

authors use categories that do belong to the stock taxonomy of heavenly journeys and may be a literary reflection and borrowing of the true experiences of genuine (or at least self-proclaimed) seers.

It is quite clear that PS sets as his goal to ‘demystify’ a number of texts that have almost automatically come to be seen as (proto-)mystical. However, his project of deconstruction is turned on its head when he states in his conclusion: “...the craving for the living and loving God and the experience that he still exists obviously applies to so many more texts that we have not included in our survey that we run the risk of voiding the category of ‘mysticism’ and ultimately rendering it meaningless by confusing mysticism with religion.” (354). With this in mind the title should probably have been followed by a question mark.

Re-Reading the Prophets through Corporate Globalization: A Cultural-Evolutionary Approach to Economic Injustice in the Hebrew Bible

Matthew J. M. Coomber. Piscataway: Gorgias, 2010.

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Reviewed by Sara Parks Ricker, McGill University

Book-length publications in biblical studies generally fall into one of two formats; such books can be “rigorous” *or* they can be “relevant.” Rarely can an author cater to both the specialist *and* the layperson in a single work. Perhaps this is due to the deeply specialised nature of modern biblical studies, as opposed to the largely non-specialist demographic that retains an interest in “applying” the biblical text.

For this reason, I was curious to review this revision of Matthew Coomber’s Sheffield dissertation, “Corporate Globalization as a Model for Interpreting Prophetic Complaints against Landownership Abuse.” Given its leap from the Hebrew prophets to present-day “corporate globalization,” I would have expected such relevance to arrive at rigour’s expense. In order to be rigorous, Coomber would have had to take into account the problematic scarcity of data for the prophetic context, and wrestle with serious methodological issues when jumping from ancient literature to ancient socio-historical reality. He would have needed to be proficient not only in the usual areas of textual criticism, ancient languages, and historical method, but also in sociology and economics. With true interdisciplinarity being so uncommon, it is only because I was familiar with Coomber’s fine work from the conference circuit that I dared to expect it. To say that I was pleasantly surprised is an understatement.

Economic injustice is a key theme in the prophetic corpus, one from which many theologians have extrapolated modern lessons. Coomber, however, combines

economics, sociology, history, and cultural-evolutionary theory for a more holistic and precise approach. Coomber isolates two key prophetic texts on landownership abuse—Micah 2:1–2 and Isaiah 5:8–10. He is building on a scholarly shift (i.e. that of M. Chaney¹ and D.N. Premnath²) away from a “common view that lacked either a discernable or accountable origin” (xii) which blamed the injustice on very small-scale corruption where a few “wealthy businessmen” seized land from “poor Judean farmers” (13). These scholars instead associate these key eighth-century Judean prophetic texts with a widespread economic shift that “brought Judean farms under the control of a few powerful landlords” *systematically* (30). In effect, “Judah underwent a significant period of cultural evolution as it was absorbed into a world system that shares a lineage with its twentieth-century descendant, ‘corporate globalization’” (283). Eighth-century Judea experienced rapid population growth and economic development, which, much like globalizing trends today, shifted the majority of land wealth into the hands of a small elite. Leaders were pressed to cultivate commercial crops with high export value “at the expense of land rights of Judean peasants” (27). Wielding the resulting “debt as their weapon [. . .] Judah’s most powerful inhabitants were able to overtake the land of Judah’s weakest citizens” (29). (In a timely twist, similar issues are being raised by the “Occupy Wall Street” demonstrations that continue as this review was sent to press.) Coomber intertwines this updated picture of the eighth-century context, and its vitriolic rhetoric against economic disparity, with modern data both global and specific in the similarly agrarian case study of Tunisia, proving that “tangible agrarian societies can be used to ask new questions of biblical texts” (276) and to “help scholars to read these ambiguous texts in a new light” (276).

In an enjoyable style, Coomber guides the reader patiently through each twist and turn along a dauntingly interdisciplinary path. He begins by confronting the problems of locating an elusive context for eighth-century prophecy. He pinpoints a plausible solution in Chaney and Premnath’s socio-economic analysis of Isa. 5:8–10 and Mic. 2:1–2. Through “interpreting literary and archaeological evidence through the lens of societal development,” (30) and “employing a methodology that lay outside of the biblical narrative and traditional biblical scholarship” (31), Chaney and Premnath were able to place responsibility for these landownership abuses at the feet of political elites who had restructured Judean land management, rather than

1. See, inter alia, Chaney, Marvin L. “Bitter Bounty: The Dynamics of Political Economy Critiqued by the Eighth-Century Prophets,” in ed. R. L. Stivers, *Reformed Faith and Economics* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1989), 15–30.

2. See, e.g., Premnath, D. N. *Eighth Century Prophets: A Social Analysis* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003).

with a few isolated instances of corruption (30). A societal shift, as opposed to an isolated incident, would have had “repercussions throughout Judean society” (31).

The second chapter introduces cultural-evolutionary theory and outlines its development, arguing convincingly for its immense yet largely untapped interpretive value in biblical studies. Coomber is careful to avoid the circular reasoning against which Philip Davies cautions (35), where scholars use social-scientific *methods* as a source of evidence. Instead, social-scientific methods must be put to work “as a heuristic tool” for posing new *questions* of the evidence (36). “The best defense against either creating a false history or falling into a trap of circular reasoning is to understand [...] both the advantages and limitations of social-scientific models” (36).

In chapter three, Coomber combines his improvements to cultural-evolutionary theory with archaeological data, in order to put meat on the bones of existing models of societal transformation in eighth-century Judah. He demonstrates that “what is referred to as ‘globalization’ today is not an entirely new phenomenon but the current evolutionary cycle of a long series of interregional world systems” (132), and that “subsistence farmers in agrarian societies appear to experience similar challenges as political and economic elites gain power and exchange subsistence agriculture for more lucrative export strategies, as seen in the modern developing world” (133).

Chapter four even-handedly explains “corporate globalization” in the twentieth century, highlighting the “negative outcomes of structural adjustment” (171). Coomber extrapolates from appropriate modern data to fill gaps in eighth-century data. For instance, the “IMF’s and the World Bank’s failures to reduce the negative effects of the rapid developments that accompany the current world system suggest that the primary producers of earlier world systems, which did not attempt to alleviate such suffering, would have experienced even greater levels of oppression” (175).

To illustrate in minute detail, chapter five contains a masterful case study on Tunisian land tenure. In the concluding chapters, Coomber dovetails the globalization model and the local Tunisian data with his socio-economic reading of the prophetic texts, finishing with a convincing reminder of the value of cultural-evolutionary theory for further study—both abstract and applied. Coomber’s approach demonstrates once again that it is absolutely imperative that we continue to move towards interdisciplinarity.

What remains incredible to me is that Coomber has succeeded in reworking this dissertation into an utterly readable publication that is both genteel and down-to-earth, both its form and its content catering seamlessly and simultaneously to the most advanced Hebrew Bible scholar and the most earnest layperson. This rare breed of academia that lives, moves, and has its being beyond the ivory towers, while still achieving scholarly excellence is something to which we are accustomed

out of Sheffield; yet Coomber is an example par excellence of Sheffield's relevant rigour. It is greatly to be hoped that Coomber's final paragraphs—"Potential for Future Study"—are a project he himself will undertake with haste.

Media, Spiritualities and Social Change

Stewart M. Hoover and Monica Emerich, eds. London and New York: Continuum, 2011.

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Reviewed by David Kolosytc, McGill University

In recent years the study of religion and media has emerged as one of the more fascinating fields of academic and social research, bringing together scholars from religious studies, theology, cultural studies, communication studies, media studies, film studies, sociology and social psychology. Some of the key areas of concern include: representation of religion in mass media; the use of communications technology by religious individuals, communities, and institutions; religious contributions to ethical and epistemological questions pertaining to contemporary communications technology; and the changing nature of religion and spirituality in a mediated world. Scholars who attempt to address these concerns face considerable challenges. The speed and unpredictability of current cultural and technological transformations demand constant reinterpretation, readjustment of data, and redefinition of our understandings of 'religion' and/or 'spirituality'. Some of the material written in the 1990s, for instance, lost its relevance following the expansion of public discourses on religion in the wake of September 11th, the emergence of new religious themes in film and on television, and changes to religious practice triggered by new social media technology. It should come as no surprise then that the majority of publications on religion and media consist of diverse collections of studies addressing a wide variety of technological and religious experience, in many instances written by relatively young scholars. The new publication from Continuum, *Media, Spiritualities and Social Change*, follows this model, bringing together seventeen essays and studies which focus on 'spiritual' concerns related mainly to questions of identity, community, social integration, spiritual consumerism, and environmentalism. The volume is edited by Stewart M. Hoover, one of the most experienced and prominent scholars in the field, and Monica Emerich, a fellow research associate from University of Colorado at Boulder's Center for Media, Religion and Culture.

The editors' introduction offers a brief but effective overview of some of the central issues that have shaped contemporary studies of religion and media. Hoover