

VIATORUM

Contents

Observations from the World of Kafka, Schwejk and Havel: The Beauty of Being Minority	189
Peter Morée	
A Cognitive Linguistic Interpretation of שִׁים עַן עַל in Genesis 44:21	194
Zacharias Kotzé	
Transtextuality and the Lukan Nativity Prefix	205
Lukáš Krynský	
Holy Men and Modern Minds: How Hesychast Spirituality Transforms During the Monastic Transition	222
Viktar Niachayeu	
From Decision to Vision: Virtue, Community, and Hauerwas' Critique of Fletcher's Situation Ethics	245
Renzhong Cui	
Book Review: <i>Desert Transformations: Studies in the Book of Numbers</i> by Christian Frevel	266
Ferdinand Tarr	

Editorial

Observations from the World of Kafka, Schwejk and Havel: The Beauty of Being Minority

One of the big concerns churches in Europe are facing is about their position in society. They are not anymore a given, a player in the public domain everyone automatically counts with, without the need to legitimise their place at the imaginary table where decisions about public affairs are being taken. The reality of diminishing numbers of members and of churchgoers has currently the shape of concerns about diminishing finances. What can and should we pay for, what are our priorities, which fields of our work in society should we leave and which new initiatives should we develop? Churches in parts of Europe where they have had an established tradition, are cutting expenses and activities, selling properties and merging communities. Churches in parts of Europe that went through many changes in the recent decades, are developing programs how to sustain their newly acquired presence by taking similar steps of reorganisations.

The changes taking place do affect theological faculties as well. The significant decrease in students are leading to consequences of that for their functioning. Reorganisations, mergers and closures seem inevitable or are already taking place. In March 2026 the German *Frankfurter Allgemeine* published an extensive article written by three theologians about possible strategies faculties of theology could adopt in the current situation.¹ They identified several essential questions German faculties should discuss. These are partly shaped by the specific structures of theological education in Germany, but have a broader significance for non-German institutions as well.

The first question the authors posed concerns the classical structure of theological studies as can be found in many historic faculties in continental Europe. “Does it make sense to continue to organise all theological

1 Hans Michael Heinig, Christoph Marksches, Stephan Schaede, “Sola structura,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 30/3/2026, 8.

faculties – unlike many other university disciplines – in the same way as they were in the nineteenth century?” The current structure of five core disciplines (Old and New Testament, Church History or History of Christianity, Systematic Theology and Practical Theology) leads to the omission of other potential fields of research and complicates the communication with non-theological disciplines in the field of humanities which do practise a different structure of their scholarly activities. Often the existing structure prevents an interdisciplinary cooperation with its surplus of new perspectives.

Secondly, the authors asked about the confessional character of theological education. “Does it make sense that faculties continue to be single-denominational?” This is a relevant question not only for universities with more than one theological faculty like in Tübingen, Prague or Budapest, but also – and perhaps even more – for universities with faculties of one particular confessional colour. For students it could be much more interesting to have an inherent access to a pluriformity of approaches during their studies.

The third issue the article raised concerns the integration of practice into the academic studies. To the authors the study of theology, especially in its first stages, tends to be rather distant from practical application and relevance. Students could find motivation in experiencing the applicability of theology in a non-academic context much earlier. Consequently, the authors advocated an integration of small schools of theological education into larger entities in order to enable students to be a part of a larger academic community. To them the option of separate institutions for theological education outside the university, run by a church (or churches) would be unacceptable, because it would isolate theology not only from an organic communication with humanities, but also from natural sciences which on the level of ethical issues offer a multidisciplinary field.

Faculties (and churches as well) should not avoid this difficult discussion about their future, but instead take the initiative that would eventually lead to changes of theological education. By that approach the position of theology and its contribution for the wider society could be strengthened. “Our country’s academic landscape would be significantly poorer without strong theological departments. And the viability of a country that is becoming increasingly multi-religious would also be in a worse state. Conversely, anyone who expects religious law and the state-church agreements to protect permanently a university discipline from capacity adjustments undermines in the medium term both the acceptance of theology amongst other

disciplines as well as the legitimacy of a core element of cooperative-liberal constitutional law on religion. This price would be so high that it could not be justified by anything.”

The statement of the three German theologians proposed not only a restructuring of theological studies and institutions, but also a new model of the academic theological discipline. Faculties have to abandon models that were developed in the 19th century, because that world has gone by. As other academic disciplines have drawn consequences from this reality, so should theology if it wants to be a part of the discourse in wider field of academia.

The same could be applied to churches and models of churches. The current wave of reorganisations in many European churches should – along the same line of argumentation – not only be implemented because of diminishing finances, but also because they reflect the realisation that the hitherto usual model of being church is related to a world of the past. A quite radical consequence of this type of analysis is drawn by Jan Loffeld in his *Wenn nichts fehlt, wo Gott fehlt. Das Christentum vor der religiösen Indifferenz*.² For Loffeld, a German theologian of roman catholic origin now teaching in Tilburg, this means that in church and theology we have to accept that the claim of many theologies that a human being needs religion, is not anymore valid. Many people in the modern world live a good, sustainable and fulfilling life without God, faith or church. We have to acknowledge that faith does not have a relevance for every human being, and that God is not necessary to achieve a completeness in one's life. This, according to Loffeld, should lead to a transformation of the church, away from the approach to be universally accessible and present (the parish model) towards core communities representing biblical values in a pluralist world.

Loffeld's theses have caused much more debate in roman catholic circles than in the protestant environment. In the Czech context – the book was translated in 2025 – it became a part of the debate on a reform of the Roman Catholic Church related to the efforts of Tomáš Petráček (see e.g. his article in *Communio Viatorum* 2025/2) and Tomáš Halík. Books of the latter (especially his *Patience with God: The story of Zacchaeus continuing in us*³) have been translated into several main languages and are being read in both protestant

² Freiburg im Breisgau: Verlag Herder GmbH, 2024.

³ New York: Doubleday, 2009.

and roman catholic circles in European countries where people realise that the majority church of the past is currently in fact a minority church.

The discovery of Löffeld, Halík and Petráček and their readership is that being a minority can also be a positive value. Minorities have often much better sensors for what is going on in the broader society, are more inclined to stand up to warn against potentially harmful developments, to defend or improve standards of justice and equality, because they are easily affected by them as well. In the current search for encouragement and orientation for how to be church in the dramatically changing circumstances churches with a long experience of a minority existence could therefore serve as a source of inspiration for communities with a majority background. Such an exchange is now regularly taking place in the network of a minority church like the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren. Visitors – often groups – from especially Germany explore the situation and the experiences of this church that has never lived in other circumstances than “diaspora”: small communities with a distinct identity in a society that treats them either with indifference or – in some periods – with suspicion, sometimes distrust. The Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren carries within its theological DNA the important realisation that, even during many of the more challenging periods of its past, it has managed to survive and carry out its work in a meaningful way. It harbours a healthy scepticism towards institutions and institutionalism, and knows that the church lives in communities. This minority status embodies a certain freedom, joy, critical thinking, determination and a sense of belonging. Freedom, because it has learnt from experience that a change in its status does not merely signify the loss of what has passed, but also the gain of what is to come. It is able to take joy in finding meaning in how it can make a difference in society. As a minority, it is acutely sensitive to a lack of understanding and acceptance in the public sphere. It possesses a significant, disproportionate potential for integration within the context of public life.

Human rights, as a set of values concerning human dignity, responsibility and solidarity, became, following the fall of the communist regime, a clear framework through which the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren presented itself – and continues to present itself – to society. Its commitment to building a democratic, open society led to remarkable steps which, in the context of the time, were pioneering like in the case of the 1995 Declaration on Czech-German Reconciliation or the Declaration against Racism from the same year. The church demonstrated that it is not afraid to stand up against

the prevailing tide in Czech politics (with the exception of the painful silence of the church to the situation in Palestine). It is no coincidence that in the last years many Protestants have actively participated in a grassroots movement defending democratic principles of society.

To be a minority community is not *a priori* a handicap, but can present an environment of hope and encouragement. Or in the words of Tomáš Halík paraphrasing Jan Löffeld:

The fundamental transformation we are currently experiencing in Europe cannot be overcome by some external intervention or at the snap of a finger – that would lead to an underestimation of the situation and to a further spiral of the old frustrations. Nevertheless, we should open ourselves up to a discussion that might shift our perspectives slightly and rearrange our priorities. This would certainly also require a review of dogmatic assumptions and topics, which we may explore at another time and in a different way. Do not expect precise formulations of grand theological theses, nor ‘applications’, or indeed a comprehensive consideration of practical implications. One thing is clear, however: Christianity undoubtedly has a future, though it is likely to be completely different from what we can imagine and plan for today.⁴

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4 Tomáš Halík in the foreword of the Czech translation of Löffelds *Wenn nichts fehlt, wo Gott fehlt*, 14.

A Cognitive Linguistic Interpretation of שִׁים עֵין עַל in Genesis 44:21

Zacharias Kotzé

Abstract: The Hebrew idiom שִׁים עֵין עַל (“to set/put the eye on”) appears in Genesis 44:21 within Judah’s speech, where he quotes Joseph’s command concerning Benjamin. Traditional interpretations have generally understood the phrase as a neutral or benevolent expression of attention or authority. This article proposes that, from Judah’s fearful perspective, the idiom evokes the image of a powerful and potentially dangerous gaze. Employing a cognitive linguistic approach, the study analyses the expression as a metaphorical-metonymic construction in which the eye functions as an instrument of influence and authority. Attention is given to the idiom’s dual valence – capable of conveying both benevolent oversight (cf. Jer 24:6) and potential threat – and to its relationship with the more frequent prophetic idiom שִׁים פָּנִים עַל (“set the face on”). Ancient Near Eastern parallels, particularly from Mesopotamia and Egypt, illuminate the cultural background of the active, projective eye and help clarify Judah’s anxiety in the context of the silver cup crisis (Gen 44:2–17). By focusing on Judah’s perspective, this study offers new insight into the emotional depth and cultural resonance of Genesis 44–45, contributing to a broader understanding of how biblical authors engaged with shared regional concepts of vision, power, and authority.

Keywords: cognitive linguistics; powerful gaze; שִׁים עֵין עַל; Genesis 44:21; Judah’s speech; ancient Near East; metaphor

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Introduction

The Hebrew idiom שִׁים עֵין עַל (*šim ‘ayin ‘al*), “to set/put the eye on,” appears in Genesis 44:21 within Judah’s impassioned plea to Joseph. Traditional interpretations have largely understood the expression as a neutral or benevolent act – an expression of Joseph’s desire to see his younger brother or an assertion of royal oversight. However, such readings risk overlooking the cultural and emotional weight the phrase may have carried for Judah in a moment of profound vulnerability and fear.

This study proposes that, from Judah’s perspective, שִׁים עֵין עַל evokes the image of a powerful and potentially dangerous gaze. In the ancient Near Eastern worldview, the eye was widely regarded as an active force capable of exerting real influence – for blessing as well as for harm. Judah’s immediate

concern that Benjamin might “die” if he leaves his father (v. 22) takes on added resonance when read against this background. Rather than dismissing this fear as mere rhetorical exaggeration, the present analysis seeks to explore whether Judah’s words reflect an intuitive awareness of the idiom’s darker potential.

Scholarly treatments have tended to emphasise Joseph’s ultimate benevolence or the narrative movement toward reconciliation. Commentators such as Skinner, Westermann, von Rad, Hamilton, Alter, and Sarna have interpreted the phrase primarily in terms of curiosity, authority, or familial concern.¹ Even Wenham, who comes closest to acknowledging the potential for fear in Judah’s plea, does not connect the idiom to broader ancient Near Eastern beliefs about the active and sometimes harmful power of the eye.² This persistent focus on positive or neutral intent has left an important cultural and psychological dimension of the text underexplored.

The present article seeks to address this gap. Drawing on cognitive linguistics and ancient Near Eastern comparative material, it argues that שים עין על can be fruitfully understood as part of a wider conceptual field of the powerful gaze, one that includes both benevolent oversight and the potential for threat or destruction. By focusing on Judah’s fearful perspective within the narrative drama of Genesis 44–45, this study aims to illuminate how the idiom contributes to the emotional depth and theological sophistication of the Joseph story.

The following sections will first outline the theoretical and methodological framework before proceeding to a detailed linguistic analysis of the idiom, its ancient Near Eastern parallels, and its function within the broader narrative.

Theoretical Framework

Cognitive linguistics provides a robust interdisciplinary framework for analysing how language reflects and shapes human conceptual systems. Emerging

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- 1 John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (ICC), 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930), 468; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37–50* (Continental Commentary; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986), 128–129; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (OTL), rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 405; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 569; Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 263; Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 306.
 - 2 Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (Word Biblical Commentary 2; Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 426–427.

in the late 1970s and 1980s, it rejects the formalist view of language as an autonomous module and instead emphasises its deep grounding in embodied experience, perception, and cultural context. Central to this approach is the recognition that human thought is fundamentally metaphorical and that linguistic expressions offer valuable insight into underlying conceptual structures.

The foundations of modern cognitive linguistics were laid by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By*, which demonstrated that metaphor is not merely a rhetorical ornament but a basic mechanism of human cognition.³ They introduced the notion of conceptual metaphor, whereby a source domain (typically concrete and embodied) is systematically mapped onto a target domain (usually more abstract). Classic examples such as ‘argument is war’ or ‘time is money’ illustrate how everyday language reveals deeper patterns of thought. For biblical Hebrew, this approach is particularly fruitful because many expressions involving body parts (eye, hand, heart, face) function as vehicles for complex conceptual mappings.⁴

Subsequent scholarship has significantly refined and expanded Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). Zoltán Kövecses has stressed the crucial role of context – both situational and cultural – in metaphor variation, while Dirk Geeraerts and Hubert Cuyckens have highlighted the importance of prototype theory and encyclopaedic semantics.⁵ Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner’s Conceptual Blending Theory offers a complementary model for understanding how multiple input spaces can be integrated into emergent meaning structures, often with creative or culturally specific outcomes.⁶ Important work on embodiment and gesture by Alan Cienki and Cornelia Müller,

3 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

4 Édouard Dhorme, *L’emploi métaphorique des noms de parties du corps en hébreu et en akkadien* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1963).

5 Zoltán Kövecses, *Where Metaphors Come From: Reconsidering Context in Metaphor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Dirk Geeraerts and Hubert Cuyckens (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

6 Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind’s Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

as well as broader overviews such as Barbara Dancygier's *Cambridge Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*, have further enriched the analytical toolkit.⁷

Within biblical studies, cognitive linguistic approaches have proven especially valuable for uncovering culturally embedded conceptual patterns. One such approach emphasises the need for careful integration of philological precision with attention to embodied experience and cultural context in the analysis of biblical metaphors.⁸ This methodology emphasises that conceptual metaphors are not universal but are shaped by the particular cultural and environmental realities of ancient Israel and the ancient Near East. For example, the concept of fire in the Hebrew Bible is more strongly associated with destructive force and divine judgment than with the English emphasis on emotional intensity.⁹ Similarly, studies on linguistic relativity in Hebrew metaphor underscore how ancient Israelite categories of perception, power, and agency differ significantly from modern Western ones.¹⁰

In the present study, these insights are applied to the idiom שים עין על ("to set/put the eye on"). Rather than treating the expression as a simple idiom of attention or favour, the analysis explores its potential as a metaphorical-metonymic construction in which the eye functions as a powerful instrument of influence or authority. This approach draws on image-schematic elements (such as the projection of a ray or beam) and culturally informed notions of the powerful or dangerous gaze widely attested in the ancient Near East, while remaining open to the ambiguity inherent in such expressions (capable of both positive and negative outcomes).

By integrating foundational works, more recent theoretical refinements, and culturally sensitive applications developed in Hebrew Bible scholarship, this framework seeks to avoid both overly universalist readings and insufficiently grounded cultural eisegesis. It provides a balanced methodology for examining how שים עין על in Genesis 44:21 operates within Judah's speech – as a culturally resonant expression of power, threat, and authority.

7 Alan J. Cienki and Cornelia Müller, *Metaphor and Gesture* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2008); Barbara Dancygier (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

8 Zacharias Kotzé, "A Cognitive Linguistic Methodology for the Study of Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 31/1 (2005), 107–117.

9 Zacharias Kotzé, "Women, Fire and Dangerous Things in the Hebrew Bible: Insights from the Cognitive Theory of Metaphor," *Old Testament Essays* 17/2 (2004), 242–251.

10 Zacharias Kotzé, "Linguistic Relativity and the Interpretation of Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible: The Case of שים עין על in Job 16:9," *Old Testament Essays* 20/2 (2007), 387–394.

Linguistic Analysis of שִׁים עֵין עַל

The idiom שִׁים עֵין עַל (*šim 'ayin 'al*, “to set/put the eye on”) occurs in Genesis 44:21 within Judah’s speech, where he quotes Joseph’s earlier directive: “Bring him down to me that I may set my eye on him” (וְאֶשְׁמְתִּי עֵינִי עָלָיו). Traditional interpretations often render this as a neutral or benevolent expression of scrutiny or favour. A cognitive linguistic analysis, however, reveals a more complex metaphorical-metonymic construction rooted in ancient Israelite and ancient Near Eastern embodied cognition.

The verb שִׁים (“to set, place, direct”) combined with עֵין (“eye”) and the preposition עַל (“upon/against”) belongs to a wider family of body-part expressions in Biblical Hebrew that conceptualise the exercise of power, authority, or intentional influence. Parallel constructions include שִׁים יָד עַל (“set the hand upon” = to take control or strike), שִׁים לֵב עַל (“set the heart/mind upon” = to pay attention or resolve), and especially the far more frequent שִׁים פָּנִים אֶל/עַל/נֶגֶד (“set the face toward/against”). These expressions treat body parts as instruments through which a person (or deity) extends their will and power into the world.

A clear positive use of שִׁים עֵין עַל appears in Jeremiah 24:6, where YHWH promises the exiles: “I will set my eye upon them for good” (וְשָׁמְתִי עֵינִי עֲלֵיהֶם לְטוֹבָה). Similarly, in Jeremiah 39:12 Nebuchadnezzar employs the idiom in a positive sense, commanding his servant to שִׁים עֵינֶיךָ עָלָיו (“set your eyes on him”), or protect Jeremiah.¹¹ In Amos 9:4, however, God declares וְשָׁמְתִי עֵינִי עֲלֵיהֶם לְרָעָה (“I will set my eye on them for evil”), linking the gaze to divine judgment and destruction.¹² This demonstrates the idiom’s dual valence: it can signal benevolent oversight and protection as readily as threat or harm, depending on context and the power/status of the agent. In Genesis 44:21, Judah’s recounting of Joseph’s words occurs in a context of acute vulnerability, suggesting he interprets the “setting of the eye” on Benjamin as potentially ominous.

This usage aligns with the ancient Near Eastern extramission theory of vision, according to which the eye actively projects a substance or ray of light/energy outward, rather than merely passively receiving images. A strong,

11 William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 26–52* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 285.

12 Shalom M. Paul, *Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 277–278.

bright eye signified health, vitality, and power, while a dim or weak eye indicated frailty or old age. The eyes of gods, kings, and powerful individuals were regarded as especially potent, capable of exerting real influence – blessing, cursing, protecting, or destroying.¹³

The eye in שֵׁם עַיִן על functions metonymically for the person as a whole or, more specifically, for their authority and intentionality (*pars pro toto*). This metonymy is extended metaphorically through the image schema ‘visual contact is physical contact’ (or ‘to see is to touch with the eye’). When the agent is powerful, the gaze-as-touch becomes an instrument capable of producing tangible effects.

Particularly instructive is the close conceptual relationship between שֵׁם עַיִן על and the more common prophetic idiom שֵׁם פָּנִים עַל/אֵל/בְּגַד (“to set the face against”). The face (פָּנִים) frequently serves as a metonym for the eyes in such expressions. In prophetic literature, שֵׁם פָּנִים עַל consistently functions as a metaphor for a destructive, hostile gaze – often with clear desiccating or consuming effects fully consistent with cross-cultural evil eye imagery.¹⁴ Examples include:

- Ezekiel 15:7 (“I will set my face against them [...] and a fire will consume them”), where the gaze results in fiery destruction.
- Ezekiel 29:2–5, where setting the face against Pharaoh leads to the vivid image of the water monster (*tannîn*) dragged onto dry land and left to wither – a classic desiccating motif of the evil eye.¹⁵

These prophetic parallels strongly suggest that שֵׁם עַיִן על in Genesis 44:21 carries a similar potential for threat, especially when uttered by a figure of great authority such as Joseph. From Judah’s perspective, Joseph’s command may evoke anxiety that Benjamin will enter the dangerous sphere of a powerful gaze – one that can bless or destroy.

¹³ John H. Elliott, *Beware the Evil Eye: The Evil Eye in the Bible and the Ancient World*, vol. 2 (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2016), 1–45.

¹⁴ Zacharias Kotzé, “The Destructive Gaze: ‘Setting the Face Against’ as Evil Eye Metaphor in Prophetic Literature,” *Colloquia Theologica Ottoniana* 41 (2025), 175–186.

¹⁵ Alan Dundes, “Wet and Dry, the Evil Eye,” in Alan Dundes (ed.), *The Evil Eye: A Folklore Casebook* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 257–312.

Ancient Near Eastern Parallels and the Dangerous Gaze

The interpretation of שֵׁם עֵין על gains depth when placed within the wider ancient Near Eastern understanding of vision and the gaze. Ancient Israelites, like their neighbours, largely operated with an extramission theory of vision, according to which the eye actively projects a substance, ray, or power that can affect the external world.¹⁶

Belief in the dangerous or envious gaze is one of the oldest and most widespread concepts in the ancient Near East. Some of the earliest known incantations against the evil eye come from Sumerian sources (late third to early second millennium BCE). These texts frequently portray the evil eye as a quasi-independent malevolent force that roams the land, causing infertility, crop failure, illness, and death – effects consistent with the desiccating motif widely attested cross-culturally.¹⁷ Importantly, the evil eye was not confined to specialised anti-evil-eye spells; it appears ubiquitously across Sumerian literary genres, including myths, hymns, and wisdom literature, often linked to divine agency and destructive power.¹⁸

In the Akkadian period and beyond (second and first millennia BCE), the evil eye (*īnu lemuttu*) features regularly in incantations, omen literature, and anti-witchcraft rituals such as the *Utukkū Lemnūtu* and *Maqlū* series. Deities such as Enlil are frequently depicted wielding a withering or scorching gaze, capable of bringing blight, famine, or cosmic disruption.¹⁹ Interestingly, the Akkadian *ina īnī šakānu* (“to place the eye upon”) appears in ritual texts, often with an implied threat when associated with divine authority.²⁰ For example, in the *Enūma Anu Enlil* omen series, Tablet 25 associates Šamaš placing his eye on the land with judgement and calamities, like famine or defeat.²¹

16 John H. Elliott, *Beware the Evil Eye: The Evil Eye in the Bible and the Ancient World*, vol. 2 (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2016), 1–45.

17 Erich Ebeling, “Beschwörungen gegen den Feind und den bösen Blick aus dem Zweistromlande,” *Archiv für Orientforschung* 17 (1954–1956), 203–211; Alan Dundes, “Wet and Dry, the Evil Eye,” in Alan Dundes (ed.), *The Evil Eye: A Folklore Casebook* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 257–312.

18 Zacharias Kotzé, “The Evil Eye of Sumerian Deities,” *Asian and African Studies* 26 (2017), 103–116.

19 Markham J. Geller, *Evil Demons: Canonical Utukkū Lemnūtu Incantations* (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2007), 30–32, 47.

20 Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 45–47.

21 Hermann Hunger, *Enūma Anu Enlil: A Catalog of the Series* (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 1992), 25–26.

Egyptian traditions likewise attest to the active, autonomous power of the eye. The Eye of Ra, attested from the Old Kingdom and becoming particularly prominent in the Middle and New Kingdoms, was conceptualised as a fiery, independent agent that could incinerate enemies or, when pacified, offer protection.²² Similarly, the Eye of Horus, while primarily protective, also embodies a dual nature, capable of destruction when wielded by gods like Sekhmet against enemies.²³ Borghouts has drawn attention to the dangerous, aggressive aspect of divine eyes in ancient Egypt, notably in spells directed against Apophis, where the eye functions as a weapon of destruction.²⁴

West Semitic evidence, though more fragmentary, points in the same direction. In Ugaritic texts, the eye can be used as a weapon against enemies, as seen in the Baal Cycle, KTU 1.2 I: “Your eye (*ʿayn*) will strike the foe like a serpent.”²⁵ This piercing stare enacts curses in ritual contexts, channelling divine wrath.²⁶ A notable Ugaritic text (KTU² 1.96) contains what appears to be an incantation against the evil eye, analysed in detail by James N. Ford, who situates it firmly within the broader ancient Near Eastern context of apotropaic rituals against envious or malevolent gazes.²⁷

This diachronic and cross-cultural survey demonstrates that the conceptualisation of the gaze as an active channel of power – capable of both blessing and harm – was deeply rooted across the ancient Near East for more than two millennia before the composition of the Joseph narrative. In such a cultural environment, Judah’s anxiety when recounting Joseph’s intention to “set his eye on” Benjamin becomes entirely intelligible. The idiom שֵׁים עַיִן על, especially when uttered by a figure of immense authority, could readily evoke the sphere of a powerful and potentially dangerous gaze – an idea reinforced by the frequent use of the parallel construction שֵׁים פְּנִים על (“set

22 Geraldine Pinch, *Magic in Ancient Egypt* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 45–52.

23 Ibid., 128–130.

24 J. F. Borghouts, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 1–5, 85–87; J. F. Borghouts, “The evil eye of Apophis,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 59 (1973), 114–150.

25 Mark S. Smith, *The Ugaritic Baal Cycle*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 112–114.

26 Simon B. Parker, *The Pre-Biblical Narrative Tradition* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 46.

27 James N. Ford, “‘Ninety-nine by the Evil Eye and One from Natural Causes’: KTU² 1.96 in its Near Eastern Context,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 30 (1998), 201–278.

the face against”) in prophetic literature, where it consistently functions as a metaphor for hostile, destructive intent.²⁸

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognised that the Hebrew Bible engages with, yet often subtly reframes or ethicises, these ancient Near Eastern concepts related to the evil eye, transforming what was elsewhere a supernatural threat into a critique of moral failings such as greed and withholding.²⁹ In Genesis 44:21, the idiom appears to retain something of its older, potentially ominous resonance when filtered through Judah’s fearful perspective.

Judah’s Perspective and Narrative Implications

Judah’s speech in Genesis 44:18–34 represents a pivotal moment in the Joseph narrative. From his perspective, Joseph’s command to “set my eye on” Benjamin (שִׁים עֵין עַל, v. 21) carries an undercurrent of anxiety. Having quoted Joseph’s earlier directive, Judah immediately adds that if Benjamin leaves his father, “he would die” (v. 22). While most commentators understand this as a reference to Jacob’s grief, the immediate narrative context and Judah’s evident fear allow for a more layered reading: Benjamin might perish under the potent gaze of a powerful figure.

This anxiety becomes intelligible when read against the ancient Near Eastern background of the active, powerful gaze. As established above, the eye was understood as an instrument capable of exerting real influence – for good or for ill. The idiom שִׁים עֵין עַל belongs to the same conceptual family as the more frequent prophetic expression שִׁים פְּנִים עַל, which in contexts of judgment consistently signals dangerous or destructive intent. Judah, speaking from a position of vulnerability and guilt, appears to interpret Joseph’s words as placing Benjamin within the sphere of a powerful and potentially threatening gaze.

The rhetorical power of Judah’s speech lies precisely in this ambiguity. By highlighting the danger to Benjamin, Judah offers himself as a substitute (v. 33), demonstrating a profound transformation from the brother who once sold Joseph into slavery. This marks the climax of the brothers’ repentance

28 Zacharias Kotzé, “The Destructive Gaze: ‘Setting the Face Against’ as Evil Eye Metaphor in Prophetic Literature,” *Colloquia Theologica Ottoniana* 41 (2025), 175–186.

29 Zacharias Kotzé, “Taming the Evil Eye: Ironical Reframing of ‘Ayin Rā’ah in the Hebrew Bible,” *Studia Biblica Slovaca* 18/1 (2026), 17–30.

and sets the stage for reconciliation in Genesis 45.³⁰ Joseph's eventual revelation and emotional embrace (45:1–15) dramatically reverses the perceived threat: the powerful gaze shifts from potential harm to recognition, mercy, and restoration.

The narrative thus draws effectively on the dual valence inherent in the idiom שִׁים עֵין על – capable of both threat and benevolent attention (cf. Jer 24:6) – to heighten emotional tension and drive the theological drama. What Judah fears as a dangerous assertion of authority becomes, in the larger story, an instrument of divine providence. Joseph, as the one “in whom the Spirit of God resides” (Gen 41:38), ultimately uses his power not to destroy but to preserve life, fulfilling the theme that “you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Gen 50:20).

This reading does not require viewing Joseph's gaze as literally malevolent. Rather, it recognises that Judah, shaped by his cultural worldview and personal guilt, perceives real danger in the idiom. The narrative arc illustrates how the biblical authors could draw directly on culturally resonant concepts of the powerful and potentially dangerous gaze that were widespread in the ancient Near East, integrating them into the theological portrayal of divine sovereignty and human transformation.

Conclusion

This study has proposed that the idiom שִׁים עֵין על in Genesis 44:21 can be productively understood within the framework of ancient Near Eastern conceptualisations of the powerful and potentially dangerous gaze. Rather than a neutral expression of attention, the phrase belongs to a broader family of bodily expressions (especially שִׁים פָּנִים על) that convey directed power and influence. In Judah's speech, the idiom carries a perceptible note of anxiety: Benjamin is about to enter the sphere of a powerful figure's gaze – one that, in the cultural world of the ancient Near East, could bring either favour or harm.

The analysis has highlighted the idiom's dual valence, attested both in positive contexts (e.g., Jer 24:6) and in numerous prophetic passages where שִׁים פָּנִים על is associated with judgment, fire, desiccation, and destruction.

³⁰ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (Word Biblical Commentary 2; Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 426–427.

These destructive associations – scorching, withering, consuming – align closely with widespread ancient Near Eastern imagery of the dangerous gaze, including early Sumerian incantations, Mesopotamian anti-witchcraft texts, and Egyptian traditions surrounding the Eye of Ra.

Read in this light, Judah's fearful interpretation of Joseph's words becomes culturally coherent. The narrative then dramatically reverses this perceived threat. What begins as anxiety about a powerful gaze culminates in Joseph's revelation, tears, and acts of mercy (Gen 45:1–15), illustrating how divine providence can transform even a potentially ominous situation into preservation and reconciliation (Gen 50:20).

By drawing on cognitive linguistics and ancient Near Eastern parallels, this study has sought to illuminate how the biblical authors could employ culturally resonant concepts of the active, powerful eye without reducing them to mere rhetorical devices. The Joseph narrative thus stands as a sophisticated example of the integration of shared regional motifs into a distinctively Israelite theological framework, where human and divine power ultimately serve purposes of life and restoration.

Future research could fruitfully extend this approach to other gaze-related expressions in the Hebrew Bible, explore diachronic developments across different literary strata, or examine how these concepts interact with notions of divine oversight and human agency in broader biblical theology.

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Transtextuality and the Lukan Nativity Prefix¹

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Abstract: This article applies transtextuality theory to the nativity narrative prefix in the Gospel of Luke. After briefly explaining the theory, the article examines how the Lukan storytelling plan moulds the Markan-inherited tradition. As opposed to the historical-critical approaches that seek to differentiate the authentic traditions from the inauthentic, as in form criticism, transtextual theory aims to understand and appreciate how the various components mutually interact to form a unified whole that functions on the synchronic plane in its present shape. As opposed to redaction criticism, the Gospel of Luke is not viewed as a mere embellishment of Mark but as an original story version to be considered in its own right. Transtextuality theory explains the inner workings between the individuating textual components that animate the Lukan story and how the resulting version creates a differing image of the *dramatis personae* therein.

Keywords: transtextuality; literary theory; nativity prefix; Gospel of Luke

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Introduction

It is held today that the Gospel of Luke was written “between 80 and 90 CE”², that is, after the Gospel of Mark, on which it relied, assuming Markan priority. “Many³ have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things...”⁴ Then, the author of the Gospel of Luke continues, saying that he, too, decided to write “an orderly account”.⁵ Whether orderly refers to temporal, narrative, theological or any other sequence may be a matter for debate. Nonetheless, in Luke, we have a written account of Jesus’ life that both depends on a Markan

1 The study was supported by Charles University, project GA UK 386021. This article may bear a resemblance in places to the wording and argument as found in the conference proceedings expected to be published [the conference *Transformations of Religious Identity in Judaism and Christianity* was held at the HTF UK (November 22, 2021), with my following conference contribution: “Jesus – John the Baptist relation as depicted in Luke 1–2 (with relation to 3–4)”].

2 François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, trans. Christine M. Thomas (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 9.

3 As per the Farrer theory, Luke was aware of Mark and maybe even of Matthew.

4 Lk 1:1a, Revised Standard Version (RSV).

5 *καθεξῆς* – “pert. to being in sequence in time, space, or logic, in order, one after the other”; Walter Bauer, “*καθεξῆς*,” Frederick W. Danker (ed.), BDAG 490.

narrative template and is innovative enough to be taken on its own terms. The textual relationship can be viewed as an encounter between the narrative tradition (Mark) and its literary innovation (Luke). This article will focus on Luke's innovative features for two reasons as indicated below.

The first reason concerns the literary context of the gospel writers, who may have been in competition with one another. Let's suppose that the Matthean and Lukan accounts had been designed not only to fill the gaps in Mark, which could have been perceived as silence on key points of interest (such as the nativity scene and Jesus' early life) but also to replace Mark as the primary narrative about Jesus, an assumption maintained throughout this paper. If this is true, Luke should be regarded as a literary innovation in its own right and not simply as an extension. As a new literary construct, Luke's story is predicated on innovative features. These include his novel prefixing, which compels the reader to appreciate both the literary qualities of the writing and the newly told story. Luke picks up where Mark ends and reconstructs Jesus' story in a way that moves beyond mere embellishments to develop a more intriguing narrative that provides an alternative account.

The second reason for prioritising the narrative of Luke as a newly constructed literary product over its indebtedness to Mark, is the fascinating construct of a new story world that the reader is invited to enter. The construct of this imaginative world, which differs from Mark's, is of particular interest in this paper.

To appreciate the story world that Luke creates requires an approach that focuses on the interrelationships of the narrative components. Therefore, this article aims to identify the distinctive textual features contributing to constructing the Lukan story world. Transtextual literary theory, as conceptualised by the French literary theorist, Gérard Genette, serves as an explanatory model for understanding Luke's composition process.

This article is divided into two parts. The first explains Genette's theory of transtextuality, while the second applies the theory through the observation of coordinates depicted in a diagram in the form of arrow icons that make up the Lukan story architecture.

Explaining the Theory

According to Genette, transtextuality (or textual transcendence) is "everything that brings it [the text] into relation (manifest or hidden) with

other texts.”⁶ The theory is closely related to intertextuality, a term (*l'intertextualité*) first coined by Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian literary critic, within the context of structuralism and its criticism in the post-structuralist period.

Further differentiation of the transtextuality can be provided. Genette frequently uses the terms “intertextuality,” “metatextuality,” “paratextuality,” and “hypertextuality,” which are essential for understanding the following: the text in its present shape is a reaction to a pre-existing text; the text is a composite product, a sum of its individuating textual parts, which all participate in meaning creation.⁷

According to Genette, the key terms are defined as follows. “Intertextuality [...] is the literal presence (more or less literal, whether integral or not) of one text within another. [...] Metatextuality [is] [...] the transtextual relationship that links a commentary to the text it comments on.”⁸ The most common intertextual relational occurrence is, for example, in the form of citations, allusions and echoes that are present within a final text, whereas the metatextual relations may be encountered through referential literature (commentaries, textbooks, dictionaries), enabling a better understanding of the text in question.

Paratextuality is a category that is used to observe an interplay between a main text and its surrounding paratext, which Genette defines as “those liminal devices and conventions, both within the book (*peritext*) and outside it (*epitext*), that mediate the book to the reader: titles and subtitles, pseudonyms, forewords, dedications, epigraphs, prefaces, intertitles, notes, epilogues, and afterwords.”⁹ Genette delineates that paratext is a “threshold, vestibule and an undefined zone between the inside and the outside [of text].”¹⁰ Finally, Genette uses the term hypertextuality, which is defined as “the superimposition of a later text on an earlier one that includes all forms

6 Gérard Genette, *The Architext: An Introduction*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 81.

7 This realisation is vital when compared with the fragmentary historical-critical approaches that, by separating the in/authentic traditions, assume the possibility of looking behind the text into a putative real “past”. However, as a construct, the text is a self-enclosed object and a literary representation in its entirety that may not necessarily correspond to a reality outside itself but, rather, seeks to tell a unique story wherein each component proves indispensable in such a storytelling task.

8 Genette, *The Architext*, 81–83.

9 Richard Macksey, foreword to *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, by Gérard Genette, trans. Jane E. Lewin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), xviii.

10 *Ibid.*, xvii.

of imitation, pastiche, and parody.”¹¹ Hence, we have a word pair combining hypertext and its corresponding hypotext; that is, an overlying text and the underlying text.

The main reason for drawing attention to all of these terms is that they explain the process of transtextuality, which assumes a relational and referential architecture of various inter/para/hyper/hypo-textual aspects that make up the text in its current form, that is, the process of narrative construction concerning initially external influences that were transtextually drawn into the construction process.¹²

Contemporary Discussion

This section provides a brief overview of contemporary discussion on the problems of transtextuality theory, with a specific focus on one of its distinctive components: paratextuality. Given that Genette’s theory remains a touchstone, this section focuses primarily on how contemporary authors engage with his work.

Stanley E. Porter,¹³ a textual critic, when commenting on Patrick An-drist’s literary-critical remarks, finds Genette’s definition of paratext problematic for several reasons, which can be subsumed under the following headings: text definition, modern situation, and problems of authorship.

- a) Text definition: to understand the paratext, one must define the notion of the text, which is problematic, as there is no clear definition of what the text is.
- b) Modern situation: Genette defines paratext as applying to modern published books,¹⁴ a situation that can hardly be utilised with regard to ancient literature.

11 Macksey, foreword, xix.

12 Michael Riffaterre holds that the text cannot be understandable without recognising its intertext. See Jiří Lukeš, “Leviticus 19,18 v recepci Nového zákona – Text, který žije ‘novým životem’. O intertextualitě v prostředí biblických textů,” in Jiří Beneš (ed.), *Otevřené dveře – Leviticus 19* (Chomutov: Pontes Pragenses, 2012), 164.

13 Stanley E. Porter, “What Is Paratext? In Search of an Elusive Category,” in *Studies on the Paratextual Features of Early New Testament Manuscripts* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 13–32.

14 Genette seems to avoid the conceptualisation of the text as something functioning beyond the realm of the book. For more about the problems of his lack of interest concerning text functionality in other types of media, see the criticism in Georg Stanitzek, “Texts and Paratexts in Media,” *Critical Inquiry* 32/1 (2005), 35.

c) Problems of authorship: Andrist regards the concept of paratext as problematic, as Genette links paratext to authorial control.

As will be shown, the above points are mutually linked. For example, one cannot satisfactorily address the problem of text definition, and hence the question of what the text-related paratext might actually entail, when operating within the conceptually anachronistic coordinates of modern categories without further reflection. (However, the present article takes a positive view of utilising Genette's categories of transtextuality, merely as "working categories".) Moreover, the problem of authorship looms even larger, if modern concepts of copyright, or authorial self-consciousness as sanctioned by the modern intellectual property law, were non-existent; for this reason, the distinction between an actual author, an authorial community, and the reception of a given work through its rewritings by the subsequent readers/authors renders the task of pinpointing the blurred distinction between authorship and readership increasingly difficult.

Touching upon text definition (a), Porter provides his readers with seven conceptions of text: ontological, phenomenological, philological, literary, linguistic, semiological, and text-critical conceptions, which correspond respectively to seven text dimensions: text as reflective of a reality, text as experienced, text as an established idealisation through a linguistic code, text as a medium, text as an interplay of signs and signification, and text as a physical representation. Since there is no single definition of text, Porter seeks to problematise that which Genette calls paratext, understood as everything standing outside the author's control or, at least, as somewhat sanctioned by the author.¹⁵

Here, we have touched upon the problem of the modern situation (b), wherein "Genette considers everything but the text (which he attributes to the author) as paratext, including epitext and peritext, even if he later differentiates between authorial and publisher epitext. However, it must be noted that Genette is concerned with a published work, not a handwritten manuscript."¹⁶ As Porter points out, "[t]his is highly problematic, even for a published book, as the published text, as a literary text, is itself merely a representation of the authorial text; that is, it is a printed version of the text written by the author. In that regard, every published book, and by

¹⁵ Porter, "What Is Paratext?," 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

implication every copied manuscript, is entirely paratext or epitext.”¹⁷ To press the argument further, if one adopts the conception of text, in its physical dimension, as a physical representation (the text-critical conception), rather than as a mere reflection of an elusive reality standing outside or beyond its physical reality (the ontological conception), nothing can be deemed an authorial text. What remains, instead, is the work of later scribes, editors, compilers, and recipient readers, who, by definition, co-author or participate in text creation, (c) problem of authorship, whose “authorial presence” can equally be found grafted upon the text. Porter is entirely dismissive of the idea of defining text and paratext, let alone of relating them to each other. Admittedly, Genette’s theory is rightly seen as problematic by critics if the transtextual categories are taken beyond the immediate questions of “Paratext for whom and in what context?”¹⁸ One may speak consciously of “received text” or “received paratext” without presupposing an authorial presence in “an earliest reconstructable text”. In its current shape and form, the text stands outside putative authorial control, yet still somewhat fleetingly participates in it through its various receptions and multiple transmissions as a communally sanctioned text tradition. Our understanding of Genette’s categories will, therefore, inevitably differ, as linking the text definition to authorial control in order to make the distinction between text and paratext is not possible in the situation of an absent autograph. For that reason, the physical gospel text (as in the text-critical conception) cannot be considered, *stricto sensu*, an authorial text, but only its received or reconstructed representation. Nonetheless, Genette’s theory still has its merits if the categories are used cautiously, as will be demonstrated later.

Applying the theory

Given the rich presence¹⁹ of the Markan tradition in Luke,²⁰ by carefully using Genette’s categories, we can refer to the textual relationship as a Luke–Mark hypertext–hypotext, whereby Mark as the hypotext is superimposed by

17 Ibid., 15.

18 Porter, “What Is Paratext?,” 32.

19 Anthony M. Honoré, “A Statistical Study of the Synoptic Problem,” *Novum Testamentum* 10 (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 95–147.

20 The gospel writings, or their composite parts (e.g., Lk 1–2), are termed here under the conventional names without implying anything specific about their actual authorship.

Luke, the hypertext. As a result, the strong Markan literary position within the territory of the Lukan gospel architecture draws our intertextual focus. By supposing Luke's connection with Mark, the nativity scene in Lk 1–2 can be deemed a paratext that acts as a vestibule and threshold or a corrected reading that fills Mark's "void". Nonetheless, as Géza Vermes points out, "[...] if the two chapters had been lost, their disappearance would not be felt by the readers of the main story [as] [...] the latter never refers back to events already recounted in the opening section [...] as the bond linking them to the rest of the gospel narratives appears extremely flimsy."²¹ However, in contrast to the above citation, the theory may demonstrate how the paratext and the immediate text mutually interact and are, by no means, strangers to one another.

If Luke 1–2 is considered a paratext, it is not only a vestibule but also a form of preparatory introduction, a literary device that functions to develop the story's *dramatis personae* as it is "the clearest case of ['authorial'] invention."²² As opposed to an external metatextual "story-poster" that would disclose the role distribution (the starring), Luke opted to prefix the Markan story using a highly dramatised²³ paratextual story stage-setting, which, as a liminal literary device, is not necessarily an inherent part of the story on the temporal plane as it stands outside of where the fictive present begins.²⁴ However, as demonstrated further,²⁵ the prefix plays a crucial role, as it informs the enfolding story. The reader's appreciation of the entirety of the narrative lends the Lukan story version a notion of unity as, according to Barthes (who views any literature as inevitably intertextual), "unity lies not in its [the story's] origin but in its destination".²⁶ In contrast, from a historical-critical perspective, the Gospel of Luke is viewed more like a "receptacle" containing

21 Géza Vermes, *The Nativity: History and Legend* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), Kindle Location 1883.

22 Ed P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 85, in Vermes, *The Nativity*, Kindle Location 278.

23 Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 253.

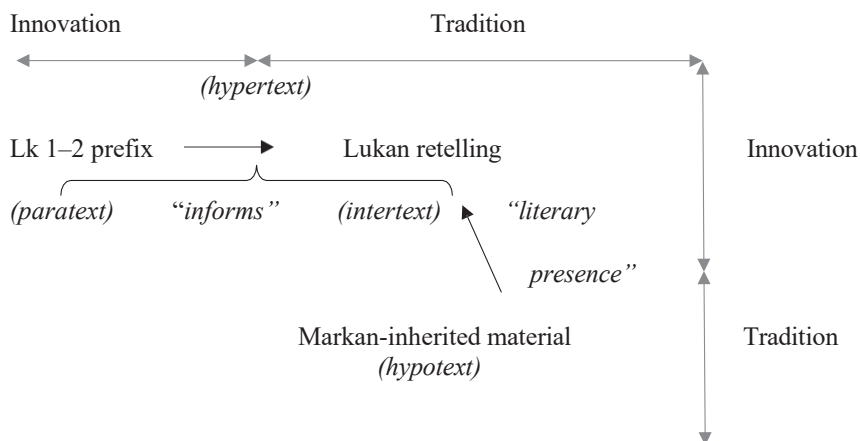
24 The fictive present is "the state of affairs at the starting point of what is perceived as the primary narrative action." Eyal Segal, "Beginnings and Endings," in John Frow (ed.), *Oxford Encyclopedia of Literary Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 8.

25 See *Envisioning the Transtextual Model*.

26 Roland Barthes, "Image – Music – Text," in Stephen Heath (ed.), *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 37 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 148.

various traditions, some of which may have independently circulated before being embedded within the gospel.

Envisioning the Transtextual Model



The above diagram envisions how the transtextual model operates concerning the textual inner workings of the Gospel of Luke. Based on the diagram, we can better visualise the following two-step process. First, the Markan “inherited” material is referenced in the form of literary presence in the Lukan retelling via an arrow as illustrated in the hypotext-to-intertext relationship. Thus, Mark is subsumed as a received tradition within the process of the Lukan individuating innovation. Second, the Lukan retelling is informed or influenced by the prefixed paratext, which, in itself, is the most innovative element (as well as the most unstable one)²⁷ among the three transtextual constituents. Therefore, when discussing the paratext as informing the intertext, the two constituents form a “unified” hypertext vis-à-vis the Markan story, which lacks any such prefixual vehicle. However, to observe the unity in contrast to Vermes’ claim that the Lukan prefix is not dependent on the rest of Luke, one may need to imaginatively integrate the prefix into the rest of the story within both the meaning-making and coherence-creating processes on the side of the reader. However, despite an

²⁷ For example, the Matthean prefix is an entirely different predication, equally a product of the imaginative narrative plotting.

awareness of there being yet another story version (the Markan hypotext, which had not been replaced as may originally have been intended),²⁸ the reader can still engage with the entirety of the Lukan hypertextual story by focusing on its individuating qualities,²⁹ as well as the art of Luke's storytelling as a competing account that conveys a distinct point of view.³⁰

Informing the Tradition: From Paratext to Intertext

Primacy Effect

To understand how the paratext animates the storytelling, we will now focus on its effect on the narrative "ascendence", as the Lukan storytelling does not start abruptly but has to be slowly accelerated. Menachem Perry states, "In literary texts, there is the exceptional and enduring importance of the narrative's opening in establishing the ground rules of the [...] transaction."³¹ To grab the reader's attention, the primacy effect with its affective qualities must be carefully arranged. Nonetheless, "[t]here is never anything inevitable about the way a narrative begins: a narrator may start anywhere, and where to begin is, therefore, a matter of choice."³² To underline, the prefix, thus, establishes the primacy effect, the impact of which is felt across the entirety of the storytelling, given the privileged position it occupies, as it is the very first component the reader encounters.

The Lukan nativity prefix, as a paratext, puts a particular emphasis on establishing the ground rules concerning the *dramatis personae*, as will be

28 Petr Pokorný, *Od Evangelia k evangeliům: Dějiny, teologie a působení biblického výrazu "evangelium"* (Praha: Academia, 2016), 188.

29 The qualities in question: setting (the temporal and spatial context of the story; §2.2.2 Narrative Past), plot (the order of the narrative, sequential relations, breakthroughs, development and resolution; see Different Predication), characters (their drives, changes and developments; see Transmotivation), rhetoric (the ways an author uses the features of narrative to persuade readers to enter into and accept the world of the story; see Narrative Imprimatur). See David E. Aune, "Literary Criticism," in David E. Aune (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament* (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2010), 128.

30 A key narrative vehicle for establishing the point of view is the role of the narrator, whose voice "reflects the beliefs and values of the story". See Aune, *Literary Criticism*, 128.

31 Menachem Perry, "Literary Dynamics: How the Order of a Text Creates its Meanings," *Poetics Today* 1 (1979), pp. 35–64 and 311–361, in Mark Coleridge, *The Birth of the Lukan Narrative: Narrative as Christology in Luke 1–2* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 29.

32 Coleridge, *The Birth*, 29.

addressed in the section on transmotivation.³³ The prefix is a liminal space wherein the action trajectory and the distribution of roles are implied or defined. Here, it can be argued that the author innovatively compensates for Mark's perceived shortcomings; if this is the case, Luke can be observed as engaging in unrestrained compositional activity in the appropriation of the received tradition. There is no need to pursue source critical analysis in this instance, as has been customary for years in Lukan studies. The hypothetical proposals of the special Lukan source material behind the prefix text are not relevant to the purpose of this study, which focuses on the function of the prefix within the context of competitive writing. The only connection with source material within the parameters of this paper concerns the Markan-inherited tradition, which lies outside the prefix.

Narrative Past

Another function of the prefix is that it establishes what is called a narrative past, which creates a situation that guides the reader to look back in time to a memorable past. According to Coleridge, the narrative past allows us "to understand the events filling the Lukan narrative [in that the] readers must begin by looking backwards".³⁴ In Luke's case, the narrative past is linked with the Jewish scriptural stories of Abraham and Sarah, as well as Elkanah and Hanna. In other words, the intriguing aspect at play here is that Luke innovatively frames Jesus' story by referring to the figures of Israel's past.

Narrative Imprimatur

Luke's literary innovation has a legitimising effect, establishing a so-called narrative imprimatur, which, in Coleridge's words, means "placing the key opening [...] in the mouth of an angel to give the hermeneutic an authority transcending the narrator".³⁵

Excursus: Angelic Pronouncement Tradition

Given the tradition of angelic apparitions, which highlights the birth of a patriarch-like figure in the Tanakh and play a critical role in various Second Temple-period literature, it is no surprise that a Lukan narrative should contain an angelic, authoritative validation of a sort. The book of Genesis features two miraculous angelic/divine messenger birth announcements (Ishmael, Gen. 16; Isaac, Gen. 18); Judg. 13 contains an angel

³³ See Transmotivation.

³⁴ Coleridge, *The Birth*, 35.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

announcing the birth of Samson. The book of Jubilees, itself a hypertext of Genesis, has, for example, the angelic appearance as being instrumental in marking the crucial events of salvation history on Sinai (Jub. 1:38nn).

Other prominent Second Temple-period texts with extensive angelology include the Enoch literature, which conceptually overlaps with the Synoptic material, albeit in a theologically downplayed manner,³⁶ and the second-century Book of Daniel – interestingly, part of the Tanakh – which features an angel representing a theophanic manifestation (Dan. 10:5–6).³⁷

It is likely that by inserting an angel – an extraterrestrial revealer of the divine plans – into the Lukan narrative prefix, Luke sought to underline the births of the two dramatis personae as crucial events in salvation history, marking them with an authoritative salvific twist imagery known and expected by the readership familiar with the Old Testament and the then-contemporaneous Second Temple-period literature traditions, functioning as intelligible frames of reference.

Additionally, as touched upon earlier, an innovative peritext may have required an officially identified “author”. What may have at one point been an anonymously penned gospel could have much later (during the second century AD) required an authoritative label (i.e., *Κατα Λουκᾶν*). This may have been conveyed by appending material in the form of an attachment to the prefix introit. When discussing the question pertaining to pseudonymity, Judith Lieu observes the reason for it as having “the earliest Apostle regenerated textually to authorise particular understanding of the teaching, and perhaps to deny other understandings or structures”.³⁸ This highlights two key takeaways. First, a narrative imprimatur requires the elevation of a particular understanding set forth by the prefix. Second, a narrative imprimatur implies rejecting other readings that run contrary to the receiver’s perceptions.³⁹ In the new competing narrative, the writer seeks to establish authority against other understandings of a similar story concerning the Jesus–John relationship, predicated on different terms.⁴⁰ With the prefix addition, the Lukan writing

36 Kelley Coblentz Bautch, “Heavenly Beings in the Enoch Traditions and Synoptic Gospels,” in Loren T. Stuckenbruck, Gabriele Boccaccini (eds.), *Enoch and the Synoptic Gospels: Reminiscences, Allusions, Intertextuality* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 106–107.

37 Ibid., 117.

38 Judith M. Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 50.

39 To say that the reader participates in meaning creation within the literary exchange process puts the latter supposition into an interesting interpretative tension. By making up an appeal to the authority (angelic or apostolic), the narrative imprimatur, thus, can be said to narrow down or channel the possible surplus of meanings, rather than cause the collapse of the reader’s imaginative participation.

40 See Different Predication.

opts for a two-fold, *ad intra*–*ad extra* validation strategy. The text gets authenticated through an angelic pronouncement (*ad intra* appeal–from within the narrative) and an appeal to a putative apostolic authorial quality in the peritext (*ad extra* appeal–external to the narrative).

Retelling the Tradition: From Hypotext to Hypertext

Different Predication

By having the hypertextual story set on a different predication through the use of the individuating prefix, which is not found in the hypotextual story, a situation akin to a change in the key-tuning of a song; in this way, the author creates a new story world by changing what the hypotext signifies. To demonstrate how a different predication could be achieved, the Diatessaron can be used as an example because it is not simply a compilation of canonical gospels available to Tatian, but, rather, as Matthew Crawford explains, it is a “new, authoritative, and singular written instantiation of the Jesus tradition to replace the diversity of written sources existing at the time [...] [and thus] a legitimate gospel in its own right”,⁴¹ the creation of which “[...] must have involved thousands of interpretative decisions”.⁴² The Diatessaron, with its different predication, profoundly influenced how, for example, Ephrem read and understood the nativity story. By combining the Johannine material with those of the Synoptics, “he [identifies] the ‘voice [of John the Baptist]’ and the ‘star’ as hypostasized entities [of Christ] through whom the eternal divine Word accomplishes his mission [...]”.⁴³ “Tatian’s juxtaposition of once separate pericopae created the opportunity for novel interpretive moves [...] [i.e., new storytelling, as] it invited interpretations that [...] [otherwise] would have been impossible.”⁴⁴

Similar to the Diatessaron, with the displacing of Markan narrative order in the form of an anachronism,⁴⁵ Luke creates a new story world by having the Jesus–John relation predicated on different terms. The story of John in prison had to be excised from the Markan narrative order and inserted

41 Matthew R. Crawford, “Reading the Diatessaron with Ephrem: The Word and the Light, the Voice and the Star,” in *Vigiliae Christianae* 69/1 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 70.

42 Ibid., 71.

43 Ibid., 73.

44 Ibid., 72.

45 Other terms of Genette pertaining to the order (the temporal sequence within the narrative) are *analepsis* (flashback) and *prolepsis* (anticipation). See Aune, *Literary Criticism*, 123.

within the liminal immediacy of where the paratext meets the third Lukan chapter. Luke obscures (and in doing so, runs contrary to the existing meaning as previously found in Mark) any notion of a relationship between the Baptiser (John) and the Baptisee (Jesus). In Luke, Jesus begins his mission independently from John.

Apart from the immediacy related to chapters 3 and 4 concerning Jesus' (non-)baptism under John, the nativity prefix appears to influence the remainder of the gospel narrative in the following ways.

The remainder of the non-baptism plot: John is almost nowhere explicitly called "the Baptist" across the Luke–Acts writings;⁴⁶ Jesus still expects his baptism to be, on the narrative plane, a future event: "*βάπτισμα δὲ ἔχω βαπτισθῆναι, καὶ πῶς συνέχομαι ἕως ὅτου τελεσθῇ.*"⁴⁷ (Lk 12:50b; trans., "I have a baptism to be baptised, and how I am anxious until it is done.") This passage likely refers to Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection, which may reflect a Pauline motif, as seen, for example, in Romans: "*συνετάφημεν οὖν αὐτῷ διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος εἰς τὸν θάνατον, ἵνα ὥσπερ ἠγέρθη Χριστὸς ἐκ νεκρῶν διὰ τῆς δόξης τοῦ πατρὸς, οὕτως καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐν καινότητι ζωῆς περιπατήσωμεν.*" (Rom. 6:4; trans., "We, together, were put to the grave, thus, with him through the baptism into death; just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so that we too may walk in new life.") By situating Jesus' baptism outside the immediacy of John the Baptist's event, the author juxtaposes the theological concerns with an innovative shift on the narrative level. With theological concerns having the upper hand over the narrative order in Luke, the early Christian readers/hearers may have found this detail instructive for neophyte praxis, akin to the situation as depicted in the book of Acts (see Transmotivation).

Lastly, the prefix reframes the relationship between the two *dramatis personae* (Jesus and John the Baptist) according to social frames of reference

46 "The Lukan double work has 32 occurrences all together of the baptizer's name as 'John', whereas the figure is called 'John the Baptist' only three times, and this is not from the narrator's perspective." See the "Abstract" in Chauchot, C. M. (2021). Luke's presentation of John's identity (Lk 3:2), in *John the Baptist as a Rewritten Figure in Luke-Acts* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), 84–98.

47 The Greek text snippets herein and throughout the article are taken from: Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28., revidierte Auflage, hg. v. Barbara und Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini und Bruce M. Metzger in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Institut für Neutestamentliche Textforschung, Münster, © 2012 Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart, <https://www.die-bibel.de/en/bible/NA28/>.

in the form of an amalgam of multiple Old Testament narratives. One may almost speak of an overkill of frames-of-reference imagery, in that the miraculous births may resemble, as said, unlikely conceptions of the great Old Testament matriarchs (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel), and mother figures of Samson (Judg. 13) and Samuel (1 Sam. 1). With a Lukan-specific focus on the temple, it is the latter that the author may have in mind when patterning the Jesus–John the Baptist relation as depicted in the nativity opening. In such a case, John would represent a Samuel-like figure, born to a priestly father, giving way, in the form of a ‘leaping’ approval (Lk 1:41), to Jesus, a Davidic-like figure. One may speak of imagery overkill ‘incited’ by Luke’s literary creativity, wherein the amalgamation of Old Testament motifs creates an abundance of interpretative possibilities that are left to the reader to integrate imaginatively into the remainder of the gospel reading experience.

Transmotivation

Throughout the Gospel of Luke, the *dramatis personae* take on different roles in conformity with the narrator’s point of view. “Transmotivation” refers to giving the *dramatis personae* in the hypertext characteristics or properties that are lacking in the hypotext. Precisely, the transmotivation, a term Genette specified, concerns how the *dramatis personae* are rewritten in the hypertext. Genette differentiates the term followingly: motivation (“introducing a motive where the hypotext offered [...] none”⁴⁸), demotivation (“consists of suppressing or eliding an original motivation”⁴⁹), remotivation (“substitution [...] by a new motive”⁵⁰).

Luke also consistently exhibits a tendency to round out the flat characters. According to Edward Forster, an English novelist, differentiation can be made between the *dramatis personae* as follows: flat characters “[...] are sometimes called types, and sometimes caricatures. In their purest form, they are constructed [a]round a single idea or quality”⁵¹ whereas the round characters, as reviewed by Alan Culpepper with regards to Forster’s differentiation,

48 Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 324.

49 Ibid., 325.

50 Ibid.

51 Edward M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927), 103.

“are complex in temperament and motivation.”⁵² The critical function of the *dramatis personae* is that they often “serve to draw out Jesus’ character by providing a series of individuals with whom [Jesus] interacts.”⁵³ Accordingly, by having the paratext prefixed towards the third chapter, Luke is able to round out otherwise flat characters.

Excursus: Dramatis Personae in Luke (Examples)

The Lukan propensity for rounding the original Markan flat figures is a consistent trend throughout the entire gospel writing. Presented here are three brief examples demonstrating the contrast when Mark and Luke are given a side-by-side comparison:

a) The Call of the Disciples (Mk 1:16–20, cf. Lk 5:1–11)

Mark’s austere statement placed on Jesus’ lips “*δεῦτε ὀπίσω μου, καὶ ποιήσω ὑμᾶς γενέσθαι ἁλιεῖς ἀνθρώπων*” (Mk 1:17; trans., “Follow me and I will make you to become fishers of people”), is entirely reworked into a dialogue through the insertion of the dramatic fishing scene miracle culminating in Peter’s confession “*ἔξελθε ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ, ὅτι ἀνὴρ ἁμαρτωλὸς εἰμι, κύριε*” (Lk 5:8; trans., “Leave me, for I am a sinful man, Lord!”). That is, only after Jesus demonstrates his power and Peter confesses his unworthiness does Luke return to the call of the disciples: “*ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν ἀνθρώπους ἔσῃ ζωγρῶν*” (Lk 5:10b; trans., “From now on you will be catching people.”)

b) The Pilate scene (Mk 15:1–15, cf. Lk 23:1–26)

Luke has the originally Markan single Pilate scene interrupted by a Herod detour to achieve a double attestation of Jesus’ innocence. Neither Pilate nor Herod could find a reason to have Jesus executed. Thereby, the case for Jesus’ innocence finds an unlikely ally in the form of a literary representation of Herod.

c) The Thieves Mocking Jesus scene (Mk 15:27–32, cf. Lk 23:39–43)

A striking example of the pliability of the *dramatis personae* in Luke is found in the thieves-on-the-cross scene. The Markan original mentioning of “*οἱ συνεσταυρωμένοι σὺν αὐτῷ ὀνειδίζον αὐτόν*” (Mk 15:32b; trans., “Those crucified with him cursed him”), is modified into a moving confession scene, with the penitent thief upholding Jesus, saying: “*οὗτος δὲ οὐδὲν ἄτοπον ἔπραξεν*” (Lk 23:41b; trans., “He [Jesus] did not do anything wrong.”)

This excursus aims to demonstrate how Luke’s literary creativity serves his narrative ends, wherein the originally one-dimensional *dramatis personae* (flat figures) are transformed, through the addition of temperament and interactivity (round figures), to create an occasion for Jesus’ status to be upheld, via literary techniques.

52 R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), Kindle Location 1339.

53 The above citations concern the *dramatis personae* as depicted in the Gospel of John. The same can be said about the character as portrayed in the synoptics. See Aune, *Literary Criticism*, 130.

Looking at the two portrayals of John the Baptist in the two Gospels conveys the difference. In Mark, John's baptism functions more overtly in the preparation of Jesus' ministry; in Luke, John the Baptist is entirely absent. This *dramatis personae* construction pattern (of Jesus' independence from John) is maintained throughout Luke's two volumes. For example, in Acts, John's disciples are baptised by the Spirit (Acts 19:2–7) and thereby integrated within the community of Jesus' followers, even though the community may have originated from the followers of John. Nevertheless, when discussing the relation between how the New Testament shaped early Christianity and an actual extratextual reality, Judith Lieu warns against the notion of "looking for some essential and abiding reality independent of the texts."⁵⁴

Conclusion

Transtextuality theory can help the reader appreciate the architecture or composition of a given text. The reader can observe the literary presence of or intertextual reliance on the Markan material (hypotext) as contained and moulded within the entirety of Luke (hypertext), creating a situation that allows for the newly added prefix (paratext) to guide the reader's imagination. The prefix sets an authoritative beginning by providing a primacy effect, achieved by using culturally significant frames of reference, invoking Israel's glorious past and instituting a narrative imprimatur (*ad intra*, from within the narrative in the form of angelic approval; *ad extra*, external to the narrative, via the peritext⁵⁵ claiming apostolic authority). The Lukan hypertext is not simply an enhancement of Mark but a multi-varied innovation. It is a "new product" wherein the relationship between Jesus and the Baptist is re-imagined. Mark's version of this relationship is left behind and replaced by the Lukan version, which sets the foundation for a new story world about Jesus. The hypertext, as opposed to a more primitive hypotext, is richly transmotivised in that John, originally a flat figure in Mark, is rendered complex in temperament and character to draw out the character of Jesus, with whom he interacts, as a literary device to assist the readers in

⁵⁴ Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 8.

⁵⁵ Specifically, the peritext is inside the book (as opposed to the epitext, e.g., an interview with the author or a review, an entity completely removed from the writing) but outside the narrative.

making sense of the two *dramatis personae*. Finally, the construction of the meaning of the text is realised within the transtextual sum, a literary whole, of its various composite parts, rather than within each part individually, as is often the case in isolationist form-critical approaches.

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Holy Men and Modern Minds: How Hesychast Spirituality Transforms During the Monastic Transition

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“In monastic life, you can achieve either an angel-like or a demon-like life, with no limits in either direction.”¹

Abstract: Viktor Frankl views self-transcendence as a key objective in developing into a fully realised human being. Hesychastic spirituality in Orthodox monasticism has a similar aim. During the transition from the secular to monastic life, monks go through radical self-transformation from the egoic to Edenic state. In that setting, self-transcendence becomes the ultimate aim of deification and a coping mechanism to deal with the suffering experiences often accompanying monastic spiritual development. I consider four elements of Hesychast spirituality: nostalgia, metanoia, Jesus Prayer, and spiritual fatherhood, to be forming elements of spiritual transformation based on the real-life experiences of Athonite hermits. Through qualitative interviews with four participants and thematic phenomenological analysis, I focus on psychological transformation processes that have been only partially addressed in previous research.

Keywords: Hesychast spirituality; self-transcendence; spiritual transformation; the transition phase

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Introduction

At 5 a.m., Fr. Silouan, a middle-aged hermit on Mount Athos,² woke up after only two hours of sleep. That night, he prayed by the sea, under stars and moonlit waves, forgetting his family for a while, but with sunrise, nostalgia returned – first in a dream of the past, then in his usual neurosis. As always, there was no breakfast, no shower, only a return to his daily prayer routine. The sun had risen, and birds were singing, but his heart remained heavy. In

¹ Fr. A, personal communications, April 3, 2024.

² Mount Athos is an isolated Northern Greece peninsula hosting 20 monasteries and numerous hermitages.

church, he read the Psalms with a distracted mind until confession brought him quiet relief. During the Divine Liturgy, he felt suddenly lifted by divine grace, ready to begin a new day, showered in God's warmth, and called back into the silence of his vocation.

This emotional highs and lows of monastic life mark a trajectory toward self-transcendence.³ Fr. Siouan's story captures the contrasts of monastic life: profound spiritual struggle with one's nature and consolation through spiritual practice. The adversary of this life is not an undesirable side effect but a part of a transformative function. The tension between affliction and consolation exemplifies how suffering becomes a source of growth in Orthodox Christian spirituality when embraced with humility and prayer. This mirrors the teachings of St. Silouan the Athonite, who insists that suffering, when approached rightly, leads to divine grace.⁴

Monastic life, defined by extended hours of prayer, minimal sleep, and rigorous spiritual labour, seeks to renounce a past centred on worldly pleasures and sin, cultivating an angelic life of virtues and asceticism amid intense loneliness and temptations. Monks endure cold nights and hot days, often with little rest, engaging in nearly a hundred hours of prayer and work each week. There is no financial reward, no remote job, no modern entertainment. This life stands in sharp contrast to today's culture grounded in self-actualisation and comfort.

The difficulties of monastic life are so high that many who arrive at Mount Athos give up and leave the monasteries.⁵ In the meantime, by assigning specific meaning to these adverse experiences, individuals can cultivate a deeper sense of spiritual well-being.⁶ Moreover, monastic life does not provide immediate comfort or the quick balance that modern culture often seeks; instead, it demands long-term daily titanic struggles with its own nature. However, despite these challenges, Mount Athos attracts many who seek to experience an exotic monastic life, as something radically different from

3 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature; Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1902).

4 Sofronij Sacharov, *Saint Silouan, the Athonite* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999).

5 An intriguing area of future research might explore the factors contributing to individuals' decisions to leave or stay within the monastery.

6 Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, 4th ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

a “worldly successful life”.⁷ This raises difficult questions: Does monasticism provide a sufficient existential answer – or is it merely the blind passion of religious zealots?

From a theological perspective, the Orthodox monastic path, rooted in hesychast spirituality, aims to imitate Christ as closely as possible. This journey is directed toward theosis, or deification, which signifies achieving a likeness to God and evokes hope for eternal life in beatitude – the highest stage of self-transcendence. However, this motivation might not be reasonable for non-Christians or non-religious individuals, and the nuances of hesychast spirituality may not be easy for the general reader to understand. Therefore, to a broader audience, I use the lens of self-transcendence, as regardless of sociocultural and religious contexts, the desire for self-transcendence remains a fundamental contradiction within human nature.⁸

Viktor Frankl, a pioneer of existential psychology, views self-transcendence as a hallmark of spirituality and a key objective in developing into a fully realised human.⁹ To reach self-transcendence, individuals search for meaning beyond self-interest, often by embracing suffering and engaging in spiritual struggle. Therefore, from a self-transcendent lens, the Orthodox monastic path represents an existential search beyond self-interests. It is oriented towards self-transcendence through lengthy, consistent efforts to overcome weaknesses while cultivating a virtuous life and spiritual well-being.

Moreover, hesychasm itself contains an implicit threefold structure (purification, contemplation and perfection) that systematically organises the elusive process of self-transcendence. Theoretical works on the topic are numerous, but to understand the living reality of this tradition, I turned to the voices of those within it. I interviewed contemporary practitioners to explore how they interpret and apply classical hesychastic teachings in their lives. I intentionally set aside most theological elaboration and instead focused on monastic practice articulated by monks at various stages of transformation.

7 For example, in 2019, the number of pilgrims to Mount Athos reached 250,000, <https://orthodoxtimes.com/mount-athos-more-than-250000-pilgrims-a-year/>. However, starting in 2023, the entrance to Mount Athos is limited to 100 Orthodox and 10 non-Orthodox visitors daily.

8 Mark E. Koltko-Rivera, “Rediscovering the later version of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs: Self-transcendence and opportunities for theory, research, and unification,” *Review of general psychology* 10.4 (2006), 302–317.

9 Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*.

Hypothesis

Against this background, I argue that hesychasm, in the context of Orthodox monastic spirituality, represents both a theologically justified and psychologically effective strategy for existential search and meaning through radical self-transformation and regular pursuit of self-transcendence. More specifically, I consider the process of self-transformation in hesychasm as a complex matrix with supernatural, psychological, and social factors, using a threefold structure of calling, transition, and perfection. Simply put, I want to understand how individuals enter monastic life, change within monastic settings, and what they could get in higher spiritual stages. Using a self-transcendence framework, the study seeks to answer:

1. What motivates believers to enter the monastery?
2. How does the transition from a secular to a monastic life happen?
3. What are the long-term effects and spiritual benefits of the perfection stage?

To support my arguments, I analyse the real-life experiences of Athonite hermitic monks through qualitative interviews with four participants. Using a thematic phenomenological analysis, I focus on the psychological dimensions of self-transformation processes that have only been partially addressed in the past. This study addresses two key gaps in the existing literature. First, it provides original empirical insights into the Hesychastic hermitic community on Mount Athos¹⁰ – an underexplored group in ethnographic and psychological research. While Paganopoulos (2012, 2020)¹¹ offers important sociological and anthropological analyses of Athonite monasticism; his focus on coenobitic communities leaves the inner psychological and spiritual dynamics of hermits largely unexamined.¹² Moreover, his study did not broadly apply a psychological perspective.

10 Hermits and coenobitic are two major types of monastic life organisation. First type assumes separate living and praying, while the second type is a monastic life with the community.

11 Michelangelo Paganopoulos, *Land of the Virgin Mary: An Ethnography of Monastic Life on Mount Athos* (PhD diss., Goldsmiths, University of London, 2010).

12 Michelangelo Paganopoulos, "Being and Becoming a Monk on Mount Athos: An Ontological Approach to Relational Monastic Personhood in the 'Garden of the Virgin Mary' as a Rite of Passage," *Open Theology* 6, no. 1 (2020), 66–87.

Second, the study applies the psychological lens of self-transcendence to the study of Hesychasm. Although emerging research (e.g., Cattoi, 2024)¹³ has begun to explore the intersections between Hesychastic practice and altered states of consciousness, systematic investigations into self-transcendence within this tradition remain blurry. In contrast to artificially induced self-transcendent experiences, such as those prompted by psychedelics, virtual reality, or neurostimulation,¹⁴ Hesychasm represents a sustained, natural method of evoking self-transcendence in daily life. By examining the psychological transformation of Athonite hermits, this study contributes to both monastic studies and the growing literature on self-transcendence as a pathway to personal and spiritual development that might find application in everyday life.

Hesychast Spirituality

Hesychasm is a method to obtain God's likeness. This mystical tradition within Orthodox Christianity emphasises inner silence and contemplative prayer and is considered the 'golden standard' of Orthodox ascetic and spiritual life. However, Hesychasm is a spiritual practice not limited to a specific methodology or certain instruments for spiritual progress. In the monastic context, it requires total commitment and encompasses all facets of life. It is more than a theological trend or an ecclesiastical system; hesychastic spirituality is a complete renewal of perception and an interpretation of the events and priorities of life. In Foucault's terms, it is a distinctive perspective that enables us to move from one reality (earthly, fleshly) to another (heavenly, spiritual).¹⁵

This movement towards a new reality and the transformation of self from the perspective of human agency is actualised through ascetic practices of the body and mind, individual and communal prayer, contemplation, and Church sacraments. It is assumed that by continuously eliminating vices and cultivating virtues in their advanced stages, practitioners can cultivate remarkable psychological qualities and develop a new way of being what

13 Thomas Cattoi, "Hesychasm and Psychedelics: Altered States, Purgation, and the Question of Authentic Mysticism," *Journal of Contemplative Studies*, Special Issue 1: Psychedelics, Contemplation, and Religion (2024), 33–51.

14 David Bryce Yaden et al., "The Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experience," *Review of General Psychology* 21, no. 2 (2017), 143–160.

15 Michel Foucault, "Speaking the Truth about Oneself," in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

they understand as deification or theosis.¹⁶ According to St. Gregory, the Theologian, man is a “living being [...] who, in the process of theosis, through the inclination towards God.”¹⁷

In Hesychasm, theosis is understood as a lifelong inner transformation in which the human person is gradually elevated from being in the “image of God” to achieving “likeness to God” – not through external moral acts, but through a personal union with the Creator.¹⁸ This process involves the progressive refinement of human consciousness – thought, emotion, will, perception, and imagination – through a synergy (Greek: *synergia*) between divine grace and human effort. The dynamic process of theosis is unique to each individual; no one is deified in precisely the same way.¹⁹

The classical vision of Orthodox anthropology frames the path to theosis within a three-stage structure: calling, transition, and perfection. This framework, rooted in early ascetic writings – Evagrius Ponticus (*praktike, physike, theologike*), St. Maximus the Confessor (purification, contemplation, perfection), and John Climacus’s *Ladder* – was further developed by Torrance (2012), who interpreted it as a progression through initial, existential, and vicarious repentance.²⁰ Also, this tripartite model of transformation is echoed in Thomas Merton’s theory of the true and false self (1949, 1961)²¹ and finds parallels in modern psychological theories, particularly Jungian individuation, offering a conceptual bridge between theological and psychological understandings of self-transcendence.²²

16 Inbar Graiver, *Asceticism of the Mind: Forms of Attention and Self-Transformation in Late Antique Monasticism* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2018).

17 Archimandrite George Kapsanis, *Theosis: The True Purpose of Human Life*, 2nd ed. (Mount Athos: Holy Monastery of Saint Gregorios, 2023), 14.

18 Ibid.

19 Brother Theophan Miskovic, “Theosis in the Light of Modern Brain and Mind Sciences.” Paper presented at *Ascetic Practices and the Mind: Mental Healing in Eastern Christianity*, The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., March 1–2, 2024.

20 A. C. Torrance, *Repentance in Late Antiquity: Eastern Asceticism and the Framing of the Christian Life c. 400–650 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

21 Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949); Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961).

22 Viktor Niachayeu, *The Prayer of the Heart as a Way to Find a True Self: Based on Thomas Merton’s Writings* (Master diss., Georg-August-Universität, Göttingen, 2021); Byron J. Gaist, Viktor Niachayeu, “Psychological and Theological Approaches to Self-Transcendence: A Comparison Between Eastern Orthodox Hesychastic Spirituality and Jungian Active Imagination,” *Quadrant* 25, no. 2 (2023), 95–105.

Self-transcendence

I use self-transcendence (ST) as a key concept in understanding the psychological and spiritual dimensions of the Hesychast tradition. ST occurs when individuals aim to move beyond self-centred desires and beliefs that connect with higher purposes such as God, love, the Divine and others. Then more we focus on others or commit ourselves to a greater purpose, the more we can flourish.²³ Contemporary scholars in the psychology of consciousness have defined ST as a crucial milestone in psycho-spiritual growth, representing advanced stages of human maturity.²⁴ In the seven-factor model of temperament and character, Cloninger et al. (1993) introduced ST as a measurable personality trait, showing how deeply individuals perceive themselves as an integral part of the larger universe.²⁵ Levenson et al. (2005) framed ST as a central aspect of wisdom linked to the ageing process and lifelong development. Later, researchers defined ST using two main characteristics – the “annihilation component” and “relational component”.²⁶ The first component promotes reduced self-salience and is complemented by the term “hypo-egoic state”. This term describes a psychological condition characterised by minimal or reduced self-focus, which can advance optimal functioning in individuals.²⁷ The central aim of Hesychast spirituality is closely linked to the hypo-egoic state, as monastic tonsure symbolises the death of the self, the mortal worldly self, while cultivating the Divine image. The second characteristic of ST emphasises connections to others and relationships beyond oneself, as a raindrop becomes part of the ocean, which for hesychasm represents gaining unity with God and cultivating advanced empathy for people around. These two components of ST are interconnected.²⁸ The Hesychast tradition resonates with both components,

23 Paul T. P. Wong, “Meaning-Seeking, Self-Transcendence, and Well-Being,” in *Logotherapy and Existential Analysis: Proceedings of the Viktor Frankl Institute Vienna*, vol. 1 (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2016).

24 Jenny Wade, *Changes of Mind: A Holonomic Theory of the Evolution of Consciousness* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996); Ken Wilber, *Integral Psychology: Consciousness, Spirit, Psychology, Therapy* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2000).

25 C. Robert Cloninger, Sarah Svrakic, and Theodore Pryzbeck, “A Psychobiological Model of Temperament and Character,” *Archives of General Psychiatry* 50, no. 12 (1993), 975–990.

26 Yaden et al., “The Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experience,” 150.

27 Mark R. Leary, Jennifer Guadagno, “The Role of Hypo-Egoic Self-Processes in Optimal Functioning and Subjective Well-Being,” in *Designing Positive Psychology: Taking Stock and Moving Forward* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 135–146.

28 Yaden et al., “The Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experience,” 150.

demonstrating the self-transcendence theory's applicability in psychological and theological contexts.

Transcendent experience (TE) can have a profound impact on our lives. Depending on their duration and intensity, we often remember these moments for a lifetime and strive to attain them again. Newberg and Waldman (2016) term high-intensity states of transcendence as moments of “big Enlightenment”,²⁹ while monastic spirituality refers to these transcendent experiences as “the prayer of the heart”, the spiritual level when prayer occurs in the mind automatically. Such TE allow us to reach the peak of emotional and cognitive states and affect what Foucault frames with the transformation of reality³⁰ via derivation of neuropsychological settings. For instance, Garcia-Romeu et al. (2015) point out that short-term effects can include perceptual alterations³¹, what frames the phenomenon of spiritual senses.³²

However, the actual value of TE is in its long-term transformative effects. As a psychological state or personality trait, TE booster self-development can lead to changes in life values, orientation, and worldview.³³ Moreover, ST and TE are crucial for understanding how humans can cope and flourish amidst suffering and adversity, as ST involves a fundamental shift in life attitude from an egotistic focus to a broader, other greater than oneself,³⁴ the attention to the personal negative experience is reduced. Thus, the TE analysed earlier by philosophy (e.g., Foucault, 1997)³⁵ and from theological perspectives (e.g., Otto, 1957)³⁶ with modern ST lenses becoming tangible.

29 Andrew Newberg, Mark Robert Waldman, *How Enlightenment Changes Your Brain: The New Science of Transformation* (New York: Avery, 2016).

30 Foucault, “Speaking the Truth about Oneself.”

31 Albert Garcia-Romeu, Samuel P. Himelstein, Jacob Kaminker, “Self-Transcendent Experience: A Grounded Theory Study,” *Qualitative Research* 15, no. 5 (2015), 633–654.

32 Gunnar Gjermundsen, “The Spiritual Senses and the Problem of Transcendence,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 23.2 (2023), 295–315.

33 Wong, “Meaning-Seeking, Self-Transcendence, and Well-Being.”

34 Piers Worth, Matthew D. Smith, “Clearing the Pathways to Self-Transcendence,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021).

35 Foucault, “Speaking the Truth about Oneself.”

36 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1957).

Overall, Hesychast spirituality cultivates ST, functioning as a coping mechanism³⁷, a developmental process,³⁸ an aspect of personality,³⁹ a core value, a component of worldview,⁴⁰ and a motivational element.⁴¹ ST in hesychasm may manifest as awe (the awareness of God's greatness and one's insignificance), flow (experienced during concentrated prayer), and mystical experience, which, though not the ultimate goal, may accompany spiritual practices.⁴² Therefore, exploring ST within the Hesychast context helps to understand how spiritual practices can facilitate profound psychological transformation and contribute to overall well-being.

Discussion

In this section, I examine hesychasm in Orthodox monastic spirituality as a path to existential meaning through radical self-transformation and ongoing self-transcendence. Using qualitative methods, direct observation and interviews with Athonite monks, I explore this process through a three-fold structure: calling, transition, and perfection. Hesychasm has been practised on Mount Athos as a living tradition for centuries. Findings show that hesychasm facilitates self-transcendence by addressing existential and psychological struggles, fostering self-awareness, and shifting values from material concerns to spiritual focus. Ultimately, hesychasm leads to the complete renewal of the self. In the discussion section, I refer to the four patterns of Hesychast spirituality – nostalgia, metanoia, Jesus prayer, and spiritual fatherhood – which are identified as crucial for spiritual development and support my hypothesis.

37 Pamela G. Reed, "Self-Transcendence: Scale and Theory," *STS-2018* (2018).

38 Michael R. Levenson, Patricia A. Jennings, Carolyn M. Aldwin, Ray W. Shiraishi, "Self-transcendence: Conceptualisation and measurement," *International Journal of Aging & Human Development* 60 (2005), 127–143.

39 Cloninger et al., "A Psychobiological Model of Temperament and Character."

40 Harry C. Triandis, "The self and social behaviour in differing cultural contexts," *Psychological Review* 98 (1989), 506–520.

41 Mark E. Koltko-Rivera, "Rediscovering the Later Version of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: Self-Transcendence and Opportunities for Theory, Research, and Unification," *Review of General Psychology* 10, no. 4 (2006), 302–317.

42 Yaden et al., "The Varieties of Self-Transcendent Experience."

Nostalgia

Monastic life requires conscious and voluntary sacrifice of former life and identity. After entering monastic life, individuals must put aside family, career aspirations, friendships, hobbies, sports, travel and other forms of entertainment. During the initial stage of monastic life, monks often face a profound emotional impact due to the separation from their families. Monks often experience intense nostalgia (e.g. in dreams of family members), which creates a significant psychological burden. Younger monks, in particular, must navigate not only their own emotional struggles but also the emotional reactions of their families.⁴³ Many family members, especially parents, struggle to understand the decision to pursue a monastic path. They may miss their children and regret unfulfilled educational and career aspirations, which can intensify the emotional burden on the monks.⁴⁴ However, this detachment is crucial in disconnecting from the secular past.

Fr. A's⁴⁵ personal experience illustrates how severe nostalgia affects him during the monastic transition. After his tonsure, Fr. A reported frequent attacks, as he believed by demonic forces who appeared in his dreams, taking the form of his child and spouse. Unable to experience this intense distress, he asked his spiritual father for help: "I am going mad and cannot carry this burden."⁴⁶ However, Abba replied that he must bear this cross for the rest of his life.⁴⁷ Despite the belief that intensive ascetical training and regular confessions might minimise nostalgic influences after three years,⁴⁸ for some monks with former families, this yearning may persist throughout their entire monastic journey and become one of the primary reasons to leave the monastery.⁴⁹

In the context of Hesychast spirituality, a self-transcendent orientation helps individuals maintain well-being during adversity,⁵⁰ as monks learn to

⁴³ Paganopoulos, *Land of the Virgin Mary*.

⁴⁴ However, in the Trappist monasteries, most monks reported their family support and approval (William L. Smith, "Vocation Stories of Cistercian Monks," *Michigan Sociological Review* [2016], 69–90).

⁴⁵ I use pseudonyms instead of real participant's names.

⁴⁶ Fr. A, personal communication, April 4, 2024.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Paganopoulos, *The Land of the Virgin*.

⁴⁹ Fr. B, personal communication, April 5, 2024.

⁵⁰ Reed, "Self-Transcendence: Scale and Theory," 421.

transform negative experiences into opportunities for development.⁵¹ Monks lose connection to their family, the outside world, and their previous identity. This leads to a radical reorientation of their sources of meaning, shifting from traditional values like family, career, and hobbies to deeper, spiritually oriented associations with meaningfulness.⁵² Thus, monks' sources of meaning are reshaped and improved in depth, breadth, and balance, key factors in experiencing meaning in life.⁵³ Therefore, in psychological terms, the goal of finding and connecting deeply with God links monks to the ultimate source of meaning, which brings exceptional meaningfulness to monastic life.⁵⁴ All possible hardships of life are ultimately restored with the possibility of obtaining divine likeness, and even death is framed not as a shutting of life but as a start of a new Edenic life. This logotherapeutic reason might explain why individuals choose monastic life despite its inherent suffering and difficulties.

Metanoia

In hesychast spirituality, metanoia is a transformative process of self-examination and following repentance. Based on practices like *automempsia* (self-search) and *endoskopisi* (introspection), it requires deliberate self-analyses to identify former and current destructive elements of behaviours and thoughts to avoid them in the future.⁵⁵ This process is usually activated in the initial purification phase through regular confession (e.g. every two days for novices in Vatopedi). Moreover, the initial confession might bring an extraordinary sense of spiritual relief.⁵⁶ For instance, Fr. A reported about his general confession: "If I were to die at that moment, I would be taken directly to Heaven."⁵⁷ Following this initial sense of relief, metanoia evolves into a sustained daily practice of spiritual and mental self-regulation.

51 Linda M. Austin, "The nostalgic moment and the sense of history," *Postmedieval: a Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 2 (2011), 127–140.

52 E.g. generativity (spiritual), care (in the form of prayer), deep religiosity, harmony (with self, others, nature and God), development (long scale hard daily work), social commitment and community (a part of a monastic living), attentiveness (a crucial element of Jesus Prayer and spiritual life), nature relatedness (seeing the beauty of Divine creation), creativity (Schnell, *The psychology of meaning in life*, 61–62).

53 Schnell, *The psychology of meaning in life*, 60–66.

54 Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 117.

55 Paganopoulos, *Land of the Virgin Mary*, 165.

56 The general confession is usually inquired by an experienced confessor who, through questioning, identifies the elements of inappropriate behaviour for the whole life.

57 Fr. A, personal communication, April 5, 2024.

Personal metanoia is realised in synergy with God and collaboration with a spiritual father or confessor. Gradually, monks and novices should develop advanced self-exploration skills to identify the destructive elements of their actions and thoughts. Deeper self-awareness leads to more in-depth self-purification. Also, metanoic transformation profits from a sincere and trusting relationship with a spiritually mature confessor or spiritual father.⁵⁸ Moreover, the value of human effort invested in the purification process (*podvig*) is significant. However, the actual results, even with the active application of all monastic spiritual means, may be hindered by the weight of previous experiences of sinful life prior to entering the monastery. As a result, more time is often needed for actual purification and, in most cases, for deeper spiritual progress after joining the monastery at a mature age.⁵⁹

“In monastic life, you can achieve either an angel-like or a demon-like life, with no limits in either direction” – claims Fr. A.⁶⁰ However, there is no universal “algorithm” for metanoia; ultimately, its process depends on individual paths to salvation and is designated differently for everyone,⁶¹ similar to theosis, as everyone is deified differently. The fruits of metanoia can manifest in various ways: as a sudden religious conversion, as for apostle Paul, like a gradual process, exemplified by St. Joseph the Hesychast’s⁶² eight years of rigorous ascetic practices, or as a lifelong struggle, as seen for St. Mary of Egypt,⁶³ or Desert Fathers who battled issues such as anger or sexual desire for decades.⁶⁴

Hesychast spirituality frames metanoia within a dual-structured ascetic system of two interrelated circles: the internal purification of the self and the eternal ritual framework that structures the ascetic journey. The outer

58 Great schema monk, personal communication, April 2, 2024.

59 Fr. A, personal communication, April 5, 2024.

60 Ibid.

61 Ivana Noble, “The Authority of Experience in the Hesychast Saints According to St. Gregory Palamas: The Relationship Between Ontology and Epistemology Revisited,” *Analogia: The Pemptousia Journal for Theological Studies* 5 (2018), 87.

62 St. Joseph the Hesychast (1897–1959) was a Greek Orthodox monk and elder who led a small monastic community on Mount Athos. His spiritual biography, *My Elder Joseph the Hesychast*, was written by his disciple, Elder Ephrem of Arizona and is considered an important work in spiritual literature from Mount Athos. This biography serves as a handbook for many monks and practitioners of the Jesus Prayer.

63 Christian saint from the 6th century who radically changed the life of a prostitute in a big city to the harsh ascetical living in the Egyptian desert for 40 years.

64 Norman Russell (ed.), *The lives of the desert fathers* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2009).

circle operates as a ‘technique of the body’⁶⁵, encompassing physical and mental practices to purify the self from spiritual toxins. The inner circle frames confession as part of a broader, lifelong ‘rite of passage,’ marking the monk’s journey towards salvation and ultimate union with God.⁶⁶ Further, this ritualistic process unfolds over time, with confession, prayer, and ascetic practices varying according to the individual’s spiritual burden. Asceticism and confession build the monk’s capacity to overcome temptations, preparing them for greater spiritual battles within their mind, as “90 per cent of temptations for monks come from inside”.⁶⁷ Confession and spiritual guidance are essential for addressing sinful actions and recognising *logismoï* – the negative thought forms that separate the individual from God. The aim is to redirect focus toward constant contemplation of God through prayer, gradually replacing distractions and harmful thoughts with divine remembrance.⁶⁸

The term *metanoia* (μετάνοια), literally meaning ‘change of mind,’ refers not to the change of rational intellect but to the nous (νοῦς) – a higher, God-like aspect of the mind that encompasses creativity, imagination, intuition, and spiritual insight. This distinction is vital to understanding how *metanoia* operates beyond cognitive change. This theological understanding of the nous resonates with Viktor Frankl’s psychological insights into existential frustration, particularly his concept of “noogenic neurosis”.⁶⁹ Noogenic neurosis articulates the existential tension that arises when one fails to access inner meaning or divine purpose. As Fr. A articulates: “only a crazy person would run away from this life” that he has, but despite this visible success, he felt “cursed” and could not find relief unless he started a spiritual life. In cases of noogenic issues, traditional therapy is often ineffective as the healing is required search for meaning beyond the self-interest.⁷⁰

Michel Foucault explored *metanoia* philosophically, interpreting it within Christian asceticism as a transformative process guiding individuals from earthly reality to a heavenly one.⁷¹ Thus, Christian asceticism can be

65 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 2006), 77–95. (Originally published 1925.)

66 Paganopoulos, *Land of the Virgin Mary*, 164.

67 Fr. A, personal communication, April 5, 2024.

68 Makrides, “The Healing Spirituality of Eastern Orthodoxy.”

69 Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, 107.

70 Ibid.

71 “Here we have everything for spiritual growth: Eucharist, Confession, a spiritual father, and the Jesus Prayer. But it is different when you become a monk and live a monastic

understood as a reality-oriented practice with a *metanoetic* function. It guides the individual from one reality to another, providing or imposing a set of conditions, rituals, procedures, behavioural rules, and a specific method of self-transformation.⁷² Monks via metanoetic function not only transform themselves, but move to another (Edenic) reality of being.

Jesus Prayer

In hesychast spirituality, the Jesus Prayer is a central practice. Prayer life is a dynamic and creative process. Monks could adapt their prayer practice to their personalities and spiritual needs, nevertheless primarily guided by their elders and spiritual texts. While in coenobitic monasteries, the prayer life is connected to communal church services, in hermitic monasteries, monks can choose how often, when, and how they will pray.⁷³ This flexibility shows the role of individual differences in spiritual development, one of the key factors in the effectiveness of hesychastic practice.

In collaboration with elders, monks receive direction, helping to identify the practices that are suitable for their current spiritual stage and resonate with their individual experiences and personalities. Moreover, monks explore a wide variety of patristic literature and spiritual texts (e.g. *My Life with Elder Joseph, the Way of Pilgrim, Philokalia*) to discover different methods of prayer and spiritual strategies. Based on received guidance, personal exploration, and inner evaluation, hermits experiment with different spiritual practices to develop the best personalised spiritual strategy.⁷⁴ Personalising spiritual practices became important in facilitating profound changes in personal identity.⁷⁵

However, not everything is ideal in a prayer life. Monks often pray, overcoming the desire to sleep, tiredness, distractions, and various temptations,

life from the inside. Monastic life is a severe, lifelong and titanic labour that you need to perform yourself. Nobody will do it instead of you; only you are responsible. It is a constant fight with the spirits of evil, and there is no way back – the only way is up and forward. You obtain a passport to the citizenship of New Jerusalem; now, you only need to reach this place” (Fr. A, personal communication, April 5, 2024).

72 Foucault, “*Speaking the Truth about Oneself*,” 96.

73 Fr. A and Fr. C, personal communication, April 4–5, 2024.

74 Fr. A and Fr. C, personal communication, personal observation, April 4–5, 2024.

75 Naum Ilievski, Angelina Ilievska, “Sociological dimensions of the FCP method according to Christian psychotherapy in coping with stress and suffering,” *European Journal of Social Science Education and Research* 4.3s (2017), 93–98.

even simply unwilling to pray.⁷⁶ These daily challenges are first viewed as obstacles but become part of the ascetic struggle, serving as a spiritual coping mechanism and sustaining psychological well-being. Therefore, losing the ability to pray in the monastery is considered a serious issue, as it deprives oneself of a powerful coping practice. For monks, prayer is not merely a compulsory obligation but a vital necessity. As Fr. A. explained, “The Jesus Prayer is our engine, just as petrol is for a car; an engine cannot work without fuel, just as a monk cannot live without the Jesus Prayer.”⁷⁷ Without profound engagement in Jesus Prayer, monks cannot grow spiritually and face significant difficulties in the harsh ascetic conditions of the monastery. “Without the Jesus Prayer, a monk is dead,” and thus cannot wear a black robe.⁷⁸ Thus, prayer life is a fundamental coping mechanism for spiritual and psychological well-being. Without prayer and grace, the monastery may feel like a dark place of suffering and doing unwanted things, but with the transformative power of prayer, it turns into a Paradise on Earth.

Ideally, hermits must maintain a disciplined prayer routine, as spiritual discipline is crucial for sustained spiritual growth. However, even experienced Hesychasts might occasionally struggle with a lack of focus, distractions and an inappropriate state for praying. The monks’ daily commitment to prayer is shaped by multiple factors, including their personal circumstances, psychological and emotional states, sacramental life, intentions, and physical health, which vary daily. All these factors influence prayer life – some days, prayer is easy-going, while others might be challenging. There are certain techniques to encourage prayer life. One of the techniques shared by experienced monks is recalling in thoughts the people in need to warm up the heart before the prayer: “When you have tears, your heart is ready for prayer.”⁷⁹ Choosing the most suitable approach for the prayer can also increase its effectiveness. This implies that different approaches to spiritual practices, including prayer, are essential, as they must naturally fit with everyone’s personality, emotional state, and spiritual disposition. For example, Fr. A, with a sports and military background, uses the fast

76 Participant observation, April 8–10, 2024.

77 Fr. A, personal communication, April 4, 2024.

78 Ibid.

79 Great schema monk, personal communication, April 9, 2024.

Athonite Rule of 1,200 repetitions of Jesus Prayer⁸⁰ in 15 minutes, what suits his energetic and disciplined personality.⁸¹

Similar to metanoia, progress in the Jesus Prayer is a human-divine collaboration. Even with great effort, spiritual progress in Jesus Prayer may come slowly or not without Holy Spirit and true contrition of a broken heart and sincere repentance. Reaching the “prayer of the heart” level, when prayer occurs effortlessly, may take decades of devoted monastic life of obedience, self-condemnation, hard work, fasting, vigilance, and prayer practice itself.⁸² For example, Fr. A, a former athlete and bodyguard, applies a sport proactive, disciplined approach to his spiritual life by setting ambitious goals and dedicating significant effort to copy the ascetic and prayer practices of St. Joseph the Hesychast.⁸³ However, despite his dedication, such as sleeping while standing and undertaking rigorous ascetic practices, Fr. A struggled to achieve significant results even after an extended training period as the burden of his past life before the monastery weighed heavily on him.⁸⁴ It is believed that reaching the level of the ‘prayer of the heart’ needs at least 10 years without “mortal sins”.⁸⁵

80 “Athonite Rule is 1200 Jesus Prayers, three prayers to the Lord, and one to the Holy Theotokos. When you pronounce ‘prayer’ in Greek, it sounds quicker, and overall Greek tradition is to say them rapidly. You can say 300 Jesus Prayers (just five words) in about 3–4 minutes. As you pray, concentrate on a particular place, but try to focus your mind in your heart (a location about two fingers below the navel) if you can” (Fr. A, personal communication, April 4, 2024).

81 Fr. A, personal communication, April 4, 2024.

82 Ibid.

83 Piedmont (1999) noted that the Five-Factor Model of Personality (FFM: neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness; Costa & McCrae, 1992), can be effective in describing the motivations of individuals who pursue spiritual or religious goals. Conscientiousness, one of the Big Five personality traits, is characterised by persistence, organisation, and motivation in goal-directed behaviour. This trait encompasses six facets: self-efficacy, orderliness, dutifulness, achievement striving, self-discipline, and cautiousness. Together, these facets support sustained effort and achieving goals (Ralph L. Piedmont, “Strategies for Using the Five-Factor Model of Personality in Religious Research,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 27 [1999]: 338–50; Paul T. Costa Jr., Robert R. McCrae, *The NEO PI-R Professional Manual* [Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources, 1992]).

84 Fr. A, personal communication, April 5, 2024.

85 Fr. A, personal communication, April 4, 2024.

Role of a Spiritual Father

On Mount Athos, the frequent question “Do you have a spiritual father?” shows the exceptional role of spiritual guidance in monastic life. The respect, or rather the cult, of the spiritual father, is highly developed on Mount Athos, where the authority of the spiritual father might take extreme forms. “If your spiritual father asks you to fly to the Moon,” you must do so without hesitation.⁸⁶ In my personal experience, when I approached one monk to become my spiritual father, firstly, he asked me: “*Would you be listening to me?*” and led me to the nearby gulf. He took my hand, asked me to close my eyes, and told me to step forward. That illustrated a “blind trust” in the spiritual father, whether with no obedience – there is no room for proper guidance. However, this might take on a near-paranormal form. For instance, one disciple of St. Joseph, the Hesychast, was not allowed to visit a doctor due to obedience, even while experiencing severe pain.

The central idea is that denying one’s will brings alliance with God’s will, which remains hidden. While direct knowledge of God’s will is rarely accessible, spiritual fathers are seen as mediators through whom the divine orientation can be followed.⁸⁷ This unquestioning obedience serves a theological function, yet it also raises significant questions about agency and the psychological implications of surrendering personal will, especially for the multiple converts to Orthodoxy from Western countries.⁸⁸

This spiritual mentorship parallels modern therapeutic models. The spiritual father analyses thoughts, behaviours, and actions, offering guidance rooted in ascetic practice and patristic texts.⁸⁹ This mirrors

⁸⁶ Fr. A, personal communication, April 5, 2024.

⁸⁷ “If I have pleased my elder, I have pleased God. I do not need other confirmations. I am absolutely convinced that these people (Abba and his ‘right hand’) are speaking from the Lord. I have a ‘blind trust’, if they say to me, ‘Jump from the mountain’, I will jump, absolute obedience” (Fr. A, personal communication, April 5, 2024).

⁸⁸ Effective spiritual direction requires the mentor’s deep understanding of the disciple’s personal context and spiritual growth. Even so, advice from a spiritual father must be critically assessed, and the disciple can decline it (Great Schema Monk, personal communication, April 9, 2024).

⁸⁹ Confession in hesychasm is not merely emotional regret but a transformative process of psychological and spiritual healing that restores one’s relationship with God (Grigorios C. Tympas, “Of Shamans, Confessors and Psychotherapists: Challenges to Repentance and Confession in the Light of the Modern and Post-Modern Shift Towards a ‘Psychological’ Society,” in St. Muse, V. Thermos [eds.], *Words into Spirit: Pastoral Perspectives on Confession* [South Canaan, PA: St. Tikhon’s Monastery Press, 2019], 1–22).

cognitive-behavioural and logotherapeutic approaches by transforming destructive thoughts and prompting spiritually beneficial ones.⁹⁰ Through confession and guidance, metanoia becomes an inner healing and meaning-making process of psychological and spiritual self-transformation. However, the activation of metanoia largely depends on a personal profound mastery of the spiritual father (“at best in the state of *apathea*”⁹¹), his specific knowledge of psychology, and his life experience.⁹² Moreover, as the monastic spiritual path is marked by trials, temptations, and existential uncertainty, an inexperienced or distant spiritual father can spiritually disorient or even harm a disciple. For that reason, within the framework of Hesychastic spirituality, a close and discerning relationship with a mature spiritual father is not just beneficial but essential for navigating the demanding path of inner transformation.

Some Critics

Despite the multiple benefits of Orthodox monastic spirituality, Makrides (2017) shows that a monastic worldview might be limited due to the lack of education and specific cultural constraints. Eastern Christianity broadly challenges adapting to the intellectual demands of a globalising, culturally diverse world today. Insular fundamentalism, with a lack of understanding of other religions and demonising them as heresies, sometimes complicates Western engagement with Orthodox monasticism.⁹³

In addition to cultural critiques, there is a claim about the psychological risks of intensive spiritual practices.⁹⁴ That sometimes can lead to a detachment from the self, which is potentially transformative and may cause risks of psychological disorders.⁹⁵ The intensive sense of self-loss promoted in

90 Tympas, “Of Shamans, Confessors and Psychotherapists.”

91 Great Schema Monk, personal communication, April 9, 2024.

92 Great Schema Monk, personal communication, April 2, 2024.

93 Makrides, “The Healing Spirituality of Eastern Orthodoxy.”

94 John Welwood, *Toward a Psychology of Awakening: Buddhism, Psychotherapy, and the Path of Personal and Spiritual Transformation* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2002).

95 Matthias Michal, Heide Glaesmer, Rüdiger Zwerenz, Achim Knebel, Jörg Wiltink, Elmar Brähler, Manfred E. Beutel, “Base rates for depersonalisation according to the 2-item version of the Cambridge Depersonalization Scale (CDS-2) and its associations with depression/anxiety in the general population,” *Journal of Affective Disorders* 128 (2011), 106–111; Francesca Ferri, Francesca Frassinetti, Francesca Mastrangelo, Anatolia Salone, Filippo M. Ferro, Vittorio Gallese, “Bodily self and schizophrenia: The loss of implicit self-body knowledge,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 21 (2012), 1365–1374.

Hesychasm is similar to depersonalisation that appears in schizophrenia and specific psychotic episodes.⁹⁶ Moreover, the pursuit of extraordinary spiritual experiences may signal or contribute to psychological distress.⁹⁷ Overall, the diminished or absent 'sense of self' in mystical practices poses psychological risks.⁹⁸

However, recent studies have found no correlation between mystical experiences and psychoticism or neuroticism.⁹⁹ Similarly, Scrutton (2024) argues that there is no link between faith and mental illness. She warns against the narcissistic overvaluation of inner experiences, like *mysterium tremendum* (the awe-filled encounter with the divine) and following aspiring idealisation of that mental state¹⁰⁰, which cannot be viewed as the goal of spiritual practice for hesychasts. Nevertheless, self-loss should be viewed as a potential alteration of consciousness, which could have either pathological or positive effects.¹⁰¹

A more sceptical view holds that self-transcendent experiences (STEs) are merely 'sensory pageantry' – vivid phenomena that make religious beliefs more memorable without deeper significance.¹⁰² This perspective suggests that STEs are a spandrel, a byproduct of another adaptation that provides no distinct evolutionary advantage.¹⁰³ Also, modern scientific research discusses STE induction through natural practices like meditation and prayer,¹⁰⁴ or

96 George E. Atwood, Donna M. Orange, Robert D. Stolorow, "Shattered worlds/psychotic states: A post-Cartesian view of the experience of personal annihilation," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 19 (2002), 281–306; Ferri et al., "Bodily self and schizophrenia: The loss of implicit self-body knowledge."

97 Alexander Moreira-Almeida, Harold G. Koenig, Peter J. Verhagen, Dan J. Stein, "WPA Position Statement on Spirituality and Religion in Psychiatry," *World Psychiatry* 15, no. 1 (2016), 87–88.

98 Yaden et al., "The varieties of self-transcendent experience."

99 Dale Caird, "Religiosity and personality: Are mystics introverted, neurotic, or psychotic?," *British Journal of Social Psychology* 26 (1987), 345–346.

100 Tasia Scrutton, "Psychopathology and Religious Experience? Toward a Both – And View," *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 31, no. 3 (2024), 243–256.

101 Yaden et al., "The varieties of self-transcendent experience."

102 Justin L. Barrett, "Exploring the natural foundations of religion," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 4 (2000), 29–34.

103 Yaden et al., "The varieties of self-transcendent experience."

104 Andrew Newberg, Abass Alavi, Michael Baime, Michael Pourdehnad, Jill Santanna, Eugene d'Aquili, "The measurement of regional cerebral blood flow during the complex cognitive task of meditation: A preliminary SPECT study," *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging* 106 (2001), 113–122.

retreats,¹⁰⁵ and artificially, through non-invasive brain stimulation,¹⁰⁶ or psychopharmacological interventions.¹⁰⁷ These advancements raise the question of whether artificial inductions produce similar effects to natural STEs and the potential risks of such artificial inductions.

Gaps and Contribution, Suggestions for Future Studies

This study detected several novel findings within the study of Hesychastic spirituality, especially when examined through the lens of self-transcendence. Jesus Prayer emerges not only as a central spiritual discipline for hermits but also as a coping mechanism during adversity, functioning simultaneously as a transformative practice essential to both spiritual and psychological well-being. Spiritual practices adapted to everyone's personality, emotional condition, and spiritual disposition might increase effectiveness. That might mean that the Hesychastic tradition implicitly recognises the role of personality in spiritual development despite lacking explicit articulation in contemporary psychological or instructional terms. However, applying the lens of self-transcendence to the empirical study of Orthodox monastic spirituality does not necessarily mean that theosis, as an ontological transformation, could be approached similarly to the modern concepts of well-being and happiness, which are more focused on emotional and meaning-based essence.

This study also identifies the divergence from previous research findings. For instance, Paganopoulos (2012) suggests that nostalgia can typically be resolved within a limited frame, e.g., a three-year novitiate period at Vatopedi

105 Ralph W. Hood, Jr., "The construction and preliminary validation of a measure of reported mystical experience," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 14 (1975), 29–41.

106 David B. Yaden, Jonathan Iwry, Andrew B. Newberg, "Neuroscience and religion: Surveying the field," in N. K. Clements (ed.), *Religion: Mental Religion: Part of the Macmillan Interdisciplinary Handbooks: Religion series* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 277–299.

107 Roland R. Griffiths, William A. Richards, Matthew W. Johnson, Una D. McCann, Robert Jesse, "Mystical-type experiences occasioned by psilocybin mediate the attribution of personal meaning and spiritual significance 14 months later," *Journal of Psychopharmacology* 22 (2008), 621–632; Roland R. Griffiths, William A. Richards, Una D. McCann, Robert Jesse, "Psilocybin can occasion mystical experiences with substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance," *Psychopharmacology* 187 (2006), 268–283.

Monastery.¹⁰⁸ However, this study indicates that for monks who had their own families, nostalgia might be present throughout their lives. Emotional experiences surrounding nostalgia and family separation may vary depending on individual backgrounds and spiritual contexts. Moreover, nostalgia emerged as a significant factor that affected monks' return to secular life. However, compensated by the coping mechanism of self-transcendence, nostalgia became a form of suffering that contributes to profound personal and spiritual growth by facilitating the discovery of deeper meaning in life.¹⁰⁹

Paganopoulos' work similarly showed the monastic tonsure as a voluntary self-sacrifice, representing a significant milestone in spiritual transformation. Monks take eternal vows at this stage, marking a point of no return.¹¹⁰ While this commitment may provide spiritual relief, it can also intensify psychological strain due to its irreversible nature. An overly romanticised picture of monastic life must be balanced by an awareness of its demanding and lifelong nature – requiring consistent daily motivation and discipline to perform tasks against personal will, all in pursuit of spiritual rewards that may only manifest in the afterlife. Another important finding concerns the influence of past experiences on current spiritual development, raising the question of how, from a scientific perspective, memory and embodied cognitive patterns shape actual progress in spiritual life.

Conclusions

For the first time, the study empirically considers Hesychast spirituality as a sustained path to self-transcendence. While previous research has addressed self-transcendent experiences in contexts like meditation or psychedelics,¹¹¹ Hesychasm remains underexplored in terms of its psychological depth and lived reality. Using interviews with Athonite monks, this research confirms that Hesychasm constitutes a complex spiritual path towards self-transcendence with theological, psychological, and sociological dimensions. This article focused on the transition phase, while the following two will cover the stage of calling and perfection necessary for the total picture of monistic spiritual transformation via Hesychasm.

108 Paganopoulos, *The Land of the Virgin*.

109 Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*.

110 Paganopoulos, *The Land of the Virgin*.

111 Yaden et al., "The varieties of self-transcendent experience."

As patristic writers Evagrius, St. Maximus the Confessor and St. John Climacus, as modern theorists such as Rambo¹¹² or Horujy¹¹³ refers to the similar sequential steps in the spiritual transformation. Through the dissolution of ego and existential reframing, monks radically reorganise, transcend previous mental constructs, reconstruct new personal narratives, and deeply spiritually and psychologically integrate into a new paradigm of life and meaning.¹¹⁴ The monastic path includes a necessity of self-transcendence via deliberate withdrawal from conventional sources of ego-gratification and social identity. The initial phase of solitude creates an existential tension vital in opening psychological and spiritual space for transformation beyond ordinary consciousness. The monastery's "non-luxury" conditions with no access to entertainment, technologies,¹¹⁵ and modern comforts are not about self-masochism. Instead, it is based on centuries-old traditions of spiritual life that create a highly supportive environment structured to transcend the self's habitual patterns.¹¹⁶ The monk's daily routine centred on prayer, physical labour, and minimal comfort, systematically rebuilding the personality structure shaped by comfort-seeking and self-validation. This everyday transcendence is much closer to Maslow's "plateau experiences", a sustained state of transcendence achieved through disciplined practice rather than spontaneous peak experiences.¹¹⁷

A key limitation of this study is dealing with highly abstract and complex experiential phenomena parts of Hesychast spirituality, which currently lack standardised evaluation and empirical measurement criteria. *Furthermore, monks in advanced stages of spiritual development might hesitate and hide their personal experience, making applying various scientific measurement tools or digital methodologies difficult.* The article did not discuss several important factors related to the transition phase, such as sacramental life, fasting, sleep deprivation, the supportive environment of the monastery, the

112 Rambo, Lewis R., "Theories of conversion: Understanding and interpreting religious change." *Social Compass* 46.3 (1999), 259–271.

113 Sergey Horujy, "Hermeneutics of Human Body According to Hesychast Anthropology," *sinergia-isa. ru* [accessed 16/12/2021] (2010).

114 Rambo, "Theories of conversion."

115 Certain monks can access social media and email, maintain YouTube channels, and actively communicate online via various media platforms.

116 Makrides, "The Healing Spirituality of Eastern Orthodoxy."

117 Nicole Gruel, "The plateau experience: An exploration of its origins, characteristics, and potential," *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 47.1 (2015), 44.

role of monastic tonsure, and other essential factors identified in studies. This omission was due to text limitations. Moreover, the findings are based on a limited sample of male hermits from a single monastic community on Mount Athos, which might differ across the broader spectrum of Orthodox monastic traditions. However, narrative analysis, with further identification of parallels in psychological studies, might be an effective empirical method of discovering hesychasm. Exploring these aspects offers promising directions for advancing the scientific understanding of such rare experiential phenomena, particularly in its radical form, though the field remains highly challenging.

So, approaching the most ambitious goal humans could ever achieve – God's likeness, monks apply the most effective methods. They know what they do and why they do it. They do only that and do it very professionally. They live in a highly supportive environment where everyone does the same and are skilfully supervised by spiritual experts. The results would be profound if that strategy were applied to any other goal. However, as the goal is so high, the methods must be very professional.

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From Decision to Vision: Virtue, Community, and Hauerwas' Critique of Fletcher's Situation Ethics

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Abstract: In the 1960s and 70s, Joseph Fletcher's "situation ethics" (or "new morality") emerged as a prominent attempt to loosen Christian moral reflection from inherited legalism and dogmatism amid new dilemmas in medicine and public life. While influential, it also provoked sustained criticism from many Christian ethicists, not least because its appeal to love risked reinforcing a decision-centered account of moral agency. This essay reconstructs that debate and highlights Stanley Hauerwas's early engagement with Fletcher in *Vision and Virtue*, where Hauerwas affirms the ambiguity of moral notions yet resists reducing ethics to case-by-case adjudication. Drawing on Iris Murdoch and Wittgenstein, Hauerwas describes Christian ethics as an "aesthetics" in the limited but important sense that moral life depends on trained perception: we can act only within the world we are able to see. Crucially, such "vision" is not an individual achievement but is learned through participation in the community of believers – its narratives, practices, and disciplines – that forms the virtues by which the world can be truthfully described. The result is a reorientation from deciding well in isolated cases to becoming the kind of people who can see and live faithfully.

Keywords: New Morality; Situation ethics; Community; Narrative; Moral vision

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Introduction

Situation ethics emerged as a product of the New Morality Movement in the 1960s and 70s in American Christianity, representing the latest trend in Western religious ethics and the broader field of ethics. During this era, as scientific development advanced, it profoundly influenced people's life and moral perspectives, raising moral dilemmas such as abortion, organ transplantation, and euthanasia. These shifts began to affect the realm of religious ethics, prompting ethicists to critique the inadequacy of existing Christian ethics in addressing these new issues, and to seek change.¹ Fletcher, as a leader in this movement, recognized that to address these modern

1 Junren Wan, *History of Modern Western Ethics II* (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2010), 824–825.

challenges, existing moral principles and Christian doctrines like legalism and dogmatism were insufficient. He emphasized that moral guidance must stem from human situations.² His ideas were chiefly expressed in his 1966 publication *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*. Although termed “new morality,” it wasn’t entirely novel. Durant Drake, in 1928, published a book titled *New Morality*, critiquing authoritarian and supernatural ethics under practical naturalism. In 1963, French priest Ignace Lepp also used the term in his book, not to harshly criticize principles but to explore the conditions under which normative moralism contradicts good conscience and humanitarian values, thus advocating for flexible moral thinking.³ That same year, Bishop John Robinson’s work *Honest to God* included a chapter titled *New Morality*.⁴ In 1964, Douglas Rhymes’ *No New Morality* strongly opposed the notion that Christian morality must be rule-based, advocating for a foundation in love rather than any law.⁵ Furthermore, situation ethics as an ethical type was influenced by modern relativism, existentialism, and pragmatism. It was reflected in Dewey’s pragmatic utilitarianism and the theological thoughts of Protestant ethicists like Barth, Brunner, Niebuhr, with Fletcher’s situation ethics representing a refinement and public expression of these ideas.⁶

Stanley Hauerwas, a prominent North American Christian ethicist and theologian, whose work spans the late 20th and early 21st centuries, critically examined Fletcher’s situation ethics in one of his early works, *Vision and Virtue*. In this book, he built upon Fletcher’s approach to develop his own ethical path. He argued that the predominant debate in American ethics during the 1960s and 70s, whether moral dilemmas should be resolved through norms or context, was misguided. In his view, it’s crucial to focus on the appropriateness of specific moral judgments, which are not mere calculative abilities in different situations, but rather akin to an “aesthetic taste.”⁷ This article argues that Hauerwas’s critique targets not merely Fletcher’s conclusions but the decision-centered picture of moral agency

2 Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, trans. Lixian Cheng (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 1989), preface.

3 Harvey Cox, *The Situation Ethics Debate* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 102–103.

4 John Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 105.

5 Douglas Rhymes, *No New Morality* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill Company), frontispiece.

6 Wan, *History of Modern Western Ethics* II, 826.

7 Brad Kallenberg, *Ethics as Grammar* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 51.

that situation ethics tends to encourage. It proceeds by (1) locating "new morality" within its broader debate, (2) reconstructing Hauerwas's analysis of moral notions, and (3) presenting moral vision, virtue, and community as the integrated grammar of Christian moral life.

New Morality is Not Entirely New

Although Fletcher's situation ethics became famous with the publication of "Situation Ethics: The New Morality" in 1966, he had actually begun to express these ideas in an article about the new face of Christian ethics written in October 1959.⁸ In 1963, Fletcher revisited his views, this time using the term "new key." In February 1966, he officially employed the term "new morality" in the magazine *Commonweal*.⁹ Similar to the fate of previous 'new morality' thinkers, he received criticism from the academic community and within the church. However, many people, especially the general non-believing public and laypeople, appreciated his courage in opposing the constraints of rule-based ethics and his contributions to relieving unnecessary burdens on people's consciences.

A Brief Review of New Morality

At the beginning of *Situation ethics*, Fletcher quotes a passage from Paul Tillich's *Systematic Theology* I:

The law of love is the ultimate law because it is the negation of law; it is absolute because it concerns everything concrete [...]. The absoluteness of love is its power to go into the concrete situation, to discover what is demanded by the predicament of the concrete to which it turns. Therefore, love can never become fanatical in a flight for an absolute, or cynical under the impact of the relative.¹⁰

Fletcher constructs his situation ethics method with the normative ideal of love, which can be termed as an ethics of love.

First, he clarifies how he uses the term "situation," as, in his view, Paul Lehmann assigns two different but often confused meanings to it. The first meaning of situation refers to the Christian action being carried out within

⁸ Joseph Fletcher, "The New Look in Christian Ethics," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 24/1 (1959), 7–18.

⁹ Joseph Fletcher, "Love Is the Only Measure," *Commonweal* 83/14 (1966), 427–432.

¹⁰ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 152.

a theological reference system, within fellowship, against the backdrop of faith. The second meaning refers to Christian action adapting to the objective environment, i.e., the situation. Fletcher employs the term in this latter, deliberately “thin” sense: by “situation ethics” he does not mean an approach that carries any intrinsic commitment to Christian doctrine, but rather a general method of context-sensitive moral reasoning that can be taken up under very different ideological banners.¹¹ In effect, he presents it as a portable decision-making logic, one that could be practiced within explicitly theological frameworks or within non-theological ones. Similarly, “love” is also a semantically confused term with many expressions. Christian ethics sometimes only uses the love (Agape) of the New Testament, or express it in forms like C-Love. But for Fletcher, outside of the professional significance of New Testament theology, love has many important and reasonable meanings that should not be mercilessly discarded. The rich meanings of love should be preserved.¹²

Fletcher outlines three paths for moral decision-making: legalism, antinomianism, and situationism. Legalistic decision-making is based on a set of pre-established rules and regulations that directly govern decision-making behavior. For people, solutions are predetermined, as if they can be found in a book.¹³ Christian traditional legalism takes two forms: the Catholic route is based on natural or natural law legalism, and the Protestant route is based on the gospel preachers and apostles of the Bible – words of the law and the prophets. Fletcher considers them one rationalistic and one scriptural; one natural, the other biblical, but both legalistic.¹⁴ Antinomianism is the opposite of legalism, with its decision-making not based on any principle or rule, claiming that in every “existential moment” or “unique situation,” people must rely on the situation itself to arrive at a moral solution on the spot.¹⁵ Regarding antinomianism, Fletcher discusses three forms, including two primitive forms of Christianity opposed by Paul – liberalism (believing that salvation comes through grace, new life in Christ, faith, and hence laws and rules no longer apply to Christians) and Gnosticism (claiming to possess

11 Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 14.

12 Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 15.

13 Ibid., 17–18.

14 Ibid., 21.

15 Ibid.

special knowledge, knowing what is right when needed, thus rendering principles and rules unnecessary), as well as existentialist ethics (rejecting all principles, 'universally valid' ethical norms or axioms, absolutizing universal principles into law).¹⁶

Fletcher presents situationism as a *via media* between legalism and antinomianism. It grants a significant role to reason in moral judgment (in a way loosely reminiscent of natural-law reasoning), yet it refuses any account of the good as inherently fixed in the nature of things. Likewise, it is willing to appeal to "revelation" for moral orientation, but it rejects revelation as a binding legal code; in practice, only the single imperative of love – loving God through the concrete neighbor – functions as the norm that governs biblical morality. Hence traditional moral rules are not discarded, but treated as presumptive guides drawn from a community's inherited wisdom: they illuminate deliberation, while remaining revisable and even suspendable whenever they appear to conflict with what love requires in a particular situation.¹⁷ Therefore, in Fletcher's view, the decisions of situationists are hypothetical, not absolute. Only the commandment of love is an absolute norm or principle; other norms or principles are only effective when serving love – the overarching commandment of loving God and neighbor.

Fletcher uses the example of abortion to illustrate the application of situation ethics. In 1962, a state mental hospital patient raped a severely schizophrenic unmarried girl. The victim's father accused the doctor of negligence and demanded an immediate abortion at an early embryonic stage. The hospital, citing criminal law that prohibits all abortions except 'therapeutic' ones when the mother's life is threatened, refused the father's request. Against this background, Fletcher presents the moral decisions of legalists, antinomians, and situationists. He believes legalists would refuse abortion because killing is inherently wrong, evil, and this case does not present a legal justification for abortion. Even if many doctors take a flexible view of life and defend abortion, it is still fundamentally an evil act, only excused. Catholic moral theology even goes beyond strict legalism, denying all exceptions and absolutizing the prohibition of abortion. For antinomians, Fletcher notes that it is unpredictable, as by its nature and definition, antinomian ethics are beyond generalization, and all one can do is make reasonable guesses.

¹⁶ Ibid., 22–24.

¹⁷ Ibid., 26.

If they live by the norm of love, then in this situation, they would tend to support abortion. Situationists, if their norm is the Christian commandment to love one's neighbor, would almost certainly favor abortion in this case, supporting the girl's father's request, as this is the most loving (correct), responsible decision.¹⁸

As a "method" rather than a "system," situation ethics draws on past intellectual resources. Fletcher points out that situation ethics operates on four presuppositions: pragmatism, relativism, positivism, and personalism. Under these operating principles, six propositions of situation ethics emerge, explaining how love functions in ethical decision-making. Fletcher notes that too many people yearn for a predetermined moral-ethical system, relying on strong rules.¹⁹ Adhering to certain rules can bring a sense of security, a lesser psychological (conscience) burden. But Fletcher's situation ethics is not intended to build a new ethical system to replace the old ones, as he pointed out, situationism aims to rescue people from the death of stubborn law and live like a free person. Of course, freedom will be accompanied by ambiguity, and moral life is destined to be an adventure.²⁰

Intense Criticism

Ironically, the term "new morality" originated from its critics. Pope Pius XII, in a speech on April 18, 1952, condemned what he called existentialist or situation ethics (he considered them synonymous). Four years later, he gave it the new name of "new morality" and banned it from all Catholic colleges and seminaries.²¹ Beyond the Catholic Church's criticism, there were many insightful and influential critiques.

Robert Fitch, born in Ningbo, China, and later the dean of the Pacific School of Religion, vividly described the core critique of situationism: there is a Catholic force called order, a Catholic disease called tyranny, a Protestant force called freedom, and a Protestant disease called anarchy. He noted that the Roman Catholic Church has always been preventing this disease and ensuring freedom within order. Protestantism is indeed moving towards strengthening order at the political and church structural levels, but in theology and ethics – at least on the Anglo-American level – it has been

¹⁸ Ibid., 37–39.

¹⁹ Ibid., 134.

²⁰ Ibid., 135.

²¹ Cox, *The Situation Ethics Debate*, 215–216.

moving towards a strengthened disorder. In ethics, its name is situationism; in theology, it is atheism or Christocentric humanism.²²

In 1971, the famous philosopher and theologian John Montgomery had a fierce debate with Fletcher at San Diego State University, later published as *Situation ethics: True or False? A Dialogue Between Fletcher and Montgomery*. Montgomery pointed out that Fletcher seemed to give love a certain degree of concrete content, sometimes defining love, i.e., as exemplified by Jesus, equivalent to Jesus' teachings and practices. However, Fletcher's understanding of love was not derived from general Biblical teachings or specific works of Jesus; he was essentially a mid-20th-century Marcionite. Montgomery believed Fletcher accepted radical New Testament critical techniques, eliminating his ability to recognize Jesus' ethics. If Fletcher took the entire New Testament seriously, he would find that it, no less than the Old Testament, insists on absolute moral standards.²³ When Fletcher equated justice with love, giving content to love, it quickly led to justice being absorbed into the vagueness of love, without revealing the content of love. Additionally, he noted Fletcher committed a category mistake, like Gilbert Ryle's example of the legal entity (University of Oxford) being confused with its concrete constituent colleges.²⁴

Montgomery listed Fletcher's most concrete description of love: regardless of whether people like their neighbors, love benefits the neighbor. However, this turned Fletcher's action – Agapeism – into Bentham-Mill style utilitarian ethics, spiced up with a lot of theological charm. Thus, the problems plaguing utilitarianism also beset situation ethics, and the flavor of love could not change this situation, such as which neighbor's interests matter, what exactly are the neighbor's interests. Montgomery believed that although the demon of explicit normative ethics was exorcised by situation ethics, it brought seven more demons of implicit, self-evident principles, making the moral situation worse.²⁵

Ethicist Paul Ramsey agreed with some of Fletcher's basic views on situation ethics, such as "love with concern and then do what you want".²⁶

22 Robert Fitch, "The Protestant Sickness," *Religion in Life* 35/4 (1966), 498.

23 Joseph Fletcher, John Warwick Montgomery, *Situation ethics; true or false? A Dialogue between Joseph Fletcher and John Warwick Montgomery* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship), 36–37.

24 Fletcher, John Warwick Montgomery, *Situation ethics*, 38.

25 Ibid., 39.

26 Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 55.

However, he pointed out two unexamined assumptions worth noting: first, that Christian love itself lacks the breadth and depth to match individual depth, thus lacking the implied force of rules; second, that the “home” of love is only in the reality of the neighbor, at that moment of concern.²⁷ Ramsey believed that, unlike emphasizing ethics as a product of social evolution or a general assertion of human values, Christian ethics (as per the authors of the Bible) established ethics in the nature and activity of God. Appreciation for rules is based on appreciation for the actions themselves, so Ramsey rejected any teleological or goal-pursuing ethics. In his view, God calls people to obey in love, so Christians’ responses to God’s commands are not isolated situational decisions, but based on a tradition of action and faith. Ramsey’s understanding of Christian love was deontological, where the motivation behind acts of love is not evaluated by achievements attained. Christian love is manifested in love for the neighbor, not in the general sense for all humanity, nor in the special sense for the individual. Therefore, Ramsey saw situation ethics as a form of “selfish sociability,” misunderstanding the meaning of selfless love shown in the New Testament.²⁸

Other critics, like Bernard Meland, worried that supporters of new morality were trying to secularize Christianity, and their anti-authoritarian stance would ultimately lead to a radical subjectivism (or pure relativism) spirit.²⁹ James Gustafson, who initially sympathized with contextualist approaches, later argued that the sharp opposition between “context” and “principles” was itself a mis-framing of the issue. In his view, “contextualism” had become an overextended label: it gathered together theorists whose positions differed markedly from one another, sometimes no less than they differed from so-called defenders of principle-based ethics.³⁰ As a result, the debate increasingly generated more heat than light, since the category had grown so elastic that it no longer marked a coherent methodological stance or a genuinely fruitful line of disagreement.

27 Paul Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics* (London: Oliver and Boyd Press, 1965), 17.

28 Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1950), 100.

29 Joseph Fletcher, *Memoir of An Ex-radical: Reminiscence and Reappraisal* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 31.

30 James Gustafson, “Context Versus Principles: A Misplaced Debate in Christian Ethics,” *Harvard Theological Review* 58/2 (1965), 173; Joseph Fletcher, *Memoir of An Ex-radical*, 32.

Hauerwas' Critical Analysis of "New Morality"

Hauerwas believes that the debate on new morality seems to be drawing to a close, despite generating many valuable reflections on the nature of moral life.³¹ However, the issue hasn't been resolved; rather, people's interests have shifted. He outlines two reasons for revisiting situation ethics or new morality: first, he agrees with most of the critiques of Fletcher's position, such as the criticism of Fletcher's oversimplification of 'love', but he believes the main thrust of Fletcher's argument is essentially correct; second, rearticulating the issue from the nature of moral notions can provide important insights for theological ethics.³²

"Love" is Not All You Need

Hauerwas uses a story from C. S. Lewis' classic children's book *The Silver Chair* to assess themes related to the 'revival of moral theology'. The story synopsis is as follows: Aslan, the creator and protector of Narnia, gives two children, Jill and Scrubb, a daunting task – to go to the underworld to find Prince Rilian, who was kidnapped by a witch. Narnia faces the dilemma of being without a king as his father is near death. In their quest to find the prince, they encounter the Marsh-wiggle Puddleglum and embark on a journey together. When they find the prince, who has been enchanted to forget his identity and free him from the silver chair, the witch appears. Instead of using violence, she quietly casts a spell that almost convinces them that Narnia only exists in dreams, the sun is merely a legend, and only the lamp in the room is real.³³

Hauerwas points out that in the enthusiasm for new morality theology, people tend to stay in illusions, thinking that only the lamp and the cat are real, while the sun and the lion should be forgotten. People assume that their lives can easily reflect and embody goodness, transforming themselves into loving people overnight by blindly imposing love, goodness, justice, even

31 Hauerwas gave an example of high-quality articles collected in "Norms and Context in Christian Ethics" edited by Outka and Ramsey; Gene Outka, Paul Ramsey (eds.), *Norm and Context in Christian Ethics* (New York: Scribner, 1968).

32 Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 11–12.

33 C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (London: Bles, 1950), 155–167; Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, 93–94.

Jesus. In reality, to truly see the world as it is, the self must be transformed, and it may require patience to endure the pain of becoming real.³⁴

New morality emphasizes love as the core of moral life, i.e., love as the sole norm for deciding moral actions and judgments. Love is both a universal attitude and sufficient as a guide for actual moral actions. Hauerwas notes that the significant impact of new morality is not just because Fletcher wrote a book on it, but because this emphasis on love as the essence of Christian behavior is correct in people's experiential impressions. People know that they rarely encounter situations that can be decided based on some law or rule; moral life needs a flexibility that only love can guide. Moreover, the insights of new morality seem more in line with the essence of the Gospels.³⁵ However, Hauerwas clarifies from both theological and ethical perspectives that new morality has serious flaws in its description of Christian ethics and the nature of Christian behavior, and theological faith cannot be reduced to an ethic of love.³⁶

Theologically, love indeed holds an important place in the Gospels, especially in the Great Commandment. However, love itself is not an end in itself or a universal policy. The command of love that Christians are concerned with cannot be separated from the person commanding the love – Jesus. Jesus himself shows the righteousness of God's kingdom, making love possible. Also, the ethics of the Gospels cannot be separated from God's story of salvation, and Christians themselves are part of that story.³⁷ Thus, in Hauerwas' view, the command of love is not the moral ultimate of this story, as new morality suggests, but rather the story itself is the moral meaning of love.³⁸ Therefore, when Jesus is the best example of love, it is not his work that defines the essence of love, but love becomes the norm defining his work.³⁹ Therefore, Jesus' death not only shows that love is not an easy thing – this is the consequence of treating love as an abstract thing – but also indicates that the essence of the Gospels is not love but Jesus himself and his work (redemption and the establishment of the kingdom of righteousness).

34 Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, 96.

35 Ibid., 111–112.

36 Ibid., 112, 114.

37 Ibid., 115.

38 Ibid., 115.

39 Ibid., 116.

Ethically, the ethics of love, by advocating a return to an ethic of understanding and acceptance between people, reinforces people's illusions, as if moving from "me" to "you" is the highest realm of human achievement. Hauerwas points out that as a social being, a person is not just an interaction between individuals; the social issues faced require justice, not love. Moral life is not about whether the question of love is always ethically constitutive, but who will be harmed. The command to love every relevant person does not help solve this problem because the issue is not about harming or not harming, but about who to harm justly.⁴⁰ Resorting to an ethic of love is just a way to alleviate this pain. People are willing to indulge in illusions mainly because they refuse to face the fact that even goodwill cannot avoid harming others.⁴¹

On the surface, Hauerwas seems to still stay in the old morality's understanding of the relationship between love and justice. However, Hauerwas' view is neither the natural-supernatural form nor the law-gospel separation form, but that even in interpersonal relationships, if there is no manifestation of justice, love is sentimental and destructive, rather than realistic and constructive. Because without respect, there can be no love, and respect must be built on the perception of the other's right to exist, because 'he' is 'he', not because 'he' is valuable to 'me'. The assertion of new morality that love is the center of Christian ethics is, in Hauerwas' view, just a satisfaction with an analysis of reality. It should be clear that love, if it represents truth and respects the other, might require people to do things that seem unloving. However, he further proposes that even if love is freed from such sentimentality, it is still not a sufficient principle. The Gospels cannot be simplified into a single formula or generalized image of moral life; Christian ethics and Christian life are as rich and varied as the stories people hold and the real lives they must live.⁴²

The Experiential Significance of Moral Notions

In Hauerwas' view, what Fletcher really should have focused on is the applicability of people's moral notions in various situations, which can be convincingly derived from common experiences (such as lying not always being wrong). However, he mistakenly equated his position with situationism.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 118–119.

⁴¹ Ibid., 119.

⁴² Ibid., 119–120.

When Fletcher used his theory of moral behavior to explain this aspect of moral experience, he risked destroying any meaningful moral discourse.⁴³ Most critiques target his oversimplification of moral life factors and his failure to explain the importance and diversity of principles and rules that determine moral behavior.⁴⁴

Hauerwas notes that Fletcher correctly identified the ambiguity of moral notions, but didn't adequately consider the richness of people's moral experiences, many aspects of which are not accurately reflected in moral language. In fact, moral life, especially in its theological understanding, is mostly an effort to constrain people's moral notions. However, Hauerwas argues that Fletcher didn't clarify this because he focused on the situational nature of moral decisions rather than moral notions.⁴⁵ This is mainly because Fletcher viewed decision-making as the core of ethics, suggesting that moral life ultimately depends on decisions. Hauerwas doesn't deny the importance of decisions but points out that neither moral life nor moral philosophy can be based solely on the concept of decision. Before deciding, one must first have moral notions. In other words, decisions must be made within the framework of their moral notions. Hauerwas notes that Fletcher's tendency to simplify the importance of moral notions into an overly simplistic rule concept led him to miss this point.⁴⁶

To address this, Hauerwas explores the nature of moral notions, noting their many similarities with descriptive categories.⁴⁷ He uses the concept of a table as an example, employing Julius Kovesi's distinction between form and matter to articulate his point. He notes that this distinction is often misunderstood as relating material elements to the physical properties of an object and formal elements to the object's shape. However, material includes not just the physical properties but also the variations an object can undergo and still be recognized as itself, such as still being considered a table despite changes in shape. Therefore, Hauerwas believes the shape of an object is also part of its material elements, introducing a new concept of form – an aspect of an object that allows people to group different objects together based on experience. Thus, a backhand miss or failure to hit a tennis ball into the court

43 Ibid., 11.

44 Ibid., 12.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., 12–13.

47 Ibid., 14.

both fall under the concept of "error." Hauerwas says that formal elements are the result of situations.⁴⁸ This way of conceptualizing moral notions avoids breaking down moral life into isolated situations, instead considering the applicability of moral notions across different situations. Had Fletcher realized this, he could have avoided the critiques raised by Montgomery and Ramsey. Thus, a person is not a series of isolated decisions but has narrative continuity, hinting at Hauerwas' future development of narrative ethics.

Moreover, Hauerwas points out that moral notions can be classified as complete or open. Open moral notions require further norms for people to make judgments about a specific action. Complete moral notions already contain these further norms. In other words, complete moral notions include everything needed to judge an action as good or bad in itself. Most moral notions are of the open type, as people's daily experiences do not require the strict certainty envisioned in complete moral notions.⁴⁹ On this level, Hauerwas sees the correctness of Fletcher's position. His use of situations is a way of positioning uncertainty, which typically involves the formal elements of moral notions, by raising questions or denying the appropriateness of certain concepts to cover specific situations. Fletcher explained the fact that some important moral experiences cannot be covered by moral notions.

However, Hauerwas notes what Fletcher didn't clarify: attempting to limit the applicability of certain moral notions in situations is different from trying to render a moral concept meaningless based on specific situations. Clearly, examples of special situations can only be described within the scope of moral notions, which doesn't mean that understanding situations necessarily determines the decisions that agents must make. The decision must still be the agent's decision. Crucially, the importance of moral notions is not negated by special situations, because without such moral notions, it wouldn't be possible to consider the situation special.⁵⁰ Therefore, in Hauerwas' view, what Fletcher failed to see is the experiential life of moral notions and their place in the entire way of life. By denying moral experience in the name of situations, he also denied the moral way of life. Hauerwas states: "The question therefore of various moral notions and rules is primarily the question of the significance of particular kinds of human action. As such the question is

⁴⁸ Ibid., 15–16.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 23.

not adhering to rules or to the situation, but what the situation is and how it should be correctly understood.”⁵¹

In Hauerwas’ perspective, the dominant debate in 20th-century American ethics about whether moral dilemmas are resolved through norms or situations is misguided. What’s truly important is whether a particular person’s moral judgment is appropriate (the applicability of moral notions), not a calculative ability in different situations, but a skill akin to aesthetic taste.

Moral Life as Life in Vision

Hauerwas believes that the current difficulties in Christian ethics stem from many philosophers and religious ethicists accepting too narrow a concept of moral experience, limiting ethics to the analysis of the justification of specific actions. This approach makes Christian ethics difficult to understand. Therefore, he attempts to develop a positive methodology, making various claims about the nature of Christian moral life more comprehensible. In his view, the Gospel’s discourse includes but transcends judgments of specific actions and practices regarding the self. Utilizing the concept of “vision” from Murdoch’s viewpoint, Hauerwas highlights the importance of seeing and training vision through metaphors and symbols, thus directing attention to moral notions rather than the significance of decisions. He perceives moral life, first and foremost, not as a life of choice – decision is not supreme – but as woven from the concepts people use to see and shape the situations they face. Therefore, ethics and moral life are best understood as the training of moral vision; moral life is a life of vision, as its task is to see the world, self, and others accurately, without any illusion. This true vision requires discipline and training, primarily achieved through community participation in narratives, and necessitates self-transformation to see correctly in a contingent world.

Seeing Correctly, Not Just Deciding

In Hauerwas’ view, Christian ethics has succumbed to the modern understanding of humans as agents and self-creators. Thus, God is relegated to the universe of the wholly Other, and humans must decide the world’s fate through their absolute freedom. Or, even if God exists, He is only the God of history, merely confirming the continuous development of human creativity.

51 Ibid., 24.

Consequently, the goal of moral life becomes acting correctly, reducing moral life to a matter of choice.⁵² However, inspired by Murdoch, Hauerwas sees the view of humans as self-creators as an illusion. Murdoch argues that the definition of humans is their inability to bear reality. Modern humans optimistically combine a naive faith in science with the assumption that humans are entirely rational and free, leading to an exaggerated understanding of the self. The reality is that human choices are severely limited, and the contingencies of life and the constraints of death constantly trouble humanity. Faced with these unpleasant realities, humans begin to create illusions for a sense of security, like continually telling themselves they can always freely make choices or decide. Murdoch's point is that the ordinary self is neither highly free nor reliably lucid: the range of genuine choice is usually narrow, and consciousness tends to drift into fantasy and daydream in order to avoid pain. Seen this way, the modern confidence in decision and autonomy is itself part of the problem, because it masks how perception is already distorted by fear and self-protection. This is precisely why an ethics centered on "making the right choice" can be misleading: before decisions, there is the harder moral task of learning to see reality without illusion.⁵³

For Murdoch, the logical picture presented by modern moral philosophy is such: all moral agents live in the same factual world, and people are indistinguishable in morality, except for differences in actions and choices.⁵⁴ However, she notes that differences can also exist as complete differences in moral vision:⁵⁵

When we apprehend and assess other people we do not consider only their solutions to specifiable practical problems, we consider something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessments of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praise-worthy, What they think funny: in short, the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation.⁵⁶

This influences Hauerwas' view of moral life, pointing out that morality is not just about following universal rules but includes people's experiences,

52 Ibid., 31.

53 Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge Great Minds, 2014), 77.

54 D. F. Pears (ed.), *The Nature of Metaphysics* (London: ST Martin's Press, 1966), 116.

55 Pears (ed.), *The Nature of Metaphysics*, 116.

56 Ian T. Ramsey (ed.), *Christian ethics and Contemporary Philosophy* (London: SCM Press, 1966), 202.

parables, beliefs, images, concepts, and monologues.⁵⁷ Therefore, for Murdoch and Hauerwas, people's moral differences are not just because they make different choices from a common factual world, but because they see different worlds. Thus, moral life is not just about thinking clearly and making rational decisions; it is also a way of seeing the world.

This 'seeing', if it is to be real, must abandon the modern human illusion that the world has universal coherence and unity and recognize the world in its contingency. Most modern philosophers would consider the contingency of the world to mean the impossibility of transcendence, while Murdoch believes that when people gaze at and affirm contingency, transcendence becomes possible. For her, the metaphor that embodies this possibility of transcendence is the (Platonic) concept of the Good.⁵⁸ Hauerwas understands this to mean that when people's vision centers on the Good, human subjectivity can be overcome, and the objectivity of the particularity of others can be affirmed.⁵⁹ However, Hauerwas might lean more towards focusing vision on God, especially the incarnate God's life, death, and resurrection.

Fletcher's new morality or situation ethics centralizes decision-making in moral life, but for Hauerwas, what kind of person one becomes precedes the question of what one should do. If one starts with decisions, as in new morality, it tempts people to think that moral situations are abstracted from the kind of people they have become and from history. Defining ethics as concerned with dilemmas or situations reflects an understanding of oneself as a group of people without history. Conversely, the situations people face are as they are because they are first of a certain kind. Situations are not just there to be seen but are created by what kind of people they are.⁶⁰ Taking abortion as an example, Hauerwas notes that people (Christians) have forgotten that to describe an action as abortion itself presupposes a certain moral tradition (e.g., life as a gift from God), and they are no longer a group of people with such active commitments, making the prohibition of abortion difficult to comprehend. Through this example, Hauerwas aims to show that people have not just changed their view of a specific action called abortion, but by changing their understanding of abortion or eliminating the concept

57 Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, 35.

58 Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 90–93.

59 Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, 37.

60 Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 116.

of abortion, they have actually changed themselves, losing the ability to see truly.⁶¹

In summary, Murdoch's analysis of the limits of human knowledge led Hauerwas to conceptualize moral life as an 'aesthetics' of seeing, focusing on the vision and virtues of people as agents, not just the decisions of people as spectators.⁶² Accordingly, "aesthetics" names one aspect of Christian ethics: the cultivation of truthful vision. Yet for Hauerwas this cultivation is inseparable from virtue and ecclesial formation, since the habits required for seeing rightly are learned through the narratives and practices of the community of believers.

Casuistry as the Art of Narratives

Fletcher termed his new morality as a new form of casuistry, which is a utilitarian calculation of love based on situational factors. However, Hauerwas proposes casuistry as a community narrative. This casuistry is not just about adjudicating difficult cases of conscience within a system of moral principles but is a process in which a tradition examines whether its practices are consistent (or truthful) with its fundamental habits and beliefs, or whether these beliefs call for new practices and actions. Casuistry is a community's reflection on its experiences, especially in enacting its narratives, imaginatively exploring the often overlooked and unacknowledged implications within its narrative commitments.⁶³ Therefore, Hauerwas argues that casuistry should not be limited to considering cases or situations but should also use imagination to examine the differences between people's life habits and a good, virtuous life with others.⁶⁴ In such examinations, people have to anticipate what kind of situations their narratives and community might entail and in what particular ways the virtues required by the narrative are manifested. These virtues shape not only what people do but the manner in which they do it. In this sense, narratives are not mere background stories; they school moral perception and train the capacity to see truthfully. For Hauerwas, the central work of Christian ethics is therefore pedagogical: it aims to form agents who can perceive the world rightly, since action is always constrained

61 Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 117.

62 Brad Kallenberg, *Ethics as Grammar* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 51.

63 Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 120.

64 *Ibid.*, 121.

by what one is able to see. Yet such vision is not acquired simply by “looking.” It is learned through disciplined practices and habits of attention cultivated by initiation into a community’s narrative, where believers are trained in the skills required to recognize what is real and what faithfulness demands.⁶⁵

The appeal of new morality to some lies in its clear direction for people in situations and its liberation of their consciences long constrained by legalism. As Fletcher says, “Love with care and then what you will, do.”⁶⁶ Thus, Hauerwas points out that some may question this method of studying ethics, emphasizing the narrative form of moral beliefs and virtues as a backdrop for decision-making, as people still have to make decisions. This method seems unable to help answer questions like what decisions should or should not be made and how to justify those decisions.⁶⁷ Hauerwas notes that emphasizing narratives and virtues does not deny that we still have to make decisions and that we are often asked to justify why we do so. However, these decisions do not hold the status in ethics that is often assumed, as ethics overlooks the importance of virtues. Virtue ethics at least partly aims to liberate people from the often-accepted assumptions of ‘necessity’ and ‘givenness’ that are part of the decision-making process. People often do not have to make decisions, at least not in the assumed ways.⁶⁸ The often-used format by these questioners is, “If [...] what would you do?” Hauerwas cites Yoder’s words:

If I turn the machine one way it will follow one course inevitably, and if I push a different set of buttons the machine will clearly operate in another direction. It is assumed that I am the only party making decisions in the total process [...]. Nor are there elsewhere in the total situation other persons whose actions might get in the way of the outworking of the mechanism, which I am therefore solely responsible to steer.⁶⁹

For Yoder, this challenge assumes that the relationship between people is mechanical. Concerning violence, once such a route is established, violence becomes the only choice.

However, Hauerwas points out that if people (Christian Community) are truly non-violent, they can no longer decide to use violence, even if the

65 Stanley Hauerwas, “The Demands of a Truthful Story: Ethics and the Pastoral Task,” *Chicago Studies* 21/1 (1982), 65–66.

66 Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 79.

67 Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 121–122.

68 *Ibid.*, 123.

69 John Yoder, “What Would You Do If?,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 2/1 (1974), 82–83; Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 123.

situation seems to necessitate it.⁷⁰ The same goes for abortion; abortion is not merely the physiological act of removing a fetus before full term.⁷¹ The moral discourse conveyed by communal narratives profoundly shapes how members describe contested acts such as abortion or violence; and those descriptions already carry value judgments and imply particular ways of life. For Hauerwas, this is why "narrative" is not peripheral to moral reasoning but internal to it. What often passes as ethical rigor – abstracting concrete acts into "cases" and then adjudicating them by overriding principles, whether deontological or consequentialist – misses what is most decisive: the narrative setting that makes an act intelligible as this kind of act in the first place. "Situations" are not simply given data awaiting neutral assessment; they are rendered meaningful within larger stories.⁷² Consequently, the most formative ethical question is not only which principle should govern a choice, but which narrative has trained us to see and name the situation as we do.

Thus, in his view, when people have the descriptive skills provided by true narratives and view situations from a new perspective, this casuistry can be defeated, enabling people to do or not do things in a manner consistent with their moral commitments.⁷³

Furthermore, the casuistry proposed by Hauerwas clearly has a communal (ecclesial) aspect, diverging from the individualistic assumptions implicit in traditional casuistry. He mentions that the very nature of Christian faith makes any self-centered decision-making process problematic.⁷⁴ For the Christian community, casuistry is not an optional technique but a necessary practice, precisely because it provides a concrete way to "test" whether members are faithfully performing God's story within the church's shared narrative. Such testing is not a straightforward move from biblical text to discrete actions, as if the community merely applies a rule to a case. Rather, it is a communal work of discernment: believers who have been formed by the same story examine one another's practices, habits, and choices, sometimes recognizing patterns of unfaithfulness, sometimes identifying more truthful and fitting ways of life.⁷⁵ In this sense, casuistry functions less as an

70 Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 123.

71 Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, 55.

72 *Ibid.*, 125.

73 *Ibid.*

74 *Ibid.*, 130–131.

75 *Ibid.*, 132–133.

abstract method of moral adjudication and more as an ecclesial discipline of mutual accountability, through which fidelity and infidelity are disclosed and the community's moral vision is refined.

Moreover, casuistry also inspires the community and its members' imagination to envision new forms of response necessary to be a peaceful people in a violent world. Thus, for Hauerwas, casuistry is a necessary activity, not the domain of a few experts, but an activity of the entire community. Moreover, the best casuists in this community might not be those who exhibit the strongest rational skills; those with intuitive gifts may simply know better than they can articulate.

Conclusion

In the mid-twentieth century, some ethicists – Fletcher most notably – advanced situation ethics as an attempt to loosen Christian moral reflection from inherited legalism and dogmatism, especially in the face of new dilemmas raised by emerging technologies in the 1960s and 1970s. This “new morality” did not aim to install a wholly new system so much as to foreground agape as the governing norm, drawing selectively on existentialism, relativism, pragmatism, and theological resources from figures such as Barth, Brunner, and Niebuhr. Yet it is important to note what kind of ethicists these were: many Christian ethicists were, on the whole, sharply critical of Fletcher's proposal, and the debate that followed was marked more by sustained objection than by broad ecclesial consensus. Alongside influential critiques from Montgomery, Ramsey, Meland, and others, Hauerwas offered a distinctive diagnosis. He appreciated Fletcher's awareness of moral ambiguity; however, by tying moral judgment to “situations,” Fletcher still risked an ethics centered on decision-making. In conversation with Murdoch and Wittgenstein, Hauerwas therefore recast Christian ethics around moral perception and formation: moral life depends on learning to see the world truthfully, without illusion, through participation in the narratives and practices of a community. The decisive question becomes not only what one chooses in a case, but what kind of person one is being formed to become – and thus what one is actually able to see.

Precisely here lies the ongoing relevance of the 1980s discussion for today. Contemporary Christians confront moral conflict not only in bioethics (from end-of-life decisions and reproductive technologies to genetic screening and

enhancement) but also in digitally mediated life, political polarization, and a culture trained to treat life as a matter of autonomous decision-making. Yet the very "cases" that demand our decisions are rarely neutral givens. Social media platforms and algorithmic feeds pre-shape what appears urgent, who counts as victim or threat, and which options seem "realistic," thereby training habits of attention long before explicit moral reasoning begins. Likewise, in polarized public discourse, questions about abortion, violence, migration, or national security are often framed in ways that already imply a moral world – what counts as "life," "freedom," "security," or even "neighbor" – so that competing narratives quietly determine what can be seen and named. Hauerwas' emphasis on vision therefore redirects Christian ethics toward the church's formative practices – worship, confession, reconciliation, hospitality, and peacemaking – that shape what can be truthfully seen and said. These practices do not simply add "religious motivation" to otherwise shared moral techniques; they train a distinctive capacity to describe the world, to resist convenient illusions, and to inhabit time patiently rather than reactively. They also clarify the church's posture toward the world: not moral expertise detached from a way of life, but a public witness whose judgments gain credibility only insofar as they arise from a community learning to see reality without illusion. The lasting question, then, is not merely how to decide well in hard cases, but how the church forms people capable of seeing and living faithfully amid competing narratives.

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Book Review

Christian Frevel, **Desert Transformations: Studies in the Book of Numbers**, Forschungen zum Alten Testament 137, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020, xvi + 610 pp., ISBN 978-3-16-153967-1

In the desert, you can remember your name...

(America: A Horse with No Name, 1971)

According to one of the hits of the seventies, the desert is able to remind us of who we are and where we are heading. The wilderness reminds us of our name – that is, of the roots of our true identity. The 2020 work by Christian Frevel¹, titled *Desert Transformations*, is a study volume written in just such a spirit: a partly reformulated and thematically arranged collection of previously published essays on the Fourth Book of Moses² and on the modern research connected with it. The volume's novelty, precision, and command of the material reflect the most recent methodology of Old Testament scholarship, especially regarding the formation history of the Pentateuch. Its special significance also lies in the fact that research on the Book of Numbers and the interpretation of the text have experienced an extraordinary “boom” in recent decades.³

In the author's own words:

This collection of essays records some intermediate results of my own discoveries. The volume appeared within the framework of a research project established by the German Research Foundation, and can be understood as preparatory work for a forthcoming commentary on the Book of Numbers. Twenty essays were produced from publications and studies that appeared between 2007 and 2019.⁴

1 Born in 1962; obtained his theological doctorate in 1994; habilitated in 1998; from 1999 to 2004 professor of biblical theology at the University of Cologne; since 2004 professor of Old Testament at the Faculty of Catholic Theology of the Ruhr University Bochum, and since 2015 appointed extraordinary professor at the Department of Old Testament Studies of the University of Pretoria, South Africa.

2 Numbers – originally *bemidbar* בְּמִדְבָּר – “in the desert.”

3 For further detail, mentioning only the major monographs: Achenbach, Reinhard: *Die Vollendung der Tora. Redaktionsgeschichtliche Studien zum Numeribuch im Kontext von Hexateuch und Pentateuch* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003); Davis, Jordan: *The End of the Book of Numbers. On Pentateuchal Models and Compositional Issues* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022).

4 Preface, V.

Novelty and Methodology

The book's main theses already become clear from the introduction (1–23). Frevel attempts to break with the traditional, and still largely dominant, source-critical model (the “source” or “documentary hypothesis”), which has often ignored or misunderstood the Book of Numbers, treating it as a merely supplementary collection of unsystematically arranged materials. He challenges the classical position of Martin Noth, who in his commentary on Numbers (ATD 7, 1966) characterized the book as a “confused and disordered” work. Instead, he claims that the final form of the Torah accords Numbers a structurally and theologically significant role that has so far been consistently underestimated. As Frevel emphasizes, “Numbers takes on a central role” in consolidating authority and normativity within the Pentateuch. The author places the emphasis on a supplementary (*Fortschreibung*) model and on inner-biblical interpretation, demonstrating that Numbers is a deliberately and purposefully developed work with its own internal logic. He argues that the texts of the book consist largely of post-Deuteronomistic and post-Priestly layers, which came into being as the result of continuous interpretive processes rather than from a single, unified source. The author convincingly demonstrates that the book is not merely a random alternation of legal, ritual, and narrative sections. Numbers portrays the community of Israel as a normative, idealized, and theologically constructed community.

Main Themes

Frevel groups his studies into three main categories:

1. Literature, History and Ideology (8 essays).⁵ In this most extensive part, Frevel calls into question the alleged disorder of Numbers, emphasizing the

5 Chapter titles: The Torah Becomes a Blessing: Narratological Impulses for Understanding the Book of Numbers; The Compositional Structure of Numbers within the Five Books of the Torah; Old Texts – Late Connections?; The Role of the Book of Numbers in the Recent Debates on the Pentateuch; Understanding the Pentateuch through the Structure of the Wilderness: Num 21 as a Compositional Link; Life in the Midst of the Land:

book's self-conscious composition and theological horizon. He examines the multifaceted literary and theological interpretation of the Fourth Book of Moses with academic precision, highlighting its complex literary growth, which spans almost five centuries. Frevel meticulously analyses how the texts of Numbers connect with other biblical books through inner-biblical interpretation, and how they reflect the social and political reality of the late Persian period. He portrays the book of "wilderness wandering" as an expanding interpretive corpus (espousing the so-called *Fortschreibung* theory⁶), which reworks earlier traditions while anticipating later developments that will appear especially in Deuteronomy and the Book of Joshua. In this sense the book embodies not a static but a dynamic Torah – "an emergent Torah, or a Torah in formation."⁷ Tradition and innovation are not opposed but mutually defining, shaping Israel's self-understanding during the transition from Sinai to the Promised Land.

One of Frevel's most distinctive moves is the reframing of the wilderness wandering. For him, this temporally forty-year "state" represents a productive and transformative theological space. The "desert, the wilderness" is not merely a narrative interval but a transitional space in which Israel undergoes social, ritual, and institutional transformation. According to Frevel, Numbers "bridges the gap between Sinai and the Promised Land" by recounting – instead of a simple geographical transition – a lengthy process of transformation. This liminal situation makes it possible to discuss questions of law, leadership, blessing, and communal order without tying them exclusively either to Mount Sinai or to the theology of the "land flowing with milk and honey." The desert thus becomes an ideal literary setting for "speech" about identity within a post-monarchical, post-exilic horizon.

2. Ritual and practice (6 essays)⁸: This chapter shows that the density of rituals/rites is one of the most characteristic features of *Numbers*. The opacity

Questions of Centralization in the Book of Numbers; Is There Any Reason Why Balaam Had to Die? (this chapter is worth a piece of criminology); Prophecy, Pseudo-Prophecy and Sorcery in the Book of Numbers; Numbers and the Twelve Tribes; The "Arabian Connection" in the Book of Numbers.

6 For more, see Martin Leuenberger's entry in WiBiLex, <https://www.die-bibel.de/ressourcen/wibilex/altes-testament/fortschreibung>.

7 "Torah in formation," "dynamic Torah," "emergent Torah."

8 Chapter titles: The Concept of Purity in the Context of the Book of Numbers; Wrestling with the Vitality of the Corpses: Understanding the Reasons for the Ritual in Num 19;

and openness of ritual texts was a deliberate strategy for unifying the various post-exilic communities and for establishing a common, centralized norm. Frevel deals at length with the ritual material of the Book of Numbers, firmly rejecting the long-standing so-called “container hypothesis,”⁹ according to which the book contains merely independent legal materials lacking inner coherence. A close reading of texts such as Numbers 5–6 shows this assumption of a shapeless mass of legal material to be entirely mistaken. These chapters exhibit deliberate structural strategies, including keyword linkages, thematic associations, and narrative frames. A key conceptual tool of this analysis is “ritual density.” Frevel argues that the Book of Numbers contains the highest concentration of ritual material in the Pentateuch, second only to Leviticus, and that this density functions as a strategy of normalization. Ritual formulation serves authority, homogenization, and identity formation, while at the same time allowing for a controlled diversity of practice. In Frevel’s formulation, the rituals of the Book of Numbers form the identity container of Second Temple Judaism, securing unity in the midst of variety rather than rigid uniformity.

3. Leadership and Priesthood (6 essays):¹⁰ The author’s command of the material is also evident regarding the hierarchical structure and political power of the priesthood. The book of Numbers regulates the relationship between the Levites and the Aaronite priesthood, highlighting the increasing political and cultic authority of the high priest, who, in the absence of a king, becomes the *de facto* leader of the community. On the whole, Frevel’s volume successfully demonstrates that the Fourth Book of Moses represents

On the Imperfection of Perfection: Observations on the Anthropology of the Rituals of Numbers; The Texture of Rituals in the Book of Numbers: A New View on Ritual Density, the Role of Tradition and the Variety Emerging in Early Judaism; The Sabbath and the Wood-Gatherer: Legal Hermeneutics and Literary History in Num 15:32–36; Interior Design: Some Observations on Endogamy in the Book of Numbers.

9 The view that Numbers is just a loose container of legal materials.

10 Chapter titles: The Transformation of Charisma: Reflections on the Book of Numbers in Light of Max Weber’s Theory of Routinization; Leadership and Conflict: The Charismatic Model of Numbers; “My Covenant Was with Him, a Covenant of Life and Peace”: The Priestly Covenant and the Question of Mixed Marriages; “When Moses Heard This, He Approved” (Lev 10:20): The Connection between Compositional History, the History of Theology, and Inner-Biblical Exegesis in Leviticus 10; “Let the Levites Therefore Be Mine”: Notes on the Connection among Numbers 3, 8 and 18; The End of the High Priesthood: The Hierarchy of Priests and Levites in Numbers.

a key, late phase in the formation of the Pentateuch, which reinterprets the wilderness period as a formative, identity-shaping time.

One of the book's distinctive features is that it is also able to work with sociological concepts – for example, following Max Weber, on the transformation of charisma in Numbers. According to the studies, the Fourth Book of Moses portrays the process of the transformation, or “routinization,” of charismatic leadership in early Israel. The institutionalization of the Aaronite priesthood: the institution of the priesthood, particularly the hierarchy linked to the Aaronite family, represents the response to the rebellions against Moses. The place of charismatic leadership is gradually taken over by legal norms and institutions. This process represents the “depersonalization” of charisma (*Versachlichung*), where power is bound not to a person but to an office. The culmination of the process, in his view, is the appearance of the high priestly office and the increase of its political significance in the post-exilic period, when priestly leadership takes the place of royal (monarchical) power.

Critical Remarks

Although the volume is undoubtedly of great significance, several remarks may also be formulated with a critical character. First: since the volume is an essay collection, certain themes recur multiple times, sometimes in a repetitive manner. A monographic synthesis could render Frevel's program even more coherent. At the same time, this generic feature is not a weakness but rather a sign that the author approaches the same problem from several directions and on several levels.

Second: Frevel's argument at times relies very strongly on the late Persian-period context. This is convincing in many cases, but with certain texts the reader may ask how confidently the historical background can in fact be reconstructed from the text itself. The author, however, is generally cautious and does not entirely conflate compositional logic with concrete historical events.

Third: it is worthwhile situating Frevel's program within the broader landscape of Numbers research, especially alongside the two major monographs cited above – Reinhard Achenbach's *Die Vollendung der Tora* (2003) and Jordan Davis's *The End of the Book of Numbers* (2022) – against which significant methodological divergences become visible. While Frevel works with a fragmentary model and the principle of inner-biblical *Fortschreibung*, in which

the layers grow organically and dynamically into one another; Achenbach proposes a much more sharply contoured, three-phase redactional model: a Hexateuch Redaction in the first half of the 5th century BCE, a Pentateuch Redaction in the second half of that century, and – as his most original contribution – a late “Theocratic Revision” (*Theokratische Bearbeitung*) in the 4th century BCE during the late Persian and early Hellenistic periods. Achenbach also adopts Deuteronomy as the “Archimedean point” of his analysis, whereas Frevel places the Book of Numbers itself at the methodological center. The consequence is that texts which Frevel treats holistically as the products of continuous interpretive processes, Achenbach is rather inclined to dissect into clearly distinguishable redactional strata. Davis, in turn, departs in yet another direction: he expressly distances himself from purely “model-based” approaches – including both classical documentary models and supplementary models akin to Frevel’s *Fortschreibung* – and instead grounds his analysis in three “verifiable tools”: empirical evidence on ancient Near Eastern literary production, historical geography and archaeology, and the influence of Northern (Israelite/Samaritan) traditions. These three approaches are not so much mutually exclusive as complementary, and reading them together throws into sharper relief what is distinctive in Frevel: a sustained sociological and inner-biblical interpretive horizon, together with a marked openness to ritual and to identity formation as theological categories.

Fourth: the academic language and conceptual usage of the volume make it accessible primarily to specialists. This is understandable given the work’s target audience, but at the same time it limits its reception.

Summary – Recommendation

Desert Transformations is a demanding volume (a specialist book in the strict sense of the word!)¹¹, which presupposes familiarity with Pentateuch research and engages extensively with the German-language scholarly literature, which it reads in a uniquely critical way. Owing to its methodological precision and conceptual coherence, it is a milestone work. It works with the Hebrew terminology circumspectly and precisely. Frevel succeeds in proving that the Book of Numbers is indispensable for understanding the formation of the Torah and the theological imagination of early Judaism. Even the title

¹¹ With all its discreet charms and not-so-discreet drawbacks.

of the book is telling: *Desert Transformations* – the desert not as backdrop but as the site of transition and reordering. Numbers really is a “wilderness” book, since it accentuates segments of a long temporal “wandering,” or sets them in entirely different lights and colors – either contrasting them with Exodus and Deuteronomy or precisely complementing them.

Christian Frevel’s *Desert Transformations* sets the study of the Book of Numbers in a decisively new framework and conceptual structure (employing original sociological, literary, and historical concepts in original ways). By foregrounding the book’s compositional sophistication, ritual creativity, and sustained engagement with leadership and power, Frevel positions the Book of Numbers as a central witness to the dynamic processes that shaped the Torah. The essay collection deepens our understanding of the Five Books of Moses and gives insight into the interpretive processes of Scripture. Owing to its methodological precision, conceptual coherence, and the placement of the Book of Numbers in a new, central role, it can be regarded as a milestone of scholarly work, indispensable for understanding the Torah and the theology of early Judaism. One hopes the author will soon complete the commentary these essays have been building toward – a unified, modern, and coherent treatment of Numbers.

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