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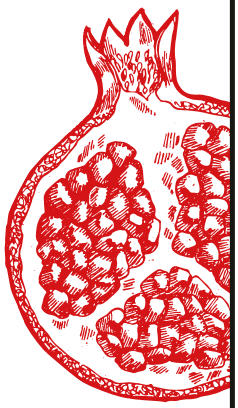

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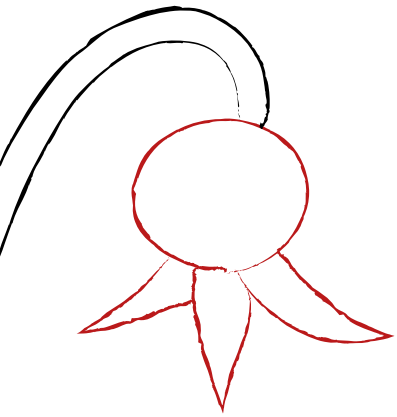

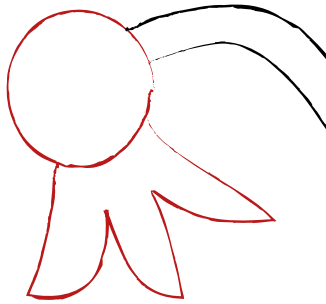

Special Issue: Hope

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A FEW THOUGHTS ON HOPE

Jeffrey L. Cooley

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Abstract

This essay is an introduction to the theme of this special issue, "Hope," and includes an elaboration on the situation that inspired the theme and a few brief reflections on the topic.

Cette brève réflexion introduit le thème de ce numéro spécial, « Espoir », et décrit la situation qui a inspiré ce thème et propose quelques idées sur ce sujet.

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A FEW THOUGHTS ON HOPE

Jeffrey L. Cooley

The motivation for inviting the studies gathered here was born in the first great plague of the new millennium.[1] They are the manifestation of a desire to *craft hope* within our guild of scholars by the very means of that guild. Permit me to explain, if you will, some of my thoughts on the genesis of this collection, which is derived from the joint 2021 and 2022 sessions of the Assyriology and the Bible and the Prophetic Texts and Their Ancient Contexts sections of the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature.

In that dark time, my wife and I endeavored, like so many other parents, to normalize our nuclear family's isolation. On the list of novelties

[1] This introduction benefited from the recommendations and insights from this issue's coeditors, Rannfrid Lasine Thelle and Jennifer Singletary. I thank them for their indulgence and acknowledge that my comments may or may not reflect their diligent considerations. In addition, Rann and I are profoundly thankful to Jen for her managerial leadership in putting this issue together. Finally, the three us wish to express our deep thanks to the editors of AABNER, in particular Izaak J. de Hulster and Valérie Nicolet, for accepting this collection and for guiding us through the publication process, and Michael Helfield for his careful copyediting.

were family walks (you can easily walk to the river from our house, apparently), a movie-watching schedule that introduced our boys to films that brought my wife and/or myself happiness in our youth (aka "covideos"), and online streaming church services coupled with street-side communion (a barely sustainable ecclesiastical situation). I taught myself to play the cornet to the household's joyous entertainment (I'm quite sure). Such activities dovetailed with new modalities of work and schooling. And always looming above and below us were our worries that our loved ones might get devoured by the viral monster that ultimately consumed millions worldwide.

As we deliberately constructed household practices intended to chime tones of calm—and hope—a realization emerged, one that, if I had thought of it before, had not made much of an impact: hope was not solely (or merely) an emotion, pie-eyed at worst, empirically grounded at best. Hope was not just a centripetal feeling or primal ambition that propelled us to move, it was also inclusive of the moving itself and the process of crafting it. It *was* the succession of deliberate acts that sought to fashion order in the chaos, presence in spite of absence, gain against loss, knowledge within ignorance, and courage from fear. Hope for us was a series of deliberate motions that craned our necks ever forward toward the horizon. We could not know what was over its ill-defined edge, but we could deliberately perform life liturgies that marked and framed our experience as we traveled together toward it. Perhaps there was no felicitous solution or resolution on the other side of the horizon (so many *were* lost and bereaved!), but we would be, somehow, better in our journey as a result of our litanies of exercises. At least we would not be worse for it.

I imagine my own experience is hardly unique, though maybe my realization emerged far more sluggishly than that of others; I can be dull-witted. Still, I think it is manifest that most do understand hope as an intangible, a fleeting wisp that can be described but not seen, touched, or performed. Illustratively, an academic acquaintance of mine recently recounted a brief exchange that her child ("M") had with a friend and that friend's mother on the realization that churches consistently feature crosses in their exterior architectural embellishments:

M's friend: "Why are there crosses on churches?"

M's friend's mother: "Well, the cross is where Jesus died, and so for some people, it represents hope."

M: "But hope is invisible! They should have put a gust of wind, like a fan or something, instead!"

We might be inclined to describe the thoughts here as those of a delightfully clever child who simply wishes to carefully (architecturally?) distinguish between a concrete thing and an abstraction. But M implicitly submits, as well, that hope, properly understood, is a propelling power ("a gust of wind, like a fan"), even if it cannot be observed directly. M offers a bodyless, structureless hope that bears the capacity to make something move.

Now, most of this volume's contributions wrestle with the words of such writers as Ezekiel, the Second Isaiah, and Šubši-mešrê-Šakkan, writers who were compelled, of course, by cultural conventions to express their hope poetically. So, it seems apt (or at least less arbitrary) to push off from M's perspicacious observations and drift toward a couple of our own poets to visit their thoughts, too, on hope. The great nineteenth-century American poet Emily Dickinson wrote:

"Hope" is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops—at all—

And sweetest—in the Gale—is heard—
And sore must be the storm—
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm—

I've heard it in the chillest land
And on the strangest Sea—
Yet—never—in Extremity,
It asked a crumb—of me.[2]

[2] Dickinson 1960, 116 (#254). Note, Dickinson has at least three poems that focus on hope: this one (#254), which Thomas Johnson places around 1861, and

Like M above, Dickinson identifies hope as something that is perceived (it "sings") but is hardly tangible. It is so light and wispy that it flies and only impacts an individual by entering the incorporeal part of the person; it "perches in the soul" (not *on* it, so that burdensome weight might not be felt). For Dickinson, hope itself is so materially insubstantial that it cannot be wearied by ill or unwelcome climate ("chillest land," "strangest Sea"). It moves its objects not by force. Instead, the chirps of this flitty little birdie are a siren's call that "is heard" even above the deafening din of "the Gale." Dickinson's hope remains ethereal—it itself need not even receive nourishment ("never ... It asked a crumb—of me").[3]

In her work "Sisyphus" (hardly a hopeful title!), contemporary poet and our Classics colleague A. E. Stallings describes hope, primarily, as a thing of thought connected to—but still distinguished from—concrete action; she begins:

> It is good to work
> the dumb, obsessive
> muscles. Exertion draws
> the mind from hope
> to a more tangible object.
> To live
>
> is to relive.
> This can only work
> when there is an object
> to push, cursive and recursive,
> up the hill, when you hope
> this draws

two others, #1392 and #1547 (1960, 587, 645), which he estimates to have been composed in 1877 and 1882, respectively.

[3] Dickinson's later poem (#1547) is far less sanguine about the emotion of hope, similarly framing it in terms of something that might consume: "Hope is a subtle Glutton— // he feeds upon the Fair—" (1960, 465).

to no close as day withdraws,
but will replay in dreams. You live
in hope
of dream-work,
its regressive,
infinite object.[4]

Though Stallings tethers work (or toil) and its iterative processes with hope, it is hardly a harmonious hitch knot. Initially, hope appears to be something *from* which the embodied person (at least briefly) can be rescued by the echoing, material tasks of living. Hope *unresolves* like the life lived. Still, hope swaddles living ("You live / in hope"—in contrast to Dickinson's hope that merely "perches *in* the soul") and compels one to carry on for yet a "dream-work" that seems at first, in its regression and infinity, ultimately unachievable (or at least not completable). But Stallings goes on:

Awake, abject,
the conscious mind draws
into a ball; the Elusive
tongues it like the pit of an olive.
The quirk
of hope

in recurrent nightmares is the hope
at last to be the object
of the murderer's handiwork,
when he draws
the knife to relieve
the stutter, to make passive

[4] Stallings 2004, 4.

the massive
machinery of hope,
the broken record of alive.
Why object?
The luck of all the draws
is the weight of stone.[5]

The lucid consideration of one's tedious task, for Stallings, itself fossilizes to the tangible, even richly tasteable, though one should not mistake it for nourishment since it is "like the pit of an olive," not the olive itself. Hope, no longer in ambivalent "dream-work," instead resides in "recurrent nightmares," an "object // of the murderer's handiwork." The word "object" seems here to offer the reader its multiple meanings at once. It is the overarching *telos* of the crime, but also the precise target of the homicide: hope is to be slayed by the chore, and the chore seems to exist for that sole and sullen purpose. And yet hope, too, hinders the turn to vocational malevolence. Hope *objects* to the end of work's iterations. "Why"? Hope engenders a burden, "the weight of stone" whose gravitational pull demands pushing. Finally, Stallings synthesizes:

Work

without hope draws nectar in a sieve

and hope without an object cannot live.

"*Work*," thus italicized and wide-versified, is now perched like Sisyphus's stone at the hill's summit, and Stallings's subtle spectacle is far clearer from that height: hopeless toil leaves only a sticky, sappy mess that is a mere residue of its sweet potential. The flip is that hope needs "an object," and here too the word's semantic riches illuminate: "object" as goal and "object" as resistance. Objective and obstacle. Without the pair, hope is a ghost.

These are but brief expressions, of course. I am more accustomed to reading ancient rather than recent poems, and I have little doubt

[5] Stallings 2004, 5.

that I have missed or mistaken something of Dickinson's and Stallings's nuances; their works of profound insight offer admittedly arbitrarily chosen foils for my reflection. They do not consider hope's actual substantiveness itself but rather its relation to substance, though Stallings certainly gestures toward it.

I confess that although I was already on the path academically for some time, the pandemic wrenched this scholar from the intangible and placed him quite firmly and finally on the body side of the mind–body problem. The virus—though entirely imperceptible on its own without electron microscopy and PCR tests— is after all corporeal, affected corpora, and effected corpses. But hope, too, is physical! As Stallings signals in "Sisyphus," since it can be obviated by orienting *without*, hope fundamentally exists *within*. Indeed, hope is, in fact, a material, biochemical constellation within our brains that can compel our cognition. This anatomical hope draws its ambitious rough drafts of reality in our thoughts and dreams. The line from mind to plan to execution is corporeal at each point. Hope is every point on that line. In the case of the pandemic, the line's lead viewed the virus, while a flock of vaccines pinched the line's end.

And thus this collection of articles. I wanted to craft hope—inclusive of conception, planning, execution, and end product—within the context of my co-leadership of the Assyriology and the Bible section of the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. It was grounded in my domestic experience of the pandemic and seemed appropriate to the meetings in 2021 (San Antonio) and 2022 (Denver). In particular, the former, which was both in-person and remotely offered, featured such abject agonic oddities: a major congress diffuse of bodies; interfacing with concealed faces; and imparting empirical knowledge by means of validated but virtual imposters. All of this while the world, inclusive of the conference's partakers, continued to battle with the death and discord adroitly dealt by COVID's ever evolutions.

My co-chair, Rannfrid Lasine Thelle, together with the section's steering committee,[6] was amenable to the topic, and, serendipitously, the

[6] Those involved in the Assyriology and the Bible steering committee in 2021 included Peter Machinist, JoAnn Scurlock, Shalom Holz, and Gina Konstantopoulos.

Prophetic Texts and Their Ancient Contexts section, led by Christopher Hays and Hanna Tervanotko, and liaised by Jennifer Singletary, was agreeable to cooperation.[7] We invited our colleagues to submit contributions that addressed hope as an emotion, a worldview, and/or a cultic or political action from diverse perspectives. Their contributions were inclusive of the biblical world and ancient Mesopotamia, as well as other and later ancient contexts, including ancient Greece and early Judaism. While not all of the papers presented at the meetings could be included here (mostly because the presenters had committed them to other venues), those that *are* included make up a fine representation of our sessions. They have been thoroughly and thoughtfully refereed in line with AABNER's standard reviewing practices.

Needless to say, in light of my considerations above I understand the following scholarly works themselves to be embodiments of hope and hope's processes. Still (and finally), I recognize that there are likely readers who are dismissive of my personal sentiments or are cynical regarding the issue's very topic. In response to such readers, I offer this morose morsel from the character Rosencrantz, who explains to his compatriot Guildenstern (in Tom Stoppard's 1967 play) that

> "The only thing that makes it bearable is the irrational belief that somebody interesting will come on in a minute ..."[8]

To be sure, applied to the topic at hand, such readers are welcome to label hope an "irrational belief." But Rosencrantz's perspective highlights the notion that the thing that sustains, that fixes our gazes on the horizon, can simply be curiosity's ambition. This, too, is a hope that can be enacted by our guild, a guild that is constituted—even brimming—with interesting people who have interesting ideas. So minimally, it is my sincere hope that readers will learn something in what *comes on* in the succeeding pages and will find something interesting in them.

[7] Those involved in the Prophetic Texts and Their Ancient Contexts steering committee in 2020–2021 were Jennifer Singletary, Jonathan Stökl, Julie Deluty, C. L. Crouch, Ehud Ben Zvi, Martti Nissinen, and Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer.

[8] Stoppard 1967, 33 (Act 1).

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