

## Political Theologies in the Hebrew Bible

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Mark G. Brett and Rachelle Gilmour



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## Foreword

When the International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature was scheduled to be held in Adelaide, Australia, in July 2020, it seemed the perfect opportunity to gather a group of scholars from around the world and invite them to nearby Melbourne for another gathering about the same time. We suggested to a number of established and emerging scholars that we might explore together some new horizons in the area of political theology and the Hebrew Bible. With the ISBL cancelled, and international travel ceasing, we decided to go ahead with the conference and meet online. This ironically opened the event to even more participants—from ten different countries and at least six different time zones, who met over two days, and also in the middle of the night for a few hardy souls. The vision was to work collaboratively to expand the contours of political theology in our discipline. The papers were circulated in advance, and nominated respondents took the lead in opening up a critical dialogue that led to some substantial revisions and also to a couple of new papers. The fruits of our labours are now collected in the present volume.

Political theology is often linked to one main topic, the idea of sovereignty, but this focus is too narrow when it comes to the biblical literature. The opening chapters of the Hebrew Bible, for example, adopt the language of dominion and rule in relation to ecology (Gen 1:28) and to gender (3:16), rather than to kingship. Human societies are divided into “clans, languages, lands, and nations” (Gen 10:20) before any mention the arrival of monarchy in the political landscape, and indeed, before the arrival of priests and prophets. Of course, the rise and fall of the ancient Israelite and Judean states figure prominently in the books of Samuel and Kings, but not in the Pentateuch, where the theologizing of laws and constitutions come to the fore instead. And in the literature of exile, the new ideas that were born out of the the loss of state sovereignty underpinned the resilience of Jewish communities in subsequent generations. All these permutations of political theology need to be acknowledged in some way in biblical studies. Accordingly, the introductory essay in this volume sets out the relevant conceptual issues, and the concluding response ties the threads of the conversation together.

The five essays grouped under the heading of “sovereignty” in Part One of the volume each introduce fresh perspectives on the familiar theme, indentifying interseptions with a range of other topics—creation, material conditions, counter-imperial discourses, the politics of gender and beauty, and the making of territory and borders. Part Two broadens the discussion even further, providing analyses of landed property, ideas of nationhood, the forms of exilic and

migrant community, politics of holiness, and cultural contestation. The discussion of leadership models in Part Three includes various forms of accommodation to empire, but also the alternative possibilities evident in prophetic assertions of power, and memories of militant revolt.

The papers prepared for the conference focussed on ancient texts and cultures, but the online discussion almost inevitably turned to the “current political moment,” as Stephen Russell put it in his concluding response. It was recognized that questions of gender, race, and nationalism cannot be avoided, or perhaps positioned only in studies of the Bible’s prodigious influences in modern times, for better and for worse. Accordingly, a number of the essays explore the tensions between ancient and modern perspectives on these key topics, and hopefully these explorations will provide catalysts for more studies of this kind, willing to embrace the methodological challenges that they entail.

We are grateful to the University of Divinity, Trinity College and Whitley College, for offering financial assistance for the proposed meeting in Melbourne, and then reconfiguring the nature of the support when the face-to-face conference could not go ahead. Thank you to Jonathan Thambyrajah for his excellent work conforming the many articles to the style guide, copyediting, and preparing indices. Thanks are also due to the editors of the series, *Journal of Ancient Judaism—Supplements*, for accepting this volume for publication, and especially to Bernard Levinson for his warm engagement with the project.

*Mark G. Brett and Rachelle Gilmour*

October 2022