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Many thanks to Nyasha Junior, Jeremy Schipper and William Brown for their thoughtful and challenging responses to my thoughts. It is very helpful to receive direct engagement with one's work, as often in academia responses are diffuse and limited. This conversation has been a learning experience for me, and for that I am indebted to my conversation partners. I will structure my response in four parts, focusing on different aspects of my interlocutors' responses.

### I. Narrating the Field of Biblical Studies

I am grateful first and foremost for Nyasha Junior's criticism of my portrayal of the recent history of biblical studies. Though I attempted to re-narrate the field with attention to dynamics of power and gender, I ended up re-inscribing some of the same problems I was attempting to avoid – in particular, the marginalization of scholars of color. I need to re-work my telling of the history of my discipline. For this lesson, I am grateful, and I am sure that it will inform my future scholarship – and hopefully, my consciousness of the racial hierarchy that informs not only our scholarly discipline, but our broader culture.

An important reason for my initial interest in reception history was the diversity of voices from which one could hear. Choon-Leong Seow, my mentor during my MDiv program at Princeton Seminary, introduced me to reception history by dedicating much of his course on the book of Job to student projects concerning the use of Job in Jewish, Muslim and Christian histories. I remember being skeptical at first that the time spent reading responses from ancient Tunisia and contemporary Jamaica would be as instructive as my biblical studies commentaries.<sup>1</sup> Some readings, of course, were not terribly helpful (though that's true of biblical scholarship, too). Yet some of these readings have shown me new ways of understanding and using texts that I would not have otherwise imagined — and in many cases, these readings do take account of the grammatical resources of particular biblical texts.

For example, in my book *Nomadic Text*, I conclude with a case study of Job 19:25-27 (“I know that my redeemer lives”), which is interpreted by most current biblical scholars as part of Job's struggle for legal vindication, including a presentation of evidence that God has wronged Job coupled with a cry for justice.<sup>2</sup> While some ancient texts reflect this reading — including the anonymous ancient Jewish version of scripture called “Theodotion”—other readings, I claim, make good grammatical sense of the words of Job 19:25-27 *and* the literary context, as well. There is not only one good reading of this text. Around the year 200 CE, Jews living in Edessa, located in modern-day Iraq, created the version of the Bible in their local Syriac dialect, called the *Peshitta*. This version of Job 19:25-27 clearly presents the text not as a legal proceeding, but rather as a

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<sup>1</sup> Note, for example, Anna Ruth Henriques' powerful interpretation of Job in *The Book of Mechtilde* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> See my *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* (ISBL; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 142-201. For an example of this tendency, see David J. Clines, *Job 1-20* (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 457-466.

hope for a theophanic encounter with the divine. As I argue, this makes quite a bit of sense not only of the Hebrew words but also of the story itself — especially because Job actually ends with a theophanic encounter (38:1-42:6). This reading is still exceptionally popular in rabbinic Judaism and Syriac Christianity, though the only currently working biblical scholar to even come close to this reading is Hector Avalos, who gestures towards its possibility.<sup>3</sup> I would not have thought much of this interpretive potential of the text of Job 19:25-27 had it not been for ancient Syriac-speaking Jews and medieval Jacobite theologians like Habib ibn Hidma Abu Ra'ita who carefully thought through this interpretation and argued for it.<sup>4</sup>

So, I think it is beneficial for biblical scholars to hear many such interpretive possibilities not only because it expands our understanding of what the text can say, but also because reception history offers an opportunity for biblical scholars to encounter greater diversity and help re-narrate the field in a much broader way. Through my recent contributions to Carol Newsom's Daniel commentary, I found myself reading and writing about interpreters situated in medieval Nubia, early modern Brazil, and 20<sup>th</sup> century Korea.<sup>5</sup> This is highly unusual in biblical scholarship, but it is becoming more accepted, and I think this can push biblical scholars out of our often much too insular confines. But Junior's important criticism, which I will not forget, is that I cannot let my interest in, say, early modern Brazil absolve my neglect of scholars of color working today in biblical studies.

## II. Reception History and Biblical Studies

Jeremy Schipper wonders if biblical scholars make ideal reception historians, and suggests that other colleagues in the humanities may be better equipped for this task. As he points out, other scholars already study what happens to biblical texts in various historical contexts other than the ancient Near East, and Schipper also notes that my proposal privileges biblical scholars. To me, however, this is not an issue of privileging — rather, it is a question of focus, and of what questions will appeal to which scholars. I certainly agree that many scholars in other disciplines study biblical texts as they intersect with their own projects, and I am extremely grateful for their work. For example, Camilla Adang's *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible from Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm* was extremely helpful in my work on the book of Daniel.<sup>6</sup> I certainly could not replicate this study. As Schipper says, people are already working on reception of the Bible in all sorts of disciplines, and with all sorts of specialty skills that I do not possess.

But scholars working in fields other than biblical studies will probably not trace the uses of a particular biblical text outside of their disciplinary boundaries. No one working in medieval studies or Islamic studies or Brazilian studies will decide to produce synthetic, broad histories of biblical texts that span many different historical contexts,

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<sup>3</sup> Hector Avalos, "Introducing Sensory Criticism in Biblical Studies: Audiocentricity and Visiocentricity," pages 47-60 in *This Abled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (eds. H. Avalos, S. Melcher, J. Schipper; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> See *Nomadic Text*, 195.

<sup>5</sup> See Carol A. Newsom with Brennan W. Breed, *Daniel: A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible from Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm* (Leiden: Brill, 1996). See Newsom with Breed, *Daniel*, 251-252.

religions, and cultural mediums reaching from the ancient world to the modern. A Brazilianist would rightly ask: why would I study the use of the Bible in medieval Iraq? The only thread running consistently through a broadly synthetic reception history of a biblical text is the biblical text. Thus, that task will always be left to biblical scholars. If it is anyone's job to study the biblical text—and in my mind, this means the biblical text wherever it may be read, copied, transmitted—it is ours.

Biblical scholars do indeed have to cooperate with scholars of other disciplines to achieve this with a modicum of sophistication, but this has always been the case. Biblical scholarship has always relied upon comparative linguistics, Assyriology, Egyptology, archaeology, ancient art history, sociology, and other disciplines which are external discursive fields. Yet this has never stopped biblical scholars from talking to people working in these other fields, interpreting and adapting their work to shed light on our own object of study. We would never be content to say, "Well, the Assyriologists have studied ancient sapiential literature, and that is their domain; either they must relate it to the literature of Iron Age Israel and Judah, or it will not happen." No, we read their scholarship, and talk to them, and then we produce new scholarship by means of their insights that focuses on our object of study. To me, it seems that "privilege" would better describe the assumption that someone else will do this synthetic work on our behalf. Shouldn't biblical scholars study the biblical text, wherever it goes? But this takes me to the next point of disagreement.

### III. Contexts and Texts

In their responses, both Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper argue that texts do not actually escape contexts; instead, people take texts and manipulate them. Ultimately, this is a criticism that I attribute agency, at least in part, to the text. Yet I think that it is beyond doubt that texts do things that exceed the particular intentions of the people who use them, and even the people who write them, re-write them and canonize them.

First: do texts traverse contexts of their own accord, or do people have to carry them into every new context? Take a random book on a shelf in a library. It is certainly not moving spatially. But it is indeed moving through different historical contexts, even if no one takes it off the shelf and reads it for centuries. And like any machine, that text is capable of functioning whenever someone takes it down and opens it. The Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, sat undisturbed in caves for millennia, without any people to take them and carry them through the Roman era, the Byzantine era, the Umayyad and Fatamid caliphates, the Crusader kingdoms, the Ottoman empire, and so on. And at every point in their undisturbed rest, these texts persisted and held the possibility of reading — that is, of saying something, and likely something different, to each different historical context. Texts are written precisely because they "drift" between contexts and yet remain powerful tools for making meaning, unlike many other objects that humans make. As archaeologists often note, much of the detritus of human civilizations has weak meaning-making potential. But texts, even ones that use languages that have not been spoken for millennia, can continue to speak worlds into existence if only they are dug up and their code is cracked.

Moreover, when these texts finally are used, the people who read them are never entirely in control of what those texts might say or do. And neither are the people who wrote them, as all ancient authors have perished. People can try to control texts, of

course, but texts, like machines, always have more uses than one. This is part of what makes reception history so interesting: one can see the range of meanings and uses texts make possible by looking at what they have done in many different contexts. One can also see how texts are misused and misread, but I think it is possible to separate uses that respect the potential meanings that actually exist within a given text from uses that do not. Junior points out that throughout the history of western culture, Exodus 21 has supported the ideology of slavery, and she argues that this proves that this text did not escape its ancient context. Yet the resources provided by this text do not only allow for a defense of slavery; Exodus 21:16 was used often in abolitionist discourse—Denmark Vesey used this as his primary scriptural support for the 1822 rising, for example—as a radical anti-slavery, pro-rebellion text.<sup>7</sup>

Texts are not ever exhausted by one reading, just like a particular tool is never exhausted by only one use. A knife can be used to attack, to defend, to open a can or whittle a toy. Biblical texts can be used to do many things, too—some of them constructive, some of them beautiful, some of them dangerous. As Rhondda Robinson Thomas shows, Exodus served white Puritan interests as a defense of slavery, but was re-appropriated by African migrants and slaves as a text of liberation; yet Safwat Marzouk argues that this liberative use often marginalizes Egyptians, while Jon Levenson argues that all of these readings sideline the particularity of Jewish uses of the text.<sup>8</sup> Who is right? And by “right” do we mean ethical “rightness,” or historical actuality, or purely grammatical correctness? Perhaps these texts provide provide multifaceted, and sometimes contradictory, resources that different people can put to different uses. I think reception history can chart many of these uses, analyze why these texts can function in particular ways in particular contexts, and note the ethical impact of different sorts of use. Ultimately, we might be able to discern the particular resources that a text might offer to any given context. But I think that our own historical and imaginative limitations keep us from seeing most of what biblical texts can do, which is why we must look to many other contexts to teach us what we are missing.

Moreover, I think it is limiting to simply ask about reader intentions, just as it is limiting to ask about an author’s intentions. People’s purposes do not explain all the impact that their readings (and writings) inevitably have. For example, I don’t think that modern Christians set out with the intention of making a monster out of modern Egyptians with their readings of the Exodus. But this impact nevertheless occurs. How do we theorize this impact that exceeds intention? I think the concept of “potentiality” is a helpful place to begin; as Brian Blount argues, “Texts do not have ‘meaning.’ Instead, they have ‘meaning potential.’”<sup>9</sup> I think that biblical scholars need to work much harder to theorize this potential that exceeds any single reading, interpretation, or use. When we argue about what a text “really means,” what are we doing? And if texts can mean lots of different things, then how does that change our understanding of our job of biblical

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<sup>7</sup> See John Coffey, *Exodus and Liberation: Deliverance Politics from John Calvin to Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 162, see also 87.

<sup>8</sup> See Rhondda Robinson Thomas, *Claiming Exodus: A Cultural History of Afro-Atlantic Identity, 1774-1903* (Baylor University Press, 2013); Safwat Marzouk, “The Exodus: A Christian Egyptian Perspective,” [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/safwat-marzouk-phd/the-exodus-a-christian-eg\\_b\\_6330118.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/safwat-marzouk-phd/the-exodus-a-christian-eg_b_6330118.html); Jon D. Levenson, “Exodus and Liberation,” *HBT* 13 (1991): 134-74.

<sup>9</sup> Brian K. Blount, *Cultural Interpretation: Reorienting New Testament Criticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), viii

criticism?

Finally, I think it's important to address the problematic assumption, prevalent in biblical scholarship, that a biblical text is a single thing. That is, people think about the book of Daniel as a something concrete, with one true identity, as if it is a person with one concrete body. I am right here, and the book of Daniel is right over there. Yet the book of Daniel has *always been* — from the moment that it was first committed to writing — something in flux, with multiple “bodies” co-existing all at the same time, and sometimes in the same place. How could that be? Well, chapters 4-6 of Daniel occur in several ancient forms *so different* that none of them are original.<sup>10</sup> The original oral versions of these legends, which were always changing, eventually were written down in different forms, and the rest of the book of Daniel grew from there. So: there is no original book of Daniel. And if there is no concrete beginning, then how would we measure a concrete end point when the book was “completed,” since there always were—and still are—multiple forms out there? For reception history, the upshot is that there can be no “correct” form distinguishable from “later” (and thus less important) forms. Or is one of these forms — say, the Greek version still in use by the Eastern Orthodox Church, or the Masoretic version that is in use by rabbinic Jews, Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians— truly more original or more final than the others? If so, how is it better? Who gets to decide, if there is a decision to be made?

Perhaps I am wrong about his analysis, but Schipper seems to assume that biblical scholars need to study things that happened before late antiquity, and leave it to other scholars should study other eras. Yet why is late antiquity the dividing line of “real biblical scholarship” if there is no natural, objective, universal line dividing the “biblical” era from “later” contexts? Moreover, Daniel can't *really* say only one thing if it occurs in many different forms at all points in time.

## V. Authority

In his response, Bill Brown raises a number of different questions concerning biblical authority, including the judgment of particular texts and readings. How should we determine which interpretations and uses are better than others? Is there only relativism and personal preference? And what effect does this have on our theologies of scripture and biblical theologies? I cannot address all of these concerns here—and there is much work that I need to do before offering a coherent response, and indeed my opinion on these matters is likely not terribly important. But I will offer a few thoughts.

On the subject of judging a text: I think this is a serious issue in biblical scholarship. When scholars say that one text is “better” than another, or one understanding of a text's meaning is “preferred,” what exactly are we saying? Almost always, the answers to two crucial questions remain unarticulated: (1) What standard is being used to compare the texts or interpretations?, and (2) What criteria is being used to measure the comparisons between the texts or interpretations? For example, when scholars say that the one ancient version of the book of Daniel is to be preferred to another version, both the *standard of comparison* and the *criteria* used to measure are usually unclear. This is, I believe, because scholars have not much thought about them. When they do, we find complicated, obscure and self-contradictory statements about

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<sup>10</sup> See Newsom with Breed, *Daniel*, 2-11.

“final texts that were not actually final.”<sup>11</sup> And when pushed, usually text-critical scholars admit that their own theological and communal commitments<sup>12</sup> lead them to make the decisions that they do. That is, of course, perfectly fine with me—so long as the scholars openly admit this, and do not make their decisions look objective as opposed to committed.

I think that interpretive decisions are very similar to text-critical decisions: there are many different questions that can be asked, and none are naturally more important than any other. Perhaps one scholar wants to evaluate interpretations of a given text based on their ethical consequences, saying that some readings are better than others because they contribute more to human flourishing. Perhaps another scholar says that “bad” readings are ones that could not have been possible in the ancient context, and that “good” readings are probably identical to whatever the author thought that he or she was saying (always a tricky proposition). Perhaps yet another scholar tries to name all the meanings of a text that would have been possible in its ancient context. One could also evaluate versions of biblical poetic texts or narratives based on their relative aesthetic value—is one version of Daniel a better story than the others, or is it worse? Scholars can also look at political implications of texts and their interpretations, and scholars in religious institutions should also, I think, pay attention to the various theological potentials of texts and interpretations.

These are all fine goals, and none of them are any more “scholarly” than any other. If some of these goals were more important than others, how would we know? By what criteria would we measure this importance? Theological, ethical, political, historical, and aesthetic judgments can all be helpful (if they are carried out rigorously and critically). But scholars need to be aware of what they are doing, and be forthright about the criteria used to judge the texts and interpretations according to particular standards. This, I think, is more important than sorting out the relative importance of big questions.

In terms of theological interpretations, I think that analyzing the many theological voices speaking in biblical texts is crucial. Moreover, I think that recognizing the potential for many different ethnological messages to come *from the same text* is equally important. That is, the Noah story in Genesis 6-9 does not *have* a theology, because it is composed of two different stories of Noah that were edited together into the book of Genesis.<sup>13</sup> These two different ancient versions of Noah offer quite different depictions of God. And yet, neither of these ancient versions offers only one clear portrait of God: rather, they both offer tools for making theology that is shaped in particular ways. They each provide different theology-producing resources.

This isn't interpretive relativism, however: I don't think that people can do just anything with any text. If someone claims that Genesis 6-9 presents no ethical quandaries whatsoever, I would say that misrepresents the potentials provided by the text. But I also do not think that Genesis 6-9 provides only one understanding of the particular ethical quandaries that the story (or stories) presents, nor does it prescribe one particular

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, *Nomadic Text*, 27-34.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, my discussion of Emanuel Tov's tacit admission of the religious grounding for his text-critical decisions in *Nomadic Text*, 24-25.

<sup>13</sup> See Ingrid Lilly's "Flood of Noah" website, particularly the article "Four Guys in a Boat" by Christopher B. Hays: <http://www.floodofnoah.com/#!ane-gilgamesh-flood-comparativ/c1jce>

solution. In fact, I think that biblical scholars need to revisit the entire conception of *problems* and *solutions*. Instead of thinking of texts as a problem in search of a single solution, like  $1+1=2$ , we must think of texts in terms of an *insolvable problem* that ask questions bigger than any single solution, like “What is the good life?” A reading of a biblical text, no matter how good, cannot extinguish the need for more readings, just as the communal discussion of what a “good life” together looks like should never end. Such would be the end of conversation, the end for our need to seek out one another in community, and indeed the end of theology.

I think we need more theological conversation, not less, and I think recognizing the many-sided nature of the text and its potential meanings will help us to keep talking. As Brown points out, the word “authority” can also mean “authorizing,” in the sense of giving the go-ahead to create new things with what we have inherited. The authority of the text, then, is another way of saying “the generative power of the text to create new things.” And I think this conception of biblical authority and “biblical theology” is well suited for the new age into which the world, and the Church with it, is currently emerging. Doubtless, this does not even begin to answer the many helpful questions that Brown raises, but I look forward to thinking more about them throughout my career.

Again, many thanks to Nyasha Junior, Jeremy Schipper and Bill Brown for their responses. I have learned much from this encounter, and many lingering questions remain. May the conversation continue!