more than “woe” or “disaster” or “calamity,” as it is sometimes translated; it means “evil.” According to Isaiah, God makes both peace and evil. How do we make sense of this? In the book of Exodus, we find more troubling images in this vein: “The LORD said to Moses: On your return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have put in your power. But I will harden ['ǎḥazzêq] his heart and he will not let the people go;” and similarly in his Letter to the Romans, Paul writes, “Consequently, he has mercy upon whom he wills, and he hardens [sklērynei] whom he wills” (Ex 4.21 and Rom 9:18). The commentary on this theme may dismiss this hardening as a primitive perspective of God’s influence in human affairs, or a limited human inconsistency in the author’s thought that seeped into the text, or somehow it is not really connected to God’s action, but to human obstinacy (Räisänen 1976).

If we can stay with the idea that God is indeed the creator of a universe that uses adversity (that we might sometimes call “evil”) as a means for growth towards his perfection, then I suggest we have a mature way to interpret this troubling theme. To be sure, some may see it as a crude means for growth and development since one may imagine a process of growth without evil, suffering, death, or ignorance as the means. However, we might see it in nature in the way childhood diseases strengthen immune systems, weight training strengthens muscles, or appropriate levels of stress keeps performance and learning at high levels (Yerkes and John D. Dodson 1908). Yet such a principle of growth may be unrelated in terms of the extremity of the stress, the weight of the pressure, the darkness of the opposition that God places in these stories of the Bible. As the Christian model, Jesus “was obedient to death,” not unto an “appropriate level of stress.” The author of John’s Gospel makes it clear that Jesus models this by choosing the ultimate evil (rā’) of death to accomplish his goal for resurrected growth and perfection. It is not forced upon him: “This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again. This command I have received from my Father” (Jn 10.17-18. My emphasis).

God’s path of growth towards his perfection in the model of Jesus is for mature human beings who really want to be mature. Francis and Clare of Assisi are two examples of this kind, two human beings who welcomed failure and life’s oppositions instead of protecting their egos against them. If one knows the physical extremes to which they went in their spiritual practices, one may protest that such forms of penitential asceticism are a thing of the past, and I might agree. However, there is a principle of growth demonstrated quite fully in their lives that one may relate to the Biblical theme of hardening and using it as fuel for progress in their desire for God’s perfection.

The most difficult hardening comes not from without, but from within one’s own faith community. It was Jesus’ most intimate companion, Judas, who turned him over to his enemies. Francis was shut out of his own order by his fellow friars and Clare’s spiritual practice was opposed by her Pope and most every male church authority in her life. Instead of returning evil for evil, Francis personified these experiences with the name “Lady Poverty” and Clare fought for a life of

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5 The Mother of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram comments on this when she says, “And if the means are crude, it is because the manifestation itself is very crude. And as it becomes more perfect and fit to manifest that which is eternally progressive, the very crude means will give way to subtler ones and the world will progress without any need for such brutal oppositions. This is simply because the world is still in its infancy and human consciousness is still entirely in its infancy” (The Mother 2001:164).
6 See Dyer 2017 for an exploration of the theme of endurance in situations of suffering as a way to grow in union with Christ who models it in his life, suffering, and death.
opposition that she called “the privilege of poverty” (Mueller 2006).

The Assisian couple sought authenticity through voluntary poverty in a context in which the state religion of Roman Catholicism was exacting onerous tithes, in which financial and political scandal dogged many institutions, and in which wars broke out as a result. They recognized in wealth-for-its-own-sake the potential for false attachments and more importantly, the potential for false protection against the oppositions of insecurity and vulnerability that were spiritually necessary for God’s presence in their lives: for the privilege of relying solely upon him as Christ had done in relying solely upon a human mother. For Clare and Francis, the incarnation grounds the principle of growth through the adversity of poverty. “Theologically, Clare was profoundly inspired by the concept of an infinitely rich God who chose to come among humankind as a poor baby. …In Clare’s mind, those who dedicated themselves wholeheartedly to following Christ needed to join him in this choice of poverty. One who is in love wants to live with and in the circumstances of the beloved” (Mueller 2006: 6). In a paradoxical inversion, these disciples of Jesus welcomed the oppositions of insecurity and vulnerability that poverty provided, because they insured their rich experience of God’s presence.

They embraced not only poverty, but ugliness. In Francis’s last “Testament” to his brothers right before he died in 1226, he writes, “while I was in sin, it seemed very bitter to me to see lepers…that which seemed bitter to me changed into sweetness of soul and body” (Caroli 2004: 99, my translation). This experience narrates learning to see with the eyes of Christ the sweet reality of beauty hidden within everything, especially within those whom the false self deems bitter, ugly, and unworthy of my gaze and care; it “demands an ongoing search for the ‘lepers’ or ‘enemies’ of life and, having found them, to go among them, to show mercy to them, to see them as friends, and to offer one’s very being to them” (Armstrong 2004: 70). Francis also found that “true and perfect joy” (vera e perfetta letizia) accompanies the experience of beauty discovered in ugliness for all persons involved in inclusive behavior (Caroli 2002: 193-94).

In the spiritual path of Sufism Reoriented, Meher Baba calls this crude principle of growth the “Law of Resistance or Reaction” (Duce 1975: 475). This law describes how adverse and atavistic forces in nature, society, and culture automatically seek to oppose new growth and creativity since any new growth, by law, displaces the old, established forms. The old will automatically resist and react for it has already proven its right to exist. Meher Baba uses the traditional Sanskrit word for this atavistic force, māyā, which in early Vedic Sanskrit, means “art, wisdom, extraordinary or supernatural power” and in later classical Sanskrit it holds meanings of “illusion, unreality, deception, fraud, trick, sorcery, witchcraft magic, an unreal or illusory image, phantom, apparition” (Monier Williams 2005: s.v. “māyā”). The semiotic comparison to the Hebrew word tselem or “image” in Genesis 1:26 is apt, as its root word means “to shade” or to present an absence of reality, a phantom (biblehub.com). The Sanskrit root of māyā is mā, which means to measure. To measure off, to fragment the whole into separate knowable forms, is to create and to understand reality by the basis of duality. The illusion is created as well—the deception that such measurement has ultimate meaning and truth—that leads to ignorance or avidyā. Vidyā, or real “knowledge,” is knowledge of the whole by spiritual vision (dṛṣṭi), not fragmented measuring of the mind (Monier Williams 2005: s.v.v. “mā,” “vidyā”).

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8 Might “mama” as the potential first word of a baby for its mother be a natural expression of this differentiation?
9 Sri Aurobindo defines vidyā as “Knowledge of the Oneness” and avidyā as “the relative and multiple consciousness” or ignorance coming to know itself through many-ness (Sri Aurobindo 2005: 39).
(manas), in this view, is the instrument par excellence of māyā in creating illusion because it knows through creating the falsehood of multiple separateness.

Meher Baba compares māyā to a certain kind of Indian bat that, once it has clutched one’s ear, holds on tighter the more one tries to remove it. However, if left alone, eventually it may let go of its own volition. He writes, “It is the law, which could not be avoided, and what cannot be cured must be endured. That is why all the great saints, Masters and Avatars suffer so terribly!” (Duce 1975: 475). Meher Baba said, however, that “spiritual work is strengthened by opposition. … It is like shooting an arrow from a bow—the more you pull the bowstring towards you, the swifter the arrow speeds to its goal” (Kalchuri www.lordmeher.org: 1417). One can see in Francis and Clare this great drive to pull the bowstring back as far as possible; to grow faster in imitation of Christ by risking failure and facing more opposition than is typical or comfortable.

In another instance, Meher Baba addressed the relationship between art and opposition. An unidentified man once asked him, “I am an artist and have encountered opposition always. I am trying to find a clear way in the face of it all, and I have always to go in for pure influence” (Meher Baba 1972: 11). Meher Baba replied, “There lies the fun of the game, to meet opposition, to face and encounter it.” He continues:

If not, life becomes dull and monotonous. One can find spirituality only through opposition. But when you are facing it, if you are determined, it becomes enduring, just like a wall which stands erect, unaffected, against any number of balls struck at it, the balls rebounding with the same force with which they are struck against the wall. On encountering opposition, life becomes enduring, determined and unaffected, like the wall that stands erect and unaffected against the continued strokes of the ball thrown against it. And art is a divine thing. It can only be rightly expressed if opposed, to bring out its inner beauty that lies behind. I will help you spiritually. (Meher Baba 1972: 11)

When Sufism Reoriented needed to publicly share its new Sanctuary project to receive a Land Use Permit from county officials, it was opposed by a vocal minority in our Walnut Creek, California, neighborhood, who became legally organized and publicly slanderous and vitriolic, which delayed the permit process and cost the community a lot of time, effort, and money. Like many new religious movements, this minority viewed Sufism Reoriented as a “cult” in the pejorative sense; this was meant to dehumanize the group, expressing the unfounded feeling that it is a threat to traditional and mainstream religions. “To bring out the inner beauty that lies behind” life expressed externally as the new Sanctuary, its spiritual director Murshida Conner helped her students to see that such opposition was a gift of powerful energy that they needed to strengthen their patience, love, and commitment to the project; if they could be “enduring, determined, and unaffected” by the number of forceful and sometimes painful “balls” thrown their way.

The New Being

I was tasked with a daunting creative problem in sculpting The New Being for the Sanctuary (See Figure 2 and https://www.reunionstudios.com/work/#/thenewbeing/). It was to represent a member of a new divine race Meher Baba calls “the New Humanity,” a species transformed by divine love, and through this transformation “will learn the art of co-operative and harmonious
life; ... free itself from the tyranny of dead forms and release the creative life of spiritual wisdom; ... shed all illusions and get established in the Truth; ... enjoy peace and abiding happiness; ...[and] be initiated in the life of Eternity (Meher Baba 2007: 12). Though there are differences that I cannot explore here, such a vision has deep resonances with Paul’s vision of “the new humanity” in his letter to the Romans. In this sculpture’s making, I learned something of growth and opposition by negotiating the concrete limits and soaring potentials of myself, my collaborators, and of physical matter. The sculpture is a monumental, thirty-nine-foot tall, eleven-ton figurative sculpture made of bronze, steel, precious metals, granite, cast clear acrylic plastic, and fiber optic lighting. The intense pressures of this project are hard to describe: to construct the sculpture to meet the requirement that it is to last for seven hundred years, to stay within a budget that was comprised of Sufi members’ life savings, to safely assemble the parts, to protect the work and people in the building from earthquakes, to deliver and assemble it within an already finished space, and lastly, to keep everyone performing at a very high level of sculptural excellence. Thankfully and quite definitely by God’s grace, the project team finished to everyone’s satisfaction, especially Murshida Conner’s, who envisioned the project and collaborated with me every step of the way. However, the road to this achievement required a commitment to constant metanoia as I risked “missing the mark” (hamartía) as both artist and project manager.

The dissertation research that I did while making The New Being focused on Sri Aurobindo (né Aurobindo Ghose, 1872-1950), an Indian revolutionary, spiritual reformer, and poet, and the Mother (née Mirra Alfassa, 1878-1973), a French painter and musician (Beldio 2016). Both were also spiritual teachers, or gurus, in what became the Sri Aurobindo Ashram (est. 1926) for a practice called the Integral (pūrṇa) Yoga. They were exemplars for the sculpture project since they used their creative process as a means for negotiating adversity in spiritual growth, teaching their students in some cases to do the same. Their yogic practice aims at what they call the “supramental manifestation” which creates a “new creation,” the crown of which is a new human species, what the Mother sometimes named “the New Being,” in which “[t]he mind must fall silent and be replaced by the Truth-Consciousness—the consciousness of details integrated with the consciousness of the whole” (The Mother’s Agenda XIII: March 19, 1972).10 This is a movement in consciousness from ignorance (avidyā) to real knowledge or wisdom (vidyā). This consciousness is “supra-mental” in that it is centered in the heart (hṛd in Sanskrit) not in the mind (manas), which “falls silent” and ultimately dissolves to be “replaced” by other faculties of consciousness that understand “the whole” of reality. I will introduce these faculties below, associated with what Sri Aurobindo sometimes calls “genius.”

10 The Mother uses “the New Being” seventeen times in The Mother’s Agenda. This vision is identical to Meher Baba’s view about the future new humanity and the new age that will dawn as a result. They all claim, in fact, that we are living at the beginning of this new “Hour of God” (Sri Aurobindo 1997: 146-47).
Figure 2. The New Being, 2016, mixed media, 39'-5" x 16'-5" x 14'9", collection of Sufism Reoriented, Walnut Creek, CA. Photo by Ali Atri.
The Mother and Sri Aurobindo noted that if pursued with consistent effort and discipline, the creative process may be used as a catharsis of one’s lower nature (false self) and as a form of yoga to awaken the higher nature (real self) with human faculties that are vastly wiser than the senses, emotions, will, and intellect, so that more comprehensive understandings of the earth, of human beings, and of God may be achieved and enacted.\textsuperscript{11} For them, intense forms of adversity are crucial for both the psychological phases of catharsis and ego-consolidation (what might be called “the front half” of growth in their understanding), as well as during the spiritual phases of ego-dissolution and ultimate cohering with the divine (what might be called “the back half” which is the focus of their Integral Yoga) (See Sri Aurobindo 2005: 278-79).\textsuperscript{12} One of Sri Aurobindo’s aphorisms captures this general principle of growth used in both halves of the process: “This world was built by Death that he might live. Wilt thou abolish death? Then life too will perish. Thou canst not abolish death, but thou mayst transform it into a greater living.” The Mother comments that this means that “oppositions and contraries [like death] are a stimulus to progress,” and “opposites are the quickest and most effective means of shaping Matter so that it can intensify its manifestation” (The Mother 2001: 164-5).

This research on the Ashram aptly named the experience of sculpting \textit{The New Being}, revealing why opposition is so fruitful and ultimately a gift from God. The potential psychological catharsis and spiritual growth in the creative process involve getting into trouble. Using this experience of making \textit{The New Being}, I will briefly examine three levels of trouble with specific experiences: first, in relationship to the self; second, in relationship to the people and media involved; and third, in relationship to God.

\textbf{The Trouble with the Self}

The first trouble has to do with psychological experiences of rejection, failure, and loneliness that the artist may feel to greater or lesser degrees in the creative process and afterwards. Now that the sculpture is installed and finished, the response has been mixed. There have been those who completely ignore it, as one well-known critic did in his review of the Sanctuary project (King 2017). Another journalist passed it over to discuss more titillating aspects of the small neighborhood opposition to the Sanctuary (Barshad 2017). I also entered the sculpture in prestigious art and architecture award competitions with no recognition given. However, members of the Sufi community are very happy with the work, and many visitors who tour the building respond with varying degrees of enjoyment and appreciation.

The very practical issues of fabricating the sculpture also presented many opportunities for adversity in the form of personal failure. There were times of failure to design the sculpture according to Murshida’s direction, but she continually guided me to became more surrendered to the vision set by Meher Baba (and the Mother and Sri Aurobindo), whether it was the graceful position of a finger, the right number of creatures in the base that symbolized the evolution of

\textsuperscript{11} Sri Aurobindo compared Tantric notions of \textit{cittaśuddhi} (purification or \textit{śuddhi} of the basic consciousness or \textit{citta}) with Greek ideas of \textit{katharsis}. He pointed out how the ancient Greeks used drama to purify the lower nature by strengthening the reason to control the emotions in the tension and release experienced during a drama, ultimately leading the audience to \textit{theoria}, or contemplation. See Sri Aurobindo 2003: 431-54.

\textsuperscript{12} I do not want to oversimplify a very complex theory and fraught experience since both “halves” may overlap, making it impossible for one within the practice to make a clean distinction between psychological and spiritual growth. The purpose here is simply to introduce the difference as the Mother and Sri Aurobindo understood it, which bears upon this author’s experience of making \textit{The New Being}. 
consciousness and form as taught by Meher Baba, or the size of the butterflies in relationship to the figure. The design for *The New Being* was daunting. Murshida asked me to enlarge a sculpture I had done of St. Francis of Assisi in which the saint is twirling out of his robes, nude, and joining the Holy Spirit as doves in an experience of “perfect joy” (www.reunionstudios.com). Instead of a male figure, *The New Being* was to be androgynous to make it relevant to both men and women, and even more significantly, to represent the wholeness of consciousness and form that this new being represents. Such subject matter places this project within an important tradition of sacred art history and religious studies in which androgyny is used to express what Mircea Eliade calls “the mystery of wholeness” (Eliade 1965). Paul’s view of the new humanity fits within this wider theme, that in the kingdom of God “there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). The resurrected Christ is the model of this new integration of masculine and feminine attributes, the “second Adam” (See Rom 5:12-21), which further connects this theme of androgyny to the Jahwist creation account in the book of Genesis (Gen 2-3). Phyllis Trible notes that the word for the first human in Genesis, ḥāʾādām, does not mean “man,” but an androgynous “earth creature,” and as such was not sexually differentiated until it was split into two genders later in the creation account (Trible 1973, 1988 and Beldio 2015).

The duration and commitment of the project was formidable, which occasioned another level of trouble for the self. The first five years occurred in the artist’s studio in Washington, DC, which included making a notional schedule and budget, designing the seven-foot model, hiring subcontractors like structural engineers and a bronze foundry, scanning the model with a 3D laser scanner, enlarging it to the full scale using the 3D scan file, and then shipping all the enlarged sections to California. The next four years required my relocating to California to sculpt the enlarged version, to fabricate it in bronze, steel, acrylic, granite, and lighting, and then to assemble and install it within the new building.

Project management provided one of the more personal challenges given my lack of previous experience in this area. It included cost estimating, budget development and tracking, acquisition management and contracting, scheduling, risk management, teaming and personnel management. This complex part of the experience exposed a weakness in my personality, which was being too easily led by some subcontractors who occasionally sought to change the design to make it easier and cheaper to build. After making the design, the need to defend it as the project unfolded became increasingly important, which leads to the next level of trouble.

**The Trouble with Others**

The second challenge of this project has to do with the potential unwillingness or inability of collaborators to share the vision of the creative project and to complete it with the same level of commitment; and also, the dilemma has to do with the potential limits of the chosen materials to transform physically in the ways needed to fulfill the vision.

As one brief example, one of the subcontractors had a habit of going forward without collaborating with the rest of the project team. It reached a point of conflict where apologies, adjustments to the contract, and a redefinition of roles were all needed. However, this difficult part of the project led to a new, united focus that was needed for the final milestones of the project. Not only people, but also materials caused much trouble in creating *The New Being*. The scope of the project included using clay, wax, resins, Styrofoam, rubber, plaster, bronze, clear acrylic, fiber optic lighting, granite, patina chemicals, and plating solutions. Every stage of the
way required focused concentration, long work days, and unexpected emergencies that taxed everyone’s time, skill, and patience; however, one of the material processes that gave me the most trouble was “brush-plating.”

The surfaces of The New Being are plated with a thin layer of platinum, gold, nickel, or copper, and to my knowledge it is the largest object to be plated in history. Usually one plates objects by immersing them in a bath of solution made of water and metal salts. For example, gold plating solution is primarily water and gold mono cyanide. An electric current is then passed through the solution, causing an electrochemical bond to occur between the bronze and the plating metal. Since The New Being is almost forty feet tall, we could not immerse it within a bath of solution; we needed to bring the solution to the sculpture in a process known as “brush plating.” This involves using a “brush” that is made of an inert graphite block covered in a cotton sleeve. It has a handle that is connected to a cable that is in turn connected to a box called a “rectifier” that creates the electric current. This brush becomes the anode while the sculpture, which is grounded by another clip and cable, is the cathode. One dips the anode in the solution and starts to move it across the surface of the sculpture and the gold begins to appear right away—except in this case. For six months, I practiced this technique with consistent failure. I plated gold, rhodium, platinum, copper, iridium, palladium, lead, cobalt, and nickel on different samples both to make decisions with Murshida about finishes and to master the process. My consultant and I were about to give up when we decided simply to skip some recommended preparatory steps and go right to plating. That actually worked, and we were on our way.

We plated two large sections of the sculpture separately: the base and then the figure. We found that if we could sand blast the surface, there is a much better plating result. A sand blaster cleaned the base and it sat overnight. The next morning, we discovered that the whole section had turned blue-green; it had oxidized in the sea salt air, which made it impossible to begin. What increased the pressure was the scheduled delivery of this part of the sculpture to the Sanctuary. Because of its size, we had to deliver it to the site by craning it through a large skylight in the roof, which was scheduled to be closed in a few weeks. The window, both literally and figuratively, was closing. The team worked every day for two to three weeks using a portable sand blaster and plating 2’x 2’ sections at a time. We easily worked fifteen-to-seventeen-hour days, but we barely made the scheduled delivery date. Meher Baba’s words rang in the ear throughout this project: “There lies the fun of the game, to meet opposition, to face and encounter it.”

The Trouble with God

On one side of the creative experience of The New Being there were feelings of vulnerability, failure, misunderstanding, and rejection that exposed my limitations to varying degrees, as well as difficult conflicts with others and with the materials that further exposed these limitations, as briefly demonstrated above. Viewed in light of Christian sacred texts and tradition, as well as the teachings of the Mother/Sri Aurobindo and Meher Baba, these processes of adversity are experiences of the divine working to stimulate growth. On the other side of the process with The New Being, there were experiences of awing inspiration that occurred during the creative activity to surprise and even to disbalance the consciousness with unlimited possibility, which is what I hope to explore briefly now. The creative process turned out to be a very difficult work of subjecting the self to feelings associated with limitations and limitlessness, which might pull the artist into inaction, divided action, or overreaction, and away from the more difficult integral action
needed in creating art.

Owing to my dissertation research on the Integral Yoga of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, I would associate the experience of limitlessness in creating The New Being with what Sri Aurobindo calls genius. Sri Aurobindo connects genius to a very high form of knowledge that functions independently from the senses and intellect and includes “sovereign discernment, intuitive perception of truth, plenary inspiration of speech, direct vision of knowledge to an extent often amounting to revelation, making a man a prophet of truth” (Sri Aurobindo 2003a: 387-88).

He also calls this level of consciousness jiñāna in his personal journal (Sri Aurobindo 2001), which in Sanskrit means “higher knowledge” and is a cognate of the word “know” (Monier Williams 2005: s.v. jiñāna). In this understanding, genius is not something one possesses, but is a level of human knowing that anyone might access to varying degrees of intensity, aided by a disciplined practice that includes stilling the mind (manas). As he defines it, genius is composed of four faculties of knowledge: discernment, intuition, inspiration, and revelation. He writes that discernment and intuition are faculties that comprise the memory of one’s real self or soul. He uses the Sanskrit word smṛti to name this dual faculty, which means “remembrance” (Sri Aurobindo 2001). Discernment is the faculty that discriminates between the false and the true, while the intuition links the truth “above” with the truth “below” in sudden and reliable strikes of knowledge that supersede reason. Inspiration (what he calls śruti, which means “hearing”) is the call of beauty and truth one hears in the soul (Sri Aurobindo 2001). Revelation (what he calls drṣṭi, which means “seeing”) is vision of beauty and truth that one sees with spiritual sight (Sri Aurobindo 2001). genius is a complex of remembrance, hearing, and seeing the soul, and when experienced within a creative practice, seeks to express this spiritual experience into forms that resonate with the memory, call, and sight received.

Throughout their writings, the Mother and Sri Aurobindo address all of these faculties of genius in different ways, but most often speak of developing the intuition when describing growth in their yogic practice and when they discuss any human endeavor such as creativity. These teachings aided my own experience of creating The New Being. I found that this complex experience of genius was also a form of opposition. Murshida gave the following image to illustrate what I mean: this kind of “positive” adversity is associated with a profound feeling of unworthiness in the face of an overwhelming gift, like a child who wakes Christmas morning to find a toy that she always wanted but now cannot bring herself to take and enjoy. The child needs the hand of a loving parent to guide her over to the gift, to encourage her to hold it, and to celebrate with her the joy of having it. God’s gift of himself is like this. In a very real way, we need to give ourselves permission to accept and to take pleasure in the gift, and it can help to have a trusted friend to first offer that permission on our behalf.

When Murshida first commissioned The New Being, it felt like a dream come true. In many ways my life had been a preparation for the project, which included natural abilities as an artist, family encouragement and support in the arts as a child, decades of education, social abilities and leadership skills, and a strong sense of self-reliance. The main preparation was an abiding recognition of God’s call to beauty that matured during college and seminary. To a lesser, more diffuse degree, this may be an example of Sri Aurobindo’s notion of inspiration. It first dawned during a foreign studies program in Rome in which the reality of the Italian Renaissance and later periods of history inspired in me a desire for such a rebirth in the United States. More than this,

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13 Stilling the mind is essential to Sri Aurobindo’s yoga or spiritual practice since it is an instrument of māyā (illusion) which creates avidyā (ignorance) or knowledge of multiple separateness. When it is stilled, other more comprehensive faculties may awaken to know the unity of reality or ādiyā. See above.
there was a call to be an artist for this purpose that grew as I matured. Murshida’s commission fulfilled this call in my understanding, so I was at risk of inaction; not wanting to actually take the gift being given for it overwhelmed my sense of worthiness.

“Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed” is a prayer that I began to say with more frequency as I worked on The New Being. As the model took shape in the studio, pleasing Murshida and pleasing the deepest parts of myself, I experienced what Sri Aurobindo might call inspiration and revelation: my own ties to a flowing creative Rhythm in the cosmos and the divine Power within it that grounds all being. I felt Sri Aurobindo’s sense of genius not as an individual state of being, but a level of consciousness that embraces all forms and waits for all human beings to drink from its depths.

As the years went on, there were impossible tasks that sapped all energy, talent, and motivation. It seems unlikely in hindsight, but there were even thoughts and feelings that I might not live to see the completion of the project since I had nothing left to give in certain phases. When I was wise, I asked God for his strength and it never failed to flood my being, and I never failed to complete the project milestone at hand. It seemed that the team and I were witnessing miracle after miracle that were not based on talent alone. Talent can be developed into very refined forms of excellence; however, the question becomes, to what end is talent being employed, and who is driving it forward? Talent might be compared to a rare performance automobile like a Ferrari, which can be driven well or can be crashed into a wall. Creating The New Being required using and using up high-performance talents, but driven by faculties other than the mind and the desires of the false self. As the many troubles and failures surfaced in the nine years that it took to create The New Being, I found that my talents were driven by a monkey, which is why it is very easy to identify with the Bonobo at the base of the sculpture as much as the joyous dancing figure of The New Being (See Figure 3). That Bonobo sits like Rodin’s Thinker, but with an expression of longing to think. It has no human mental ability, but it has aspiration and it is this that makes her beautiful. The aspiration for higher knowledge and light—for perfection—is connected to the gold and platinum that pushes for more expression as it makes its way through the different forms of evolution, up the garment into the body and through the butterflies to the light in the oculus of the dome above it.

Making The New Being revealed a glimpse of the real self. It did so by taking me to a point in which friends and family could not help; wife and even spiritual teacher could offer no assistance. Without God testing the personal limits of one’s talents, and then abolishing them so that the only option was to call on his aid, I would have never known in the personal,

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14 For my Protestant brothers and sisters, this is the prayer Catholics used to say before receiving communion. The prayer has been changed to say “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed,” taken from Mt 8.
bodily way that yields real wisdom, the fullness of that aid, the completeness of that strength. God first joins our call for his help from within it, saying with us, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” Choosing to remain in this crucible of transformation in silence and in cheerfulness is the real difficulty, but the only way to reach the goal where the fires of transformation no longer burn the flesh, but cast a light, as a previous Murshid once said. Once cast, we follow it. I would suggest that this is the rare fire of God’s highest presence transmuted from the fires of torment into the fires of purification, and then into the fires of divine union. These fires of union engulf, but do not consume, like the burning bush (Ex 3:1-12); they lead with reliability like the pillar of fire that led the Israelites by night to the Promised Land (Ex 13:21); they purify the inner being like the fires of the Holy Spirit with which Jesus baptizes his followers (Lk 3:16); and they unite all people into one as the tongues of fire that illumined and joined each person in the upper room after the Resurrection (Acts 2:3).

Conclusion

What does the creative process teach us about God? The creative process can be a crucial tool that accompanies growth at all phases of maturity towards the Father’s perfection. Creativity is a means by which psychological troubles can be faced and integrated through a growth process of catharsis, where one’s talents are developed, the mind and will are refined, and the sense of self is strengthened by differing experiences of opposition. Creativity is also involved in troubling spiritual processes where the ego-self is dissolved and the mind is stilled, where definition of roles and consolidation of the personality are not the goal, but the very opposite. In spiritual growth, a person’s ripened ego is first offered and then consumed in a difficult and painful process of transformation and expansion. In each case—the front half of growth in psychological development, and the back half in spiritual transformation—it is the force against a person’s intention, the enemy of one’s purpose, that plays the most important part to ensure that the development reaches its end, which is ultimately evermore likeness of God’s perfection. It is not a logical and clean process, but one in which we all fail. Success is not the goal, however. The ability to be resilient and the commitment to be enduring are what count the most in the practice. One might think of the Book of Job and Job’s relentless contest with the adversary (ḥaš-ṣā-ṯān) or Jacob who wrestled with an adversary (“a man” or ‘īš) to receive his blessing (Gen 32:22-32). Job and Jacob’s faithfulness to the sometimes painful process of being in relationship with God is the image of mature discipleship. For the Christian, the ability to be resilient and the commitment to be enduring is ultimately a matter of taking up the cross and following beloved Jesus (Mt. 16.24).

This way of describing the creative process and its relationship with growth highlights the theme of opposition in the Bible that I call “God’s hardening.” God hardens the hearts of our enemies that we might be stimulated to admit our own hard hearts and grow beyond our limited loving, so that we might love as universally as God loves. In the creative process in service to beauty, it means being induced by ugliness to use matter to reveal the divine beauty that is hidden within it by employing qualities of beauty that are as inclusive as possible, especially of those on the margins of our society. Sri Aurobindo wrote that “[i]f Art’s service is but to imitate Nature, then burn all the picture galleries and let us have instead photographic studios. It is because Art reveals what nature hides, that a small picture is worth more than all the jewels of the millionaires and the treasures of princes” (Sri Aurobindo 1997: 440). That revelation happens through a crude process of adversity, sin, death, evil, suffering, ignorance, or falsehood. Whatever its name, if
opposition is welcomed and utilized with faithfulness and resilience, it becomes labor pains for a new birth that is a new humanity and a new creation in Christ’s own image and likeness.

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The Poetic Language of the Psalms: *Sui Generis?*
A Comparison of the Vocabulary in the Psalms with Other Hebrew Scripture,
and with Other Ancient Semitic Poetry

Tom Hobson

Introduction

An examination of the Hebrew of the Psalms reveals that the Psalms use uncommon words for which there are already more common synonyms in elementary Hebrew: *haqšib* instead of *šama’* for “hear,” *šabah* instead of *hillel* for “praise.” To some extent, we would expect this in poetry that uses semantic parallelism, which requires a wealth of synonyms. We need not be surprised at “poetic” vocabulary; poetry commonly employs words that most languages do not use in ordinary conversation (see discussion in Watson, 35-8).

But where does Hebrew poetic vocabulary originate? Is it archaic? Is it a special dialect? Is it borrowed from other Semitic languages? Is it a language unto itself? Or does the vocabulary seem unusual simply because we have limited sources and no access to native speakers? None of the studies by Driver, Murtonen, Patton, Tzevat, or Watson answer these questions satisfactorily.

In order to answer these questions, this study employed a speed-reading through the entire Hebrew Psalter, doing frequency analyses on significant words in the text to compare with their frequency in other texts in the Hebrew Bible. This was followed by a survey of poetry in other Semitic languages from the same general time period. Poetry from Sumer, Egypt, and the Hittites was not investigated linguistically in this study, since the intent was to find Semitic vocabulary links with Hebrew poetry, although a study by someone who is qualified to handle these non-Semitic languages (as well as Hurrian) might find some additional cognates.

Results

The following is a selective collection of Hebrew words and roots that are disproportionately represented in the Psalms in comparison to the Hebrew Bible as a whole; that is, they occur in Psalms twice as often or more (proportionately) as their occurrence outside of Psalms. The baseline for comparison will be Tzevat’s figure that Psalms constitutes 8.8% of the Hebrew Bible (Tzevat 79 n 27). Statistics are based mainly on Bible Works 7. No attempt was made to differentiate between genres or dates of Psalms.¹ *HALOT*, Del Olmo Lete, Murtonen,

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¹ An analysis of the results for *ḥšḥ*, for example, shows that out of 24 occurrences in Psalms, all but four of them are either in the first two books of the Psalter, or are in psalms attributed to David. Of the three occurrences in Isaiah, two are from the first half of the book. And of the eight remaining occurrences, two are Davidic (2 Samuel 22:3, 31), and one is in early poetry (Deuteronomy 32:37). By contrast, only four of the 37 occurrences of the root *pl’* in the Psalms are in the first two books, indicating possibly a later date range. Results from other OT books on this root are mixed.
and the CAD were consulted on cognate languages. Arabic was not noted except where other cognates were lacking. Comparisons to Aramaic refer to Biblical Aramaic or earlier. When Kautzsch claims that a root such as hesed is borrowed from Aramaic (Kautzsch 31-2; see also Driver 26-39), he is appealing to late sources, whereas I would argue that the word in question is originally Hebrew, borrowed into Aramaic.

'imrah, “word, promise” – used 37 times, including 25 in Psalms (67.5%), four in Isaiah. It is found elsewhere only in Ugaritic amr, “to order, command.” 'imrah is a poetic alternative for dabar, a word which is far more common in Hebrew (1430 times), but less common in Aramaic and extremely rare in Ugaritic (where its meaning is disputed), and not found in Akkadian.

hawwah, “ruin” – used eight times, seven in Psalms (87.5%) plus Job 6:30. In Ugaritic, hwt means “words,” which could easily fit the context in the Hebrew psalms, where hawwoth (presumably threats) are spoken against the psalmist.

zamar, “to sing” – used 46 times, including 42 in Psalms (91.3%). The root appears in both Aramaic and Akkadian with the same meaning as in Hebrew.

zanaḥ, “to reject” – used twenty times, including ten in Psalms (50%), three in Lamentations, two in Hosea, and two in 2 Chronicles. No ancient Semitic cognates were found except Arabic znḥ, “repel.” Hurrian anzannoḫ, “request,” is opposite in meaning (Speiser 193). The Hebrew Bible outside of Psalms prefers ma’as (used 75 times, including nine in Psalms, twelve in Job, ten in Isaiah, and ten in Jeremiah).

ḥasah, “to take refuge” – used 35 times, including 24 in Psalms (68.5%), three in Isaiah. A classic psalm word, it also appears in Akkadian as hesu, which translates a Sumerian expression “to duck one’s head into grass” (CAD 6:176-7). Also mahseh, “place of refuge,” is used twenty times, including twelve in Psalms (60%) and four in Isaiah. Refuge language is almost totally Psalmonic, except for miglat (city of refuge), and five occurrences of manōs outside of Psalms.

hōbîl, “to come, bring” – used 21 times, including six in Psalms (28.5%), six in Isaiah, three in Job. It is a standard root in Ugaritic, in contrast to Hebrew bō’. hōbîl also is cognate to the standard Akkadian verb wabalum, “to bear, carry.”

yiḥēl, “to wait, hope” – used 42 times, including nineteen in Psalms (45.2%), eight in Job. yiḥēl is a Hebraism, not found in other languages. Its synonym qawah may be more familiar to some readers: the latter verb is used 49 times, including seventeen in Psalms (34.7%), fourteen in Isaiah.

le’om, “people, nation” – used 31 times, including nine in Psalms (29%), ten in Isaiah, four in Proverbs, two in Genesis. It occurs in Ugaritic as lim, “people, clan.” le’om is the archaic counterpart to ’am (used 1855 times) and goy (555 times).

mōṭ, “to shake, move” – used 45 times, including 26 in Psalms (57.7%), four in Proverbs, three in Isaiah. The root occurs in Ugaritic as mt, “to stagger, shake.”

maḥas, “to smite” – used fifteen times, including five in Psalms (33.3%), while the rest are all in archaic poetry: Balaam’s oracles, Deuteronomy 32-33, the Song Of Deborah, Job, Isaiah 30:26, and Habakkuk 3. The only psalms in which it is used are Psalm 18, 68, and 110. The root is common in Ugaritic, and is the standard word for “smite” in Akkadian. Hebrew prefers hikkah (used 513 times, but only fifteen in Psalms).

ma’ōn, “den, lair, stronghold” – used 37 times, including nine in Psalms (24.3%), nine in Isaiah, seven in Daniel 11. There appear to be no extant ancient Semitic cognates. The Arabic cognate means “to cover, be thickly foliated” (HALOT).

meṣudah, “fortified place” – used 24 times, including nine in Psalms (37.5%), five in 2 Samuel. The term occurs in Ugaritic as msd, “fortified tower.”
mirmah, “deceit” – used 40 times, including fourteen in Psalms (35%), eight in Proverbs. The word occurs in old Aramaic, and possibly in Akkadian (see HALOT). “Deceit” is a persistent fact of life encountered in the Psalms.

miṣgab, “high, inaccessible place” – used seventeen times, including twelve in Psalms (70.5%), two in Isaiah. The root occurs in old Aramaic, and possibly in Akkadian (segbu = elite class of troops). According to Tzevat, it is also found in the Amorite name Sagbi-Adad, “Adad Is My Stronghold” (Tzevat 52, referencing Archives Royales de Mari 5: 123).

nahah, “to lead” – used 40 times, including eighteen in Psalms (45%), four in Exodus. The root occurs as Ugaritic nḥy, “to proceed toward.”

nesah, “forever” – used 41 times, including fourteen in Psalms (34.1%), six in Isaiah, five in Job. It is unclear whether Ugaritic nḥ “to be victorious” is cognate. In Akkadian the root means “to remove, expel.” ‘īlam is the more common synonym (used 439 times, including 138 in Psalms, 45 in Isaiah, and 31 in Jeremiah).

nasal, “to deliver” – used 213 times, including 44 in Psalms (20.6%), nineteen in Isaiah. HALOT finds the root in an Old Sinaic inscription (according to Albright BASOR 110:18), Ammonite, and late Aramaic. Also, yāša’, “to save,” is used 241 times, including 76 in Psalms (31.5%), 34 in Isaiah, twenty in Judges, seventeen in Jeremiah, plus yešu’ah – used 78 times, including 45 times in Psalms (55.3%), eighteen in Isaiah, but not used in any other book more than twice. “Deliverance” is a common theme in the Hebrew Psalms.

‘atap, “to be exhausted” – used fourteen times, including eight in Psalms (57.1%), two in Lamentations. Likewise, Ugaritic ḫp means “to be weak.”

‘alaš, “to exult” – used eight times, including four in Psalms (50%). It occurs in both Ugaritic (‘ls) and Akkadian (eleṣu) (Enuma eliš II 121: Marduk’s heart e-li-iṣ, “rejoiced”). A variant is ‘alaz – sixteen times, including six in Psalms (37.5%).

nipla’, “to be wonderful” – used 84 times, including 37 in Psalms (44%), six in Job, and in other books three times or less. Evidence from Semitic cognates is scanty. Murtonen (I/3 340) reports that the root does exist in Aramaic (no indication of time period) and at Ebla (pa-la-um, “inspection”), but Phoenician palu is textually suspect, and Ugritic ply “semantically ambiguous and phonologically deviant.” The Akkadian puluhtm, “awesome,” (from palaḫum, “to fear”) is a more likely cognate, although the ḫ makes the connection questionable. The Hurrian root pal- , “to be authentic” may also be related to pl’ (Speiser 130). The God of the Psalms is a God who does “wonders.”

pilleṭ, “to bring to safety” – used 31 times, including eighteen in Psalms (58%) and single uses in other books. In Ugaritic, the root means “to be safe” in the G stem, and “to save” in the D stem. In an Akkadian synonym list, pa-la-ṭu = šuzubu, “to save” (this verb may be connected with balatu, “to live”). In one El Amarna letter, pa-liṭmi means “it is spared” (HALOT cites El Amarna 185: 23, 33). Elsewhere, Hebrew prefers the verb millēṭ (96 times, including thirteen in Jeremiah, eleven in 1-2 Samuel, ten in Job, nine in Isaiah, seven in Psalms).

ṣarah, “distress” – used 71 times, including 22 in Psalms (30.9%), eight in Jeremiah, seven in Proverbs, and seven in Isaiah. Also sarar, “enemy, rival” – used 72 times, including eighteen in Psalms (25%) and five in Isaiah; and sar – used 101 times, including 36 in Psalms (35.6%), twelve in Isaiah, and nine in Job. It occurs in old Aramaic (ṣr), as well as Akkadian (serru, “enemy, rival”) and Ugritic (ṣr “to hurt”, ṣrt, “enemy, rival”). The Psalmist appears to be perpetually in conflict and distress.

qiddēm as verb “to confront, encounter” – used 26 times, including twelve in Psalms (+ two in 2 Samuel 22) and three in Job. The root occurs in all three ancient cognate languages, but
it is used most frequently as a compound with min (31 times in the OT) or an adjective (“eastern” or “ancient” – 52 times in the OT).

*qerab*, “war, battle” – used nine times in Hebrew plus once in Aramaic (Daniel 7:21), including five times in Psalms, plus single uses in 2 Samuel, Job, Ecclesiastes, and Zechariah. The root is used in Ugaritic only to mean, “to draw near,” but is regularly used for “battle” in Akkadian. A far more frequent term for battle outside Psalms is *milḥamah* (316 times, only ten in Psalms).

*haqšīb*, “to listen” – used 55 times, nine in Psalms (16.3%), nine in Isaiah, eight in Proverbs. The only cognate found is Arabic *qsb*, “to learn.” In Hebrew, *haqšīb* is used as a parallel for *šama’,* along with “give ear” (*he’ezīn*).

*šiyḥ*, “to meditate, complain, utter” – used 38 times, nineteen in Psalms (50%), nine in Job. The root is possibly cognate with Akkadian *šēḫu* “wind, breath” or *šêḫu* “to be agitated.” A close synonym is *hagah* (25 times, seven in Psalms).

*šabaḥ*, “to praise” – eleven times, seven in Psalms (63.6%), two in Ecclesiastes. Only in Hebrew and Aramaic (five times in Daniel). More common synonyms include *hillēl* and *zamar*.

*šawa’,* “to cry for help” – used 30 times, ten in Psalms (33.3%), eleven in Job, three in Isaiah. It occurs apparently as a loanword in Aramaic, and in Ugaritic as *t*’. It is common in Psalms as both verb and noun, but even more common are the two noun forms of *‘ezér,* “help” – 42 times combined, 23 in Psalms (54.7%). The verb *‘azar* is less common proportionately (60 times, twelve in Psalms). The term for crying out to God, *qara’,* occurs much more broadly (more than 500 times, but usually meaning “call” rather than “cry out”) as well as the term, *zā’aq / ṣā’aq* (46 times + 59 times).

*tebel*, “world” – used 38 times, fourteen in Psalms (36.8%), ten in Isaiah. It does not occur in Ugaritic or Akkadian, but is found in El Amarna 10:33: *umāmu lū ša tābali lū ša nāri,* “let there be creatures of the land and also of the river.” It appears to be from the root *‘bl*, “to be dry.”

*menaṣṣēaḥ* and *mizmor* – Here are two terms that occur nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible (except *menaṣṣēaḥ* in Habakkuk 3:9), neither do they appear in the Psalms themselves (!), but only in the superscriptions. As such, they are probably best described as reflecting the language of later editors rather than of the Psalms themselves.

Also examined were the following words from elementary Hebrew, selected because of their seemingly frequent use in Psalms, for purposes of comparison with the words identified above:

*ebyon*, “needy” – used 61 times, 22 in Psalms (36%), six in Job, five in Deuteronomy, five in Isaiah, five in Amos. In Ugaritic, *‘bynt* appears to mean “misery” and is used in parallel with *‘nh,* “sighing.” Lambdin (145-6) traces it to the Egyptian *ebyēn,* from a root *b’n,* “bad, evil, wretched.” Also, *‘anaw,* “afflicted” – used 25 times, twelve in Psalms (48%), four in Isaiah, three in Proverbs, two in Amos (no apparent cognates), and *‘ani,* “poor” – 120 times, 39 in Psalms (32.5%), fourteen in Isaiah, nine in Proverbs. A large portion of what the Hebrew Bible says about the poor is here in the Psalms.

*‘ahab*, “to love” – used 220 times, including 39 in Psalms (17.7%), 25 in Proverbs, 21 in Deuteronomy, fifteen in Hosea, thirteen in Genesis. Compare with its antonym, *šanē’,* “to hate,” where the numbers indicate heavy use of the two in parallelism – 148 times, 40 in Psalms (27%), 25 in Proverbs, 18 in Deuteronomy. Also, *‘ōyēb,* “enemy” – 283 times, 72 in Psalms (25.4%), 23 in Deuteronomy, nineteen in 1 Samuel, and nineteen in Jeremiah. All three terms are common Semitic.
'emunah, “faithfulness” – used 49 times, including 22 in Psalms (44.8%), five in 2 Chronicles, four in Isaiah, four in Jeremiah. Its only ancient Semitic cognate is Ugaritic amn, which may mean “to be faithful.” HALOT cites Egyptian mn, “to be firm.”

'emet, “truthfulness” – used 127 times, including 37 in Psalms (29.1%), twelve in Isaiah, eleven in Jeremiah. Also found in Ugaritic and Canaanite; it may also be related to Egyptian maat, “truth.”

būš, “to be ashamed” – used 128 times, including 31 in Psalms (24.2%), 26 in Jeremiah, 21 in Isaiah. būš forms a common Semitic root. For example, the psalmist often asks to be spared shame and wishes shame on his enemies.

bataḥ, “to trust” – used 163 times, including 48 in Psalms (29.4%), 22 in Isaiah, twenty in Jeremiah, and fourteen in Proverbs. The word does not occur in Ugaritic or Akkadian. Murtonen states that it is a loanword in Aramaic. It surprised me to find this root virtually absent outside Israel, and to find the root so concentrated in poetry (73.6% of its OT occurrences).

hamas, “violence” – used 68 times, including fourteen in Psalms (20.5%), eight in Proverbs, six in Jeremiah, six in Ezekiel, and fight in Habakkuk. In Ugaritic, the verbal root (which is not common) seems to mean, “to force.” The root is also found in Aramaic and in the dialect at Emar (Pentiuc 82). The psalmist commonly complains about violence.

hesed, “steadfast love” – used 252 times, including 128 in Psalms (50.8%), twelve in 2 Samuel, eleven in Genesis, eleven in Proverbs, and ten in 2 Chronicles. Also, hasīd, “pious, loyal one” – used 34 times, 25 in Psalms (73.5%), but in no other book more than once (occurs in Deuteronomy 33, 2 Samuel 22). hesed is found nowhere in Ugaritic, Aramaic (except as a late Hebraism), or Akkadian, but it has been found in NW Semitic material (for example, Mari) in the form ḫa-si-da-mu-um – Tzevat cites one writer who suggests a Hurrian etymology (Tzevat 135 n 424). Tzevat also observes that in poetry, hesed is used 4-1 as an attribute of God rather than of humans, whereas in prose it is used almost 30-1 to refer to human rather than divine love (Tzevat 45).

hanan, “to be gracious” – used 90 times, including 30 in Psalms (33.3%), six in Proverbs, six in Job, and six in Nehemiah. It is a different story for the noun hēn, “grace, favor,” which is used 68 times, but only two in Psalms (2.9%). The root occurs in Ugaritic, Aramaic, and Akkadian (enēnu). The psalmist seems to favor raṣon (thirteen times out of 56 OT occurrences) to hēn.

herpah, “reproach” – used 73 times, including twenty in Psalms (27.4%), twelve in Jeremiah, seven in Ezekiel, and six in Isaiah. Other than in Arabic and later Syriac, the root only occurs as Ugaritic hrp (“mania, insanity?””). The psalmist often complains of suffering reproach.

mēšarīm, “equity” – used 17 times, including seven in Psalms (36.8%), five in Proverbs, and three in Isaiah. The root yṣr (common Semitic “to be upright, straight, level”) occurs 161 times, including 29 in Psalms (18%), 35 in Proverbs, nineteen in 1-2 Kings, sixteen in 1-2 Chronicles, and eleven in Job. This root is more concentrated in Psalms than the term mišpaṭ, which is evenly spread throughout the Bible: 424 times (spread through 59 books), including 64 times in Psalms (15.1%).

ṣūr, “rock” – used 120 times, including 26 in Psalms (21.6%), fourteen in Isaiah, thirteen in Deuteronomy, seven in Job, and seven in Jeremiah. A common Semitic term, as is selā’ – used 62 times, including nine in Psalms (14.5%), nine in Isaiah, eight in Judges, and eight in Jeremiah. Not so common, however, is the use of either term as a positive reference to Deity in non-Hebrew poetry, one exception being a lone occurrence of the Amorite name Ṣura-Ḥammu, “Hammu Is a Rock” (Tzevat 52).
radap, “to pursue” – used 144 times, including twenty in Psalms (13.8%), 21 in 1-2 Samuel, fifteen in Joshua, and eleven in Judges. It is found in Akkadian; HALOT cites Wagner, Aramaismen, who calls it an Aramaic loanword, although his grounds for saying so are not clear. Nine of the occurrences in Psalms are the participle form “pursuers.” The psalmist constantly speaks of being pursued, like David in the desert.

Comparisons to Poetry in Other Semitic Languages

How does the vocabulary of the Psalms compare with the vocabulary of comparable Ugaritic and Akkadian poetry? The key word here is “comparable.” Finding poetry in the ancient Near East that truly compares to Israel’s psalms is difficult, particularly in Ugaritic. There is plenty of poetry extant from Ugarit, but it is almost totally epic or narrative poetry. Ugaritic poetry includes almost no hymns or prayers to deity, two exceptions being KTU 1.119 and KTU 1.123, neither of which offers much to compare with Hebrew psalms. Much has been made of the linguistic resemblance between Ugaritic poetry and Psalms 18 and 68, but these happen to be the only two psalms written in epic style.

Prospects are more encouraging in the area of Akkadian poetry, but not by much. There are hymns and prayers, but even where the genre and sentiments conveyed are comparable, the actual vocabulary that is used shows no connection. Even the Akkadian lamentations do not closely resemble the pleas of Hebrew “blues” songs attributed to David, but are more like the OT book of Lamentations, or like Psalm 74 or 79. The urgent plea for action found in the Psalter is lacking. To add further to the comparison problem, even the laments available to me were mostly composed in Sumerian, and then translated.

The following are some lamentation samples from Mark E. Cohen, The Canonical Lamentations of Ancient Mesopotamia. In the piece entitled “The Lowing Cow” (Cohen 2: 626-9), the refrain “On account of the destruction of X, PN cries out all day long” is repeated 30 times, followed by 44 refrains of “Because of the destruction of X, PN is no longer stationed in his/her/their residence.”

Another piece (Cohen 2: 662-3) begins with the title line: “She of the destroyed city says, ‘O my city!’... ‘As for me, the lady, who has ever been treated as I have?’ [she says] hotly. ‘Who has ever [experienced] sickness as I have?’” (Compare Lamentations 1:12.)

Still another piece (Cohen 2:587-8) opens with the title line: “That city which has been pillaged! Oh, its children! ... That destroyed city which has been carried off from me! That destroyed house which has been carried off from me! ... My utterance, my moan is ‘Woe!’ My cry which in my city never goes away! My cry which in my house never goes away! Before my very eyes my house has been strewn about. What has been taken from it? Before my very eyes my city has been strewn about. What has been taken from it?”

From “The Defiled Apsu” (Cohen 1:58-60): “Why does the Apsu turn against me at every shore?” (This refrain is repeated a total of eleven times). “I wander about the place that has been

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pillaged. I wander about...He who goes for wood has been carried off. He who goes for water has been carried off...The dogs, which (now) do not know me, follow the enemy. The flocks of birds do not acknowledge my fledglings, who must pick at the ground. My bird does not acknowledge its marsh. It flies away.”

From “She of the Ruined City” (Cohen 1:268): “The merchant has been cut off. The entire country is in confusion. The merchant has been cut off from the city. The entire land is in confusion...That city which is being neglected by its lord has Enlil turned into a haunted place. The (professional) mourner weeps there. The sayer of laments laments there.”

Other Akkadian poetry more closely resembles our Psalms. The “Hymn to the City of Arbela” (Livingstone, 20-2) faintly resembles Psalms 48 and 87 in their praise of Zion:

“Arbela, O Arbela, Heaven without equal, Arbela!
City of merry-making, Arbela, City of festivals, Arbela!...
Arbela is as lofty as heaven. Its foundations are as firm as the heavens...
Its likeness is like Babylon, it compares with Assur.
O lofty sanctuary, shrine of the fates, gate of heaven!...
Those who leave Arbela and those who who enter it are glad, they rejoice...”

“Assurbanipal’s Acrostic Hymn to Marduk and Zarpitanu” (Livingstone 6-10) brings to mind the many acrostic psalms in the Hebrew Bible, although here the first sign of each line, rather than following a cuneiform sign list, spells out the following message: “I am Assurbanipal, who has called out to you: give me life, Marduk, and I will praise you!”

“Assurbanipal’s Coronation Hymn” (Livingstone, 26-7) resembles Psalm 72 and the royal psalms:

May Šamaš, king of heaven and earth, elevate you to shepherdship over the four [region]s! (Compare Psalm 72: 8-11).
May Aššur, who ga[ve y]ou [the scepter], lengthen your days and years!... (Compare Psalm 72: 5, 15, 17).
May eloquence, understanding, truth and justice (me-ša-ru) be given him as a gift! (Compare Psalm 72:1-2, 4).
May [the people] of Assur buy 30 kors of grain for one shekel of silver!... (Compare Psalm 72: 3, 16).
Aššur is king – indeed Aššur is king! (Compare Psalm 93:1, 97:1, 99:1).
Assurbanipal is the [representative] of Aššur, the creation of his hands.
May the great gods make firm his reign, may they protect the life [of Assurba]nipal, king of Assyria! (Compare Psalm 72: 5, 15).
May they give him a straight scepter to extend the land and his peoples! May his reign be renewed, and may they consolidate his royal throne forever! … (Compare Psalm 72: 8-11).
Give our lord Assurbanipal long [days], copious years, strong [wea]pons, a long reign, y[ea]rs of abundance, a good name, [fame], happiness and joy, auspicious oracles, and leadership over (all other) kings!” (Compare Psalm 72: 5, 6, 17).

A broken tablet dubbed, “Your Slanderous Lips,” resembles David’s complaint against Doeg in Psalm 52 (Livingstone 121-2): “2 [...] one who plots[...] ... 4 You used to wander about [...] 5 The slander of your lips [...] 6 All the dark things that you did [...] R1 You pocketed a shekel, [...] your comrade 2 You used to sit opposite [...] 3 What did you achieve, (you) terrible, evil [...]?”
A better comparison to typical Hebrew psalm material can be found in prayers and hymns such as the Shamash Hymn and *Ludlul Bel Neqemi*, otherwise known as the “Prayer of the Righteous Sufferer.” An excerpt from the latter (Lambert 58-9):

**Tablet IV**

2 be-li u-ṣa-bit-an-ni My lord took hold of me  
3 be-li u-pat-tin-ani-ni My lord set me on my feet  
4 be-li u-bal-liṭ-an-ni My lord gave me life  
5 [ina ḫašṭi] e-kim-an-ni He rescued me [from the pit]  
6 [ina ka-ra-]šē id-kan-ni He summoned me [from dest]ruction

Note that, although the sentiments that are expressed resemble the kind found in the Psalms, there is no resemblance with regard to cognate vocabulary (with the lone exception of ḫašṭi, “pit,” for which the letters of Hebrew šaḥat may be transposed). I found similar results when comparing Akkadian poetry with Hebrew: even when the ideas expressed are virtually the same, Akkadian employs different vocabulary than the Hebrew psalms.

Another brief sound bite from the Šamaš Hymn (Lambert 126-7):

25 šu-ut na-piš-ti šak-na mitḥariš te-re-‘e Whatever has breath, you shepherd without exception  
26 at-ta-ma na-qid-si-na ša e-liš u ša-pliš You are their keeper in the upper and lower regions. (compare nōqēd, 2 Kings 3:4, Amos 1:1)

Another example from *The Context of Scripture* (Hallo and Younger I:486), entitled “A Sufferer’s Salvation” (Akkadian is from Nougayrol, *Ugaritica* 5 (1968): 267-8):

39 id-da-an-ni u u-ša-aq-qa-an-ni He threw me down, then lifted me high  
40 ul-tu pi-i mu-ti i-ki-ma-an-ni He snatched me from the jaws of death  
41 ul-tu er-ṣe-ti u-še-la-an-ni He raised me up from hell (lit. “the earth”)

Finally, from the Neo-Babylonian “Prayer of the Raising of the Hand to Ishtar” (Rogers 156-60):

43 a-mur-in-ni-ma belti-ia li-qi-e un-ni-ni-ia Look upon me, my Lady, and accept my supplication  
44 ki-niš nap-li-sinni-ma ši-mi-e tas-li-ti Pity me in truth, and hearken to my prayer.  
93 a-di ma-ti belti-ia zi-na-ti-ma suḥ-ḫu-ru pa-nu-ki How long, my Lady, will you be angry, and your face be turned away?  
94 a-di ma-ti belti-ia ra’-ba-ti-ma uz-uz-za-at How long, my Lady, will you be furious, and your liver be in anger?  
97 ik-du-ti-ia ki-ma qaq-qa-ru lu-kab-bi-is My oppressors, may I trample them like clay  
98 šab-su-ti-ia kun-ni-šim-ma šu-pal-si-ḫi ina šap-li-ia And they that are angry at me, subdue them, and crush them beneath my feet  
99 su-pu-u-a u su-lu-u-a lil-li-ku eli-ki Let my prayers and supplications come to you!

In these passages, we see some common Semitic terms: *pum* = mouth, *mutum* = death, *napištum* = breath, *ra’um* = to shepherd, Bel/Baal = lord, *amarum* = to look, *lequm* = accept (*laqaḥ*), *erṣetum* = earth, *panum* = face, *kabtum* = liver, *šemum* = to hear, *adi-mati* = how long?
On the other hand, we find none that is traceable to the Hebrew psalm language that is the focus of this study. Instead, Akkadian employs its own unique words at points where one might have expected words reminiscent of Hebrew, such as damqum for ḥēn (“favor”), takalum for baṭaḥ (“trust”), dannatum for mišgab (“fortified refuge”), puzrum for maḥseh, (“refuge”), and dalalum for hillēl (“praise”). Indeed, Tzevat describes how Old Babylonian poetry (1950-1550 BCE) has tended to preserve Old Akkadian (pre-1950 BCE) speech patterns when more contemporary options were available. Perhaps this is what Hebrew poetry has done as well, but most of the archaic language that Hebrew poetry has preserved has left little apparent trace elsewhere.

Tzevat (59) offers the following tentative conclusions at the end of his study:

The presence in the Bible of a particular devotional language which has perpetuated otherwise obliterated or rare forms of speech can be explained in two ways: (1) A genuine Israelite idiom might have been partly preserved in it, representing a stage of language history as old as, or older than, the oldest pieces of the Bible. (2) The language of the Biblical psalms is a continuation of the cultic language used at the Canaanite shrines at the time of the Israelite migration into Palestine…The two explanations are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they indicate roughly the same age as the time to which we can trace back the origin of psalm language, the time of immigration into Palestine of the Israelite tribes.

Given the characteristics of the language that is extant in Ugaritic poetry, option 1 above appears more likely than option 2. However, Albright (3) estimates that the number of words preserved in Ugaritic poetic texts is little more than half the volume of words employed in the Hebrew Psalter. In addition, Ugaritic texts are narrative poetry, whereas very few Hebrew psalms fit that classification. We can only wonder whether Ugaritic songs of praise or prayers for deliverance would employ the vocabulary that otherwise seems limited to the Hebrew psalms.

Conclusions

Some unscientific observations that may be made from the data as a whole. First, there does appear to be a repertoire of vocabulary that is characteristic of the Psalms. The words may be archaisms, but while some are traceable to Ugaritic or Akkadian, some seem to be unique Hebraisms (possibly from Hurrian, or simply Northwest Semitic roots that did not survive). The following words may be included in this pool: baṭaḥ, “to trust;” zanah, “to reject;” hesed, “steadfast love” (and hasid, “pious one”); hasah, “to take refuge;” ma‘on, “den;” mišgab, “high inaccessible place;” nipla‘, “to be wonderful;” haqšīb, “to give heed;” śīḥ, “to complain/mutter/meditate;” šabah, “to praise.”

Second, the books that seem to share this vocabulary most often with Psalms are Isaiah, Job, and Proverbs. However, this does not reveal much, since the dates of all three are in dispute. It is significant, however, that all three are poetic books and if one dates Isaiah to approximately 700 BCE, one can argue that the rest are all even earlier (with the exception of some of the Psalms).

Third, much of the language of the Psalms presents a profile of individual piety, one that fits with a character on the run in the wilderness, seeking refuge, praying for deliverance from

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3 Tzevat, Psalms, 58, citing W. Von Soden, Zeitschrift für Assyriologie 40, 1932, pp. 163-227; and 41, 1933, pp. 90-183, 236.
enemies, a predicament which one would not imagine to be typical of the average Iron Age Hebrew. (Nor does it appear to be typical of the average person who composed poetry in the ancient Near East).

Fourth, the patterns cited above do not fit with psalms such as 74 or 79, which describe the destruction of Jerusalem, nor with most of the last 30 psalms, where a pattern of seemingly late language presents itself. The conjunction ūše- is used a total of nineteen times in Psalm 122-46 and nowhere else in the Psalter. The use of salaq in Psalm 139:8, zan in Psalm 144:13 (a Persian loanword into Aramaic, also found in Daniel 3: 5, 7, 10, 15), kanas in Psalm 147:2 (occurs in post-exilic books, except for Psalm 33:7 and Isaiah 28:20), and the use of pašah with the accusative in Psalm 144:7, 10, 11 (according to HALOT) also contribute to the appearance of lateness in this section.

Fifth, not all of the remaining psalms fit all of the above traits, either. The psalms that best fit these patterns, not surprisingly, tend to be psalms that contain David’s name on the superscription. All that can be said is that a large number of psalms have both a consistent vocabulary pool and individual piety that fits with David’s reported experience. The presence of these combined traits may indicate nothing more than the preferences of those who collected these compositions for the Psalter.

Sixth, the Hebrew Psalms stand in contrast to virtually all other Near Eastern poetry. There are no Hebrew psalms that worship nature or monarchs. There is no true plurality of deities. One hunts in vain to find hymns of any kind in the extant Ugaritic literature, while the narrative poetry characteristic of Ugaritic is almost as hard to find in the Hebrew Psalms. Even Near Eastern laments do not resemble the “blues songs” in the Psalter, but are more like the hopeless/helpless poetry in the Hebrew Bible book of Lamentations. And while numerous Akkadian compositions do resemble the hymns and personal prayers of the Hebrew Psalms, the vocabulary they use shows almost no cognate connections to the vocabulary of the Hebrew Psalms. Indeed, both Hebrew and Akkadian hymns and personal prayers seem to use archaic language, some of which has ceased to be used by the time these songs were composed. In many ways, the language of the Psalms is sui generis, in a class by itself.

Works Cited


Singing Culturally Relevant Theology in Tanzania

Stephanie Biggs

Ethnodoxology and Christian Theology

Music, defined by some as patterns of “humanly organized sound” (Blacking 32), does not exist in a vacuum. Individuals and groups who exist in relationship with each other as well as the community that immediately surrounds them and the communities that surround those communities, organize and pattern sound to suit their environment. This activity speaks to the inherent anthropological aspects of making, absorbing, and participating in the social phenomenon called music. Understanding this social phenomenon in its infinite variety, contexts, and applications—in addition to how all these aspects influence and are influenced by each other—keeps ethnomusicologists fascinated and engaged in work that takes them near and far.

Ethnomusicologists study music with some connection to religious belief and practice. Religious belief and/or activity is a significant social phenomenon, influencing and being influenced by culture and every kind of social structure. Furthermore, creative activity often exquisitely expresses religious belief. For these reasons alone, many ethnomusicologists at least acknowledge, or at most conduct full length studies on, the interplay among religious belief, practice, and music. Christian belief and practice and ethnomusicology meet in the developing, interdisciplinary field of ethnodoxology. Ethnodoxology appropriates methods and practices from ethnomusicology to facilitate deeply authentic expressions of creative worship among communities of Christians. Where ethnomusicology predominately seeks to understand and record socio-musical phenomenon, ethnodoxology intentionally labors to facilitate a better understanding of the God of the Bible as well as authentic-to-the-community-of-believers creative expression. This distinction is key in understanding how ethnodoxology and Christian theology can reinforce each other. By choosing to see music through the lens of culture, ethnodoxologists are able to facilitate Biblically faithful, culturally honest, and creative worship. Christian theology both informs, and is informed by, this process. With all this in mind, a look at the socio-cultural context of Tanzanian Christians can inform an understanding of the songs they sing and the theology contained therein.

The Tanzanian Context

The nature of culture and its definition(s) have been discussed at length in both scholarly and popular literature. Most pertinent to this paper is research about culture types and their influence on Christian belief and practice. A number of books have been published in recent years on this subject (examples include Georges 2014 and Mischke 2015). Jayson Georges, in

1 Some examples include the work of Gregory Barz, Imani Sanga, and even Kedmon Mapana.
cooperation with others, has developed the HonorShame Network, including a website listing resources and information for this growing field. According to Georges, all cultures are orientated towards one of three dynamics; guilt-innocence, shame-honor, or fear-power. The guilt and innocence dynamic emphasizes the individual and laws are kept or transgressed. The shame and honor dynamic values collective identity and community expectations. Finally, the fear and power dynamic is animistic, where spirits are appeased or aggravated (Culture's Color, God's Light 1).

All of these dynamics are present in the Bible and in Jesus' explanations of His purpose and work, and should therefore shape how the gospel is presented in any given place and any given people (Georges 2014). “The Culture Test,” a five-minute online assessment of any group's primary culture type, was developed alongside these materials. Although with clear shortcomings, this short survey both helps people understand cultures as well as collects data about the world's cultures. Results from this research show that cultures in Tanzania are predominately shame-honor oriented (Culture's Color, God's Light 2) with the fear-power orientation ranking stronger than the guilt-innocence orientation. The following aspects of Georges' description of shame-honor cultures are accurate for much of Tanzanian society:

Honor is a person’s social worth, one’s value in the eyes of the community. ... Shame, on the other hand, is a negative public rating: the community thinks lowly of you. ... Because honor and shame are inherently relational, such cultures are collectivistic. Members of shame-honor cultures are expected to maintain the social status of the group, often at the expense of personal desires. ... Connections are vital in every aspect of life. ... People strive to maintain interpersonal bonds and avoid offending others. ... In a shame-honor culture, every person has a proper role, which is often based on age, gender, and position. People maintain honor by behaving according to that role. ... The group enforces morality externally. ... Status in collectivistic societies is primarily inherited from the group. Who you are, either honorable or shameful, is ascribed based on your group’s ethnicity, prominence, origin, and lineage. Identity is based more upon who you are, than what you do. (Georges 20-23)

The values represented in each cultural orientation are reflected in the creative output of any given people group because music and the arts are an invaluable part of culture. In Tanzania's case, many of the songs people sing in church reflect an emphasis on community, part of the shame-honor dynamic, as well as on the supremacy of God, part of the fear-power dynamic. As shown below, a number of African scholars have explained both the “African” spiritual worldview, applicable also in Tanzania, as well as its connections to Pentecostal Christianity.

**African Spirituality**

Religion is an important part of culture, both forming and formed by worldview. Both Christianity and Islam have a strong presence in Africa, including Tanzania, but various manifestations of African Traditional Religions are also important. Aspects of these religions inform the worldview of many Africans regardless of religious affiliation. A Pew Research Center study on religion and public life in several African countries showed that 62% of Tanzanians

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2 The term, “Africans,” is somewhat problematic because of tendencies to generalize inappropriately the continent.
exhibit high levels of belief and practice in African Traditional Religions (Yoo 34). Nigerian scholars Ekeke and Ekeopara have also outlined several aspects of these belief systems, consolidated primarily from traditional religions among peoples in West Africa. Their conclusions also have some relevance in East Africa. They argue that Africans (they use the term broadly) believe in a “Supreme Being” who is real, not abstract, unique with no equal, simultaneously transcendent and immanent in human experience and the natural world, while being both eternal and immortal (Ekeke and Ekeopara 210-212).

Adherents to these religions think of divinities in various ways, but all divinities are under the authority of the Supreme Being. Spirits are classed somewhere between humans and this Supreme Being and are sometimes addressed “...anthropomorphically by attributing human characteristics [to the spirit] such as thinking, speaking, intelligence and the possession of power” (Ekeke and Ekeopara 216). Spirits live in the same environment with humans and so humans must “...try in one way or the other to protect [themselves] from the activities of the spirits, knowing that the spirits are stronger,” using any available means, including “...magical powers, sacrifices, and offerings to appease, control and change the course of [a spirit's] action” (Ekeke and Ekeopara 217). In Tanzania, this anthropomorphization of spirits and the human responses to their activities appear when a spirit is referenced in conversations about a particular sort of behavior or way of thinking, such as the “spirit of disobedience,” or when employing the services of a witchdoctor or traditional healer, to cite two of many examples. Christianity has a long history in Tanzania, and traditional religious belief and practice is sometimes blended with Christian belief and practice. Understanding the aforementioned religious worldview, as well as the history of Christian activity in Tanzania outlined below, offers valuable insights and context for the songs analyzed for this paper.

Christianity was established in East Africa in the mid 1800s by three German Lutherans: Krapf, Rebmann, and Erhardt. All three were sent out through the Church Missionary Society under the Anglican church in Britain (Omulokoli 29). Both the Lutheran and the Anglican churches were and have remained strong and influential in Tanzania. Just a few years later in the century, Krapf, Rebmann, and Erhardt were joined by two Catholic missionary orders, The Holy Ghost Fathers and The White Fathers (Sahlberg 48). These two were followed by a number of other orders who, over many years, established the strong presence that Catholics continue to have in many parts of the country. The twentieth century saw an influx of a number of smaller and independent Christian missionary efforts, many of which were not associated with these mainline churches. Much of the activity in East Africa was from Pentecostal missions such as Assemblies of God, Swedish Free Mission, Pentecostal Assemblies of God, Elim Pentecostal Church, the New Testament Church, and the Pentecostal Holiness Church (Sahlberg 175; Onyinah 307).

Since their entrance in the mid-twentieth century, Pentecostal denominations have continued to grow and multiply. This kind of Christianity emphasizes practical aspects of the faith. Theological education is often not highly valued, although most pastors receive some official training from a Bible college associated with their denomination (Salhberg 177). Short, one to five day seminars for pastors and church leaders in these denominations are both regular and common in many places in the country. According to Onyinah, Pentecostal theology and practice is meeting

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3 Respondents in this study who reported belief or participation in 6-11 of the following attributes were classified with high levels: belief in reincarnation, witchcraft, evil spirits, the protective power of sacrifices to spirits or ancestors, juju or shrines, “evil eye” or curses, and the protective power of spiritual people as well as possession of traditional African sacred objects, participation in traditional ceremonies to honor ancestors, participation in traditional puberty rituals and use of religious healers (34).
cultural needs felt by most Africans where the Bible both affirms some portions and denounces other portions of the African spiritual worldview as introduced above while providing Biblical solutions to their problems in life. In his article on the subject, he explains that the Christian God's uniqueness and supreme power over the spiritual realm, as well as access to this power through belief in Jesus, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (predominantly proven by speaking in tongues) as evidence of receiving this power, speaks strongly to the African spiritual worldview. Pentecostal expressions of faith are distinctly different from those of mainline churches in many ways. The experiential is emphasized, along with the relational and the emotional. Narrative texts are preferred, and sermons are structured to receive a response. Corporate worship gatherings are more informal and spontaneous, especially with singing, drumming, clapping, and dancing. After participating in these churches for some time, believers speak and act differently and share their experiences with others (Onyinah 308-312).

As illustrated by the African adaptations of Pentecostal Christianity shown above, Christian belief and practice can fuse with local cultures to create expressions of faith unique to a particular worshipping community in a particular place. Aspects of a national Tanzanian Christian culture are shared with Christians in other African locations, while definite variations exist within Tanzania according to denomination, kabila (tribe or ethnic group), or even geographical location. Much of this culture is infused with and characterized by Pentecostal expressions of Christian belief and practice such as those mentioned above. At the national level in Tanzania, a uniquely Christian culture is indicated by the presence of culture specific language, clothes, holidays, regular meetings, and arts. Specific Swahili words and phrases have meanings particular to Christians, and Christian greetings are heard regularly among churchgoers. Christian women are often required to wear clothing that covers most, if not all, of the body to the knees or ankles (skirts and dresses only), as well as elbows and/or wrists. Both Easter and Christmas are national holidays, but are known to be Christian, just as Ramadan and Eid el Fitir are national as well as Muslim holidays. Corporate worship gatherings are held throughout the week, with Sunday services being the most important. Tanzanian Christians share with other Christians the unique worldview concerning Jesus and his work on the cross, which in turn, for those with genuine faith, changes behavior and way of life, even within local and national cultural norms. This worldview and accompanying lifestyle adjustments distinguish Tanzanian Christians from other parts of Tanzanian society, giving them a unique culture. Creative expression is naturally included in this uniquely Tanzanian manifestation of Christian belief and practice. Music, dance, and drama seem to be the most meaningful to Tanzanian Christians, with specific kinds of music designated as Christian, even nationally.

Music in Tanzania

Tanzania is rich in musical diversity from one end of the country to the other. Each of its more than 100 makabila (tribes or ethnic groups, plural) has a unique way of singing and dancing, often complemented by various instruments including drums of varying sizes, plucked idiophones, zithers, bells, and/or shakers, for example. Ethnomusicologists broadly give this sort of creative activity the Swahili term ngoma (literally translated, “drum”) although it is sometimes simply called utamaduni (culture) by ordinary Tanzanians. In practical application, these systems of creative expression form part of a person's identity, linking them to their people group's collective identity. Some ngoma in Tanzania is closely tied to traditional religious practices, while aspects of
others have been appropriated and “redeemed” by the Christian church (Cf. Mapana 2007). Unlike some other parts of Africa, this kind of traditional music is regarded as entertainment when performed outside of ritual contexts, meaning that the rhythms, melodies, body movements, lyrics, and so on of *ngoma* may have ritual/religious/spiritual intentions and implications, or they may not, depending on the performance context (Jansen 21).

Many ethnomusicologists recognize several additional genres of music both foreign and native to Tanzania including, but not limited to, *mziki wa dansi* (dance music), bongo flava, reggae, zouk, and taarab. A handful of scholars have spent much of their life's work researching and understanding musical phenomenon in Tanzania and have produced a prolific number of books and articles as a result. Among these, scholars such as Barz and Sanga have focused specifically on Christian church music in Tanzania.

Christian music in Tanzania has changed along with other kinds of music in the country. Christian hymns and the western musical system were introduced by missionaries in the 1800s. In some cases, hymns and choral singing were enforced by various Christian missions both in their church services as well as in the education system they developed. However, as the church has gained autonomy, some effort has been made to “Africanize” Christian music in this country (Sahlberg 153). This three- to four-part choral tradition remains strong today in the form of Tanzanian *kwaya* (choir) music, albeit somewhat transformed. Other kinds of music such as reggae, *mziki wa dansi* (dance music), zouk, and taarab (Sanga 2007) have also influenced what is sung and performed in Christian gatherings (Perullo 2011). Currently, however, Christian music seems to fall loosely into three categories; *kwaya* (choir), *mziki wa injili* (gospel music), and *mapambio* also known as *kusifa na kuabudu* (praise and worship). Because of their Christian messages, songs in all these categories fall within the idea of *mziki wa injili* (gospel music). This term seems to also include individual artists however, which does not fit comfortably in either of the other two categories. Both Barz and Sanga have published extensively about *kwaya* through an ethnomusicological framework, and Sanga has also explored aspects of *mziki wa injili* (gospel music) (See Barz 2003 and Sanga 2006). Although all of this scholarship is helpful for understanding music in Tanzanian churches from musical and anthropological perspectives, none of it approaches this music from a Christian theological perspective or gives much attention to *kusifa na kuabudu* (praise and worship) songs.

While present at Christian gatherings of all sorts, *kusifa na kuabudu* (praise and worship) has a growing presence in Pentecostal churches and is uniquely characterized by its participatory nature. Congregation members interact with *kwaya* (choir) or individual artist performances in a multitude of ways including singing, clapping, feet stamping, ululation, and tipping (Mkallyah 2016). Congregants also commonly join to participate with those on stage. A separation still exists between the performers and the audience, however, that is not present in *kusifa na kuabudu* (praise and worship). In corporate worship services, *kusifa na kuabudu* (praise and worship) songs are sung by those on stage together with the congregation, making these songs congregational by definition. The congregational nature of these songs is the primary reason this genre was chosen for analysis. How these songs were collected and analyzed is further explained below.

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5 The latter term was chosen for this inquiry because it is what respondents from all locations used to describe the short call and response, congregational songs that are the focus of this study.
Methodology

Songs were collected and chosen for analysis with familiar Ethnomusicological research methodology. This includes decisions about how to limit this study and structure the song collection and analysis process. An effort was made to draw empirically from a diverse sampling and counteract potential imbalances in the data. The following discussion about the limitations of this study, as well as the collection process, how songs were chosen for analysis, and the attempt to obtain complete lyrics, testify to the nature of the data collected, which demonstrates how this kind of methodology is informative to theological inquiry.

This study of Tanzanian congregational song is limited to the short call and response songs sung by all worshippers at corporate worship gatherings, often called *kusifa na kuabudu* (praise and worship). *Kwaya* (choir) and individual artist performances may inform and reinforce theological concepts in significant ways; however, the focus of this study is the *kusifa na kuabudu* (praise and worship) genre for two reasons. First, performance of these songs in corporate worship gatherings intentionally requires participation from the congregation. Second, they are short and highly repetitive, with simple musical elements, and thus quickly learned, remembered, and internalized. Some additional general characteristics of this kind of music are given further below, just before the songs chosen are analyzed.

Ethnomusicologists often examine both the words and the musical elements of a song (its melody, rhythm, instrumentation, vocalization, etc). Many ethnomusicologists also include performance context analysis in order to understand better a song's anthropological impact. Although these musical and performance elements reveal many valuable levels of meaning, because the words of a song hold the most immediate and consistent theological force, they are the focus of this study's analysis.

To collect songs for analysis, individuals in various parts of Tanzania were asked what short songs are often sung by the congregation in their churches or at other fellowship gatherings. Out of the eight individuals I contacted, three responded; one in Dodoma, another on Kilimanjaro, and the third in Tabora. In addition to the data provided by these individuals in various places in Tanzania, audio recordings of *kusifa na kuabudu* (praise and worship) songs were taken over a five week period at corporate worship events at three different churches in Bunda, Tanzania. These corporate worship events included mid-week prayer services and music team rehearsals, as well as Sunday services and a few typical although not regularly scheduled events which included times of corporate singing. All data from these three churches were consolidated and considered as one location when choosing a song sampling for this study. Finally, observations gleaned from three years of informal participant observation in corporate worship gatherings in Tanzania also informed this study.

Although the formal data collection period for this study was short (five weeks), the song choices are considered representative enough for this present preliminary study because of the

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6 All respondents were given three choices for song collection. One option was to record with a mobile smartphone the *kusifa na kuabudu* (praise and worship) times in corporate worship gatherings for four weeks and submit the recordings by Whatsapp or email. Another option was to write the names or titles of *kusifa na kuabudu* (praise and worship) style songs sung corporately at church for four weeks and submit them by Whatsapp or email. The third option was to ask the regular song leaders for these corporate worship gatherings for titles of *kusifa na kuabudu* (praise and worship) songs they sing often or songs they prefer to lead during these times.
diversity of sources. No single song was present at all locations, so songs present at three of the four locations were noted; the contact at the fourth location then asked if those songs from the other three locations are also sung in their location. All respondents indicated those songs are also regularly sung at their church or fellowship. In this way, out of the 133 unique songs collected, four songs were chosen for lyric and theological analysis because they are sung at all four locations.

Given the significant place words have in conveying messages in songs, an effort was made to determine and collect accurate lyrics for each of the songs chosen for analysis. Obtaining “complete” and “accurate” lyrics for this study highlights some of the challenges presented to this kind of work in East Africa. Many of these challenges are related to seeking the history and origin of these kinds of songs sung in Tanzanian churches. The word complete implies that the set of lyrics are accurate according to the original release of a song, perhaps accounting for variations and compilations adopted over time. In the Tanzanian context, however, the terms complete, original, and accurate are more subjective. Furthermore, deciding which is more relevant—the first edition from the composer or composing group, or what is popularly sung—is often a matter of opinion. These related issues are outside the scope of this paper's study, but are worthy avenues of future research and may speak to how musical expression, particularly in Christian churches, changes over time.

Through limiting these challenges, an attempt was made to obtain and consolidate lyrics for each of the songs that are accurate to the worshipping communities who sing them. Where respondents submitted audio recordings, or audio recordings were taken at corporate worship events, lyrics and song forms were transcribed with particular attention given to lyrics sung by the congregation, as they seem to be most consistent from performance to performance and community to community, with cursory attention given to the additions and alterations of the lead singer(s).

Where respondents gave song titles, these titles were searched on YouTube, and a comparison made between the top one to three most possible matches. Word matches, basic musical components, and sing-ability by music non-experts (whether the song seemed to be unique to a particular artist or performing group or something more likely to be sung by a crowd) were considered in determining the most likely matches. Visual elements such as production quality and content were also considered after lyric and musical elements.

Considering the above, where the lyrics, essential melody, and rhythm corresponded with songs collected by other means, the lyrics for the YouTube videos were transcribed in their entirety. Variations in lyrics and arrangements were observed between communities. In other words, no one performed exactly the same arrangement of words, melodies, rhythms, vocals and instruments as another location. Hakuna Mungu Kama Wewe and Mwamba Mwamba are excellent examples. In the case of the former, five songs were collected, distinct in lyrics and basic musical qualities. None of these five are exclusive to any one community, and in fact may all be sung by all of them. Because the core lyric content is very nearly the same in each song (see below), a decision was made to consider their theological impact together. Regarding Mwamba Mwamba, musical content was the determining factor in that no other song with the same basic melody and rhythm and significantly different content was observed. The other two songs, Kwa Viwango Vingine and Wastahili Sifa za Moyo Wangu, were fairly uniform across all sources in both lyric and musical content.
General Characteristics

Some general characteristics of *kusifa na kuabudu* (praise and worship) songs form a helpful foundation for analyzing the songs in this study. *Kusifa na kuabudu* (praise and worship) songs are short and repetitive and divided into two categories, *kusifa* (praise) and *kuabudu* (worship). *Kusifa* (praise) songs are characterized by fast tempos and danceable rhythms and congregants regularly gather at the front of a church to dance enthusiastically while singing them. *Kuabudu* (worship) songs have slow tempos and are nearly always accompanied or immediately followed by corporate-individual prayer, where congregants engage in individual, audible conversations with God.

For the purposes of this paper, the essential elements, or core, of a song is defined as the opening line sung by the lead vocalist and the corresponding response from the congregation and other vocalists. The precise instrumental accompaniment for this core may change from performance to performance, but the essential lyric, melodic, rhythmic, and sometimes harmonic elements, remain the same. This core can range in length from about ten seconds to ninety seconds and then is repeated as often as desired. The number of repetitions is sometimes prescribed, sometimes improvised. Nearly all of these songs are antiphonal, or call and response, between an individual vocal leader and everyone else who is singing. A group of singers typically leads these corporate singing sessions accompanied at the very least by an electric keyboard and may include some combination of electric keyboard, electric guitar, electric bass, drum kit and/or acoustic drums of varying sizes. At smaller gatherings, songs may be unaccompanied.

One vocalist may lead every song in a given session or vocalists may take turns leading songs. When not leading, vocalists sing with the congregation. The lead vocalist introduces the song by singing the first phrase. The other lead vocalists and the congregation then join with the response, which for some songs is completely different from the first line and in others an exact repetition. Once the song is established through a number of repetitions of this core, the lead vocalist usually begins to improvise by changing the lyrics, or singing one to two words with a different rhythm and/or melody in the same amount of musical space. Sometimes the response from the congregation changes according to these alterations—but often it does not—and the congregation continues to repeat the same line.

Subtle, but clear, differences in song form are readily observable. Some songs clearly have a repeating AB format, while others are more sequential (See Hawn 2003). Sometime after the A section is established, the lead chooses to introduce the B section, which is defined by its own core. This B part may take material from the A part and repeat it in a shortened form, but this is by no means true for all songs of this type. In the case of the latter, where songs are more sequential, the congregation's response is typically identical to the lead's call, and may have one to three verses. The core lyrics for the four songs chosen for this study are below, first in Swahili then in English, each followed by an analysis of their lyric content. Note that some songs include vocables, or syllables of sound without exact meaning. Commas indicate semi-cadences and a number followed by an “x” indicates the number of repetitions for that specific line in parentheses, corresponding to the musical content.
Hakuna Mungu Kama Wewe: 5 songs

Song One
A
Kiongozi: Hakuna Mungu kama wewe Bwana ah, aha
Washiriki: Hakuna Mungu kama wewe Bwana ah, aha
B
Kiongozi: Anaweza
Washiriki: Anaweza eh eh eh, hakuna Mungu kama wewe Bwana ah, aha
A
Leader: There is no God like you Lord ah, aha
Congregants: There is no God like you Lord ah, aha
B
Leader: He is able
Congregants: He is able eh eh eh, there is no God like you Lord ah, aha

Song Two
A
Kiongozi: (Hakuna Mungu kama wewe)3x hakuna na hata kuwepo
Washiriki: (Hakuna Mungu kama wewe)3x hakuna na hata kuwepo
B
Kiongozi: Nimetembea kote kote, nimetafuta kote kote, nimezunguka kote kote, hakuna na hata kuwepo
Washiriki: Nimetembea kote kote, nimetafuta kote kote, nimezunguka kote kote, hakuna na hata kuwepo
A
Leader: (There is no God like you)3x, there is no one, not anywhere
Congregants: (There is no God like you)3x, there is no one, not anywhere
B
Leader: I've walked everywhere, I've searched everywhere, I've circled around everywhere, there is no one, anywhere
Congregants: I've walked everywhere, I've searched everywhere, I've circled around everywhere, there is no one, anywhere

Song Three
Kiongozi: Hakuna Mungu kama wewe, hakuna kama wewe, hakuna
Washiriki: Hakuna Mungu kama wewe, hakuna kama wewe, hakuna
Leader: There is no God like you, there is none like you, there is none
Congregants: There is no God like you, there is none like you, there is none

Song Four
Kiongozi: Hakuna Mungu kama wewe, hakuna, popote, hakuna mwenye ishara kubwa kama wewe Mungu
Washiriki: Hakuna Mungu kama wewe, hakuna, popote, hakuna mwenye ishara kubwa kama wewe Mungu
Leader: There is no God like you, there is none, anywhere, there is none who has a great
sign like you God
Congregants: There is no God like you, there is none, anywhere, there is none who has a
great sign like you God

Song Five
Shairi ya 1: Hakuna Mungu kama wewe, hakuna kama wewe, hakuna Mungu kama
wewe, hakuna Mungu kama wewe
Shairi ya 2: Weve tu niwe utoshae, weve tu utoshae, weve tu niwe utoshae, weve tu
niwe utoshae
Shairi ya 3: Weve tu niwe kimbilio, weve tu kimbilio, weve tu niwe kimbilio, weve tu
niwe kimbilio
Verse 1: There is no God like you, there is none like you, there is no God like you, there
is none like you
Verse 2: Only you are sufficient, you only sufficient, only you are sufficient, only you are
sufficient
Verse 3: Only you are my refuge, you alone refuge, only you are my refuge, only you are
my refuge

The principal message of these songs is clear: there is no God like our God. In every
instance above, the song is directed to God himself, at least initially. While implying the existence
of other gods, these songs are both an affirmation and acknowledgement of God's uniqueness. This
unique supremacy of God, even over other gods, is a strong and persistent theme in the Bible. God
constantly shows his sovereignty to Israel throughout the Old Testament in word and action (for
example, Deuteronomy 4:32-39, I and II Kings, I and II Chronicles). Jesus affirmed this by his
birth, life, death and resurrection (John 1). The Apostles continue this theme in their preaching and
teaching (for example, Acts 4:12). Finally, the Revelation shown to John the Apostle about future
events is an unquestionable testament to the singular place God holds everywhere and at all times
(Revelation 22): an affirmation absolutely central to the Christian faith.

Each one of the five songs transcribed above further elaborates on God's supremacy in its
own way. Song One switches from singing towards God to singing towards other people to affirm
the superiority of God through particular attributes. The singers then turn to themselves and sing
about God's character, simultaneously reminding themselves and telling others of these truths.
“Anaweza” (S/He is able) is a declaration that God has the ability to do what needs to be done, to
fulfill His promises, to be who He says He is, and more. The term anaweza (s/he is able) is often
said among Tanzanian Christians to encourage those who are experiencing hardships and
challenges of varying sorts. In its essence, this term implies victory on God's part, and faith on the
Christian's part. This is fitting for a song on the kusifa (praise) side of kusifa na kuabudu (praise
and worship), and is found in the lives and writings of Biblical figures such as Abraham, David,
and Paul, to name only a few. In performance, “anaweza” (s/he is able) may be replaced by any
of God's other attributes. Song Two is similar to Song One in its A section declaration to God
himself about his incomparability. It differs from Song One in that the singer(s) affirm God's
uniqueness through testifying to the listener that a thorough search shows nothing comparable to
God. The word kote (everywhere) implies geographical places, everywhere, worldwide. Song
Three is another firm and direct statement of the same kind as the A sections in Songs One and
Two.

Songs One, Two, and Three are praise songs, while Songs Four and Five are worship songs.
They begin with the same clear statement of God's uniqueness among other gods heard in Songs One, Two, and Three. Song Four further elaborates with a statement about place in the word *popote* (anywhere), and another about how God's signs and wonders are like no other's. This references the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus and/or the many signs and wonders He did during His ministry or even in the book of Revelation. The fifth song elaborates further about who/what God alone is to the singer, keeping this first person dialogue through the whole song. *Utoshae* (sufficient) and *kimbilio* (refuge) are slightly different from *anaweza* (s/he is able), and imply satisfaction and safety, two characteristics of God also found in the next song, *Kwa Viwango Vingine*.

**Kwa Viwango Vingine**

*Chorus:* *Kwa viwango vingine, nataka kuwabudu, chini ya mbawa zako, nilaze kichwa changu 2x*

*Shairi 1:* *Nimechoka kuwabudu, kama mataifa waabuduvyo, maana wengi hufanya hivyo ili kusudi waonekane. Lakini mimi minatumaini, nikupe sifa za moyo wangu, kwa sababu ninahakika, ya kwamba wewe wastahili*

*Shairi 2:* *Kama maserafi na makerubi wakisemanza matakifia, moto unapita mbele yao, kama mawimbi ya maji mengi, nami haja yangu leo tena, ninapokuabudu wewe Bwana, niuone utukufu wako, ukidhihirika kwa mataifa, nami haja yangu leo tena, ninapokuabudu wewe Bwana, niuone utukufu wako, ukidhihirika kwa mataifa.*

*Chorus:* *At other levels, I want to worship you, under your wing, I should rest my head 2x*

*Verse 1:* *I am tired of worshipping you like the nations worship you, meaning that many do so with the intent to be seen, but me, I have hope, I should give you the praises of my heart because I am sure that you are worthy.*

*Verse 2:* *Like Seraphs and Cherubs when they say holy, fire passes in front of them, like the waves of lots of water, and me my need/urge again today, when I worship you Lord, I should see your holiness, when you manifest yourself for the nations, and me my need/urge again today, when I worship you Lord, I should see your holiness, when you manifest yourself for the nations.*

*Kwa Viwango Vingine* is sometimes sung in tandem with another song, *Jehova,* which consists of that word alone. The two YouTube videos referenced for lyrics (*Kwa Viwango* and *Mzumbe*) put these two songs together, and this, together with the my own experience, makes this pairing seem like a common, although not required, variant. Many performances from other sources sing them separately, or one without the other. Some sing only the chorus of *Kwa Viwango Vingine,* leaving out the verses. The occasional presence of these verses, which are not repeated in a response from a congregation, in addition to the fact that the response portion imitates the lead, *Kwa Viwango Vingine* may be considered a more sequential song.

Similar to *Hakuna Mungu Kama Wewe,* *Kwa Viwango Vingine* is sung to God both in its verses and in its chorus. The first verse relates to the first two phrases of the chorus in that the singer wants to be more genuine and to heighten the quality, or *viwango* (“levels”), of their worship of God. This verse in particular seems to imply a desire for transparency in worship, implied by wanting to worship not just to be seen; and confidence of God's worthiness causes the singer to
give God heartfelt praise. The second verse borrows imagery from heaven in Isaiah 6:2 and 6, and Revelation 4:7-8, as well as several Psalms including 93, 78, and 29, while asking God to respond to the singer's worship with a manifestation of His holy presence.

The verbal imagery of the chorus is similar to that of a number of Psalms, including 17, 55, 61, and particularly 91, where resting under wings, or protection, imples safety and shelter. The first half of the chorus, translated, “I want to worship you at other levels,” implies the growth that happens in the Christian life as mentioned by both Paul (I Corinthians 3:1-2) and Peter (I Peter 2:2). Furthermore, the desire to worship God is a persistent Biblical theme in words as well as actions and expresses God's will (John 4:21-24). The last two phrases of the chorus further the message of safety, security, even rescue and healing under God's protection. These are common themes in the Bible. David's life, as well as numerous instances in both the major and minor prophets where God promises the restoration of a remnant (ex. Isaiah 45 and Amos 9:11-15) are examples. Rescue and protection are also promised to Paul in Acts 26:17 and characterize the new heaven and the new earth (Revelation 21:4).

Mwamba Mwamba

A
Kiongozi: Mwamba mwamba, mwamba mwamba, mwamba wamba, Yesu ndiye (nie) mwamba
Washiriki: Mwamba mwamba, mwamba mwamba, mwamba mwamba, Yesu ndiye (nie) mwamba
B1
Kiongozi: Sisi sote (kweli) tusimama msingi wetu ukiwa kwenye mwamba (mwamba)
Washiriki: Sisi sote (kweli) tusimama msingi wetu ukiwa kwenye mwamba (mwamba)
Kiongozi: Mwamaba aokoa, mwamba afariji, mwamba mwamba yesu ndiye mwamba (mwamba)
Washiriki: Mwamaba aokoa, mwamba afariji, mwamba mwamba yesu ndiye mwamba (mwamba)
B2
Kiongozi: Wamama watasmusana msingi kwao tuko kwenye mwamba
Washiriki: Wamama watasmusana msingi kwao tuko kwenye mwamba
Shairi yanafuata yanaweka “wababa”, “vijana wetu,” “watoto wetu,” “watumi,” n.k. badala ya “Wamama” katika kila sehemu ya kiongozi pamoja na kila sehemu ya washiriki.
B3
(Kiongozi: yesu nie
Washiriki: mwamba)3x Yesu nie mwamba
C
Kiongozi: Akashinda vita
Washiriki: Mwamba
Kiongozi: Anastahili kupokea sifa
Washiriki: Mwamba
Kiongozi: Yesu simba wa Yudah
Washiriki: Mwamba
Intégrité: A Faith and Learning Journal

Kiongozi: Tumwimbe kumsifu
Washiriki: Mwamba
Kiongozi: Anashinidikana mauti
Washiriki: Mwamba
Kiongozi: Anastahili sifa
Washiriki: Mwamba  A

Lead: The rock the rock, the rock the rock, the rock the rock, Jesus is definitely the rock
Response: The rock the rock, the rock the rock, the rock the rock, Jesus is definitely the rock

B1
Lead: All of us we will stand when our foundation is on the rock
Response: All of us we will stand, when our foundation is on the rock
Lead: The rock saves, the rock comforts, the rock the rock, Jesus is definitely the rock
Response: The rock saves, the rock comforts, the rock the rock, Jesus is definitely the rock

B2
Lead: Mothers will stand, their foundation is on the rock
Response: Mothers will stand, their foundation is on the rock
Successive verses replace “mothers” with “fathers,” “our youth,” “our children,” “servants (of God),” in both the lead and the response.

B3
(Lead: Jesus is definitely
Response: the rock)3x Jesus is definitely the rock

C
Lead: He won the war
Response: the rock
Lead: He is worthy to receive praise
Response: the rock
Lead: Jesus Lion of Judah
Response: the rock
Lead: We sing to him to praise him
Response: the rock
Lead: He won over death
Response: the rock
Lead: He is worthy of praise
Response: the rock

The lyrics above represent an aggregation of three performances of this song: one recorded live in the data collection process and the other two on YouTube (Mahlangu and Mwamba). Particular elements are the same in all versions and have been combined. It is clear from lyric content as well as melodic and rhythmic elements these are different arrangements of the same song. All versions open with the A section, whereas in the B sections we see more variation, and the C section appeared in only one source. It should be noted that this transcription does not reflect the order in which these lyrics are sung in their respective arrangements. The singer(s) is(are) addressing themselves or others as opposed to singing towards God in all three performances.

This song, in all its arrangements, communicates that Jesus is a strong foundation, and people will stand when their foundation is built on Jesus. Section B2 makes this idea explicit by
identifying specific segments of the community that will stand when they are grounded in Jesus. Section B1 elaborates two qualities of Jesus: he saves and comforts. Ideas such as victory and endurance are implied in the verb *simama* (“stand”). This idea of victory is further emphasized in the lone section C by the phrases *akashinda vita* (s/he won the war), *Yesu Simba wa Yudah* (Jesus Lion of Judah), and *anashindikana mauti* (s/he won over death). These phrases reference Jesus' victory on the cross as well as his eschatological victory (Revelation 5:5) in the war against Satan and death. This section also indicates that Jesus is worthy to receive praise, including praise through song as our response to His victory, much like Exodus 15:21-24 and Judges 5. Furthermore, the two qualities mentioned in section B1—that Jesus saves and comforts—are particularly strong needs during times of conflict and when facing death.

This song finds its primary Biblical foundation in Matthew 7:24-27 at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. As in that parable, the analogy is spiritual. Jesus' physical death won a spiritual battle, and when we build a spiritual foundation on Jesus by hearing and doing his words, we will persevere through all kinds of hardships.

**Wastahili Sifa za Moyo Wangu**

*Kiongozi: Wastahili sifa za moyo wangu, nakwabudu, uliniumba nikwabudu, nakwabudu eh mungu wangu nakwabudu eh Yesu (Bwana)*

*Washiriki: Wastahili sifa za moyo wangu, nakwabudu, uliniumba nikwabudu, nakwabudu eh mungu wangu nakwabudu eh Bwana (Yesu)*

**Lead:** You(pl.) are worthy of the praises of my heart, I worship you, you created me that I should worship you, I worship you oh God, I worship you oh Jesus (Lord)

**Response:** You(pl.) are worthy of the praises of my heart, I worship you, you created me that I should worship you, I worship you oh God, I worship you oh Jesus (Lord)

Like *Hakuna Mungu Kama Wewe* and *Kwa Viwango Vingine*, *Wastahili Sifa za Moyo Wangu* is sung to God. It is somewhat more sequential, in that the congregation responds by directly imitating the lead. In performance, the core of this song is typically repeated many, many times while prayer is actively encouraged on the part of all participants. Its message is simple; God/Jesus is worthy of heartfelt praise, the singers (i.e. all humans) were made to worship God/Jesus, and they will worship God/Jesus. God's worthiness to receive praise is a persistent Biblical theme, nicely illustrated in Psalm 145. Verse three of this psalm clearly declares this fact, followed in the remaining verses by reasons God is worthy of praise. The third phrase of the song in question, “*uliniumba nikwabudu*” (you created me that I should worship you) is a clear statement of God/Jesus' creative nature, coupled with the idea that God created humans to worship Him. From the first chapter of Genesis through the last of Revelation we see that God is creative. Furthermore, if worshipping God reflects his glory, then everyone who belongs to God was made to worship Him (Isaiah 43:7 and 21). Finally, the use of plural verbs in this song addressing God/Jesus implies an understanding of trinitarian concepts as applied to the object of Christian worship.
Conclusions

Although short, these songs say something significant about what Tanzanian Christians believe about God, and how they should live in response to His presence in their lives. *Hakuna Mungu Kama Wewe* reflects God's supremacy over other gods and by extension other spirits. The fact that five unique songs with this primary message exist is very telling. A belief that other spirits exist is implied in these lyrics, an idea reflected in African traditional belief systems still present and active in Tanzania. This further reflects the assumption that a spirit world exists and influences the physical world. God's supremacy over both spiritual and physical realms is grounded in the Bible and is foundational to a Christian worldview.

God's supremacy is related to His protection from physical and spiritual harm. The necessity of protection from unknown or unexpected spiritual or physical harm caused by all kinds of enemies is part and parcel of an African and Tanzanian worldview. The chorus *Kwa Viwango Vingine* and the fifth *Hakuna Mungu Kama Wewe* send the message that safety, security, and refuge are found in only one God. In a worldview where physical and/or spiritual harm are regular potentialities, this brings reassurance and, when necessary, the strength to keep moving forward, particularly in the midst of adversity.

An idea related to both God's supremacy and His protection is victory. The concept of victory reinforces belief that God is both supreme and can protect those who are with Him. *Mwamba Mwamba* shows that the strength of a community is built on Jesus and His victory over death. This community will stand when they listen to and obey the words of Jesus (build their foundation on the rock). By using collective conjugations of verbs, along with singing specific sections by the community, each in turn, this song illustrates a collective identity, another significant Tanzanian cultural characteristic.

Sprinkled throughout all these songs, but emphasized in *Wastahili Sifa za Moyo Wangu*, is the idea that God is worthy of heartfelt praise. As mentioned above, the idea of worth that comes from the Bible, is related to value; and praise is related to honor. In subtle, but significant ways, this reflects the honor-shame cultural orientation of Tanzanian society.

Aspects of the lyrics for all these songs also reveal a specifically Pentecostal outlook in their emphasis on the experiential/testimonial (“anaweza” and “nimetafuta...” in *Hakuna Mungu Kama Wewe*), attention to the eschatological and heaven (section C in *Mwamba Mwamba* and the second verse in *Kwa Viwango Vingine*), and the emotional (“sifa za moyo wangu” in *Kwa Viwango Vingine* and *Wastahili Sifa za Moyo Wangu*). This illustrates the connections between the Tanzanian spiritual worldview and Pentecostal belief and practice.

The songs briefly analyzed here reflect what Tanzanians believe about the God they worship. He is seen as a powerful, victorious, uniquely supreme being, able to protect all His people and give them rest both individually and corporately. These characteristics assign God worth enough for deep, heartfelt honor or praise from His people. Culturally, these songs reveal an assumed presence of an active spiritual world, the importance of victory, protection, stability and assurance in life as well as the collectivistic honor-shame orientation of Tanzanian society.

So what would an ethnodoxologist do with this knowledge? Knowing worldview characteristics and cultural orientations, such as those indicated by the theology in these songs, can help ethnodoxologists encourage song composition with themes from the Bible that address these issues in locally meaningful song forms. New songs with these themes are more likely to be widely accepted by both Christian and non-Christian communities, because they connect with both the mind and the heart. As those new songs are distributed, God's solutions to these fundamental
concerns are also spread and people are more likely to believe in the God of the Bible and to be strengthened in their faith.

**Works Cited**


“Kwa Viwango Vingine Jehova” *YouTube,* Frank Msapa, no date, https://youtu.be/LC6ci5jQ_6w


Musical Choices in Early Baptist Missions among the Xerente

Elsen Portugal

Introduction

The indigenous people group of Brazil known as the Xerente (Sheh-ren´-teh) has been in contact with Western culture for about three centuries. The most recent census reports a population numbering around 3,500 distributed among sixty or more villages. Local oral history suggests that they originally inhabited areas close to the Atlantic Ocean, but have effectively lived in the northcentral state of Tocantins at least since the eighteenth century (Povos Indígenas do Brasil). Despite being faced with numerous conflicts over land and worldview during the previous centuries, the Xerente community has displayed a strong determination to maintain their culture, particularly their language.

Since before World War II, evangelical missionaries have had some level of contact with them. In the fifties, the New Tribes Mission sent Anna Muller as the first missionary who settled among the Xerente (Anais 1). In 1959, Missionary/Pastor Guenther Krieger, later accompanied by his wife, joined the work with the Xerente, sent by the Brazilian Baptist Convention. In 1960, Missionary/Pastor Rinaldo de Mattos joined them as a missionary with the New Tribes Mission. In the 1980s, after a period away from Tocantins, Mattos also became a missionary sponsored by the Baptist Convention.

Guenther Krieger and Rinaldo de Mattos have continued their work with the Xerente since those early days until the present. These pioneers, along with others who have assisted them since then, have used various approaches to bring the gospel to the Xerente population. They have sought to improve the precarious health conditions of the Xerente, to provide literacy and further their education, as well as to guide them into the knowledge of the Christian gospel. The missionaries testify that “since the beginning, [they] intended to be a support, an anchor for the Xerente in existential issues, and similarly be a support, and perhaps a bridge, for the accomplishings of their sociological aspirations” (Mattos “Entrevista” 8). This concern and approach to the local people is indeed confirmed by the missionaries’ high esteem within the Xerente community, the informal status as consultants they have attained even among secular institutions, and by the frequent reliance on their reports found on secular written and electronic materials concerning the Xerente (Povos Indígenas do Brasil).

As these early Baptist missionaries actively engaged with the people to live and preach the gospel, church meetings were presumably planned and contents for each considered. Among the various elements of a Christian church service, as understood in Western culture, music serves as a regular form of expression in almost every model of collective worship. Thus, Pastor Guenther and Pastor Rinaldo would have felt the need to teach songs to or about God to the Xerente people

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1 Reflecting common practice in Brazilian evangelical circles of calling every ordained minister a ‘pastor’ (Pr.) whether he functions as a local church pastor or not, followed by the first name, this article will often refer to Guenther Krieger and Rinaldo de Mattos as Pr. Guenther and Pr. Rinaldo.
right from the start of their meetings. At this point, choices would have been made as to what songs they would need, considering style, tempo, mood, textual content, and possibly other elements. Observing the outcomes over half a century later, the question of motivation and direction for these musical choices becomes relevant if one wishes to understand the present state of development in the musical practices of Xerente believers. Although one could presume that choices made by missionary leadership are always determined by ideological, philosophical, theological, or missiological guidelines, it is also possible that none of them were used as strategies for musical choices for the Xerente church in the early years of Baptist missionary activity among them. If such was the case, how should its present-day forms be understood?

Considering the developing character of anthropological knowledge throughout the last one hundred years, and the ongoing changes taking place in missiology at the same time, the testimony of the missionaries gives evidence that their choices were fluid and even circumstantial, rather than settled on unmoving norms from the aforementioned fields. Based on the public sources available about the Xerente culture, as well as the possible motivational factors one could deduce, the testimonies of these missionaries, personal and recent interaction with the missionaries and Xerente believers, and a reflection on the perception of the value of musical and artistic expression for Christian communication, a complex and challenging development emerges. This article will consider these factors, seeking to deepen the understanding of the Christian musical environment among the Xerente and to provide direction in the missional use of music and the arts in the twenty-first century.

Ideologies about People and Music

Since the early encounters between European explorers and aboriginal societies, the incoming culture entertained various ideologies about the “newly discovered” peoples. Guido Abbattista classifies the prevalent views into two main camps: one which regarded the autochthonous people as pre-fall, innocent communities, capable of receiving religious information, and receiving salvation; the other camp regarded the so-called “savages” as “semi-human beings,” which “had to be subjected to a superior political authority” (Abbatista 17). A wide range of opinions between these two extreme points would likely appear within Western society across the centuries. According to Abbattista, these two prominent ideologies continued to permeate the thoughts of Westerners well into the nineteenth century and their presence can be verified in the history of conquest in the South American continent. Considering the presence of such ideologies, some could allege that the missionaries among the Xerente also applied their cultural prejudice, based on faulty ideology, against the use of the Xerente community’s musical heritage for the propagation of the Christian faith among the Xerente. Even if well-intentioned, deeming their choices to be superior and more helpful to the people, such attitudes would have probably damaged the relationship between the messengers and the Xerente. However, this does not appear to have taken place between the Baptist missionaries and the community. Rather, the apparent result of these last fifty years of interaction is one of mutual respect and appreciation (Krieger).

As products of their own age, the missionaries did indeed have personal musical

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2 This article relies not only on published and unpublished documents, but also on personal conversations and interviews with the missionaries Guenther Krieger and Rinaldo de Mattos. References to such personal interviews will be cited simply with mention to their last names.
interpretive philosophies which they could have imposed onto the Xerente (Mattos). Music is commonly perceived as being able to transport the human mind to other places or to create and recreate emotions previously experienced, some of which may have even been superficially forgotten, and to guide the listener or music participant into deep roots in his or her consciousness. In view of this, ideas and philosophies (systems of “precepts and propositions”) (Kivy 12) about this phenomenon have arisen and been recorded since the ancient world. For example, “in the Republic, Plato outlines his view of the qualities of the modes (musical scales) of the time” (Grocke). In the Western world during the middle ages, the Catholic Church had a particularly strong influence in musical choices. After the Renaissance, many philosophers looked for answers from the ancients while at the same time developing new ideas that progressively added to the spectrum of music perception. Music has become an integral component of Western culture and plays an important part in modern education. Whole curricula have been developed based on specific concepts about what music does and should do to people as individuals and as members of society. A perusal of the sources used for this essay would be valuable to confirm this development, but it would be beyond the scope of its thesis.

Within the Christian church, music choices have frequently reflected the desire to maintain a discernible distance from what is locally considered to be of the world. The issue of using a traditional native music style that may be intimately tied to pagan religious concepts, as well as the use of contemporary styles (such as jazz, blues, rock and roll) in Western society, revived many ancient concepts mentioned above along the course of the twentieth century.³ Such concepts have been frequently used to defend the idea that sacred music must be particularly distinct from what society at large used. Arguably, the controversies usually referred to as the “worship wars” result partly from opposing schools of thought concerning the absolute character of music styles, choices of instruments, vocal techniques, volume, origins of the genres, as well as other factors (Liesch 178).

At the heart of the issue stands the question: is music moral or amoral? Does music have the capability of teaching or inducing moral values, especially apart from a song’s lyrics, or is it a neutral art that can be used, whatever its genre or style, for either a good or bad message? (Woetzel, “Is Music Neutral?” 11) The conclusion of some is that music styles do indeed possess inherent qualities that would preclude them from being used in a Christian context. Others, however, believe that the evidence available, especially when evaluated worldwide with a consistent comparative methodology, cannot support the proposition that music’s morality is innate in its patterns of melody, harmony, and rhythm, nor in any other of its basic elements. (Liesch 178-180; Miller 25-26) This view proposes that, as the paint on a canvas may carry a good or a bad message, so musical elements are neither good nor bad in and of themselves. To convey a “message,” one must combine them in specifically cultural ways. Thus, the listener’s culture serves as the interpretive lens through which the sounds create meaning. Much like phonemes and words, which must have a linguistic meaning agreed upon by cultural convention, the message of musical sounds can be accurately comprehended by only those who understand its cultural significance. From this point of view, the style of music (as the style of art on a canvas) is not irreparably tied to a moral message, but rather draws meaning based upon the values and customs of the culture from which

it comes, thus being capable of either positive or negative messages (and everything in-between) (Harris, KL 2945).

**Missionaries Meet Xerente Music**

The philosophical dilemma described above could have caused hesitation in the use of local musical forms in the early years of the Baptist Mission. However, the diligence of Rinaldo de Mattos in collecting information on traditional instruments of the Xerente is an indication of their desire to value their culture rather than to dismiss or discard it (Mattos, “Instrumentos Musicais Xerente”). Through the years, a list of traditional instruments has been compiled describing their constriction, their appearance, their sounds, as well as their purpose in the community. With various names, although different in form, sound, and application, they would fall under the Western categories of percussion and wind instruments. Even if distinct, or even exotic, to Western ears, the characteristics of these instruments are not so uncommonly disagreeable that they would have necessarily produced any rejection based on prejudice among the missionaries.

Philosophically and theologically, the association of local traditional instruments and styles with Xerente religious practices could have caused the missionaries to doubt the possibility of their use for Christian worship. For instance, the instrument list compiled by Pastor Rinaldo makes mention of a rattle-like instrument called Zâ, which he describes this way: “This instrument is used exclusively by the Sekwa (Portuguese: pajés; English: witchdoctor) who, besides employing it in his witchery, also uses it for the warri nôkrêze, yard songs, in which the witchdoctors function as MCs” (Mattos, “Instrumentos Musicais Xerente”). On the other hand, however, Pastor Rinaldo’s list indicates that the Kupkrnãihirê (a type of flute) and the Wanẽkumkrê (an instrument resembling a tambourine) could have only been incorporated into the community’s musical practices after the Xerente came into contact with non-indigenous music, and that they served exclusively “secular” (Mattos, “Instrumentos”) ritualistic purposes. In general, Pr. Rinaldo suggests that music in the Xerente context is exclusively ritualistic—whether they are religious or secular rituals—and that people do not typically sing along while performing daily activities (Mattos “Características” 1). Nevertheless, the missionaries believed that traditional musical instruments were not so intrinsically bound to traditional religion that they would have inevitably created opportunities for misunderstanding Christian doctrine or led to syncretism (Mattos; Krieger).

Other important musical characteristics they would have considered include elements such as melody, harmony, and rhythm. Pastor Rinaldo, in his brief description of Xerente music (Mattos “Características” 1), describes the Xerente musical vocabulary as consisting typically of five different notes—a form of pentatonic scale—with an occasional use of two other alternative tones, which do not both appear in the same piece of music. His brief rhythmic analysis describes a consistent binary musical pulse, with a strong first beat and a weak second. Xerente music is always accompanied by “choreography” (his general term for “dance” or “movement”) except for songs of mourning. Since binary musical pulse and accompanying dance movements are also part of Western music, the missionaries did not believe this would be detrimental to the Christian message in any way (Mattos).

One other concern could have led the missionaries to distance themselves from Xerente styles. Pastor Rinaldo explains, “In the Xerente worldview, there is no human composer. The

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4 The Portuguese term that Pr. Rinaldo de Mattos used for ‘secular’ is profane. While it can mean the same as ‘profane’ as a cognate, would, in this case, be a false cognate in the sense Mattos and the Xerente use it.
authorship of the music they sing is not attributed to any one person. All of them were ‘left’ (given) by Bdâ, the cultural hero, as were the other cultural features” (Mattos, “Características” 3). This attribution of authorship could have had the potential to connect the source of music to a spirit world alien to the tenets of Scripture. Nevertheless, this confusion would be unlikely if specific, present-day, human beings composed a new repertoire of Christian music in traditional genres. Indeed, the missionaries openly express their desire to see a genuinely Xerente hymnody for the local churches.

Missionary Training and the “Great Awakening”

Both Pastors Rinaldo and Guenther participated in the first course in Linguistics offered by SIL in Brazil in 1958, although the course was unofficial (Mattos). It was a three-month intensive course, without formal publications in Portuguese to guide them and led by a guest teacher from the United States who later went to work with another indigenous group. In those days, he said, the study of Anthropology was still “in diapers” in Brazil.⁵ There were very few books written on this topic in the Portuguese language, and unless one had a good enough grasp of English or German, a Brazilian reader would have had little encouragement to discover deep cultural features and to apply these in the communication of the Gospel. This was the extent of training in cross-cultural communication provided for the missionaries at the start of their work with the Xerente.

It was only after they were confronted with the realities of the Xerente culture in daily interaction that the missionaries “woke up” to the need of gaining a deeper understanding of their worldview and their cultural expressions. Due to the regular exchanges between the Xerente and the Brazilian society that had taken place since colonial times, many of them already understood basic Portuguese. This factor led the missionaries to set aside serious consideration of translating the New Testament until the end of the 1960s. At that point, they sought out further preparation and took on the task of translating the New Testament. Pastor Rinaldo stated that Pastor Guenther had become a more avid translator than he had. Pastor Guenther, who speaks better English—and German—than Pr. Rinaldo, had, therefore, more access to translation aids and literature to help him in this task (Mattos). They agreed that Guenther would dedicate more time to the translation process and Rinaldo would focus on other needs of the Mission.

During the 1970s, a “great awakening” began to take place in these missionaries’ indigenous ministry. They achieved a better understanding of culture and sensed the need to have a deeper knowledge of it to accomplish Christian mission in a more effective manner. Don Richardson’s books describing potential “redemptive analogies” in every culture around the world were greatly influential in this process, particularly Peace Child. Pr. Rinaldo first read about it in a short book review in the Reader’s Digest publication (called Seleções in the Portuguese edition). Although he still had a weak grasp of the English language at the time, he ordered the book from the United States and struggled to read it all. The missionaries eventually identified an analogy that Pastor Rinaldo termed “Xerente Existential Messianism” (Anais 6). This and other newly attained perspectives of cross-cultural missions deeply affected the two pioneer missionaries’ expectations and emphases in their work. Xerente Baptist churches of today, established in various

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⁵ Expressions like “in diapers,” found in quotation marks in this section of the article, are derived from this author’s personal conversation with Pr. Rinaldo. They are direct translations of his mode of expression and are included here to emphasize the interviewee’s characteristics and intended messages.
villages in their territory, continue to reap positive fruits of their impact.

Concerning the early choices of music for Christian worship among the Xerente, Pr. Rinaldo describes a different scenario at the beginning of the Mission’s endeavor than some might expect. Mattos explains that the missionary team was truly unaware of the importance of cultural consideration for musical choices and they had not pre-formulated a set of calculated choices based on philosophical, theological, or missiological guidelines. They had not made a conscious choice based on some form of cultural prejudice nor by a feeling of cultural superiority (Mattos). Neither did they totally discard the musical elements of Xerente music due to their traditional and religious purposes. Pastor Rinaldo affirmed, rather, the use of “corinhos” (worship choruses) and of some of the traditional hymns from the “Cantor Cristão” (the standard Baptist hymnbook in Brazil at the time), was simply a practical choice since these were the songs and hymns the missionaries knew. After translating the lyrics into their traditional language, they shared the songs with the Xerente and incorporated them into their services.

The Xerente Response to the Missionaries’ Music

Pastor Rinaldo clarified that the indigenous people never questioned the use of those songs at the time (Mattos). There could be various reasons, including cultural predispositions and temporal factors, that facilitated the seemingly smooth introduction of Western music genres and their integration into church practices. It could be that the long-standing acquaintance with the “white man’s religion”—particularly Catholicism, which typically maintained standard forms along with the meaning-content—had already imprinted an expectation of absolute form onto the Xerente mind. They would have assumed that these forms were irreplaceable if they were to accept Christianity’s tenets as their own. This view would have also been reinforced by their own religion’s presumably stable forms. They could have thought another faith would bring specific unalterable forms with its message that new believers were expected to accept.

A further potential predisposition among the Xerente could be the expectation of distinct forms of expression for worship or communication with the transcendent world found in multiple cultures around the world. These, accepting as “natural” the use of a heightened linguistic or artistic form for these purposes, may be particularly prone to accept Western Christian hymnody, being stylistic distinct from their own musical forms, as part of the total “package” that the new message brings. Discussing philosophies of religions early in the twentieth century, Emile Durkheim proposed that the dichotomy of sacred and profane was a cultural universal (37). Although this universality may not be as comprehensive as Durkheim suggested, the worldview of countless people groups around the world does indeed contain such dichotomy.

Another possible reason behind the Xerente acceptance of Western music could be that the new believers themselves (or those at least listening in to consider the gospel) felt that the other musical styles were too closely related to their traditional religion to be utilized in God’s service. This is not an unusual occurrence among converts who sense that many of their old customs are not compatible with a committed Christian life. Alternatively, it could be that the missionaries had gained the respect of the population to such degree, that they were willing to trust their musical choices, even if they felt their traditional music would have been more conducive to their worship expression.

When Western music genres were first introduced, the Xerente may not have held certain artistic features of their own culture in high regard. Furthermore, when encountering what
appeared to them to be of a higher nature, they may have begun to lose interest in their own music. It is possible that they developed a greater appreciation and enjoyment for the new songs than they had for their own traditional songs (Loh KL 3731). The rhythmic patterns, the harmony, and many other musical elements found in the new genres could have had a personal appeal to a good number of individuals and could have been catalysts for a change of “musical taste” or preference in that society. A potential low view of their own cultural arts, or at least of their musical vocabulary, at the point of contact, could have been a factor in this presumed “taste shift.” In fact, societies that come under the political or social pressure of another society naturally struggle with the value of their own cultural identity.

One appealing factor in the foreign songs could have simply been the very newness of the music. According to Pastor Rinaldo’s account, the presumably limited musical repertoire of the Xerente had some beginning in a distant past and may have contained few new creations. Arts specialists around the world have observed that preservation and revitalization of a musical repertoire or style of minority ethnic groups can be very difficult when the community does not produce new songs or instrumental pieces. Considering the need for new music creations among people groups facing this dilemma, Todd Saurman, who describes the cultural identity crisis among the Tampuan people in Cambodia in his doctoral dissertation, suggests that new creations, coupled with some important internal attitudes and processes of transmission, are necessary for an artistic revitalization process to take place (Saurman). Among the Xerente Christians, the development of new compositions in traditional genres is the expressed desire of their friend and mentor, Pastor Rinaldo, who continues to look for a revitalization of the cultural musical inheritance.

Pastor Rinaldo recalls that years into the Mission’s ministry, people in the church became more interested in preserving their own cultural styles for Christian purposes. The Baptist missionaries had gradually recognized the value of cultural preservation and had discussed it with the church people through the years. Since the 1980s, several musicians have successfully attempted to compose Christian songs in one of the Xerente styles (Mattos). Pastor Rinaldo believes, however, that the moment to create their own hymnody in Xerente style is still to come and remains hopeful that the time may be soon. As a step in this direction, fellow ethnomusicologist Heber Negrão and I began a process of addressing revitalization of traditional styles and sparking new creations among Xerente Christian musicians in July of 2017. During an eight-day course, a group of about twelve Xerente musicians gathered in a village deep in their territory, received training in the Biblical foundations of music, and took part in a music-creation workshop. They gave clear indications that they wish to value their traditional musical heritage. Early during the workshop, they requested to have a short service during which they dedicated to the Lord the traditional Zâ, the percussion instrument that only the village shamans used in their traditional culture. Nevertheless, the Christian musicians also gave evidence of having a multifaceted and pluralistic perception of music in their community. The songs (or new lyrics to traditional Xerente songs) which they created in the course of that week seemed to always call for the keyboardist and guitarist to add Western harmony, a characteristic that would not have been found in their songs decades ago.
Present Day Xerente Christian Music: A Complex Integration of Elements

Around the world, after decades and even centuries of employing musical forms originating from outside the community, such forms and their derivatives become standard for Christian worship. They become integrated into these cultures. Thus, generations arising after the introduction of outside musical elements are predisposed to accept them as their own and may view all artistic forms they experience in their early life as part of their identity. The two sources (inside and outside) may not be perceived as opposites, but any genre to which they are exposed—including those resulting from a fusion of elements—can be genuinely theirs.

At present, there are concurrent musical preferences among the various Xerente village churches. Some musicians have tended to adopt the popular northeastern Brazilian style known as Forró. When asked by Pastor Rinaldo why they do not write songs in their Xerente style, certain musicians reply that their traditional songs are too slow, and that the people now want more movement. Pastor Rinaldo expressed doubts about that evaluation, but he, as customary, respectfully allows the Xerente musicians to make their own choices (Mattos). Regarding this preference for faster movement, it could very well be that the leading musicians’ preferences are becoming the standard styles primarily because they are empowered to utilize them and make the congregation’s choices for them. There may be a variety of ideas within one single church that would lean towards another musical direction, but the people who hold different opinions may not be able to make these choices, or their sentiments may simply be disregarded.

Some Ethnodoxologists, as well as other supporters of contextualization efforts, may lament a cultural direction towards a fusion of elements from the local indigenous tradition with those of Western genres. As human experience, history, and Anthropology attest, however, cultures do change. This fact is also manifested in the development of Christianity. Dr. Swee Hong Lim of Emmanuel College in Toronto explains, “Christianity, like culture, is not static: it is shaped by a myriad of sociocultural forces, and as it grows its roots in the culture, its outlook and expression will change” (Lim 7). When we contemplate the cultural transformation which has taken place throughout known history and the various ways in which customs and artistic forms penetrated or modified an earlier culture, both within and without the church, it may be unreasonable to expect a community that has already adopted and incorporated Western musical elements to decide suddenly to discard them all. After all, they now belong to their own cultural tradition! Authors who have surveyed Christian artistic development in other parts of the world, as in Asia for instance, confirm this observation and demonstrate the presence of practically all of the above-mentioned predispositions and factors among the Eastern people groups (Loh KL3731, Butler 117-118, Fleming 55). Any or many of them may also have been determinant in the case of the Xerente Church.

The existence of a fusion of musical elements can be easily verified in the Xerente Christian community. Those early musical choices, as well as subsequent ones along the way, have in fact helped to shape the musical character of the Xerente church into its present form. The shape remains fluid and may yet incorporate further Xerente traditional characteristics as its community develops a genuine hymnody. Although one could take a purist approach to culture and prefer to eliminate everything that has been “recently” imported (anywhere from days to decades), the present complex character of a community will likely continue to be accepted communally as authentic.
Further Reflection on the Place of the Arts in Mission

Pastor Rinaldo’s report on the Mission’s experience with the Xerente presents a picture that does not correspond to my original expectations concerning the Mission’s early musical choices. The structured, premeditated guidelines one might have expected to find are seemingly absent in this case. Although up to this point the comprehension of music’s value in Church environments has been assumed and the question has focused on the motivations and reasons behind the stylistic choices in this specific people group, perhaps further reflection should take place. In view of the frequent lack of intentionality in the use of music and the arts for Christian worship in the history of missions, it would be appropriate to inquire how the missional community should address the place of arts in the total mission of God. A variety of nuances exist in the relationship between the value of artistic expression and the value of the propositional and expositional “preaching” of the Word. Although music and the arts have been present throughout the history of Jewish and Christian worship traditions, their value and position have been perceived in various ways depending on cultural context, religious tradition, and numerous other factors. The study of Scripture demonstrates God’s use of the arts to reveal Himself, including oral-verbal forms, music, drama, sculpture, and architecture. Yet the perception of the value and place of artistic expression—in the case at hand, music—in Christian worship and mission has often relegated it to an aspect of decoration rather than to an integral and indispensable medium of communication. Missionary and ethnomusicologist Roberta King addresses this dilemma specifically in the context of worship. She describes it as being “on the sidelines or on the edge of society” (Shubin 12-13) and that “it can be at the heart of society” (12-13). On the other hand, positive changes are taking place:

I find in contemporary society, in this postmodern age, [that] music is becoming a major vehicle for communicating a message. We have had a tendency to say there’s only one form that is valid for worship. Really, there is only one God whom we worship— and many forms can help us to worship, depending on what our backgrounds are and what our musical language is. (12-13)

So it could be argued that music, as well as other artistic forms of expression, does not simply serve as the “icing on the cake” of a carefully planned worship service, nor is it some form of expression without substantial value. It is, or at least can be, a powerful, effective, formative, and lasting communicator of the truths of the Christian faith.

When one recognizes the communicative value of artistic expression as suggested above, musical choices for worship settings are more likely to become intentional. Absent at the early stages of earlier missionary projects, intentionality of musical choices could have played a key role in the development of a “native” hymnody in multiple instances across the world. Later results do not need to necessarily be critically evaluated as good or bad at this point. The early and on-going artistic choices, however, and the value attributed or denied to the local culture, do ultimately affect the development of the Christian community receiving the mission. In the Baptist Mission with the Xerente, an intentional dismissal of the local arts due to erroneous preconceived philosophies would have likely damaged the relationship with the population. By the same token, an intentional but uncritical attitude towards anything in the local culture could have damaged the message of the Gospel. On the other hand, an intentional esteem of the potential of local cultural arts to communicate with God and humans, combined with a Spirit-led, critical contextualization
approach towards the evaluation of artistic forms for worship and for the proclamation of the Gospel, could have possibly avoided the creation of cultural barriers against the gospel message that are still in place, particularly among the older members of the Xerente population (Krieger).

Many of the authors who have written about the purpose and need of arts in Christian worship in the last decades, would likely admit readily to a process of learning and growth they have experienced. Pastor Rinaldo, serving as a spokesman for the Baptist missionaries among the Xerente, readily acknowledges their lack of clear guidelines for musical choices at the early stages, but also looks forward in hope that a native Christian hymnody will exist someday. This essay represents an effort to signpost a plainer path for those entering cross-cultural mission, as well as for those who are disposed to have a similar “great awakening” to that of Pastor Rinaldo.

Looking towards future research, the question of foundational guidelines for the use of music in evangelical mission endeavors among indigenous people groups in Brazil or anywhere else in the world could possibly encounter similar answers as the ones uncovered in this instance. Perhaps, in view of the absence of settled foundations for musical choices at the early stages of the Baptist mission among the Xerente, further projects among other people groups should begin with open questions regarding musical perception among the host people group, a study of their own traditional arts, and an examination of the missionary views of artistic expressions for worship and mission. The answers are likely to display a complex panorama of arts and mission interaction in Brazil, but one that would hopefully energize the growing desire among indigenous Christians to offer their authentic arts in worship to God.

Works Cited


Reviewed by Tom Hobson

This book is designed primarily for scholars in the area of theology and culture. The author is professor of apologetics and holds the John Boyer Chair of Evangelism and Culture at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. He demonstrates a command of literary and cultural studies that is both broad and deep, while also exhibiting competence in Biblical exegesis. This book is not written for a popular audience, but as a valuable resource for writers of substance who write for popular audiences.

Edgar begins by giving an erudite, extensive review of what scholars of all disciplines have written about culture. After a chapter summarizing the thoughts of non-Christian literary scholars, he highlights the works of Christian thinkers, including Richard Niebuhr, T. S. Eliot, C. S. Lewis, Abraham Kuyper, Klaas Schilder, and Francis Schaeffer. His own views lean toward Niebuhr’s category of Christ transforming culture.

Edgar ponders why Lewis disparages the value of culture so much, when he himself contributed so much cultural treasure to the field of literature. At least, he says, Lewis believed in absolute standards in the area of art: whether the work rings true to the world of which even the fictional Narnia is only a shadow.

After this extensive introduction, consuming almost half of his book, Edgar unpacks the core of his Biblical thesis. He announces, “I will argue in this book that our duty to oppose cultural evil is not a war against creation but against the malignancy of sin” (100). He first presents a chapter full of scriptures that pit believers against the world, entitled “Facing the *contra mundum* Texts.” But in the following chapter, Edgar focuses on the believer’s rationale for embracing the world, here meaning the created world in which we must live and from which we are not commanded to withdraw. He asks the reader to take familiar passages and “read them again” to see their value in affirming rather than disparaging our earthly existence. As Edgar proceeds to show, the New Testament, and indeed the whole Bible, is “rife with cultural implications” (217).

Edgar’s comments on the Sermon on the Mount give the flavor of his theology of culture, crystallized in this chapter. He argues that holding treasure in heaven does not mean leaving the world or being indifferent to it. Nor does refusing to lay up treasures in the wrong place mean that we have finished the job. The flip side is to lay up treasure in heaven, which must involve some sort of positive contribution we make to God’s world over and above simply avoiding “worldliness.”

Edgar perceives that the Sermon on the Mount is full of wisdom about how to live in the world, without falling prey to the idolatry of thinking that matter is all that matters. Jesus’ call for us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world can hardly be called otherworldly values.
As Edgar observes, “earthly pursuits matter,” but “not as idols.” He writes that idolatry takes good gifts of God and makes them ultimate. In the process, he says, we “feed the idol and lose our soul,” a fateful mistake that Jesus sought to correct in the hearts of his listeners.

Edgar goes on to address Jesus’ exchange on God versus Caesar by demonstrating that Jesus is not at all trying to separate the two realms, but rather is affirming that everything belongs to God. Caesar may be the legitimate authority whose face is on the coin, but where is God’s face? Not on the other side of the coin, he says, but on his entire creation, and particularly on his image-bearers. God’s face, Edgar argues, is imprinted everywhere, even on Roman economic life. Thus, Jesus signals that all of life, including economic life, calls us to recognize the proper authority of him to whom it belongs.

Edgar’s conclusion on “Render to Caesar” is there is nothing remotely resembling a sacred-secular separation. What things could belong to Caesar that do not already belong to God? Edgar concludes that in this Gospel sound bite, Jesus redeems the realm of money, which is often considered a lower, even “dirty” realm, and shows that money belongs to God first, and then to people as God’s managers.

In his final chapters, Edgar launches into an exegesis of the Cultural Mandate, which he finds not only in its original formulation in Genesis 1, but echoed in Psalm 8, Jeremiah 29, and even in the Great Commission and in Revelation 21, where “earthly activities are not abandoned…but given their full meaning” (231). I am not sure I agree with the way he sees the Cultural Mandate in these last two examples, but his analyses of Psalm 8 and Jeremiah 29 I found to be creative and insightful.

God’s original Cultural Mandate, as Edgar formulates it, includes the “covenant blessing of God on the human race,” the command to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth with our productive presence,” and to “rule over the creation with benevolent lordship” (176; emphasis his). Edgar then traces this pattern into the later passages enumerated above, and other passages. He finds this pattern in the covenant with Abraham: God’s blessing, plus the predictions that Abraham’s descendants will multiply, and will rule the Promised Land. It takes a little more imagination to see this pattern in the Great Commission.

Correcting the common misunderstanding that “subdue” and “have dominion” means we are authorized to run roughshod over creation, Edgar points us to Richard Bauckham, who cites Psalm 145:9 in this regard: “The Lord is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made.” Our dominion over creation must be caring and merciful.

Edgar argues that while creation was pronounced “very good” when it was initially completed, there is still much work to be done by humans partnering with God. “Genesis underscores the human calling to develop and expand God’s purposes in the world” (174). This is not to be confused with humanistic notions of “progress.” (Lest we fall into the mistake that C. S. Lewis called chronological snobbery, newer is not necessarily better).

There is a substantial distance between Genesis 1 and a full-blown theology of cultural engagement, but if we can find it anywhere, it is in Jeremiah 29, even the necessity to multiply and not decrease. Everybody benefits when God’s people become culturally engaged. The blessing of God’s presence can and will be found even in a foreign land, even in exile. Jeremiah 29 demonstrates proper dominion, building, and intercession can still be exercised under oppression.

Edgar’s final chapter is entitled “Culture in the Afterlife,” a brief discussion of how much of our present world’s culture will continue into the next world. Using his original framework, he points to the full blessing of God being fulfilled in his presence in the holy city, no more marriage
and childbearing will be necessary, and believers will reign with Christ. Music and language will continue, however, and certainly our existence will not be disembodied.

I am surprised that Edgar overlooks Proverbs 25:2, a verse that would have supported his thesis: “It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of royalty is to seek things out.” God is glorified when humans find a cure for ovarian cancer hidden in the bark of the Pacific yew tree or the cure for poison ivy in the juice of the jewelweed. Perhaps the verse does not fit into his focus on passages that can be linked with the Creation Mandate.

Edgar’s book has made a contribution to our thinking toward a Biblical theology of culture. For advanced scholars of theology and culture, he has made a major contribution. For those who are not advanced scholars of theology and culture, Chapter 4 crystallizes some very helpful insights that we can apply to our own everyday encounters with the culture around us.

Reviewed by Stephanie Biggs

This book is volume 2 in the *Throne in the Earth Series* on the Arts, the Ark, and the Word Made Flesh from Belonging House Creative, 2016. [www.belonginghouse.org](http://www.belonginghouse.org). Christ John Otto's intent in *Mary: When God Shares His Glory*, is to repair what is broken in perceptions of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as well as the Incarnation, and in doing so, to bring Shalom to creative people. Throughout the book, Otto weaves his ideas and values of others with Biblical scholarship to reveal a rich tapestry of Mary's life that illuminates many aspects of her character, which may have been previously hidden or distorted. He aims to empower his readers, specifically artists, to embrace fully their God-given identity, inviting them to join God's family, to be transformed, and in so doing, to transform the world.

The theological ideas gleaned from Mary's life and example have importance to all Christians, but are of particular significance to artists. Otto argues in this book, and in nearly all the rest of his published work, that artists are vitally important because they are uniquely poised to build and shape culture. The summary below highlights how Otto makes a number of theological concepts relevant to artists and other creative people.

Otto establishes the context and outlines the foundational ideas of the book in the Introduction. He argues that Mary agreed to her God-given identity, gave flesh to the Word of God, and in so doing became an indispensable part of the Incarnation. Additionally, her example as someone who shared in the glory of God and lived into her God-given identity is one that artists can follow to fulfill their calling to create Shalom, or as Otto conceives it, repair what is broken and missing in the world (L110). Artists have a unique role in this effort because of their ability to see what is wrong, to create solutions, and to build and shape culture. Mary's identity as God-bearer also connects her to the Ark of the Covenant, God's portable throne on the earth, which was the subject of the first book of the series, *Bezalel: Redeeming a Renegade Creation* (2015). In Mary, however, the purpose of the Ark is transferred to people, first to Mary because she bore Jesus, and then through Jesus to the rest of humanity.

Otto spends a large portion of the book writing about God's glory. He is careful to contrast Greco-Roman and Hebrew ideas about God and His glory in order to correct how many Christians see and think about the concept. Otto then explains that God's glory is a thing, not just an idea, defining it as “...an extension of the Person, Presence, and Power of God” (L275) and, therefore, something that can be shared. When God shares His glory, we see some of God's identity as well as our true identity, which enables us to change things for the better.

Creativity originates in the inner person, and when we are touched by God's glory, it directly affects creativity, positively impacting those who engage with that creative output.

This raises a problem, however. Otto argues from the creation account in Genesis that humans shared part of God's glory and identity—humans were created to create because we were made in the image of our creator. God's glory was diminished in humans, however, when Eve disobeyed God and Adam shared her disobedience. With diminished glory and disfigured identity, we now create distortions that destroy, rather than create, Shalom.
Otto describes how episodes from Mary's life in the gospels accounts of Luke and John illustrate truths of the Christian life. Mary's encounter with Gabriel was an encounter with God's glory and reveals her grace-filled identity. He argues that Luke later identifies Mary with the Ark of the Covenant by drawing parallels between her encounter with Elizabeth and 2 Samuel 6. Not to be forgotten, Jesus' conception and birth illustrate how, similar to Mary who gave flesh to the Word of God, artists co-labor with God to make the intangible, tangible. All of these principles are central to Otto's thesis outlined in his introduction.

Turning to John's gospel, Otto points out that when Mary embraced her creative role at the Wedding in Cana (John 2:1-11), she helped “birth” Jesus' ministry, where the disciples were transformed into believers. According to Otto, this shows how someone touched by the glory of God, who lives out their God-given identity with its creative role, can initiate external change. Otto argues that John's account of the Crucifixion shows that events in the physical world powerfully impact the spiritual world. Since artists make tangible the intangible, this is particularly significant. Otto maintains that John simultaneously connects Mary with both Eve and the Church and that Mary receives a new family, which is the Church (L1249). Otto explains that this scene teaches us that giving up ourselves to embrace all of God’s purposes begins at the cross, continues with listening and obeying God, receiving grace, and becoming part of God's family.

In the concluding chapters, Otto connects Mary to themes in his other work. Because Mary consented, Jesus came into the world through her and created a new relationship with God as Father. In his family, humans are called to bear the glory of God, transforming the world through living out our creative identities and building the culture of heaven on Earth. To quote Otto, “You are good, because Jesus called you out, set you apart, crowned you with glory, and made you a priest to serve others. When this truth gets settled in you, your creative output is going to change, your reality is going to shift, and you are going to start shifting the realities of others,” (L1631).

With a strong grounding in scripture and accessible style, Otto’s book successfully works toward the series' goal of “...theology and Biblical teaching...to help transform artists and creative people from the inside out” (Otto, L102, 2015). To support his ideas, Otto draws from well-known theologians and other Christian writers including C.S. Lewis, Francis Schafer, Bruce Metzger, Ambrose, Ide M. Ni Riain, Scott Hahn, Curtis Mitch, John Wesley, Rachel Fulton Brown, and Justin Martyr. Demonstrating continuity in his overall theme, Otto consistently makes connections to the larger ideas of the series. Otto also appeals to Greek and Hebrew terms, deriving meaning from the original languages, which strengthens his points and adds to the educational value for artists, who are not likely to have a seminary background. Otto also takes time to address possible objections to some of his points and to correct popular misconceptions about his ideas. Otto's use of illustrations and analogies from multiple creative disciplines, including visual art, poetry, and music, to illustrate and frame his ideas is appreciated.

Otto is writing for a primarily American and/or Western European audience in the series (L53ff). Readers must draw similarities and comparisons for other contexts for themselves. Otto’s book holds an invitation for artists and creative people to believe in Jesus and to become part of God's family. Otto is writing to artists and other creative people as he discusses the arts, creativity, God, and the Bible. With 32 years of experience both as an artist and in ministry to artists Otto seems particularly well-equipped for this task.
“Prince Hal Saying Goodbye” and Other Poems

Janice Witherspoon Neuleib

Prince Hal
Saying Goodbye
(For Sarah)

Death came quietly to this noble soul,
so slim and kind.

The kittens, saved, like Hal, from the streets,
bounded lively round his boney stumbles.
So much life, adolescent fluffs of cotton silk, floating,
  flying, flinging themselves in heedless tumbles
  past his fading spirit.

He, equally heedless, teetered to his water bowl and back to the
green couch, needing a little lift, no longer the slender athlete, lord
of the air.

How do we know when to say goodbye?
We don’t of course, but he did.

Sleeping away gently, without protest,
as he had lived his life, a gift of love
from the universe to a few grateful,
if unworthy, humans.

* 

Creeping Charlie

Blackened finger nails, back bent, struggle:
the stuff wends its way everywhere,
eating up emerging grass,
choking best intentions,
strangling the divine in the mundane.
Rip at the tendrils,
cannot use poison,
must not soil the water table,
but hating, hating, hating
the invader, offended
by the uninvited
foreigner,
determined to pull the life
from those ubiquitous tendrils,
knowing a losing cause
while fighting that same cause,
seeing clearly why Christ had to die.

No amount of weed pulling
can save, no anger
can stop the spread of the beast.

* 

**On Taking a University-wide Health Quiz**

“Go and give all that you have to the poor.”
—Luke 18:22

I’ve always thought that Jesus was just playing
with the rich young man. The youngster claimed
to follow all the commandments (623 or there-
abouts). So Jesus (I’d like to think smiling as he speaks)
raises the bar: give up your obsessions, possessions,
and wealth.

The health quiz makes clear that well-being comes
with a high price: give up all that you value, keep
nothing, help the needy. Then you will be healthy
in mind and body. You will sleep well, eat sparsely,
drink moderately, love your neighbor.

In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis makes clear
that heaven comes with a price; give up your
most beloved sin/self-indulgence.
You like bossing your spouse around: stop it.
You want to be obeyed at work: forget it.
You want to dominate your children: nope.
You want to be the committee chair: serve.
You want to be secure: never going to happen.
You want to have lots of sex: want to be a slave?
You want rich food and drink: think Jabba the Hut.

The only way, the sure way, the easy way
to heaven: give it all away, let it go, open your palms
and wave goodbye to your dreams of power and might.

God does the power part, not you.
You love, share, trust, and hope.

Try opening your palms and the light will flow in
and out.

*

**Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73**

That time of year thou may'st in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruin'd choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day,
As after sunset fadeth in the west,
Which by-and-by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must expire
Consum'd with that which it was nourish'd by.
    This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,
    To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

**Cautionary Thoughts on 73**

They all died at 77, my family that is,
Grandpa Witherspoon faded first, still bright and straight,
then dear Anna, his wife, ten years his junior.
She too succumbed at 70 and 7, then Grace, my mother’s mother,
then Daddy, breathing love right to the last,
followed by brother Jack and sister Gen.
Only mother’s father died before his time at 65, and she, she still relished the day to come at 90, on her birthday exclaiming, “I wonder what’s coming next!” And it was at long last to be the end.

I feel them now as I approach that 73 of Shakespeare’s sonnet, as I breathe in the day, love more strongly the moment’s taste or breeze, playing with those words each day, remembering the number 77, and wasting not one minute of the time from now to then.

*

On the Magnificat

How dare God ask so much of a woman! Child bearing itself is inconvenient, but then there’s the child! Always there, never ever gone from the psyche.

He had to choose a really young woman. An older woman would have laughed in his face. She would know what this Announcement meant:

Years of worry, guilt at every turn, commitment of every fiber of body and soul. Only a male god would ask such a thing.

The Goddess would have at least offered full-time day care, a nanny with super human powers, or a second wife to help out. But God just speaks from the clouds, makes an offer she does not refuse, and disappears back into the Infinite.

And she buys it. What was she thinking? What does any woman think when presented with a child? Take me, against my better judgment, I’m yours.
“When I Was a Child” and Other Poems

Todd Sukany

When I Was a Child

I made a house out of scrap lumber
and shingle. Three days before Easter,

I glued two sticks together
to set on the roof, higher than anything.

I covered the windows in Wonder
Bread wrapper and wired open

the doors. I was never afraid
the building would sit empty.

*

You Swear

though you live in a world of privilege
privileged to decry injustice, inequity
those white words from a white world
privileged by skin tone or breasts
privileged by the very country
you swear

And if these words
black on a white page
ever find privilege
to enter your home
rest on your table
under your coffee or tea
I will not be there to know
its honor

*

Yard birds, cloudy brown, miss
Paul’s big hands and little feeds.
Empty kitchen chair.
*  

**Easier with Practice**  

Running long miles without stopping.  
Swimming lengths of the pool without consuming one’s weight in chlorine.  

Painting angel eyes with a thin brush.  
Weathering turbulence minutes before landing on the hometown tarmac.  

But a bag of pretzel sticks  
isn’t filling the hole left by this two-hour flight.  

*  

**Finish It Somehow**  

Sitting with pen in hand,  
I resume. “Procrastinatio—  

*  

**While Sitting on the Deck**  

Funny how fog  
like a hungry cloud  
runs from the sun  
off Guthrie Lake.  

A hoot owl comments  
to a red squirrel  
hot on the tail of that black one.  

The blue jay’s non-musical “chut”  
is interrupted by a lunker  
finishing breakfast.
Two Poems

Phillip Howarton

Barn Removal

The barn swallows return again
by instinct, following a homing device
to this place where a barn stood
for more than a century.
Torn down during winter,
only its foundation remains,
ruins beyond the birds’ reckoning,
and they dive and circle,
almost losing grace to confusion,
and then they alight on a phone wire
and tap their instrument panels.

*

The Last Mail Box on the Rural Route

“All changes. Families die off and others
move away, and they never come back
for their dead. My husband died early,
and I don’t know anyone around here
no more. The local store closed.
The board consolidated our school
and haul the local kids like cattle
more than an hour to the county seat.
New folks have changed the names
of all the dirt roads, and my box number
has changed five times, but I’ve
been the last one for 61 years.
If I’m in my garden and hear the box
door slam at the end of the lane,
I know it’s time to get some supper
and that the carrier is done for the day.
I’m holding the end of the line.
I’m marking the end of something,
and that’s the most any of us can hope for.”
“Winter Firewood” and Other Poems

Oh Se Ju
(Translated from the Korean by John J. Han)

Winter Firewood

When cold winds blew,
my mother climbed
the mountain.

Braving those winds
as if they were nothing,
she loaded pine twigs and firewood
on her slim, fragile back.

Once touched by my mother,
our cold floor became hot enough
to burn our buttocks,
making my younger brother and me
giggle.

We sang a winter song
while living each day
on a single baked sweet potato,
one with a burnt crust,
and thanking God for each day
we were given.

*

Eight Brothers and Sisters

My father and mother—
they worked a lot.

To care for us eight brothers and sisters,
they stepped all over the field
without rest in spring
and in fall.
Their hearts were
filled with love for children.
With broad smiles,
they willingly embraced all kinds
of miscellaneous work.
Mother opened
each predawn
by prayer, then singing the hymn
“Nearer, My God, to Thee.”

Now, on the hill of Judong
filled with the fragrance
of peach blossoms,
those eight brothers and sisters
smile in unison.

*

**Eight Brothers and Sisters in Judong Valley**

Mother was
always
full of compassion.

Father was
always
full of love.

We lived in an alley
which was the narrowest
in the whole world,
regarding all neighbors
as part of our family.

Amid such an environment,
we eight brothers and sisters
dreamed of happiness,
opening ourselves to the world.

After the passage of blessed time,
Judong Valley is alive again
with a jovial gathering
of eight brothers and sisters
and their spouses.
Abandoned Rural Churches in the Mississippi Delta

John Zheng

The Mississippi Delta has been called “the most southern place on Earth.” It is “southern” because it has its unique history of antebellum South, plantations, slavery, sharecropping, migrations, civil rights, races, music, and economic and environmental changes. The amalgamation of all this reflects the characteristics of cultural heritages of the region and the human connection to the land. With its history rooted deeply in the fertile land, the Delta has appealed constantly to researchers, visitors, and photographers as well as to locals. Unlike urban attractions such as grand museums, galleries, theaters, and wooded parks or natural landscapes with majestic mountain ranges, beautiful pastures, waterfalls and stunning peaks, attractions of the Delta exist in its flatland and its flat life in hamlets, villages, and small towns. In a sense, flatness characterizes the Delta geographically and offers surprises in simplicity, remarkability in the ordinary, or oddity in triviality.

To find simple, delightful surprises, many tourists and photographers drive around in the Delta, learning about its cultural heritages, landscapes, townscapes, and history. With a nurtured interest in learning, a viewer will gain knowledge about life, people, pathos, tension, and humor related to the place. William Ferris, Distinguished Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, exemplifies himself as a person with a heart for the South. He reflects his complex relationship with the South and the Mississippi Delta in *The South in Color: A Visual Journal*, a collection of photographs that preserves the faded shine of the South. One of its focuses is on the rural church and its role in the community, as Ferris recollects vividly:

> As a child, on the first Sunday of each month, Mary Gordon took me to services at Rose Hill Church, where I learned traditional hymns and spirituals.... Childhood friendships on the farm shaped my understanding of race and my commitment to record both black and white people as a way to honor and preserve their history. These are my first attempts to capture a world I later understood as “the South.” My earliest color photographs explore the farm—its landscape and its people at home and at work in fields and at Rose Hill Church [that] hovered above the homes of the black families who formed its congregation.²

Ferris’s words reveal an indispensable part of the Mississippi Delta’s identity: religion.

Deltans have deep convictions in religion, and most of the churches are rural. Having grounded their places at edges of cotton fields, rural churches play an important role to build a stronger spiritual life of the Deltans living especially in hamlets, villages, and small towns. Many of these religious structures are like historic markers of the inerasable past and are also witnesses of the present time still haunted by poverty, economic stagnation, and unemployment. Built in the typical style of vernacular architecture, they are usually modest wood frame buildings that stand alone on the vast flatland; however, each has its own uniqueness and identity of the place, exemplified by Truevine Church...
located on the east of Itta Bena, Mississippi. One gray day on my way to take photographs of the church, I ran into a man fishing by Roebuck Lake. He gave me the direction and told me they called it the blue church. He also said that it used to be a big old church, which was destroyed, and his parents and grandparents were all buried in the churchyard there. After I drove slowly on the wet dirt road, a small church emerged in the distance. It was eye-catching because it was indeed a structure with its walls painted bright blue and surrounded by the brown fields. Behind it is the Columbus-Greenville Railway that still chugs through the Delta.

However, many of the rural churches in the Mississippi Delta no longer provide religious services. When machines replaced farm workers, many Deltans, especially African Americans, started their exodus or outmigration to the North and settled down in the metropolitan cities like Chicago and Detroit. As a result of the Great Migration, hamlets like Panther Burn and Nitta Yuma began to dwindle almost into ghost places. As a result, many rural churches could no longer hold congregations. Over the years these churches were abandoned, decaying in an appearance of neglect and going extinct through human demolition or natural devastations. Therefore, many historians, folklorists, or photographers such as William Ferris and Tom Rankins have realized that it is necessary to explore and preserve the rural churches through the lens before they fall apart and vanish from the Delta’s vast flatland.

Arranged here are photographs of rural churches once filled with sermons, hymns, spirituals, gospels, laughter, and social life. They record an eternal moment of nowness to preserve the southern identity of the Mississippi Delta. To viewers, they may be an eyesore or an ironic image against fertility of the land; they may also be stark landscapes of the nostalgic beauty of the Delta that hold personal memories and provide evocative and ekphrastic sources for a creative eye to inject vision and narration into them. To me, a learner relocated to the Delta, these photographs reveal continuous changes of structures and places, past religious sublimity, and prevailing poverty. With ekphrasis in consideration, each photograph is accompanied with a narrative and a haiku to show the interaction between mind and place and to suggest the aesthetic appeal and appreciation.
Beulah Grove Missionary Baptist Church in Berclair, Mississippi, is completely off the beaten track. It hides miles away from the local dwindling communities of Itta Bena and Quito. A former church member took me there. She said that when people started to go to a new brick church by the highway (which I took as a way of disconnection to the land), this church stopped functioning. Having been abandoned for years, it still offers an appearance of sublimity and holiness with a pilgrim spirit, especially when its steeple is silhouetted against the halo of the slanting sun. Each time when I look at the cross in the halo, I wonder about its definitions beyond its religious symbol: virtue, devotion, loyalty, patience, steadfastness.

heavenly halo
a cross
to bear in mind

Berclair is a farming area with only a few houses scattered alongside the Blue Lake, a few of them abandoned and ghostlike. Driving west for two miles along the creek-like lake, you will see a Mississippi Blues Trail Marker that commemorates the birthplace of the blues legend B.B. King on the site of his childhood house no longer in existence.
Figure 2. Abandoned East Money Church of God in Christ, Leflore County, Mississippi. Photograph by John Zheng, 2015.

Figure 3. Inside of the Abandoned East Money Church of God in Christ, Leflore County, Mississippi. Photograph by John Zheng, 2015.

The utterly abandoned East Money Church of God in Christ was one where Emmett Till’s great uncle Moses Wright served as the preacher until 1949. Inside were broken pews and littered trash, all covered with a thick layer of dust, as if history has been long littered.

roaring wind
through broken walls
sad preaching

To the right of the church is a small cemetery that looks almost neglected. An instruction was made to bury Emmett Till there immediately after his body was found in the Tallahatchie River near Glendora, Mississippi. When Till’s mother, Mamie, was called about the burial in Mississippi, she “became outraged at this attempt to bury her son in Mississippi without her permission or even her knowledge, and she became all the more determined to get him home.”3 It was her determination to get Till’s body home in Chicago
that gave the whole world a chance to see the shocking brutality of the murder in the Mississippi Delta.

**East Money Church**
silent witness
to Emmett Till’s lynching

Figure 4. Abandoned Shiloh Baptist Church by Church Rd, east of Greenwood, MS. Photograph by John Zheng, 2016.

The abandoned church in Figure 4 was a discovery by mere happenstance. After crossing Yalobusha River and turning onto Route 318, a gravel road through cotton fields, I saw a pickup truck parking in front of the fenced Cypress Grove Church. I stopped and asked the man sitting in the driver’s seat if there was an abandoned church down the road, and he told me he was the pastor of the fenced church and if I drove on for a couple of more miles, I would see an abandoned one on the left side of the road. When I drove there with gravel popping under the tires, I mumbled that this church must have been waiting impatiently for my snapshots.

**autumn sunshine**
on the church wall
a shifting shadow

The church looks ironic as it remains abandoned by the road called Church Road. Year by year, it will dilapidate and surrender to its destiny from the fields surrounding it.
One Saturday morning I drove for a snapshot outing. After meandering through the blues town of Clarksdale to photograph Riverside Hotel, Red’s Lounge, and blues murals, I headed to Highway 1 which leads to the Moon Lake that has become known through Tennessee Williams’ references in his plays. Cruising on the empty road, I looked left and right at the roadside for something to take a picture of. Then I spotted a church that appeared abandoned by a back road (Figure 5). With its white paint fading and peeling under the autumn sun and some undersides of the eaves rotten, the weather-beaten look revealed a growing mood of ambivalent dismay and loneliness, but the church is still in function. The haiku moment I had through my perception or mind’s eye seemed to relive the old-time church singing:

Silver Cloud Church
gospel tendriling
around sunbeams
One weekend on my way to Yazoo City to take photographs of the abandoned building of the Afro-American Sons & Daughters Hospital, I caught sight of an abandoned church (Figure 6) by Highway 49, south of Belzoni. I slowed down and turned right onto the dirt track that rocked the car to the church. Standing behind sprigs of a chinaberry tree to click the shutter, I felt the church’s two windows, like two black sockets, gazing blankly at me. It was windy, so I scooted back to the highway to resume my journey. Behind me:

autumn wind
a hymn
across the fields

Figure 7. Second Holly Grove Missionary Baptist Church by Whaley Road, Leflore, Mississippi. Photograph by John Zheng, 2017.

The church in Figure 7 was photographed on the last day of November 2017. After my lonely journey to snap shots of the Mississippi John Hurt Museum in the hills of Carroll County where GPS didn’t work, I drove back to Greenwood. On the way I turned right onto Whaley Road leading to Money, Mississippi. After I crossed the bridge, the road was not paved. Instead of grinding along, I decided to turn around. Just at that moment I noticed a church half hidden behind trees. Was it an abandoned one? Why was a wooden board lying upside down on the ground? Was it the church sign? The doors looked decayed, but the frames of the doors and windows in faded brown did give the church a dignified touch. It was the Second Holly Grove MB Church, established in 1894, and its solemn look deserved reverence. A strange feeling grabbed me. I stopped photographing it, fearing to disturb its silence.

deep autumn
step by step into
a divine time
Notes

1 James C. Cobb, a professor of history emeritus from the University of Georgia, calls the Mississippi Delta “the most southern place on Earth.” *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (Oxford UP, 1994).


4 *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Heinemann, 1989) where Blanche Dubois says, “Yes, the three of us drove out to Moon Lake Casino, very drunk and laughing all the way” (76).

5 Ekphrasis: a poem on a visual work of art, such as a painting, a sculpture, or a photograph.
Notes on Contributors

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John J. Han (Ph.D., University of Nebraska-Lincoln) is Professor of English & Creative Writing and Chair of the Humanities Division at Missouri Baptist University. He is the author, editor, co-editor, or translator of nineteen books, including Wise Blood: A Re-Consideration (Rodopi, 2011), The Final Crossing: Death and Dying in Literature (Peter Lang, 2015) and Worlds Gone Awry: Essays on Dystopian Fiction (McFarland, 2018). Han’s poems have also appeared in periodicals and anthologies worldwide, including Akitsu Quarterly, Failed Haiku, Frogpond, Kansas English, The Laurel Review, Modern Haiku, POMPA, The Red Moon Anthology of English-Language Haiku, Steinbeck Studies, Valley Voices, A Vast Sky: An Anthology of Contemporary World Haiku, and World Haiku Review.
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Janice Witherspoon Neuleib, Ph.D., <jneuleib@ilstu.edu> has been a professor at Illinois State University for most of her adult life. She was the founding director of the learning center and directed the writing programs for a decade. She has worked with many graduate students on their doctorates in writing and published widely on writing theory and the teaching of writing. She currently edits the *Illinois English Bulletin*, the journal of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English, NCTE’s oldest affiliate. She teaches Bible as Literature and Religion and Cultures as well as undergraduate and graduate writing courses. Her dissertation on C. S. Lewis was among the first on this now famous Inkling.

Oh Se Ju <sejusong@hanmail.net> is a contemporary South Korean poet who lives in the city of Icheon, Gyeonggi Province, located thirty-two miles southeast of Seoul. Born in Gochang, North Jeolla Province, in 1966, he grew up in neighboring Yeonggwang County, South Jeolla Province, where his wife, Han Hyun Suk, comes from. In 2010, he won the New Poetry Prize from monthly *Hanmaek Literature* and the Children’s Poetry Prize from monthly *Sisamundan*. Additionally, he won the 2007 South Korean Minister of Education Prize for Children’s Education, the 2008 Mayor of Icheon Prize for Children’s Composition, and South Korea’s 2015 Prize for the Exemplary Citizen in the Area of Culture. The three poems in this issue of *Intégrité* appear in *My Wife Is Smiling and Other Poems by Oh Se Ju* (Cyberwit.net, August 2018), a collection of sixty-five poems translated into English by John J. Han.

Elsen Portugal <elelportugal@gmail.com>, a musician and missionary, was born in Brazil in 1963. In order to continue his training as a pianist, Elsen moved to Texas in 1981 where he later graduated with a Bachelor’s in Music from East Texas Baptist University. He also holds a Master’s in Music from the University of Central Arkansas, post-graduate work in World Arts, and is currently in a Ph.D. program in Ethnodoxology at B. H. Carroll Theological Institute, Irving, Texas. He has served as minister of music in New Jersey, as missionary in Germany for eleven years, led short-term missions’ teams to various countries, and worked as professor and accompanist for National Park College and Champion Christian College in Hot Springs, Arkansas.
Since 2010, his work has involved the application of local (indigenous) music and the arts in worship and missions. In this context, he and his wife spent the last three years in Brazil, where Elsen served as music director at a local church while also connecting with missions agencies to advance this vision. Since April 2017, the Portugals have taken up residence once again in Hot Springs, Arkansas.

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Call for Papers and Book Reviews

Intégrité:
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Intégrité (pronounced IN tay gri tay) is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal on the integration of Christian faith and higher learning. Founded in the fall of 2002 with the Institutional Renewal Grant from the Rhodes Consultation on the Future of the Church-Related College, it is published both online and in print copy. Interested Christian scholars are encouraged to submit academic articles and book reviews for consideration. Manuscripts should be sent as e-mail attachments (Microsoft Word format) to the editor, John J. Han, at hanjn@mobap.edu.

Articles must be 15-25 pages, and book reviews must be 4-8 pages, both double-spaced. Articles should examine historical, theological, philosophical, cultural, and/or pedagogical issues related to faith-learning integration. Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- the current state and/or future of the church-related college
- history of Christian liberal arts education
- Christianity and contemporary culture
- a Christian perspective on multiculturalism and diversity
- service learning
- academic freedom in a Christian context
- implementation of Christian truths in academic disciplines
- Christian education in the non-Western world
- global Christianity.

Articles must engage in faith-learning issues or controversies in a scholarly, critical manner. We generally do not consider manuscripts that are merely factual, devotional, or sermonic. Due dates are March 1 for inclusion in the spring issue and September 1 for the fall issue.

Articles are expected to be research-based but must focus on the author’s original thought. We typically do not consider articles that use more than twenty-five secondary sources; merely present other scholars’ opinions without developing extended, thoughtful analysis; and/or use excessive endnotes. Direct quotations, especially lengthy ones, should be used sparingly.

Considering that most Intégrité readers are Christian scholars and educators not necessarily having expertise on multiple disciplines, articles and book reviews must be written in concise, precise, and easy-to-understand style. Writers are recommended to follow what William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White suggest in The Elements of Style: use definite, specific, concrete language;
omit needless words; avoid a succession of loose sentences; write in a way that comes naturally; and avoid fancy words.

For citation style, refer to the current edition of *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. Articles should include in-text citations in parentheses, a list of endnotes (if applicable), and an alphabetical listing of works cited at the end of the article. Book reviews need only page numbers in parentheses after direct quotations.