The Future of New Testament Studies Will Be Reparative or There Will Be No Future.

A Preliminary Metaphor: Apocalypse

I want to start by introducing a metaphor, or a lens, through which we can view New Testament studies today. The other paper I’m giving at BNCTC this year is on Revelation so apocalyptic thinking has been on my mind. And apocalyptic signs seem ubiquitous – collapsing economies, democracies, and employment sectors are all around us. There are dwindling numbers, at least for the next few years, of undergraduate-aged students to register at our universities. Permanent academic positions are increasingly replaced by precarious, temporary staff, if they are replaced at all when senior scholars retire. Many of us were on strike this past semester to try and protect our pensions, and we may well be out on the picket lines again before too long. Things seem grim. Things are changing, and not always for the better.

Rapid changes and the destruction of the status quo are key elements of apocalyptic literature. Revelation describes the sudden slaughter of the people of earth through several means, from the violence of war (6:4) to famine (6:8), as well as increasing prices of staples such as wheat and barley (6:6). 4 Ezra describes the inversion of nature’s order, with blood coming from wood, barren seas giving up fish, and the earth no longer producing food (5:1-13). What once was normal can no longer be taken for granted, from Britain’s perennially rainy summers to admissions numbers for Theology and Religion programmes. We make do with ever decreasing amounts of funding, space, staff, and students.

But the thing about apocalypses that often gets over looked is that change creates the space for something new and wonderful. And we have a choice, if we want to assert it, about
what the new order looks like. We have a choice about submitting to the marketization of Higher Education, of our students, of our research and its REFability, and of our jobs. We have a choice in how we interact with each other.

1. Sara Ahmed, Living a Feminist Life

This summer I’ve been reading Sara Ahmed’s work, and so I’m departing from the question of the future of BNTO research in order to think more about the future of BNTO scholars. Between Ahmed’s visit to Sheffield in May and my experiences on the UCU picket lines in the spring, I’ve been thinking a lot about the labour I do and which labour is valued. I’ve also been thinking more deeply about the relationship between the way I carry out my research, the content of my research, and my embodied experience as a human being with a job rather than an esoteric identity as “scholar.”¹ There persists in the academy a narrative that the ideas and theories we generate emerge from “contemplation and withdrawal”; we have a tendency to erase or dissemble how much actual work goes into “conceptual work.”² In contrast, Ahmed identifies the work of being a feminist, of gaining knowledge from struggle, as “sweaty concepts,” ideas that are generated from coming up against systemic road blocks and from trying to make changes in the world.³ When we resist these roadblocks, we create disturbances in the world.

These disturbances make visible how systems of power, structural hierarchies, and established patterns, make the world more comfortable for some bodies to navigate than others, and that these systems and our experiences in them are reflected in how we do our work, whether we are conscious of it or not. Some pass through the world making very few ripples, while others seem to cause a wake after them. These disturbances (or lack thereof) we make in our lives and

in our places of work are important to recognize. In her work on “use,” Ahmed reflects on how “use” implies an inherent function, and without that function something can be said to be out of use. Easy use of an object is done without thought, whereas use that disrupts stands out. She writes, “the more a path is used the more a path is used” – paths less frequently travelled are more difficult to push through; branches and weeds may obscure them or prevent us from walking them easily. “A path is made clear by work,” Ahmed observes. This is true also in how we interact with our colleagues, how we carry out our research, the level of ease we feel walking through the world.

Sara Ahmed’s blog is called “Feminist Killjoys: Killing Joy as a World Making Project.” A killjoy is one who does the work to make a new path. A killjoy creates disruption, moves with friction through the world. I see in this title an echo of the apocalyptic hopes articulated in the texts that make up my current research. Killing Joy as a World Making Project. Breaking down what is rotten and making anew.

Ahmed applies the used path analogy to the cited man: “The more he is cited the more he is cited.” Take a look at your papers for this conference, take a look at the last few articles you published. How many of the scholars you engage with are white men? Are you seeking out women? Scholars of colour? Are you disrupting your normal habits of research? How about manels and manthologies? Men, have you pledged not to sit on all-male panels or publish in all-male volumes? If you are inviting women and scholars of colour to contribute to your project and are still coming up unbalanced, reflect: what is it about the topic/deadline/location that is discouraging? Does this project need to go ahead now/in this form?

Disruption can also take the form of placing your own body in the way of the systemic difficulties imposed on more vulnerable colleagues by your university, your department, or higher education in general. This means supporting junior scholars, women, people of colour, queer scholars — sometimes this support might be at the expense of senior, cis hetero white, male scholars. It involves voluntarily, without being asked, taking on some of the thankless admin labour that junior scholars, women, scholars of colour, are routinely expected to do at the expense of their research. It means less competition, and more collaboration.

2. Eve Sedgwick, Reparative Reading

The other piece of writing that has given voice to something I think we should pay attention to in the BNTS is Eve Sedgwick’s essay on Paranoid and Reparative reading. Segdwick’s essay is important for a number of reasons. She acknowledges how important critical engagement with our sources and our scholarship is, and how this critical, or paranoid, reading skill allows us to identify hegemonic social relationships. This ability to read using a paranoid lens has given us feminist theories, queer theories, class analysis, post-colonial analysis, disability analysis, and many more ways of engaging fruitfully with the Bible and its social, political, and literary contexts. The last thirty years of scholarship are testament to how important this kind of paranoid reading has been for the field and for scholarship in general, something that I join Sedgwick in acknowledging and valuing. But Sedgwick is more interested in what knowledge does. She recognizes the fact that knowledge and its production are not neutral, that scholarship is not neutral, and that our research has ramifications whether we intend them or not.

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7 Sedgwick, “Paranoid and Reparative,” 124.
So paranoia is illuminating, but also limiting. It allows us to construct patterns and systems of meaning, or of oppression, in various aspects of literature, culture, or history. But paranoia is only one way of engaging with the world, and Sedgwick reminds us of the dangers of forgetting that paranoia is but one tool of many. Paranoia is contagious. In trying to analyse the hateful or harmful or envious aspects of the world, the scholar risks embodying or internalizing those characteristics.\(^8\) Paranoia becomes embedded rather than put on like a pair of glasses.\(^9\) Paranoia points out violence, but it does not do anything to combat it.

Reparative reading, on the other hand, is a lens that seeks to illuminate the joyful; Sedgwick describes it as “additive” in its approach to texts rather than destructive.\(^10\) Heather Love’s response to Sedgwick articulates further what this might mean.\(^11\) Love says, “This kind of reading contrasts with familiar academic protocols like maintaining critical distance, outsmarting (and other forms of one-upmanship), refusing to be surprised (or if you are, then not letting on), believing the hierarchy, becoming boss.”\(^12\) Reparative reading, on the other hand, welcomes surprise, multiplicity, divergence, and creativity.\(^13\) Reading reparatively is about noticing, taking joy in observation, and experiencing affect. This is not to say that reparative readings are naïve, however: “To be other than paranoid […], to practice other than paranoid forms of knowing does not, in itself, entail a denial of the reality or gravity of enmity or oppression.”\(^14\) Instead, reparative modes of engagement allow the possibility of positive surprise as well as the negative.

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\(^8\) Sedgwick, “Paranoid and Reparative,” 127-8.
\(^9\) Sedgwick, “Paranoid and Reparative,” 130-143.
\(^10\) Sedgwick, “Paranoid and Reparative,” 149.
\(^12\) Love, “Truth and Consequences,” 235.
They allow for the possibility of building up while we are picking apart. They urge us to answer “yes, and…” rather than a simple “no.”

How can our actions embody reparative world building rather than paranoia? Combining Sedgewick with Ahmed, we might think about how we are building up the BNTS and whom we are supporting. Support includes formal mentoring but also being a killjoy in informal conversations, calling out or correcting those whose paranoid readings put these scholars in harm’s way, whether online, at conferences, or in our responses to their scholarship.

**Conclusion: What does this mean for the BNTC?**

We are rightly proud of our critical thinking skills but we need to do better with reparative analysis. If we return to the apocalyptic analogy I outlined at first, biblical scholarship has done a great job so far with the fire and brimstone, but has a long way to go if it wants to foster a new heaven and a new earth that doesn’t merely repeat the old, flawed world. This is true of our scholarship and also true of how we treat each other. As Ahmed’s work suggests, the work of the academy is reflected in our lives as people; to ignore the interrelationship between what we write as scholars and how we act as colleagues only serves to prop up oppressive modes of hierarchy; it may do the paranoid work of tearing down but it prevents the reparative work of building up. What new paths can we create? What new culture should we try to build in our scholarly relationships in our departments and in our fields? What does disruption look like for New Testament studies? I have made a few suggestions of things that might feel uncomfortable to do, that might seem to kill joy, and therefore might help us think beyond deconstruction and to encourage reparative work.