

STUDIA ANTIQUA

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ABBREVIATIONS

All abbreviations are taken from *The SBL Handbook of Style*, 8.4.

AASF	<i>Annales Academiae scientiarum fennicae</i>
AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by D. N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York, 1992.
AJP	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
ArOr	<i>Archiv Orientální</i>
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BDAG	Bauer, W., F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago, 1999.
BDB	Brown, F., S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford, 1907.
BMes	<i>Bibliotheca mesopotamica</i>
BSac	<i>Bibliotheca sacra</i>
BSC	Bible Student's Commentary
BT	<i>The Bible Translator</i>
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

ALL ABBREVIATIONS ARE TAKEN FROM THE SBL HANDBOOK OF STYLE, 8.4. V

CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CDME	<i>A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian</i> . Edited by R. O. Faulkner. Oxford, 1962.
COS	<i>The Context of Scripture</i> . Edited by W. W. Hallo. 3 vols. Leiden, 1997–.
DDD	<i>Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible</i> . Edited by K. van der Toorn, B. Becking, and P. W. van der Horst. Leiden, 1995.
DJD	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert
EBib	Etudes bibliques
EDNT	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by H. Balz, G. Schneider. Grand Rapids, 1990–93.
EgT	<i>Eglise et théologie</i>
ExpTim	<i>Expository Times</i>
HBC	<i>Harper's Biblical Commentary</i> . Edited by J. L. Mays et al. San Francisco, 1988.
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HTS	Harvard Theological Studies
IB	<i>Interpreter's Bible</i> . Edited by G. A. Buttrick et al. 12 vols. New York, 1951–57.
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IDB	<i>The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> . Edited by G. A. Buttrick. 4 vols. Nashville, 1962.
Int	<i>Interpretation</i>
IOS	<i>Israel Oriental Studies</i>
JAC	Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JCS	<i>Journal of Cuneiform Studies</i>
JFSR	<i>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</i>
JHS	<i>Journal of Hellenic Studies</i>
JNES	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JQR	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
JRS	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>

VI ALLABBREVIATIONSARE TAKEN FROM THE SBL HANDBOOK OF STYLE, 8.4.

JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LSJ	Liddell, H. G., R. Scott, H. S. Jones, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . 9th ed. with revised supplement. Oxford, 1996.
<i>MDB</i>	<i>Mercer Dictionary of the Bible</i> . Edited by W. E. Mills. Macon, 1990.
<i>NewDocs</i>	<i>New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity</i> . Edited by G. H. R. Horsley and S. Llewelyn. North Ryde, N. S.W., 1981–.
<i>NIB</i>	<i>The New Interpreter's Bible</i>
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OTS	Old Testament Studies
<i>OtSt</i>	<i>Oudtestamentische Studiën</i>
SHANE	Studies in the History of the Ancient Near East
SP	Sacra pagina
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids, 1964–76.
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
VC	<i>Vigiliae christianae</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZDPV	<i>Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins</i>

“ALL POWER OVER OURANOS AND GAIA”

THE MAIESTAS DOMINI SUPRA CAELUM MOTIF IN MATTHEW
28.18 AND THE JUNIUS BASSUS SARCOFAGUS

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Abstract: The maiestas domini supra caelum motif, as depicted in the central vignette of the upper register of the Junius Bassus sarcophagus, is widely understood as epitomizing a Christian ideal or an eschatological adventus as opposed to a representation of any “historical” biblical narrative. Nevertheless, this paper addresses the compelling iconographical allusion between the Bassus enthronement scene over Caelus and the final chapter of Matthew, specifically highlighting Jesus’s declaration of divine power “ἐν οὐρανῶ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς.”

Through an examination of the relevant contemporaneous theological and ritual literature produced during the period of Matthew’s authorship and the crafting of the Bassus sarcophagus, augmented by a grammatical analysis of the merismatic epigram “ἐν οὐρανῶ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς,” this study aims to elucidate the enduring resonance of Ouranos and Gaea within the collective consciousness of the Greco-Roman milieu during the imperial period. Recognition of this context will demonstrate that the depiction of Jesus enthroned over Caelus exhibits striking parallels with Matthew 28.18. Examining this passage through the interpretive lens of the enthronement scene of the Junius Bassus sarcophagus potentially offers valuable insights into how early Christian laypeople could have construed this passage as Jesus asserting divine dominion over both Ouranos and Gaea.

Characterized by ten intercolumnar vignettes depicting scenes from both the New Testament and Hebrew Bible, the Junius Bassus sarcophagus has become one of the most engaging and recognizable examples of Christian iconography (figure 1). This remarkable piece features an unprecedented double register with the primary facade comprised of a “five-niche entablature-type register over a five-niche arch-and-gable type register.”¹ The upper register,

1. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 4.



Figure 1. Junius Bassus Sarcophagus. 359 CE. Photo by Miguel Hermoso Cuesta, Wikimedia Commons (edited)

arranged from left to right, depicts the sacrifice of Isaac (Akedah), the arrest of Peter, Christ enthroned between Peter and Paul, the arrest of Jesus, and the trial of Jesus before Pilate. The lower register, following a similar left-to-right progression, depicts the misery of Job, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Daniel in the lions' den, and the arrest of Paul. Of primary significance are the central scenes in both registers—Christ enthroned in the style of the *maiestas domini supra caelum* (Christ in majesty over heaven) motif in the upper register and the triumphal entry in the lower register (figure 2). Traditionally, many scholars view these two central scenes as an intentionally designed vertical panel, expected to be interpreted as a type and antitype of one another.² This deliberate juxtaposition stems from their positive thematic nature, portraying the triumphant Jesus in both heavenly and earthly realms, distinct from the eight remaining vignettes predominantly depicting scenes of suffering.³ Moreover, the central prominence of the Christ enthroned and triumphal entry scenes in both the upper and lower registers enhances this interpretive framework. This is further emphasized by the distinctively decorated columns that separate them from neighboring scenes. These central columns are ornamented with paradise imagery of putti gathering grapes, a departure from the spiral-fluted columns adorning the eight remaining vignettes.⁴

The portrayal of the *maiestas domini supra caelum* motif, situated in the central vignette of the Junius Bassus sarcophagus's upper register, is widely understood as epitomizing a Christian ideal or an eschatological *adventus* (a coming or arrival), distinct from a representation of any “historical” biblical

2. Malbon, *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, 52–53; Massimiliano Vitiello, “*Neofitus iit ad Deum*: Some Observations on the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus,” in *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History*, vol. 13 ed. Carl Deroux (Brussels: Latomus, 2006), 449–50; Sabine G. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981), 65–66.

3. Vitiello, “*Neofitus iit ad Deum*,” 449–50.

4. Vitiello, “*Neofitus iit ad Deum*,” 452.

narrative.⁵ Nevertheless, this interpretation stands in marked contrast to the remaining nine scenes of the sarcophagus, each exhibiting distinct biblical parallels, and minimizes the potential literary connection with the Great Commission highlighted by Elizabeth Malbon: “The central scene of the upper register should also be seen in relation to the ‘Great Commission’ of Matthew 28:18–20, with two disciples representing the eleven.”⁶ This paper demonstrates how the Bassus enthronement scene over Caelus—the Roman primordial deity symbolizing the heavens and counterpart to the Greek Ouranos—can be read as an allusion to Matthew 28:18, specifically emphasizing Jesus’s declaration of divine power over Ouranos and Gaia, the primordial creator gods of the Greek pantheon.⁷ Through examining the relevant contemporaneous theological and ritual literature produced from the period of Matthew’s authorship to the crafting of the Junius Bassus sarcophagus, I intend to elucidate Ouranos and Gaias’s enduring resonance within the collective consciousness of the Greco-Roman milieu during the imperial period and their potential influence on viewers’ perception of the Bassus sarcophagus. Specifically, this study will situate the sarcophagus among the discourse of patristic writers as they grappled with the theological implications of Jesus’s domination and supremacy over traditional Roman deities.⁸ Recognizing this context will demonstrate that



Figure 2. Bassus Sarcophagus, Central Panel. Christ Enthroned and Triumphal Entry Vignettes. Photo by Giovanni Dall’Orto, Wikimedia Commons (edited)

ate the sarcophagus among the discourse of patristic writers as they grappled with the theological implications of Jesus’s domination and supremacy over traditional Roman deities.⁸ Recognizing this context will demonstrate that

5. Paul Corby Finney, ed., *The Eerdmans Encyclopedia of Early Christian Art and Archaeology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 616; René Grousset, *Étude sur l’histoire des sarcophages chrétiens: catalogue des sarcophages chrétiens de Rome qui ne se trouvent point au Musée du Latran* (Paris: Ernest Thorin, 1885), 39; Malbon, *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, 52–53; Vitiello, “*Neofitus iit ad Deum*,” 449–50; Jaś Elsner, “Framing the Objects We Study: Three Boxes from Late Roman Italy,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 71 (2008): 28.

6. Malbon, *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, 186n83.

7. Ἐδόθη μοι πᾶσα ἐξουσία ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς. Although there are significant distinctions between the Roman Caelus and the Greek Ouranos, their respective citations throughout this paper will be circumscribed as “Ouranos,” and references to Caelus will remain exclusively within the context of the Junius Bassus Sarcophagus and Roman Christian iconography.

8. Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of the Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 5–8. Although Mathews’s approach has since been nuanced, many of his assertions still warrant consideration. See Robin

the depiction of Jesus enthroned over Caelus exhibits striking parallels with Matthew 28:18, potentially offering valuable insights into how early Christian laypeople (non-clergy) might have construed this passage as Jesus asserting divine dominion over both Ouranos and Gaia. Therefore, this paper functions as an audience reception study of Matthew 28:18, examining it through the interpretive lens of the enthronement scene of the Junius Bassus sarcophagus and sheds new light on the possible reception of the Gospel of Matthew on the lay populace among early Greek and Roman converts to Christianity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

René Grousset may have been the earliest to suggest that the *maiestas domini supra caelum* scene depicted on the Junius Bassus sarcophagus reflects a distinct Christian ideal, diverging from any narrative rooted in biblical literature. In his 1885 work *Étude sur l'histoire des sarcophages chrétiens*, Grousset classifies the Bassus enthronement scene as belonging to a category he terms “groupes dans une action imaginaire.”⁹ Subsequent scholarship spanning over a century has consistently followed a similar interpretational pattern regarding the sarcophagus. In her monograph *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, Malbon quotes Grousset, characterizing the enthronement scene as the “one ‘ideal’ scene of the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus” because it is “given the place of first importance: the upper-register, center intercolumniation” (figure 3).¹⁰ More recently *The Eerdmans Encyclopedia of Early Christian Art and Archaeology*, edited by Paul Finney, denotes that the *traditio legis* motif, featured in the Christ enthroned scene, has “no literary prototype” and “points to an ideal world: the eschaton and paradise.”¹¹ In his examination of the



Figure 3. Christ Enthroned Vignette. Photo by Jim Womack and Anne Richardson, Wikimedia Commons (edited)

M. Jensen, “Allusions to Imperial Rituals in Fourth-Century Christian Art,” in *The Art of Empire: Christian Art in Its Imperial Context*, ed. Robin M. Jensen and Lee M. Jefferson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 13–47; See Lee M. Jefferson, “Revisiting the Emperor Mystique: The Traditio Legis as an Anti-Imperial Image,” in *Art of Empire*, 49–86.

9. “Groups in an imaginary action.” See Grousset, *Étude sur l'histoire des sarcophages chrétiens*, 39.

10. Malbon, *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, 52.

11. Finney, *Eerdmans Encyclopedia*, 616.

sarcophagus, Massimiliano Vitiello perceives the enthronement scene as an eschatological *adventus* juxtaposed with “the ‘historical’ one in Jerusalem ... the entry of Christ into the Holy City” (figure 4).¹² This contrast, commonly considered a deliberate design by the artisan(s), underscores the interpretive connection between these two scenes. Sabine MacCormack succinctly encapsulates the state of scholarly interpretation:



Figure 4. Triumphal Entry Vignette. Photo by Jim Womack and Anne Richardson, Wikimedia Commons (edited)

“The juxtaposition of these two scenes, one above the other, and the central place they both occupy in the iconographical scheme of the sarcophagus as a whole indicate that the content of each was clearly understood to be related to the other, and both scenes are rendered in iconographies familiar from imperial art.”¹³ In essence, the voices of Grousset, Malbon, Finney, Vitiello, and MacCormack represent the scholarly consensus on the interpretation of the Christ enthroned vignette and its integral placement

within the vertical central panel of the sarcophagus, namely that it has no biblical precedent and should be seen as the idealized antitype to the triumphal entry scene of the bottom register.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge the inherent interpretive flexibility intended by the commissioner(s) or the artisan(s), permitting a multiplicity of concurrent readings. As Vitiello observes, “It is not unlikely that more than one reading of the sarcophagus was intended.”¹⁵ Recognizing the plausible interpretation of an idealized Christian perspective of Jesus, or an eschatological *adventus*, juxtaposed with a historical interpretation is valid. However, a judicious approach against dogmatism or rigid interpretation is warranted.

The traditional interpretation of the Christ enthroned vignette appears anomalous within the context of the Bassus sarcophagus imagery since it stands as the sole scene lacking a direct biblical parallel. Recognizing this, Malbon identifies such a parallel between the enthronement panel and the

12. Vitiello, “*Neofitus iit ad Deum*,” 449–450.

13. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony*, 65–66.

14. See also Andre Grabar, *Early Christian Art: From the Rise of Christianity to the Death of Theodosius*, trans. Stuart Gilbert and James Emmons (New York: Odyssey Press, 1969), 248.

15. Vitiello, “*Neofitus iit ad Deum*,” 452.

Great Commission in Matthew 28. Despite quoting Grousset’s classification of the enthronement scene as a Christian ideal in the main body of the text in her monograph, she observes in her footnotes that “the central scene of the upper register should also be seen in relation to the ‘Great Commission’ of Matthew 28:18–20, with two disciples representing the eleven, and the longer ending of Mark: ‘... the Lord Jesus ... was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God’ (Mark 16:19).”¹⁶ Additionally, Robin Jensen cites Matthew 28:18 when she suggests that the images of Christ as the Lawgiver (*traditio legis*) show Jesus “as the ruler of the cosmos. These images expressed Christ’s ascendancy and supremacy and presented him as the *God of all gods* and king of kings (Revelation 17:14), the one who holds all authority in heaven and on earth, a name above every name (cf. Matthew 28:18; Ephesians 1:17–23).”¹⁷ While both Malbon and Jensen understand the *traditio legis* motif (the handing of the Law) to be inspired by a conglomerate of New Testament passages, both credit Matthew 28:18 as serving as a partial impetus.

However, Malbon’s understanding of the *traditio legis* motif in the enthronement scene representing the Great Commission in verses 19–20 is not the only allusion the sarcophagus potentially makes to Matthew 28. The preceding verse explicitly mentions Christ’s enthronement over Ouranos and Gaia. In Matthew 28:18 Jesus issues a merismatic declaration of divine power, one that encompasses both οὐρανός and γῆ—heaven and earth, or the κόσμος. The presence of both a claim to universal authority and a literal “handing of the Law” within this short passage in chapter 28 resonates notably well with the *maiestas domini supra caelum* and *traditio legis* motifs of the Bassus sarcophagus.

Building upon Malbon’s suggestion, I will argue that Matthew 28:18 served in part as a biblical model for the adoption of the imperial scene of the Roman emperor enthroned over Caelus and its eventual conflation with Christ.¹⁸

16. See comments in Malbon, *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, 186n83.

17. Robin M. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2023), 154, emphasis added. The phrase “*traditio legis*” is defined as the “transmission” or “handing of the Law.” This artistic motif became commonplace in Christian imagery after the Junius Bassus sarcophagus and occupied the central position in the register. Images portraying Jesus in the *traditio legis* motif frequently depict Jesus handing the gospel, represented as an open scroll, to his disciples. See Malbon, *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, 50–51; Finney, *Eerdmans Encyclopedia*, 616.

18. Beat Brenk, “The Imperial Heritage of Early Christian Art,” in *Age of Spirituality: A Symposium*, ed. Kurt Weitzmann (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980), 39–52. Although the use of an imperial precedent for Christian images, the “Emperor Mystic,” is challenged by Thomas Mathews. See Mathews, *Clash of the Gods*, 3–22. While it is likely imprudent to entirely divorce Christian imagery from earlier imperial imagery, we cannot understand the new Christian icons through the same interpretive framework

Furthermore, examining the interplay between Matthew 28:18–20 and the Junius Bassus sarcophagus can offer scholars a distinctive lens through which to explore a layperson's comprehension of the biblical passage. This perspective diverges from the more orthodox patristic writings and instead emerges from the contextual milieu leading up to the crafting of the Bassus sarcophagus in the fourth century. Given the complex theological symbolism and dualistic nature of οὐρανός and γῆ, coupled with Matthew's significant Hellenistic influence,¹⁹ it is likely that within the Greco-Roman world, the declaration of divine ἐξουσία in Matthew 28:18 could be interpreted by some communities as subjugating the Greek primordial creator gods Ouranos and Gaia beneath the resurrected Jesus.²⁰

ANALYSIS OF THE JUNIUS BASSUS SARCOPHAGUS

The Junius Bassus sarcophagus was discovered in 1595 in the catacombs beneath Old St. Peter's Basilica during the construction of the modern edifice.²¹

of the older imperial icons, even though it is modified to fit a Christian image. Therefore, interpreting these new images of Jesus in the same way they would have been understood in previous centuries is insufficient, especially in their initial appearances. They warrant a new meaning and explanation within their new cultural context.

19. Robert Kinney and Dennis MacDonald both recognize significant Hellenistic influences on the Gospel stories of Jesus of Nazareth. Kinney's analysis of Matthew, in particular, demonstrates that this Gospel follows the formulation of a Hellenistic biography and identifies frequent Homerisms within the Gospel, presenting the text as an intricate intertextual representation of the merging cultures within the Greco-Roman world. See Robert S. Kinney, *Hellenistic Dimensions of the Gospel of Matthew: Background and Rhetoric* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 252–83; Dennis R. MacDonald, *Mythologizing Jesus: From Jewish Teacher to Epic Hero* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 16.

20. An appeal to the authoritative commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew reveals their interpretation of 28:18 as a declaration of Jesus's divine power over the κοσμός as well as an intentional parallel to the Son of Man prophecy Daniel 7:13–14. "As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed." See W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 683; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 4. Strack and Billerbeck point to the Exodus Rabbah 12 as a reference between Matthew 28:18 and the ten plagues Moses calls down upon Egypt. See the note on Matthew 28:18 in Hermann L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, vol. 1 (Munich: Beck, 1922–1961), 1213. Jonathon Pennington identifies a connection to Genesis 1:1 and suggests that 28:18 establishes Jesus as a New Creator in addition to the New Moses. Furthermore, Pennington explores the idiolectic potential of Matthew's unique use of the stock phrase "heaven and earth" as an expansion on the use of the phrase within the Septuagint. See Jonathan T. Pennington, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew: Supplements to Novum Testamentum* 126, (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 88.

21. Finney, *Eerdmans Encyclopedia*, 429.

The sarcophagus itself was commissioned in 359 CE for its eponymous patron, Junius Bassus, an affluent member of the elite Roman class who served as the *praefectus urbi*, or the administrative chief of Rome. Just prior to his death at the age of forty-two, Bassus was baptized while on his deathbed, a common practice among Roman elites during the initial stages of Christianity's assimilation into the Eastern Roman Empire,²² reminiscent of Constantine's conversion over two decades prior.

The iconography of the Junius Bassus sarcophagus typifies the intersection between Christianity and Rome in its portrayal of biblical events from both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament, drawing from extant Roman imperial imagery.²³ Nevertheless, it is crucial to emphasize that early Christian sarcophagi were commissioned by and created for laypeople, with a primarily lay audience in mind. The decoration of marble sarcophagi for burial purposes did not commence at the behest of Christian clergy until the conclusion of the fourth century.²⁴ Consequently, "the iconography of these [earlier] sarcophagi was invented and created by laymen," reflecting their individual theology and interpretation of scripture modified from worship in ecclesiastical settings.²⁵ Robin Jensen emphasizes the prominent role of the client and describes the absence of clerical oversight in funerary ornamentation by demonstrating that "individual patrons chose the images that decorated their tombs or burial boxes with little oversight or control by church officials," and the wealthier the client, the greater role they played in selecting the imagery of their tombs and sarcophagi.²⁶ Being *praefectus urbi*, Junius Bassus as well as the executors of his estate would have had immense wealth and resources at their disposal in selecting the images that would adorn the sarcophagus.²⁷

22. Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 690.

23. Malbon, *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, 186.

24. Jutta Dresken-Weiland, "Christian Sarcophagi from Rome," in *The Routledge Handbook of Early Christian Art*, ed. Robin M. Jensen and Mark D. Ellison (London: Routledge, 2018), 41.

25. Dresken-Weiland, "Christian Sarcophagi from Rome," 41; Also see Dresken-Weiland, "Zur Entstehung der frühchristlichen Kunst," *Das Münster* 65 (2014): 244–250.

26. Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 21. Jensen further expounds by saying, "The most important influence on the essential design, quality, or character of early Christian art was its clients. Whereas bishops or other church authorities would have overseen the decoration of ecclesiastical buildings, almost no surviving textual or material evidence indicates the degree to which they influenced the decoration of early Christian tombs."

27. In this sense, Bassus's selection of Christ enthroned over Caelus as the central scene could perhaps reflect his personal conversion—the inner triumph of Jesus and his newfound belief system over that of the declining Roman gods.

The exceptional representation of a layperson's theology depicted on the Junius Bassus sarcophagus has spurred debates regarding the interpretation of the imagery and the potential existence of an intentional program.²⁸ While scholarly discourse continues to grapple with the overarching program—or potential lack thereof—in the imagery of the Junius Bassus sarcophagus, there is a consensus on the artisan's deliberate emphasis on two central scenes: the enthronement of Christ (upper register) and the triumphal entry (bottom register). The enthronement scene depicts a beardless Jesus, adopting a typical Hellenistic aesthetic modeled after Apollo,²⁹ flanked on either side by Peter and Paul, the *Principes Apostolorum* or patron saints of the now-Christianized Rome.³⁰ In a symbolic representation of the New Law, or the gospel, Jesus holds an open scroll in his left hand, adhering to the standard imperial *traditio legis* motif.³¹

Of particular significance within this imagery is the figure situated directly below the feet of Christ. This bearded figure, extending a veil across his head and holding it in both hands, represents Caelus—the Romanized incarnation of the Greek primordial sky god Ouranos. The placement of Christ's feet over Caelus, especially his left foot, transcends a mere visual superimposition, suggesting an active interaction between the two gods. With the left foot extending past the veil separating Caelus from Jesus and the apostles, partially covering his left temple, Jesus is actively invading the realm of the Greco-Roman creator god, suggesting a relationship of dominance and subjection between the ruler and the ruled.³² This portrayal of subjugation is frequently represented in Roman imagery in a similar manner, often showing emperors trampling over their conquered enemies.³³ Hadrian is depicted in such a way, trampling over a subjugated barbarian, symbolizing his victory over a conquered foe (figure 5). Another notable parallel is the use of the left foot to trample. In both images, Hadrian and Jesus are depicted trampling over their respective adversaries with their left feet. This symbolism underscores Jesus's triumph over the

28. Jaś Elsner, "Image and Rhetoric in Early Christian Sarcophagi: Reflections on Jesus' Trial," in *Life, Death and Representation: Some New Work on Roman Sarcophagi*, ed. Jaś Elsner and Janet Huskinson, vol. 29 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 371.

29. Mathews, *Clash of the Gods*, 126–8.

30. Vitiello, "Neofitus iit ad Deum," 451.

31. Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, 2 vols., trans. Janet Seligman (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1972), 2:5–6; Also see Mallon, *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, 50–51. It is also possible that the figure of Jesus might likewise have been offering an object to Paul, but damage to his right hand obscures any further speculation. Additionally, "The sarcophagus of Bassus is the oldest example we have of *traditio legis* of Christ to His apostles," see Vitiello, "Neofitus iit ad Deum," 449–50.

32. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony*, 249.

33. Fred S. Kleiner, *A History of Roman Art* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2007), 172–73.

heavens, over death, over creation, and establishes his universal sovereignty as the *κοσμοκράτωρ*.³⁴



Left: **Figure 5.** Hadrian as imperator, second century CE. Photo by Dick Osseman, Wikimedia Commons

Above: **Figure 6.** Constantinian frieze on the Arch of Constantine, fourth century CE. Photo by Tyler and Pierce, Wikimedia Commons (edited)

While the enthronement scene of the Junius Bassus sarcophagus embodies significant Christological imagery, it is crucial to recognize that the iconographical elements within this vignette are not exclusive to Christian representations. Rather, this scene signifies the commencement of the conflation and substitution of the Roman emperor with Jesus and has a multitude of imperial iconographical *comparanda* that serve as precedents. As previously mentioned, the act of delivering the Law to Paul and Peter is rooted in the imperial *traditio legis* motif. This motif conventionally portrays the enthroned emperor, flanked by his sons or soldiers, delivering a codicil.³⁵ This imagery predates the Junius Bassus sarcophagus, appearing on the Arch of Constantine (figure 6), and continues to be utilized as late as 388 CE on the Missorium of Theodosius I (figure



Figure 7. Missorium of Theodosius I, fourth century CE. Photo by Italica Res, Wikimedia Commons

34. “lord of the world.” The epithet was originally attributed to Ouranos (Orphic Hymns 4:3), later to Zeus (see Mithraeum inscription at the Baths of Caracalla), and then usurped by Jesus as exhibited in the apse mosaic of San Vitale. See Henry George Liddell et al., “*κοσμοκράτωρ*,” *LSJ* A.1; E. Ghislanzoni, *Scavi nelle Terme Antoniniane*, *NovScat* 5 vol. 9 (Rome: Accademia dei Lincei, 1912), 323. See also Grabar, *Early Christian Art*, 248; Vitiello, “*Neofitus iit ad Deum*,” 449–50; Malbon, *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, 50.

35. Massey H. Shepherd Jr., “Christology: A Central Problem of Early Christian Theology and Art,” in *Age of Spirituality: A Symposium*, ed. Weitzmann, 111.

7).³⁶ Similarly, the enthronement of Christ over *Caelus* finds its inspiration in earlier depictions of Roman emperors, such as the portrayal of Diocletian and another emperor on the Arch of Galerius in Thessaloniki—both “enthroned on a *solium* over the *caelus*,” (figure 8).³⁷ When considered collectively, the *traditio legis* and the enthronement on a *solium* over the *caelus*, as embodied in this scene, also echo the conventions observed in common Roman “city-gate” sarcophagi.³⁸



Left: **Figure 8.** Frieze of Diocletian and an unnamed emperor enthroned over *Caelus* on the Arch of Galerius. Third century CE. Photo by J. Matthew Harrington, Wikimedia Commons (edited)

Right: **Figure 9.** Lateran Sarcophagus 174. Fourth century CE. Photo by Hartmann Grisar, Wikimedia Commons (edited)

The appropriation of this imperial image, portraying a figure seated on a *solium* over the *caelus*, by the artisan(s) who crafted the Junius Bassus sarcophagus marks the inception of the *maiestas domini supra caelum* “a pictorial motif that is not seen before 359.”³⁹ The creation of a Christianized imperial image such as this once again demonstrates the flexibility and creative control a wealthy client like Junius Bassus would have exerted—or allowed among the commissioned artisan(s)—independent from ecclesiastical oversight. Subsequent sarcophagi, exemplified by Lateran Sarcophagus 174, will replicate this image (figure 9).⁴⁰ However, Georg Daltrop, while acknowl-

36. Malbon, *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, 51. However, Robin Jensen nuances the idea that Imperial imagery served as the primary impetus for the tradition *legis*, “the imagery has actually little in common with these proposed prototypes. Most notably, the two co-regents on the Missorium are not the scroll’s recipients, but only a single individual who kneels at the emperor’s feet.” See Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art*, 152.

37. Brenk, “Imperial Heritage of Early Christian Art,” 39–52. Also see figure 110 in Andre Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of its Origins* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 43.

38. Charles Rufus Morey, *Early Christian Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1942), 135.

39. Georg Daltrop, “Anpassung eines Relieffragmentes an den Deckel des Iunius Bassus Sarkophages,” *Rendiconti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia* 51–52 (1978–1980): 164.

40. Friedrich Wilhelm Deichmann, Giuseppe Bovini, and Hugo Brandenburg, eds., *Repertorium Der Christlich-Antiken Sarkophage* (Wiesbaden: Stuttgart, 1967), 274; Giuseppe Wilpert, *I Sarcofagi Cristiani Antichi*, vol. 1 (Rome: Pontificio Istituto di

edging the imperial precedents, contends that they alone “do not suffice to explain the picture of Christ on the Junius Bassus sarcophagus.”⁴¹ If the imperial precedents are not sufficient to explain the attributions of these motifs to the image of Jesus, perhaps Thomas Mathews’s arguments that the new Christianized images should be interpreted within their own context become particularly relevant.⁴² At this juncture, it is necessary to revisit Malbon’s observations regarding the need to comprehend the enthronement scene within the contextual framework of the Great Commission in Matthew 28, as noted earlier. It is also imperative to acknowledge that “the translation of the Gospels from literature into visual images profoundly affected their content,” creating a multitude of disparate readings, interpretations, and subsequent theologies in a post-Constantinian era.⁴³ Expanding upon Malbon’s insights, there seem to be further parallels between the concluding verses of Matthew and the enthronement scene. First, the *traditio legis* image of Jesus handing the open scroll, representing the Great Commission to the apostles, according to Malbon, is not exclusive to the Junius Bassus sarcophagus. Numerous other Christian sarcophagi, mosaics, and murals, including Lateran Sarcophagus 174, exhibit a comparable thematic pattern (figure 9).⁴⁴ After 370 CE, these sarcophagi adopted an image of the “*traditio legis* with Christ standing on the Mountain of Paradise” (figure 10).⁴⁵ Rather than construing this “Mountain of Paradise” as an exclusive eschatological ideal, it might, at times, also be identified within a particular Galilean mountain: “Now the eleven disciples went to



Figure 10. *Traditio Legis* Sarcophagus in the Museo Archeologico, Ravenna. Fifth century CE. Photo by Francesco Bini, Wikimedia Commons (edited)

Archeologia Cristiana, 1929), 168. For further attestations within Wilpert’s three volumes, see Malbon’s list in Malbon, *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, 184.

41. Daltrop, *Anpassung eines Relieffragmentes*, 164.

42. See footnote 18.

43. Mathews, *Clash of the Gods*, 11.

44. See footnote 40.

45. Malbon, *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, 51.

Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them” (Matthew 28:16). From there they worshipped the resurrected Jesus, and he commissioned them to “make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you,” thereby invoking the literary example of the *traditio legis* motif.⁴⁶ Second, Jesus, seated in a position of authority over Caelus (*maiestas domini supra caelum*), recalls the first words he spoke after his resurrection on behalf of his patron god YHWH, “All authority in heaven [οὐρανός] and earth [γῆ] has been given to me,” reflecting the literary precedent of the *maiestas domini supra caelum* motif.⁴⁷ The presence of both the *traditio legis* and *maiestas domini supra caelum* motifs within the Christ enthroned scene encapsulates multiple elements of Matthew 28:18–20, presenting a convenient adoption and modification of a preexisting imperial image conflated with Jesus.

An additional motif identified by Andre Grabar within the central panel of the Bassus sarcophagus encompasses a typical adventus scene, representing “the relationship between ruler and ruled” as portrayed by Christ both in heaven—the eschatological coming—and on earth—the historical coming.⁴⁸ Together, the adventus and enthronement scenes symbolize the dominion of Jesus in both realms, constituting a visual merism that portrays the mortal Jesus as king over the earth and the immortal Jesus as king over the heavens. This portrayal of Jesus’s dual dominion within the central panel is exceptionally reminiscent of Jesus’s claim that he has been given “all power in heaven and earth” in Matthew 28:18.

In light of the Gospel of Matthew’s potential influence on the enthronement scene, the portrayal of Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem, situated beneath the enthronement of Christ, could also be modeled on the Matthean account. In comparing the description of Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem found in Matthew 21:1–11, Mark 11:1–11, Luke 19:28–44, and John 12:12–19, Erich Dinkler and Hugo Brandenburg assert that the representation on the Bassus sarcophagus most closely aligns with the Matthean version.⁴⁹ The Bassus sarcophagus portrays an individual laying a cloak before the colt bearing Jesus while another figure actively cuts a branch from a tree. Barring a harmonization of the Gospels by the artisan(s), Dinkler and Brandenburg concluded

46. See Matthew 28:16–17, 19–20.

47. Ἐδόθη μοι πᾶσα ἐξουσία ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς. See Matthew 28:18.

48. Grabar, *Early Christian Art*, 248; MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony*, 249. Also see Vitiello, “*Neofitus iit ad Deum*,” 451–2.

49. Erich Dinkler and Hugo Brandenburg, *Der Einzug in Jerusalem: Ikonographische Untersuchungen im Anschluss an ein bisher unbekanntes Sarkophagfragment* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1970), 47–59. Also see Vitiello, “*Neofitus iit ad Deum*,” 461.

that Luke and John could not have served as the model for the Bassus scene, citing the absence of branches in Luke and the lack of cloak spreading in John. They further suggested that Mark’s use of the verb κόπτω (to cut) did not align with the sarcophagus vignette, depicting a figure in the present act of cutting, as Mark employs the aorist participle κόψαντες. In contrast, Matthew alone includes both the presence of branches and cloaks and utilizes the imperfect form ἔκοπτον to convey the cutting in the present tense. If the triumphal entry scene is modeled after the Matthean account, as asserted by Dinkler and Brandenburg, and the *traditio legis* motif from the enthronement scene is reminiscent of the Great Commission, then it might also be likely that other Matthean elements are present in the vignette. This could help to triangulate Matthean influence on the appearance of Caelus beneath the feet of the enthroned Jesus.

In consideration of this comparison between the possible inclusion of Ouranos and Gaia in Matthew 28:18 and the central panel of the Junius Bassus sarcophagus, an initial concern may be raised regarding the apparent absence of Gaia imagery within the sarcophagus. However, two plausible ways emerge in which the sarcophagus alludes to the goddess. First, as previously noted, interpreting the enthronement scene in the context of the triumphal entry scene beneath it represents Jesus’s dominion over the earth as a whole, that “Christ’s earthly and temporal kingship is fulfilled by Christ’s universal and eternal kingship.”⁵⁰ Additionally, the image of Jesus’s triumphal entry “functioned as an emblem of the epiphany of Christ eternal,” once again emphasizing his resurrection, parallel to the Christ enthroned vignette, and further suggesting his everlasting supremacy over the earth.⁵¹ Yet rather than depicting the complementing deity on the sarcophagus—perhaps due to spatial constraints—the portrayal of Jesus’s dominion over the earth could convey the idea that Jesus has usurped the authority from the goddess of the earth. Thus, the juxtaposition of the enthronement scene, representing the heavens, and the triumphal entry scene, representing the earth, alludes to both gods by illustrating their respective domains. A similar positioning strategy is observed on the Prima Porta statue of Augustus (figure 11). Here Caelus, depicted akin to his representation on the Bassus sarcophagus, is positioned at the top of the breastplate, while an image of Terra is located directly below Caelus at the bottom of the image.⁵² The entire breastplate is therefore framed by depictions of the two gods. With

50. Malbon, *Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, 52–53. See also Vitiello, “*Neofitus iit ad Deum*,” 449–50.

51. Mathews, *Clash of the Gods*, 39.

52. Terra (also Terra Mater) being the primeval Roman goddess and personification of the earth, consort of Caelus, and counterpart to the Greek Gaia.

the appropriation of the Caelus image on the Bassus sarcophagus, it could be possible that freed from spatial constraints, the artisan(s) of the Junius Bassus sarcophagus would have incorporated Terra into the triumphal entry scene in a similar manner, such as below the triumphal entry scene. This addition would deepen the parallel with the framework of the breastplate on the Prima Porta statue already suggested by the Caelus image in the Christ enthroned scene. Nevertheless, the imagery of the central panel may allude to Terra symbolically rather than explicitly, in the scene of the entry into Jerusalem, alluding to the earthly realm over which Christ has come to rule.

Second, the image of Caelus carries a broad and flexible meaning, signifying not only Caelus himself but also the heavens and the entirety of creation, in other words the κόσμος. Consequently, the inclusion of the Caelus imagery may convey not only Caelus and the heavens but also Terra and the earth, symbolizing the entirety of creation.⁵³ It is also possible that the inclusion of Gaia was considered unnecessary, as the depiction of Caelus was deemed sufficient to convey the concept of both deities. Moreover, by situating the image of Caelus between the enthronement of Jesus and his triumphal entry, the artisan(s) might be using the Caelus image as a visual bridge between the two vignettes. In this sense, Gaia may be implied in the triumphal entry scene, if interpreted as representing the earth as a whole, and also within the figure of Caelus, embodying not only the heavens but the cosmos in its entirety. Although Matthew 28:18 is not the exclusive source of inspiration for the enthronement vignette on the Junius Bassus sarcophagus, the convergence of the *traditio legis* motif with the *maiestas domini supra caelum* appears to aptly represent Matthew 28:18 and aligns with the broader context of the fourth- and fifth-century belief in Jesus's supremacy over the Roman gods.⁵⁴



Figure 11. Prima Porta Statue of Augustus. First century CE. Photo by Francesco Bini, Wikimedia Commons

53. James B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 142–48.

54. Mathews, *Clash of the Gods*, 5–8.

GRAMMATICAL ANALYSIS OF 28:18

The author of Matthew inherited the stock phrase “heaven and earth” and its merismatic function from the Septuagint. However, he distinctively develops his own idiolectic formula, drawing upon “the semantic flexibility of οὐρανός.”⁵⁵ The Septuagint and Hellenistic literature served as the contextual framework for the composition and elaboration of the author’s distinctive utilization of the concept of heaven and earth, a use that could have been interpreted by some early Christian communities as Jesus having power over Ouranos and Gaia.

The Greek word οὐρανός is a deeply dualistic term rife with locative potential—the ability to indicate location linguistically—coupled with significant religious implications.⁵⁶ One such use of οὐρανός in the singular in Matthew appears in the epigram ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς.⁵⁷ Here, it is coupled with a term equally rich in symbolism, γῆ—the feminine complement to οὐρανός in both the locative and divine sense. Isolating the epigram found in 28:18 as a composed phrase independent from 6:10,⁵⁸ we see the entire axiom attributed to Jesus centers on the nominative ἐξουσία.⁵⁹ Due to the breadth of religious symbolism and dualistic meanings contained within both οὐρανός and γῆ, coupled with the Hellenistic influence of Matthew’s audiences, the declaration of divine ἐξουσία in Matthew 28:18 could have been understood by early lay Christians as invoking the Greek primordial creator gods Ouranos and Gaia.

To consider the possibility of early Christian communities rendering οὐρανός and γῆ as the ancient gods Ouranos and Gaia, we must first make

55. Pennington, *Heaven and Earth*, 149.

56. A philological analysis of the Gospel of Matthew reveals that οὐρανός appears 84 times in its 28 chapters: 58 in the plural and 26 in the singular. See the entry on οὐρανός in Gerhard Kittel and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 384; Regardless of its clear plurality, nearly every instance of a plural οὐρανός is curiously rendered as a singular “heaven” in most English editions of the New Testament. The singular οὐρανός in 28:18 is one of the few examples of a true singular use. See Pennington, *Heaven and Earth*, 139.

57. This exact phrasing appears in two places in Matthew, one in 6:10 during the Lord’s Prayer and the other in 28:18, part of the verses comprising the Great Commission. While seemingly similar, there is undoubtedly a source issue when comparing these two phrases as 6:10 is part of the assumed “Q” material, sharing an apparent source with Luke 11:2, while 28:18 is unique to Matthew. A possible departure between 6:10 and 28:18 could be the disputed presence of the genitive article τῆς in both verses within manuscript traditions. The article τῆς is omitted in manuscripts \times A K W and present in B D in 28:18. On the other hand, 6:10 omits τῆς in \times B W and includes it in D K. Due to these inconsistencies within manuscripts such as K and B and the absence of A, the committee determined that τῆς was not original to 6:10, and they bracketed it within 28:18.

58. Although it could be said that 6:10 could have influenced Matthew’s composition of 28:18 or vice versa.

59. Ἐδόθη μοι πᾶσα ἐξουσία ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς.

sense of the use of the adjoining prepositions and the following dative and genitive cases in the phrase ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς in verse 18. Due to the complexities surrounding the preposition ἐν, let us first examine the more clearly defined ἐπί. In most English translations of 28:18, καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς is rendered “and on earth,” clearly interpreting ἐπί as “on” and taking the genitive singular γῆς as a genitive of place. While grammatically, this translation functions correctly, it seems to operate outside the context of the sentence, Ἐδόθη μοι πᾶσα ἐξουσία ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς. When considering our subject is ἐξουσία, commonly rendered as “authority,” “power,” or even “absolute authority,” we see that a genitive of place is insufficient.⁶⁰ Rather, this phrase should utilize a genitive of authority, a case usage that depends upon the preposition ἐπί.⁶¹ Equipped with a new case usage, the clause should more accurately be rendered, “and over earth.”

This appearance of an ἐπί plus a genitive of authority is not an anomaly in Matthew, let alone in the New Testament. Matthew 24:45 includes a similar use, “... ὃν κατέστησεν ὁ κύριος ἐπὶ τῆς οἰκετείας αὐτοῦ.” Here a “lord,” a title where authority is clearly implied, has set a faithful servant “over his household” (ἐπὶ τῆς οἰκετείας αὐτοῦ). Revelation 20:6 also utilizes an ἐπί with a genitive of authority in conjunction with an explicitly stated ἐξουσία, “... ἐπὶ τούτων ὁ δεῦτερος θάνατος οὐκ ἔχει ἐξουσίαν” (Over these, the second death has no power). This use of ἐπί with a genitive of authority is used frequently within the New Testament and in other first- and second-century Greek authors such as Lysias and Plutarch.⁶² With these examples in mind, one may realistically render καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς, at least, as “and over earth.”

In contrast with a clear and substantiated definition of ἐπί, responsibly defining ἐν is a greater challenge. The *BDAG* recognizes this complexity as its lengthy entry on the preposition begins with the following preface:

The uses of this preposition are so many and various, and often so easily confused, that a strictly systematic treatment is impossible. It must suffice to list the main categories, which will help establish the usage in individual cases. The earliest auditors/readers, not being inconvenienced

60. William F. Arndt, Walter Bauer, and Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Logos Research Systems, 2000), 277–78; hereafter *BDAG*.

61. Also called a genitive of subordination. As a subset of a subjective genitive, a genitive of subordination “is related only to certain kinds of head substantives—nouns (or participles) that lexically imply some kind of rule or authority.” In this respect, ἐξουσία qualifies as a noun with a lexically implied sense of ruling, therefore initiating a genitive of subordination/authority and replacing “of” with “over.” See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 103–4.

62. See Henry George Liddell et al., “ἐπί,” *LSJ* A.III.1.

by grammatical and lexical debates, would readily absorb the context and experience little difficulty. (Arndt et al., “ἐν,” *BDAG*, 257)

According to the *BDAG*, the context in which ἐν appears is the primary influence on the ancient readers’ (or hearers’) understanding of the function of the preposition. Liddell & Scott include provisions for ἐν to be rendered as “over” with “verbs of ruling, ἄρχειν, ἀνάσσειν ἐν πολλοῖς to be first or lord among many, i.e. over them.”⁶³ Although presented as a noun in 28:18, ἐξουσία carries the same implications as verbs of ruling and can expect a genitive of authority as mentioned above. Davies and Allison point out that “the Son of Man, who was once handed over to the power of others, now has authority over them. The sense corresponds not to the Latin *omnipotens* (the ability to do all things) but the Greek παντοκράτωρ: Jesus is the ruler of all.”⁶⁴ Based on Davies and Allison’s interpretation of the verse, the concept of ruling is well attested within 28:18. Bullinger also allows for ἐν to be translated as “over” within the Greek New Testament, citing eighteen instances where “over” would be an appropriate rendering for ἐν.⁶⁵ The most compelling is Acts 20:28, “καὶ παντὶ τῷ ποιμνίῳ, ἐν ᾧ ὑμᾶς τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον ἔθετο ἐπίσκοπους.” (And over all the flock, over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.)⁶⁶ Also not necessarily including a verb of ruling, the presence of the noun ἐπίσκοπος (overseer) in Acts 20:28 implies a hierarchical relationship between ruler and ruled, informing the context for which the reader to render ἐν, in this case conceivably as “over.”⁶⁷

In the case of 28:18, there seem to be two plausible options for rendering ἐν. First, just as ἐπὶ plus a genitive can be translated as “on,” ἐν plus a dative

63. Henry George Liddell et al., “ἐν,” *LSJ*, A.I.5.

64. Davies and Allison, *Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 682.

65. It is important to note that Bullinger relies on the KJV translation and thus some of these attestations of ἐν translated as “over” have been modified. See entry on ἐν in Ethelbert W. Bullinger, *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament* (London: Longmans, 1908). Bullinger sees ἐν appropriately rendered as “over” in the following: Mark 5:21, Luke 15:7; Luke 19:30; Luke 21:34; Luke 22:7; John 2:23; John 2:23; John 16:25; John 16:25; John 18:39; Acts 20:28; Romans 12:21; 1 Corinthians 10:5; 2 Corinthians 11:32; Galatians 6:1; Colossians 2:15; 1 Thessalonians 5:12.

66. My own translation, reflecting elements from both the KJV and the NRSV.

67. While Matthew is not cited in Bullinger’s list of appropriate attestations of ἐν being over, we can find at least two places in Matthew where ἐν has variant definitions not congruent with most lexicons. For example, Matthew 7:6, in Jesus’s sayings on casting pearls before swine, the Greek says, “μήποτε καταπατήσουσιν αὐτοὺς ἐν τοῖς ποσὶν αὐτῶν.” Most English translations render the ἐν plus a dative as “under” which is not a typical definition, but the context of being καταπατήσουσιν (trampled) by ποσὶν (feet) drives the definition of “under.” Additionally, some variant readings (probably later insertions) include the phrase ἐν τῷ λαῷ at the end of Matthew 9:35. English translations that recognize this insertion translate this phrase as “among the people,” rendering the ἐν plus a dative as “among,” an interpretation not commonly found amongst most lexical entries for ἐν.

can be rendered in the same way using its locative sense. However, ἐπὶ also can be translated as “over,” as mentioned above, which, while uncommon, is still within the grammatical reach of ἐν as demonstrated by the aforementioned lexicons. In the physical world, if an object or a person is placed on top of another, the former would be *over* the latter. This is probably why Davies and Allison frequently use “over” in their shorter commentary on 28:18. “The Son of Man, who was once handed *over* to the authority of others, now has authority *over* everyone. The sense is not that Jesus has the ability to do all things but that he is the ruler of all.”⁶⁸ Therefore, an ancient reader or hearer could logically understand an ἐν with a dative as related to an ἐπὶ with a genitive and render them both as “over,” especially in the case of 28:18 as ἐπὶ is never coupled with οὐρανός in Matthew.

The second feasible option draws upon similar elements. Since the definition or use of ἐν can be so ambiguous, could the stronger definition of ἐπὶ within the context of divine power (ἐξουσία) drive home a contextualized definition for ἐν, similar to the function of ἐπίσκοπος in Acts 20:28? Those reading or hearing the Gospel of Matthew might initially be unsure of how to understand ἐν οὐρανῷ in this context, especially in a house church setting where the text is being read aloud and the audience is required to understand it audibly. But after reading or hearing a more clearly defined ἐπὶ γῆς, one would now have greater context for which to understand ἐν οὐρανῷ. Whether the close relationship between ἐν with a dative and ἐπὶ with a genitive is defining both prepositions or the strength of the latter is informing the former, it appears that within the context of 28:18, both ἐν and ἐπὶ can be rendered as meaning “over” οὐρανός and γῆ.

As with the preposition ἐν, both οὐρανός and γῆ greatly depend on their given context to accurately render their meanings. Most uses of οὐρανός within Matthew clearly refer to the sky or the heavens, the place where the god of Jesus dwells and the kingdom of which he proclaims. However, 28:18 seems to be a special case as it is the “high point of Matthew’s Christology” and “it aims at resolving all the Christological conflicts and debates.”⁶⁹ Its significance is underscored by its placement as the first utterance made by the resurrected Jesus to his disciples within the climactic final three verses of the text. Additionally, the author of Matthew’s idiolectic use of the Hebraic idiom “in heaven and in earth” is evident here, invoking the dualistic terms οὐρανός

68. Dale C. Allison and W. D. Davies, *Matthew: A Shorter Commentary* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 546, emphasis added.

69. Benjamin Ogechi Agbara, *Universal Mission: The Climax of Matthew’s Post-Resurrection Account* (New York: Lang, 2018), 245.

and γῆ, as opposed to words such as κόσμος or αἰῶνος, both of which are present within the Gospel and the latter appears just two verses later as the concluding remark. The author’s deliberate choice to situate οὐρανός and γῆ within the framework of divine power (ἐξουσία), particularly when considering alternative options, could have consequently steered the audience toward interpreting those terms in their religious sense as gods, rather than their locative definitions. Additionally, Jesus telling his disciples that he has all authority over the primordial Greek gods, the powerful precursors to the Olympians, would have been understood as a powerful preface to the following directive to μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη (make disciples of all the nations), as many among “the nations” would have revered Ouranos, Gaia, and their Olympian descendants. This, in turn, could have given Matthew’s initial audience and Christians living in the fourth century the reassurance and confidence they needed to maintain their discipleship within the pagan world of the Roman Empire.

CONSTRUCTING THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF MATTHEW’S INCEPTION

While the Romans ruled Judea and the surrounding provinces in which the Gospel of Matthew would have first been introduced, the Olympians ruled Rome. With temples and associated cultic centers dotting the Roman Empire, one would be hard-pressed to find a region that was not familiar to



Figure 12. Mosaic pavement: Earth, mid second century AD Roman. Stone. 140.0 x 140.0 cm (55 1/8 x 55 1/8 in.). Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of the Committee for the Excavation of Antioch to Princeton University

some degree with the reigning pantheon of Olympian gods. Even in religiously conservative first-century Judea, there were at least three major Roman cultic centers. Both Caesarea Maritima and Samaria Sebastes featured opulent structures venerating the Emperor and the Roman deities. The third was a smaller cultic complex situated in the caves and rocky escarpment at Caesarea Phillipi. Antioch, the likely birthplace of the Gospel of Matthew, also sported a robust cultic scene with monuments dedicated to various pagan deities, reinforcing the Hellenistic and religious context into



Figure 13. The Glorification of the Earth. Mosaic from Philippopolis. Third century CE. Note Gaia reclining on the right and Aion-Ouranos seated on the left. Photo by Dick Osseman, Wikimedia Commons



Figure 14. Terra (Gaia) reclining with the Seasons, accompanied by Aion-Ouranos within a zodiac wheel. Mosaic from a Roman villa in Sentinum, third century CE. Photo by Bibi Saint-Pol, Wikimedia Commons

which the Gospel of Matthew was composed and received.⁷⁰

With Jupiter and the rest of the pantheon commanding the vast majority of the religious devotion, they were not the only gods, nor were they the oldest. They themselves descended from the much older primordial creator gods, Ouranos and Gaia, who, according to the myths, fell from prominence in the aftermath of the Titanomachy.⁷¹ Yet their presence remained imprinted on the public consciousness. Gaia's influence extended across the Roman Empire, marked by cultic centers and shrines with varying levels of prominence. Additionally, her figure was a recurring motif in imperial period iconography, with notable instances such as the Prima Porta statue along with a mosaic discovered in Antioch (figure 12). Oftentimes she is situated alongside Ouranos, such as on the Prima Porta statue, as well as in mosaics found in Philippopolis and Sentinum (figures 13 and 14). Frequently, shrines to Gaia were included within temple complexes dedicated to Demeter and Kore as their respective representations of the utilization of natural resources served as a type of tripartite agricultural devotion. Writing in the second century, Pausanias, in his *Description of Greece*, makes frequent references to the many shrines dedicated to Gaia, oftentimes associated with Demeter and Kore. In the city of Patrae, Pausanias describes “a sanctuary of Demeter; she and her daughter [Kore] are standing, but the image of Ge (Earth) is seated.”⁷² Athens had a precinct dedicated to Gaia in the temple of Olympian Zeus, “Within the precincts [of the sanctuary of Olympian Zeus] are antiquities: a bronze

70. On the likely origin of Matthew and its early audience, see Davies and Allison, *Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, ix; Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, 11.

71. Hesiod, *Theogony*, 251.

72. Pausanias, *Graeciae descriptio*, 7.21.11 (Jones, LCL).

Zeus, a temple of Kronos (Cronus) and Rhea and an enclosure of Ge (Earth) surnamed Olympia.”⁷³ In Aegae there is a sanctuary dedicated to Gaia located “about thirty stades [from the stream of Krathis (Crathis) near the ruins of Aigai (Aegae) in Akhaia] to what is called the Gaion (Gaeum), a sanctuary of Ge (Earth) surnamed Eurysternos (Broad-blossomed), whose wooden image is one of the very oldest.”⁷⁴ This sanctuary is similar to the one at Olympia, “on what is called the Gaion (Gaeum, Sanctuary of Ge) is an altar of Ge (Earth).”⁷⁵ Phlya and Myrrhinos, Sparta, and Tegea also have altars and shrines dedicated to the earth goddess.⁷⁶

While Gaia was venerated at cultic shrines throughout the Empire during the imperial period, Ouranos saw no such widespread devotion, at least in a physical sense.⁷⁷ However, the Orphic Hymns, provenanced in Asia Minor and written around the second or third centuries,⁷⁸ include a devotional supplication to Ouranos, intended to be offered with the burning of frankincense. “Ouranos, father of all, eternal cosmic element, primeval, beginning of all and end of all, lord of the universe, moving about the earth like a sphere, home of the blessed gods.”⁷⁹ The Orphic Hymns “were used by a religious association of people who called themselves (mystic initiates) and who, through prayer, libation, sacrifice and, presumably, secret ceremonies, invoked a deity and asked for its presence or for the gift of some blessings.”⁸⁰ While no sanctuary and an associated cult was dedicated to Ouranos in the imperial period, the prayer to Ouranos in the Orphic Hymns indicates that supplications in conjunction with ritual action directed toward the sky god were occurring within an organized, albeit secret, religious order.⁸¹

While lacking institutionalized cultic shrines, Ouranos remained a relevant figure and symbol in the Greco-Roman world during the imperial period and well into the fourth century. What he lacked in cultic shrines was made up for in his frequent appearances in imperial Roman iconography. On the

73. Pausanias, *Descr*, 1.18.7 (Jones, LCL).

74. Pausanias, *Descr*, 7.25.13 (Jones, LCL).

75. Pausanias, *Descr*, 7.25.13 (Jones, LCL).

76. Pausanias, *Descr*, 1.31.4 (Jones, LCL). Also see 3.11.9; 8.48.8.

77. See entry on Uranus in Lutz Kappel, “Uranus,” in *Brill’s New Pauly. Antiquity: Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World*, ed. Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

78. A-F Morand, “The Narrative Techniques of the Orphic Hymns,” in *Hymnic Narrative and the Narratology of Greek Hymns* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 209.

79. Apostolos N. Athanassakis, *The Orphic Hymns: Text, Translation and Notes* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977), 9.

80. Athanassakis, *Orphic Hymns*, ix.

81. For more on the organization of the “mystic initiates” who used the Orphic Hymns see Athanassakis, *Orphic Hymns*, ix–x.

visual presence of Ouranos in Roman culture, Gerhard Kittel and Geoffrey Bromiley state, “How strong was the impression made by the god Uranus may be seen from his depiction not only on the Pergamon altar but also in the imperial period, e.g., on the Prima Porta statue of Augustus and above all on the sarcophagus of Junius Bassus (300 A.D.).”⁸² In addition, Ouranos frequently appeared in depictions of the Roman emperors, demonstrating their power by associating themselves with the “lord of the universe.”⁸³ Such depictions include the aforementioned Prima Porta statue and in the frieze of Diocletian on the Arch of Galerius—which portrays the emperor standing over the image of Caelus—the imperial antecedent of the Junius Bassus sarcophagus.⁸⁴ The association of Ouranos with the ruling class and imperial imagery demonstrates the significance of the figure even without a robust exclusive cultic system in place.

While the worship and public consciousness of Ouranos and Gaia might have looked very differently on the ground with respect to their worship and cultic activity, they both featured prominently together in literature that was composed in the centuries leading up to the manufacturing of the Junius Bassus sarcophagus. Philo of Byblos, a Greek grammarian and historian, compiled a text of ancient Greek mythologies during the late first century and early second century CE, including the Greco-Roman creation narrative and the subsequent Titanomachy.⁸⁵ This feat is paralleled by another anonymous author, frequently called Pseudo-Apollodorus, who created a tremendously significant three-volume compendium of Greek myths also during the first or second centuries CE. This corpus, the *Bibliotheca*, records the creation stories of Ouranos and Gaia, along with tales of later Greek heroes.⁸⁶ These works served to maintain the memories of the primordial creation of the cosmos and the Olympians by Ouranos and Gaia well into the imperial period.

Together, Philo’s *Fragmenta* and Pseudo-Apollodorus’s *Bibliotheca* represent at least two corpora revitalizing the public consciousness surrounding these primordial Greek gods within the first and second centuries CE. With the extant Gaia cults, the prominence of Ouranos in imperial iconography, and the redistribution of classical Greek myths into the greater empire, there is ample possibility for the public consciousness of Ouranos and Gaia to reach the threshold of permeating the contextualized worldview of Matthew’s later

82. See the entry on οὐρανός “In the Mythological Sense” in Kittel and Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 386.

83. “κοσμοκράτωρ.”

84. Brenk, “Imperial Heritage of Early Christian Art,” 45.

85. Herennius Philo, *Fragmenta* 2, 3c. 790. F.

86. Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, 325.

audience. At the very least, it would be a significant task within the Roman Empire not to be aware to some degree of the existence and importance of the Greco-Roman personification of the heavens and the earth.

JESUS AND THE IMPERIAL PANTHEON IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

During the second century and onward, the early Christian movement came into several conflicts with the pagan Roman Empire. These conflicts could take the shape of violent physical encounters or more rhetorical and theologically based issues. These became encoded in the literature and iconography produced by fourth- and fifth-century Christians. Oftentimes, the latter conflicts would result in early Christians comparing Jesus to the heroes and gods of the Greeks as either an equal or sometimes superior being, a framework within which Matthew 28:18 and the central panel of the Bassus sarcophagus could fit. These comparisons can be found within the literature composed by Christian bishops and clergy, but were also frequently depicted in murals, mosaics, and sarcophagi created by non-clergy laypeople.

In the second century, the Christian apologist Justin Martyr claimed that the “demons,” the gods revered by the Greco-Roman world, had been corrupting the ancient prophecies of the coming of Jesus. This corruption included attributing Jesus’s future miracles and works to the likes of Dionysus, Perseus, and Asclepius with the intent to distort and confuse potential believers, so that “if we say that Jesus made healthy the lame, the crippled, the blind from birth, and raised the dead, we seem to say things similar to those things performed by Asclepius.”⁸⁷ In a direct polemic against one of the twin founders of Rome, Tertullian wrote that Jesus “was caught up to heaven—far more truly than any Romulus.”⁸⁸ Already in the second century, Christian theologians and apologists were grappling with Jesus’s relationship or superiority with the gods and heroes of the Greco-Roman world.

With the reign of Constantine ushering in the institutional power of Christianity, the motif of Jesus dominating the gods of the pagans intensified and became a common theme not only in literature but also in iconography. Eusebius of Caesarea elucidated this concept in several of his works. In his *Praeparatio Evangelica*, the gods of the pagans are characterized as luminaries mistakenly worshipped by “mere children in mind” who are powerless against

87. Justin, *1 Apol.* 22.5. Also see Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta, “Christian Apologists and Greek Gods,” in *The Gods of Ancient Greece: Identities and Transformations*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Andrew Erskine (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 454.

88. Tertullian, *Apol.*, 105 (Glover, LCL).

the authority (δυνάμειος) of Jesus.⁸⁹ With the prominent rise of Christianity, Eusebius asserts that, “the divine power of our Saviour always more than conquered them all, and overthrew all the insurrections of the evil daemons against His teaching, and drove the daemons themselves away; for evil daemons verily they were, though falsely supposed to be gods or even good daemon.”⁹⁰ Eusebius continues this idea of Jesus’s divine superiority over the pagan gods in his *Theophania*. There he asserts that, “the Power of the Saviour of all, whose aid was at once extended to, and established with, everyone. For, the divine superiority of our Saviour swept away the authority of the many Demons, and many Gods.”⁹¹ Jesus’s authority and power over the gods of the imperial pantheon was not in question for Eusebius. Similarly, writing several decades after Eusebius, Empress Eudocia’s Homeric cento positions Jesus over both men and gods, declaring that he is one “who is God and man, who rules over all mortals and immortals.”⁹² These “immortals” being a reference to the gods and demigods of the Greco-Roman religion.

The homily *Sermo Catecheticus in Sanctum Pascha*, which has occupied a prominent position in the liturgical functions of Eastern Orthodoxy for centuries, features a contest between Jesus and the personified Hades. This fourth- or fifth-century text, tenuously attributed to John Chrysostom, describes Jesus’s descent to Hades after his crucifixion and his subsequent victory, “he descended into Hades and took Hades captive.”⁹³ The text then quotes 1 Corinthians 15:55, “Hades where is your victory?” before declaring, “Christ is risen, and you are overthrown.”⁹⁴ This theological assertion is no mere metaphorical victory over a conceptual death, but rather a subjugation of Hades personified. Hades was taken captive, overthrown, and embittered by Jesus when “[Hades] tasted [Jesus’s] flesh,” actions performed by and against a luminary as opposed to an abstraction.⁹⁵ The author of this homily accepts the victory of Jesus over Hades, providing a contextual framework for the declaration

89. Eusebius’s use of δυνάμειος is synonymous with Matthew’s ἐξουσία. See Eusebius of Caesarea, *Praep ev*, 2.6.320, trans. Édouard Des Places and Karl Mras (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1983).

90. Eusebius, *Praep en*, 1.5.200.

91. Eusebius, *Theoph*, 405, trans. Samuel Lee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1843).

92. Brian P. Sowers, *In Her Own Words: The Life and Poetry of Aelia Eudocia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 94–95.

93. “ἐκόλασε τὸν ἄδην κατελθὼν εἰς τὸν ἄδην.” See Pseudo-Chrysostomos, *Sermo Catecheticus in sanctum pascha* (CPG 4605), 1.29, in *The Reception of John Chrysostom in the Middle Byzantine Period (9th–13th centuries): A Study of the Catechetical Homily on Pascha* (CPG 4605), ed. M.P. Huggins (Edinburgh 2020), 61.

94. “ἀνέστη Χριστὸς καὶ σὺ καταβέβησαι.” See Pseudo-Chrysostomos, *Pasch*, 1.40.

95. “αὐτὸν γευσάμενον τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ.” Pseudo-Chrysostomos, *Pasch*, 1.30.

in Matthew 28:18 that Jesus has all power over heaven and earth to be interpreted in the late Roman period as another victory for Jesus over Ouranos and Gaia. While these texts do not directly cite Jesus’s domination over Ouranos and Gaia, their sweeping declaration of Jesus’s power over “the many Demons, and many Gods” and “all mortals and immortals” would include figures such as the primordial creator gods without needing to make distinct and explicit references to each deity. Instead, a concise representation of this concept and theology could be symbolized in an image of Jesus in a position of authority over the creator of these demons, gods, and immortals.

In addition to the apologetic and liturgical literature produced by the Christian clergy in the fourth and fifth centuries, non-clergy lay Christians in Rome were creating images and icons demonstrating Jesus’s superior authority. In his monograph *The Clash of the Gods*, Thomas Mathews illustrates the religious and sociopolitical dynamic of the fourth century as ushering in “an unparalleled war of images and it was the strength and energy of the winning images that determined the outcome.”⁹⁶ In his exploration of the question of how Jesus successfully supplanted the entrenched Roman pantheon, Mathews turns to the poignancy of iconography and imagery of early Christianity. He attributes the decline of the Greco-Roman gods to the “bankruptcy of their images and the appearance of a more forceful set of divine images.”⁹⁷ However, these forceful images of the deified Jesus should not be characterized as “simply filling up the voids left by the overthrow of the old, but as actively competing with the old images.”⁹⁸ Therefore, in centuries past, the image of Christ enthroned over Caelus would be understood in terms of its imperial context. However, in the volatile sociopolitical dynamic of the fourth century, this image could very likely have assumed a whole new meaning—an aggressive and competitive stance against the declining Olympians and the old order with which they were associated. As such, the Junius Bassus sarcophagus must absolutely be understood within the political and cultural dynamic of the fourth century, one characterized by increasingly contentious theological concerns regarding the upstart Christian religion and the traditional Roman gods.

A review of this patristic literature demonstrates the perceptions many early Christians held regarding Jesus and the traditional Roman gods. However, these beliefs were not monolithic; not all early Christians shared identical views or personal theologies, with the ecclesiastical hierarchy potentially serving as a form of theological stratigraphy, preserving distinct beliefs

96. Mathews, *Clash of the Gods*, 10.

97. Mathews, *Clash of the Gods*, 10.

98. Mathews, *Clash of the Gods*, 8.

at different levels. As a result, capturing the beliefs of laypeople, those at the base of the hierarchy, presents a challenge. John Curran's review of Malbon's monograph on the Junius Bassus Sarcophagus makes a poignant observation on the complexity of this endeavor, questioning "whether the fourth-century beholder was as familiar with the patristic material which [Malbon] has at her fingertips."⁹⁹ The methodological questions explored in this paper stem from this issue: to what degree is the fourth-century beholder familiar with patristic material? And how reliable is the patristic material in recovering the theology of the layperson? Consequently, relying solely on the writings of early church fathers would prove inadequate in recovering the potentially distinctive interpretations of scripture by the lay populace. Thus, the iconography of the Junius Bassus sarcophagus—commissioned, designed, and crafted by laypeople—serves as a unique lens through which to access the beliefs of Christians beyond the purview of the church fathers.

CONCLUSION

This audience reception study has sought to investigate the potential interpretation by early Christian laypeople, primarily Greek and Roman converts, of Jesus's proclamation of divine authority over heaven and earth in Matthew 28:18, as suggesting a symbolic subjugation of the Greco-Roman primordial creator gods, Ouranos and Gaia, beneath the resurrected Jesus. The depiction of Jesus enthroned over Caelus, encapsulating the *maiestas domini supra caelum* and *traditio legis* motifs, suggests a possible intentional parallel to Jesus's declaration of divine authority and the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20. This was achieved by conflating Jesus with existing imperial Roman imagery traditionally reserved for the emperor but now attributed to Christ after the Christianizing of Rome.

An evaluation of texts such as the *Bibliotheca*, Pausanias's *Description of Greece*, and the writings of Philo of Byblos has elucidated the presence of Ouranos and Gaia within the public consciousness during the centuries leading up to the Junius Bassus sarcophagus. This review supports the notion that the Gospel of Matthew was conceived and circulated in a world fully aware of the authority and influence attributed to these primordial creator gods. Consequently, this awareness presents a context wherein the Greek and Roman converts of Matthew's audience could interpret Jesus's declaration, Ἐδόθη μοι πᾶσα ἐξουσία ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς as "all power has been given to me over Ouranos and Gaia." Additionally, an analysis of the function of

99. John Curran, review of *The Iconography of the Sarcophagus of Junius Bassus*, by Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *JRS* 82 (1992): 305–8.

the prepositions ἐν and ἐπὶ within Matthew 28:18 has demonstrated that they could reasonably have been understood to imply that the ἐξουσία of Jesus extended “over” οὐρανός and γῆ.

The potential impact of this interpretation on the receiving communities becomes particularly significant during the convergence of Christianity with the later Roman Empire, where a very real battle was being fought between the traditional Roman gods and the immortal Jesus through the medium of imagery. With the eventual ascendance of Christianity, this victory became symbolized in literary works, where Church fathers polemicized their “conquered” pagan neighbors, and in the religious iconography created by the laypeople, such as the Junius Bassus sarcophagus. If indeed certain communities within Matthew’s early audience interpreted Jesus as having power over Ouranos and Gaia and, by virtue, the Olympians themselves, such a perspective yields an intriguing insight. This insight pertains to the distinctive religious and political dynamics that characterized the intersection of the fledgling Christian religion with the formidable might of imperial Rome and its patron gods—gods that, according to a particular community within the Matthean audience, fell under the power of the resurrected Jesus.

JOSHUA AS A HYMN OF GLORY

AN ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON OF ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN TEXTS

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Abstract: A knowledgeable reader of the Hebrew Bible understands that there are two conflicting conquest narratives contained in the books of Joshua and Judges. This paper seeks to reframe Joshua 5–11 in a genre other than the traditional interpretation of a conquest narrative. These chapters of Joshua, as compared with Merneptah's Victory Stele and the annals of Adad-Nārārī II, fit thematically into an entirely different genre from ancient Near Eastern literature: hymns of glory. Using four characteristics inspired by the work of Susan Hollis—propagandistic royal ideology, divine empowerment or call, utter destruction of enemies, and will of the deity accomplished—to analyze these three texts will demonstrate how they fit into this genre. Although this does not prove the Deuteronomistic Historian's purpose in creating the book of Joshua, it does present the hymns of glory genre as a likely medium of oral transmission for Joshua 5–11.

INTRODUCTION

An astute reader of the Hebrew bible quickly recognizes that there are two conquest accounts recorded in the biblical record: Judges and Joshua.¹ If a reader desires to take both accounts as accurate historical information, then this creates significant tension regarding how the conquest of the Holy Land took place. A plausible remedy to this issue is that the first section of Joshua—Boling and Wright's literary unit of chapters 5:13–11:23—was intended by the author to present a specific perspective of the conquest narrative through the use of literary devices. Such a perspective does not seek to deceive or manipulate, but rather to emphasize specific components of the Israelite conquest through those devices in the form of a hymn of praise or glory to the Israelite deity, Yahweh. A remedy of this nature assumes that the conquest narrative in

1. Hershel Shanks et al., *Ancient Israel: From Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple*, ed. Hershel Shanks. 3rd ed. Washington, DC: Biblical Archeological Society, 2011.

the book of Judges more accurately depicts the historical events as part of this Israelite conquest when compared to the book of Joshua.

One fruitful method by which we can analyze Joshua 5–11 is through Susan Hollis’s analysis of two other ancient Near Eastern texts and the genre-specific characteristics she presents: propagandistic royal ideology, divine empowerment or call, utter destruction of enemies, and will of the deity accomplished.² Her article serves as a prototype for analyzing these four literary parallels between the following ancient Near Eastern texts: the book of Joshua, Merneptah’s Victory Stele, and the beginning of the annals of Adad-Nārārī II (only the first thirty-eight lines). Although these three texts are part of different genres at their core, each contains distinct similarities to a hymn of glory despite not having all the same poetic structures. When compared directly to these other ancient Near Eastern texts, chapters 5–11 of Joshua clearly contain many thematic elements that are distinctive of such hymns. This comparison provides an interesting perspective on a potential new interpretation for this literary unit.

COURSE OF STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

The creation and authorship of the book of Joshua has critical bearing on this interpretation. The text recorded in the book makes the argument that the prophet Joshua was actually there and could have contributed to this record, but this does not preclude the idea that the Deuteronomistic Historian was later greatly involved in the book’s creation.³ Philip King and Lawrence Stager point out that “both the Deuteronomistic Historian and the Chronicler were interested in reinterpreting and reshaping older and contemporary sources in order to create a new past relevant to their present times and comprehensible to new generations,” a bias that must be understood when attempting to interpret or understand any of the ancient biblical texts.⁴ Likewise, it must be noted that “the historical work is always the historian’s interpretation of events being filtered through vested interest, never in disinterested purity.”⁵

2. Susan Tower Hollis, “Two Hymns as Praise Poems, Royal Ideology, and History in Ancient Israel and Ancient Egypt: A Comparative Reflection,” in *Egypt, Canaan and Israel: History, Imperialism, Ideology and Literature: Proceedings of a Conference at the University of Haifa, 3–7 May 2009*, eds. S. Bar, D. Khan, and JJ Shirley (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 115–36.

3. Brian Neil Peterson, “The Editing of the Book of Joshua,” in *The Authors of the Deuteronomistic History: Locating a Tradition in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 131–62.

4. Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

5. K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 2009), 33.

Utilizing King and Stager's method of dating, the sources contributing to the book of Joshua were likely compiled by the Deuteronomistic Historian as late as the seventh and sixth centuries BCE.⁶ These were not limited to the Deuteronomistic Historian alone, but also included material from the J source (Jahwist), the E source (Elohist), and the P source (Priestly), along with a potential addition of an independent Benjamite collection that was also circulating at this time.⁷ This provides ample opportunity for the record of Joshua to change over time, due to the well accepted Israelite tradition of an oral history between the actual events recorded in the book of Joshua and when the book was compiled, since the conquest narrative of Joshua is set during the Late Bronze Age or Early Iron Age, c. 1400–1150 BCE.⁸ The medium of a hymn of glory or praise is a reasonably probable method of transmission for an oral tradition to be passed from one generation to the next. After all, "these hymns, whether termed propagandistic or otherwise, served an essential purpose: stabilizing the kingship, even while they lauded the king, his god or gods, and perhaps reflected some version of history."⁹ Although Israel did not have a king at the time of the conquest narratives, Hollis's proposed purpose for these hymns fits with Joshua's role as Israel's leader.

The four literary categories discussed in Hollis's article appear within each of the three texts contained in this analysis: the book of Joshua, Merneptah's Victory Stele, and the incipit of the annals of Adad-Nārārī II. Although these categories are not all explicitly stated from the text of Hollis's article, each one is evident from the arguments in her publication, specifically: propagandistic royal ideology, divine empowerment or call, utter destruction of enemies, and will of the deity accomplished. Crucial to the hymn of glory genre—if not the

6. "We accept the early dating of the Yahwistic source, known as (J=Jahweh) of the Pentateuch in the tenth century B.C.E.; the combined epic source of J and E (E=Elohim) in the ninth century; the Priestly (P) source collated in the exilic period but containing many earlier traditions; the Deuteronomistic Historian(s), who edited the books of Deuteronomy through 2 Kings, first in the late seventh century (Dtr 1) and later in the sixth century (Dtr 2)." King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*, 2–3.

7. Thomas Römer, "The So-called Deuteronomistic History and Its Theories of Composition," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Historical Books of the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Brad E. Kelle and Brent A. Strawn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 303–21.

8. Shanks, *Ancient Israel*, 62–64; "Without a doubt the Israelite tradition was handed down orally from adults to children through stories, songs, poems, and proverbs repeated around the hearth, weather in the home or shrine, and at religious festivals or other public gatherings. The Israelite Epic known as 'JE,' after its two traditions 'J'(Jahwist) and 'E'(Elohist) were joined, began to take form orally. Its many early poems may have been common fare for youths to learn, sing, and recite. At the same time there could have been those who wrote down oral traditions at an early date, even if the texts continued for some time to remain in a rather fluid state." (King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*, 311).

9. Hollis, "Two Hymns," 125.

defining and overarching crux of this type of literature—is the propagandistic royal ideology that is found within each text. These poems or hymns often include what Hollis refers to as the “rhetoric which constitutes a part of ... royal legitimation and warrior strength.” In all ancient Near Eastern cultures, the king must be (or at least must be portrayed as) a strong and successful warrior. She further explains that “extremes of battle and slaughter accompany war descriptions throughout ancient Eastern Mediterranean texts and form part of the royal ideology, [which is] the presentation of the past in the way most favorable to the current ruler, justifying, praising, and legitimizing him in his rule.”¹⁰

The divine empowerment or call is no less important to the hymn of glory genre, as each text in this category includes a telling interaction between the protagonist and a supernatural figure. Hollis’s article anchors this point in the idea that such special attention from a deity is not only justified by the social position or actions of the protagonist but is also requisite for a culture’s royal ideology to take root.¹¹ Differences in portrayal of divine empowerment in hymns of glory should be expected when comparing texts across cultural boundaries because of the stark differences between Egyptian, Assyrian, and Israelite cultures. The reality that such differences exist further legitimizes this category as part of a hymn of glory by demonstrating how different cultures used and adapted the same literary genre.

Accounts of the calls or divine empowerments themselves typically include specific tasks to be accomplished by the protagonist in the name of his deity, which normally involve the complete and utter destruction of the protagonist’s enemies. Hollis emphasizes that this outcome is surely “the ideal of every battle leader,” particularly those who recorded their version of history as the most accurate portrayal of how events transpired.¹² The positive outcome resulting from the completion of these violent tasks leads to the will of the deity being fulfilled, which is the fourth point of this analysis and an important characteristic of hymns of glory. These categories, although virtually inseparable, stand alone in each of the texts analyzed in the subsequent pages.

The biblical text of Joshua, as any astute reader of the Hebrew Bible knows, is written in the form of a narrative and not a poem. Boling and Wrights literary unit of chapters 5–11 clearly demonstrates that this is the case. Despite not being formatted or structured as a poetic work, the biblical text still contains the aforementioned characteristics of a hymn of glory, which will be compared

10. Hollis, “Two Hymns,” 121.

11. Hollis, “Two Hymns,” 120.

12. Hollis, “Two Hymns,” 121.

against how the other two texts in this analysis also display the same characteristics. Merneptah's Victory Stele is much more poetic in nature than Joshua and portrays these characteristics in different ways due to its Egyptian context. A similar statement could be made regarding the annals of Adad-Nārārī II, which are not poetic in nature but still display the same four characteristics of a hymn of glory within an Assyrian context. Although not part of the hymn of glory genre, these annals are included in this analysis because they contain the characteristics that Hollis considers to be part of this literary category. Adad-Nārārī II's annals clearly serve their purpose as historical records in the Assyrian Empire while also providing an interesting comparison to the book of Joshua and Merneptah's Victory Stele because each of the four characteristics of a hymn of glory are found within its text. Beginning with Joshua 5–11, each of the four categories will be analyzed, showing how they appear in the biblical text in comparison to how they appear within the other two texts.

PROPAGANDISTIC ROYAL IDEOLOGY

JOSHUA

According to Robert Boling, the role of the book of Joshua in the entire Deuteronomistic historical work is to portray Joshua as “God’s charismatic leader for the task of leading the people in the conquest,” whose victories are “not attributed to the people, but to God and God alone.”¹³ This is ultimately the crux of Israel’s royal ideology—as the victories of Israel are credited to the Lord rather than Joshua—while further supporting and centering on the idea of the divine warrior. Boling elaborates on this point, explaining that “the march through the wilderness from Egypt to Canaan is pictured in poetry as well as prose as a triumphant march of the divine commander in chief [aka Yahweh or Israel’s divine warrior] leading his earthly and heavenly forces from the Sinai wilderness to victory,” which victory supposedly culminates in the book of Joshua.¹⁴ It is this ideology that is portrayed throughout Joshua that stabilizes the kingship of the Lord, a trait that Hollis considers a central purpose of hymns of glory. At this stage in Israel’s history, the people of Israel had no earthly king, unlike their surrounding neighbors, because their God was their king, and their texts serve to glorify Him rather than an earthly ruler.

King and Stager explain why this ideology does not glorify Joshua but rather is intended to glorify Yahweh by describing the three-tiered societal

13. Robert G. Boling and G. Ernest Wright, *Joshua: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, 1st ed., (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 51.

14. Boling and Wright, *Joshua*, 27.

structure of ancient Israel. The base of this societal structure is the *bet av* (בֵּית אָב) or “house of the father,” followed by the tribe or state, and lastly the house of the king as the father over Israel. However, Stager points out that “the king, however, does not represent the apex of this societal model; rather, it is Yahweh (in the case of Israel) who is the supreme patrimonial Lord.”¹⁵ Because the events of the book of Joshua predate Israel’s United Monarchy, it does not identify anyone as an Israelite king. The Lord was still their king, and it is he, as the ultimate ruler of Israel, who is praised throughout the Joshua account. Harold Attridge further emphasizes this point when he explains how “stories of warfare ([Joshua] 6.1–11.15) stress that the conquest was the result of the Lord’s gracious action, for which Israel could claim no credit” as their “proper role was loyalty and obedience.”¹⁶

Within the Book of Joshua, Israel’s royal ideology of Yahweh as their ultimate ruler and defender does have propaganda-like themes to it, which is likewise a characteristic of the hymn of glory genre. Joshua 5:1 is an excellent attestation of this through the Israelite perspective of the kings of the Canaanites and the Amorites. Having heard of Israel’s miraculous crossing of the River Jordan, the local kings’ “heart[s] melted, neither was there spirit in them anymore, because of the children of Israel.”¹⁷ Reminiscent of a similar passage involving Rahab in Joshua 2:9–11, this melting fear is not credited to the people of Israel themselves, but rather to Israel’s God who serves as their divine protector. Aside from Rahab’s witness, Joshua’s conquest of seven different kings and the entirety of the land, as recorded in Joshua 10:28–42, seems to have taken place all at once or “at one time,” according to the last verse in this pericope. Conquering all these kings and their lands “at one time” would have been improbable if not impossible for Israel to accomplish, but the text claims that it was so “because the Lord God of Israel fought for Israel.” This direct reference to Israel’s royal ideology—exemplifying God as their divine warrior—further emphasizes how these chapters of Joshua could have once been part of a hymn of glory. The method in which Joshua 5–11 demonstrates this propagandistic royal ideology is not the same as either our Egyptian or Assyrian examples, a discrepancy that should be expected when comparing Egyptian, Assyrian, and Israelite cultures.

15. King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*, 4–5.

16. Harold W. Attridge, *HarperCollins Study Bible: Fully Revised and Updated* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2006) 310–345.

17. All translations are from the NRSV unless otherwise indicated.

MERNEPTAH

The Egyptian perspective of their propagandistic royal ideology is clear through Merneptah's Victory Stele. In lines 4–5, 17–18, and 21–26 of the stele's text, Merneptah is glorified as a powerful king of Egypt through the inscription's portrayal of history, creating a strong emphasis on or theme of Egyptian royal ideology. These latter two sections of text refer to Merneptah as a protector of Egypt, a task that was given him via an ordination of the god Ra.¹⁸ This appointment places the pharaoh in the position of the divine warrior as the protector of Egypt, which directly contrasts the position of the divine warrior being filled by Yahweh—rather than a man—in the book of Joshua. Lines 4–5 support this idea because they describe a people being awed by the appearance of the pharaoh, “the Sole One who steadied the hearts of hundreds of thousands, breath entered their nostrils at the sight of him.” This Egyptian royal ideology is further characterized by two brief statements around line 22 as part of the praise portion of this hymn, where it states, “How beloved is he, the victorious ruler! How exalted is he, the King among the gods.”¹⁹ The last portion of this praise is not referring to Merneptah as the king of the Egyptian pantheon, but rather as a king who sits among or converses with the gods. Such a statement supports Merneptah's position as a divine warrior for his people, a belief that is central to Egyptian royal ideology.

ADAD-NĀRĀRĪ II

Similar statements of royal ideology appear within the incipit of the annals of Adad-Nārārī II. This Assyrian king utilizes an extensive amount of text to describe himself in the first person, emphasizing his accomplishments and greatness in lines 13–20. In these lines, directly following the passage explaining his divine appointment, he states, “I am king, I am lord, I am powerful, I am important, I am praiseworthy, I am magnificent, I am strong, I am mighty, I am fierce, I am enormously radiant, I am a hero, I am a warrior, I am a virile lion, I am foremost, I am exalted, I am raging.” He continues for at least five more lines. This self-aggrandizement could represent an important part of Assyrian royal ideology alongside the divine appointment contained in lines 5–12, which is needed to confirm Adad-Nārārī II's kingship. Kirk Grayson categorizes this entire section contained in lines 5–22 as a list of royal names and epithets, which may contribute to this ideology, but such is not explicitly

18. Hollis, “Two Hymns,” 122.

19. Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: The New Kingdom*, 76; Hollis, “Two Hymns,” 131.

stated.²⁰ In this category, once again, this beginning portion of an Assyrian annal serves its intended purpose as a historical record while also demonstrating aspects of Assyrian royal ideology. This characteristic of ancient hymns of glory is consistent across all three texts—Merneptah’s Victory Stele, Joshua, and the incipit of Adad-Nārārī II’s annals—despite how the portrayal of this literary element differs based on cultures of origin.

DIVINE EMPOWERMENT OR CALL

JOSHUA

At the beginning of Boling and Wright’s literary unit, Joshua is near the city of Jericho when he meets “a man over against him with his sword drawn in his hand.” This divine figure identifies himself as the captain appointed over the host of the Lord and promptly commands Joshua to do as his predecessor had done—remove his shoes from his feet because Joshua is standing on holy ground (Joshua 5:13–15). In the subsequent verses, Joshua is given specific instructions by the divine messenger as to what he is to do in the name of the Lord, which in this pericope involves taking the city of Jericho (Joshua 6:1–5). This is but the first example included in Joshua 5–11 of a call or command received by Joshua directly from the ruler of Israel, a pattern that is expected to be found in the text due to Israel’s royal ideology with Yahweh as their commander and king. In Joshua 8 and 10, the pattern is repeated, with further commands being given to Joshua involving the destruction of the people of Ai and instruction not to fear the people of the land (Joshua 8:1–2; 10:7–8). The several instances of these divine calls support Hollis’s findings that special attention from deity is inherent in the hymn of glory genre.²¹ Although not a perfect equivalent, these divine calls as contained in the biblical text have parallels in other ancient Near Eastern texts.

MERNEPTAH

Merneptah’s Victory Stele outlines when the memorialized events of Merneptah’s divine empowerment or call occurred in context of his incredible actions and those of the gods, the former being “under the Majesty of Horus.”²² In the first line, Merneptah is lauded as the “the King of Upper and Lower Egypt: *Banere-meramun*; son of Ra ... magnified by the power, exalted

20. A. Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC* (1114–859 BC) (University of Toronto Press, 1996), 145.

21. Hollis, “Two Hymns,” 121.

22. Hollis, “Two Hymns,” 128; Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*.

by the strength of Horus; strong bull who smites the Nine Bows, whose name is given to eternity forever.”²³ As the living Egyptian king was considered to be synonymous with the god Horus, it makes sense that this divine empowerment associated with Merneptah would come from him.²⁴ One textual difference from the book of Joshua that appears within the second line of the stele explains that this inscription will be an accounting of all Merneptah’s victories rather than that of the deities of Egypt. Joshua is recorded as following the commandments of the Lord and for taking all the land, but not for embodying a deity himself, as Merneptah was likely seen as doing (Joshua 11:16, 23).

An additional portion of Merneptah’s inscription provides a physical example or at least a symbol of his divine empowerment, supposedly taking place before Merneptah fought with the Libyans. Lines 15–16 contain not only the condemnation of the pharaoh’s enemy—Mereye, the king of the Libyans—but also the bestowal of a sword to Merneptah by the “Lord-of-all.”²⁵ Shaw explains that this was likely “the Atum” who had given him this sword symbolizing victory before the six-hour-long battle took place between Merneptah’s forces and the Libyans.²⁶ Similar to Joshua’s divine empowerment in the biblical record, both accounts included the use of a sword, but a symbolic sword was given only to Merneptah.

Adad-Nārārī II

The incipit of Adad-Nārārī II’s annals do not follow the same form as the rest of his account, as these lines are not delineated with the title “eponym.” This first portion seems to follow the same pattern laid out for a hymn of praise by demonstrating how Adad-Nārārī II was given divine power. Lines 1–4 constitute an invocation of the gods whereas lines 5–10 demonstrate the right of power given to the Assyrian king, along with many different royal titles.²⁷ The fifth line begins with the following claim:

Great gods, who take firm decisions, who decree destinies; they properly created me, Adad-nārārī, attentive prince, [...], they altered my stature to lordly stature, they rightly made perfect my features and filled my lordly body with wisdom ... they had entrusted to me the sceptre for the shepherding of the people, (after) they had raised me above crowned kings (and) placed on my head the royal splendour; they made

23. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 74.

24. Ian Shaw, *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002).

25. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 76.

26. Shaw, *Oxford History*, 295; Hollis, “Two Hymns,” 123.

27. Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers*, 143.

my almighty name greater than (that of) all lords, the important name Adad-nārārī, king of Assyria, they called me.²⁸

This text is not directly a form of empowerment as we see in the stele of Merneptah and in Joshua, but it serves the same purpose in the context of hymns of praise as presented by Hollis. Although this text refers to the enthronement of Adad-Nārārī II rather than a sudden event or a crisis that would require divine power, it does give a specific task that the king is to fulfill, namely the “shepherding of the people,” which is a command or empowerment from deity. Likewise, as with Merneptah, Adad-Nārārī II is seemingly given a physical representation of his divine call in the form of a scepter with which the gods have entrusted him. As physical symbols of God’s power—specifically those that could be held by a man—were frowned upon in Israelite society, it is no surprise that Joshua did not receive such a symbol as part of his divine call (Exodus 20:3–4; Deuteronomy 5:8). The physical manifestations of divine power given to Merneptah and Adad-Nārārī II fit within the cultural context of Egypt and Assyria whereas the lack of such a symbol in the biblical texts supports the Israelite perspective regarding a divine call as part of a hymn of glory. Finding this literary device in the book of Joshua does not mean it should *only* be interpreted as a hymn of glory, but it does suggest that the additional interpretation has merit when compared to other ancient Near Eastern texts.

UTTER DESTRUCTION OF ENEMIES

JOSHUA

Joshua’s record of the complete destruction of his enemies is not limited to one instance between chapters 5 and 11. One of the most prominent examples of this destruction is found in Joshua 6:20–21, which recounts the result of Jericho’s defeat. Not only were the men and women “utterly destroyed,” but all their livestock were also cut down “with the edge of the sword” save Rahab and her household. Hollis emphasizes that this rhetoric of “total annihilation” is an essential part of how ancient hymns of glory portrayed accounts of battle and slaughter.²⁹ Along with other ancient Near Eastern texts, the biblical text is not timid in recounting such slaughter, with one of the most descriptive pericopes on the subject found in Joshua 11:11–14:

And they put to the sword all who were in [Hazor], utterly destroying them; there was no one left who breathed, and he burned Hazor with fire. And

28. Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers*, 147.

29. Hollis, “Two Hymns,” 121.

all the towns of those kings and all their kings, Joshua took and struck them with the edge of the sword, utterly destroying them, as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded. But Israel burned none of the towns that stood on mounds except Hazor, which Joshua did burn. All the spoil of these towns and the livestock the Israelites plundered for themselves, but all the people they struck down with the edge of the sword, until they had destroyed them, and they did not leave any who breathed.

This dramatic example demonstrates how Joshua and Israel annihilated the people who were inhabiting the land which the Lord had promised to them. Such complete destruction, marked particularly with language like “utterly destroyed,” “destroyed them,” or “did not leave any who breathed” is a strong indicator of this characteristic within the hymns of glory genre. This language is likewise present in Joshua 8 regarding the destruction of the people of Ai and in Joshua 10, which portrays the defeat of seven different kings at once. This type of language is so strong regarding what occurred that—in context of Merneptah’s Victory Stele—Mariam Lichtheim stated, “At the present time, scholars are wary of seeking historically accurate information in such triumphal poetry; hence one would hesitate to treat the poem as firm evidence for an Asiatic campaign of Merneptah.”³⁰ The same caution can be applied here for Joshua as an ancient text, particularly because the subsequent chapters in both Joshua and Judges discuss how much of the land remains to be conquered and how not all the peoples of the land have been “utterly destroyed” (Joshua 13 and Judges 1).

MERNEPTAH

The destruction language of Merneptah’s Victory Stele closely parallels that of the book of Joshua. Phrases denoting the complete removal of a people—although not the exact same phrases as Joshua—are present in lines 10–12 and 26–28. The former proclaims, “Woe to the Libyans, they have ceased to live in the good manner of roaming the field; in a single day their stride was halted, in a single year were the Tjehenu burned ... their villages were ruined.”³¹ As Joshua explains that none are left that breathe, Merneptah likewise proclaims that none of the Libyans are left alive. Lichtheim summarizes lines 26–28 as a “concluding poem [that] extols [Merneptah] as a victor over all of Egypt’s neighbors, especially the peoples of Palestine and Syria.”³² This final poem comes just after a lengthy poem of praise, suggesting that this conquest of the

30. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 73.

31. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 765; Hollis, “Two Hymns,” 129.

32. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 73.

Syro-Palestine area was likely an exaggeration rather than a historical event. Hjelm and Thompson state this directly, claiming that “the text is not historical ... but is rather a poetic eulogy of a universally victorious pharaoh. Thus, it was not out of place to introduce the real or figurative triumph over Asiatic peoples in the last poem of the hymn.” Their statement proves consistent with Lichtheim’s skepticism.³³ But this seemingly boastful claim of how completely the enemies of Merneptah were defeated is one of the primary characteristics of ancient hymns of glory, which honors both Merneptah and the Egyptian deities by association, a theme which was already portrayed within chapters 5–11 of the book of Joshua regarding his God.

ADAD-NĀRĀRĪ II

The theme of destruction and defeat continues in the annals of Adad-Nārārī II in lines 11–12, 16–18, and 26–33, although none of these examples are as strong or as clear as those found in the previous two texts. In both lines 11–12 and lines 16–18, the word “defeat” is used in the context of describing the king as “one who defeats his enemies” not in the context of which enemies have been defeated as seen in the other two texts. A couple instances exist of mentioning specific cities being defeated, as contained in lines 26–33, but this Assyrian text prefers the term “conquered” rather than “defeated.” Such a differentiation makes sense when considering Assyrian military strategy and their intention to create taxable vassal states rather than simply annihilated their enemy, an idea that is supported by Adad-Nārārī II’s mention of collecting tribute in line 33.³⁴ Unless the act of conquering a people is on par with the act of “utterly destroying” a people, this aspect of a hymn of glory is not as well supported here as in the book of Joshua and the Merneptah stele.

WILL OF THE DEITY ACCOMPLISHED

JOSHUA

The Lord’s will for Joshua and his people to conquer the Holy Land and claim their ancestral inheritance is clear from the start of this biblical record (Joshua 1:1–9, 17–18). Although the entire book could be argued as being the fulfillment of the Lord’s will, there are specific verses that explicitly state that his will has been completed within chapters 5–11. A dramatic example of the fulfillment of the Lord’s will is found in Joshua 6:6–21, in which the people of Israel

33. Ingrid Hjelm and Thomas L. Thompson, “The Victory Song of Merneptah, Israel and the People of Palestine,” *JOT* 27, no. 7 (2002): 3–18.

34. Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers*, 149.

follow the Lord's instructions with precision regarding how the city of Jericho was to be conquered. A few pages later, in Joshua 8:18, a less well-known but still pertinent example to this literary category describes how Joshua is commanded by the Lord to raise his spear as the battle for Ai rages. Once his spear is stretched out in his hand—per the Lord's instruction—the people of Israel are victorious over their enemies. Both examples support Hollis's claim that in the context of hymns of glory, accomplished feats are shown to be possible not only through the divinely appointed figure but also through the power of the deity itself.³⁵ To summarize the rest of the Lord's will being fulfilled, one need only review Joshua 11:23, which reads, "So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the Lord had spoken to Moses, and Joshua gave it for an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal allotments." This aspect of fulfilling the will of deity is at the heart of Joshua's record likely because the Deuteronomistic Historian wanted to emphasize how Joshua followed the Lord's will as Moses did before him. At the same time, this characteristic of a hymn of glory is clear from the text of Joshua itself, alongside the texts of Merneptah and Adad-Nārārī II.

MERNEPTAH

The fulfillment of the Egyptian god's will as well as that of the Assyrian god is evident in our two texts, but it is not near as plain as within the book of Joshua. Merneptah's stele describes the will of the Egyptian gods *after* accounting for its fulfillment. In line 20, as part of the council of the gods (lines 15–21), the stele records, "Then said Ptah concerning the vile Libyan foe: 'His crimes are all gathered upon his head. Give him into the hand of *Merneptah, content with Maat*, he shall make him spew what he gorged like a crocodile.'"³⁶ This quote shows the will of deity being given regarding the Libyan threat Egypt is facing, which is earlier demonstrated as fulfilled in lines 5–11. The text describes this fulfillment of the deities' will with language such as "Their leading troops were left behind, their legs made no stand except to flee, their archers abandoned their bows, [and] the hearts of their runners grew weak as they sped." Similar descriptions of the Libyan defeat continue through the end of line 11.³⁷ It is likely that Merneptah's stele is organized in this fashion because of his desire to not only glorify himself, but also glorify the power of his gods, fitting this text squarely within the genre of hymns of praise.³⁸

35. Hollis, "Two Hymns," 124.

36. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 76; Hollis, "Two Hymns," 130.

37. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 76; Hollis, "Two Hymns," 130.

38. Hollis, "Two Hymns," 115–16.

ADAD-NĀRĀRĪ II

Adad-Nārārī II follows suit with his annals. He demonstrates his fulfillment of his deities' will by first describing their will in lines 13–15 and then fulfilling their will in lines 30–36. This Assyrian king recorded that he was given a charge, “at that time, by the edict of the great gods, my sovereignty (and) dominion were decreed (and) they named me to plunder the possessions of the lands.”³⁹ And plunder he did. His annals record that he “took hostages from them (and) imposed upon them tribute and tax; (I who) brought about the defeat of the field troops of the *ahlamû*-Aramaeans; (I who) received the tribute of the Suhu; (who) brought into the boundaries of his land the cities idu (and) Zaqqu, fortresses of Assyria; (who recaptured) the cities Arinu, Turhu, (and) Zaduru.”⁴⁰ This juxtaposition of the “will of deity” against “the fulfilled will of deity” clearly demonstrates how this text exhibits characteristics of hymns of glory or praise, parallel to Merneptah's Victory Stele and the book of Joshua.

CONCLUSION

The Book of Joshua, Merneptah's Victory Stele, and the Annals of Adad-Nārārī II each display all four of Susan Hollis's characteristics of ancient hymns of glory as contained in this analysis. In comparing Joshua directly to these other ancient Near Eastern texts, it clearly contains many thematic elements that are distinctive of such hymns, which provides an interesting perspective on a potential new interpretation for Joshua 5–11. Although these parallels do not prove that the Deuteronomistic Historian was working with the Book of Joshua as a hymn of glory, they do provide a possible medium for how the book was transmitted orally prior to the seventh and sixth centuries BCE. This would permit the book of Joshua to have other purposes rather than just providing a historical record, which would, in part, eliminate the conflict between this book and the book of Judges. To prove this perspective, it is probable that further research regarding ancient Israel in both the Late Bronze and Early Iron Age would need to be conducted on an archeological and textual level to provide evidence more concrete than these parallels.

39. Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers*, 147.

40. Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers*, 149.

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OUTSIDE THE DICHOTOMY

REDEFINING JUDITH AS A PROPHET

HEIDYN VON BOSE

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Abstract: The character of Judith has often been reduced to a dichotomy: is she a pro-feminist or an anti-feminist character? This traditional debate limits Judith and tries to squeeze her into ill-fitting literary boxes. The following paper offers a more nuanced interpretation for the character and role of Judith within her story, particularly that Judith is a prophet. It first demonstrates that she meets the criteria of a prophet by synthesizing the works of Martti Nissinen, Esther Hamori, and Lester L. Grabbe. It then examines how her “irritations”—morally or culturally questionable actions—do not disqualify her from this role. The paper concludes with questions of feminist interpretation, suggesting that sexist assumptions may influence the way Judith is typically received by interpreters and offers thoughts on the interpreters’ responsibility to challenge personal bias.

For years, Judith has been placed within a moral dichotomy of whether she is a pro-feminist character or an anti-feminist one. Helen Efthimiadis-Keith provides commentary on the current state of Judith in scholarship in her chapter titled “Judith, Feminist Ethics and Feminist Biblical/Hebrew Bible Interpretation” from the book *A Feminist Companion to Tobit and Judith*. Efthimiadis-Keith argues that this dichotomy has created unethical interpretations of the text and Judith’s character. She proposes three reasons why these interpretations are unethical, but I will focus on just one: they “close meaning.”¹ If Judith, a complex and very human character with both good and bad traits, is interpreted by her parts to be all good or all bad, the author must commit “texticide” and ignore one side or the other.² These interpretations close off other possible meanings to the text and to Judith herself. Efthimiadis-Keith

1. Helen Efthimiadis-Keith, “Judith, Feminist Ethics and Feminist Biblical/Hebrew Bible Interpretation,” in *A Feminist Companion to Tobit and Judith*, ed. Athalya Brenner-Idan and Efthimiadis-Keith (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 151.

2. Efthimiadis-Keith, “Judith, Feminist Ethics,” 151, 156.

goes further and warns us that by closing off meaning and ignoring the “irritations” in Judith’s text, “we are not permitting [the book of] Judith to challenge our ‘assumptions, world-views and practices,’ and we are not giving ourselves the opportunity to be challenged by it.”³ This is the viewpoint in which I wish to enter the conversation surrounding Judith. In this paper, I do not intend to sort Judith into a simple pro- or anti-feminist framework. Instead, I will offer a more nuanced interpretation for the character and role of Judith within her story in my attempt to heed the warning of Efthimiadis-Keith and allow Judith “to challenge our ‘assumptions, world-views and practices.’” In particular, I’ll consider Judith in relation to a bible archetype of a prophet. The majority of my paper will be devoted to considering Judith in relation to the prophet archetype, but I’ll return to questions of feminist interpretation at the conclusion. Rather than closing the meaning of the text by definitively classifying Judith in a feminist framework, I’ll suggest that sexist assumptions may influence the way Judith is typically received by interpreters and that as interpreters ourselves, we have a responsibility to challenge these assumptions.

Since I will be presenting the story of Judith out of chronological order in my evidence, I relate here a brief summary of her story in whole. The book of Judith is an incredible story found in the Septuagint (LXX). It describes the people of the Lord in the city of Bethulia who are under threat of the Assyrian army led by their general Holofernes. The heroine Judith first appears halfway through the narrative in chapter 8 when all hope seems lost. With food and water supplies running dangerously low, the leaders of Bethulia have decided that if God does not save them within five days, they will surrender to the Assyrians (see *Jdt* 7:13, 21, 29–31). It is in these dire circumstances that Judith summons the Bethulian leaders to her home and chastises them for not having faith in God (*Jdt* 8:9–31). She concludes her chastisement by promising that God will deliver his people by her hand within the deadline they set (*Jdt* 8:32–34). After she prays, and armed with this promise, Judith and her servant approach the Assyrian camp where they are let in due to Judith’s beauty and given an audience with Holofernes (*Jdt* 9; 10:11–23). Judith then convinces Holofernes that she has been sent from God to help him defeat the Bethulians because they have not been following God’s law and that she will lead him to victory (*Jdt* 11:5–19). An excited Holofernes invites her to stay in his camp and eventually invites her into his tent to drink with the intentions to seduce her (*Jdt* 11:20–12:20). Holofernes drinks until he is dead-drunk, and Judith uses this opportunity to strike. Judith beheads Holofernes, steals his head, and

3. Efthimiadis-Keith, “Judith, Feminist Ethics,” 157.

returns to Bethulia (Jdt 13:1–20). Once there, she commands the armies of Bethulia to quickly attack the Assyrians while they are confused, and they are successful in removing the Assyrians from their borders (Jdt 14; 15:1–7). The people then celebrate and praise Judith because God saved them by the hand of a woman (Jdt 15:8–14; 16:1–20). Judith returns home and dies a hero (Jdt 16:21–25).

Through various interpretive lenses, the role of Judith has been described in a myriad of ways, including titles such as “the Jewess,” a literal translation of her name, or “the champion of God” for her salvific actions.⁴ However, none of her titles have fully explained how she is able to speak on behalf of God when she chastises the Bethulian men or how she is able to know the Assyrians’ reaction to the death of Holofernes. These actions are prophetic ones, but considering Judith a prophet is not a common interpretation of this text.⁵ In this paper, I will argue that Judith should be considered a prophet but has not been described as one in the past due to the various un-prophet-like “irritations” in the text and a sexist interpreter bias. First, I will describe Judith’s qualifications as a prophet. Second, I will dispute some of the common “irritations” brought up throughout Judith scholarship. And lastly, I will discuss some of the implications of these irritations and how considering Judith a prophet could be challenging our worldview for the better.

This paper will not provide an extensive analysis in each section but will only briefly describe Judith’s qualifications, possible disqualifications, and the ramifications of classifying Judith as a prophet. Each topic addressed here could be a paper of its own, but this overview will help introduce the argument and provide some context for further discussion.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As briefly touched on in my first paragraph, much of the scholarship surrounding Judith has been considered with extreme binary opinions, trying to answer the question whether Judith is a feminist figure or not. Lawrence M. Wills and Helen Efthimiadis-Keith provide extensive summaries of the research done

4. For “champion of God,” see Deborah Levine Gera, “The Book of Judith,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Apocrypha*, ed. Gerbern S. Oegema (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 142. In a future iteration of this paper, I will discuss how some scholars identify Judith as a judge and how Deborah is both a judge and prophet, so Judith can be too. Judith calls the Bethulians to repentance like a prophet. Only Deborah and the unnamed prophets in Judges 6 call people to repentance in a way similar to Judith in the book of Judges. This is something to continue researching for either this section—as I discuss Judith’s past identities—or in the irritations sections.

5. Renate Egger-Wenzel, “Mirjam, Debora und Judit – eine Prophetinnentradition?,” *Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Yearbook* (2008): 95–122.

within that dichotomous framework.⁶ Wills separates the various authors by waves of feminism, concluding with third-wave feminism. Efthimiadis-Keith charts the current binary field by categorizing the scholars in their camp of either “pro-feminist Judith” or “anti-feminist Judith.” This paper, as mentioned before, enters the conversation through one of Efthimiadis-Keith’s warnings against binary readings of Judith that “close meaning.”⁷

WHAT IS A PROPHET?

For the purposes of this paper, I will be relying heavily on the works of Martti Nissinen, Esther Hamori, and Lester L. Grabbe to define and identify a prophet.⁸ Nissinen summarizes a prophet as “someone who intermediates allegedly divine knowledge by nontechnical means,” where “nontechnical means” refers to receiving divine knowledge through divine inspiration rather than through technical (or academic) skills like extispicy, augury, or astrology.⁹ The idea of an intermediary for the gods to their people is reflected in the word choice of “προφήτης” as the Greek term to convey the Hebrew נָבִי. Nissinen states:

When the translators of the Septuagint needed a Greek equivalent for the Hebrew word for a prophet, *nābī*, they quite systematically chose to use the word *prophētēs*, which in their view, rendered an idea that was close enough to what they thought a *nābī* was. The Greek word-family was thus influenced by a strong semantic input from the biblical tradition, which had effects on its use in early Jewish and Christian parlance and writing. For an overview of the Greek semantic field, a quick look at Liddell and Scott’s *Greek–English Lexicon* will show that *prophēteia* is presented as equivalent to the “gift of interpreting the will of gods” and the verb *prophēteuō* to being an “interpreter of the gods,” whereas *prophētēs* (fem. *prophētis*) is “one who speaks for a God and interprets his will to man,” or, in a more general sense, an “interpreter.”¹⁰

Nissinen highlights that the understanding of what a prophet is around the time of the creation or translation of the Septuagint is that of interpreter or spokesman for God. Speaking on behalf of God and interpreting are the main ways a prophet can be identified, but not the only way. Nissinen also

6. Lawrence M. Wills, *A Commentary on the Book of Judith, Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 50–70.

7. Efthimiadis-Keith, “Judith, Feminist Ethics,” 151.

8. I will be pulling specifically from these works: Martti Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy: Near Eastern, Biblical, and Greek Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2017); Esther J. Hamori, *Women’s Divination in Biblical Literature: Prophecy, Necromancy, and Other Arts of Knowledge*, ABRL (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015); Lester L. Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages: A Socio-Historical Study of Religious Specialists in Ancient Israel* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995).

9. Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 24.

10. Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 24–25.

writes extensively on prophecy as a “gender-inclusive phenomon.”¹¹ Female prophets are a normal occurrence throughout the ancient Near East with some cultures having more female prophets than male prophets. The Hebrew Bible, like many other Western Semitic cultures, seems to have a “preference of male prophets,” but it is not without female prophets (e.g., Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Noadiah, and Isaiah’s wife), so there is no gendered requirement for the role of prophet.¹²

Hamori identifies three factors—intent, interpretation, and special identity—that can be used to identify “divinatory particularity” (under which falls that category of prophet). Only one factor needs to be present to identify someone as a prophet, such as special identity with a divine call to be a prophet, but “there is more frequently a combination of these elements present.”¹³ For example, in a technical form of divination, “necromancy requires intent as well as possibly the special identity of the necromancer, but probably not interpretation.”

In addition to using Hamori’s identifiers, it is important to note this statement from Grabbe: “one does not have to be called a *navi*’ [or προφήτης] to be identified as a prophet.” If a prophet does receive a special identity, it does not necessarily have to be προφήτης, but instead can be terms such as “man of God” or “servant of God.” One example of a prophet without the designation προφήτης Grabbe mentions is Hosea, who will be addressed later in the paper.¹⁴ In addition to this comment, Grabbe states that “divine revelation is a sine qua non of prophecy. How this comes about varies considerably. Many times, we are only informed that ‘the word of YHWH came’ to so-and-so. Occasionally, though, we get a glimpse into the diverse nature of prophetic revelations.”¹⁵ One of the most important criteria when trying to determine a prophet is divine revelation.

There is a lot of overlap between the definitions of these three authors. Nissinen and Grabbe define a prophet mostly by their ability to receive divine knowledge or revelation.¹⁶ Nissinen adds that a prophet is “one who speaks for

11. See Martti Nissinen, “Nonmale Prophets in Ancient Near Eastern Sources,” in *The Bible and Women: An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History*, ed. Christiana de Groot et al., vol. 1.2, *Prophecy and Gender in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. L. Juliana Claassens and Irmaud Fischer (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2021), 75–109; “Prophecy and Gender” in Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 297–325.

12. Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 297.

13. Hamori, *Women’s Divination*, 5–6.

14. Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages*, 83.

15. Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages*, 78.

16. See Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 10–12, 17; Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages*, 78.

a God and interprets his will to man,” which aligns with one of Hamori’s criteria of interpretation.¹⁷ All three authors at least touch on the special identity of “prophet” and although a prophet does not have to be called προφήτης, there will be a separation of roles between them and the people seen through their ability to receive divine knowledge and speak on behalf of God.¹⁸ An additional method to see how some “questionable” prophets may also qualify for that role is to compare them with other “less questionable” prophets (usually those with clear designation προφήτης). They may also have a different title such as “servant of God.”

By synthesizing the works of these authors, the definition and criteria of a prophet that will be used for this paper is as follows: a prophet is someone set apart from their people who receives and divulges divine knowledge or revelation in their role as a spokesperson for God, interpreting his will for his people. They may be set apart by a special title such as “προφήτης” or “servant of God.” However, not every prophet receives this designation, so the evidence of their setting apart is often seen by comparing them to other prophets.¹⁹ Therefore, the three evidences of a prophet are (1) someone set apart from their people; (2) a receiver and bestower of divine knowledge; and (3) an interpreter and spokesperson for God.

JUDITH’S QUALIFICATIONS

Judith’s prophetic identity can be clearly seen through three specific episodes: the chastisement of the Bethulian men in chapter 8, her initial conversation with Holofernes in chapter 11, and the command of the Bethulian army in chapters 14 and 15. By connecting Judith’s actions and experiences in these episodes to both the qualifications of a prophet determined in the previous paragraph and other canonical prophets, Judith’s own qualifications for the title of prophet become apparent.

SET APART FROM HER PEOPLE—SPECIAL IDENTITY OF JUDITH

In Judith 11:5–19, Judith tells Holofernes that she has come because her people in Bethulia will be destroyed by God for breaking laws surrounding the tithes and offerings for the priests. Judith offers to help Holofernes destroy her people by living with Holofernes until God reveals to Judith when the people have sinned. They will then go up together to Bethulia, and God will deliver

17. See Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 17; Hamori, *Women’s Divination*, 5.

18. See Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 25–26; Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages*, 83; Hamori, *Women’s Divination*, 6.

19. Some examples include Nahum, Micah, and Zephaniah. Even Moses is not directly called “the prophet” until later writings (compare Deut 18:15–22 to Hos 12:13).

Bethulia into the hands of Holofernes. Although Judith is not explicitly called a *προφήτης* in this scene, she clearly meets the criterion of a prophet in that she is set apart from her people.

In Judith 11:5–6, Judith identifies herself and asks Holofernes to listen to her words:

5 και εἶπε πρὸς αὐτὸν Ἰουδίθ· δέξαι τὰ ῥήματα τῆς δούλης σου, και λαλησάτω ἡ παιδίσκη σου κατὰ πρόσωπόν σου, και οὐκ ἀναγγεῶ ψευδὸς τῷ κυρίῳ μου ἐν τῇ νυκτὶ ταύτῃ.

6 και ἐὰν κατακολουθήσης τοῖς λόγοις τῆς παιδίσκης σου, τελείως πρᾶγμα ποιήσει μετὰ σοῦ ὁ Θεός, και οὐκ ἀποπεσεῖται ὁ κύριός μου τῶν ἐπιτηδευμάτων αὐτοῦ·

5 And Judith said to him, hear the words of your servant, and let your servant speak before you, and I will not declare falsehoods to my lord in this night.

6 And if you will follow after the words of your servant, God will bring about the thing to completion with you and my lord will not fail to obtain his goals.

Judith declares herself the servant of Holofernes and is ready to help him. However, the meaning of “ὁ κύριός μου” is a little bit ambiguous. Judith could be speaking of Holofernes, or she might be speaking of God, promising that the following interaction will be for the purpose of accomplishing the will of God.²⁰ The first word Judith uses to describe herself as a servant is “δούλη” which has also been used to describe prophets.²¹ In Jeremiah 7:25, some prophets are described with the masculine form, *δούλος*. Moses is also described as the *δούλος* of God in 3 Kingdoms 8:53, 56. Finally, Daniel in Daniel 6:20 is also called the *δούλος* of the living God, and, like Judith, he is not called a prophet within his own text. More will be discussed later in the paper using this example from Daniel. The ambiguity of “ὁ κύριός μου” allows Judith to call herself a servant of the Lord God and shows how she is set apart from her people like the prophets Jeremiah, Moses, and Daniel.

More evidence of Judith’s setting apart presents itself in chapter 8 when she first addresses the unfaithful Bethulian men. Judith enters the story in chapter 8 and works to set her people straight and protect them by promising the Lord will work through her. In chapters 14 and 15, after Judith returns from murdering Holofernes, she fulfills her full promise that “ἐπισκέπεται Κύριος τὸν Ἰσραὴλ ἐν χειρὶ μου” (“the Lord will visit Israel by my hand,” Judith 8:33). I

20. See Gera, “Book of Judith,” 58. This reading is often noted in the footnotes or notes of various study bibles. See the HarperCollins Study Bible footnotes for Judith 11:5 and the Anchor Bible Series notes for the same verse.

21. The Greek is probably more accurately translated as “slave,” but for the sake of consistency, it is translated as servant.

propose that chapters 8, 14 and 15 should be read together as a promise and the fulfillment of that promise. Judith's special identity is apparent as her actions are directly comparable to the actions of Deborah, Huldah, and Elisha. When Deborah and Huldah consult men in their stories, the men approach them and enter into their spaces. Similarly, Elisha is approached in his home by Naaman. The same happens to Judith. Deborah summons Barak in order to chastise him and give him God's commands, and he comes to her place under the tree (Jdgs 4:6 LXX). Elisha sends an inquiry for Naaman to the king (4 Kgdms 5:8). Huldah is sought out by the priests and king's servants, as they approach her in her home (4 Kgdms 22:14 LXX). Judith follows Deborah and Elisha's stories as she sends her favorite maidservant to summon the men to her (Jdt 8:10). Then Judith parallels Huldah and Elisha as the men approach her in her own home (Jdt 8:11). Judith is not among the other citizens of Bethulia, but instead she is set apart, remaining outside the main crowd like Deborah, Huldah, and Elisha. In the end, in chapter 16 (which is outside the primary three episodes analyzed in this paper), she must return to her space set apart from the people.²² Judith's designations as the servant of God and her space outside the citizens of Bethulia demonstrate that she is someone set apart from her people.

A RECEIVER AND BESTOWER OF DIVINE KNOWLEDGE

The second criterion for a prophet is someone who receives and bestows divine knowledge. Judith demonstrates this ability in two examples: in chapter 8 she declares that God will deliver the Bethulains within five days, and in chapter 15 she describes how the Assyrians will react to the death of Holofernes. First, the Bethulians were ready to surrender in five days, but Judith again promises that God will deliver them "by her hand" within those five days (Jdt 7:29; 8:32–33). Judith's declaration is a prophecy, or divine knowledge from God which is fulfilled through her actions. She spends the first three days in the enemy camp establishing her presence and habit of leaving the camp to go and pray which ultimately provides the way for her to get away with the smiting of Holofernes (Jdt 12:5–9). On the fourth day, Judith goes into the tent of Holofernes by his invitation and smites his neck, beheading him that evening (Jdt 12:10; 13:1, 8–9). After taking his head, Judith and her servant return home where her people light a fire to give light because the Lord "destroyed [their] enemy by [Judith's] hand this very night" (Jdt 13:13–14 NRSV). Judith

22. For more on women occupying the "Other" space throughout the book of Judith, see Amy-Jill Levine, "Sacrifice and Salvation: Otherness and Domestication in the Book of Judith," in *No One Spoke Ill of Her: Essays on Judith*, ed. James C. VanderKam (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 17–30.

returned successfully within the deadline after felling the general by her hand which fulfilled her prophecy of salvation and demonstrates her ability to receive divine knowledge.

Second, after returning with the head of Holofernes, Judith once again receives divine knowledge which she bestows upon the Bethulians, allowing their armies to claim further victory over the enemy. In Judith 14:1–5, Judith seemingly prophesies again, but this time she describes how the Assyrians will react to the death of Holofernes causing a panic the Bethulians can use to drive out the Assyrians. This prophecy consists of five parts:

1. The Bethulians are to grab their weapons and go “as if [they] were going down to the plain against the Assyrian outpost” (Jdt 14:2 NRSV).
2. “The Assyrians will seize their arms and go into the camp and rouse the officers of the Assyrian army” (Jdt 14:3 NRSV).
3. “They will rush into the tent of Holofernes and will not find him” (Jdt 14:3 NRSV).
4. “Then panic will come over them, and they will flee before [the Bethulian armies]” (Jdt 14:3 NRSV).
5. The armies will then “pursue [the Assyrians] and cut them down in their tracks” (Jdt 14:4 NRSV).²³

As the story continues through chapters 14 and 15, Judith’s prophecy is again fulfilled:

6. The Bethulians go down as if to attack (Jdt 14:11).
7. The Assyrians see them and “[send] word to their commanders ... and to all their other officers” (Jdt 14:12).
8. Bagoas, Holofernes’s servant, goes into the tent of Holofernes and finds him dead (Jdt 14:13–15).²⁴
9. The Assyrians were afraid and “fled by every path” (Jdt 15:2 NRSV).
10. The Bethulians “took flight ... [and] with one accord they fell upon the enemy and cut them down.” (Jdt 15:3–5).

23. Part five may change slightly from prophecy and foreknowledge to more of a command, but it still acts as a part of the whole prophecy.

24. I suspect there is clever irony here with the word “find” (εὕρισκω). Judith specifically states that they “will not find (εὕρησουσιν) [Holofernes]” (Jdt 13:3), but Bagoas does find (εὔρεν) him, he just finds him dead. Judith could be referencing that they would not find him alive, but I suspect there is a joke or irony hidden here as the text says “with his head missing” (Jdt 14:15). More study is needed, but I propose that Judith saying that they will not find him and then a few verses later hanging his head on the wall (Jdt 14:11) contains some humor.

The fulfillment of her words demonstrate that she receives divine knowledge and can bestow it to her people.

In addition to the fulfillment of her words, this section is an ironic twist of what she promised Holofernes in Judith 11:5–19 when she convinced the general that God gave her “foreknowledge” (πρόγνωσίην) to help him win, thus providing additional evidence to how this can be read as divine revelation. Judith tells Holofernes that after God tells her when to strike, she will lead him to victory (Jdt 11:16–19). However, in this brilliant ironic twist, Judith is now leading her own people against the Assyrians by telling them the perfect time to strike. In her speech with Holofernes, Judith attributes her knowledge to God (Jdt 11:16–19). Here, the same can be assumed (that her knowledge is from God) because of the strong ironic nature of the story. Through these scenes we see that Judith receives divine knowledge and shares that divine knowledge with her people.

AN INTERPRETER AND SPOKESPERSON FOR GOD

Judith’s role as spokesperson relies on every part of the story discussed previously. Prophets may have to interpret signs or wonders from the divine, including mediums such as dreams. Judith does not perform a technical form of interpretation like interpreting dreams, but instead Judith shows that she can interpret the will and mind of God. In Judith 11:12–13, Judith is describing to Holofernes how starving and desperate the people in Bethulia are becoming. The people have determined to eat everything that God commanded them not to eat according to his laws (διεστείλατο αὐτοῖς ὁ Θεὸς ἐν τοῖς νόμοις αὐτοῦ μὴ φαγεῖν) including the tithes that are reserved for the priests. Here Judith has explained the law to Holofernes, and by doing so, she is explaining how exactly death has fallen upon them (ἐπιπεσεῖται θάνατος ἐπὶ πρόσωπον αὐτῶν), sin has seized the people (κατελάβετο αὐτοὺς ἁμάρτημα), and how these things will provoke their God to anger (ἐν ᾧ παροργιοῦσι τὸν Θεὸν αὐτῶν), which she introduced in the previous verse. Judith’s understanding of Jewish law and this basic interpretation show her role of interpreter. After describing how her people are desperate for food and water, she states her intent (Jdt 11:16, 19), namely that she was sent to do something with Holofernes and has been sent with foreknowledge. In these verses, Judith describes that God has sent her because God told her what would happen, and she must declare that to Holofernes. Her prophetic roles of spokesperson and intermediary are crystal clear: God sends her to help do something and she does it (even if it is not what Holofernes thought it would be).

Judith's role as spokesperson is prominent throughout her story as seen in the following example. When Judith chastises the Bethulians for putting God under a five-day deadline to save them, she says, "Who are you to put God to the test today" (Jdt 8:12). She continues, "Do not try to bind the purposes of the Lord our God; for God is not like a human being, to be threatened, or like a mere mortal, to be won over by pleading. Therefore, while we wait for his deliverance, let us call upon him to help us, and he will hear our voice, if it pleases him" (Jdt 8:16–17 NRSV). Judith continues to praise God until Judith 8:32–34. Judith declares that "the Lord will deliver Israel by my hand" (Jdt 8:33 NRSV) and that she will do it "within the days after which you have promised to surrender the town to our enemies" (Jdt 8:32 NRSV). She has flipped the script and where the religious leaders were not allowed to declare the mind of God for the people, Judith clearly is. Judith follows the criteria of a prophet overall as someone set apart from their people who receives and divulges divine knowledge as a spokesperson for God.

JUDITH'S POSSIBLE DISQUALIFICATIONS AND CHARACTER IRRITATIONS

Classifying Judith as a prophet may be uncomfortable for some due to various "irritations" found in Judith's character. In her article, Efthimiadis-Keith describes how Judith cannot be considered wholly feminist or anti-feminist because the text contains characteristics that support both sides of the argument and to argue one or the other "fail[s] to give the text its due."²⁵ She continues and describes that the "fact Judith returns home without assuming any overt leadership position" is one of many "irritations" and is even "one of the textual reasons that prompts [E. M.] Cornelius to discard Judith as patriarchally blemished despite the many positive aspects of Judith's nature that she noted."²⁶ These irritations, according to Efthimiadis-Keith's article, are moments in the text where Judith's actions do not fit into only one box. Instead, they show that she is a complex character who does both good and bad things which can destroy those binary arguments. In this paper, I want to expand this definition from not only textual irritants, but to cultural or interpretive ones as well. For example, some may find it difficult to call a Judith a prophet because she tricks Holofernes and, after he is smitten with her, she smites off his head. Those actions are typically seen as morally wrong, and it seems even more wrong for a prophet, who is meant to be holy, to do them. The irritant lies within the interpreter's views of who prophets (and women) are meant to be. However, as I argued above, Judith meets the specified qualifications of a prophet. This

25. Efthimiadis-Keith, "Judith, Feminist Ethics," 156.

26. Efthimiadis-Keith, "Judith, Feminist Ethics," 156.

adds another irritant to the mix. Judith cannot be thrown out entirely due to her possibly problematic actions because she does have qualifications. All of these irritations, her morally problematic actions and her distinct qualifications, are part of Judith's character and "we cannot commit texticide, no matter how much we might wish to."²⁷ Therefore, in the spirit of accepting the entire character of Judith, irritations and all, she cannot be given the title of prophet without first working through the actions that may disqualify her. In the following sections, I will demonstrate by comparing Judith to other prophets that these irritations of her morally questionable actions—namely trickery, sexual themes, and violence—do not disqualify her from being a prophet because these irritations can exist within the character of a prophet.

TRICKERY

First, one could argue that Judith's actions of deception disqualify her from being a prophet. Before comparing Judith to other prophets, it is important to note that this text and others in the Bible do not seem to have the same issue with deception modern readers might have. Judith is praised and celebrated for her actions, including how the Lord worked through her and "foiled [the Assyrians] by the hand of a woman" (Jdt 15:8–13, 16:5). In the following examples, it will become more evident that there seems to be a place for deception within the narratives of the Bible.²⁸

One example of a trickster prophet is Elisha.²⁹ With his deceptive nature, Elisha "mislead[s] the Arameans on a twelve-mile journey ... ending up in Israel's capital."³⁰ With the goal to take Elisha captive, they "now have become captives themselves."³¹ In addition, tricksters often resort to deception to overpower the powerful or gain power under "certain social conditions."³² Although not considered prophets, the stories of both Tamar and Rebekah can show how trickery is not always condemned, and deception can even be praised or rewarded. Deception seems to be seen as a legitimate way to gain power.

Both Tamar and Rebekah want to gain an advantage from the men over them. Tamar, who was promised a husband, tricks Judah into giving her

27. Efthimiadis-Keith, "Judith, Feminist Ethics," 156.

28. For more on ancient audiences, see Efthimiadis-Keith, "Judith, Feminist Ethics," 152.

29. Keith Bodner, *Elisha's Profile in the Book of Kings: The Double Agent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 128.

30. Bodner, *Elisha's Profile*, 112.

31. Bodner, *Elisha's Profile*, 112.

32. Naomi Steinberg, "Israelite Tricksters, Their Analogues and Cross-Cultural Study," *Semeia* 42 (1988): 6; Bodner, *Elisha's Profile*, 128.

sure evidence of his identity before having sex and conceiving a child (Gen 38:16–19). Then when she is confronted for being pregnant, she proves that it is Judah's child, and he acknowledged that "she is more in the right than I" (Gen 38:26 NRSV). Tamar's act of deception ends in almost praise and certainly reward. In Rebekah's case, she wanted Jacob to have the blessing from Isaac before he died. Through food and hairy clothing, Jacob is able to trick Isaac into giving him the blessing meant for Esau (Gen 27:14–29). Upon finding out, Esau cried to his father to change the blessing or to give him a blessing also, but Isaac refused (Gen 27:30–40). Despite the deception used to gain it, Jacob had been given everything (Gen 27:37).

Judith, to the Assyrians, is the enemy woman. Her people are about to be destroyed, and she would normally have no power in this situation. Therefore, she uses trickery to gain power over her opponent. She is then praised for her actions as mentioned above. In Judith's story, it seems that, like the examples from Genesis, trickery is seen as a legitimate way to gain power. Returning to prophetic titles, Elisha was able to keep his prophetic title even with his trickery. Therefore, acts of deception should not disqualify Judith from being a prophet.

SEXUAL THEMES

Second, one could argue that Judith seducing Holofernes and other sexual themes in her story disqualify Judith from being a prophet. There are two potential issues. One, if Judith did have sex, then could she be considered a sort of "impure" that would disqualify her and two, do sexual themes in general prevent her from obtaining the title prophet. In her story there are sexual overtones. However, Holofernes is the one to initiate every potential sexual encounter. He invites her to drink (see Jdt 12:11) and comments that he will be a "disgrace" if he does not sleep with Judith (Jdt 12:12 NRSV). After Judith accepts the invitation and enters his tent, *Holofernes* is described as having been "waiting for an opportunity to seduce her from the day he first saw her" (Jdt 12:16 NRSV). After they share drinks and Judith later beheads him, Judith states that Holofernes did not defile her twice (see Jdt 13:16; 16:22). Therefore, if the issue is sex, then Judith, who did not have sex with Holofernes, can still be considered a prophet.

In addition, the sexual themes and overtones should not disqualify her. Hosea, in his story, is commanded by God to marry the prostitute Gomer. The Lord then uses Hosea's life as an extended metaphor for Israel, comparing the entire people to a whore. Hosea chapter 2 has especially heavy sexual theming.

Therefore, Judith's story containing sexual elements should not disqualify her from the title of prophet.³³

VIOLENCE

Third, one could argue that Judith's acts of violence disqualify her from receiving the title of prophet. However, Judith is not the only prophet to commit acts of violence. Rather, by considering her a prophet she joins the ranks of other prophets who have committed violence for a number of reasons. In her story, Judith smites (ἐπάταξεν) the neck of Holofernes with all her might, beheading him and ultimately ensuring the lives of her people (see Jdt 13:8). Holofernes was not a murdered randomly by an unstable woman with a sudden, terrifying desire; instead, he was murdered by a notably pious and faithful woman acting under the direction of God.³⁴ Judith is praised by her people, and her actions are attributed to God as seen in both Uzziah's words (Jdt 13:18–20) and her hymn of praise (Jdt 16:5–6, 13–17). Within her story, Judith's violence does not disqualify her from having acted with the power of God. On the contrary, her violence is attributed to God as her hands become his (see Jdt 8:32–34, 16:5).

Judith can easily be compared to Moses, a prophet who committed violence. Moses, before becoming God's spokesman, smote down an Egyptian man. If violence were an obstacle to becoming a prophet, Moses would have been disqualified before he began (see Exod 2:12, 14). Instead, he is considered one of *the* prophets and saves God's people. The language used in both Moses's and Judith's acts of violence is important. In Exodus 2:11–12, Moses smites the Egyptian man using πατάξας which is a form of πατάσσω. The verb πατάσσω is often translated as to smite or to strike.³⁵ Moses smote the Egyptian man to death. Judith likewise uses a form of πατάσσω to smite Holofernes's neck, killing him. Not only do both prophetic figures act violently, but the verb describing both actions, πατάσσω, is the same. In contrast to Judith's story, this specific act of violence from Moses is not attributed to God. Violent acts described later in the Exodus story, like the drowning of Pharaoh's armies, will be attributed to God, but this specific smiting is not.³⁶ If Moses smiting without explicit sanction from God does not prevent him from being considered (or

33. Additionally, there are examples in the Bible where characters do have sex outside traditional settings, and even then it does not make them bad. One example is Tamar when she has sex with Judah. As mentioned in the previous section, Judah even admits Tamar is in the right (see Gen 38:26).

34. Judith's actions are similar to Jael from Judges, and, like Jael, Judith is praised for her work. Compare Jdgs 5:24–27 and Jdt 13:18–20; 14:7–8; 15:9–14; and 16:21–23.

35. Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, "πατάσσω," *LSJ* 1347.

36. Compare Exod 2:11–12 and Exod 14:6–7.

becoming) a prophet, then Judith's smiting of Holofernes, which is seen as an act of God protecting his people, should not disqualify her from the title of prophet.³⁷

LACKING SPECIAL TITLE OF "προφήτης"

In addition to her actions described above, one seemingly obvious irritation is that Judith is never called a prophet within the text. As previously mentioned, Grabbe argues that prophets "[do] not have to be called a *navi*"; which applies to the LXX with the term "προφήτης" as well.³⁸ Judith never receives the title within the text, but this should not prevent her from being called a prophet by later interpreters and readers. There are many prophets in the LXX who do not receive the title of prophet, but are nonetheless considered prophets such as Micah, Nahum, Hosea, and Daniel. This title is easier to give to the minor prophets because of the organization of the books within the Hebrew Bible. All are categorized as "minor prophets" because their books are grouped together and given that designation. Therefore, even if some do not receive the title within their individual texts, the grouping provides legitimization to their title. However, Daniel does not receive the title prophet in the text and is not organized within the prophetic books, but he is considered a prophet in most modern Christian denominations.³⁹ Instead, Daniel fits the criteria above: he is called "servant of the living God" (Dan 6:20), setting him apart from the others. He has prophetic experiences with divine revelation (Dan 4:27) and acts as an interpreter (Dan 2:17, 24–45), so he has been given the title "prophet." Even Moses is not called a prophet right away, but the first time the prophetic title could be applied to him textually is Deuteronomy 18:15, 18. Both Daniel and Moses, are called "the prophet" in later texts. Moses is called a prophet in later texts such as Hosea 12:13 while Daniel is called a prophet in 4Q174, which demonstrates that one does not have to receive the title prophet in their primary text or story to be considered a prophet in later traditions. This same principle could be applied to Judith. Although Judith does not have the title of prophet, she can qualify for prophetic status like many of the minor prophets, Daniel, and even Moses.

37. In a future project, I would like to see how the root *πατάσσω* is used in other places in the LXX. There are instances of the Lord using forms of *πατάσσω* to strike down the Egyptians as well as other enemies. For a few examples, see Exod 12:27, 29 and 1 Kgdms 5:9. One other example of prophetic violence is Elijah killing the 450 priests of Baal (see 3 Kgdms 18:20–40).

38. Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages*, 82.

39. In the second verse of Bel and the Dragon, he is called a priest ("ἱερεύς"), but he is not called a prophet.

WHY IS JUDITH NOT CURRENTLY CONSIDERED A PROPHET?

The discussion of her qualifications and the rebuttal against her possible disqualifications have led to this point: Why is Judith not considered a prophet when so many of her male counterparts are?⁴⁰ Initially, it is easy to blame the text or any sexism in the historical background of Judith for why she is not called a prophet, but a closer reading does not allow for this answer. First, there are other female prophets in the LXX such as Deborah, Huldah and Miriam, so there is a space and even a precedent for female prophets provided by ancient authors and redactors. Second, how the other characters react to her makes any textual or historical sexism an unconvincing counterargument.

Holofernes reaction to Judith's words during her audience with him demonstrates the second point above clearly. In Judith 11:11–19, Judith convinces Holofernes that she is a prophet of the Lord sent to punish the Bethulians for not following the laws of God (see Jdt 11:11–12). Although Judith is purposefully deceiving Holofernes for power, his belief in her claim effectively demonstrates that her having prophetic powers is not outside the realm of possibilities in the minds of these characters (and therefore for their author or redactor). In Judith 11:16, Judith tells Holofernes that “God sent me to do something with you,” (ἐπέστειλέ με ὁ θεὸς ποιῆσαι μετὰ σοῦ πράγματα) which leads into verse 17 in which Judith describes the plan given to her by God. Judith explains that while she remains with Holofernes and goes out to pray to God at night, God will tell her when the people of Bethulia sin so that Holofernes can claim victory over them. Judith demonstrates confidence that God will answer her prayers. As she continues to lay out the victory plan, she credits her foreknowledge (ὅτι ταῦτα ἐλάληθη μοι κατὰ πρόγνωσίν μου, Jdt 11:19). In Judith 11:18–19, she describes how with this foreknowledge, or divine knowledge from God, she has been told how to “establish” Holofernes's throne in the midst of Jerusalem and how to “lead” him so that no one can stand in his way. By divine revelation she will lead Holofernes. In summary, Judith convinces Holofernes that what God has sent her to do is for his benefit which builds up the story for an ironic twist only Judith and the reader see coming. Judith will do something with Holofernes, but it will be for the good of her people.

After she finishes declaring her purpose and her plan to Holofernes, he immediately and unquestioningly believes her, and he praises her beauty and

40. The arguments surrounding Judith in the past have typically been focused on if she is a feminist character or not (see Gera, “Book of Judith” and Efthimiadis-Keith, “Judith, Feminist Ethics,” 144–49). To see her as a prophet is not a common view, and I only found one other article arguing she could belong to the prophetic tradition. See Egger-Wenzel, “Mirjam, Debora und Judit,” 115–18.

wisdom. Holofernes's acceptance of her and even his declaration that "ὁ Θεός σου ἔσται μου Θεός" (your God will be my God), is indicative that even as Judith is lying, Holofernes still sees her as one who actually has this foreknowledge and has come to actually help him win the war (see Jdt 11:23). In the mind of Holofernes, there is nothing wrong with this situation, which can help the reader to understand that Judith's prophetic actions here are, again, not outside the realm of possibility. A woman prophet might even be expected in Holofernes's Assyrian context.⁴¹ There is no doubt in Holofernes's mind that she comes from her God, which is also true with the men in Bethulia. They accept her words and even praise her for chastising them (see Jdt 8:28–31). No character has an issue with Judith and her role within the context of the story.

Therefore, if the hesitation surrounding Judith as a prophet does not originate in the text we must turn elsewhere.⁴² I propose we must turn to the interpreter. For example, when discussing why some scholars question the decision to seek out Huldah, another woman prophet, Hamori says, "the inclination of scholars—from the rabbis to now—to ask why Josiah consulted a female prophet reflects the issues of interpreters, and not the text itself."⁴³ Judith has suffered a similar fate. She has been kept from the rank of prophet, at least in part, because it can be difficult for modern interpreters to see women in violent or deceptive roles in general. Trying to add a holy role like prophet on top of that can be even harder. I believe this is one of the many reasons Judith is often scrutinized under extreme dichotomous interpretations with a seeming inability to see past the good and bad of Judith. It seems that men in general are allowed greater moral and ethical complexity by interpreters, such that irritations do not disqualify them from the role of prophet.

As I quoted at the beginning of this paper, Efthimiadis-Keith warns that trying to smooth over the "irritations" of a text is "denying it the opportunity to challenge our 'assumptions, world-views and practices' and denying ourselves the opportunity to be challenged by it."⁴⁴ In the past, this "smoothing" was mostly exemplified in attempting to identify Judith as either a pro- or anti-feminist character. In this paper, the definition of irritation has expanded to include the irritations that we, the interpreters, might carry into a text via our personal belief systems. I have attempted here to approach Judith from a totally different angle. Although it is influenced by my belief system, my

41. Although the story is almost certainly fictional, the enemy are identified as Assyrians. For more on Assyrian female prophets see Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 297.

42. I recognize that the canonicity of Judith likely plays a part. However, within scholarship we should not be bound by canonicity.

43. Hamori, *Women's Divination*, 153–154.

44. Efthimiadis-Keith, "Judith, Feminist Ethics," 157.

argument is still valuable because it creates a challenge against the generally accepted views of Judith. More specifically, it can challenge some sexist views interpreters may carry. This allows for growth, and it creates a space where personal bias can be questioned and reevaluated. Can a woman who commits acts of violence still be seen as someone holy just as men like Moses? Is there an imbalance in opinions regarding men versus women involved in sexual themes such as with Hosea or Tamar? Are people who deceive automatically bad, or could it have been a clever way to gain power in an ancient world such as with Rebekah, Jacob, or Elisha? The worldview challenged by allowing Judith the title of prophet brings into question why she has not been considered one before and allows us, the interpreters, to think on our own bias, assumptions, worldviews, and practices. If carried out, this thoughtful reflection can then open closed meanings of the text. By opening up the text to more interpretations and understandings, a fuller and more accepting interpretive environment is created. This allows more voices and people from different backgrounds a place at the table, likely leading to more discoveries and connections throughout the biblical texts. We cannot come to the table with every single experience, only our own. It is essential for us as interpreters to continually check our personal biases and challenge our assumptions. If we do not, we may close meanings, push away chairs, and shut out voices essential for a full interpretive experience. In the continual quest for understanding, every voice will bring important information and knowledge to light.

CONCLUSION

It is essential to step outside the mindset of “Judith, the pro- or anti-feminist character.” Instead, we must allow ourselves to be challenged by considering Judith in new ways. One of those ways, as I have argued, is to categorize Judith as a prophet. She meets the synthesized qualifications: (1) someone set apart from their people, (2) a receiver and bestower of divine knowledge, and (3) an interpreter and spokesperson for God as seen in the examples from her conversations with Holoferenes and the Bethulian men. She should not be disqualified for common irritations found in both her story and the stories of other prophets. Although considering Judith a prophet will not automatically create seats at the table for everyone, the principles of challenging bias and common interpretations will open meaning and the interpretive field to a more diverse and full interpretive experience.