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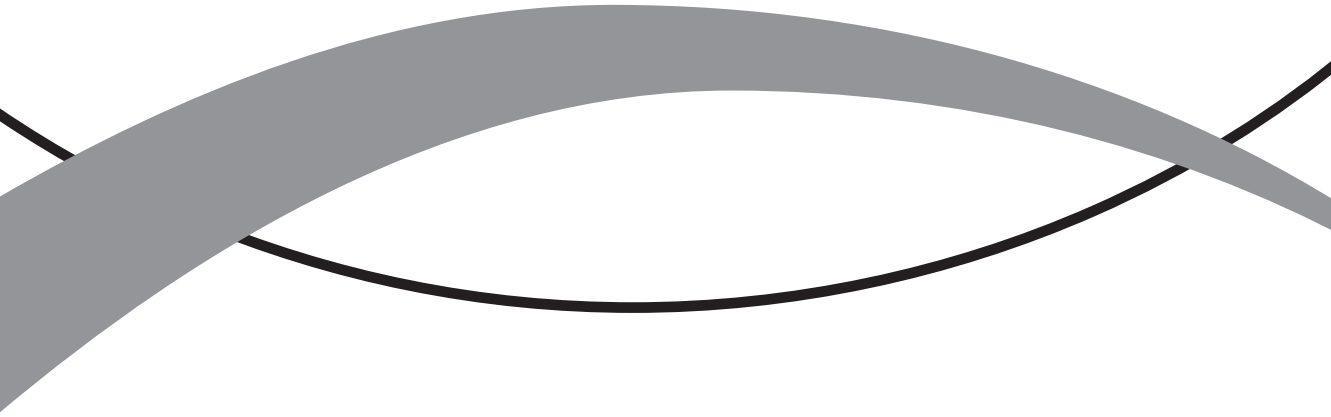

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# Book Forum: Julia M. O'Brien's *Prophets Beyond Activism: Rethinking the Prophetic Roots of Social Justice*[1]

## Challenging a Progressive Orthodoxy and Sparking the Moral Imagination: Reflections on *Prophets Beyond Activism*

***Elenie Poulos***

I knew I was in trouble from the opening sentence of Julia M. O'Brien's book, *Prophets beyond Activism: Rethinking the Prophetic Roots of Social Justice*: "The assumption that the prophets of ancient Israel were primarily concerned about social justice runs throughout the thinking and the discourse of progressive Christianity" (1). Say what?! The '*assumption*'? What assumption?

I am not a biblical scholar, but I do have many opinions about the Bible (don't we all?), some of which, I will admit, are better informed than others. I love the Bible for so many reasons, but I am not a biblical literalist, and I do not hold that the Bible is inerrant. I try to remain alert to the complexity inherent in these texts that were shared, written, gathered, edited, collected, translated, by many different authors and editors over a long period of time. I understand it and all its constituent parts as socio-literary constructions with social, cultural and political aims.[2] I'm not sure what the phrase 'divinely inspired' means when applied to the Bible but I do believe that the biblical texts are testament to how generations of people in particular places and times have tried to understand the sacred in their lives, communities, societies and histories. And in this way, I believe that Bible holds deeply profound truths and lessons about what it means to be human and human reaching for the transcendent. It is the sacred book of my religious tradition. We find Jesus in there. I should read it more and read it better than I do. *Prophets beyond Activism* inspires me to do both.

In the introduction to her book *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture: Reading the Bible on Its Own Terms*, biblical scholar Robyn J. Whitaker writes, "In truth, we all read in a way that privileges some parts of the Bible and gives little attention to others".[3] I have known this from my first class in biblical studies at United Theological College in 1993. So, when I'm working with the biblical texts, I strive to be diligent in applying the exegetical and hermeneutical tools I gained at theological college and the lessons about language and discourse I gained at university studying linguistics. These days, I also strive to bring insights gained from

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[1] Julia M. O'Brien, *Prophets Beyond Activism: Rethinking the Prophetic Roots of Social Justice* (Louisville: WJKP, 2024).

[2] I do not include 'religious' here because the concept or category of 'religion' is a contemporary (and contested) construction, see for example William E. Arnal and Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Sacred Is Profane: The Political Nature of 'Religion'*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012; Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, Yale University Press, 2013; and Craig Martin, *A Critical Introduction to the Study of Religion,* London: Routledge, third edition 2023). The biblical writers did not know they were writing 'religious' texts.

[3] Robyn J. Whitaker, *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture: Reading the Bible on Its Own Terms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023, Kindle edition, 11.

my ongoing apprenticeship as both a critical scholar of religion and a politics scholar interested in power and discourse at the intersection of politics and religion. But it seems I've had a blind spot when it came to the so-called prophetic roots of social justice.

In her book, Whitaker asks, "What can we learn about interpreting the Bible from the Bible itself?"[4] O'Brien offers a case study in exactly this and it is an explicit and a direct challenge to me and my Christian 'tribe' – theologically and socially progressive Christians and churches who make assertions along the lines of this one, "The Uniting Church in Australia believes it is called to take a *prophetic stand* in this world, standing with those who are marginalised and confronting the interests and the powers that perpetrate violence, injustice and oppression."[5] *Prophets Beyond Activism* is littered with such statements from O'Brien's own denomination (the United Church of Christ), the Roman Catholic Church, the World Council of Churches, the Lutherans, the Anglicans and more. You may better understand the personal challenge of this book for me knowing that for many years I was writing statements like this for the Uniting Church in Australia and ecumenical organisations. The book is not, however, a take-down of Christian churches, people, and organisations committed to social justice or Christian justice activists. On the contrary, it is a plea from a progressive biblical scholar to other progressive Christians: unpick the progressive, interpretative *orthodoxy* that claims that "the Hebrew prophets were primarily concerned with social justice" (3) so that "we can do better" (9) with the texts (honesty) and with talking and working with Christians who understand the prophetic witnesses differently (humility).

O'Brien's book has unsettled me but also convinced me that I can no longer casually throw around phrases such as 'the prophetic call to justice' to justify a call to action for social justice.

O'Brien begins her short, punchy book with an exploration of the "origins and problems of the 'prophets were social critics' orthodoxy" (13). Drawing on recent scholarship of the prophetic books, she situates the prophets in the context of the worldviews of ancient Mediterranean cultures. Hebrew prophets were 'diviners' who read signs, dreams and visions, and foretold the future for kings, just like the diviners mentioned in ancient texts found in Mari (in what is now Syria) and Ninevah (Mosul in Iraq). O'Brien also makes extensive use of redaction criticism to consider the "retrospective" (17) editing of ancient texts from a post-exilic perspective around 550-350 BCE. The prophetic books look back to explain why Israel and Judah fell to the Babylonian Empire, defend "YHWH'S justice in carrying out this punishment" (19), and "offer hope [of] divine forgiveness" (17). The main point of the books of Deuteronomy and those from Joshua to Kings (inclusive) are to drive home the lesson that when Israel fails to worship and obey YHWH it falls. These are stories, poems, prayers of a traumatised people trying to understand what happened to them – why YHWH punished them so violently and devastatingly – and reaching for a better future. The prophets were offering explanations of harsh times and hope for the future, not treatises on social or economic justice or what happens in the world when injustice rules.

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[4] Whitaker, *Even the Devil Quotes Scripture*, 11.

[5] Uniting Church in Australia, 'An Economy of Life: Re-Imagining Progress for a Flourishing World', Resolution 09.21, Twelfth Assembly, 2009, p.6 (italics added), accessed August 6, 2025, https://ucaassembly.recollect.net.au/nodes/view/16

In ancient, intensely poetic forms, the meaning of many metaphors, puns, and wordplays will be elusive but what should not escape us, however, are the violent, patriarchal, hierarchical and misogynistic ideologies evident in so many of the texts – ideologies that are all too often obscured by the lens of 'the prophetic call to social justice'. In a contemporary critique that offers readings of the texts (tasters, really) from womanist, feminist, queer, postcolonial and trauma-informed perspectives, O'Brien asks us to take seriously the "multiple layers of oppression" (36) both represented in the prophetic books and perpetuated by the imagining of a god who punishes through violent dispossession and war where women, children and those who live in poverty are crushed: "Maintaining this paradigm [the prophets as social justice advocates] requires selective reading, the universalizing and generalizing of prophetic discourse, and denial of the ways in which the language of the prophetic books perpetuates problematic ideologies" (41). So, O'Brien asks, where did this paradigm come from? And then, I ask, what is left?

O'Brien answers the first question with a genealogy of the politics of biblical interpretation and scholarship that begins with early Christianity, passes through the Enlightenment, the influence of nineteenth century German scholars, and the Social Gospel movement of the twentieth century. On the way through she interrogates those scholarly movements for antisemitism and racism. It is a salutary reminder that interpretations are *made* – made over time and to serve particular purposes – and have consequences. She writes, "progressive discourse about social activism continues to employ many of the racialized and Eurocentric tropes of the past. It privileges the rational, universal, the intellectual, and those who see prophets as conforming to these values" (61). Like the category religion itself which is not a "neutral descriptor" of something found "in the wild"[6] neither are the "intellectual frameworks" (66) which we use to construct our worldviews. Her use of Willie Jennings's book *After Whiteness*[7] draws much needed attention to the white, masculine, individualism that underlies the production of knowledge in western scholarship and its institutions, including the theological.

O'Brien also aims to crack open the stereotypes in progressive Christian discourses which cast alternative understandings of prophecy as "naïve, uneducated and superstitious" and neglect "the nuanced ways in which the category of prophecy is utilized in other understandings of past and present phenomena" (61). The arrogance of this stance, she believes, hinders the work for justice because it places a barrier between charismatic and progressive Christians, hence her call for humility. I find this significant thread running through the book less than convincing. If I had been more open to a wider and deeper understanding of prophecy, I'm not sure it would have changed the mutually respectful relationships I've been privileged to have with charismatic and Pentecostal Christians as we struggled together against climate change, violence and injustice.

So, to my question, what then is left? Where we can we go with our beloved prophets if they are not (or not just) the courageous social justice advocates we have imagined them to be?

Using some of the most well-worn texts with an eye on the Revised Common Lectionary (think Amos 6 and 8, Micah 2 and 6, Isaiah 2, 61 and 58 and the book of the Prophet Jeremiah), O'Brien presents a number

[6] Arnal & McCutcheon, *The Sacred is Profane,* 126
[7] See *Uniting Church Studies* 26(1) and 26(2).

of case studies that interrogate the progressive orthodoxy of the social justice prophets: were Amos and Micah, for example, really calling for economic justice and if so, for whom?

If, from the texts, we can't be sure about "who was oppressing whom and how" (81); if from a deep reading of the texts, the calls for social, economic, ecological justice reveal themselves as ambiguous: then what's to be done in our advocacy? O'Brien suggests that the way forward for Christian social justice advocacy is to start with "social scientific analysis" of the issues we face and only after that, listening to "how the interpreter finds resonances with the biblical text" (77). This is not new practice for many Christian social advocates I have worked with. But her point is well made. At a time when a particular biblical vision of the world and its future is "being granted divine authority" (129) we need to be clearer than ever about what we're advocating for and why. We …

> must be talking about the details of justice, speaking in our own voices about what environmental justice entails and why it matters to our faith, about what forms of racial justice we pursue and whose voices inform that pursuit, about how we define criminal justice, and about the basis of our convictions about gender and sexuality (129).

The prophets may not provide the social and economic foundations for a contemporary vision of a just, inclusive and peaceful world but they can still, over 2000 years later, move and inspire us to action, spark our moral imagination and creativity, and remind us, as does First Isaiah, that after destruction comes hope.

And, as O'Brien argues, "good biblical interpretation is important because the Bible is being weaponized against the planet, and the harm being done in its name must be challenged" (125).

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## Prophets Beyond Activism: a Pasifika response

***Brian Fiu Kolia***

In her *Prophets beyond Activism*, Julia O'Brien seeks to rethink a widely accepted interpretive framework for progressive Christianity: that the Hebrew prophets were primarily social justice activists. She argues that this 'prophets-as-justice-warriors' view has become such an interpretive orthodoxy, that it is often assumed rather than critically examined. O'Brien does not deny that the prophets speak about justice or spoke truth to power. Instead, she cautions that the way the prophets are read can obscure the complexity of the prophets, while perpetuating unexamined ideologies. At the same time, such readings may limit how prophetic texts may be used for justice today. She invites readers to a more nuanced, contextual, humble, and honest engagement with prophetic texts, by recognising their historical layers, literary complexities, and the ways our own modern biases may shape interpretation.

In outlining her argument, O'Brien organises the book into two major parts. In Part 1, "Troubling the Progressive Orthodoxy about the Prophets," which consists of four chapters, she critically examines how the common picture of prophets as primarily social justice activists developed and the assumptions that

underlie it. The chapters attend to historical context, modes of reading, interpretive origins, and the limitations of the orthodoxy.

In the second Part of the book, "New Approaches to Justice and the Prophets," which contains five chapters, O'Brien revisits specific prophetic texts with a view toward justice but doing do in ways that attend to the prophets' distinctiveness and complexity. She takes a specific look at Amos and Micah with respect to economic justice and oppression structures, Isaiah with regards to inclusive justice in conversation with the Gospel of Luke, Jeremiah and the dynamic between the voice of community and the solitary prophetic voice, and Second Isaiah in light of ecological justice. Each chapter explores how these texts might contribute to contemporary justice concerns when interpreted more carefully.

As a Pasifika person, I am naturally drawn to the final chapter on "The Prophets and Ecological Justice." O'Brien expertly brings into discussion the beginnings of the harmful expositions of Scripture which perpetuate anthropocentric attitudes towards Earth. She then proceeds to explain the foundational text of Earth readings, Genesis 1–2, which formulates a "creation paradigm" from which other biblical stories and poems about creation follow. Intriguingly, O'Brien argues that there is an advantage to this creation paradigm as it helps counter many Christian perspectives of millennialist and apocalyptic theological leanings, which deny climate change and human responsibility for climate change. Many of such readings, as O'Brien notes, emerge from the New Testament (see Mark 13:28; Luke 21:11). She writes that a "creation paradigm for climate advocacy provides an important counternarrative to such views, fascinatingly by turning to the Old Testament to challenge particular readings of the New Testament" (115).

As her argument progresses, it is noteworthy that she references Christians with millennialist and apocalyptic perspectives without clarifying which specific denomination or group holds these views. I am inclined to believe that progressives are not climate change deniers, nor do they deny human accountability in the climate crisis. But this dichotomy between progressives and conservatives does not seem to hold in the Pacific, a region considered by many to be on the frontline of the climate catastrophe. And it is in this chapter, from a Pasifika standpoint, that I realise what O'Brien had acknowledged before in earlier chapters: that white privilege, or more specifically, the whiteness of scholarship, may obscure diverse voices which offer new and alternative insights. It is a crisis – I call it a 'crisis' because white scholarship is often normalised while minoritised voices are either ignored or have assimilated into the depths of normalised white scholarship – in scholarship that is overlooked, and in the discussion of climate and the ecological crisis, the very people whose scholarship warrant an ecological reimagining in light of the urgency of the crisis in their contexts, often play second fiddle. Here, I invite O'Brien to engage with some of these authors. Pasifika scholars such as Teresia Teaiwa, Katerina Teaiwa, Epeli Hau'ofa, Maina Talia (now the Tuvaluan Minister for Home Affairs, Climate Change and Environment), Winston Halapua, Jione Havea, Nāsili Vaka'uta, Cliff Bird, Upolu Vaai, and others, have evaded the "orthodoxy" of climate scholarship in this chapter.

Being viewed as small and insignificant, and therefore ignored by dominant discourses, is a common experience for Pasifika peoples. Tongan scholar Epeli Hau'ofa explicates the issue by pointing to our existence and the way our world is viewed by our people. While the rest of the world views Pasifika as tiny islands in the sea, Hau'ofa states to the contrary, saying that Pasifika peoples …

> did not conceive of their world in such microscopic proportions. Their universe comprised not only land surfaces but the surrounding ocean as far as they could traverse and exploit it, the underworld with its fire-controlling and earth-shaking denizens, and the heavens above with their hierarchies of powerful gods and named stars and constellations that people could count on to guide their ways across the seas. Their world was anything but tiny. They thought big and recounted their deeds in epic proportions.[8]

When O'Brien speaks of climate change in this final chapter, she only accounts for Earth, but does not consider the heavens above, nor the ocean, the *moana*! I want to extend the invitation to O'Brien to consider these other spaces for an alternative view of the world. A view that perceives the sea spaces to be just as important as the land spaces. To envision an inverted view of the globe, where the sea spaces are seen as land masses, thus portraying the Pacific Ocean as one gigantic continent. Currently, the oceanic spaces do not seem to matter to most mass land nations, and this is the "orthodoxy" in climate scholarship which I invite O'Brien to consider. In the spirit of Hau'ofa (and other Pasifika scholars), any serious reading of the prophets in the climate crisis, needs to take into account the ocean, connecting all the different (is)lands in Pasifika to form one huge continent.

Additionally, the realities of the ocean need to be considered also, and particularly the realities of rising sea levels for Pasifika. O'Brien writes that "YHWH makes the Earth different so that humans can travel safely to Jerusalem as 'home.' Second Isaiah's vision is clearly anthropocentric, treating nature as a resource to serve human needs" (122). I agree that the text is clearly anthropocentric and favours the return of Judah back to Jerusalem. And O'Brien is right in concluding that "Second Isaiah's vision is for some and not for all" (122). The focus in its modern application, as O'Brien rightfully notes, would seem to "privilege some over others" (123). A reimagining of creation theology is needed, and what O'Brien might consider as not fitting the creation paradigm, might actually fit with a new creation paradigm, one where relocation and repatriation become the realities for climate refugees, particularly for natives of Tuvalu, Tokelau, Kiribati and Marshall Islands, who are forced to relocate to other islands and other nations, due to rising sea levels.

This would offer an alternative to how O'Brien reads Second Isaiah, with regards to YHWH's "geological tampering" (122). Geological tampering privileges one group over another, which means there are those who stand to suffer as a result of the geological tampering. As the exiled nation are imagined to walk freely back to the land, we are reminded that Isaiah is saturated with Exodus imagery.[9] One wonders whether this aspect of the exiles returning should be "read intersectionally" (cf. 123) with the famous "return" of the Isaraelites from Egypt to the Promised Land, and the subsequent conquest narratives which also saw geological tampering, such as the dividing of the Red Sea and the drying up of the Jordan river. Understanding who is being privileged and who stands to suffer when creation is "tampered" with, procures an alternative view of the creation paradigm which would resonate with Pasifika (and other islanders), who suffer from geological tampering by humans, "or more precisely … the people and the systems that facilitate and even normalize devastation" (124).

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[8] Epeli Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," in *We are the Ocean: Selected Works,* edited by Epeli Hau'ofa (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 31.

[9] Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah: A Commentary*, ed. William P. Brown, Carol A. Newsom, and Brent A. Strawn, 1st ed., The Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 302.

In sum, O'Brien's discussion throughout is built on deconstructing the orthodoxy of progressive readings of scripture, that might seem well-intentioned, but fail to give a critical account of prophetic literature. As a biblical scholar, I resonate with this intention for the pure goal of paying critical attention to the ancient context from whence those words emerged and to explore the complexity and nuance of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, as opposed to subscribing the text to a single agenda. However, I wonder if O'Brien's discussion is based on a caricature of progressives as social activists who use a selective and unnuanced range of proof texts to advance a particular version of the Bible which prioritises social justice. Yet, it is not clear if she is referring to her own context, or to progressives in general. Many of the Pasifika scholars mentioned above are progressives, and two of them in particular, Jione Havea and Nāsili Vaka'uta, are pioneers in biblical scholarship in Pasifika, who are always engaging in nuanced readings of the biblical text, to (re)claim justice for the poor, the marginalised, and in particular, the suffering plight of Pasifika peoples who are on ground zero in the climate catastrophe. Despite the prolific scholarship of Havea and Vaka'uta, I notice that O'Brien has not referred to their work, and this adds a different dimension to the orthodoxy, which, in my view, *Prophets Beyond Activism* itself reflects.

*Prophets beyond Activism* is a great reminder in reading the Prophets with respect to the rich tapestry of the diverse works, and the complex diversity of its messages for different eras and settings. The progressive agenda is a noble one, and O'Brien, a progressive herself, invites the reader to be more self-critical in reading by way of a nuanced interpretation. We could do well to follow O'Brien's plan, to be honest with ourselves, not just of our progressive or conservative paths, but of our privilege and paying more attention to the voices our privileges seek to obscure.

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## Beyond Activism, Yes, but Beyond Progressivism?

***Matthew Anslow***

In the 2023 volume of *Uniting Church Studies* focused on activism, I penned an article on a particular expression of Christian activism, namely a movement known as Love Makes a Way (LMAW). This was a movement and campaign I co-founded with two friends and co-led for around four years. I will refrain from going over the story of LMAW here since interested readers can peruse that article now freely available via open access.[10] I will simply explain that LMAW, which was most active from 2014–2018, focused on advocating for refugees, primarily using civil disobedience, in the face of Australia's draconian immigration policies. It has a legitimate claim to being Australia's largest-ever Christian activist movement and is almost certainly Australia's largest church-based civil disobedience campaign to date.

I mention this not to signpost my own history or credentials regarding activism, nor to boast about my achievements (which, in any case, are hardly mine). Rather, I mention it as a foundation on which to reflect on a point of great appreciation I have for Julia O'Brien's arguments in *Prophets beyond Activism*.

[10] Matthew Anslow, "A Distinctly Christian Activism: Lessons from Love Makes a Way," *Uniting Church Studies* 25, no 1 (2023): 9-24.

O'Brien's central purpose in her book is to trouble the firm conviction, found widely across contemporary progressive Christianity, that the Hebrew prophets were primarily concerned with social justice. Frequently depicted as fierce individualists courageously standing against injustice, the prophets are often equated with activists, who, like progressive activists, "speak truth to power." O'Brien rightly takes this characterisation to task.

My experience of Love Makes a Way confirms O'Brien's observation about the way the language of "prophets" and "prophecy" is utilised in progressive discourse. LMAW was regularly labelled a "prophetic movement," a "prophetic voice," or some such similar designation. I never considered it such. Indeed, such designations made me enormously uncomfortable. Theologically speaking, my doctoral studies in the Gospel of Matthew's prophetic christology had helped clarify some of my objections. But I was also immensely nervous about the implications for public discourse of labelling something "prophetic." Prophecy, after all, involves the conviction that one is speaking or acting in some sense on behalf of God. If one's social and political expressions are equated with God's will, what room can there be for compromise, much less the possibility that we are wrong? Tribalism, arrogance, and self-righteousness seem to me the likely consequences of identifying our activism as prophetic.

For these and other reasons, I am immensely grateful to O'Brien for her work in bringing attention to what she calls "progressive orthodoxy" about the prophets. I suspect that only a progressive Christian, which O'Brien explicitly identifies as (e.g., 2, 126), could have written this book. Despite the fact that *Prophets beyond Activism* is explicitly aimed at progressives, and that I am not a progressive (nor a conservative, mind you), I learned much from its pages.

O'Brien's introduction gets right down to business, outlining eight problems that she perceives with the progressive orthodoxy regarding the prophets that are explored in the book's chapters (3–6). For instance, she points out that progressive orthodoxy is selective in its reading of texts, that it is often blind to its own contextuality, that it can be intellectually arrogant, and that it invokes the authority of the Bible for its own agendas (what she calls "biblical ventriloquism"). Of course, these are problems that *any* orthodoxy can face. In the context of progressive Christianity, these represent important observations about the way the prophets are appropriated in service of a concern for social justice. The result is a truncated and stereotyped rendering of the prophets that goes unnoticed or excused because the social justice goals of progressives are deemed an end worthy of such a misleading portrayal.

O'Brien spends the next two chapters outlining the historical problems with the progressive understanding of the prophets, problems both ancient (Chapter 1) and contemporary (Chapter 2). In Chapter 1 she shows convincingly that the prophets are rather diverse – even discordant – in their message and activity. Moreover, O'Brien shows that prediction plays a larger role amongst the Hebrew prophets than progressives are usually willing to admit. The common notion that prophets are "forthtellers" rather than "foretellers" does not sit so well with the evidence. Her account here is incisive, revealing the simplified progressive account of the prophets stands on shaky historical ground. Chapter 2 exposes the sheer difficulty of ascertaining what these poetic and affective texts mean, before turning a contemporary liberationist eye on them to show that they are not as commensurate with progressive notions of social justice as some would like.

To my mind, Chapter 3 is a highlight of the book. O'Brien deftly outlines the origins of the "progressive orthodoxy" about the prophets, tracing major shifts in understanding, particularly through the Enlightenment period. Here, O'Brien shows how modern philosophical shifts, particularly in epistemology and metaphysics, narrowed the window on what was acceptable discourse. The result was a distillation of the prophetic so that it fit into this narrowed, scientific, and rationalist – and also Romantic – account of reality. Such understandings of prophecy jettisoned its predictive or "supernatural" character and confined it within the realm of the ethical. This is a chapter worth the price of admission alone.

Chapter 4 sees O'Brien evaluate the picture she has so far painted. She suggests that, despite its own self-perception, the progressive approach to the prophets is in fact bound to the Enlightenment project, championing what Willie Jennings calls "white self-sufficient masculinity" (55) and perpetuating various troubling trends, not least antisemitism and colonialism. Indeed, she notes that the elitist progressive approach to prophecy – in which alternative views are deemed "naïve, uneducated, and superstitious" (61) – is both Eurocentric (in privileging Enlightenment values) and conservative (in taming the prophets according to modern categories; 63).

From here the second half of the book turns toward particular passages, bringing them into conversation with contemporary issues for activists (economic justice; structural oppression; inclusion; "heroic individualism" and trauma; and ecological justice). I will refrain from summarising these chapters, lest my comments here become little more than synopsis. But, again, I applaud O'Brien for her penetrating critique of progressive orthodoxy regarding prophets, and also her constructive suggestions for our work for justice.

Not that I do not have questions for and disagreements with O'Brien. Her arguments are bold and, as such, they are likely to generate fruitful disputes. For my part, the most central issue raised by the book is the nature of our political and ideological allegiances. Put another way, if I take issue with O'Brien's arguments, it is not so much the arguments themselves that I question, but rather some of the suppositions that underlie them.

Here I want to try to retain the nuance that O'Brien's book deserves. All biblical scholarship involves underlying socio-political allegiances, and to point this out or to identify a particular such allegiance is banal. O'Brien is as forthright as one can hope in identifying her own commitments as a progressive. However, her critique of progressive treatments of the prophets is undertaken in such a way as to forego any kind of critique of progressivism itself. Indeed, progressivism becomes the grid through which all else is judged, including Scripture. Not that critiquing Scripture is inherently wrong – I am not a fundamentalist, and I am not opposed to pointing out potential issues with scriptural texts, particularly when considering a text's *Wirkungsgeschichte* (history of effect/influence). But Scripture remains, for me at least, authoritative, able to call my own view of the world into question.

In *Prophets beyond Activism*, however, critique generally goes only one way. True, the "progressive orthodoxy" regarding the prophets is challenged. But this speaks only of a progressive interpretation, not of anything substantial about progressivism as such, which is generally presented as self-evidently correct in its basic intuitions about the world. This results in certain disagreeable moments in the book.

For instance, O'Brien points out how progressives reduce the prophets to social activists and, in doing so, divorce them from Judaism (esp. 56–59). This, she rightly notes, perpetuates harmful anti-Jewish tropes (58). However, much of the book, particularly its latter half, involves critiquing the prophets – who, remember, have been firmly identified as Jewish – for their failure to live up to progressive ideals. For instance, "Amos produces … mixed justice results" with regard to gender and race (86). Likewise, Micah comes up short regarding the gendered dimensions of its concern with land loss (87). I remain unsure how these two strategies cohere. To insist upon the centrality of the prophets' Jewishness in order to combat antisemitism, whilst also critiquing these prophets for being racist, misogynist etc., seems confused. Does the latter not constitute a kind of anti-Jewish move that the book earlier warns against?

Likewise, the Bible is said to have as its most enduring legacy not its laws but its function "to shape and reshape our moral imagination" (89). It is difficult not to perceive here the traces of an older liberal theological view wherein the substance of Jewish law was deemed irrelevant in favour of the more universalistic ethic or principle underlying it.

The problem, I think, is the way the book centres a progressive worldview; the progressive way of seeing the world is simply assumed to be good, right, and true. O'Brien never broaches the possibility that the issues she raises about the "progressive orthodoxy" regarding the prophets might stem from maladies within progressivism itself. As mentioned above, she judiciously points to the way the progressive reading of the prophets is captive to the Enlightenment project, not least its rather conservative ratification of the self-sufficient individual, as well as its perpetuation of antisemitism, colonialism, elitism, Eurocentrism, etc. Elsewhere, though, judgements from a progressive viewpoint are self-evidently true. There is something of a contradiction here.

The result is that progressivism stands over the scriptural witness. O'Brien regularly states that the prophets fall short of a variety of progressive convictions. Such convictions, rather than Christ, serve as the hermeneutical key of the prophetic literature. Indeed, the book at one point appears to subject Christ himself to this standard, seemingly affirming the judgement that he fell short of a liberative attitude to women (64). I cannot help but get the sense that progressive values have displaced Christ as the guiding light in this book.

Moreover, O'Brien speaks of not needing advocates for economic justice "to use Amos or Micah to tell me what is wrong about my world or to provide biblical precedent to challenge those wrongs" (78). Instead, we ought to use social scientific analysis of the world to analyse the present, and only then find resonances with the biblical text (77). This makes me wonder what the role of Scripture (and perhaps tradition) might be for O'Brien. If we already can determine what is wrong with the world, and if we have enough of the answers such that we can reproach the prophets for not attaining to our present understanding, what need have we for Scripture at all?

Of course, I realise that matters of biblical interpretation are complex. And, again, I am not commending a fundamentalist approach such that we simply adhere to a plain reading of the scriptural texts, never mounting any challenge to its words. But whereas O'Brien centres progressive values as the standard for such challenge, I would stridently insist that Christ is that measure.

In sum, I see tensions in O'Brien's work that require ongoing reflection. In particular, there is friction between the centring of progressivism in a seemingly unquestioned way and the book's important call to humility:

> I am convinced we need fewer churches where everyone agrees with one another and more churches able to engage in dialogue across difference. Because each of us, including the most passionate advocate, has a limited view of justice, we need to talk and rub up against each other in hopes of discovering both the values we share and our own blind spots. (78)

Here I would question the need to discover mere *values* we share (I am critical of the reduction of ethics to "values," but this is an issue for another day). And I would want to interrogate the apparent reduction of the purpose of dialogue to the advocate's quest for justice. Still, I am wholeheartedly in favour of the substance of this call, to engage in genuine dialogue with those different to us. In what I have said, I am not telling progressives not to be progressives. But if we are unable to bring our own assumptions into question, such that dialogue might challenge and alter our social and political convictions, I fear such dialogue risks fostering the status quo and generating a false humility.

I say all of this with some trepidation, for at least two reasons. First, the current political climate in the West is such that my comments could easily be construed as a contribution to our insufferable culture wars. I have no interest in this. I do not mean my comments as an attack on progressives, much less a defence of a conservatism to which I do not subscribe. I mean only to probe tensions inherent to O'Brien's book, which is explicitly progressive. Second, I would not want my comments to suggest that O'Brien's book is not an important and thorough corrective to certain troublesome ideas about the prophets. On the contrary, this is a book well worth reading and contemplating. I do not think its critique, though aimed at progressives, is relevant only for them. Further, the constructive work undertaken in the book is exceedingly valuable for those of us who seek after the reality of God's kingdom to be embodied in our lives and communities.

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## Appreciation and Response

***Julia M. O'Brien***

I am grateful for these authors' gracious and challenging reviews of *Prophets Beyond Activism*. Each has understood my goals in resisting the tendency of progressive activists to flatten prophetic literature in the service of a worthy agenda. And each has raised important questions about the shortcomings of my work. Throughout the volume, I invited others to add their wisdom to my own, and I thank them for doing just that.

Elenie Poulos helpfully voices the "ouch" factor of my criticism of the progressive use of the term "prophetic." As she is painfully aware from her own activism, the work of social justice is so gruelling and underappreciated – especially in our own time and place – that most of us desperately long for support. Do we really need critique from our friends right now? Elenie also articulates the ensuing problem: if the prophets are not clear beacons of social justice, then what can continue to us fuel our vocation?

The second half of the volume attempts to answer this question. We can be enriched by wrestling with prophetic literature while avoiding what I call "biblical ventriloquism," the tendency to cite biblical texts in ways that that amplify and authorize our own voices. My claim is that "when [biblical interpretation is] done with care and honesty, it has the potential for inspiring and empowering social change" (p. 125). Of course, my call for a nuanced and at times critical reading of biblical texts requires a great deal of effort and offers no easy formula for crafting rousing sermons or punchy placards. And yet, I know of no other way to be true to these texts and to ourselves. I understand my calling as a biblical scholar and theological educator as calling for greater attention to texts and to our patterns of interpretation.

In describing my approach to activism, Elenie hears me as prioritizing social scientific analysis. Of course, the Prophets and the Bible as a whole go beyond the realm of social science, deprioritizing human structures and insisting upon Ultimacy in ways that analysis cannot. My larger point is that simply citing biblical passages does not answer the difficult question of what justice entails in a specific context. The rousing demand of Amos to "let justice roll down like water" (5:24) and of Micah "to do justice and to love kindness" (6:8) does inspire, yet these words can be translated and applied to the present in very different and equally legitimate ways. I implore preachers to help me better understand what is going on in the world and to explain their own formulation of a Christian response.

Brian Fiu Kolia appropriately listens for the voices missing in my attempts at conversation. He suggests that my characterization of progressive activists as dismissive of conservative theology and selective in their reading of biblical texts does not ring true in the Pacific, where he finds greater theological fluidity and hermeneutical nuance. He invites me to engage more directly with Pasifika biblical scholars in order to recognize and dismantle the cultural assumptions undergirding my thought.

Brian is right that my argument has particular interlocutors in mind, ones who should have been named more clearly. I am not challenging the work of all Christian social activists but instead those who anoint their social justice agendas with the label "prophetic" and cherry-pick passages to undergird their claims. Not all activists behave in this way, of course (even in my own context), and I would have done well to draw attention to alternative modes of faithful activism. Indeed, doing so would have supported my insistence (particularly in ch. 4) that this particular orthodoxy about the prophets emerged from and continues to undergird a dominant Eurocentric worldview.

Much of Brian's critique appropriately focused on my chapter devoted to Second Isaiah and ecological justice. I have indeed read Jione Havea's evocative commentary on Jonah (Earth Bible Commentary, Bloomsbury 2020) and appreciated its important disruption of the traditional genre of biblical commentary; I assigned it to students in my course "The Bible and the Climate Crisis." I also have devoted much attention to climate science and the existential threat to the islands posed by rising sea levels. And yet, clearly, I still am in the early stages of "thinking with" Pasifika insights. After marinating for decades in the critiques posed by feminist, womanist, Black, queer, and postcolonial voices, these latter insights come naturally to me. I look forward to learning more deeply from Brian and his colleagues.

In response to Brian's criticism that I focus on land masses rather than oceanic spaces, I have been pondering how to read Second Isaiah with and for the ocean and its inhabitants. On the surface, these chapters seem

also to merit Brian's critique. Isaiah 40-54 primarily invokes the sea as a vehicle for transporting riches to land-dwellers, calling unidentified "coastlands" to witness the miracle of the repatriation of Judean exiles to Jerusalem and to ferry her children home in ships laden with silver and gold (Isa 42; also 60). Throughout, water enlivens not when it fills the ocean but when it spouts forth in the desert to quench the thirst of those journeying from one land boundary to another (Isa 44; 48).

More central to its claims (and seemingly more problematic in a Pasifika context) is Second Isaiah's delegitimizing of Diaspora. It single-mindedly attempts to convince Judeans living in Babylon to (re)locate to Jerusalem: the land of their ancestors is their only true home, such that Diaspora is a tragedy to be reversed by return migration. For this reason, modern climate refugees may find Second Isaiah less generative for their own spatial re-orientation than the perspectives of Judeans who remained in Babylon, seemingly embracing their hybrid identity, and that of modern thinkers (Jewish, African) for whom Diaspora is a valid and even productive way of living. I engage with these voices in my forthcoming commentary on Isaiah 40-66 (Interpretation Bible Commentary) but am eager to hear more Pasifika voices on the nature of Diaspora.

Matthew Anslow poses two major critiques to which I respond. The first regards my hermeneutic, which he describes as grounded in unquestioned progressive commitments rather than the mind of Christ. Matthew is right that there are some progressive values that I simply acknowledge rather than debate. I learned long ago that argumentation will not convince others to join me in addressing disparities in gender equity, racial justice, and economic status, but that it is my responsibility to explicitly articulate these commitments. I do however forcefully challenge other values that typically characterize progressivism, such as the denigration of tradition and ritual, particularly in Part 1 of the volume.

Matthew also is right that I do not espouse the Christocentric hermeneutic that informs his faith and activism. Like the Anabaptists with whom I co-labour in my own geographical context, he grounds his advocacy for asylum seekers in Jesus's care for the stranger. Yet while I recognize and celebrate the fruits of this framework, it is not my own.

In brief autobiographical comments in ch. 4, I explain that my progressive ideals were formed within the Christian tradition and while reading biblical texts. But I do not presume that my values clearly replicate the mind of Jesus. My study of the New Testament and the diversity of its interpretation has convinced me that while one can legitimately prioritize certain Gospel passages and understand them in particular ways (as teaching nonviolence, care for the stranger, etc.), other texts and other meanings also can be – and have been – framed as central to Christian belief. Those espousing just war theory, rigid standards of purity, and asceticism also have found warrant in the witness of the Gospels; and feminist and postcolonial interpreters have drawn attention to the implicit violence and scripts of patriarchy scaffolding even our most beloved texts.

We can and should articulate the values that inform us, but to claim them as "biblical" or the "mind of Christ" requires us to interpret the New Testament with the same textual and interpretive transparency that I am seeking for the Prophets. I find such transparency missing, for example, in *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Augsburg, 2009), where biblical scholar Eric Seibert "solves" the violence of the Old Testament by proposing that Christians evaluate problematic passages

according to the standard of Jesus: since Jesus reveals a God who is kind to the wicked, nonviolent, does not punish people with infirmity or disaster, and is loving, any contrary witness must be seen as human perception rather than divine revelation. To maintain this characterization of Jesus, however, Seibert is evidently selective in his choice of Gospel passages and discussion of debates regarding the historical Jesus.

A Christocentric hermeneutic also too easily draws a distinction between Jesus and the ethical power of the Hebrew Bible. Like the Christian appropriation of the prophets as proto-Christians, it credits Jesus will all the good of the Bible while dismissing the bad as "Jewish" or, more politely, as "tradition-bound." Understood in this way, Jesus becomes an innovator, a disruptor of ancient faith rather than its extension.

Given that resisting Christian anti-Judaism has informed my life and scholarship, Matthew's critique that the logic of my volume is implicitly anti-Jewish touches an especially tender spot for me. He claims that (1) if I describe the prophets as Jewish, and (2) I critique the prophets, (3) then I am necessarily critiquing Judaism. I respectfully disagree with this framing of my claims.

Regarding (1), while I resist attempts to separate Jesus from ancient Judaism, I actually do not characterize the Hebrew Bible as Jewish, at least not in the ways that label is typically understood. The prominent Jewish scholars with whom I studied at Hebrew Union College (Cincinnati) and Duke University insisted that the Hebrew Bible is not coterminous with modern Judaism, which has been profoundly shaped by the rabbinic tradition, its liturgical formulations, and its modes of interpretation. Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity are two trajectories of thought carrying forward the ancient Israelite texts that we call the Hebrew Bible; the prominent Jewish scholar Allan Segal describes them as siblings born from a common parent (*Rebecca's Children: Christianity and Judaism in the Ancient World*, Harvard University Press, 1986). Similarly, Marc Brettler and Amy Jill Levine's excellent volume *The Bible with and Without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently* (HarperCollins, 2020), demonstrates than both Jews and Christians read the Hebrew Bible through the interpretive frameworks of their later traditions. I do resist supersessionist claims that these texts are now only for Christians, and I honour and seek to learn from Jewish interpretation. But I understand neither the Jewish nor Christian interpretive traditions as determinative of meaning.

In response to (3), I adamantly insist that asking hard questions about texts claimed by a tradition does not disrespect the tradition itself. The work of Jewish feminists such as Judith Plaskow, Rachel Adler, Amy Kalmanofsky, and Tamar Kamionkowski makes this abundantly clear. So too do the insights of Christian interpreters who critique the patriarchy and violence of both Hebrew Bible and New Testament texts, such as the prolific and incisive prophetic scholarship of Carolyn J. Sharp, Professor of Homiletics at Yale Divinity School, and volumes in the feminist-oriented Wisdom Bible Commentary series (Liturgical Press).

These responses have pushed me to clarify my assumptions and goals – including for myself. And they have appropriately pointed to missing voices and perspectives. I am grateful to all three, and to Geoff Thompson for inviting me to this conversation. By learning more about their social justice ministries and the powerful work of the Uniting Church of Australia, I have been inspired to listen better and do more. While activism may be lonely, we are not alone in seeking to address the needs of a suffering world.

**Julia M. O'Brien** (B. A., Wake Forest, 1981; M. Div., Duke, 1984; Ph. D., Duke, 1988) is Professor Emerita at Lancaster Theological Seminary (USA). Publications include *Challenging Prophetic Metaphor* (2008), three commentaries on the Minor Prophets, *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies* (Editor-in Chief, 2014), and *Oxford Handbook of the Minor Prophets* (Editor, 2012). *Isaiah 40-66* (Interpretation Bible Commentaries) and *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, sixth edition (Associate Editor) will be published in 2026.

**Elenie Poulos** is an ordained Minister of the Uniting Church and an Adjunct Fellow in Politics and International Relations at Macquarie University and past Visiting Fellow at Harris Manchester College at the University of Oxford. Her research on religion and politics is interdisciplinary, drawing from politics, sociology of religion and critical studies in religion. She was the director of the UnitingJustice Australia for 15 years and is a former Commissioner of the World Council of Churches' advisory body on international affairs.

**Brian Fiu Kolia** is a second-generation Australian-born Samoan. He is a lecturer in Hebrew Bible/Old Testament at Malua Theological College. He holds a PhD from the University of Divinity, in Naarm/Melbourne, Australia. He is the author of Carrying Qoheleth's Maota (House): An Australian-Samoan Diasporic Reading (SBL Press, 2024) and co-editor with Michael Mawson on Unsettling Theologies: Memory, Identity and Place (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024). More importantly, he is a husband to Tanaria and a father to Elichai.

**Matthew Anslow** is Educator for Lay Ministry with the Uniting Church's NSW/ACT Synod and Lecturer at United Theological College. He is the author of *Fulfilling the Law and the Prophets: The Prophetic Vocation of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew* (2022). Matt has published numerous articles in the areas of biblical studies and theology, philosophy, peacemaking, direct action and civil disobedience, preaching, and agriculture. He was a co-founder of Love Makes a Way, Australia's largest ever church-based civil disobedience campaign. He lives with his wife, Ashlee, and their three children in Blackheath, New South Wales.

# About Uniting Church Studies

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## Abbreviations

***Documents***

Hyperlinks are embedded in the full name and provide access to the full documents.

| | |
|---|---|
| *AssMin* | Assembly Minutes |
| *BOU* | Basis of Union |
| *CS* | Covenanting Statement |
| *RP* | Revised Preamble |
| *UCMC* | The Uniting Church is a Multicultural Church |
| *UCAConst* | Uniting Church Constitution |
| *UCARegs2025* | Uniting Church Regulations 2025 |
| *UIW2* | Uniting in Worship 2 |

***Institutions and Organisations***

| | |
|---|---|
| *UCA* | Uniting Church in Australia |
| *UAICC* | Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress |
| *WCC* | World Council of Churches |
| *ASC* | Assembly Standing Committee |

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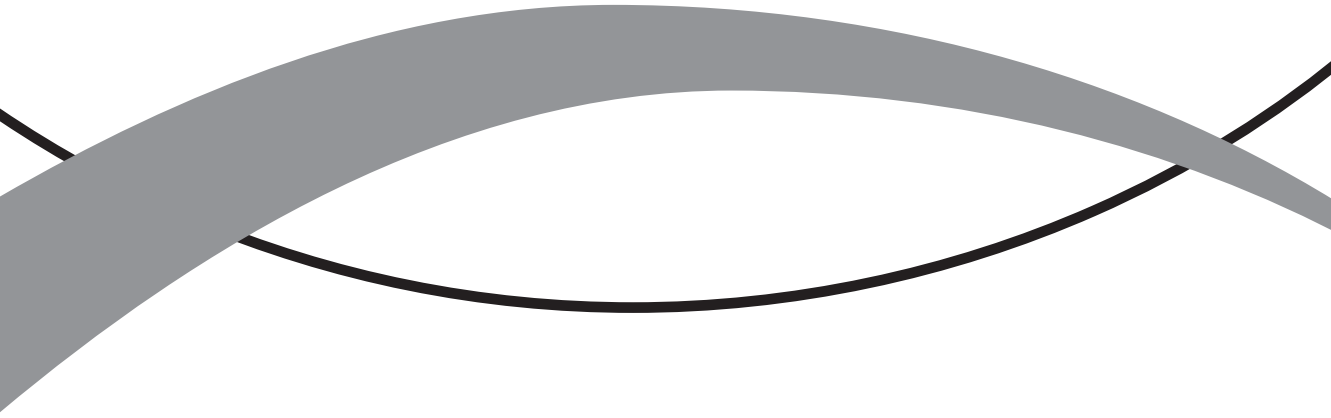
| *UCS* | Uniting Church Studies |



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