

Biblical Stuff

(Re)reading the Bible as/with/through/by Materiality

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In Matthew 6:25, Jesus advises “[D]o not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on.” He continues “Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” (RSV) The six essays in this volume would answer his question in a rather ambiguous fashion: on the one hand, with a clearly-voiced “yes! Lots!”; and on the other hand a somewhat conflicted and long-winded “no! Let’s avoid creating too strong a distinction between ideas and things!” These essays, in fact, obsess over bodies, food, drink, clothing, and a host of other material and found objects and how Bibles and Bible readers use, engage, create, adapt, adopt, transform and thoroughly embrace them all. Ironically, they appear to arrive at a reappraisal of these things by a route that completely ignores Jesus’s initial advice.

New Materialist approaches might seem an odd fit in the work of biblical scholarship given the disciplinary prevalence of text and textuality. Indeed, it is precisely the tendency to assume an overly abstracted form of textuality by much contemporary theory that New Materialist scholars are challenging—consider, for example, the profound influence on contemporary biblical approaches, not to mention literary theory more broadly, of the so-called “linguistic turn” exemplified by Derrida’s “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” (Derrida 1976, 159) or Kristeva’s “*intertextualité*” (Kristeva 1980, 66). So, how does the return to a radical “monism,” an integrated perspective that potentially collapses the boundaries that continue to sustain the discipline, shape the ways in which the Bible is read and understood but also experienced? For, New Materialism seeks to shift the focus from the human agent to a more integrated appreciation of the ways in which material elements coalesce and engage.

While there have been relatively few self consciously New Materialist readings within the discipline, given the enormous range of approaches to the topic, there exists a rather expansive theoretical backdrop for future work. Any introduction to New Materialism, therefore, is bound to involve a representative sampling of examples, each one contributing its share of the bigger intellectual picture. For instance, Elizabeth Chin’s sophisticated *My Life with Things: The Consumer Diaries* is a late-capitalist and new materialist review of things and their accumulation and assemblage into complex systems of consumption which fuse subjectivity and materiality. Theories of seamless materiality and subjectivity are also critical to Deleuze’s idea of “assemblage,” and Chin tacks this pattern to her reading of Marx, the politics of anthropology, and her relationship to the material things near and around her. As she does so, she also, via a cultural studies orientation, patches into an emerging conversation in twenty-first century Theory and Continental Philosophy. If nothing else, Chin’s reading is a demonstration of the extent to which a New Materialist approach is “transversal” rather than “territorial,” to use Dolphijn and van der Tuin’s terminology (2012, 105-106). In other words, rather than an emphasis on disciplinary specific modes of classification, Chin employs a range of cross-

disciplinary approaches and strategies to enact a more integrated engagement of materiality and material agency within the scholarly process.

In her Oxford Bibliography entry on New Materialism (2017), Susan Yi Sencindirer defines the “material turn” and New Materialism as an: “interdisciplinary, theoretical and politically committed field of inquiry emerging roughly at the millennium as part of what may be termed the post-constructionist, ontological, or material turn.” She continues, “spearheaded by thinkers such as Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Jane Bennett, Vicki Kirby, and Manuel DeLanda, New Materialism has emerged mainly from the front lines of feminism, philosophy, science study and cultural theory.” In general, New Materialism is a collection of work and thinking focused on renewed attention to matter, systems and material aspects of things. It is a return to “monism” and, as such, the interrogation and dissolution of the binaries between actor and agent, sentience and matter.

More an interdisciplinary strategy oriented around common questions and themes than a method or organized approach, New Materialism returns philosophical attention to the things around us. New Materialism draws from various twentieth century philosophical renegotiations of accepted Western foundational axioms (anthropocentrism, Cartesian dualism, poststructuralist anti-binarism, and Vitalism), as a part of a general shift towards the “non-human” (Grusin 2015) . It reexamines the “thingliness” of things and challenges the arbitrary binaries between animacy and inanimacy, human and animal/floral, agency and inertness, volition and action, thought and affect. To put it simply: things do things, and biological animacy is actually the aggregation of an array of non-material, “inanimate,” chemical and physical properties, agents, reagents and “actants” (Bennett 2010). New Materialism intersects with and often draws from, but is not precisely identical with, other theories of inquiry such as animal/animality studies, affect theory, computer/AI and artificial thought, economic theory, ecological theory, and more. Much work (and many of the essays in this collection) has spun outward from the near endlessly provocative *1000 Plateaus* of Deleuze and Guattari, particularly the Deleuzian concept of “assemblage.”¹

Antecedents to material approaches in the field of Religion include the work of S. Brent Plate (particularly Plate 2014 and his work behind the journal *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art & Belief*, 2004 to present). Plate brings to the study of religion an anthropological interest in objects as doorways or entry points through which one engages with central ideas, defining traditions and grounding practices that characterize religions. Strictly speaking, while dealing with religion, Plate is not doing New Materialism in the way it plays out in this volume. His attention to material culture and the theoretical frameworks he employs remain tied to traditional reading practices in that he puts objects at the forefront while asking the question of how we access religious meaning and significance. And yet, Plate’s work is an important reminder of the complex connections between texts and objects and the ways in which conventional boundaries separating these phenomena are in fact porous and even arbitrary.

¹ For general, beginning a review of new materialist and post-human critique, see Alaim and Heckman 2008 on the intellectual history of the question and general outline of its question; Bennett and Joyce 2010 for interdisciplinary and political aspects to the work; and Coole and Frost 2010 and Dolphijn and Tuin 2012 for a survey of pivotal essays and authors.

Further expanding on this complex relationship between text and object is Maia Kotrosits' very elegant *The Lives of Objects* (2020). Kotrosits deftly encapsulates much of New Materialism as a reaction to "the linguistic turn, the shift toward analysing the ways in which language or discourse both constructs what is perceived as real and funds power relations in the social world," a "fist shaken at the Cartesian formulation...and the sovereign, knowing subject it emblemized"(3). Importantly, Kotrosits hones in on the troubled relationship between psychoanalytic theory and material studies. She notes psychoanalysis is fundamentally narrative, but a narrative of a particular kind that is "also a history of objects" (6).

In object-relations, relationships are rendered into discrete, even concretized forms that we consume or internalize ... In the Freudian scheme, the human psyche contains impersonal, inhuman parts (the id or the "it" being the prime example), and the psyche is the place in which subjects and objects are made. It is the place where subjects and objects are distinguished and no longer really distinguishable. . . . [P]art of the materialism in psychoanalysis is that it treats objects and matter or what matters as elastic. (2020, 6)

The insights that Kotrosits offers in her work here have profound implications for biblical scholarship. They form a crucial bridge between on the one hand, the issues of New Materialism and its relationship with an overly abstract tradition of psychoanalytic theory and, on the other, the need for textualists and biblical readers to appreciate the profound manner in which reading connects to matter. Our hope is that future Biblical and New Materialist projects will engage with Kotrosits' work more fully to explore the latter. Our view is that the essays in this volume are an important next step in this critical trajectory.

As another mode of engagement, New Materialism also can be expanded with an array of thinking, loosely categorized as "object-oriented ontology." This expansion would encompass not just material items (and the mutual interactions between things and animate beings) but even inanimate conceptual or systemic structures or processes that emerge from the nexus of various forms of materiality and activity. Rather than emerging fully-formed from Deleuze, object-oriented ontology develops out of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, in particular his challenge to an anthropomorphic separation of the categories of human and non-human. It is a resistance to the privileging of and special pleading for human cognition. By way of capturing this approach, Quentin Meillassoux (2008) coined the term "correlationalism" which refers to the argument that thinking and being are, necessarily, congruent and can not be separable. Timothy Morton (2010) has applied this idea to Ecological systems (2010) and Graham Harman to human tool-making, social systems, and the role of both in human evolution (2002). The most natural point of connection between object-oriented ontologies and new materialist thought sits squarely in affect-infused studies, what Jane Bennett (following Bruno Latour) calls the "actant" – a term or category for the active "agency" of inanimate objects (Bennett 2010; Latour 2005). In this way, New Materialist readings of biblical texts continue work already underway in readings informed by Affect Theory and by extension Animal Studies, Ecocritical and even Ideological Criticism.

The core of the collection of these essays met the scholarly world as a panel at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in November of 2019, under the themes of Bible, New Materialism and Object Oriented Ontology sponsored by the section *Reading, Theory and the Bible*. They have undergone revision and expansion in light of that

conversation so as to be included here, as a set, in peer-reviewed publication. We are certain the authors join us in thanks to our many fine conversation partners and reviewers. These essays are a first foray, offered as a point marking beginning conversation about new ways to think about not just what is “in” a Bible, but how actual, material Bibles in/and other parts of the material world engage with us as readers and interpreters.

The essays pursue an array of topics. SuJung Shin explores the Ark of the Covenant in 2 Sam as actant. Dong Hyeon Jeong looks at the eco-theological potential of the Gospel of Mark’s eucharistic language of Jesus “incarnate” as bread. Jennifer Quigley, in an argument similar to Brent Plate’s *5 ½ Objects*, looks at how material items such as a statue, a table and a measure reveal the inter-animation of religion and economics in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians. Robert Seesengood looks at the assemblage structure(s) of fashion, religion and Bibles, questioning the way we ascribe “agency” to things (and the way Things and systems perform affectively). Plotting a winding course through John’s Gospel, Orthodox iconography and the head of a well-known Australian outlaw, Andrew Wilson argues that interpretations of John might look quite different when ways of seeing avoid reflexively pivoting towards the abstract and spiritual and instead maintain a steely focus on the material. Finally, Anne Elvey continues the theme of Things intruding into bodies via her performative reading of “breath” in the narrative of Jesus’s synagogue visit in Luke 4:16-30.

This collection of essays, each exploring New Materialist pathways through the discipline (and beyond), represents a significant site of initial entanglement that seeks to side-step traditional binaries and consider differently the ways in which the Bible is implicated in broader experience by cutting across implicit divisions that shape and contain scholarly practices. Certainly nothing can be done at this time in history without reference to the global pandemic that continues to hold us in its stifling grip. It goes without saying that many have suffered during the past year as the virus has ravaged our lives, our systems, our freedoms and our hopes. At the same time, there has also been a sense that the pandemic has allowed us to see the world differently. This is not an attempt to don rose coloured glasses and ignore the clear devastation that continues to be wrought, but it does provide us with a unique context within which to consider the work we do. Just as a virus, a thing neither living nor dead, has allowed us to re-territorialise those practices and institutions we take for granted—politically, socially, existentially and geographically—our hope is that the kind of reappraisal of our field that New Materialism represents might allow for the opening up of conversations, opportunities and connections that escape our typical scholarly divisions, structures and understandings along with their unnecessary limitations. It is not a great comparison, to be sure, and New Materialism has nothing of the pressing significance of COVID19. But, if anything, the pandemic has taught us in far harsher terms than necessary what Dolphijn and van der Tuin observe: “Matter is a transformative force in itself” (2012, 108). We ignore the material at our own peril while, by contrast, engagement is a potential, albeit challenging, path to transformation. With promising vaccines just starting to appear and a future once again seeming possible, we can dare to hope. What could this transformation look like within our own discipline of biblical studies? How will the effort to account more fully for materiality and the interdisciplinary measures necessary to explore it create new points of connection and interaction, indeed, new paradigms that shape the future of biblical studies?

Recalling Jesus' advice in Matthew 5, living this year in the midst of a global pandemic has turned all of us in often brutal ways towards considering what (or where) we shall eat or what we put on. It has reoriented us to the Thingly nature of the world around us, to our political and personal engagement with systems and communities, to attention to economic and material systems that seem increasingly autonomous. As scholars of the Bible, these essays grapple with both mundane daily experience and larger thematic shifts in our world and our scholarship, calling us as to renewed thinking about the world, and the objects, we encounter.

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