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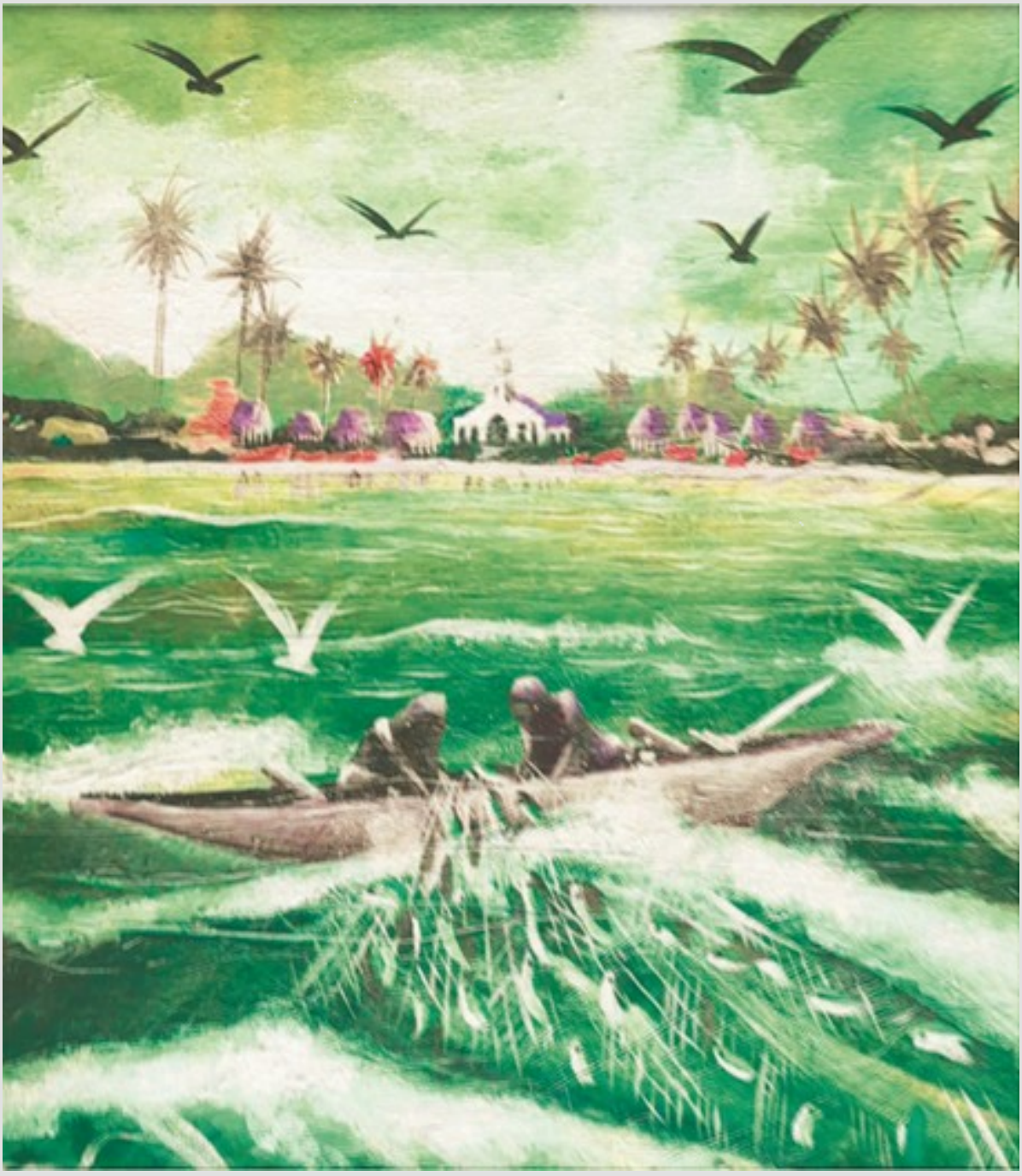

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CONTENTS

"LET US DESCEND AND DISURBANIZE THE PEOPLE" Reading the Babel Narrative (Genesis 11:1-9) in light of Apia's Urban Problem

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Abstract

This paper is a reading of the Bable narrative in Genesis 11:1-9 in light of the urban problems in Apia. Like any urban centre in the world, Apia is facing urban decay. There are signs of environmental, social, economic, and health problems experience in the vicinity of the Apia urban area. Unfortunately, some of these problems are irreversible and escalating. As an inhabitant of the Apia urban area, I wish to utilize my first-hand experience of the emerging problems to view and read the Babel Narrative (Genesis 9:1-11). The aim is to create a dialogue between the biblical world and contemporary Samoa with the hope that engaging with the text and the biblical world can inform contemporary issues in Samoa.

Key Words: Apia, Urbanization, Babel Narrative, Contextual Reading.

Introduction

The impact of urbanization (the movement of people from rural areas to urban centers or the physical expansion of urban areas) are beginning to surface in urban areas in the Pacific today and the Apia (Samoa) urban area is no exception.[1] The development of Apia into an urban center encouraged migration from the rural area of Samoa into Apia and its peripheries. Unfortunately this inward migration and expansion brings problems; that is, around the Apia urban area there are signs of interrelated problems, environmental pollution and increased pressures on its public infrastructures and services. As an inhabitant of the Apia urban area with a firsthand experience of the emerging problems, I will use this backdrop (urban perspective) to read the Babel Narrative (Genesis 11:1-9). The aim is to create a dialogue between the biblical world and contemporary Samoa with the hope that engaging with the text can inform contemporary issues in Samoa. This paper therefore will be divided into two sections. First, a brief survey of the Apia urban problem will be presented highlighting the impact of urbanization on Apia and Samoa as a whole. The aim here is to develop a lens and a context to read Genesis 11:1-9, which will be carried out in the second half of this presentation.

Apia and the impact of Urbanization

In its 180-year history (1840's- present), Apia grew from just a village with a natural harbor on the north side of Upolu, to a trading port with a foreign settler population, to becoming the center of the colonial administration; housing both the German and the New Zealand colonial offices. Apia would later become the capital and the only city in Samoa.[2] Over this same period, Apia urban area extended its boundaries to the east to include the village of Letogo, to the west to include the village of Faleula, and to the

[1] Donovan Storey, "The politics of managing urban development in Pacific Island states: The case of Samoa and Tonga," *The Journal of Pacific Studies*, 22 (1986): 61-80.

[2] Apia was the centre of the German Colonial Administration (1900-1914) and the New Zealand Colonial Administration (1914-1962) and in 1959 became the official capital of Samoa.

south to include the village of Vailima.[3]

Today, Apia is one of the fastest developing cities in the Pacific with a population of around 20% of the country's total population.[4] As the main city in Samoa, Apia serves as the political center of the country, accommodating the offices of the Head of State and the Council of Deputies, Parliament, government offices, the courts, foreign consuls, and offices of international organizations.[5] Apia also serves as the economic center of Samoa, housing nearly all of the commercial and trading activities. All major businesses, works and all government ministries and sectors have their main offices in Apia. The major manufacturing factories in Samoa are also located in the vicinity of the Apia urban area.[6] Apia is also the cultural and educational center of Samoa with state of the art gymnasiums and sporting facilities, and museum. The city also stages a number of cultural festivals[7] and is the location of the top primary and secondary schools in the country, as well as the tertiary and educational training institutions.

In addition, Apia is also the social and entertainment center of Samoa with hotels, bars, restaurants, cinemas and night clubs for the out goers and party lovers. And lastly, Apia serves as the religious center of Samoa, housing the headquarters and main temples and churches of most of the Christian denominations in the country. From these observations, it is apparent that the Apia urban area provides the people of Samoa with numerous services and opportunities for a better life, therefore attracting and pulling the rural population into its surrounding areas.

Apia functions as the political, economic, cultural, social, and religious center of Samoa. It continues to encourage significant and major developments. Over the last twenty years, there were major transformations to the structural and physical outlook of the city. Evidence to this is the number of modern multi-story building and large multi-purpose complexes erected throughout the capital. There are also changes to the demographic patterns of the city- the Apia urban area and its peripheries are experiencing high population growth. This is a result of the continuous centralization of political, economic, cultural and social services, pulling rural dwellers into the Apia urban area and neighboring regions to access the education and job opportunities and services available in the capital. Unfortunately, this population boom is always associated with negative implications. It not only generates social and ecological consequences (especially when the population exceeds the carrying capacity of the area) but it also put strains on Apia's infrastructures and services.

A. Social Problems

The *faa-samoa* (Samoan way) is the essence by which Samoans identity themselves, whereby the matai (chiefly) system and *fono a matai* (chiefly meeting) serves as the social fabric that maintains law and order within the families, villages and the country as a whole. However, the growth of urbanization in Samoa puts this ethos into jeopardy.

[3] Government of Samoa, Urban Planning and Management Project Team, *An Integrated Urban Planning and Management System for Samoa* (Apia: Urban Planning and Management Project Team, December 2001), 22.

[4] Government of Samoa, Samoa Bureau of Statistics, *Samoa: Population and Housing Census Report 2006* (Apia: Samoa Bureau of Statistic, July 2006), 30. Also see, Government of Samoa, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Planning and Urban Management Agency, *The Samoa National Urban Policy: Sustainable, Resilience and Inclusive City* (Apia: Government Printing, 2013), 12.

[5] Apia houses the four diplomatic missions in Samoa: New Zealand, Australia, China and the United States. And nine international organisations: FAQ, SPREB, ICA, EU, UNDP, WHO, JOCV, USPC.

[6] Manufacturing Companies in Apia include; Vailima Breweries, British American Tobacco, Ah Liki Wholesale, Apia Concrete Products, Wilex Samoa, Samoa Superior Poly Products, Nonu Samoa and others.

[7] Teuila Festival, Siva Afi Festival and Independence Celebration.

Rural-urban migration has created an imbalance not only in the urban communities but the rural villages as well. In the Apia urban area the rural migrants have resettled on freehold properties creating freehold societies and mixed village societies consisting of customary land with clusters of freehold properties. It is within these urban settings and this social breakdown, on top of the unfavorable economic conditions (unemployment, increase in the cost of living, and so forth) that amount to the various interrelated social issues challenging Apia: poverty, overcrowding, increase in crime rates, street vendors and beggars, alcohol and drug abuses and suicides and so forth.[8]

B. Environmental Problems.

Environmental problems are a growing concern for the Apia urban area, as population growth puts strain on the region's environment and natural resources. Increased population growth leads to the over-exploitation of the limited natural and biophysical environments. The Samoa State of the Environment Report 2023 indicates this environmental issue adding that the one of the root causes of the is population size which adds pressure to the environment and resources.[9] In other words, Apia's natural resources are insufficient to cope with its rising population. Symptoms of environmental degradation and pollution can be seen in the Apia urban region; destruction of water catchment areas, destruction of mangroves and coastal areas and various forms of pollutions.

C. Pressure on Infrastructures and Services.

In 2011 the Urban Planning and Management Project team identified several infrastructures and public areas, services in the Apia urban areas that needed improvements to accommodate Apia's rising population. In other words, these infrastructures and services are in stress and are feeling the effects of urbanization. The key services and infrastructures identified by the team included- water supply, roads and land transport, sewerage and drainage, electricity, education and health.[10]

In summary, it is therefore apparent from the above analysis that the Apia urban area is facing the challenges of urbanization with numerous implications for its inhabitants. The government in 2011 heeds calls for careful urban planning and management to improve the urban social, physical environment and infrastructures and services. This is a costly and expensive undertaking, but such improvements may encourage further rural to urban migration, creating more problems in both the urban and rural communities. In this sense, the impacts of urbanization will never be impeded. As an inhabitant of the Apia urban community feeling and experiencing the effects of urbanization, I am therefore approaching Genesis 11:1-9 with an urban frame of mind, using my knowledge of the Apia urban problem to read the story with empathy and confront any interpretive issues the story presents from this urban perspective.

Urbanization and the Babel Narrative

To retell the Babel narrative from an urban perspective using the language of urbanization will depict an account like this:

At the time when the world was one (v1) they were pulled out from the rural east

[8] Asian Development Bank, *Priorities of the People: Hardships in Samoa* (Manila: Asian Development Bank, Nov 2002), 2-4. Also see, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, *The Samoa Family and Safety Study* (Noumea: Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2006).

[9] Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MNRE) and Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), Samoa State of the Environment Report 2023, (Apia, Samoa: SPREP, 2024), 9.

[10] Urban Planning and Management Team, (2011), 31.

and reached a plain in the land of Shinar. (v2) And they decided to burn bricks and develop an urban center there, a city with a tower that reaches the heavens, to make a name for them and avoid outward migrations (urban to rural migrations). (3-4) And Yahweh came down to observe the urban area which the sons of man had built. (v5) And Yahweh saw that what humanity is doing is polluting themselves. (v6) So Yahweh and his counsel decided to descend and deurbanize the people by confusing them. (v7) And the people were dispersed to the rural areas and halted the process of urbanization. (v8) Therefore the urban area was called Babel, because there Yahweh confused the language of all the people and from there Yahweh dispersed them to the rural areas (v9).[11]

This retelling of the Babel Narrative clearly echoes the opinion that the story could be referring to the process of urbanization. John H. Walton from a historical perspective supported this view. He sees the building project in Genesis 11:1-9 as a mere reflection of the development of urbanization in southern Mesopotamia.[12] Most historical scholars directly or indirectly made allusions to this view. Terrence Fretheim who reads the Babel narrative in three different historical contexts, sums up these observations as follow. First, through reading the narrative under the Babylonian context Fretheim sees the Babel narrative as a negative criticism on the history of the Babylonian Empire. The narrative reflects the retribution of the proud posture of Babylon in the world. Second, Fretheim reads the Babel narrative in light of the history of the Israelite monarchy. Here he sees the purpose for the Babel narrative as a pessimistic evaluation of the building projects of the monarchy. And third, from an exilic perception, Fretheim sees the Babel narrative functioning as a manifestation of the collapse of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the people during exile.[13] Apparently, these three historical readings of the Babel narrative to an extent seem to criticize some form of urbanization. However, from a literary point of view there are literary features of the story itself reflecting urban evolution and its effects. A number of points can be made to illustrate this view.

Firstly, the story discloses the people's intention to develop a site into an urban area. That is the development of the plain of Shinar into a city with a tower. The choosing of the site was not just a random choice but it was done with careful considerations. According to the story the site for the city was chosen because of its special topographical features. The site was a plain flat area which is the ideal location for a city or an urban center. More light can be shed on the people's decision to settle on the plain of Shinar if we consider the different connotations of the Hebrew singular noun *vĭq^{e}'āh*. The term could be seen as a plain cutting through a rugged/ mountainous region and sometimes it is seen as a peaceful and safe location. These nuances reveal more reasons why the people might choose to settle there. The people choose the location on purpose not only because it is easy to access compared to rugged lands but also because the place is secured and peaceful as well.

Secondly, the movement of the people depicted in the story can be compared to the rural-urban drift associated with urbanization. This is reflected in verse 2 if we consider the various nuances of the Hebrew verb *nāsă*.[14] In the *Qal* stem, the verb could either mean pull out/up, or to journey or set out. The first nuance here is suggestive of the fact that the people in the narrative were pulled out from the east and journeyed to

[11] Translations presented here are the author's unless stated.

[12] John H, Walton, "The Mesopotamian Background of the Tower of Babel Account and Its Implications," *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, 5 (1995): 155-176.

[13] Terrence Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, eds. Leander E. Keck, et. al, eds., vol 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 411. See Walter Brueggemann, "David and His Theologian," *CBQ*, 30 (April: 1968): 156-181.

[14] For the word "נסע", see Comelis Van Dam, *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis,* ed. Willem A. Van Gemeren, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 145. Gordon J. Wenham, "Genesis 1-15," *Word Biblical Commentary*, eds. D. A. Hubbard and G. W. Baker, vol 1 (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 238.

their new destination. The pulling out of the people suggests that some forces were at work here encouraging the people to migrate and move into the land of Shinar. Obviously judging from the above observation it is apparent that the people were pulled to settle in the plain in the land of Shinar because of its geographical features and security. This resonates with how pull factors attract people into urban locations.

Thirdly, the Babel narrative also highlights a number of issues and challenges associated with the process of urbanization. Evidently, the narrative highlighted numerous impacts of urbanization and population increase, such as, overcrowding in the narrative. Despite the absence of statistics concerning the population density of the plain of Shinar in the story, the fivefold appearances of the expression *kōl hā'ārĕtz* (all the earth/all the world) in the narrative, yields the impression that the total earth population migrated from the east and settled on the plain of Shinar. This depicts overcrowding conditions if we consider this innumerable population settling in a relatively small land area. James G. Murphy agrees with this interpretation of the Hebrew expression. For him, the expression plainly refers to all the inhabitants of the known world.[15] Again Murphy's analysis of the expression is added proof to the above calculation that the expression is simply referring to a large and infinite number of people. Second, there is also verification of the degradation of the environment in the Babel narrative. The process of making and burning bricks mentioned in the story could pose hazardous repercussions for the environment. The main components for brick are straws and clay. The acquiring of the former suggests the depletion of grasslands while the latter advocates the destruction of the land through mining activities. The quantity of bricks required for the building project (tower and city) in the story is enormous thus suggesting the unmanageable depletion of grass lands and resources in the region.

Furthermore, the burning activity required for such a task suggests enormous gas expulsions that could pollute the air. This is highlighted by the usage of the term *nĭs^{e}r^{e}pāh* twice in verse 3. The term means to burn and it is often used in contexts of destruction thus disclosing the point that the burning activity in the narrative is harmful to people and the environment. Moreover, a consideration of the Hebrew term *hăhĭlām* in verse 6 could further reinforce this view. The term is derivative of the stem *hālăl* meaning pollute, profane, or begin. Considering the first nuance yields the point that what the people are doing in the land of Shinar is hazardous not only for themselves but also for the environment as well.

And fourthly, it is very apparent in the Babel narrative that Yahweh is playing the role of an urban planner. Yahweh's call to scatter the people reflects one of the major strategies employed by government agencies in resolving urbanization and its impact. In most cases, governments develop rural communities to offset rural-urban drifts or develop other towns to divert people from moving into urban areas under stress. Yahweh's objection towards urbanization can be further demonstrated by the omission of the object marker preceding *hā'îr* (the city) in verse 8.[16] The omission puts the spotlight on the city alone. So, what happens to the city? It is left undone while the people scatter throughout the world. The omission also suggests that the tower could not be the centerpiece in the narrative but the city as a whole. This reinforces the claim that the storming of the heavens is not the sin that prompted Yahweh's resentment towards the people, but it is the gathering of the people into one locality (or urbanization). Ellen Van Wolde and Danna Nolan Fewell both allude to this explanation by rejecting the traditional Christian interpretation that the story is about Yahweh's rejection of human ambitions and arrogance. For them, what drives Yahweh to action is humanity's

[15] James G. Murphy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, (Eugene: WIPF & Stock, 1998), 258.

[16] Compare verse 4.

intention of coming together rather than scattering and filling the earth.[17]

Moreover, a consideration of the repetitive usage of the cohortative "come let us" appearing in verses 3, 4 and 7 further reveals Yahweh's objection to urbanization. The first two cohortatives belong to man while the last is God's commands. The first two exhorts the building of the city and Tower while God's speech opposes and reverses those intentions. This trend really highlights the narrator's stance on the issue of unity in one locality or urbanization. The cohortative formula here calls for the reader's participation in the building project and later in dissolving humankind's project. In other words, the readers are invited to choose who to take side with: humanity or God. Since God is victorious at the end, the readers are most likely to choose God's side to make a stance against urban development.[18]

Furthermore, the movement in the structure of the narrative also gives evidence to this claim. That is, the movement from a scattered to a united community and back to a disintegrated community (such movement alludes to the movement from rural to urban and back to rural) within the narrative is clear evidence that the narrative favors a scattered community over urban progression and development. The narrative structure is also carefully tailored to highlight progression and development, but the twist in this progression and development is all futile, considering the fact that at the end of the narrative the people return to their initial status as a scattered population.

Furthermore, the progression from a dispersed society to an urban society and back to a dispersed society can be visualized in the twofold division of the Babel narrative:

A. vs 1-4: Humanity's Activities: Rural to Urban Progression
B. vs 5-9: Yahweh's Activities: Urban to Rural Progression

This subdivision is based on a couple of factors. Firstly, it separates the actions of humankind and Yahweh: section A highlights the activities of humanity while section B discloses the activity of the divine. Secondly, an obvious basis for the division is the attempt to unify humanity and the plot to disperse it. That is, section A encircles the former motive while section B encloses the latter. Nonetheless, this structural partitioning of the narrative highlights the contradictory activities of man and the divine. In other words, what humanity's will to settle into one place (urban area) is against the will of Yahweh.

Furthermore, more complex structures of the Babel narrative also testify to the contradictive notion of God' actions and human endeavors. Such can be expressed in various forms of chiastic structures. First, an involution or alternating chiasmus can be detected. This is articulated in the Babel narrative as:

1. Humankind's Activities:
    A. One lip and one words (verse 1)
        B. "Come" (verse 3)
            C. "Let us build" (verse 4a)
                D. "Make a name" (verse 4b)
                    E. Dispersed upon the face of all the earth (verse 4c)
2. Yahweh's Activities:
    A.' One people, one lip (verse 6)
        B.' "Come" (verse 7)
            C.' Stopped building (verse 8)
                D.' "Its name" (verse 9a)
                    E.' Dispersed …upon the face of all the earth

[17] Ellen van Wolde, *Stories of the Beginning* (Ridgefield: Morehouse, 1997), 168 & 171; Danna N. Fewell, "Building Babel," in *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible*, ed. A. K. M. Adams, (St Louis: Chalice, 2001), 3-4.

[18] This cohortative phrase can be found in verses 3 and 4 (meaning: "Come let us built ourselves") and in verse 7 (meaning: "Come let us go down").

So, what can this structure tell us? It again highlights the thesis-anti-thesis impression or the contradictive notion between God's deeds and humankind's activities. Thus, suggesting the fact that humanity's desire for a centralize urban settlement has done in section A of the structure, is not acceptable to God, leading to the events in section B where the events of section A are reversed and the dispersal of humanity.

Moreover, a multiple chiasmus or an introversion can also be identified from the Babel narrative.

A "All the earth had one lip" (verse1)
B "there" (verse 2)
C "each to his companion" (verse 3)
D "'Come let us brick bricks" (verse 3)
E "let us build for ourselves" (verse 4)
F "a city and a tower" (verse 4)
X "Yahweh descended. . ." (verse 5)
F' "the city and the tower" (verse 5)
E' "which mankind had built" (verse 5)
D' "come... let us confuse" (verse 7)
C' "each his companion's lip" (verse 7)
B' "from there" (verse 8)
A' "the lip of all the earth" (verse 9)

So, what can this structure tell the readers? First, this six pair chiastic structure implies that the composer of the Babel narrative cautiously structured it to present and emphasize its message. Evidence to this is the fact that the chiasmus is disseminated evenly within the narrative. Fokkelman agrees with this assessment when he declares that the structure of the Tower of Babel narrative is well balanced.[19] Furthermore, the structure also directs the reader to the composer's point of emphasis. This is apparent when considering the duo appearances of words and motifs in the structure of the story. So, if structure aids and instructs the readers in interpretation, what then is the structure of the Babel narrative telling us the readers? This question can be answered only through a consideration of the different corresponding points identified in the chiastic structure.

The combination AA' operates as an inclusio for the Babel narrative, marking the parameters of the story. Despite performing an equivalent function in the narrative's presentation, the pair describes opposite circumstances. That is, A portrays the entire world in unity while A' portrays the opposite: a world in dispersion. This trend apparently illustrates the movement and progression depicted within the narrative, that is, from a state of unity to a state of disarray. Fokkelman has the same opinion in suggesting A' to be the antithesis of A, therefore, A' reverses the illusion of unity in A.[20]

On the surface, pair BB' seems to be insignificant. But similarly, this pair also explains opposite positions. The first 'there' in B indicates that the location of the travelers is right where they have settled thus portraying the narrator to be looking forward towards this locality. On the other hand, the phrase 'from there' in B' signifies the settlers departing from the location. The preposition 'from' also depicts the narrator facing his back towards the location. Like the previous pair, this pair also portrays movement but such a movement is geographical rather than conceptual as in AA'. Furthermore, Fokkelman identifies another discrepancy between the two words. The 'there' in B represents unity while the one in B' symbolizes the opposite.[21]

The Hebrew idiom translated as 'each to his companion' in pair CC' represents differing situations as well. In C, the phrase portrays a relationship united under one language, where communication is feasible and uncomplicated. In C', the relationship is now in disarray with complications in communication. Fokkelman, however, takes this pair further and interprets it in relation to its counterpart in AA'. This step puts the

[19] Jan P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991), 22.
[20] Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 21.
[21] Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 23.

emphasis on the importance of language in communication.[22]

The cohortatives 'Come let us', enclosed in pair DD', is in opposition to each other due to several factors. First, they belong to different speakers. The first cohortative is the speech of humankind while the second is of Yahweh. Second, the pair encourages different proceedings. Man's speech in D encourages people to pursue the building of the city and the tower whereas Yahweh's speech in D' exhorts the confusion of lips which hinders the former.

Unlike the above opposing combinations, pair EE' compliments one another in the sense that E' depicts progression from E. The motif of 'building' is depicted in this pair and the two reflect different stages of the building process. E reflects the early stages of the project while E' reflects some stage towards the completion of the project where the project is now visual and accessible to observation. This differentiation suggests progression and development in the plot of the narrative itself.

Similarly, pair FF' does not depict opposing views between the two. However, differences can still be detected between the two. The first dissimilarity can be seen in the forms of the phrases. The phrase in F is indefinite while in F' is definite with the use of the definite article. This use of the definite and the indefinite forms of the phrase 'city and tower' also depicts progression and movement in the plot of the narrative. The indefinite form portrays an unrealistic city and tower at the planning stage in the imagination of man whereas the definite form depicts a city and a tower in existence to which one can point and refer to. So, the progression being explained here is that from the metaphysical to the physical or from imagination to reality.

Finally, the core of the chiastic structure at X portrays an evolution in the plot of the Babel narrative in terms of setting and focus. First, the story now enters the realm of Yahweh thus introducing and adding a new location to the setting of the story. Second, the story also changes its focus here. It now turns the spotlight on the action of Yahweh whereas prior to Yahweh's intervention the story is solely centered on the activities of humankind.

In general, what is the composer of the Babel narrative trying to convey to us through the structure of the narrative? Several logical suggestions can be formulated. First, the movement from a scattered to a united and back to a disintegrated society within the narrative. This is a clear evidence that the composer favors a scattered community rather than a unified society. In other words, the composer seems to stand in opposition to urbanization. Second, the structure is also carefully tailored to highlight progression and development in the narrative but the twist in this progression and development is all futile, considering the fact that at the end of the narrative the people return to their initial status in terms of community development and urban progression. Third, the structure also reveals a theological message by highlighting the divine will: that people should be dispersed throughout the world. This is done by placing Yahweh's descending in the core of the narrative. This appearance according to X is the turning point of the narrative that brought into progress the unmaking of urbanization.

All in all, it is clear that the above literary and structural analysis of the Babel narrative that the narrative presents opposition to the process of urbanization. The narrative not only draws attention to the negative impact of urbanization, but it also portrays Yahweh as an urban planner, designing and implementing strategies to overcome urbanization and its negative impact.

Conclusion: The Urban Problem in Apia and Babel

Evidently the analysis of the urban centers in Apia and Babel exhibits similar trends and problems. Both urban centers are feeling the stresses and strains of urbanization and population growth. Equally, the two cities are experiencing signs of environmental

[22] Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis*, 24-25.

degradations and social upheavals. In addition, the story of Babel reveals the necessary measures crucial in addressing the issues associated with urbanization. These are achieved through the relocation of the people to sparsely populated regions, and by offsetting rural-urban migrations. This is a very significant message for urban planners and government officials who are making decisions and formulating policies and regulations to improve the Apia urban environment.

Perhaps my anti-urban reading of the Babel story is also a call to the re-strengthening of Samoan de-centralized traditional systems where all aspects of human and ecological development (political, social, economic, spiritual, etc.) are equitably distributed amongst the villages and districts. Furthermore, the Babel story possibly can provide the thematic core of government development initiatives to reverse rural-urban drift in Samoa.

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Identifying Palliative Care as Pastoral Caregiving for the Dying: An Exploration of End-of-Life Practices Applicable for Samoans

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Abstract

We are born into this world through the miracle of life, coming into being as God's creation. We also die from this world, an inevitable event that no one in their power, wealth, economic standing, age, or well-being status can avoid. Palliative care is the care of persons at their end-of-life stage and occurs when all possible medical care to restore life has been exhausted, making no impact in sustaining life. Palliative care, therefore, ensures that one experiences the least amount of pain and discomfort in preparing to die from this world with dignity. For the faithful and devoted Christian, such a period becomes a time to prepare to meet our Creator God, having served and worshipped our Lord while living. This essay proposes how palliative care can be identified as pastoral caregiving for the dying, providing spiritual and emotional support for those within Samoan church communities faced with end-of-life realities. Faith in God during the end-of-living stage gives hope to hopelessness, despair, fear, and uncertainty; faith in God at such a desperate time also allows for God's peace and love to journey with the dying into the waiting arms of our Lord in His Eternal Kingdom.

Key Words: palliative care, pastoral counselling, church minister *(faifeau)*, church minister's wife *(faletua)*, social worker, and end-of-living.

Introduction

> *…le auauna lelei e, ma le faamaoni, ua e faamaoni i nai mea itiiti, ou te tofia oe e pule i mea e tele; ina ulufale mai ia i le fiafia o lou alii. (Mataio 25:23)*
> …well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master. (Matt 25:23 NRSV)

The above words in Samoan were whispered into the ear of a dying father at a hospital in Sydney, Australia, at the start of 2019. After speaking these words and knowing in faith that they were heard, my father took his last breath from this world that God had blessed him for seventy-nine years. Organ failure meant that my father was unresponsive for around 4-5 days, and hearing the medical staff say that nothing more could be done were words that were not easy to process. "You can go now, Dad," I softly shared, and then slowly and peacefully, he went. The event instilled the inspiration to articulate pastoral caregiving and its link to palliative care and offer a perspective of end-of-life practices for the dying applicable to the Samoan church.[1] This personal experience is not only the motivation for this paper, but also serves as a bridge between theological reflection and pastoral practice in Samoan contexts.

Dying completes the existence and the exit of all people from this world. We are born, we live life, and then we die. A great emphasis is placed on the *living* dimension of one's existence—Christian ethical teachings and practices in living moral and just lives in our servanthood and worship of God. Wellness in terms of living is often understood as a desired balance between the person's body, mind, and soul. Yet, regarding the

[1] Any mention of church/ Samoan church in this paper is made to the Congregational Christian Church Samoa/ Ekalesia Faapotopotoga Kerisiano Samoa (CCCS/EFKS) unless specified otherwise.

holistic ministry of the church, few considerations are made for the *dying* component of one's life cycle, simply the last moments where all avenues for preserving life have been exhausted. This is where this essay aims to locate palliative care within the realms of pastoral caregiving of the church, to navigate the theological underpinnings of one's faith in God's Grace to accept the inevitable that is frightful yet an imminent reality for the dying person.

This paper is therefore structured in three movements. First, it outlines key theoretical perspectives on pastoral care, palliative care and theological reflection, drawing largely from Western scholarship. Second, it offers a brief personal reflection to situate the author's engagement with end-of-life care. Third, it develops a contextualised proposal for Samoan church-based pastoral caregiving. This movement from theory, to experience, to proposal, seeks to offer a more integrated and coherent framework.

Pastoral Caregiving

It becomes necessary from the outset to locate pastoral caregiving in the church's ministry, which begins with a discussion about pastoral and practical theologies and the distinction between both. Pastoral theology falls within the discipline and scope of practical theology. James Lapsley defines pastoral theology as *"the study of all aspects of the care of persons in the church, in a context of theological inquiry, including the implications for other branches of theology."*[2] Through critical and theological reflections, pastoral theology is administered in all aspects of the life and role of the *faifeau* (church minister or pastor) and the *faletua* (church minister's wife). The *faifeau* and *faletua* are responsible for the spiritual well-being of the community of believers assigned to their care within the parish.[3] The *faifeau* (and *faletua*) are considered artists who use various sources to encourage reflections (including the Bible) to help people discover the meaning and sense of their experience, making connections with Christian tradition.[4]

The term pastor is derived from Latin and translated as a *shepherd*. It is a metaphor that represents God's protection and guidance for his people as it is frequently mentioned in both the Old Testament (Ps 80; Isa 40:11; Jer 43:1-4; Ezek 34) and in the New Testament (Heb 13:20; 1Pet 2:25). Jesus Christ is called the Good Shepherd in John 10:1-18. The roles and activities of the pastor *(faifeau)* are considered to be those who try *to give integrity to lives, solidarity to groups, mend broken relationships, heal, accept, and restore.*[5]

Pastoral theology primarily involves the church disciplines of Christian education, pastoral care, preaching, liturgy and worship, mission, evangelism, and social ministries. Pastoral theology also incorporates pastoral care, which is part of the task of the proclamation of the Word of God. In addition, pastoral theology emphasises the administration of pastoral care.[6] Theological reflections on the life of one's church also fall within the scope of pastoral theology. Pastoral caregiving, therefore, is located within the practices of pastoral theology.

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[2] James N. Lapsley, "On Defining Pastoral Theology," *Journal of pastoral theology* 1, no. 1 (1991/07/01 1991): 116, https://dx.doi.org/10.1179/jpt.1991.1.1.009.

[3] In the case of the CCCS, *faifeau* are men. However, for other churches in the ecumenical family of churches, the pastor/minister/*faifeau* may be either men or women.

[4] Haddon W. Robinson and Craig Brian Larson, eds., *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communicators* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 392.

[5] James F Hopewell, "Pastor," in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, ed. Rodney J Hunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 827.

[6] Stephen Pattison and Gordon Lynch, "Pastoral and Practical Theology," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, eds. David F Ford and Rachel Muers (2005), 410.

Practical theology is defined as the *"critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world."*[7] Through this critical and theological reflection, valuable insights are formulated, with the primary goal of practical theology in guiding and transforming future practices that inform and shape the life of faith.[8]

As an ordained minister in the church and co-ordinating third-year student visitations as part of the pastoral fieldwork taught at Malua Theological College, pastoral caregiving is one key component of the course. Student visitations involve placements to the national hospital at Motootua, the Mapuifagalele Home for the Aged of the Little Sisters of the Poor order of the Roman Catholic Church, the Tanumalala Prison, and village parishes both on the islands of Upolu and Savaii. From 2025, parish placements of third-year students will be done for parishes of the church in Aotearoa, New Zealand, to accommodate the church's growth abroad. Through these visitations, students are encouraged to share the Gospel of Christ and offer love and support for the marginalised, the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, and the oppressed.

Yet, in all areas of the church ministry that students are prepared for, there appears to be a gap in addressing those dying from terminal illnesses in how best to provide pastoral caregiving. Some difficult questions are often asked and challenged by the terminally ill, their immediate carers, and family members: why has such a fate come upon them, yet they have lived and served God faithfully? Why has God allowed this terminal condition to unfold? Is it unjust to no longer have hope in God to restore health to live, yet accept the reality of the inevitable death? This is the void that pastoral caregiving can fill, to offer spiritual and emotional healing when nothing more can be done medically to restore health and preserve life. Yet, instead, allow the natural process of dying to take its course with the least amount of pain and discomfort endured by the dying person.

Samoan Cultural and Theological Perspectives on Death and Dying

One of the key concerns in developing pastoral models for end-of-life care is the need to begin not with the imported frameworks, but with local understandings of death, dying, and care. In contemporary Samoa, death is not merely an individual medical event, but a deeply communal, cultural, and theological reality. Families, extended kinship networks, and church communities play central roles in accompanying the dying.[9]

Attitudes toward death are shaped by Christian faith, relational identity (*va fealoai*) and cultural obligations and customs such as *faaaloalo* (respect)[10] and *faaaloaloga* (reciprocal gifting).[11] As Byron M. S. Seiuli demonstrates, practices surrounding death such as *faalavelave* (customary communal obligation) and *sii alofa* (presentation of sympathy/love) activate the collective involvement of the *aiga* and wider community, reflecting shared responsibility in mourning and care. Similarly, Fuimaono Karl Pulotu-Endemann's Fonofale model situates the individual within a holistic framework where family, culture and spirituality are inseparable from wellbeing,

[7] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London, United Kingdom: SCM Press, 2006), 6.

[8] Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 12.

[9] See Byron Malaela Sotiata Seiuli, "Ua tafea le tauofe: Samoan Cultural Rituals through death and bereavement experiences," *Illness, Crisis & Loss* 21, no. 2 (2013): 103-117.

[10] See Brian Kolia, *Carrying Qoheleth's Maota (House: An Australian-Samoan Diasporic Reading* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2024), 22-23. Here, Kolia talks about how this Samoan custom of respect "strengthens relationships and ties between families and villages."

[11] See Albert Wendt, "Tatauing the Postcolonial Body," *SPAN* 42-43 (1996): 15-29; Malama Meleisea, *The Making of Modern Samoa: Traditional Authority and Colonial Administration in the Modern History of Western Samoa* (Fiji: USP, 1987), 14.

including end-of-life experience. Moreover, based on the Samoan custom of *mavaega* (legal will), dying is often understood not simply as loss, but as a transition – returning to God after fulfilling one's calling in life.[12]

Within Samoan Christian communities, I believe that pastoral care at the end-of-life is already practiced informally through prayer, visitation, hymn singing, confession, reconciliation, and communal presence. However, these practices are rarely articulated as "palliative care," nor are they systematically integrated into theological training or medical frameworks. This raises crucial questions: How do Samoan churches already practice care for the dying? To what extent do medical systems in Samoa reflect or marginalise these cultural values? How are *faifeau* and *faletua* trained for end-of-life care? How do diaspora contexts (e.g., New Zealand and Australia) complicate these practices, especially where assisted dying is legal?

These questions suggest that any meaningful pastoral framework must emerge from dialogue between theology, culture, and medical practice, rather than relying primarily on Western models.

Palliative Care

If all possible interventions have been exhausted by medical personnel to restore health and preserve life[13], palliative care welcomes the inevitable and eventual death with the least amount of pain and discomfort. In other words, palliative care is end-of-life care that no longer aims to save life but to offer a quality of living close to its end. A detailed definition of palliative care includes the following:

> The word "palliative" is derived from the Latin root *palium which means "to cloak". At the end of life the care offered envelopes both patient and family with a cloak of good pain management, symptom control, spiritual support, peace and dignity. Time and space are made to grieve, heal and reminisce.*[14]

From the above definition, palliative care can be identified metaphorically as a garment or blanket that both clothes and provides comfort and safety for the palliative care patient. Comfort in this manner is extended to the palliative care patient's carers and family members in managing pain and discomfort with spiritual support. Such care has shifted the emphasis and desires away from medical care that works endlessly to determine pathways and solutions to preserve life. This comes from the understanding that in palliative care, the primary aim of treatment is not to prolong life but to make life that *remains as comfortable and meaningful as possible.*[15]

One key component of palliative care is to ensure that hope is not lost; in this end-of-life care, hope takes on a new direction. Before the onset of palliative care, hope was in the form of recovery from illness with the ambition of steady improvement of health. Twycross identifies three elements of hope: hope in being rather than achieving, hope for a relationship with others and hope for a relationship with God or with the Divine.[16] The

[12] In Samoan contexts, *mavaega* is not simply a legal will in the Western sense, but a final and sacred directive given by a dying person (often a *matai*), that carries moral, social and spiritual authority for the *aiga* (family). *Mavaega* therefore functions to maintain continuity, defines relationships, and may include instructions regarding succession, obligations, and family order. See Fuimaono Karl Pulotu-Endemann, *Fonofale Model of Health* (1984); widely cited in 2001 Pacific health frameworks; See also Seiuli, "Ua tafea le tauofe."

[13] Robert G. Twycross, *Introducing Palliative Care* (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Radcliffe Publishing, 2003), 9.

[14] Bob Tees and Jennifer Budd, "The Sound of Spiritual Care: Musical Interventions in Palliative Care Setting," *The Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 65, no. 1 (2011), 5.

[15] Tees and Budd, "The Sound of Spiritual Care," 11.

[16] Twycross, *Introducing Palliative Care*, 19.

following interpretation expands on these elements within a pastoral-theological framework relevant to this paper.

The first type of hope for the dying person under palliative care is simply a hope of being. This means that hope is merely to be alive in the moment. Hope is no longer about sustaining life to achieve all that one desires and works hard to attain, but hope has aligned with being in the now, taking each day and valuing every moment of life that remains. Secondly, hope is to be in a relationship with others, especially significant others, to the dying person. At such a time where imminent death and departure from this world are forthcoming, being surrounded by family, friends, and loved ones is the hope that gives purpose for the dying person to stay close to loved ones for whatever remainder of the time is left. Finally, the hope for the dying person is to remain in a close relationship with God at this crucial moment of one's being. This final hope is to be in a relationship with God that gives peace to the dying, that beyond death is God's eternal Kingdom for all faithful followers of our Lord.

A dying person under palliative care can fluctuate between happy days and challenging days simply by the degree of hope one has for any given moment. Hope is one of the surviving desires that remain with the dying person until the end. Therefore, hope mustn't be deflated by those surrounding the person holding onto hope. It is still possible for someone to increase one's hope by receiving effective and appropriate care despite being close to death. When hope almost becomes helpless and pointless, one can still hope for a peaceful death.

Hope increases for the palliative care patient when one feels valued, has meaningful relationships through reminiscence and humour, realistic goals are set, and there is pain relief. On the reverse side, hope deflates when the person feels unworthy and devalued, abandoned, and isolated with silence, and words like 'there is nothing more that can be done' are shared by health professionals.[17] In situations where there is a lack of direction and goals, and pain and discomfort are not managed effectively, hope decreases for the dying palliative care patient.

While Western models of palliative care provide valuable clinical and conceptual tools, they are not culturally neutral. One critique often raised is that such models can unintentionally require local communities to conform to their assumptions about care, autonomy and personhood. In Samoan contexts, where relational identity and communal decision-making are central, such models may need to be adapted rather than adopted wholesale. For instance, positioning *faifeau* and *faletua* within a clinical team model risks reducing their role to that of auxiliary support within a medical system, rather than recognizing pastoral care as a primary, culturally embedded of care in its own right.

Theological underpinnings for Palliative care

Some may believe that one becomes free from suffering when committed to Christ by accepting His teachings about God's grace. This, however, is not the case. We are still surrounded by suffering, both as personal experiences and as witnesses to suffering, but as Christians, we find inner peace to deal with the suffering we feel and see. Being diagnosed by medical professionals as requiring palliative care means that all pathways for recovery and restoring life have been exhausted. Most likely, in these contexts, end-of-life becomes the primary thought to ponder upon by the palliative care patient, carers, friends and family members. Suffering here is in the sense that imminent death is near; nothing more can be done. Do we abandon God at such a time in asking, 'Where is God, and why does God allow his children to suffer?' Or do we find peace, knowing God is with us despite our suffering? Scriptures such as 1 Peter can help us understand human suffering, such as palliative care, in knowing that the reality of death is ultimately near.

[17] Twycross, *Introducing Palliative Care*.

The letter of 1 Peter is one of the general or catholic epistles in the New Testament, together with the letters of Hebrews, James, 1-3 John, 2 Peter and Jude.[18] These letters are different from other letters in the New Testament since they are not addressed to any given church or are believed not to have been authored by Paul.[19] These letters are considered catholic as they are directed to a collective of churches. Specifically, for 1 Peter, this letter is considered catholic by offering encouragement for the suffering of Christians due to their faith, from the end of the first century until now.[20] Notably, the persecutions that began at the end of the first century CE are carried through to today's Christian community since the epistle speaks of suffering now and the glory of God to come.[21]

Edmund Clowney's discussion of 1 Peter suggests that no Christian can escape suffering on behalf of Christ, in that the faithful believer in Christ must encounter suffering because of His name.[22] Suffering becomes a condition that the true believer and follower of Christ must be willing to accept, and rejoicing in the glory of God is the end product of enduring and withstanding all forms of suffering in one's life. For the end-of-life stage that one experiences through palliative care, accepting the outcome of death means the faithful believer in Christ finds peace in dying, accepting that God has accompanied them right to the end. Peace in knowing that God is right there suffering with the palliative care patient, and the comfort in knowing that God has not abandoned the faithful Christian when the end draws near.

As a pastoral letter, 1 Peter encourages Christians today to make sense of the suffering one may encounter for their steadfast faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.[23] God's grace gives the courage to endure suffering. The courage that provides us with the strength to pick up our broken and painful lives and battle on until the end. Therefore, God's graciousness is not manifested to eliminate all the various struggles and trials in life; instead, God's grace is to help us get through our suffering.[24] It is through God's grace that one can find peace amidst suffering. Through God's grace, we can be enlightened and realise that God has never abandoned us in our times of need. Through God's grace, the palliative care patient now has the hope to die healed and rejoice in the peace of God, rather than holding onto any hope to die cured.

Coping with Trauma

Trauma can be described as a psychological wound experienced by a person as the result of a significant event or a chain of events.[25] The effects of the traumatic event are essential in these discussions as they may lead to great sadness, depression, and grief, impacting the person's emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being.[26] With the diagnosis that nothing more can be done medically other than undergoing palliative care,

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[18] David L Barlett, "The First Letter of Peter: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreters Bible, a Commentary in Twelve Volumes: Hebrews, James, 1&2 Peter, 1,2 & 3 John, Jude, Revelation,* eds. Leander E. Keck & Luke T. Johnson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 229.

[19] Barlett, "The First Letter of Peter."

[20] Barlett, "The First Letter of Peter."

[21] Edmund Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter: The Way of the Cross* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 15.

[22] Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*.

[23] Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter.*

[24] V. J. John, "Grace of God and the Struggles of Life: Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-15) Revisited," in *The God of All Grace*, ed. Joseph George (Bangalore, India: Asian Trading Corporation and United Theological College, 2005), 71.

[25] Reinder Ruard Ganzevoort, "Scars and Stigmata: Trauma, Identity and Theology," *Practical Theology* 1, no. 1 (2008): 20.

[26] Ganzevoort, "Scars and Stigmata."

such a result naturally is traumatic for anyone to receive. It becomes a situation where hope for complete recovery and being cured slowly fades away with each passing day.

In terms of coping with trauma, which includes hearing unfortunate news of undergoing palliative care, K.I. Pargament identifies three religious coping approaches: a self-directing approach, a deferral approach, and a collaborative approach.[27] The descriptions below adapt these categories to the context of end-of-life pastoral care.

Firstly, taking a self-directing approach to coping with trauma entails the palliative care patient relies entirely upon oneself, with no room or consideration allowed for God. The feeling of abandonment by God is strong here, blaming God for a lack of divine intervention and absence, which results in the outcome faced. Secondly, a deferring approach in coping with trauma is where the palliative care patient defers all things to God. For a person with steadfast faith in God, there is always hope. Although faced with imminent death, one does not blame God for where they are but defers all things to God, who faithfully suffers alongside them, giving peace in waiting for the time to be called back to God. Finally, a collaborative approach means relying upon God in coping with trauma for spiritual healing, together with any self-interventions towards emotional and psychological healing in dealing with the trauma.

There are several practices of the church at present that all work towards coping with trauma, especially for the palliative care patient. Pastoral visitations by *faifeau* and *faletua*, either at the home or in the hospital bed of the palliative patient, are a practice many clergy still adhere to. The recipients of these visits—palliative care patients, carers, family members, and friends—enjoy fellowship with the spiritual leaders of their parishes, sharing the Gospel and meals, and being together in their times of need. These visitations encourage them to remain faithful and hold onto hope, to encounter God's peace to help them accept and cope with their trauma.

Deferring all things to God in times of trauma is a coping strategy familiar to many faithful believers in Christ. It is, therefore, not uncommon for those who have accepted being assigned to palliative care to have found peace and hope in God in their dying moments. When my wife's grandmother (considered as her mother since being raised by her from birth) was diagnosed with a terminal illness in 2012, my wife and sons returned to Sydney to care for our dying mother. Staying back at Malua for classes and our duties at the college, my last phone call with our dying mother was filled with silence, with very little being said. I did not know what to say or how to provide hope and comfort, being in denial that she would somehow recover and return to Samoa with my family. The medical professionals informed us that nothing more could be done other than to keep her comfortable, manage her pain, and stay close by as her time was near. Yet, in her weak and feeble condition, she extended her blessings to us and told me not to be upset or sad, to have courage, for she was ready to go and meet our Lord. This is proof of someone strong in her faith that even facing inevitable death, she was still the pillar and strength for our family one last time. Hearing such words gave me hope and comfort: hope that I could one day demonstrate such peace and faith in God when the end was near, and comfort, knowing that our mother was ready to exit this world and meet our Creator as a woman of faith until her dying hour.

As mentioned above, a deeper theological engagement with trauma is needed, particularly within practical theology. Trauma at the end of life is not only psychological but also spiritual, raising questions of meaning, suffering, and divine presence. Engaging biblical texts, such as lament psalms (e.g., 13, 22, 64) alongside Lamentations 3 and Job 10, could further enrich this discussion by holding together suffering, protest, and hope.[28]

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[27] K.I. Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice* (Guilford Publications, 1997), 180.

[28] See Samasoni Moleli, "From Theodicy to Resilience: Reframing Suffering as a site of Innovation," (paper presented at the 10th NUS Measina Conference, 31 October 2025).

Furthermore, Samoan relational framework (*va*) offers important insights into how trauma is shared, carried, and healed collectively rather than individually.

A proposal: Identifying palliative care as pastoral caregiving for the dying and their carers

The following framework (APPP) seeks to integrate theological reflection, cultural practice, and pastoral experience. It is not a rigid model, but a flexible guide that recognises the messiness of end-of-life care, where individuals may not move neatly through stages, and where trauma, culture and faith intersect in complex ways.
Palliative care has been defined herein as making the end-of-life stage of the dying person as comfortable as possible. Pastoral caregiving, therefore, is proposed as a component of the church's ministry that must include palliative care for the dying person. As a *faifeau/faletua*-led approach within the church's ministry, pastoral caregiving assists the palliative care patient in dying peacefully and contentment in preparation for meeting our Lord. Pastoral caregiving aligns with palliative care practices by medical professionals worldwide[29], explicitly using the *Effective Palliative Care model*, a **TEAM** approach.[30] The TEAM approach involves palliative care workers of doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, social workers, counsellors, chaplains, and priests, which can now include *faifeau* and *faletua.* The inclusion of *faifeau* and *faletua* in the TEAM approach is due to their inherent roles as pastoral counsellors for the parishioners they are called to lead, through life challenges, including end-of-life practices.[31] The extension of the acronym TEAM **T**ogether **E**veryone **A**chieves **M**ore draws strength in working collectively to give hope to the dying person. Yet, hope now transcends from being about recovery and being cured to the hope of dying peacefully with contentment while experiencing the least amount of pain and discomfort.[32]

Palliative care as pastoral caregiving in the church ministry is proposed using the acronym **APPP** simplified as "**A.Triple.P."** There are four stages to A.Triple.P. as the following:

Acceptance
Preparing
Planning
Peace

Acceptance is by far the most challenging for any pastoral caregiving ministry of the church geared towards administering palliative care. For a devoted Christian who has been committed to one's faith through life, it seems unlikely that there will come a time when medical teams tell them that nothing more can be done to be cured of a terminal illness. Why would God allow such suffering to occur to someone who has served faithfully and is committed to our Lord? Feelings of abandonment by God in times of need exemplify the challenge of this stage of pastoral caregiving through palliative care. Yet acceptance is possible once the palliative care patient and carers realise God's presence during difficult times, together with understanding the theological underpinnings of palliative care. Once acceptance has occurred by the palliative care patient and carers, the work of God's Grace gives new hope of peace in preparing to

[29] Jackie Robinson et al., "The 'Problematisation'of Palliative Care in Hospital: An Exploratory Review of International Palliative Care Policy in Five Countries," 15 (2016), 5.

[30] Lancealotte Alaimoana, "A Ministry for Palliative Care Patients (PCPS) and Their Families in the Context of the Congregational Christian Church Samoa (CCCS" (BD Thesis, Malua Theological College, Samoa, 2021), 5.

[31] Alesana Pala'amo, "Fetu'utu'una'i Le Va Navigating Relational Space: An Exploration of Pastoral Counselling Practices for Samoans" (2017), 10, 43, https://mro.massey.ac.nz/handle/10179/11813.

[32] Twycross, *Introducing Palliative Care,* 10.

leave this temporary world entrusted to us for only a while.

Preparing comes next, to meet our Creator. This stage of pastoral caregiving through palliative care involves attending to any unfinished business as best one can. This stage involves the summon of family members and close friends either in person or through various online platforms, to prepare them emotionally and spiritually to bid farewell to someone they care about and love. Visitations will need to be managed by carers of the palliative care patient, as many will try and travel near and far to be in the presence of their loved one. The comfort and pain management of the palliative care patient must be considered, as well as enough rest and appropriate food.

Planning is the stage to consider what comes next. The team of palliative care workers will have their management plan in place as per the protocols and processes of the medical care teams. For *faifeau* and *faletua* providing pastoral caregiving for the palliative care patient and their carers, assistance is in the form of making final funeral arrangements. Once the previous two stages have progressed, this stage must include planning the final moments for the palliative care patient. Funeral arrangements also need to factor in traditional Samoan gifting protocols *(fa'aaloaloga),* a significant component adhered to by the families of the recently deceased. Such preparations are often families' most considerable emphasis on departing with their loved ones. All who have attended and donated monetary gifts, *ie toga* (fine mats), food gifts and others, their love and generosity shown must be reciprocated by the family of the recently deceased. As proposed here, palliative care and pastoral giving are such that now the person at the centre of planning, the palliative care patient, can also become involved in all the final arrangements. It still becomes the situation of whether family members and carers of the palliative care patient will honour and hold to the plans made when the time has come to farewell their loved one.

Peace is the ultimate hope that the palliative care patient seeks. Peace for oneself from persevering through the terminal illness and declining health, and peace for family and carers who have witnessed the gradual deterioration of the life and health of their loved one. It is through God's Grace and love that the hope for peace is possible, that beyond the sorrow and pain of departing loved ones from this life, there is joy in God's Kingdom that awaits all the faithful believers in Christ.

Hence, this model would benefit from further development through dialogue with medical practitioners, theologians, and cultural experts, as well as through ongoing reflection on lived pastoral experiences.

Concluding remarks

While this paper has proposed an initial framework, further work is needed to ensure that pastoral caregiving for the dying in Samoan contexts is deeply rooted in cultural realities, and practically responsive. Further research should continue to integrate pastoral experience, and interdisciplinary dialogue.

In closing, this essay has attempted to articulate and propose a ministry for the church that is focused on those who are close to death and are under palliative care. APPP (ATripleP) adds to the pastoral caregiving ministry of the church, giving structure to the work of *faifeau* and *faletua* with palliative care patients in their parishes. Hope has been redirected away from being about a cure for a terminal illness to a new hope in embracing peace in and through God's Grace and love. Palliative care through pastoral caregiving can add life to one's days, rather than adding days to one's life.[33] The very last line of the hymn *Make Me a Channel of Your Peace* sums up hope for the faithful believer in Christ: for someone who is dying and under palliative care, there is hope for a peaceful departure and re-birth into God's eternal kingdom. When our dying loved ones

[33] Twycross, *Introducing Palliative Care,* 10.

find peace and are ready to meet our Lord, God's love, comfort, and peace are extended to all those who are left behind in this world.

1. Make me a channel of Your peace.
   Where there is hatred let me bring Your love;
   Where there is injury, Your pardon, Lord;
   And where there's doubt, true faith in You.

   Oh, Master, grant that I may never seek
   So much to be consoled as to console;
   To be understood as to understand;
   To be loved, as to love with all my soul.

2. Make me a channel of Your peace.
   Where there's despair in life let me bring hope;
   Where there is darkness, only light;
   And where there's sadness, ever joy.

   Make me a channel…

3. Make me a channel of Your peace.
   It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
   In giving to all men that we receive;
   And in dying that we're born to eternal life.

Source: Malua Theological College Hymns and Praises (2017, 2010, 2002) Hymn # 161

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Jesus' Triumphal Entry (Mark 11:1–11): A *Tautai*'s Challenge to Transform

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Abstract

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem (Mark 11:1–11) is generally perceived as a celebration of Jesus' messiahship. The aura surrounding the acquisition of the donkey, Jesus riding it, and the disciples' and the crowd's nationalistic reactions and proclamation certainly suggest so. Then, unexpectantly, that celebratory mood disappeared. In the end, Jesus just looked around the temple and left. It was an anti-climax conclusion for a so-called triumphal entry.

Can the Markan Jesus' entry into Jerusalem be interpreted differently? This is the focus of this article. It aims to interpret this Markan story through a "tautai" hermeneutic in which the protagonist is perceived as challenging the status quo, especially the seat of Jewish power – Jerusalem and her leaders.[1] *The purpose of this challenge is to usher in positive transformations for the people, both in their landscape and in their senses. Hence, the Samoan term for a master fisherman (tautai) is used metaphorically to illustrate Jesus' qualities of servanthood by issuing such a challenge.*

Key Words: triumphal entry, crowd, Samoan hermeneutic, sociohistorical, reader-response, transformation, *tautai*, Samoan Islander, messianic.

Introduction

The deflated end to this Markan pericope jars open the scholarly conversation, enlightening it with possible and relevant interpretations from specific hermeneutical locations, such as those of Samoan/Pasefika Islanders.[2] This suggestion supports the ongoing recognition of Samoan/Pasefika hermeneutics as a complement to and an interrogation of existing scholarly conversation. From our hermeneutical location and lived experience, the impact of authoritative powers (local and foreign) is still marginalising some communities with hardship and oppression.

Such an authoritative influence, as the sociohistorical analysis below aims to demonstrate, points to Jesus' journey into Jerusalem as a challenge to the seat of power. This challenge is supported by the narrative's messianic tendency and elicited by the crowds' nationalistic participation. That is, the prophetic acquisition of the donkey and the crowds' spontaneous response, with a joyful, patriotic predisposition, amplify this challenge. On the narrative level, this is further supported by Mark's powerful critique of power structures and authoritative elites, which may have reflected the sociohistorical contexts of both the text and the author.

A Sociohistorical Context for Mark 11:1–11

The messianic implication of Jesus entering the city of Jerusalem can never be discounted from a Christian believer's worldview. This paper affirms such a christological emphasis by highlighting prominent historical triumphal processions,

[1] This paper was originally presented at the 2025 Oceania Bible Study Association (OBSA) Conference at Sia'atoutai Theological College (Kingdom of Tonga), and has since been revised to reflect some helpful insights from the scholarly *talanoa* that followed and with valuable contributions from external reviewer.

[2] This reference highlights our common islandedness of being proud custodians of our island nations and devoted bearers of our island identities - both cultural and Christian.

beginning with Roman accolades for victorious heroes and leaders. During Jesus' earthly ministry, the whole of Palestine was under Roman rule, whose authority was asserted through the Jewish cultural and religious leadership.

Roman triumphal processions

The ceremony of triumph (*triumphus*) for a Roman military victory was the "highest honour bestowed upon a victorious general in the ancient Roman Republic."[3] This significant and historical occasion was marked by rituals honouring the gods and the successful recipient.[4] Such a military procession was only granted and paid for by the Senate when the victorious hero, who should hold at least a magistrate position with supreme and independent command, won a land/sea battle within his province and killed at least 5,000 of the enemy.[5]

The ceremony is described as beginning with the victor waiting outside the city wall, where he was "greeted prior to entry by sacerdotal and political figures accompanied by various groups, [and was] then escorted into the city."[6] Furthermore, the triumphal hero is described as dressed in the costume of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, a paramount god in Roman mythology (which can also mean "best and greatest").[7] The victorious commander would be processed on a chariot through the city, accompanied by the leading men of the state, by his victorious army, and then by his captives and spoils of war. The occasion lasted about three days and ended with the offering of a sacrifice to the god at the temple[8] and the selling of the slaves.

The Roman historian Suetonius (69–122 CE) reaffirms this by recalling that Augustus was customarily welcomed on his travels, both within and outside Rome.[9] Similarly, Gaius Caligula was so popular with the people that whenever he came or went, his life was endangered from the crowds that met him or saw him off.[10] Even outside of this Roman eloquence, the Roman statesman, Cicero (106–43 BCE), recalls that as pro-consul of the province of Asia, he was met in the customary way where "the extraordinary throngs of people have come to meet [him] from farms and villages and every homestead."[11]

Such public and affectionate celebrations were not new. The Greek philosopher and historian Plutarch (40–120 CE) recalls the triumph of Aemilius Paulus after his victory over King Perseus of Macedon (167 BCE).[12] The display of the spoils of war and of the captured Macedonian weapons, transported on two hundred and fifty chariots were displayed on the first two days. This was followed by 3,000 men bearing silver coins in vessels. On the third day, the procession was headed by young men carrying

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[3] The Editors, "Triumph: Ancient Roman Honour," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* at https://www.britannica.com/topic/triumph-ancient-Roman-honor, visited 7th August, 2025.

[4] Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome,* Volumes One and Two (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 144.

[5] The Editors, "Triumph: Ancient Roman Honour."

[6] R. E. Watts, "Triumphal Entry," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels,* eds. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin, Second Edition (Downers Grove, 2013), 980. Accordance Edition by OakTree Solution, Inc., Version 1.1.

[7] The Editors, "Triumph: Ancient Roman Honour."

[8] Beard, North and Price, *Religions of Rome,* 145.

[9] Gaius Suetonius*, Books II, The Deified Augustus* 53, 1–3*,* Volume One, trans. J.C. Rolfe, ed., G.P. Goold (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1913), 231–232.

[10] Suetonius, *Books IV, Gaius Caligula,* 423.

[11] Tullius Cicero, *Letters: Atticus,* 5.16*,* ed. Evelyn Shuckburgh, at: http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?, visited on 6th August, 2025.

[12] Lucius Plutarch*, Parallel Lives, Dion and Brutus, Timoleon and Aemilius Paulus: Aemilius Paulus,* 32–34*,* trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1918), 441–447.

silver and gold offering cups, followed by the defeated Perseus himself, his household, and his comrades and friends. Following these were 400 golden wreaths, which were sent to Aemilius as prizes of victory. The victorious Aemilius himself was last, clothed in a purple robe shot with gold, riding on a chariot, and he held a spray of laurel in his right hand, followed by his generals' chariots in their ranks and divisions.

From the above examples, as the victorious general, commander, ruler, or any royal dignitary approached the city, a band of municipal officers and other citizens (the social, religious, and political elite) would proceed some distance from the city in order to meet them, well in advance of the city gate. The guest was then escorted back into the city as a hero by those who had gone out to meet him, a practice also evident in some ancient Jewish processions.

Jewish procession/Victory Celebration

Such nationalistic displays were also evident within Palestine. The Galillian rebel leader Menahem, son of Judas, broke into King Herod's armoury (Masada?) and distributed arms to his followers and other brigands. With armed guards surrounding him, he entered Jerusalem in the state of a king. He became the leader of the revolution and directed the siege of the palace.[13] There was also the triumphant rebel leader, Simon Maccabaeus, who rode victoriously into Jerusalem after expelling the men of Akra from the citadel. His followers uttered praises and waved palm branches to the sound of lyres, cymbals, lutes, hymns, and songs, because a great enemy had been smashed and driven out of the city (cf. 1 Macc. 13:51).

The Old Testament account of King David bringing back the ark of God from captivity by the Philistines[14] prefigures the Romans' victory celebration of triumph. David and the people of Israel, in "festal celebration,"[15] were dancing with songs and lyres (cf. 2 Sam. 6:5). They were rejoicing with shouts and the sound of trumpets, making offerings before the Lord. David was at the forefront of all this, girded with a linen ephod. The joyous celebration ended with David distributing food to the people before they returned home (cf. 2 Sam. 6:12–19).[16]

During David's numerous war victories,[17] he brought the spoils of war (prisoners, chariot horses, bronze, silver, and gold) to Jerusalem and subjected his victims to pay him tribute. Upon hearing of David's triumph, King Toi of Hamath sent his son Joram to meet David with gifts of silver, gold, and bronze (cf. 2 Sam. 8:1-8).[18] All these, King David dedicated to the Lord.[19] Was the Markan crowd, in their reminiscing, recalling this historical reality of a victorious king returning to a joyous celebration when they ushered Jesus into Jerusalem?

This idea of prominent and ordinary people waiting, cheering, and heralding a victorious candidate back from a campaign reflects the Samoan concept of a *tapuaiga*. It is where the people, especially the elders, some of whom would accompany those

[13] Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Wars,* trans. H. St. J. Thackeray (London: Harvard University Press, 1927), 2.433–435, 492–493.

[14] The Ark of God was captured by the Philistines (cf. 1 Sam. 4:1–11). They took it to Ashdod, Gath, and then Ekron, where God struck the people with tumours. They were terrified and wanted the Ark removed from them (1 Sam. 5:1–12). It was then taken to Beth-shemesh (1 Sam. 6:15) and finally to the house of Abinadab at Kiriath-jearim, where his son, Eleazar, had charge over the Ark for some twenty years (cf. 1 Sam. 6:19–7:2).

[15] Watts, "Triumphal Entry," 980.

[16] Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities,* trans. H. St. J. Thackeray (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1930), 7.85–86, 404–405.

[17] He conquered the Philistines, Edomites, Moabites, King Hadadezer of Zobah, Arameans of Damascus and subjected them to a tribune (cf. 2 Sam. 8:1–8).

[18] See, Josephus, *Antiquities,* 7.107, 416–417.

[19] There is also an obscure mood of a victory celebration when David conquered Jerusalem. King Hiram of Tyre sent gifts of cedar trees, along with carpenters and masons to build David a

participating, or silently cheer from home and pray for a successful outcome in any individual or communal endeavours, whether in sports, travel, gatherings, or even a fishing expedition. The main leader for any of these occasions is referred to as the *tautai,* whose responsibility is to bring home a successful outcome, knowing that the *tapuaiga* is praying for it. Such an undertaking is directly linked to a master fisherman's (a *tautai'*s) primary objective, which is to catch enough fish for the fishermen themselves, but the very best is given to the *tapuaiga*. Thus, the *tautai*'s responsibility and success benefit everyone, while everyone in the *tapuaiga* applauds and prays for the *tautai*'s success. This reciprocal relationship is represented by Jesus' triumphal procession in the Markan story.

Jesus' Procession

Jesus' procession then resonates with the Samoan *tautai/tapuaiga* relationship, but differs significantly from the "triumphal processions" of the Romans described above, as Brent Kinman observes:

> First, the traditional triumph could only be held at Rome, second, the triumph was given to a qualified Roman magistrate, third, the triumph procession was held over a course of several days, and fourth, the triumph was fundamentally a military honour.[20]

As such, the so-called "triumphal" interpretation of Jesus' procession into Jerusalem does not resonate with the Greco-Roman triumphal welcome, designated for victorious commanders or rulers. Even the OT victory celebrations differ significantly with the absence of any social, religious, and political elite welcoming Jesus. Thus, the Markan narrative of a "triumphal entry" cannot be supported by the historical realities as mentioned above. It portrays an "insignificant" event, as some argue,[21] signifying a clear rejection of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem. But this is a "triumphal" event for the masses who are represented by and the focus of Jesus' challenge, as this article argues.

This suggestion implies that the authorities recognised Jesus' coming not as a triumph in the form of a popular procession but as a threat to their religious and political privileges and security. Only Jesus' faithful supporters (*tapuaiga*) who had been travelling with him from Galilee (cf. Mark 10:1, 52; 15:41) and perhaps some from Jerusalem (cf. John 12:12) were there to cheer him into Jerusalem. The authorities were not. They were waiting for him indeed, but in order to "destroy" and "kill" him (cf. Mark 12:12; 14:1, 10–11; 15:11–15).

Such contrasting perspectives highlight the different expectations of the people (especially the disciples) and Jesus. Jesus knew the result of this challenge. He warned his disciples thrice that he would suffer and die on the cross (cf. Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34),[22] which was his true purpose on earth (cf. Mark 1:38). This heroic stance against all expectations and being truthful to his responsibilities in spite of all the opposition and danger embodies the real essence of a true *tautai*, who remains steadfast focus on the end result in times of challenging storms.

Ironically, Jesus' self-sacrifice was indeed for the transformation of his followers'

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house. He developed the city and the kingdom for the sake of his people and David became greater and greater, because the Lord was with him (cf. 2 Sam. 5:9–12).

[20] Brent Kinman, "Parousia, Jesus" 'A-Triumphal" Entry, and the Fate of Jerusalem (Luke 19:28–44),'" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118, no. 2 (1999): 280.

[21] Such as Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark,* trans. Donald H. Madvig (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1970), 227.

[22] Parallel versions of these predictions are: (Matt. 16:21; 17:22; 20:18–19; Luk. 9:22, 44; 18:31–33; cf. Jn. 8:21–30, 12:27–36, 13:21).

whole being from sinners to believers, and not a physical overthrow of earthly powers.[23] The latter Jewish messianic expectation views Jesus as a saviour-warrior who would liberate the people from the authorities, just as the victorious King David did. But Jesus knew he had to suffer and be humiliated, so that everyone who believes might be transformed physically and spiritually with joy, freedom, and redemption, as alluded to with the crowd's celebratory mood when Jesus entered Jerusalem, on the narrative level.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, Mark's story

The above discussion highlights the significant differences between Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and some historical political and military extravagance processions. Such divergence has also led to differing scholarly arguments about this Markan story.

Literature Reviews: Mark 11:1–11

Such differences support the argument of this article that there may be another motive for Jesus' entry into Jerusalem besides the crowds' intention of heralding him as a Davidic-type king who would save them from the authoritative rulers represented by Jerusalem. These religious and political leaders certainly had no intention of welcoming Jesus. However, the messianic significance of the story, some have argued convincingly,[24] relates to the fulfilment of the Prophet Zechariah's prophecy (cf. Zech. 9:9).

Others, however, do not agree.[25] In particular, Ched Myers and Richard Horsley highlight a political dimension to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.[26] They argue that this was a political demonstration to highlight the plight of the oppressed and marginalised people, against the political and religious leaders, located in Jerusalem, as Myers puts it: "The episode resembles a carefully choreographed street theatre, [which] is politically loaded, [but] Jesus does not intend to fight."[27] For Myers, Jesus' procession is a "kind of parody, contrasting Jesus' destiny of the cross with the popular messianic expectations of the disciples, crowds and the readers."[28]

R.T. France alludes to the theatrical aspect of Jesus' procession, pointing out the significance of Jesus riding into Jerusalem. For France, "riding" becomes the "centre of attention, [as] this was a deliberate departure from [Jesus'] normal practice of travelling by foot. Jesus was aiming to be noticed [and] he could be said to have engineered the

[23] Peter's false confession concerning Jesus' messiahship (cf. Matt. 16:16–23; Mark 8:29–33; Luke 9:20) and the other disciples seeking positions of honour (Matt 18:1–5; 20:20–28; Mark 9: 33–37; 10:35–45; Luke 9:46–48) reflect such messianic confrontations.

[24] Refer, Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes and Indexes,* Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966), 45. See also, C.S. Mann, *The Anchor Bible, Mark: A New Translation with introduction and Commentary* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1986), 432; Sherman E. Johnson, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1960), 186; Henry Barclay Swete, *The Gospel According to St Mark: The Greek Text with Introduction Notes and Indices* (London: MacMillan and Co., Limited; New York: The MacMillan Company, 1898), 236; D.E. Nineham, *The Pelican New Testament Commentaries: The Gospel of Mark* (Middlesex, New York, Victoria, Auckland: Penguin Books, 1963), 291.

[25] For example, refer to Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark*, 227. Also, Morna D. Hooker, *A Commentary on The Gospel According to St Mark* (London: A & C Black, 1991), 256; C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark: An Introduction and Commentary,* ed. C.F.D. Moule (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), 352.

[26] Richard A. Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville, London, Leiden: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

[27] Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 294–295.

[28] Myers, *Binding the Strong Man,* 296.

outburst of joyous proclamation by the crowd."[29] This nationalistic mood plays into the people's messianic expectation, as further implied by Jesus riding on a donkey.

Similarly, Hugh Anderson argues that "Jesus himself aimed at a demonstration that he was a Messiah not of the Davidic warrior type of popular expectation, but rather like the peaceful king of Zech. 9:9."[30] However, R. Otto thinks that Jesus' procession and the accompanying "acclamation is eschatological but not messianic,"[31] as Jesus himself had insisted and foretold the outcome of this journey. Even David Bruce Taylor questions if such an event ever took place, as Mark explains it, because of the contrasting imagery used of "a victorious and triumphant King, yet humble and riding on an ass."[32] But these victorious and triumphant qualities are essential for a successful *tautai*, whose humbled demeanour with strong conviction can bring success and benefits for both the *tautai* himself and those around him and depend upon his action.

Other scholars point to the first part of the pericope – Jesus' instruction to acquire the donkey – to imply Jesus' "supernatural power,"[33] rather than those who argue that this was a pre-planned arrangement.[34] The latter argument suggests that Jesus knew the donkey's owner, who was already with him. This owner, whose title "Lord" (*ὁ κύριος*) is mentioned in Mark 11:3, is not Jesus.

Perhaps, Lamar Williamson sums up this scholarly diversity by stating that: "the main point about the colt is that Jesus took the initiative to arrange [prearrange?] and the preparation occurred through the divine foreknowledge and according to plan."[35] As for the acclamation, he says that "the participants are wrong in their expectation that Jesus will restore the fortunes of Jerusalem, yet they are right in their hope that he is the Messiah."[36] In the end, the whole event came to "nothing,"[37] and the "triumphal entry must have seemed very insignificant."[38] Jesus just took a look around and left.

Such a diverse scholarly view can be grouped into two distinct categories. One

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[29] R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary of the Greek Text,* eds., Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids, Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 2002), 428.

[30] Hugh Anderson, *New Century Bible Commentary: The Gospel of Mark – Based on the Revised Standard Version* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co.; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott Publ. Ltd., 1976), 260.

[31] R. Otto, *The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man,* transl., F.V. Wilson and B.L. Woolf (London, 1938), cited by Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark,* 454.

[32] David Bruce Taylor, *Mark's Gospel as Literature and History* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1992), 261.

[33] Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 624.

[34] William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes,* ed. F.F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 395, argues that the availability of the donkey suggests prearrangement with the owner. Also, Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark,* 454, asks a similar question of whether the instruction implied a previous arrangement with the owner of the colt; Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene A. Nida, *Helps for Translators, Volume II: A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Mark* (Germany: United Bible Societies, 1961), 343; Bruce J Malina, "Jesus' Out-Group Relationship," in *Windows on the World of Jesus: Time Travel to Ancient Judea* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 93.

[35] Lamar Williamson, *Mark: Interpretation – A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983), 203.

[36] Williamson, *Mark: Interpretation,* 204.

[37] France, *The Gospel of Mark,* 436.

[38] Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark,* 227.

illuminates the theological perspective, emphasising Jesus's messianic and extraordinary powers. The other, however, points to the sociohistorical elements of Jesus' procession, aiming to accommodate the struggles of marginalised people, most of whom followed Jesus. Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan concur with the latter group's argument that Jerusalem underwent a major transformation from being the "centre of the sacred geography of the Jewish people to a city that became the centre of a domination system, marked by political oppression, economic exploitation, and religious legitimation."[39] They believe that this system was controlled by a few wealthy families at the top, including the "high priest and members of aristocratic families."[40] Jesus' challenge was a struggle against this multifaceted system of domination, favoured and maintained by the few wealthy elite families and those in power for their indulgence.

For the purpose of this paper, a *tautai* hermeneutic promotes both views by interweaving them with the hermeneutical purpose for a related and meaningful interpretation.

Mark's story of Jesus

Before going to Jerusalem, Jesus' ministry had been concentrated in Galilee and the surrounding areas. This experience allowed Jesus to encounter the hardships people faced because of their religious leaders' deeds and the burden of being subjected to foreign power and control.

Jesus responded by helping the poor, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, comforting the mourners, and even arguing against Jewish establishments.[41] For the crowds' part, they followed Jesus in Galilee, even on his way to Jerusalem. Their historic conditionedness prompted their worldview of a messiah who would liberate them from these oppressive regimes, and they perceived Jesus to be the one. But for this transformation to eventuate, Jesus must go to Jerusalem and present a passive challenge to the authorities. This marks the beginning of a decisive confrontation in which "neither side will be in a mood to compromise."[42] This also reflects a *tautai* hermeneutical emphasis, where the master fisherman ought to maintain focus on his or her real responsibilities of providing for or leading his or her people, despite the overwhelming challenges.

Mount of Olives (τὸ ὄρος τῶν ἐλαιῶν)

As Jerusalem is mentioned first (Mark 11:10) before Bethphage and Bethany (two small towns on the slope of Mount of Olives), it indicates that Jerusalem is indeed the target to reach, making it the "centre of attention."[43] The mention of Mount of Olives is significant in relation to the upcoming challenge, as it is from here that Jesus would base and launch his operation. To validate this claim, some historical and biblical events that mention specific warring purposes concerning the Mount of Olives ought to be examined to draw out their significance and their important contributions to this concept of a challenge.

Josephus tells the story of an Egyptian false prophet who came to Jerusalem and gathered about 30,000 supporters.[44] Under the premise that he would command the wall

[39] Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 7–8.

[40] Borg and Crossan, *Last Week,* 16.

[41] Graham Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus,* second edition (Oxford: University Press, 2002), 51.

[42] France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 428.

[43] Gundry, *Mark,* 623.

[44] Josephus, *Antiquities,* 20.169–172, 92–93; Josephus, *Wars,* 2.261–263, 424–425.

of Jerusalem to fall and gain entry into the city,[45] he would overpower the Roman garrison, thereby liberating the people and, with him ruling over them. Although his plan was foiled by Governor Felix, he launched his ambitious assault on the city from the Mount of Olives.

The proximity of the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem's walls made this series of hills a grave strategic danger for the city's defenders and an ideal lookout spot for surveying the city beyond its walls. The Roman commander Titus had his headquarters on the northern extension of the ridge during the siege of Jerusalem in 70 AD.[46] The whole hill would have provided a platform for the Roman catapults that hurled heavy objects over the Jewish fortifications of the City.[47]

In the OT, the Mount of Olives is designated as the place of the future eschatological revelation of God's glory (cf. Zech. 9:1–9; Ezek. 11:23).[48] This event alludes to a victory of Yahweh over the nations, the coming of the new king of the line of David, and the return of the exile.[49] But it was to be on Mount of Olives, from which the judgment of the enemies of Israel would take place and that "the Lord will go forth and fight against those nations as when he fights on that day, his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives" (Zech. 14:2–4).

Although Mount of Olives is synonymous with military actions, as explained above, it is also symbolic of the judgment against Israel's oppressors. Thus, Jesus' procession was much more than a military battle for the people's liberation. It was a challenge to bring transformative judgment and justice *against* the authorities in Jerusalem and justice *for* the people. This motif is further supported by Jesus changing his normal mode of transport, walking, but instead, he chose to ride on a donkey as he headed into Jerusalem.

The Colt/Donkey (πῶλον)

The term *πῶλον* is defined as a "young animal, foal,"[50] or a colt (Mark 11:2), and is generally used in the Gospels to point to the messianic implications of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.[51] This royal/kingly emphasis is reinforced by the phrase, "a colt that has never been ridden" (Mark 11:2), thus pointing to its sacred purpose.[52] This messianic interpretation alludes to the Prophet Zechariah's prophecy, which is Matthew's emphasis on Jesus as the coming king (cf. Matt. 21:5):

> Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a

[45] Josephus, *Wars,* 2.262, 424–425, states that this Egyptian false prophet would force an entrance into Jerusalem.

[46] Tacitus, *Histories, Book V: AD 70,* 5.1 and 5.9, transl., Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb, eds., et al., Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago, London, Toronto, Geneva, Sydney, Tokyo: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 295, 297. Also, Josephus, *Wars,* 5.106–134, 230–239, records that during the siege, Titus surrounded the city with arrays of soldiers and war machineries, while he maintained one legion on Mount of Olives.

[47] Josephus, *Wars,* 5.268–270, 284–285.

[48] Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark,* 394.

[49] P.D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 293.

[50] BDAG, 900, translates *πώλον* as 'the colt of a horse, or young animal' with a qualification – e.g. a young donkey; *TDNT,* 959, relates *πώλον* as a 'foal,' the young of the horse or ass.

[51] Refer Sasson J, "Ass," in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 72–73. This royal connotation is also evident in the appointment of Saul as Israel's first king (cf. 1 Sam. 9:1–10:24). In Greek, the donkey was associated with the Syrian god, Dionysus.

[52] Williamson, *Interpretation – Mark,* 202.

> donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations… (Zech. 9.9-10a).

This powerful passage also implies humility, which aligns metaphorically with a suffering servant whose mission was to provide justice where injustices occurred[53] and relief for the poor due to economic and political oppressions. Carol and Eric Meyers support this by saying that the Hebrew (מֶלֶךְ *melek*) refers to a king in a political sense, where the "king will not benefit socially or economically by his position."[54] That is, in this challenge, the people stood to benefit, not the historical Jesus, who, as a king, would "rule his people in righteousness, which includes justice *for* the poor."[55] From the perspective of a *tautai* hermeneutic, Jesus can be seen as a master *tautai* whose priority is the benefit of the people he serves, disregarding the personal cost that may be incurred.

The humbleness of the donkey indicates the humility and majesty of its rider. It can also be viewed as "the strength that is in vulnerability, and the victory that is in innocence."[56] This reverse-psychological inclination is reflected in the contrast between human expectations of the coming Messiah and the reality of that event in Jesus Christ. The authorities in Jerusalem knew that Jesus was coming and refused to welcome him, illuminating their perception of Jesus as a challenge to their authority and status quo. And they were prepared to meet that challenge with questionable means.

The royal and nationalistic mood of the crowd in verses 8–10 complements the assumption that Jesus chose to ride rather than walk, so that the authorities would know he had arrived. Myers compares this noisy demonstration (procession) to a "carefully choreographed street theatre"[57] with a political aim. Thus, riding on the donkey was entirely engineered in order to be noticed, a strategy aimed at forcing the authorities to respond[58] (cf. Luke 19:39–40; Mark 11:18–19). It also implies that Jesus was not afraid, even though he was well aware of the outcome. Instead, riding into Jerusalem was indeed a powerful statement that portrayed his claim to authority,[59] as proclaimed by the crowd.

Many people (όι πολλόι)

The crowd is described as a "large crowd" (Mark 10:46) and "many people" (Mark 11:8), and it seems they had accompanied Jesus and the twelve, heading into Jericho and approaching Jerusalem (Mark 11:1). This particular crowd cannot be from Jerusalem.[60] They would certainly make up of some day labourers, farmers and fishermen from

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[53] This relationship between the humble donkey and its implied reference to humility and justice can also be compared to the silent lamb that has been led to be slaughtered (cf. Isa. 53:7; Jer. 11:19; Acts 8:32; Rev. 13:8) for the sake of the people's sin. See, Johnson, *A Commentary of the Gospel According to St. Mark,* 186, citing Sanh. 98a, "R. Yehoshua ben Levi [*c.250*]" who attempts this connection by reasoning that: "If they (Israel) are worthy of him, he comes on the clouds; if they are not worthy of him, poor and riding on an ass."

[54] Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *The Anchor Bible: Zechariah 9–14, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, 1993), 128–129.

[55] Ralph L. Smith, *Micah-Malachi,* World Biblical Commentary, Volume 32 (Waco: Word Books Publisher, 1984), 256.

[56] John Eaton, *The Circle of Creation: Animals in the Light of the Bible* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1995), 30.

[57] Myers, *Binding the Strong Man,* 294.

[58] France, *The Gospel of Mark,* 428.

[59] Morna D. Hooker, *Black's New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 257.

[60] Rebekah Eklund, "From "Hosanna!" to "Crucify!" The Fickle Crowds in the Four Gospels," *BBR* 26, no. 1 (2016): 21–41, convincingly argues the differences between this crowd and the crowds of Jerusalemites shouting for Jesus' crucifixion in 15:15.

Galilee,[61] and others whom Jesus helped, fed, healed, or cured (cf. Matt. 20:34; Mark 10:52; Luke 18:43). Although the majority of them would have come from the peasant class, who had suffered much under the religious and political systems, there were also some people of wealthy status, who could afford to have cloaks or outer garments (*ἱμάτια,* Mark 11:7).

Their reaction to Jesus riding on a donkey was perhaps spontaneous and unexpectedly nationalistic, but it invoked the prophecies of a heroic and victorious king riding on a donkey toward Jerusalem,[62] who would be their saviour from their oppressors. This would appeal to their own expectation that Jesus was indeed the liberating saviour they had been waiting for.[63] Their rejoicing and shouting in verses 9–10 recapitulate Psalm 118:25–26. But it is also, perhaps, a cry to the "blessed" Jesus to "save" them. This Psalm was composed as a "royal song of thanksgiving for military victory, but set in the context of a processional liturgy."[64] It is, therefore, entirely possible that this large crowd was hailing Jesus as their deliverer, and at the same time, celebrating that coming victory with the acclamation of joy or shout of praise.

In relation to the hermeneutical location, Jesus, the master *tautai*, is leading from the front for the sake of the people. He is their true hope, a relentless leader, and a brave provider who, against all odds, could find a way to help his dependent followers by overcoming any impossible circumstances and opposition.

The Entry – v.11

Jesus finally entered Jerusalem after all the commotion of verses 1–10. At this stage, according to the Roman triumph proper, Jesus was expected to offer sacrifices to God, to complete his triumphal entry, if that were the case. Unfortunately, that did not happen. Instead, Jesus just entered Jerusalem, took a look around the Temple and then left (Mark 11:11). This concluding verse of the procession looks more like the scouting phase of the challenge that was now truly underway. He looked around to familiarise himself and observe the reality. From this initial surveillance, he would plan his next move: a more direct encounter with the Temple authorities. He then returned to his base of operation at the Mount of Olives.

This also resonates with a master *tautai*'s crucial responsibility: to be aware at all times of potential threats and opportunities, and be prepared to act accordingly. Otherwise, he would no longer be a leader to and for the people, but a burden and a liability.

From the Markan narrative, we know that the next day Jesus disrupted temple operations, much to the dismay of the authorities (cf. Mark 11:15–19), rather than offering a sacrifice to honour God, as in a triumphal entry. They reacted accordingly by urgently seeking ways to plot his death (cf. Mark 11:18). Jesus' strategic challenge of riding into Jerusalem, supported by the crowd's spontaneous nationalistic mood, had achieved its purpose. The authorities had duly noticed his arrival in Jerusalem. But the

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[61] D.F. Watson, "People, Crowd," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels,* eds. Joel B Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin, Second Edition (Downers Grove, 2013), 606.

[62] This again invokes the messianic aspects of Jesus' coming to Jerusalem, just like Solomon riding on a mule to his enthronement (cf. 1 Kgs. 1:38–40) and perhaps the use of a donkey in the oracle of Judah (cf. Gen. 49:10–11).

[63] Taylor, *Mark's Gospel as Literature and History,* 261, argues that Jesus' riding on a donkey, may have been his way of communicating to the people that he was the Messiah of prophecy, but not the Messiah of their dreams, as in a mighty warrior, who would liberate them from foreign rulers.

[64] Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150,* World Biblical Commentary, Volume 21, eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1983), 124. See also, Mitchell Dahood, *The Anchor Bible, Psalms III: 101–150* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970), 155, who alludes to this Psalm as a thanksgiving for a military victory.

crowds' nationalistic activities (cf. Mark 11:1–10) and Jesus' confrontational approach (cf. Mark 11:15–19) had created outrage and instilled fear in the authorities that an uprising might result, which would then give the Romans an excuse to destroy them (cf. John 11:48–50).

Although the end (cf. Mark 11:11) appears to be an anticlimax as nothing happened, there is a great deal of suspense in the air and a sense of anticipation of what would follow. So far, the procession had demonstrated the power of the people, who had been united under a challenger, to stand up against the authority's oppressive regime. It had served notice on the authorities that Jesus and his followers had arrived and would no longer remain silent about their situation. They had signalled their intention by proclaiming victory with shouts of joy and praises. It was an indication of their confidence and trust in their leader, Jesus, to liberate them.

But Jesus' procession was seriously undermining peace and security in Jerusalem, considering its timing. The Roman authority usually bolstered security by providing extra soldiers during pilgrim festivals, in this case, the Passover festival.[65] A great multitude of pilgrims would come to Jerusalem, which often led to demonstrations and disruptions. Jesus' procession did just that by turning the whole city into turmoil (cf. Matt. 21:10–11).

This direct and confrontational approach would have supported the people's expectation of Jesus as their messianic liberator. He condemned and accused these temple operators as thieves (cf. Mark 11:17). These were most likely the priests and the high priest, who performed these functions within the Temple. Together with the Pharisees, the scribes, the Herodians, and even Pilate, they orchestrated Jesus' arrest and crucifixion.

Thus, on the narrative level and historical reality, Jesus' challenge is unsuccessful due mainly to external influences, as demonstrated above, and to internal forces. Judas Iscariot, whom Jesus hand-picked as one of his disciples, betrayed him out of greed (cf. Mark 14:10–11; Matt. 26:14–16). The disciples fled in fear, and the crowd's disloyalty turned to hostility toward Jesus. Their hope of liberation and assurances of a better kingdom appeared futile. As far as they were concerned, Jesus was now one of a long line of messianic pretenders who promised so much, but failed to deliver.[66] Now, their hope had been squashed.

However, the disciples and some of the crowd's guilty conscience and fear (during Jesus' arrest and crucifixion), and their renewed enthusiasm after the resurrection, spurred them on to continue Jesus' ministry and teachings,[67] which they had now fully comprehended. Although he was arrested, tried, and executed by crucifixion, Jesus came back to life after three days, just as he had predicted (cf. Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:33–34).

Jesus' resurrection signals his victory over death and worldly powers. The people–the disciples, the crowds, the authorities, the gentiles, the audience, and the readers–are now realising that Jesus' challenge is a different kind of liberation for all. It is a challenge that cannot be fought with weapons of destruction, and the faithful believers themselves are now called to bear the cost of discipleship, so that others may be saved and imitate Christ in their contemporary locations.

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[65] Josephus, *War,* 2.223, 411.

[66] Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans; Toronto, 2000), 6. Williams says that Jesus holds back from revealing who he is because people's expectation of him as the "triumphant deliverer" cannot portray the truth about him.

[67] Robert C. Tannehill, "The Disciples in Mark: The Function of a Narrative Role," in *Issues in Religion and Theology 7: The Interpretation in Mark,* ed. William Telford (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; London: SPCK, 1985), 136. Tannehill states that the disciples were encouraged to proclaim the good news of the risen Lord, in their "continuing relationship" with Jesus.

A "tautai" hermeneutic

The transformative power of Jesus' death and resurrection can encourage purposeful change to empower everyone, particularly our Pasefika people. This focus allows for a reinterpretation that illuminates relevant and purposeful local perspectives, while still remaining faithful to the biblical narrative. This reader-response platform seeks an integrated conversation with other meaning-making methodologies, as demonstrated above, including the possible sociohistorical milieu of the story world Mark tells and the narrative features he employs to tell it. It is an interactive conversation that enhances the reading experience, potentially leading to a revised understanding and a related message for contemporary readers.

In this engaging scholarly conversation, the above exegetical analysis can then be fused with a local *tautai* hermeneutic, which reflects the Samoan custom of applying the essence of this crucial Samoan title "*tautai*" (master fisherman) to delicate situations (not only at sea but also in any location) where bold, courageous, and strong leadership is needed.

The Samoan term "*tautai*" literally combines "*tau*" (to read/observe, to fight) and "*tai*" (sea/ocean/moana), highlighting both the role(s) and relational space(s) for that particular person to act with specific responsibilities. A *tautai*'s ability to read/observe his/her environment (the stars, waves, currents, winds, and wildlife) allows him/her to discern location and direction at sea, literally. Such observations constantly remind the *tautai* to be aware of his/her reality while struggling to maintain focus on the targeted outcome (to find and catch the fish for the people). These external and internal conflicts are truly captured in Samoan proverbial expressions that emphasise the essence and the crucial roles required and expected of any Samoan master *tautai*. For instance, the proverb, *"seu le manu ae taga'i i le galu"* (catch the bird but watch the wave), illuminates the dual role of being a *tautai*, which is foremost to catch the bait, which will attract the fish, but also to keep an eye on the waves, which might overwhelm the boat.[68]

Theologically speaking, such knowledge is considered both spiritual and practical, connecting the *tautai* to ancestral wisdom and divine guidance.[69] Ancestral wisdom highlights the transmission of inherited traditional knowledge through oral tradition and lived experience. Divine guidance points to various creatures that may assist the *tautai* in his roles while reflecting a personal relationship between the *tautai* and his Creator. This relationship equips the *tautai* well to *tau* (fight/overwhelm) any physical and psychological challenges, as well as the visible and invisible forces, anywhere. And only those with experience, wisdom, and divine direction can be entrusted with such a critical role, thereby prompting positive transformation in others who are relying solely on the *tautai*'s ability to provide.

Thus, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, as described by Mark, can be perceived as a strategic approach by Jesus, a master *tautai* "fishing for men," who directly and passively challenges the Roman and Jewish suppressive powers in Jerusalem, resulting in his death and resurrection and transforming his followers into faithful believers. As a master *tautai*, Jesus has become the ordinary people's hope for transformation/rescue against the powerful constraints/oppositions in Jerusalem, who are prepared to do anything and everything in their power (legally or illegally) to stop this challenge to their status and riches. Despite swimming against the current/waves of the time, Jesus was determined and devoted himself, even to the point of dying, for the benefit of the people.

Similarly, a Samoan *tautai,* in our contemporary context and in any role, is called upon to act for the benefit of all people without prejudice, selfish ambition, or personal

[68] This translation is also a title of a book by Fatilua Fatilua, *Catch the Bird but Watch the Wave. A Pacific Sociorhetorical Reading of Luke 18:18–30* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2024), which symbolises responsibilities and constraints.

[69] Shawn S. Barnes and Terry L. Hunt, "Samoa's Pre-contact Connections in West Polynesia and Beyond," *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* (2005): 16.

gain. He/She should be prepared to defend the defenceless, the voice for the voiceless, and to act with devotion and compassion for the needy, the neglected, and those who are genuinely poor and unfortunate in our societies. A Samoan *tautai* also ought to break down barriers that marginalise people due to status and wealth, but to bring every Samoan and Christian together as a people of God, sharing and enjoying God's gracious providence.

This reinterpretation results from weaving together and fusing the story's sociohistorical context and its narrative features with the particular hermeneutical lens of *tautai*, as discussed above. This analytical fusion suggests that Jesus exhibits the true characteristics of a master *tautai,* whose sole responsibility is to serve his people's physical and spiritual needs. Such a reinterpretation can also be applied to our local readers, encouraging them to be bold *tautai* who can be called upon when the incoming waves of foreign and local authoritative powers continue to suppress our people politically, economically, and socially. It is a challenge to be daring, just as Jesus challenged the powerful elites of his day and transformed his followers into true and active believers.

Jesus' challenge and the eschatological outcome (both realised and not yet) in his death and resurrection can then be the transformative power for all potential *tautai* to follow. Jesus, the master *tautai* himself, has called and empowered us to lead, live, and follow his example of challenging oppressive forces (both local and foreign) that are marginalising and drowning our own people.

Conclusion

The divine *tautai*, Jesus, has lived our human experience, not as a distant commander but as an ever present guardian hero, "navigating the perilous waters of human existence" to transform us as bold and courageous "fisher of men" to live, enjoy, and proclaim Jesus as the "Blessed One who comes in the name of the Lord" (Mark 11:9). His empowering presence and transformation allow us to go forth and make disciples of all nations, by bearing the cost of discipleship in our contemporary locations as Pasefika Islanders, enjoying God's blessings in our "islands of people",[70] in our moana.

It is essential to keep the challenge going, which our forefathers and visionary *tautai* from the past had laboured with, with love and determination. We owe it to them and our future *tupulaga* (generations) to keep reading the currents and fighting the seas of negative and opposing influences, with divine guidance and grace. It is also critical to keep re-freshing our theological challenge with relational purpose for our hermeneutical locations.

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[70] See Visesio Saga, "Other boats were with him" (Mark 4:36). The radical inclusivity of the Samoan *motu o tagata* reading of Mark" (PhD Thesis, University of Divinity, 2022), who discusses this issue further with implications for Samoan Islanders.

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Social Tensions amidst the Celebration of Unity in Psalm 133

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Abstract

Psalm 133 has become a forerunner among biblical texts when promoting the sentiment of harmony and unity. From an ideological perspective, this reading of Psalm 133 moves in a different direction, exposing tensions and conflicts that fragmentarily exist in the text. Furthermore, while these fragments can represent various social groups in various contexts, this article focuses on the power struggles experienced by the priestly families during the post-exilic era.

Key Words: Marxism, Psalms, Gale Yee, Fredric Jameson, Wisdom, Ideologies, Priests.

Introduction

Although the core subject matter of Psalm 133 may vary in opinion and thought, there is a general consensus that the promotion of harmony and unity is the ultimate goal of the psalm. This work aims to unveil contradicting ideals that not only exist beneath this harmonious façade but also function to undermine the main idea presented before us.

Method & Methodology

This work will employ Ideological Criticism as the instrument of interpretation. A combination of well-known Marxist scholars – Gale Yee, Fredric Jameson, and Roland Boer – will all play a role in the interpretational process. Yee's two-fold task combines a literary critical analysis with that of a social historical analysis.[1] The primary goal of the ideological critic is to discover the dominant ideology or ideologies embedded in the text as well as the ideologies of the unheard voices within it. Jameson's theory on the ability of the text to symbolically resolve real social tension will always be the catapult that fires up our sense of suspicion toward any text, and thus, the task will be to identify these fragments of the dominated voices in the text.[2]

This work will commence with a literary analysis to identify the contradictions embedded in the text. It will then undertake a social historical analysis, looking at the ideological world which gave birth to the embedded ideologies, to associate the conflicting voices and possible social groups within the historical context.

Literary Analysis

This section shall undertake a rhetorical analysis focusing on the text's placement in its various units, as well as its form, structure and content.

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[1] Gale A. Yee, "Ideological Criticism: Judges 17-21 and the Dismembered Body," in *Judges & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 149.

[2] Jameson's textual theory – *PU* – is no easy endeavour to comprehend when compared to the works of fellow Marxist scholars such as Eagleton, Yee, Sneed, Clines, Penchansky, and many others. I have mentioned this before in another work, but for those interested in Jameson's method and methodology, Roland Boer's detailed work will be of great assistance – *Jameson and Jeroboam*, Semeia Series, SBL (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 43-98.

From a structural viewpoint, a pattern identified by Hengstenberg[3] will be worth a brief visit as it presents a platform for the rhetorical dialogue that is to follow. Of the fifteen psalms, Psalm 127 is sandwiched between two lots of seven. Each cluster of seven comprises two psalms credited to David and five that are anonymous.

A. 7 psalms (120-126 = 5 anonymous + 2 Davidic)
X 1 Psalm (127 – Solomon Temple Psalm)
A' 7 psalms (128 – 134 = 5 anonymous + 2 Davidic)

I believe it would be difficult to claim that this layout of the pilgrimage psalms was purely coincidental. Intentionally structured, Psalm 127, ascribed to Solomon, can also function as an interpretive center to the collection, i.e., the message has great bearing on the messages and emphasis of the rest of the Psalms of Ascent. We note the essential themes from this psalm for our interpretation. First, the psalm begins with the words *"unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain."* (Ps 127:1). Although Solomon is renowned for other building ventures (1 Kgs 9:16-19, 10:18-20), it is the building of the original temple in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 5:1-7:51) he is well-known for. Thus, the temple theme, which is central to this collection, already radiates strongly from the Solomon psalm. So the reference to the 'house' most likely is the house of the Lord also evident in the collection (Ps 122:1, 134:1). To continue along this line of interpretation, other important elements in the psalm is the reference to the "city" and "sons" which would then be associated to the city of Jerusalem itself and the sons of David, both of which are developed further in other psalms of the collection (Ps 122:1, 134:1, 132:11-12).

Returning to Psalm 133, we assume that although there is no mention of the temple in the psalm, it does not warrant the conclusion that the psalm has nothing to do with the temple, or even Jerusalem and the sons of David, for that matter. To further establish the connection, we take note of the theme of building, but especially the notion of building after the return from exile, which others, such as Goulder, understand as the compilation date for these psalms.[4] For Psalm 127 to expressively promote the importance of rebuilding in a post-exilic Judah would have been encouraging to the returning exiles, regardless of whether they are rebuilding the temple or their own houses. At this point, we have established three things: the first is an unseen association of Psalm 133 with the institution of the temple. Second, this work will show interest in the temple in the period after the exile. Third, social tensions and conflicts will be closely associated with the institution of the temple in the post–exilic era.

Form and Structure

From a Jamesonian standpoint, literary texts can be understood to be imaginary resolutions to texts, and these resolutions take place primarily in the form of the text.[5] This idea is ideological in nature, as the resolution does not omit the problem but merely papers over it. The task then is to locate the main contradiction in the text, to find that very point where the text fails to follow the logic or the thematic norm. Like Jameson, Boer understands the essential role of ideology to be revealed in the text's aesthetic structure rather than the conscious objectives of the author.[6] For that reason, the analysis of the text at this time will focus on form and structure to identify traces of the imaginary

[3] Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms,* Vol 3 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1860), 467.

[4] Michael D. Goulder, "The Psalms of the Return (Book V, Psalms 107-150)," in *Studies in the Psalter IV* JSOTSup 258 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 21, 27-30.

[5] Roland Boer, *Marxist Criticism of the Bible* (London: T & T Clark International, 2003), 183.

[6] Boer, *Jameson and Jeroboam*, 55 - 56.

resolution that has taken place.[7]

From a formal perspective, we shall take note of a few things. First, we look at a contradiction, which, although symbolic in nature, nonetheless has significance to the conflicting nature of undermining the harmonious flow of the notion of unity in the Psalms. The symbolic use and implications of 'directions' have been employed by Berlin, who concludes that the flow of the dew from Hermon onto Zion embodies the reunification of Yahweh's people, i.e., the return of the Northern kingdom.[8] We have discussed the importance of the idea of 'going up' to the collection. While it is no different for our chosen psalm, our psalm, however, is dominated by the notion of descending and is apparent in the root ירד going down" occurring three times (vv.2-3). Symbolically, directions suggest the presence of tensions in the text; that is, while the psalm indicates its close affiliation with the idea of going up, the content itself emphasizes the opposite direction. Second is the dilemma of identifying the psalm with a particular genre.[9] While others have associated the psalm with wisdom traditions,[10] others perceive the strong influence of the priestly circles, concluding that the psalm is a representation of the Aaronic blessing (Num 6:24-27).[11] For this article, we shall concentrate on these two types and their symbolic connection.

In dealing with wisdom and priestly traditions, we shall also be discussing the corresponding institutions of family and the priesthood.[12] Here, we bring up what Yee refers to as a noticeable "absence" in the text; that is, although we understand these psalms to be closely affiliated to the monarchy – especially David – there is no direct reference to the institution of the Israelite monarchy in this Psalm.[13] This further becomes an observation when we take into consideration the close social and literary history, in particular between the temple and the monarch. In Yee's analysis of the texts of Judges, this absence shines a positive light on the institution of the monarchy, this may not be the case in our text. In light of the subject in discussion – unity –the author seems to suggest the existence of unity when the monarch is absent, rhetorically, another way of putting it, the presence of a monarch only brings divisions. Does this represent a sense of hostility towards the monarch? For as it stands, the monarch does not seem noteworthy in the discussion of unity and living together of brothers. To go even further, given the notion of how pleasant and good such a sight is, indicates that this unity that the people are experiencing is rare, and for it to be more common, the people must note

[7] Boer, *Jameson and Jeroboam,* 44.

[8] Adele Berlin, "On the Interpretation of Psalm 133," in *Directions in Hebrew Poetry*, ed. Elaine R. Follis, JSOTSup 40 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 145.

[9] The contemporary form critic no longer deals with small literary units classified by their form, but larger units which may contain various forms—or genres as recently considered—which may have been appropriated by the composer suiting a specific setting. In other words, form refers to the distinct devising of a text or unit while genre refers to the principles of language and expression found within this unit. Marvin A. Sweeny, "Form Criticism," in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and their Application*, revised edition, eds. Steven L. McKenzie, Stephen R. Hayes (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 58 -60.

[10] Hans Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, A Continental Commentary, trans. by Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 485.

[11] Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, Vol 21 WBC (Texas: Word Books, 2002), 214.

[12] Doyle also acknowledges the existence of two fraternities, that of familial and liturgical with a third being the national already mentioned by Berlin. Brian Doyle, "Metaphora Interrupta Psalm 133," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses. Louvain Journal of Theology and Canon Law* 77, no. 1 (2001): 5-22.

[13] Marxists critics also refer to these absences as "gaps." Absences and gaps are seen as a result of the notion where some things are best left unsaid. See Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production: With a New Introduction by Terry Eagleton and a New Afterword by the Author*, trans. by Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge Classics, 2006), 95. See also Yee, "Ideological Criticism," 143.

that this was a time when the monarch was insignificant. On the other side of the coin, experiencing the rare occasion which is unity is also a compliment to the leaders of the community at the time, that is, in the absence of the monarch, the priests and the priesthood.

A Blessing (v.1)
B Comparison with Oil (v.2a)
X Aaronic Ministry (v.2b)
B' Comparison with Dew (v.3a)
A' Blessing (v.3b)

VanGemeren sees the structure of the psalm as presenting the pattern of blessing and comparison.[14] Here we note how the text is enveloped with the priestly concept of "blessing" while portraying the Aaronic ministry at the centre of the text. The central position of the temple in the collection, as discussed above, further strengthens the priestly overtone in the psalm. Further on the concept of blessing, others theorize that the collection is a reproduction of the Aaronic benediction (Num 6:24-27), especially with the occurrence of the themes of "blessing," "keeping," and being "gracious" and "giving peace" throughout the Psalms of Ascent (Ps 121). Such a message would be encouraging for the pilgrims journeying to Jerusalem, but also to the returning exiles.

We note the use of *'shemen'* "שמן" oil which carries both royal and familial undertones, as in some cases, it was used to anoint guests (Lk 7:46), but more commonly, it would be used for the anointing of kings and priests.[15] We noted the distinction between the monarch and the priesthood above; however, the oil here can represent either of the two mentioned, or even the family unit. Here, we do not see a contradiction, but the fact that priests were the leading figures in the post-exilic society would have seen them also undertake administrative and political roles. Thus, the dominant priestly influence in the text may very well also represent royal ideals and concepts.

In support of a familial mode, some argue that the psalm falls under wisdom traditions. Some have even considered this psalm as a greeting song by a guest to acknowledge brothers living together in a house he/she enters.[16] The concept of *'ach'* אח "brother" in v.1 is the obvious evidence of familial language however, there seems to be tension with a more nationalistic interpretation. If Berlin is right and the Hermon represents the Northern kingdom, it will then be a reunification between brother nations, i.e. Israel and Judah, on the other hand, this unification can also refer to an extended family of Yahweh to include both nations, thus closely associating with the sacred sphere. In addition to this, we note then the four possibilities of reading the phrase שבת אחים גם־יחד *when brothers live together in unity"* (v.1). First, the phrase appears to find its origin in earlier scripture of the Bible (Deut 25:5). The custom here is related to that of the extended family where brothers lived together with their father after marriage (Gen 13:6, 8; 36:6-8).[17] Second to an undivided kingdom, as suggested by Berlin. Third, to worship the Israelites, and fourth, the pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem. For Booij, the opening line of the Psalm is literally about a social practice where the comparisons that follow suggest that a gathering of Yahweh's worshippers is meant and that this situation

[14] Willem A. VanGemeren, "Psalms," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs,* Vol.5, ed. Frank E Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 816.

[15] Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms: New International Biblical Commentary,* OTS Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 125. VanGemeren, "Psalms," 816.

[16] Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 485.

[17] Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 212.

takes place literally in Jerusalem on the occasion of a religious festival.[18] Here, whilst there, it is considered a social practice in line with familial language; it is prompted by religious or liturgical duties. This is evident in the tensions between wisdom and priestly/ royal language. While the structure and meter of the psalms suggest wisdom sayings, they are incorporated into the dominant priestly blessing. Here, we can see glimpses of the familial bonds existing within the realm of the sacred duties.

Aaron – Disruption amidst Unity

Jameson discusses strategies of containment as part of his treatment of Lukács's ideal of totality.[19] According to Boer, Jameson's understanding of this concept "refers to the power of a narrative ideology to project the illusion that it has said all there is to say, that the account is complete."[20] We wish to expose the containment strategies that convey this deception of totality and completion. Upon saying this, this collection, according to Bodenhamer, does not shy away from exposing 'polarization' as is evident in the psalmist's cry to be rescued from enemies and difficult situations (Ps 120:2, 5, 7). However, in Psalm 133, the oppositions are ingeniously disguised under the concept of unity. The mention of the name of Aaron, in my opinion, disrupts the flow of thought throughout the psalm. Whilst their concept of unity is evident from start to end, Aaron's name, while noticeably associated with the theme of brotherhood and unity, unnoticeably, threatens to turn the dominating theme of unity on its head. From a Jamesonian position, Aaron's name is where the fragments of challenges to the dominant ideal reveal themselves.

How is the mention of Aaron significant? Of great importance to tensions in the text is Rochester's theory on 'sibling rivalry', which undermines the text. Here, a comparison is made between the two mountains of Hermon and Zion, deemed brothers. The former being the stronger brother, due to it being physically great and abundant in dew, while the latter being the weaker, of little stature and dry. The catch, however, is that despite its greatness, Hermon is not the main mountain in the text. Furthermore, the transfer of dew to Zion symbolizes the stronger giving to the weaker, which is common amongst siblings.[21] Along this line, the mention of Aaron brings forth the sibling rivalry with Moses, who we may say is noticeably absent from the text. Moses was the stronger brother, privileged with many duties from Yahweh, while Aaron was the weaker. His actions in building the golden calf in Moses' absence can also be seen as a challenge to Moses' authority and work. While Aaron is pictured being anointed, Moses, the anointer, is not. Similar to the discussion of the absence of the monarchy, the absence of Moses also carries the same notion and, in effect, promotes Aaron and his family. Furthermore, Moses represented leadership in the community and, in this case, was more secular than sacred as represented by Aaron and the priesthood. The mention of Aaron alone and the absence of Moses disrupts the theme of unity promoted in the text.

The mention of Aaron's name would also be the undoing of the dominant priestly material, as it seems to be a challenge against the priestly name itself. Given the central position of Aaron in the text, the move from Hermon to Zion symbolizes pilgrimage to the holy place, that is, "there" for the people to receive Yahweh's blessing (Num 6:23). Thus the narrative this work rolls out is the importance of the journey up to Jerusalem so that Yahweh's blessing can come down upon the worshipers. This very much promotes

[18] Thijs Booij, "Psalm 133: Behold how Good and how Pleasant," in *Biblical Studies on the Web* Vol 83 (2002), 258-267. See also Wen-Pin Leow, "Form and Experience Dwelling in Unity: A Cognitive Reading of the Metaphors of Psalm 133," *Tyndale Bulletin* 68, no. 2 (2017): 185-202.

[19] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 52-53.

[20] Boer, *Jameson and Jeroboam*, 49.

[21] Kathleen Rochester, "The Missing Brother in Psalm 133," *The Expository Times* 122, no. 8 (2011): 1-3.

the institution of the temple and priesthood. However, the flow, as mentioned, is troubled by the mention of Aaron's name, especially as the Aaronite family was not the leading priestly family of the time. In other words, while unity amongst the brothers is of great concern in the text, the mention of Aaron alone undermines this unity.[22]

Summary

We commenced with a formal analysis where there is slight tension between the wisdom sayings and the priestly benediction. While the dominant priestly material is quite visible in the text, the wisdom traditions appear to go unnoticed. We see how the priestly form incorporated wisdom. We note for the first time the overarching third form of a hymn/ song, which appears to resolve the tension between the two forms. The hymn form not only provides that illusion, but it also functions in a capacity as a formal closure. But even then, hymn is also a major element in the sacred. Moreover, it is also possible to articulate the main ideological oppositions in the text and begin to generate initial reflections of these tensions on a more social level.[23] We have 'unity' on one end and 'no unity' on the other. While it is evident that unity will serve the interests of those who support it, unity does not appear ideal for those against it. The question is, however, what about those considered the middle group who fall between these two? So, if we uphold Aaron as undermining unity, which other social group(s) are pro-unity? Who would be on the fence for that matter? This is our next task: to associate these existing conflicts and tensions with the respective social groups and classes in society.

Social-Historical Analysis

Within the realm of Marxist theory, the base and superstructure make up the two fundamental elements of human society. Analogous to the fundamental elements of a building structure, the base is the foundation, and the superstructure is the building that arises on this base. For Marx, the base in society is the economy, and it comprises the forces of production, which refer to technology, ecology, and the population, and the relations of production, which are prominently presented in the form of classes. The superstructure that supposedly arises on top of this foundation is the political and legal domains of society. It is in this section that all cultural and ideological activities can be situated.[24] For this analysis, we shall discuss the base and conclude with the superstructure of social class.

Base – Modes of Production

Usually, the base determines the superstructure in a one-way relationship; a position that is still upheld by orthodox Marxists. We will note a few things about the base of human society. First, the analogy of the base as foundation can be misleading as it immediately implies something that is static, unmovable, and unchangeable. However, that is not the case, as even the economic base of any society is vulnerable to change and transformation. In fact, there is more activity in the economic base than initially thought,

[22] Priestly rhetoric in the *Torah* very much promoted the status of Aaron as the High Priest. This was during the time when the Aaronite priests were the leading family. The maintaining of Aaron's name in Psalm 133 can be seen as traces or what Marxist scholars such as Jameson refer to as fragments; i.e. evidence of the existence of the dominated voices in society, or in this case, within the Jewish Priesthood. James W. Watts, "The Torah as the Rhetoric of Priesthood," in *The Pentateuch as Torah: New Models for Understanding Its Promulgation and Acceptance*, eds. Gary N. Knoppers and Bernard M. Levinson (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 319-332.

[23] Boer, *Jameson and Jeroboam*, 44. Dowling, *Jameson, Althusser*, 85-89.

[24] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 32-33.

especially in terms of internal conflict and contradiction. Marx refers to development in the base that takes place as a result of conflicts and contradictions between the forces and relations of production. In other words, these conflicts are the core and essence of development and transformation, which in effect, leads to the transformation of the entire superstructure. Second, although orthodox Marxism argues that the base influences the superstructure, from a literary point of view, the conflicts of the former can be determined and comprehended through the latter. In other words, the real conflicts that occur at the economic base can be explained through signs which occur in the superstructure or text. Therefore, in order for the critic to attempt to grasp the real-life contradictions at the base, it is most viable to achieve this through the superstructure, especially when access to the historical realities is very limited, as is the case with a lot of ancient texts, including the Bible.[25] We now move to discuss the economic base before the final discussion of superstructure.

As many scholars have stated, these psalms can be applicable to a variety of situations and dealings within the lives of the people of Israel. For our purpose, given the dominance of priestly influence, we place our reading in the days after exile, when the priestly circles were dominant under the Persian imperial rule. We can now move to discuss confidently the Persian period as the era evident in the text, but also the era in which those responsible for the compilation lived.[26] Note that because the social classes correspond to preferred modes of production, the transition from one mode to another is evident in cultural transformation. The returnees would be living proof of cultural transformations especially given change in their geographical location, that is, living in their current culture which is very much tainted with imperial interests, while at the same time still showing glimpses of a culture in the past which only a few people can really boast to have truly known. Politically, although they were relocated back to their homeland, they remained under Persian authority. They had no monarch on the throne of Judah and were no longer independent. They were now living like captives within their own homes. Socially, the returnees were the minority and were outnumbered by those who remained in the land. Furthermore, they were faced with an identity crisis, especially with the struggle to define the true people of *Yahweh* and of the land of Judah. From an economic standpoint, their local economy was now only a part of the greater Persian economy. On the religious front, not only was the temple controlled by the Persian king, but the status of the High Priest, in particular, had climbed to the top of the local leader's hierarchy. From a historical point of view, it is obvious that with the Persian interests invested in the temple, religion may have been the main vessel that assisted the imperial rule to achieve its goals. In saying that, the cultural backdrop to which the tributary mode of production is dominant is religion. This would also confirm the affiliation of the dominant priestly ideals and that of royal ideologies.

Gottwald distinguishes three types of modes of production in ancient Israel, each having its own defining period of dominance in Israel's history. First is the communitarian mode of production, which was the preferred system in pre-monarchic

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[25] Boer, *Jameson and Jeroboam*, 38.

[26] Yee's discussion on the book of Judges exposes the dilemma of the difference between the era described in the text and that of the authors. For Yee, the different periods also represent two different modes of production which were dominant within the respective eras. Yee, "Ideological Criticism: Judges 17-21 and the Dismembered Body," 152-153.

Israel during the tribal era.[27] The communitarian mode of production[28] is linked to the traces of familial presence within the text. Second, the tributary mode of production was dominant from the beginning of the monarchy to the Hellenistic era. The tributary mode of production – also known as the "Asiatic Mode of Production"[29] – presupposes the basis of production within villages where the majority of the farmers would work the lands by means of their own labor and that of their families. Under this system, the farmers practically labored for two reasons: to feed the family and pay the required government taxes.[30] Third was the slave mode of production, which dominated from the Hellenistic to the Roman period.[31] Since the Psalm is associated with the Persian era, the economic discussion focuses on the first two modes of production. Gottwald breaks down the tributary mode of production into two phases: a native tributary phase when Israel enjoyed political independence and a foreign tributary stage when Israel was colonially subject to foreign powers.[32]

In terms of social class, the tributary modes logically are in the best interests of the wealthy and elite of a society, whilst the communitarian suits the interests of the general populace on the lower end of society. As mentioned, the most prominent institution in Judah during the Persian era is the office of the high priest and the priesthood. We shall discuss the priesthood in light of the Persian backdrop in seeking an insight into their ideological standpoint.

Superstructure – Priests Dwelling in Tension

Psalm 133 is part of the collection labelled "Psalms of Ascent," which extends from Psalm 120 to 134. The Hebrew term *maʿalot* (מעלת) derives from the root *ma'alah,* (מעלה) translated as "step," thus the nuance of "going up." The historical reference of the Psalms of Ascent remains a debate among scholars. One view perceives the fifteen psalms as a symbolic reference to the fifteen steps leading up to the temple in Jerusalem.[33] A more popular view sees the reference to a pilgrimage ascent, i.e., as Jerusalem is seen to be positioned on a hill, the journey to Jerusalem, during the three annual feasts (Deut.16:16), is perceived as a climb to worship at the temple. Another view, which also takes into account the ascent to Jerusalem, is more specific in identifying the journey as the return of the Jews from exile. At this point, it is evident that the collection shows affiliation to a variety of contexts within the timeframe extending from the early monarchs of Israel to the days after exile. While the emphasis of unity would most preferably be the testimony in the days of the united kingdom under David, it is not the only possibility, as the history of Israel is full of instances where unity is celebrated, particularly in the face of opposition.

The returnees considered themselves as the continuation of the cultic community,

[27] The widely accepted view of the economy-type in the province of Yehud is the 'agrarian.' The entire peasant class depended on the working and cultivation of land, although some amongst the elite made profits through trading, it was a norm in practice that investments were made in land and agricultural activities rather than in merchant trading. Lester Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period* (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 202-208.

[28] Gottwald also refers to this as the "Household mode of production" due to the household (usually the extended family) being the productive unit. – "Social Class as an Analytical and Hermeneutical category in Biblical Studies," *JBL* 112, no. 1 (1993): 7-8.

[29] Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period*, 191-192.

[30] Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period*, 191; Jack Pastor, *Land and Economy in Ancient Palestine* (London: Routledge, 1997), 1.

[31] Norman K. Gottwald, "Sociology," in *ABD*, ed. David N Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 79-99.

[32] Gottwald, "Sociology," 79-99.

[33] K. W. Bodenhamer, "Dwelling together: Psalm 133 and the Song of Ascents," *Review and Expositor* 16, no. 2 (2019): 219-224.

which was destroyed in 587/586 B.C.E. Maintaining certain traditions and customs of the pre-exilic cult gave them their own sense of independence whilst in exile.[34] However, to assume that the religion upheld by the returnees was essentially a continuation of the earlier cult would be a misconception. Miller has shown how much of a struggle it would be to define an orthodox Jewish religion.[35] For our purposes, it is safe to conclude that the post-exilic cult was somewhat influenced by the Zoroastrian religion of their imperial rulers, especially with the significant and convincing parallels[36] noticed between the two. Despite the arguments regarding the nature of the relationship between the two religions, this affiliation would have been one way the Persian imperial ideology may have filtered through to control the Jewish subjects.

The main functions of the priesthood had always been to reconcile and mediate on behalf of the Israelites, where holiness was the main requirement of reconciliation. Their work and everything about it represented the larger relationship between Yahweh and His people.[37] This work included overseeing of all ritual acts within the temple, sacrificial rites, relaying to the people things that were pure and impure in accordance with the cult, and passing on blessings.[38] A late development to these religious roles was the interpretation of the law, which was a necessity in their additional judicial and legal roles during the Second Temple period.[39]

The law[40] contributed greatly to the upright image of the priesthood in the eyes of the people especially as its importance had heightened with the exilic experience for two reasons: first, the exilic community understood their current situation as the outcome of

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[34] David F. Hinson, *History of Israel* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1990), 178.

[35] While it is possible to point out a handful of factors which are supposedly distinct to the Israelite cult, the affiliation with other deities and their practices of worship, as a feature of Yahwism, was ominous from a very early stage of the cult's history. As opposed to the orthodox Yahwism, Miller expresses these affiliations in terms of "heterodox Yahwism" and "syncretistic Yahwism." While the former is more concerned with the appropriation of practices contradictory of the orthodox, – such as the use of cultic objects, consultation of diviners, witches etc. for the divine will – the latter assimilated aspects of worship of other deities in their worship of *Yahweh*. Patrick D. Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel*, ed. Douglas A. Knight (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 46-62, 51-57.

[36] W. O. E. Oesterley, Theodore H. Robinson, *Hebrew Religion: Its Origin and Development*, second edition (London: SPCK, 1957), 312-314. In this study of the Hebrew Religion, the authors discuss the parallels between the Jewish religion and Persian religion of Zoroastrianism. The following are some of the noticeable equivalents; Zoroaster appeared as a reformer and spiritualizer who believed in a monotheistic god, the sole creator of all things, the great emphasis on moral living to be guided by code of laws, the notion of the kingdom of God on earth, the cult was a book-religion as the Jewish cult eventually came to be, the pre-existence of a personified Law, angelology and demonology.

[37] Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1983), 84-85.

[38] John J. Castelot and Aelred Cody, *Religious Institutions of Israel: New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), 1258. See also Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel*, 162-165.

[39] Carol L. Myers and Eric M. Myers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* Anchor Bible Series (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 194. Castelot and Cody, *Religious Institutions of Israel*, 1256.

[40] Knight distinguishes between Israelite laws and the biblical laws. While the former can be easily equated with the customary laws, the latter "designates law-like material recorded in the Hebrew Bible. Take note especially of the Decalogue (Exod 20:2-17; Deut 5:5-21), the various codes; i.e. Covenant Code – also known as the Book of the Covenant – (Exod 21:1-23:19), Deuteronomic Code (Deut 12-26), Holiness Code (Lev 17-26), and the Priestly Code (all other laws in Exod, Lev, and Num). Douglas A. Knight, *Law, Power and Justice in Ancient Israel*, Library of Ancient Israel, ed. Douglas A. Knight (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 16-24.

disobedience to the Laws of Yahweh,[41] thus, to avoid further destructions, the upholding of the Law was important. Second, the absence of fundamental institutions of the Jewish world—the monarchy and the Temple—during the exile experience threatened to disrupt the Jewish way of life.[42] For Knight, the local teachings and instructions weakened during the exile, and the focus was now on the teachings of the cult and Yahweh.[43] For almost a century, the exiled Jews had to cope and find ways to maintain and preserve their way of life and identities; people fell back on the law.[44] This elevated importance of the law had vital consequences. Ringgren believes that the threat posed by Darius I's scheme of "codification of laws" had given rise to the idea of canonization, which would preserve the religious and cultural identities of the Jews. With the formation of the canon, it is obvious that a future-oriented vision was also at work, with the concern for future generations. Second, appropriating the law to everyday life was of the utmost importance and required interpreters; thus, the emergence of the scribes. Third is the equating of the law, symbolic of life, with wisdom traditions. Ringgren mentions that they were both "incarnations of God's revelation," and finally, in conjunction with this, reflecting on the law had become a norm for the people. Its function was to provide guidelines for appropriate behaviour that would, in turn, reward man with life, and in order to comply with these laws, they were to be accurately comprehended.[45]

As administrators of the law and justice, the priesthood would work hand in hand with the imperial command in both civil and religious matters.[46] The interaction between the two types of laws remains unclear, especially with the people of Judah, whose everyday life seemed inseparable from the religious. What is clear is that the office of the high priest, in coalition with the elders, had jurisdiction in the province of Judah, and the extent of authority would only be as much as the imperial civil laws allowed. Thus, assuming that even the religious laws were overshadowed by the imperial mindset[47] suggests that justice, which was accepted and practiced as the norm in the returning

[41] Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History,* JSOTSup Vol 15 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 76-78.

[42] While in the pre-exilic era the temple had been considered "royal property" in which the managing of the financing and maintenance of the temple seemed to be under the authority of the king, the temple was now considered as the property of the people or rather the citizens as Weinberg coins. These functions of the monarch were now upheld and controlled by the high priest—whose position was now established at the top of the hierarchy.— Georg Fohrer, *History of Israelite Religion*, translated by David E. Green (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), 331. Kessler reports that the 'anointing' which was reserved for the king, was now adapted by the high priest in succession. — Rainer Kessler, *The Social History of Ancient Israel: An Introduction*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 145.

[43] Knight, *Law. Power and Justice in Ancient Israel*, 52.

[44] Helmer Ringgren, *Israelite Religion*, trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 302.

[45] Ringgren, *Israelite Religion*, 302-309.

[46] A distinction is made between the civil and religious laws. The civil laws are believed to have been directly administered by the Imperial ruler himself. We may take note especially of Darius I involvement with the codification of the traditional law, furthermore, the destruction of the Egyptian temples by Cambyses demonstrates the monarch stepping in to carry out punishment against rebellious subjects. Ackroyd, *Israel under Babylon and Persia*, 165. Capital punishments would be ordered by the imperial ruler on offences against the state or the royal family and any form of injustice within the empire; even the lesser judges received the death penalty for corrupt judgment and practices. Charles Rollin, *The Ancient History of the Egyptians, Carthaginians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Medes and Persians, Grecians, and Macedonians: Including a History of the Arts and Sciences of the Ancients*, Vol.1 (New York: George Dearborn Publisher, 1836), 148-149.

[47] The religious laws were under the authority of the priesthood with the high priest presiding over such matters. This should not automatically mean that the religious laws were not tainted with the Persian influence as even the religious practices may have operated in such a way to avoid transgressing the civil laws and regulations of the central authority. In other words,

community, would really have been a Persian form of justice.[48] The administering of justice, then, would be perceived as being directed from the imperial ruler through his loyal officials who were scattered all over the empire. However, this still does not take away from the fact that the priesthood was definitely in a favorable position within the Jewish hierarchy.[49] Furthermore, such favorable circumstances also meant that enemies were not too far away.

Zadokite vs Levite / Aaronite

It is evident that the priestly class had their own agendas and interests, and it is possible that these interests could also play a role in tainting their judgments and decisions as leaders of the post-exilic society. If we were to take into account the understanding that the Persian government directly appointed the office,[50] then the encouragement of loyalty and obedience to the Persian Empire would also have been part of their responsibility. In other words, to stay in office and power, they would ensure that the Persian interests were served. Despite any internal conflict within their ranks, it would have been in their general interests to uphold the beneficial position.

Given that a great deal of Persian interests, whether social, economic, political, or religious, depended heavily on the temple and its various functions, it also meant that the status and importance of the temple priests would be elevated. As far as the local community is concerned, the Law ensured the people's obedience and loyalty as their salvation depended on it.[51] Furthermore, the priesthood would also be enjoying the process of codification and the preservation of traditions as a way to not only spread but also maintain their priestly ideals to wider communities.

We now narrow down to acknowledge the power of the office of the "high priest," who not only headed the priesthood but would have been a very influential individual in the returning community. The usage of the term "high priest" emerged in the sixth century as reflected in the books of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. It designates the person of Joshua the son of Jehozadak not only in Haggai (Hag 1:1, 12, 14; 2:2, 4) but also Zechariah (Zech 3:8; 6:11).[52] Initially the term was used as a designation rather than a title (Lev 21:10). This Levitical account talks simply of the high priests position in comparison to fellow priests, i.e. "....the one among his brothers...": this is complimented by Ezra's reference to Aaron who is referred to as the "head priest" (Ezra 7:5), which for Meyers and Meyers designates the "first" priest. This notion of the first or head seems to associate later with the temple, where the head priest would be referred to as simply the priest of Jerusalem or the priest of Bethel. The association of the high priest with the Levitical cities of refuge (Exod 21:12-14; Num 35:9-34; Deut 19:1-13; Joshua 20:1-9) shows a move from this reference to the head priest of the temple or Jerusalem to designating the head priests in these various cities. Finally, evident in the Deuteronomic author, are additional functions as revealed in Jehoiada and Hilkiah; i.e. the

religious laws which operate within the confines of the imperial civil laws would have been supported by the Persian government. Noth, *The History of Israel*, 314-315.

[48] Kessler, *The Social History of Ancient Israel,* 146.

[49] Knight discusses the different levels of leadership within the Israelite cult. There are the "non-professionals" – who were cultic officials but also had other primary roles in the economy and community life – and the "professionals" who were focussed strictly on their cultic roles. The high priest and the priesthood fall under the latter and oversaw the cult from the context of the state. On the other hand, the former would include farmers, and even the elders and operated at the level of the domestic and sometimes regional cults. Knight, *Law. Power and Justice in Ancient Israel,* 81-82.

[50] Hinson, *History of Israel*, 161.

[51] Norman Snaith, *The Jews from Cyrus to Herod,* Gateway Handbooks of Religious Knowledge, third edition (London: The Religious Education Press Ltd, 1963), 147-148.

[52] Meyers & Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1-8*, 17.

administering of revenue collection for temple expenses (2 Kgs 12:11; 22:4, 8; 23:4). For Meyers and Meyers, the term high priest carries an administrative side that is not associated with hierarchy of the Jerusalem temple, i.e. they were responsible for collecting funds for temple expenses.

We must also note that even the priesthood maintained a hierarchy within itself, with duties assigned accordingly. The high priest descended from the pre-exilic line of the high priest Zadok, who served the role as the principal community leader for the Jews after the exile. The other temple priests – descending from Aaron and Levi – were responsible for more basic liturgical duties and other required administrative functions. Furthermore, security and ensuring the ceremonial cleanliness within the temple were also part of their job.[53] The struggle for leadership amongst the priestly families has long haunted the priesthood. Hanson also identifies these opposing groups within the postexilic community. The first of which he refers to as "Hierocratic Party of the Zadokites;" this group consists of "the leading priestly group of the post-exilic period whose centre of power was the Second Temple in Jerusalem." The opposing group is referred to as "visionary" because they resorted to "visionary motifs" for the hope of restoration. The conflict has a long history that relates back to the struggle of the two priestly houses of Judah for control of the central cult, that is, the Zadokites and the Levites. The Zadokites had eventually gained power after the death of King David and remained in that position over the Levites even into the postexilic period.[54] The second group, on the other hand, can be seen in light of their conflicting nature towards the hierarchy. While the Second Temple is of major importance to the hierocrats, the visionaries are wary of the Persian support behind it, which spells for them a Persian-Israelite alliance; the danger of the union is the threat it poses to the sovereignty and self-rule of Yahweh. Secondly, they saw that the corrupt nature of the leaders easily led them astray from God. The third issue was the "virtual indifference" with regard to "eschatology". They simply had little or no concern at all and regarded the temple and the priesthood as untouchable, vulnerable to nothing, even judgment. [55]

Conclusion

Despite Aaron holding a special place in the history of the Israelite priesthood as the first chief priest, the Aaronite family with the Levites continued to play second fiddle to the dominant Zadokite family. While the high priest and the priesthood in general would have been pro-imperial in ideals, cracks in the structure of the religious institutions are evident. On the formal front, we noted the tension between wisdom traditions and that of the priestly. While the text's structure and meter suggest wisdom, the wisdom form is not eliminated but incorporated by the dominant priestly blessing. Its liturgical form and use as a song celebrating unity serve as the formal closure, which symbolically resolves the tension.

The mention of Aaron not only disrupted the flow of the governing theme of unity, but it also represented a challenge to the office of the high priest, in particular towards the Zadokite priests who hold the authority and power in Judah. In Hanson's terms, Aaron represents the views of the visionary who hopes for change and restoration.

[53] John Bright, *A History of Israel*, Fourth Edition (Louisville/London: Westminster – John Knox Press, 2000), 435. Castelot and Cody, *Religious Institutions of Israel*, 1258.

[54] Gabriele Boccaccini, *Roots of Rabbinic Judaism: An Intellectual History, from Ezekiel to Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2001), 82-83.

[55] Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1952), 220-280. Yairah Amit believes that a characteristic which is unique to the book of Deuteronomy is viewing the Levites as part of the deprived and oppressed. Yairah Amit, *History and Ideology: An Introduction to Historiography in the Hebrew Bible*, trans. Yael Lotan (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 54.

In economic terms, it would see the clash between the native and foreign tributary modes, with the former challenging the latter.

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Living by the Spirit: A Pauline Response to the Rise of Drug-Related Abuse in Samoa from a Socio-Rhetorical Perspective

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Abstract

Drug-related crime is increasing in Samoa, as police acknowledge a national crisis with an increase in methamphetamine (Ice) and cannabis related issues being reported. This article uses Pauline literature to address the growing drug problem in Samoa from a socio-rhetorical perspective, with a particular focus on drug addiction, drawing on Paul's letters to the Galatians (5:16–26), Romans (6–8), and First Corinthians (6:12–20). It is my view that Paul's use of flesh (σάρξ) in contrast to Spirit (πνεῦμα) can provide a biblical framework to grapple with the ongoing issue of drug abuse in Samoa.

As Paul alludes to in his letters, sin dominates the body, highlighting the obsessive nature of the addiction experience. For Paul, the body is the temple of which the Holy Spirit dwells; thus, carrying out any unethical behaviour that affects the body is discouraged by the apostle. Life in the Spirit (ἐγκράτεια) has the potential to set a pattern for change, renewal, and self-discipline. This article calls for a community response to drug-related issues among Samoan community members, drawing on Paul's theological teachings and the cultural values of fa'a Samoa (Samoan way of life), so that communities can work together to respond and to bring about spiritual and moral order through formation and community life.

Key Words: Pauline theology; Flesh and Spirit; Drug-related issues in Samoa; Community response.

Introduction

The increase in drug-related crime in Samoa is a serious and escalating problem for the country.[1] Increasing reports of methamphetamine (Ice) and cannabis crime, specifically importation, sales and personal use, are all indications of substance abuse trends that are slowly but steadily destroying our society.[2] Drug crimes have had devastating consequences in Samoa, as evidenced by a rising number of drug-related crimes, family instability, a rise in domestic violence cases, and a growing number of people suffering from health and mental illness issues.[3] These developments reveal that a real crisis in Samoa is unfolding, driven by a major breakdown in the spiritual and moral values of those who commit these crimes. At the same time, research in public health and

[1] Police Commissioner Auapaau Logoitino Filipo issued a stark warning about Samoa's escalating drug problem, with reports implicating school children in drug-related activities. Residents also voiced growing concerns over the spread of methamphetamine, a drug previously rare in Samoa. See Bethel Peato-Ale, "Crime Drops but Drug Crises Worsen," *Samoan Observer* (25 June 2025): accessed March 13, 2026, https://www.samoaobserver.ws/category/samoa/114922.

[2] The increase in drug activity has been put down to deportees coming into Samoa from the United States, Australia and New Zealand creating their own lines of drug smuggling. See Barbra Dreaver, "'Growing Issue': Concerns for Samoa as meth spreads across Pacific," *1news* (27 July 2027): accessed March 14, 2026, https://www.1news.co.nz/2025/07/27/growing-issue-concerns-for-samoa-as-meth-spreads-across-pacific/.

[3] Misiona Simo states that, "There is a rising number and almost all the cases that we encounter are almost drug induced psychosis or relapsing due to substances of alcohol and marijuana and there is also a rise in meth users." See Joyetter Feagaimaali'i-Luamanu, "Substance abuse in youth worrying," *Samoan Observer* (09 August 2018): accessed 15 March 2026, https://www.samoaobserver.ws/category/samoa/24572.

sociology highlights that drug addiction[4] cannot be understood as a failure of an individual's spiritual and moral values alone, but also as a complex phenomenon shaped by biological, psychological, social, and structural factors.[5] This broader perspective, therefore, invites a more nuanced theological engagement that takes both the personal and communal dimensions of drug addiction seriously.

Samoan identity is rooted in *fa'a Samoa* (Samoan way of life).[6] These are the spiritual beliefs and values that define Samoa, emphasising the importance of interrelated relationships with one another, the responsibility of each person towards the entire family and the community, and the maintenance of spiritual awareness. From a Samoan perspective, a person does not live in isolation but in a network of relationships with others, including the *aiga (*family), *nu'u* (village), and *ekalesia* (church), with God at the centre. These relations play a crucial role in maintaining social peace within the community.

A rise in drug abuse cannot solely be put down to the individual's failings; however, the gaps within social relations that have been built upon the Samoan way of life must be reassessed. Addiction has particularly devastating effects within any context. Substance use and involvement in drug-related crime weaken family roles, erode trust, and undermine authority structures. People with addiction are often alienated from their families and communities, and their behaviour becomes a strand in cycles of harm that go beyond the individual. Drug-related crimes raise fundamental questions about what it truly means to live a just life in relation to God, to others, and oneself. The problem, therefore, becomes a theological matter that requires a theological response.

It is my view that Paul's letters provide a means for engaging these particular questions. Paul offers an account of human nature through the contrast between Flesh (*σάρξ*) and Spirit (*πνεῦμα*). This distinction refers to two features of life that have an effect on an individual's behaviours. Life in the Flesh includes disordered desire, indulgence, and disconnection from God; life in the Spirit describes transformation and living in alignment with the will of God.[7] Life in the Spirit demonstrates that God's redemptive work can be transformative, helping drug users recover from destructive behaviour, restoring them to a right relationship with God and others.[8]

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[4] Drug addiction or Substance Use Disorders (SUD) has widely been accepted as referring to "patterns of substance use that cause damage to physical or mental health or lead to clinically significant functional impairment or distress." Nora D. Volkow and Carlos Blanco, "Substance Use Disorders: A Comprehensive Update of Classification, Epidemiology, Neurobiology, Clinical Aspects, Treatment and Prevention," *World Psychiatry* 22, no. 2 (2023): 204.

[5] Mohammadnezhad and others state that "the determinants of substance abuse identified include personal, facilitatory/promotive, environmental, and social factors." See M. Mohammadnezhad, A. Thomas, and R. Kabir, "Determinants and Prevention Strategies of Substance Abuse in Pacific Countries: A Systematic Review," *Oman Medical Journal* 35, no. 5 (2020): 187; Truls Wangensteen, "A Comprehensive Approach to Understanding Substance Use Disorder," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18 (2021): 45–54.

[6] The Samoan way of life, or the *fa'a Samoa*, is a collection of practices and rituals by which Samoans conduct their lives. According to Amosa, "this term is subject to the complexity of definitions but may nevertheless be described as an 'umbrella term for a worldview', 'the essence of Samoan existence' and 'the ideals of Samoan culture.' See Sam Amosa, "The Rupturing of Samoa's Foundations: On the Importance of a Public Theology." *Religions* 16, no. 4 (2025): 3–4.

[7] For a detailed discussion on "life in the flesh" and "life in the spirit," see Arland J. Hultgren, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 294.

[8] Theissen identifies how transformation occurs, stating that, "In these three contexts (ethical, ecclesial, and eschatological frameworks) the body is a transformed body, a body created anew by the spirit or transformed by the spirit." See Gerd Theissen, "Sarx, Soma, and the Transformative Pneuma: Personal Identity Endangered and Regained in Pauline Anthropology,"

When drawing on Pauline theology, the message needs to be understood in their original historical and rhetorical contexts. Paul's letters make it clear that they were written to specific groups of people facing specific problems. Therefore, paying careful attention to the occasion of each letter, the issues being addressed, and the rhetorical aims of Paul's argument is crucial when drawing on contemporary issues. This article, therefore, adopts a socio-rhetorical approach to explore the drug issue in Samoa by reading Paul's theology of flesh, Spirit, and the body within their first-century communal settings and then bringing these insights into dialogue with the Samoan context. This method seeks to bridge the world of the text and the world of the reader in a way that provides exegetical and contextual meaning.

This article suggests that Pauline theology offers a productive, context-sensitive lens through which to view the rising problem of drug use in Samoa. Drawing on Pauline texts such as Galatians 5:16–26, Romans 6–8, and 1 Corinthians 6:12–20, it is my view that the call to "live by the Spirit" is a significant response in addressing the rising issue of drug-related crime as well as addiction in Samoa, encouraging both personal transformation and communal restoration.

Overall, this article asks:

> *How can a contextually grounded reading of Paul's theology of flesh and Spirit provide a framework for addressing drug addiction as a communal and relational crisis in Samoa?*

It is my view that "living in the Spirit" not only provides an ethical solution to drug-related issues in Samoa but also enables transformation that resonates with Samoan beliefs and values, encouraging both personal and social growth and healing.

Methodology

This article will employ a socio-rhetorical analysis of Paul's epistles to the Galatians and Romans, utilizing the methodological framework developed by Vernon K. Robbins, which examines the "textures" of a text, comprising its inner, intertextual, social, ideological, and sacred dimensions to clarify how meaning is constructed within its rhetorical and cultural context. This article analyses the impact of Paul's historical, social, and rhetorical circumstances on his theological terminology, particularly on the notions of flesh (*σάρξ*), Spirit (*πνεῦμα*), and body (*σῶμα*). This method situates these concepts within the real-life realities of the early Christian communities to whom Paul writes. This article also briefly examines why Paul wrote each of the letters I have chosen to discuss, what he addressed in each letter, and the rhetorical aims that guide his arguments.

Galatians 5: The Flesh (*σάρξ*), Spirit, and Communal Identity

Paul's idea of *σάρξ* (Flesh) is a critical lens through which to view drug abuse. Although the term is often misinterpreted as referring only to the physical body, in Pauline thought, *σάρξ* can also refer to a way of being characterised by a self-oriented nature, chaotic desire, and withdrawal from God.[9] Humanity turning away from God leads to passions and desires taking over, eventually leading to ruin. The Flesh is therefore not a

in *The Depth of the Human Person: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, ed. Michael Welker (Grand Rapids, MI; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 173–174.

[9] The term "*σάρξ* or flesh" does not strictly refer to humans as physical beings, but it can also refer to human nature. See Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 104–105. Dunn also explains Flesh as not just the physical body. See James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 62–65.

mere part of the human person but a condition in which human life is motivated by desires that are contrary to God's purpose.

The broader context of the letter should be considered when engaging with Paul's discussion of the "flesh" in Galatians 5:16–26. Paul, in concern, wrote to the Galatian churches after learning they were embracing a completely different Gospel message from the one he had taught them.[10] Opponents had infiltrated the communities, possibly connected to Jerusalem, to challenge Paul's authority and impose Jewish legal requirements, particularly circumcision and observance of special days.[11]

The letter's central message centres on freedom, earning it the designation "the charter of Christian liberty."[12] Paul addresses this crisis through three strategic moves: first, he draws on his personal experience to illustrate how the Gospel relates to Mosaic law and the Jerusalem apostles; second, he appeals to both Galatian experience and Scripture to argue that justification through Abraham's lineage comes by faith apart from Torah-observance; and third, he demonstrates that ethical conduct pleasing to God flows from faith and the Spirit's work rather than legal observance.[13]

Rather than following the conventional epistolary pattern of thanksgiving, Galatians opens with rebuke and imprecation,[14] a rhetorical choice signalling the severity of the situation. Fundamentally, the letter grapples with ecclesiology, what defines the church and who belongs to it.[15] Galatians represents a climactic moment in Paul's Aegean ministry, immediately preceding Romans. The argumentative trajectory that appears in Romans already takes form there.[16]

Turning to Galatians 5, Paul emphasises that belief directly shapes behaviour.[17] Paul begins by urging the Galatians to hold fast to the Gospel freedom that Christ secured for them, then develops multiple arguments against submission to circumcision and the Mosaic law, warning that such submission would nullify their Christian profession, bind them to the entire law, and forfeit Christianity's blessings.

Galatians 5:19–21 serves as a pivotal moment in which Paul directly addresses the Galatian crisis through a concrete catalogue of destructive behaviours. The Galatians had apparently taken their freedom in Christ too seriously, with the "desires of the flesh" running strong, prompting Paul's detailed warning against "the works of the flesh." The "works of the flesh are obvious" and include acts of sexual immorality, impurity, idolatry, jealousy, anger, selfish ambition, dissensions, envy, drunkenness, and carousing.[18] These behaviours are not portrayed as isolated acts but as symptoms of a deeper state. They speak of a life ruled by distorted, disordered urges.

The vice list itself serves a rhetorical function: it operates as a warning that exposes the social consequences of a life oriented around the flesh. By naming these behaviours, Paul not only diagnoses the problem but also seeks to dissuade the

[10] Martinus C. de Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary*, in eds. C. Clifton Black, M. Eugene Boring, and John T. Carroll, *The New Testament Library* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 37, 39.

[11] Stanley E. Porter, *The Apostle Paul: His Life, Thought, and Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 196.

[12] Panayotis Coutsoumpos, *Paul of Tarsus: An Introduction to the Man, the Mission and His Message* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 135–136.

[13] Don Garlington, "Review of *Galatians* by Douglas J. Moo," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 24, no. 4 (2014): 590–591.

[14] de Boer, *Galatians*, 37, 39.

[15] Coutsoumpos, *Paul of Tarsus*, 135–136.

[16] Coutsoumpos, *Paul of Tarsus*, 135–136.

[17] John G. Butler, *Analytical Bible Expositor: Galatians–Philemon* (Clinton, IA: LBC Publications, 2009), 51.

[18] Galatians 5:19–21: 19 Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, 21 envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (NRSVUE).

community from practices that fracture relationships and destabilize communal identity. Drunkenness, alongside revelry, is especially relevant in today's issues of drug abuse, as both terms suggest patterns of excess behaviour, lack of order, and indulging in immediate pleasure.[19]

While Paul does not explicitly mention modern-day drugs like methamphetamine, the dynamics he describes can be translatable to what it is like to be an addict. Addiction can be understood as analogous to life in the Flesh, where the soul cannot resist being driven by a craving rather than a decision based on reason.[20] It starts as a voluntary behaviour that escalates into a compulsive habit, a pattern that demonstrates the iterative aspect of disordered desire. In this way, addiction is triggered by the power of the Flesh, which in turn perverts human freedom into compulsion.

Instead of seeking what is life-giving and sustaining, an individual is focused solely on immediate gratification. This misdirection leads to behaviour that is destructive to both the individual and the community. Substance abuse, for example, may offer temporary relief. Still, the long-term consequences are harmful for the body, affecting mental stability as well as relationships within the family, village, and Church.

Paul's view of the Flesh also stresses its inner aspect. The problem is not just how people act on the outside; it is also how they act on the inside, which affects their hearts and minds. People who abuse drugs are looking for meaning, desire, identity, and control. Someone might know that what they are doing is wrong, but they continue to use. This tension shows how strong disordered desire can be, even when reason tries to overcome it.

This is the harsh reality for anyone facing drug addiction. More often than not, they wish to break free, but they remain trapped in the same exhausting cycle. They want to make changes, yet every time they fall back into the same harmful behaviour. In contrast to the works of the flesh, Paul presents the "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22–23) as a rhetorical counter-vision. This list functions not only as ethical instruction but as a constructive reimagining of communal life. By highlighting qualities such as love, patience, and self-control (*ἐγκράτεια*), Paul seeks to cultivate patterns of behaviour that restore relationships and sustain communal unity.

Recognising addiction via the concept of the Flesh illustrates the insufficiency of interventions that concentrate solely on external behaviour. Regulation and restriction alone cannot yield enduring recovery. A change is needed at the level of desire, so that the heart is in line with God's plans. This is where Paul starts to talk about the Spirit as the force that changes things. The idea of the Flesh gives us a lot of information about addiction, including how it makes people lose control and do things that hurt themselves and others. When you compare this Spirit-led vision to the Samoan context, it fits very well with the relational values of *fa'a Samoa*.

Understanding the idea of the Flesh also puts these truths in a theological context that does not rule out diagnosis but rather speaks to the possibility of change. Paul's theology creates a more complete and deeper way to understand the drug crisis in Samoa. Therefore, Galatians 5 is both a diagnosis of behaviors that make life in a community difficult and a strong call to change the way we live. It gives us a way to see drug abuse not just as a personal problem but as a community issue that needs to be addressed.

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[19] John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians: Only One Way* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 169.

[20] James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (London: Continuum, 1993), 297. See also Kent Dunnington, who discusses addiction in light of desire, habit, and moral formation, Kent Dunnington, *Addiction and Virtue: Beyond the Models of Disease and Choice* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 36–45.

Romans 6: Slave to Sin and the Loss of Freedom

The Christian movement in Rome initially started within the Jewish synagogues. Conflict had arisen between the Jews and Jewish Christians, which led to Emperor Claudius ordering them to leave Rome around 49 CE. When Jewish Christians returned in the mid-50s, they found that Gentile Christians had taken over and changed religious life to fit non-Jewish beliefs. Jewish practices often faced strong resistance from non-Jews.[21] The city's social, ethnic, and cultural diversity led to different interpretations of the Gospel in house churches, each with its own leadership style and attitude toward believers and non-believers.[22] Paul's letter addresses disagreements among different groups, especially Jewish and Gentile believers over issues such as race and religion, while also encouraging believers to live in harmony. Paul stresses that the Gospel's inner logic includes forgiveness, peace, love, and unity.

In Romans 6, Paul's focus shifts to sanctification and how salvation transforms believers' lives as they navigate a hostile, sinful world.[23] The chapter responds to a potential misunderstanding of Paul's earlier claim that grace abounds where sin increases. Romans 6:16 stands as the foundational principle undergirding Paul's entire argument about Christian existence and moral transformation. Paul says, "You are slaves of the one whom you obey," meaning that obedience is never neutral: it always expresses allegiance to a power. Thus, this view of sin not only includes acts of sin that have consequences but also an active power that shapes the victim's identity and results in bondage.[24] As mentioned, Paul in Romans 6 responds to a potential misunderstanding of grace, that it permits continued sin, and instead redefines the believer's identity through the language of participation in Christ.

The metaphor of slavery reflects a familiar social reality in the Roman world, where slavery signified not merely economic status but total allegiance and identity.[25] Paul uses this imagery to show that sin is a powerful force, and the power they choose to obey will eventually shape their lives. This definition of sin as enslavement is a good way to explain addiction. People often think of addiction as needing something and not being able to stop using it. What starts as harmless experimentation can turn into an addiction, which makes it hard to stop doing certain things. Paul's choice of the word "enslavement" instead of "sin" helps us see how a controlling power can stop someone from making the right choices. The analogy emphasises the structural and experiential aspects of bondage, rather than merely ascribing addiction to individual moral deficiency.

The language of slavery reflects the transition from liberty to servitude in both sin and addiction. In Romans 6, Paul says that enslavement takes hold of both the body and the will. Sin rules over the body of the living (Romans 6:12), telling people what to do and feeding their desires. This kind of rule is not passive; it is active, forcing people to disrespect their bodies. Paul's description of sin "reigning" in the body is important

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[21] Corneliu Constantineanu, *The Social Significance of Reconciliation in Paul's Theology: Narrative Readings in Romans*, ed. Mark Goodacre, *Library of New Testament Studies* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 101–103.

[22] Constantineanu, *Social Significance of Reconciliation*, 101–103.

[23] Edward F. Murphy, *Handbook for Spiritual Warfare* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 66.

[24] Douglas J. Moo, "Romans," in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1135. Wright also explains that sin is an enslaving power while identity is shaped by allegiance. N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 1008–1012.

[25] For more on Paul and slavery, see J. Albert Harrill, "Paul and Slavery," in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, ed. J. Paul Sampley (London; Oxford; New York; New Delhi; Sydney: Bloomsbury; Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 333–334.

because it shows sin as an active force that controls behaviour and shapes who a person is. This supports Paul's larger point that people are not free but are instead subject to competing forces. Also, when someone is addicted to something, that thing becomes the most important thing in their life, controlling how they act and think. According to Paul in Romans 6:12, being enslaved means that a person can no longer do what they want. Instead, they do what their addiction tells them to do rather than thinking about the consequences. A key part of Paul's argument is that being enslaved means losing touch with who you are. Paul uses this imagery rhetorically to make the point that life under sin is very serious, prompting his audience to reflect on who they are.[26] The language of slavery is not just descriptive; it also tries to convince people that their new identity is not compatible with continuing to submit to sin.

Identity is then bound up with the power you serve. An illustration of this happens with addiction, as people may define themselves through their dependence, and they gradually lose agency and self-awareness. The sense of being trapped or unable to initiate change mirrors the full extent of distorted identity. Paul's own response to this particular condition is rooted in the restorative work of Christ. Paul says in Romans 6:6, "We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, so we might no longer be enslaved to sin."

In Romans 6:6, Paul says that we are now free from sin because of Jesus' sacrifice. The example of Jesus' crucifixion shows how important this change is. This freedom is not just about change; it is about a whole new kind of commitment that goes beyond being free. In Romans 6:18, Paul makes it clear that we are no longer "slaves of sin" but "slaves of righteousness" because of salvation. At first, Paul's view may seem contradictory (from being slaves to sin to now being slaves of righteousness), but it shows that he believes that true freedom is not the absence of duty but the alignment with God's will. Being free through Christ means doing the right thing instead of giving in to sinful desires. This contradictory language has a rhetorical purpose: it changes the meaning of freedom. Instead of independence, freedom is shown as a properly ordered loyalty. Paul uses this difference to convince his audience that true freedom is not found in being alone, but in being part of a new way of life shaped by righteousness.

This new understanding of freedom is particularly important when it comes to drug addiction. Recovery is the action of reclaiming control over one's rights and decision-making. However, Paul expresses that freedom is more than living free from external forces; true freedom entails a reorientation of life away from the world and toward what is good and life-giving, thus Paul urges believers to "consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:11). Paul expresses that this new identity should be embraced. Embracing this new identity means presenting oneself to God as a tool of righteousness. Overcoming drug addiction and staying away from drug-related crime means committing to a new way of life. In this way, Paul's encouragement is a call to live out a new identity. The passage's rhetorical power lies in its progression from a theological statement to an ethical call to action, urging believers to live out the effects of their new faith.

In the Samoan context, this transformation extends beyond the individual to their family, village, Church, and the wider community.[27] People who remain in bondage not only continue to harm themselves but also others and eventually society as a whole. However, when people work towards recovery, they can rejoin the community. People who have overcome addiction can return to their familiar roles within the family, village, and Church. This process helps rebuild trust with those groups and restore social harmony. This makes sense when considering Paul's focus on identity and loyalty in the

[26] Craig S. Keener, *Romans* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 82.

[27] Malina similarly explains that a person's identity is embedded in the group (family, kingship, community); therefore, one's behaviour affects the entire social group. See Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 75–76.

context of Samoa, as *fa'a Samoa* is grounded in relationships among family, village, and church. Therefore, breaking free from harmful patterns is not just about changing yourself; it is also about getting back to your place within the community.

Paul says that people can achieve this newly regained freedom by actively following Christ, thereby living out their new identity. This vision provides a theological framework for dealing with the growing number of drug-related problems in Samoa. By acknowledging that such issues exist, we can recognise how serious the problem is and how it can change. Therefore, Romans 6 serves both as a diagnosis of bondage to sin and as a persuasive call to change one's identity. It provides a way to see addiction not just as a personal struggle but as a state of broken allegiance that needs both change and reintegration into community life.

Romans 7: The Inner Conflict: The Struggle of Addiction

Romans 7 is one text from the New Testament that explores the nature of sin and provides insight into the human struggle with it. Paul gives an intense personal account of a divided self, describing the tension between the desire to do what is right and the forces that pull him toward what is wrong.[28] This passage must be read within the broader flow of Romans 5–8, where Paul develops his argument about sin, law, and transformation. The use of first-person language is not simply autobiographical but draws the reader into the experience being described, highlighting the depth and universality of the struggle. In Romans 7:15, Paul states, "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Romans 7:15). This ongoing conflict between desire and behaviour shows that people often experience inner conflict. Paul's words suggest he is going through something that is more than just moral weakness.[29] Paul says that "another law" is at war with the law in his mind, keeping him trapped in the law of sin (Romans 7:23). This picture depicts a state in which people are at odds with themselves and cannot consistently do what they know is right. People who keep doing bad things are showing that addiction is not just a lack of knowledge; it is a deeper distortion of the will.

Paul's cry in Romans 7:24, "Wretched man that I am! Who will save me from this body of death?" signifies that the struggle that Paul is facing is aggressive. This struggle acknowledges the futility of any human effort and, indeed, a condition that cannot be undone through willpower alone.[30] This is the case with addiction. It cannot be resolved solely by sheer willpower. While individual resolve is a major factor, it may not be enough to overcome the struggles of addiction.

The struggles of the individual occur in networks of relationships. Families bear the strain of supporting loved ones, while communities also experience the wider social consequences. In Samoan culture, this internal struggle has communal implications. There are networks of relationships that also experience the struggle of each individual. The conflict Paul describes is therefore both personal and communal. Romans 7 is the link between diagnosis and transformation. Paul, in this chapter, exposes the depth of the

[28] See Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 430–435.

[29] Modern addiction research adds to this tension by showing that addiction is not just a moral failure but also a result of patterns of desire and habit. Kent Dunnington says that addiction is not just a choice or a disease; it is also a habit that people have. This point of view supports Paul's picture of a split self torn between what it wants to do and what it actually does. See Kent Dunnington, *Addiction and Virtue: Beyond the Models of Disease and Choice* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 57–79.

[30] William T. Kirwan, *Biblical Concepts for Christian Counselling: A Case for Integrating Psychology and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 91–92.

problem, reveals the limits of human resolutions, and prepares for the role of the Spirit as the agent of change.[31] The struggle described is real and widespread, but it is not the final outcome.

Romans 7 functions as a critical transitional moment within Paul's argument. By intensifying the problem of sin and demonstrating the inability of the law to bring about transformation, Paul prepares his audience for the resolution that follows in Romans 8.

Romans 8: Life in the Spirit

The tension expressed in Romans 7 is now resolved by Paul in Romans 8, where we see the Spirit as the catalyst for liberation and transformation. While the last chapter lays bare humanity's inability to overcome inner conflict, Romans 8 declares a new reality rooted in God's work. Within the broader argument of Romans 5–8, this transition marks a decisive movement from the diagnosis of human incapacity to the announcement of divine agency as the basis for transformation. An important point that underlies our new identity is found in Romans 8:1, where Paul writes, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Paul here signals a shift from guilt and bondage to acceptance and freedom. This statement is not only comforting, but it also gives a theological declaration that reaffirms the believer's relationship with God.

Transformation begins with the Spirit, as Paul refers to it. It is "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" that frees man from "the law of sin and of death" (Romans 8:2). Here, "law" refers not merely to a rule but to a living power at work. Just as sin once dominated the flesh, the Spirit now operates and takes over, shaping and directing one's life.[32] This change involves a shift from disordered desire to the Spirit as the primary source of human behaviour. Paul in Romans 8:5 makes a distinction between life in the Flesh and life in the Spirit, saying, "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit." This difference shows how important inner orientation is in shaping outward behaviour. Paul's focus on the "mind" shows that change is not just about changing how you act on the outside; it is also about changing how you think, feel, and intend to act.

The Spirit works in the mind, shaping how a person sees and reacts to the world. This focus on changing from the inside out is important for understanding and treating drug addiction. Getting better does not just mean ceasing to use drugs; it also means changing the way you think and considering what you want. You need to change the way you act so it reflects life in the Spirit rather than addiction.

This means not only avoiding actions that could be harmful, but also encouraging actions that bring life, just as the Spirit renews the mind. This framework does not mean that addiction is only a spiritual problem, but it does help us understand how to bring about change by combining inner renewal with outer change. Paul also says that living in the Spirit means having a new relationship with the body. The body used to be a vessel for sin, but now it holds new life. Paul says in Romans 8:10, "But if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness." This shows that change is not just a spiritual thing; it also has real effects on how we live our lives.[33]

The Spirit enlivens the whole person, including both physical and relational dimensions. A key aspect of Romans 8 is the restoration of relationships. Through the Spirit, believers receive adoption as children of God, who cry out, "Abba,

[31] John G. Butler, *Analytical Bible Expositor: Romans* (Clinton, IA: LBC Publications, 2009), 68.

[32] Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 505–510.

[33] David Peterson, *Possessed by God: A New Testament Theology of Sanctification and Holiness*, ed. D. A. Carson, vol. 1, New Studies in Biblical Theology (England; Downers Grove, IL: Apollos; InterVarsity Press, 1995), 113.

Father" (Romans 8:15). The language of adoption signals a shift from alienation to belonging, emphasising identity, intimacy, and restored relationship with God. Paul is talking about a restored relationship with God built on intimacy and trust.[34] As drug abuse and addiction often bring isolation and shame to an individual, as well as the family and community, the Spirit provides a sense of belonging and acceptance, leading to recovery while restoring connections with others that may have broken. This transformation produces qualities such as love, patience, and self-control, which rebuild trust and repair damaged relationships. The effects extend beyond the individual to the wider community.

Romans 8 also carries an eschatological dimension. The Spirit looks ahead and points to future glory and the redemption of creation (Romans 8:23). This future hope helps people get through the challenges of recovery. It offers sustenance by framing change in relation to God's bigger plans. There are great communal impacts of life in the Spirit. The Samoan culture is relational, and the nature of the relationships is similar to Paul's teachings, which echo in the restored social and community life. Once the individual has changed, the impact is felt within families, in villages, and even in the church. In this way, transformation is not confined to the individual but extends to the restoration of communal life, resonating with the relational structure of *fa'a Samoa*.

Transformation and renewal of the Spirit and the Flesh take place through worship, prayer, fellowship, and mutual aid.[35] Romans 8 moves us to live in the Spirit. Throughout the chapter, Paul emphasises that this transformation is grounded not in human effort alone but in the Spirit's enabling presence. It represents hope for a prosperous future while promoting change, which is precisely what Romans 7 fails to see. Since the restrictions in Romans 7 have been laid bare, it establishes the Spirit of God as the one who makes the difference: it recognizes the Spirit as the agent that makes transformation possible.

The Body as Temple: Ethics of the Body (1 Corinthians 6)

Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 6:12–20 is a crucial ethical dimension of his theology, especially regarding the body and its proper use. The letter's primary aim was to address factional behaviour and encourage unity through deliberative rhetoric.[36] Rather than arbitrating between competing groups, Paul confronted a conflict between himself and community members, leading the church toward an anti-Pauline perspective, a twofold crisis threatening both his apostolic authority and his understanding of the Gospel.[37] The key issue centred on the Corinthian understanding of what it meant to be "spiritual." Paul sought to address problems of community cohesion, deploying the "body of Christ" metaphor and the cross as his primary weapons of argument. The "in Christ" theme was exploited fully, with the cross and identification with Christ's suffering becoming fundamental approaches to addressing rivalry. Though Paul employed rhetorical persuasion, he ultimately trusted the Spirit of God to guide the Corinthians toward acceptance and transformation.[38]

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[34] Kathy L. Gaca and L. L. Welborn, *Early Patristic Readings of Romans*, Romans through History and Cultures Series (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 126.

[35] Whitmore similarly demonstrates that moral transformation occurs through participation in communal practices that reshape behaviour and identity. See Todd Whitmore, *Imitating Christ in Magwi* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 140–145.

[36] Timothy A. Brookins, *Reading 1 Corinthians: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, *Reading the New Testament, 2nd Series* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2020), 5.

[37] B. J. Oropeza, *1 Corinthians: A New Covenant Commentary*, eds. Michael F. Bird and Craig Keener, *New Covenant Commentary Series* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 9–10.

[38] Oropeza, *1 Corinthians*, 9–10.

In 1 Corinthians 6, Paul addresses a Corinthian saying, “All things are permitted for me,” but not all things are beneficial. “All things are permitted for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything (1 Corinthians 6:12). In responding to this slogan, Paul redefines freedom not as unrestricted autonomy but as freedom rightly ordered toward what is beneficial and life-giving. Instead of seeing the body as morally indifferent or merely instrumental, Paul affirms its transformative importance, declaring that the body is “...for the Lord, and the Lord for the body” (1 Corinthians 6:13). This statement situates the body within a theological relationship, indicating that it is not a neutral object but an integral part of the believer’s identity and vocation.

This teaching reaches its height in Paul’s declaration that the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). The temple imagery conveys holiness, presence, and consecration.[39] Neyrey's anthropological study shows that ideas about the body in ancient times were closely linked to honour, purity, and social boundaries. From this point of view, Paul's use of temple imagery can be seen as a guide to how people ought to act with their bodies, reflecting their community and moral order. Therefore, actions that involve the body are not just personal; they also affect the community's well-being.[40] In its original context, this imagery emphasises that God’s presence now dwells within the community of believers, giving the body both personal and communal significance.

In the context of addiction, this presents both challenges and hope. It challenges behaviours that harm the body, such as substance use, which violates its sacred character and damages its physical and psychological well-being. Again, while Paul is not addressing substance abuse directly, his theological vision provides a framework for evaluating practices that harm the body and disrupt its intended purpose. This contradicts the purpose of the body as a dwelling place of God. The body belongs to the Lord and is not beyond redemption. If it is affected by addiction and abuse, it remains within God’s plan for restoration. That is critical when it comes to stigma and self-loathing. Paul thus gives recovery a basis, not in shame but in dignity, reinforcing the dignity of the body.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:20 that believers have been “bought with a price,” a reference to the redemptive work of Christ accomplished through his death and resurrection. This language supports the idea of belonging by saying that the body is not its own but is part of God's work of redemption. Paul says that the body belongs to God, so everyone should "glorify God in their body." The body is not a way to make oneself happy; it is the way God wants to carry out His plan. The body is not a means of self-satisfaction, but the instrument through which God intends to accomplish His purpose. Ethical behaviour, therefore, is grounded not in external regulation alone but in a transformed understanding of identity and purpose. This theology calls for a re-evaluation of the habits and practices we partake in that damage the body given to us for the purpose of glorifying God. For those struggling with drug addiction, it involves recognising the harm caused to the body by the individual’s actions and taking steps toward restoration through treatment, guidance, and healthy practices. These actions reflect not only practical change but also a commitment to honouring God through the body.

People in Samoa see the body as a part of a relational group. Health and well-being are not merely individual matters but collective ones. When someone injures their body, they cannot fulfil their family and village duties, thus affecting the whole community. This way of thinking about the body as a relationship aligns with Paul's point that the body matters not only to the person but also to the community. Paul's

[39] Thiselton also talks in depth about temple imagery and the ethics of the body. See Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 469 –475.

[40] Jerome H. Neyrey, “Body Language in 1 Corinthians: The Use of Anthropological Models for Understanding Paul and His Opponents,” *Semeia* 35 (1986): 135–140.

teaching in 1 Corinthians 6 discusses beneficial ways to care for the body. This ethical practice respects the body as sacred and calls for its proper use. It therefore provides a framework in which care for the body is both a theological and communal responsibility. In the context of drug addiction, these ethical values provide a theological basis for tackling substance abuse, reminding us of the importance and sacredness of the body and that the dignity of the body must be upheld for the fulfilment of God's purpose.

Galatians 5:22–23: *ἐγκράτεια* (Self-Control) and the Discipline of the Spirit

The concept of *ἐγκράτεια*, or self-control, holds an important place in Pauline morality and is mentioned in Galatians 5:22–23 as one of the fruits of the Spirit. For Paul, self-control is a fruit of the Spirit, not merely a virtue grounded in disciplined human behaviour.[41] The term *ἐγκράτεια* carries philosophical weight yet undergoes theological transformation in Paul's usage. Socrates introduced self-control into Greek ethics, and by Paul's era, it had become central to Hellenistic philosophy, adopted subsequently by Jewish and Christian writers, though it held minor significance in biblical religion.[42]

Unlike views that describe restraint as a virtue grounded solely in human ability, Paul explains that *ἐγκράτεια* originates as life in the Spirit.[43] The believer does not progress on willpower alone but also with the help of the Spirit. Self-control cannot be achieved solely on one's own. This difference is important when it comes to dealing with addiction, where it is clear that people cannot control themselves all the time. People facing addiction who go through rehab stay on track when they have a supportive community. They are reminded of who they are, supported in their weaknesses, and comforted when they fail. This shows that Paul is more interested in communal formation, in which people grow morally through their relationships with others rather than on their own.

It takes time and effort to develop and change toward self-control. Setbacks are normal, but they do not stop the process. Instead, they show how important it is to rely on the Spirit and to get help from the community. This kind of process aligns with Paul's idea of ongoing change, where the Spirit changes behaviour over time rather than making it perfect right away. The communal aspect of *faa Samoa* makes it easier to practice self-control. The family, village, and Church give the individual power and hold them responsible at the same time. This way of relating to others fits with Paul's idea that living an ethical life requires being part of a community that supports identity and responsibility. What is evident from Galatians 5:22–23 is that *ἐγκράτεια* is a key factor in overcoming addiction. It is the transformation of desire and the restoration of agency; it provides people with a way to live in relation to who they are in Christ. Therefore, *ἐγκράτεια* can be understood as part of a broader pattern of Spirit-enabled transformation that reorders desire and supports sustained change. As a fruit of the Spirit, it demonstrates that lasting change comes not through human effort alone but through the power of God at work within.

Galatians 5:16: Living by the Spirit

Paul's command to "live by the Spirit" establishes the founding principles that govern spiritual transformation.[44] Within the argument of Galatians 5, this exhortation functions

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[41] Marion L. Soards and Darrell J. Pursiful, *Galatians*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2015), 292–293.

[42] Soards and Pursiful, *Galatians*, 292–293.

[43] Hays, in his book, discusses ethics, spirit, and moral transformation. See Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 196–199.

[44] Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 352–353.

as a central directive that contrasts life directed by the Spirit with life shaped by the flesh. Rather than depicting an internal conflict between competing desires within a single person, Paul identifies two opposing ethical forces seeking to control thought and activity, as well as God's personal Spirit and the personified flesh, making the conflict fundamentally relational, between trusting the Spirit's intention to produce fruit and trusting one's autonomous desire to find life apart from the Spirit.[45]

The present-tense imperative suggests continuous action: believers should be characterised by walking continually in the Spirit's direction. The Spirit provides not merely the means of Christian living but also its direction and empowerment, determining the believer's walk.[46] Critically, flesh and Spirit represent eschatological realities marking the essential characteristics of two ages: before and after Christ, rather than competing forces within the human person. Human agency is either dominated by the Spirit or by the flesh, restricting believers from doing whatever they desire if those desires contradict the Spirit.[47] The flesh fundamentally represents everything aside from God in which one places final trust, a relational resistance to the Spirit.[48]

The call in Galatians 5:16 to "Live by the Spirit" is more than an individual ethical instruction; it is a relational and communal way of life. In this sense, identity is defined through relationships, and individual well-being is dependent on community well-being (or its opposite). The Pauline response to addiction in Samoa must therefore engage the social structures that shape life, including the family, church and the village. In Samoa, the *aiga* is the primary unit of belonging, where values are formed, responsibilities are assigned, and individuals are nurtured. Addiction disrupts this structure by breaking trust and weakening relationships.

Living by the Spirit means rebuilding relationships with family and friends, encouraging people to make peace with each other, while taking responsibility, and making a new commitment. A community that walks in the Spirit shows the fruit of the Spirit through divine power rather than human effort. This is because God's life-giving presence informs, sustains, and guides communities of faith. This process supports what Paul says about how change comes from God's work and not just from people's efforts. People who are trying to overcome their addiction must rely on the Church for worship, teaching, and community support. Traditional leadership systems ensure that behaviour is controlled and that community problems are addressed. These structures give Spirit-shaped life a place to grow and thrive in the real world. A Spirit-led response involves restoration while still being responsible. This kind of response fits with Paul's idea of a community led by the Spirit, where change happens in relationships and in how people act. In conclusion, walking by the Spirit in Samoa means living a spiritually grounded life, shared with others.

Conclusion

Drug-related issues in Samoa are an ongoing challenge that needs to be properly addressed. This article asserts that Pauline theology functions as a beneficial framework for addressing certain areas concerning drug-related issues, especially drug use and addiction. This article has shown that Paul's theology can help us understand both the depth of the problem and how it can be changed by examining key Pauline texts in their original contexts and comparing them with the Samoan setting. Paul depicts addiction as

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[45] Steven L. Porter, "The Gradual Nature of Sanctification: Σάρξ as Habituated, Relational Resistance to the Spirit," *Themelios* 39, no. 3 (2014): 476–477.

[46] Moo, *Galatians*, 352–353.

[47] Jarvis J. Williams, *Galatians*, eds. Michael F. Bird and Craig Keener, *New Covenant Commentary Series* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 161.

[48] Porter, "Gradual Nature of Sanctification," 476–477.

a lifestyle influenced by disordered desires in his contrast between Flesh and Spirit. This study does not directly link addiction to "life in the flesh," but it does, however, suggest that Paul's words can help us understand that disordered desire can change behaviour and affect both personal and community life.

Addiction exemplifies existence in the corporeal realm, wherein individuals are subjected to influences that curtail autonomy and disturb interpersonal and bodily relationships. However, Romans 8 says that the Spirit can bring about change. In this framework, the movement from flesh to Spirit reflects not merely behavioural change but a reorientation of identity and allegiance. Living in the Spirit offers a theological framework that can complement existing social, medical, and pastoral responses. Living in the Spirit enables all people to live a life truly pleasing to God. Living in the Spirit also means turning away from habits such as drug abuse while supporting those of our community who are dealing with drug addiction to heal and move forward, while reconnecting with families, churches and villages to strengthen and uplift the entire community.

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Life-Giving or Life-Draining?
A Samoan Reading of Jesus' Bloody Sweat in Luke 22:43–44 and Youth Development Pressures in Samoa

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Abstract

This article re-examines Luke's account of Jesus' agony on the Mount of Olives by reading Luke 22:43–44 through Samoan understandings of tautua, especially tautua-toto (blood-costly service). It focuses on the debated statement that Jesus' sweat became "like drops of blood falling upon the ground," asking both whether this detail is historically plausible and how it functions theologically and contextually for Samoa today. While the textual history of Luke 22:43–44 is contested and hematohidrosis is extremely rare, the evidence allows the cautious conclusion that Jesus may have sweated blood—or something like it—under extreme emotional and spiritual distress. More importantly, whether taken literally or metaphorically, the image of Jesus' sweat "like drops of blood falling on the ground" can be read as the supreme act of tautua-toto: a costly, life-giving service for humanity and creation. On this basis, the article develops a tautua-toto hermeneutic that brings Luke's passion narrative into conversation with Samoan concepts of tautua, 'ele'ele (ground/land), and contemporary development pressures. It applies this hermeneutic to three key youth-related issues: youth unemployment and migration, and the changing role of the taule'ale'a; health and mental well-being under strong family, village, and church obligations; and education and long-term human development in the face of competing demands from fa'alavelave and church donations. The article concludes that a Christ-shaped understanding of tautua provides vital resources for reimagining social, economic, and ecclesial practices in Samoa so that the "blood" of its people, especially its youth, is expended in ways that are genuinely life-giving for people, land, and all creation, rather than life-draining.

Key Words: *Tautua*, Jesus' Sweat Blood, Youth Development, Samoa, Luke 22:43–44

Introduction

Luke 22:44 briefly but vividly says that Jesus' sweat became "like drops of blood falling to the ground." This line has long stirred both devotion and debate. Many Christians have seen it as a striking sign of how deeply Jesus suffered as he faced his death. Others have noted that some manuscripts of Luke 22:43–44 vary, that Matthew and Mark do not mention this detail and that there is no external confirmation of such an event.[1] For these reasons, many scholars treat the verse with caution.[2] For Christians today, however, the question "Did Jesus sweat blood?" is more than a historical puzzle. It touches on how we understand Jesus' real humanity and obedience, how we relate to debated biblical texts, and how we connect the passion narratives to forms of suffering and service in our own contexts. Admittedly, Luke 22:43-44 is a prelude to the betrayal, arrest, humiliation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. While the cross is the main event, the blood falling to the ground has led preachers and theologians to overlook the event in Luke 22:43-44 as either too difficult or unimportant.

As a result, this article tackles the overlooked, difficult, and unimportant to show

[1] Claire Clivaz, "Luke 22:43–44 and Judeo-Christian Memories," *RRS* (2023): 3, accessed April 8, 2026, https://dial.uclouvain.be/pr/boreal/en/object/boreal%3A284742/datastream/PDF_01/view.

[2] Nicolas Kluger, "Hematidrosis (bloody sweat): A Review of the Recent Literature (1996-2016)," *Acta Dermatovenerologica APA*, 27 (2018):85 see https://acta-apa.mf.uni-lj.si/journals/acta-dermatovenerol-apa/papers/10.15570/actaapa.2018.19/actaapa.2018.19.pdf.

how Luke's account of Jesus' struggle on the Mount of Olives can help readers understand how the agony experienced by Jesus in the garden is a lens to read the agony facing young people in Samoa today due to development pressures. This paper has intentionally chosen to focus on youth pressures in Samoa only, because youth-related issues such as unemployment, mental health, and a lack of educational opportunities are becoming increasingly pressing for several reasons, including familial, village, and church obligations. From a Samoan point of view, this article uses the idea of *tautua*[3]—especially *tautua toto*[4] as a lens to read not only the changing role of the *taule'ale'a* Samoa today, but more importantly, the pressures that come with the role and expectations to provide.

In Samoan society, the *taule'ale'a* (untitled man) has traditionally been the primary servant of the '*aiga* (extended family) and *nu'u* (village). His *tautua* takes many forms: *tautua matavela/tu'avae* (physical work on the plantation, at sea, and in the *umukuka*), *tautua 'upu* (service through respectful *gagana fa'aaloalo*), and *tautua toto* (protective service that may involve the risk of bloodshed in defence of family honour, titles, and land).[5] In recent times the Samoan scholar Vaitusi Nofoaiga coined *tautuatoa* - which refers to someone who is prepared to face challenges and changes, to improve his or her *tautua*.[6] In this setting, service and identity are inseparable. To be *taule'ale'a* is to be called into a life of self-giving commitment to others, even to the point of shedding blood.[7]

At the same time, Samoan ideas about *'ele'ele* (ground/land) and practices such as burying the umbilical cord bind blood, body, and land together.[8] This connection strongly echoes Luke's picture of Jesus' sweat "like drops of blood falling on the ground" to foreshadow the coming crucifixion, where Jesus will fulfil his calling to give his life for all of humanity. Yet the context in which these traditions operate is changing rapidly.[9] Samoa now faces strong development pressures: limited rural employment, heavy expectations around *fa'alavelave* and church giving, increased migration to *Apia* and overseas, and growing concern about mental stress and the long-term costs of placing family obligations ahead of education and health.[10] Young people who once expressed *tautua* mainly through working the land and serving in the village now commonly live in towns or abroad in insecure jobs, sending money home. In such situations, the *tautua* of the *taule'ale'a* can drain life rather than give it. As we consider the challenges of intense youth-development pressures in Samoa, the passage in Luke 22 offers insights and parallels to this experience. While Luke foreshadows Jesus' coming hour of literal shedding of blood and life-giving for others on the cross, I use Luke 22 to

[3] Vaitusi Nofoaiga, *A Samoan Reading of Discipleship in Matthew* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 33.

[4] Saifoloi Saifoloi, "Jesus: Tautua of God Towards a Samoan Christology" (BD Thesis, Malua Theological College, 2000), 17.

[5] Malama Meleisea, *The Making of Modern Samoa: Traditional Authority and Colonial Administration in the Modern History of Western Samoa* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies,1987), 7.

[6] Nofoaiga, *Samoan Reading of Discipleship*, 46.

[7] Saifoloi, "Jesus: Tautua of God," 17.

[8] Makesi Neemia, "The Dead and Land in the Old Testament: A Perspective on Land and Land Rights from the Dead in Samoa," *Samoa Journal of Theology* 1, no. 1 (2022), 36; Esera Esera, "Land, Ecotheology, and Identity in Samoa," *Samoa Journal of Theology*, 1, no.1 (2022), 102. Esera here refers to *ele'ele* as 'life-blood' of the community.

[9] Cluny and La'avasa Macpherson, *The Warm Winds of Change: Globalisation in Contemporary Samoa* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2009), 4; Unasa Leulu Felise Va'a, review of "The Warm Winds of Change: Globalisation in Contemporary Samoa, by Cluny Macpherson and La'avasa Macpherson," *Pacific Studies* 33, no. 1 (2010): 16.

[10] Asian Development Bank, *Priorities of the People: Hardship in Samoa* (November 2002): 7, accessed April 16, 2026, https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/29746/hardship-samoa.pdf.

foreshadow two things: firstly, the agony Jesus endured in the garden that caused his sweat to become like drops of blood, as the lens to read the agony that young people currently face in Samoa, and secondly; in a minute way the development pressures for young people today at times, can seem like being crucified. This raises serious theological and ethical questions about whose "blood" is being shed, for whom, and to what end.

This study employs two main hermeneutical approaches. First, a hermeneutic of suspicion asks critical questions of Luke 22:43–44: the strength of the textual evidence, the absence of the verses in the earlier Synoptic Gospels, the meaning of "like drops of blood" in Greek, and the possibility of later editorial intensification. This includes attention to textual and redaction criticism and to modern medical discussions of hematohidrosis (a rare condition that might explain bloody sweat).[11] Second, a hermeneutic of faith receives Luke's Gospel, in its canonical form, as Scripture for the church and asks what theological meaning Jesus' agony and possible bloody sweat might hold, whether we read the image literally or metaphorically. These approaches are then brought into conversation with a Samoan contextual reading focused on *tautua-toto,* allowing Luke's passion story and Samoan cultural–religious ideas to illuminate each other.

The article advances two central claims. First, historically, we cannot be certain exactly what happened in Luke 22:43–44: the manuscripts are not fully consistent, and *hematohidrosis* is extremely rare. Even so, the evidence permits the conclusion that it is possible Jesus sweated blood, or something very like it, under extreme emotional and spiritual pressure. Second, from a theological and Samoan standpoint, the force of the passage does not depend on a strictly literal reading. The image of Jesus' sweat "like drops of blood falling on the ground" can be read through Samoan understandings of *tautua-toto* and *'ele'ele* as the highest form of *tautua*: a costly service that gives life to humanity and creation. On this basis, the article uses a *tautua-toto* hermeneutic to interrogate how *tautua* functions in Samoa today, especially in relation to youth unemployment and migration, health and mental stress, and education and long-term human development.

The argument unfolds in three parts. First, it outlines the main forms of *tautua* and the close links between blood, land, and identity, providing a Samoan starting point for reading Luke 22:43-44. Second, it examines Luke 22:39–46 and briefly considers the medical plausibility of hematohidrosis. Third, it applies a *tautua-toto* reading of Jesus' blood "falling on the ground" to three key youth issues in Samoa today: the changing role of the *taule'ale'a* amid youth unemployment and migration; the heavy mental load of *tautua* within family, village, and church; and the tension between immediate ceremonial obligations and investment in education and long-term youth development. The article concludes that a Christ-shaped view of *tautua* can help reorient social, economic, and ecclesial practices in Samoa so that they more clearly reflect a *tautua-toto* that is life-giving for people, land, and all creation, rather than life-draining.

Hermeneutics of *Tautua*

In Samoa, the *taule'ale'a* plays a crucial role in safeguarding family members, assets, chiefly titles, and land—everything cherished by the *'aiga*. His life is fundamentally oriented toward others: he exists to protect, provide for, uphold family honour, and give his life for others.[12] Within this cultural framework, identity and service (*tautua*) are inseparable. Samoan tradition recognises several interconnected forms of *tautua*. *Tautua*

[11] Jane Manonukul, et al., "Hematidrosisi: A Pathologic Process or Stigmata. A Case Report with Comprehensive Histopathologic and Immunoperoxidase Studies," *The American Journal of Dermatopathology* 30, no. 2 (2008): 135; Manonukul, et al., "Hematohidrosisi: A Rare Clinical Phenomenon," *Indian Journal of Dermatology* 53, no.1 (2008): 29.

[12] Meleisea, *The Making of Modern Samoa,* 7; Saifoloi, "Jesus: Tautua of God," 18.

matavela / tautua tu'avae literally means "cooked eyes," referring to the reddened eyes of the *taule'ale'a* from smoke and long hours preparing food. More broadly, this form of *tautua* includes physical labour: working the plantation, fishing at sea, serving in the *umukuka* or moving barefoot between households and village spaces to meet family needs. It is the daily, embodied service that sustains the *'aiga, matai*, and *nu'u*.[13]

Tautua 'upu is service through speech. It involves mastery of *gagana fa'aaloalo* (honorific language) and the ability to speak on behalf of the family and village at public gatherings such as weddings, funerals, and inaugurations. A skilled orator is formed over many years of listening, observing, and participating in family and village councils. Here, *tautua* is not only physical but intellectual, relational, and deeply respectful.[14] *Tautua toto* is the costliest form of service. While disputes are ideally resolved through judicial and customary processes, conflicts can escalate into violence, even to the point of loss of life. In such situations, the *taule'ale'a* is expected to stand at the front line for the safety and honour of the family, sometimes risking the shedding of his own blood. His body becomes the place where loyalty, protection, and destiny are enacted. In this sense, he lives—and may die—for others.[15] These forms of *tautua* are united by a common theme: the sacrifice of one's life for others. Blood, service, and identity converge in the person of the *taule'ale'a*.

At the same time, Samoan understandings of *'ele'ele* (ground/land) deepen this picture. Samoans perceive an intimate connection between body and land, rooted in the creation narrative in which God forms humanity from the dust in Gen 2:7. The customary burial of the umbilical cord—on church grounds in the hope a son will become a church minister, in the sea for a future fisherman, or in the family land—symbolizes that a person's identity and vocation are tied to particular *'ele'ele*.[16] This worldview provides a rich lens for rereading Luke's account of Jesus' agony, in which his sweat is described as "like drops of blood falling on the ground". Blood, service, sacrifice, and destiny converge in both horizons: the blood of Christ shed for humanity and creation, and the blood of the Samoan *taule'ale'a* shed in defence of family and land.

The reference to the "ground" (*'ele'ele*) evokes not only soil but the whole created order, recalling the curse upon the ground in Genesis 3:19. Thus, when Jesus' sweat—or blood—falls to the ground, it can be understood as a life-giving *tautua toto* offered not only for human beings but for all of God's creation. Read in this way, Jesus' agony does not stand apart from Samoan experience; rather, it gathers up and reconfigures Samoan notions of costly service. The *taule'ale'a* who gives his life for his *'aiga*, district, and region participates—imperfectly but meaningfully—in the same logic of self-giving that shapes Christ's *tautua toto* for the world.[17]

Luke's Narrative

Luke locates Jesus' struggle on "the Mount of Olives" (Luke 22:39), continuing a pattern already signalled in 21:37. This explains how Judas knows where to find him (John 18:2) and subtly underscores that Jesus chooses a familiar, accessible place as he steps toward arrest. Unlike Matthew and Mark, who name "Gethsemane," and John, who mentions "a garden," Luke emphasizes the Mount of Olives rather than the garden setting.[18] This variation already hints at Luke's distinctive way of telling the story.

The traditional association of Gethsemane with an olive press offers a fitting metaphor: just as olives are crushed so that oil may flow for healing, Jesus is "pressed"

[13] Saifoloi, "Jesus: Tautua of God," 19; Meleisea, *The Making Modern Samoa*, 7.
[14] Saifoloi, "Jesus: Tautua of God," 17; Meleisea, *The Making Modern Samoa*, 7.
[15] Saifoloi, "Jesus: Tautua of God," 18; Meleisea, *The Making Modern Samoa*, 8.
[16] Esera, "Land, Ecotheology and Identity in Samoa," 102.
[17] Saifoloi, "Jesus: Tautua of God," 19.
[18] Neil Alexander, *New Interpreters Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press: 1995), 431.

in prayer as he prepares to pour out his life as a balm for many.[19] In Luke, this pressure is expressed above all in his prayer. Jesus does not seek death for its own sake; he prays, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done" (22:42).[20] The image of the "cup" drawing on Old Testament associations with God's wrath and suffering in Ps 75:8; Isa 51:17, signals that Jesus freely receives the costly path set before him while remaining fully human in his desire, if possible, to avoid it.[21]

Luke's account also reshapes the role of the disciples. Whereas Mark stresses their failure by repeating Jesus' threefold command to stay awake and pray, only for him to find them sleeping each time, Luke narrates a single cycle and adds that they are "sleeping because of grief" (22:45). This does not excuse their weakness, but it softens the polemic: their problem is not simple laziness but being overwhelmed by sorrow.[22] In this scene, Luke introduces the much-debated verses 43–44, in which an angel strengthens Jesus, and his sweat becomes "like drops of blood falling to the ground." These verses are absent from Matthew and Mark and from some important manuscripts of Luke.[23] Their presence seems, for some interpreters, to disrupt the underlying chiastic structure of the passage and to shift attention more directly to Jesus' inner agony.[24] For this reason, several scholars view them as a later addition intended to highlight Jesus' real, physical suffering and to encourage readers to pray for strength in times of crisis.[25]

Whether original or added later, however, Luke's narrative as we have it portrays Jesus in an intense struggle of will, emotion, and body. The Mount of Olives becomes the place where he accepts the "cup", entrusting himself to the Father's will, even as his sweat falls to the *'ele'ele*. This scene prepares readers for the shedding of his blood in the passion that follows and provides a key narrative bridge for a Samoan reading of *tautua-toto*: costly, life-giving service offered for others.

The Debate: Did Jesus Sweat Blood?

The debates over whether Jesus actually sweated blood in Luke 22:43–44 centre on two main questions: the textual and theological status of the verses, and the medical plausibility of the event they describe. The critical issue is whether verses 43–44 formed part of Luke's original Gospel or were added (or removed) later. On one side, scholars such as Ehrman argue that the verses are a later scribal interpolation, introduced to counter Docetic claims by emphasising Jesus' real, physical suffering.[26] The fact that Matthew and Mark omit the episode, and that the narrative reads smoothly if verses 43–44 are removed (moving directly from 22:41 to 22:45), and that early manuscript evidence for the verses is uneven, all support this view. Some, such as Clivaz, suggest that early doctrinal controversies, including Marcionite debates, may have influenced the passage's transmission.[27]

[19] John W Lawrence, *The Six Trials of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1996), 23.

[20] Alexander, *New Interpreters Bible*, 433.

[21] Alexander, *New Interpreters Bible*, 435.

[22] Viliamu Leilua, "The Death of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke" (MTh Thesis, Dunedin: Otago University, 1995), 167.

[23] Lawrence, *The Six Trials of Jesus*, 23.

[24] Alexander, *New Interpreters Bible*, 433.

[25] Bart D. Ehrman and Mark A. Plunkett, "The Angel and the Agony: The Textual Problem of Luke 22:43-44," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (1983): 401.

[26] Bart Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*? (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 139-143; Radu Gheorghita, "Misquoting Bart: The Story Behind Who Changed Misquoting Jesus and Why," *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 10, no 2 (2011): 39-54, accessed April 17, 2026, https://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/midwestern-journal-theology/10-2_039.pdf.

[27] Clivaz, "Luke 22:43-44 and Judeo-Christian Memories," 6.

On the other side, others defend the authenticity of the verses. Drawing on external manuscript evidence, argue that it is more plausible that the verses were omitted in some textual streams for apologetic reasons—for example, because the picture of an agonised, sweating Jesus seemed theologically problematic—than that they were a late addition.[28] From this perspective, Luke 22:43–44 likely belongs to the earliest recoverable form of the Gospel, even if it later provoked discomfort in some communities. The Greek wording itself does not settle the debate. Luke 22:44 can be translated as: "his perspiration was like drops of blood falling upon the ground." The key term is *hōsei* ("like/as"), which clearly introduces a comparison. Many interpreters therefore take the phrase as a vivid simile:[29] Luke stresses the intensity of Jesus' anguish and the heavy flow of sweat rather than asserting a medical condition in which blood literally exudes from the pores.[30]

However, some translations (for example, the NRSV: "his sweat became like drops of blood") lean toward a more literal reading,[31] and Brown, cited by Pope, shows that *hōsei* does not exclude the possibility that actual blood is in view.[32] The Samoan Bible ("*ua pei o 'alu'alu toto*") and the Jerusalem Bible ("like great drops of blood") both preserve the ambiguity. The textual evidence remains inconclusive. There are reasonable arguments for viewing verses 43–44 either as a secondary theological interpolation or as authentic Lukan material that later scribes sometimes removed. Even if one accepts the verses as original, the language permits both a literal and a metaphorical interpretation of the "drops of blood."[33]

From a medical standpoint, scholars have investigated whether a literal reading of the phrase is physiologically possible. Studies by Manonukul et al., Carvalho, Mishra, Jerajani et al., Bhagwat et al, Patel and Mahajan Wang et al., and many others, including Zheng et al., document rare cases of hematohidrosis, in which, under conditions of extreme psychological stress, small blood vessels around the sweat glands rupture, mixing blood with sweat that appears on the skin.[34] These accounts do not prove that Jesus experienced hematohidrosis in Gethsemane, but they demonstrate that the phenomenon Luke describes is not medically impossible.

When the textual and medical data are held together, no definitive historical verdict is possible. The textual history of Luke 22:43–44 is contested, and the Greek allows more than one nuance. Nevertheless, the passage can be read as either a rare but plausible description of literal bloody sweat or a powerful metaphor for the extremity of Jesus' suffering. In both cases, the theological point remains similar: Luke portrays Jesus' inner agony as so intense that it leaves visible, almost unbearable marks on his body, preparing readers for the ultimate shedding of his blood in the passion narrative that follows.

From a hermeneutic-of-suspicion perspective, Jesus did not sweat drops of blood. Although this statement contradicts the emphasis of this paper on Jesus's sweating blood,

[28] Lincoln Blumell, *"Luke 22:43-44: An Anti-Docetic Interpolation or an Apologetic Omission?"* Brigham Young University (2014): 3, accessed April 17, 2026, https://www.jbtc.org/v19/TC-2014-Blumell.pdf.

[29] Mike Pope, "A Closer Look: Luke 22:43–44 and Questions of Interpretation," *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* 6 (2014): 129. Pope here points out that Brown takes great interpretive pains to place actual blood in this scene, even though most specialists take the blood as a simile.

[30] Clivaz, "Luke 22:43-44 and Judeo-Christian Memories," 9.

[31] Walter Harrelson, *The New Interpreters Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1898.

[32] Pope, "A Closer Look: Luke 22:43–44 and Questions of Interpretation," 129.

[33] Clivaz, "Luke 22:43-44 and Judeo-Christian Memories," 3.

[34] Dimitrios Anyfantakis et al., "Diapedesis Leading to Hematidrosis due to Abrupt Emotional Suffering," *Experimental and Therapeutic Medicine*, 28 (2024): 8 accessed April 20, 2026,https://research.ebsco.com/c/4zpjrm/viewer/pdf/ohvapv26wz;Nicolas Kluger, "Hematidrosis (bloody sweat): A Review of the Recent Literature (1996-2016)," *Acta Dermatovenerologica APA*, 27 (2018):85.

as I mentioned at the outset, it is imperative to exercise critical judgment when interpreting scripture, because, as we have learned, there are gaps, nuances, and inconsistencies within the text. This underscores the importance of beginning with the text itself. Revisiting the original text will help uncover and inform readers about the events of that night, giving us the opportunity to decide whether Jesus did, in fact, sweat blood. The Greek translation of verse 44 states, "and his perspiration was like drops of blood falling down upon the ground." This differs significantly from the NRSV, which reads "and his sweat became like drops of blood falling down on the ground." The Samoan translation indicates, "*Ua puapuaga o ia, ua atili ai lana tatalo; o lona afu foi ua pei o 'alu'alu toto ua pau ifo I le eleele*." The Jerusalem Bible presents it as, "and his sweat fell to the ground like great drops of blood."

Four significant phrases with considerable meanings that merit acknowledgment: 1) "was like," 2) "became," 3) "*ua pei*", and 4) sweat fell…like blood. The initial translation does not literally imply that Jesus perspired blood, but rather employs blood as a metaphorical figure of speech to illustrate Jesus's imminent suffering. Many scholars, including Darrell Block, endorse this interpretation, asserting, "it is important to note that this is metaphorical, not a literal statement that Jesus sweat blood."[35] Instead, the remark describes Jesus's emotional state as being so intense that he perspired profusely. Conversely, the use of the word 'became' implies that Jesus truly did sweat blood.

The Samoan translation corresponds to the Greek text, whereas the Jerusalem Bible suggests that Jesus did not sweat blood but instead used the blood metaphor once again. Additional evidence indicating that Jesus did not sweat blood is the omission of verses 43–44 in both Matthew and Mark. Since Mark is widely regarded as the earliest Gospel written, and Luke borrowed extensively from Mark, it can be inferred that Luke later incorporated verses 43–44, signifying that Luke redacted them.[36] To further substantiate that verses 43–44 are not part of Luke's original account, verses 41 seamlessly continue into verses 45 when verses 43–44 are omitted: "he withdrew from them...knelt and prayed (v45) "when he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples. Consequently, it can be concluded that Jesus did not actually sweat blood; rather, verse 44 was inserted to underscore Luke's perspective on the event.

From a hermeneutics-of-faith perspective, Jesus did sweat blood. Luke is the sole gospel author to mention the phenomenon of bloody sweat, potentially due to his interest as a physician in this rare physiological occurrence, which signifies the profound spiritual anguish Jesus was experiencing. Although this medical condition is relatively uncommon, it is widely recognized, with numerous cases documented. The clinical designation for this condition is "*hematohidrosis*," involving the blood vessels within the sweat glands, which form a netlike pattern. Under extreme stress, these vessels constrict; subsequently, as anxiety diminishes, the vessels dilate to the point of rupture.[37] The blood then enters the sweat glands, and as these glands secrete a substantial amount of sweat, the blood is expelled to the surface, manifesting as droplets of blood mixed with sweat.[38] This atypical disorder likely results from a severe disruption of the nervous system, forcing red blood cells out through the pores. The severity of the psychological struggle may become so profound that it precipitates a significant physiological response.[39]

According to John P Meier in his pursuit of the historical Jesus, "the Gospels act as a principal source for our reconstruction of the historical Jesus."[40] Here, Meier

[35] Darrell Block, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1761.

[36] Leilua, "The Death of Jesus," 167.

[37] Anyfantakis et al., "Diapedesis Leading to Hematidrosis," 8.

[38] Anyfantakis et al., "Diapedesis Leading to Hematidrosis," 8.

[39] Anyfantakis et al., "Diapedesis Leading to Hematidrosis," 8.

[40] John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus. Volume 1: The Roots of*

distinguishes between what can be substantiated by history and what is accepted on faith. What, then, is the purpose of seeking the historical Jesus, according to Meier? It is faith seeking understanding.[41] Consequently, if the Gospels are regarded as authoritative canonical texts, a hermeneutic of faith reading would say that it is plausible that Jesus indeed sweated blood. Noting here, I use the word plausible rather than definitive wording, suggesting a concrete affirmation that Jesus did, in fact, sweat blood. In his review of the criteria typically applied to the Gospels to establish the authenticity of an event recorded by the Gospel writers, Meier concludes that the four canonical Gospels are "the only significant documents containing substantial material relevant to the quest for the historical Jesus."[42]

Furthermore, the Gospels were compiled many years after the events; therefore, there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that Jesus did not sweat blood, as there were no direct eyewitnesses. From a hermeneutic of faith perspective, the event occurred, despite what the text indicates, because the Bible has been translated and interpreted numerous times. Nonetheless, we cannot assert with certainty that the accounts written by the Gospel authors are absolute; rather, they are probable or highly likely. Considering that Luke records verses 43–44, it is highly probable that Jesus indeed sweated blood. The subsequent question, therefore, is: why?

The Agony: Nature of Service

The passion narratives present Jesus in a state of profound inner turmoil. In Gethsemane, He confides in the disciples, "I am deeply grieved, even to death" (Matt 26:38). The term *perilupos* conveys extreme sorrow or distress, intensified by the phrase "even to death," which suggests that the emotional burden brings him to the edge of collapse. Mark adds that Jesus was "amazed" (*ekthambeo*) and "distressed" (*ademoneo*) in (Mark 14:33), further highlighting the depth of his anguish. Luke's language of *agonia* (struggle, contest) and the description of his sweat "like drops of blood falling to the ground" Luke 22:44 sum up this inner conflict in a single, stark image.

Within a hermeneutic of faith, and considering modern medical discussions of *hematohidrosis*, it is therefore reasonable to say that Jesus may indeed have sweated blood, or something close to it, under extreme spiritual and psychological pressure. Yet, whether we read the phrase literally or metaphorically, the central point is the same: Jesus embraces a form of *tautua* that is costly, embodied, and directed towards a life of serving others. The immense burden upon Jesus was the awareness that He would soon endure the severe trauma of bearing the guilt for all our sins—my sins and yours. He understood that, under this burden of sin, the Father would forsake Him, and consequently, He would endure a form of hell itself for sinners who are lost. In Mark 14:33, the terms used are 'amazed' (*ekthambeo*), which also signifies being astounded, and 'Heavy' (*ademoneo*), which additionally also means terror.[43]

The essence of the Samoan concept of *tautua* lies in unwavering commitment to serving others. As observed, various forms of *tautua* necessitate steadfast dedication, ranging from agricultural work on plantations and maritime fishing to culinary preparation for one's family and service to the village council of chiefs in *tautua upu*. These exemplify the significance of service. Accordingly, the concept of *tautua*, which encompasses *tautua matavela/tuavae*, *tautua upu*, and *tautua toto*, involves offering one's life, not necessarily through literal sacrifice, but through the metaphor of blood to signify the suffering involved in service. While this does not equate to the physical suffering Jesus endured — where He literally sacrificed His life for others — the *tautua*

the Problem and the Person (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 21.

[41] Robert Crotty, *The Jesus Question: The Historical Search* (Victoria: HarperCollins, 1996), 149.

[42] Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 21.

[43] Lawrence, *The Six Trials of Jesus*, 24.

of the Samoan *'taule'ale'a'* in fulfilling his duties reflects a similar level of commitment to service.

Based on the scientific explanation provided above, it is possible to conclude that Jesus's sweat transformed into drops of blood due to his intense spiritual agony. As the Son of God, he would have been fully aware of the events about to unfold. He understood that he was confronting one of the most agonising forms of capital punishment. His human body would have experienced at least as much pain as any other human. The words 'agony' and 'anguish', derived from the Greek term *agonia*, from *agon* meaning 'struggle, trial, or contest', are central to this passage. The profound intensity of Jesus's prayer demonstrates a moment of acute anxiety and fear, culminating in an event that may have caused his sweat to become like drops of blood. The agony resulting in his bloody sweat is a lens through which to view the same agony experienced by Samoan youth today, due to family, village and church obligations. The intensity Luke depicts can help paint a picture of the inner battle faced by the *taule'ale'a* to meet his culturally expected obligations to his family, which at times causes anxiety and fear of failure in some. The difference between Luke 22:43–44 and the role of the *taule'ale'a* is that there is no debate that the *taule'ale'a* bled in his *tautua* to protect his aiga – in many cases, they do.

Tautua-toto and Youth Employment Pressures

The Samoan concept of *tautua*, especially *tautua toto*, provides a sharp lens for thinking about youth unemployment, migration, and the changing role of the *taule'ale'a*. Traditionally, the *taule'ale'a* was the key servant within the *'aiga* and *nu'u*, undertaking *tautua matavela/tu'avae* (physical labour on land, at sea, and in the household), *tautua 'upu* (formal oratory using *gagana fa'aaloalo*), and *tautua toto* (protecting family, titles, and land, even at risk of bloodshed).

Service and identity belonged together: to be *taule'ale'a* was to be called into a life of costly service for others. Today, social and economic shifts have greatly disrupted this pattern.[44] Paid work in rural areas is scarce, while expectations around *fa'alavelave* and church donations remain high. Many young people move to *Apia* or migrate to New Zealand, Australia, and beyond in search of income.[45] Their *tautua* often takes the form of remittances from insecure jobs overseas or in town. In practice, the *taule'ale'a* can become a distant source of money—an ATM for the *'aiga* in a sense—rather than an active participant in the spiritual, relational, and cultural life of the family and village.

Read alongside Luke's account of Jesus' agony, this raises a crucial question: what kind of *tautua* truly gives life, and when does it become life-draining? Jesus' sweat "like drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:44) portrays a form of *tautua-toto* that is undeniably costly, oriented towards a life given for others. He freely accepts suffering in obedience to the Father and for the salvation of many. This offering does not erase his identity; rather, it reveals it. By contrast, when economic pressures arising from *fa'alavelave* and church giving, combined with limited local employment, compel youth to migrate in ways that fracture family relationships, exclude them from village and church decision-making, and undermine their education, health, and vocation, *tautua* then risks becoming exploitative.[46] In such situations, the community (*aiga*, village, and church) is, in effect, "spilling the blood" of its youth in ways that do not align with

[44] Macpherson, *The Warm Winds*, 59.

[45] Macpherson, *The Warm Winds*, 61; Gemma Wood & Andrea Abel van Es, "Samoa Youth Monograph 2020," *Samoa Bureau of Statistics* (2020): 17, accessed April 20, 2026,https://pacific.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/youthmonograph_final_web_19aug_1.pdf; Peati Mene-Vaele, "Stress and Mental Illness Amongst Samoan Adults (16+) Living in New Zealand: Measuring Levels of Psychological Distress and Mental Illness and Exploring Medical and Non-Medical Treatment Preferences" (Master Thesis, University of Canterbury, 2017), 13-16.

[46] Asian Development Bank, *Priorities of the People*, 8.

Christ's life-giving *tautua-toto*. This perspective suggests at least three practical shifts.

The first requires the reframing of *tautua matavela/tu'avae*. In a modern economy, *tautua matavela* includes not only plantation work but also study, training, and sustainable employment. Supporting young people to gain skills and decent work—rather than pulling them out of school or into exhausting jobs purely to meet immediate obligations—is itself an act of *tautua* toward future generations.

The second seeks to open *tautua 'upu* to youth. Migration and urbanisation often sideline young people from *fono* and church discussions. Yet Luke's Jesus entrusts real responsibility and a voice to his disciples. Families, village councils, and churches can mirror this by intentionally including youth in deliberation and leadership, recognising their *upu* as a vital form of *tautua.*

The third asks to recast *tautua toto*. In light of Christ, *tautua toto* need not centre on violent conflict. It can be understood as a non-violent, costly commitment to the long-term well-being of *'aiga, nu'u,* and the nation. For youth, this may involve sacrificial work and remittances—but within limits that protect their health, relationships, and calling. For elders and leaders, it means calibrating expectations so that the "blood" of youth—their time, energy, and income—is not demanded in ways that damage their future.

Seen this way, employment and migration policies, apprenticeship schemes, and efforts to generate local jobs can be framed theologically as collective *tautua* to young people. They help ensure that the *tautua* of youth, whether at home or abroad, remains genuinely life-giving—for themselves, their *'aiga* and *nu'u*, and the *ele'ele* of Samoa—rather than life-draining.

Tautua-toto and Youth Mental Health Pressures

Luke's portrayal of Jesus in agony on the Mount of Olives offers a rich theological lens for contemporary health and mental health challenges in Samoa. Luke's term *agonia*—from *agon*, struggle or contest—depicts Jesus in intense emotional and spiritual turmoil, to the point that his sweat becomes "like drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:44). Whether read as a rare condition such as *hematohidrosis* or as a powerful metaphor, the narrative shows inner suffering leaving visible marks on his body. His *tautua-toto* is not abstract; it is inscribed in flesh. This resonates with Samoan realities, where expectations of *tautua* to *'aiga*, *nu'u*, and church can generate chronic stress.

Heavy obligations to *fa'alavelave*, maintaining family and community honour, and sustaining church commitments often lead to financial strain, relational tension, and emotional exhaustion. Recent assessments of children's and youth well-being in Samoa highlight how economic hardship, educational pressures, and migration-related family separation compound these stresses, contributing to heightened vulnerability to mental distress and self-harm among young Samoans.[47] Within such contexts, mental distress is frequently silenced or interpreted as weakness, lack of faith, or failure in *tautua.*

A *tautua-toto* hermeneutic grounded in Luke's Garden scene challenges these assumptions in at least three ways. First, deep anguish is not incompatible with faith. Jesus, who embodies perfect *tautua*, is described as "deeply grieved, even to death" (Matt 26:38), "greatly distressed and troubled" (Mark 14:33), and in *agonia* (Luke 22:44). His distress arises not from spiritual failure but from the acceptance of a costly calling. Experiencing mental strain under heavy responsibility can therefore be a sign of serious engagement with one's vocation, not of deficient belief.

Second, Jesus models honest engagement with distress. He does not hide his anguish but names it before his closest disciples and repeatedly brings it to the Father in prayer: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done." He avoids both denial and despair, a pattern that commends practices of

[47] Asian Development Bank, *Priorities of the People*, 9.

lament, shared prayer, and open conversation within families, churches, and villages. Communities that follow Christ's *tautua* will create spaces where tears, fear, and vulnerability are received as part of faithful service rather than threats to it. Empirical work with Pacific and Samoan youth likewise underlines the importance of supportive, communicative relational networks within the *aiga*, schools, churches, and youth groups for buffering the effects of social and economic stressors.[48]

Third, spiritual burdens have bodily consequences. When Jesus' sweat became "like drops of blood," the text signals that internal struggle can manifest physically. In Samoa, where *tautua-toto* already implies that service may involve costly "blood," this can be extended to the slow "spilling" of life through chronic stress, hypertension, insomnia, depression, and other health problems linked to unrelenting obligations. Studies of Pacific youth point to elevated risks of self-harm, substance misuse, and suicide when such pressures are combined with limited access to appropriate services and ongoing stigma around mental illness.[49] If the body of Jesus bears the marks of his mission, then the bodies of Samoan men and women overloaded by *tautua* likewise become signs that current expectations may exceed what is truly life-giving.

From this perspective, caring for physical and mental health becomes a form of *tautua.* Elders, *matai*, and church leaders are called to practice *tautua-toto* not by demanding endless sacrifice from others, but by safeguarding the well-being of those under their care.[50] This includes setting realistic expectations for contributions, recognising when families are nearing the breaking point, and normalising rest, counselling,[51] and medical treatment as faithful responses rather than as spiritual failure. National and regional policy documents similarly emphasise the need for child and youth -centred health and protection systems that recognise the cumulative impact of economic, educational, and cultural pressures on young people's well-being.[52] A Christ-shaped *tautua* resists spiritualising overwork and burnout: Jesus' suffering serves the Father's will for life; it is not suffering for prestige, appearances, or others' comfort. Where social or religious pressures drive people, especially youth, towards breakdown to maintain status or image, Luke's Garden scene asks whether such suffering truly reflects Christ's purpose for spilling His blood.

Integrated into development discourse, this hermeneutic suggests that public health and mental health initiatives in Samoa can be understood as communal *tautua* for those in distress. Programmes addressing stress, substance misuse, domestic violence, depression, and pastoral training that equips leaders with basic mental health awareness, become expressions of *tautua-toto* that seek to prevent unnecessary "spilling of blood" through suicide, violence, or preventable illness. In summing up, reading Luke's depiction of Jesus' bloody sweat alongside Samoan understandings of *tautua-toto* offers a strong theological basis for rethinking how mental and physical health are addressed. It

[48] Gemma Wood & Andrea Abel van Es, "2016 Population and Housing Census: Samoa Youth Monograph 2020," *Samoa Bureau of Statistics* (2020): 11-18, accessed April 20, 2026, https://pacific.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/youthmonograph_final_web_19aug_1.pdf.

[49] Alec Thornton et al., "Alienation and Obligation: Religion and Social Change in Samoa," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint,* 51, no. 1 (2010): 8-9.

[50] Olive Samuelu, "Weeping Together at Jesus' Feet in Luke 7:38: A Theological Rejoinder to the Plight of Mothers and Children," *Samoa Journal of Theology* 1, no.1 (2022), 97. Samuelu echoes this paper's underlying message to Samoa's leaders about the pressures young people face due to family, village, and church obligations and expectations.

[51] Alesana, F. Pala'amo, "Three-Dimensional Triangular Roles of the Samoan Church Minister–Faife'au (Church Minister), Social Worker, and Counsellor," *Samoa Journal of Theology* 1, no. 1 (2022): 113-125. Here Alesana Pala'amo argues that the *faife'au* is not just a church minister, but also a social worker and a counsellor. He plays these triads of roles to help parishioners deal with daily stressors, an expectation parishioners have of the *faife'au* because he has "divinely-inspired wisdom to fix the troubled person's problems."

[52] Brigid Ryan et al., "Art and Mental Health in Samoa," *Australasian Psychiatry* 23, no. 6 (2015): 55-56.

legitimises emotional struggles as part of faithful service, calls communities to bear one another's burdens rather than intensify them and redefines health care as vital forms of life-giving *tautua* that, in fragile human ways, mirror the costly yet redemptive suffering of Christ.

Tautua-toto and Youth Education Pressures

The image of Jesus' sweat "like drops of blood falling on the ground" (Luke 22:44), read through the Samoan concept of *tautua-toto*, raises urgent questions about how communities sacrifice in the present for the sake of the future. Education and long-term human development are key areas in which the tension between immediate ceremonial obligations and future well-being is acutely felt.

Within *fa'a-Samoa, tautua* often appears in visible, short-term forms: contributions to *fa'alavelave*, church projects, and village events. These have deep cultural and relational value, yet they can compete with investment in schooling, vocational training, and health when resources are limited. Parents may withdraw children from school to meet urgent financial needs, and young people may abandon further education for low-wage work at home or abroad to sustain ongoing obligations.[53] In such cases, *tautua* narrows to the present, weakening the long-term capacity of the '*aiga* and *nu'u* to flourish.

A *tautua-toto* hermeneutic grounded in Luke's passion narrative offers a different horizon. Jesus' agony on the Mount of Olives, culminating in blood on the *'ele'ele*, is not an isolated moment of piety but the decisive act in a long, incarnational commitment to redeem humanity and renew creation. His *tautua-toto* is inherently future-oriented: his life is given so that others may have life—not only now, but across generations. Theologically, his blood consecrates the ground and anticipates a restored creation where people live rightly with God, neighbour, and land.

If *tautua-toto* is life-giving service to *'aiga, nu'u*, and creation over time, then investing in education must be seen as a central form of *tautua*, not a luxury. Supporting children through school, enabling tertiary study, and ensuring access to basic healthcare are ways of "pouring out" present resources so that future generations can stand, speak, and serve more fully. Choosing to forgo certain ceremonial expenditures to pay school fees or training costs is therefore not a failure of *tautua*, but a deeply faithful, Christ-shaped act of service.

This perspective also challenges the reduction of young people to short-term income earners. When educational opportunities are consistently sacrificed to maintain outward symbols of honour, the community effectively sacrifices its own future. Against this, the image of Jesus' blood on the *'ele'ele* presses the question: whose "blood" is being spilled, for what purpose, and with what consequences? A *tautua-toto* approach insists that the "blood" of youth—their time, energy, and potential—should be devoted primarily to cultivating capacities that will sustain *tautua* for many years, rather than to preserving appearances.

Practically, this reading can shift discourse and practice in at least three ways. First, churches and village councils can explicitly frame scholarships, literacy programmes, and skills training as communal *tautua* for children and youth, rather than as external add-ons from the West. Second, families can engage in theological and cultural discernment about balancing *fa'alavelave* with school-related costs, naming difficult decisions to limit certain contributions as costly but faithful acts of *tautua-toto*. Third, at policy level, a *tautua-toto* hermeneutic can undergird advocacy for education and health funding as moral imperatives: if Jesus' blood on the *'ele'ele* signifies God's commitment to the flourishing of people and land, then investing in teachers, schools, clinics, and prevention is not just technical development work but a collective willingness to bear present costs so that life may be sustained more abundantly in the

[53] Mene-Vaele, "Stress and Mental Illness."

future.

Integrated in this way, Luke's depiction of Jesus' bloody sweat and Samoan understandings of *tautua-toto* redefine education and long-term human development as essential to Christian and Samoan faithfulness. They invite communities to ask whether current practices of giving and obligation genuinely prepare children and grandchildren for *tautua matavela, tautua 'upu,* and *tautua-toto*—or whether, instead, they sacrifice that future to immediate demands. A Christ-centred *tautua* seeks sacrifices that, like those of Jesus, ultimately build people's capacities, and communities able to serve God, neighbour, and *'ele'ele* across generations.

Conclusion

This article has argued that, although historical certainty is not possible, Luke 22:43–44 can be read as a rare but plausible description of Jesus sweating blood—or something like it—or as a powerful metaphor for the extremity of his suffering. In either case, the theological force of the passage remains: Luke portrays Jesus' agony as an embodied, costly *tautua* that anticipates the shedding of his blood on the cross. Read through a Samoan hermeneutic of *tautua-toto*, the image of Jesus' sweat "like drops of blood falling on the ground" resonates deeply with Samoan understandings of blood (*toto*), land (*'ele'ele*), and life-giving service. The *taule'ale'a* who offers his strength, words, and even blood for the sake of his *'aiga, nu'u*, and land participates—imperfectly but meaningfully—in the same logic of self-giving that shapes Christ's *tautua* for humanity and creation. Samoan practices that connect the body to the land, such as the burial of the umbilical cord, underline this shared horizon in which blood, identity, and *'ele'ele* belong together. Placed in conversation with contemporary development pressures, this Christ-shaped *tautua-toto* becomes a critical lens. It exposes exploitative patterns of service that "spend" the blood of young people through migration and economic obligation; it reframes attention to physical and mental health as a necessary form of *tautua* rather than a distraction from it; and it redefines education and long-term human development as central expressions of service to future generations rather than optional extras. In this way, the question "Did Jesus sweat blood?" becomes more than a historical curiosity. It invites Samoan churches, families, and leaders to discern whether their expectations of *tautua* are ultimately life-giving or life-draining—for people, for *'ele'ele*, and for all creation. A Christ-centred understanding of *tautua-toto* calls for social, economic, and ecclesial practices in which the "blood" of Samoa's people, especially its youth, is offered in ways that genuinely nurture life, in continuity with the costly yet redemptive *tautua* of Christ.

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"The *Paia* Woman's Voice Weakens": A Samoan Reading of Ruth's Resilience

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Abstract

This article explores Ruth's courage and resilience through the lens of "Ua leo itiiti le Paia" (The Paia Woman's Voice Weakens). It highlights Ruth's unwavering commitment to Naomi, her transformation into an agent of comfort, and her embrace of Naomi's God over her own identity. Ruth's journey is marked by her steadfast loyalty and kindness, which are pivotal in her role as Naomi's comforter. Using Samoan concepts of nofotane, tofā saili, and tautua, the paper emphasizes Ruth's wisdom, service, and generosity. By employing the Samoan concepts of nofotane (a wife staying at her husband's family) that rooted in tofā saili (wisdom in seeking solutions), tautua (service), and Ruth's ultimate decision to embrace Naomi's God over returning to her own identity, the article highlights the depth of Ruth's character and her resilience. Ruth's journey demonstrates resilience and courage, paralleling the experiences of Samoan women navigating complex social and familial dynamics. Employing a Samoan native form of intertextuality known as talanoa (conversation), the article reads Ruth 1:6–22 alongside the story of the Paia woman to highlight Ruth's resilience.

Key Words: resilience, kindness, loyalty, courage, *nofotane*, *tautua*, *tofā saili*, intertextuality, *talanoa*.

Introduction

Ruth's loyalty to Naomi is well-known, yet her resilience against expectations placed on women is less emphasized. This paper re-reads Ruth 1:6–22 through the Samoan proverb *Ua leo itiiti le Paia* (The voice of the *Paia* woman weakens), highlighting Ruth's refusal to "turn" as agency and resistance. Intertextual *talanoa* (conversation) with the *Paia* woman's story reframes Ruth's actions not merely as compassion but as resilience in vulnerability, challenging colonial readings that limit women's agency. The deaths of men in the narrative create space for Ruth and Naomi's persistence, paralleling the *Paia* woman's endurance. Methodologically, the paper employs a Samoan hermeneutic of intertextuality known as *talanoa*, engages scholarship on Ruth's resistance, and offers a de-colonial response that reimagines resilience from a Samoan perspective.

Definition of Intertextuality

Julia Kristeva, defines "intertextuality" as "the transposition of one or more systems of sign into another, accompanied by a new articulation of the enunciative and denotative position."[1] Sebastien Doane and Nathan Robert have noted that Kristeva's focus was "not [to] search for the meaning of a text by investigating its author's intentions or the text's own structures, but by exploring the many possible dialogues of a text with other texts and contexts."[2] Therefore, Doane and Robert focus on the social contexts of texts and can also look at the shared theme(s) of two different stories.

The use of intertextuality in biblical studies has a different focus, as John Barton

[1] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semantic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez, European Perspective (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 15.

[2] Sebastien Doane and Nathan Robert Mastnjak, "Echoes of Rachel's Weeping: Intertextuality and Trauma in Jer.31: 15," *BibInt* 27 (2019): 415.

explains, "In biblical studies today the term is widely used to cover all cases of interrelation between texts in the Bible, and hence to include what has more traditionally been referred to as 'Scripture citing Scripture,' 'inner-biblical interpretation,' and the 'reception' of earlier biblical texts in later ones."[3] "In recent times, the use of intertextuality as a method of interpreting the biblical text comprised mainly of two different forms, namely "diachronic" intertextuality which is aligned with "author-oriented" and "historical" interpretations, and "synchronic" intertextuality which deals with "reader-oriented" or "literary" readings of the text."[4]

Benjamin Sommers offers a similar distinction to Barton, as he writes, "Intertextuality is concerned with the reader or with the text as a thing independent of its author, while influence and allusion are concerned with the author as well as the text and reader. Intertextuality is synchronic in its approach, influence or allusion diachronic or even historicist."[5]

Elkad-Lehman and Greensfeld define the concept "intertextuality" by considering the etymology of the word first, then survey some central implications of the concept, concentrating on its extensive cultural connotations in general terms alone. The word text originates in the Indo – Iranian word *tec*, meaning handicraft, especially weaving. In Latin the word *textus* means a woven fabric or its consistency, its texture. The verb *texere* means to weave, to combine into a composition, hence the word textile Latin for cloth or tissue. "Intertext" is also Latin, meaning to intertwine threads and form a piece of cloth.[6] In this light, intertextuality can be seen as the weaving together of various happenings in two or more stories, to analyse and comment on commonalities and certain differences among their contexts and themes. What could this mean for reading the Bible in an intertextual manner?

Brian Kolia argues that "Although we may still be unsure as to an author's intention, even if there is no real doubt about the chronology of the texts, the value of intertextuality as an approach lies especially in the comparisons between a variety of genres and traditions."[7] As Kolia contends, "While Kristeva may not have aimed for intertextuality to be used as a reading method, it has been a helpful enterprise for biblical interpretation."[8]

Finally, in terms of texts, what do we mean by texts? In particular, I speak as a Samoan whose culture is largely an oral culture, and where our stories are transmitted from one generation to the other by mouth. David Penchansky argues that focusing on just literary texts may be limiting the application of intertextuality. To increase the intertextual possibilities, it may be more productive to expand on the definition of texts to include "texts of culture," including oral culture, and the interactions between written and unwritten culture.[9] For this paper, I will re-read Ruth intertextually with one of our native stories as a "cultural text."

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[3] John Barton, "Déjà Lu: Intertextuality, Method or Theory?," in *Reading Job Intertextually*, eds. Katharine Dell and Will Kynes, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 2. Also see: Peter D. Miscall, "Isaiah: New Heavens, New Earth, New Book," in *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 44.

[4] Barton, "Déjà Lu," 2.

[5] Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Read Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-60* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 8.

[6] Ilana Elkad-Lehman and Hava Greensfeld, "Intertextuality as an interpretative method in qualitative research," *Narrative Inquiry* 21, no. 2 (2011): 258–275.

[7] Kolia, "Maota Tau Ave," 30.

[8] Kolia, "Maota Tau Ave," 30.

[9] David Penchansky, "Staying the Night: Intertextuality in Genesis and Judges," in *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 78.

Talanoa as Intertextuality

Using *talanoa* as a way of (re)interpreting texts (literary, oral, cultural, etc.,) is not a new sensation, nor is *talanoa* restricted to a single definition.[10] Jione Havea understands *talanoa* as "[t]he confluence of three things: story, telling and conversation. *Talanoa* is not story without telling and conversation, telling without story and conversation, or conversation without telling and story. *Talanoa* is all three—story, telling, conversation—as one."[11]

Kolia perceives *talanoa* as a construct of the words *tala* and *noa*. Kolia's understanding emerges out of "[t]he observatory nature of Samoan culture and wisdom [which] contributes to the formation of many of its words."[12] As such, in comprehending *talanoa* from a Samoan perspective, Kolia argues that, "Many of Samoa's wisdom stems from the oceanfront and here I argue that the word *talanoa* results from observations of its sea-life, in particular, fishing. *Talanoa* thus can be taken to mean an untying of knots, as envisioned in the untying of knots in an *upega* (fishing net). Before a *tautai* (fisher) goes out to use the *upega*, they must first untie the knots so that it can be used for fishing."[13] In light of this metaphor, Kolia seeks "to *tala* (untie) the *noa* (knots) of the text, where the *noa* refers to the ambiguous and problematic elements of the text in reading."[14]

Developing A Samoan Hermeneutic of "The *Paia* Woman's Voice Weakens"

1. The village of *Paia* and its life

Paia is a small village compared to other Samoan villages, and because of this, it is not well-known. Located inland in the forest, coastal villagers often call *Paia* people *ai vao* (grass eaters). Though mocked, *Paia* has subverted the meaning of *ai vao* into something positive as people using the forest for farming, hunting, cooking, and weaving. Traditionally, villagers lived in poverty, relying on the barter system and committed to church offerings. Today, *Paia*'s demographics have changed. Some now work in government and large companies, others own businesses, and some serve God through parishes and churches.

2. The story of the *Paia* woman

In *Paia*, the proverb *Ua leo itiiti le Paia* ("The *Paia* woman's voice weakens") comes from the tale of two nameless women—one from *Paia*, one from *Fatuvalu*—who worked together weaving *ie toga* (fine mats) and producing *siapo* (cloth). They agreed to an *anapogi* (fast), abstaining from food, drink, and *tipi* (tobacco), so their families might prosper during a time of scarcity. On her way to *Paia*, the *Fatuvalu* woman broke the vow by eating along the shortcut road called *Saō*, rich with fruit and hospitality. She arrived strong, while the *Paia* woman, faithful to the fast, grew weak. By the end, her voice faltered, and others mocked *Paia* for her "foolishness." Thus arose the proverb,

[10] For an extensive discussion on the different meanings and uses of *talanoa* in theorising and analysing texts, see Matt Tomlinson, "Talanoa as Dialogue and PTC's Role in Creating Conversation," *Pacific Journal of Theology* 59, no. 2 (2020): 35-46.

[11] Jione Havea, "Bare Feet Welcome: Redeemer Xs Moses @ Enaim." in *Bible, Borders, Belonging(s): Engaging Readings from Oceania*. Semeia Studies 75, eds. Jione Havea, David J. Neville and Elaine M. Wainwright, (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 210.

[12] Brian Fiu Kolia, "Arriving Like a Fish of the Night" ("*Tō'ai Faa-I'a a le Po*"): An Australian-Samoan Diasporic Reading of *Pāsaḥ* in Exod 12:12-13 through a Samoan Fishing Proverb," in *Reading the Bible in Australia*, eds. Barbara Deutschmann, Michelle Eastwood and Deborah Storie (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2024), 103.

[13] Kolia, "Arriving Like a Fish," 103.

[14] Kolia, "Arriving Like a Fish," 103.

used in jest to excuse not having enough, as in: "We are sorry, the *Paia* woman's voice is weak, for this is all we have to show our appreciation." Yet beneath this self-deprecating use lies the hidden shame of *Paia*, where the story reminds natives of the trauma and resilience of its women. From this standpoint, the proverb connects to the wider scholarly conversation on resistance and resilience, like that of Ruth.

3. The *Paia* woman's resilience

The poverty of *Paia* prompts hard work and determination, generating resilience seen in building projects and plantations. Out of this context arises the *Paia* woman, whose fasting (*anapogi*) reveals her resilient character. Fasting is an impoverishment of the body. According to Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Efi, "[a]napogi literally refers to the rituals of the evening. It is a ritual of self-denial, prayer and meditation, i.e., the denial of food, company, sex and other distraction."[15] In this ritual, one seeks to "contemplate the harmonies and gain spiritual insight."[16] For *Paia*, these harmonies meant prosperity for family and village. The *Paia* woman fasted to raise her family's profile, believing resilience would bring good fortune. Yet tragically, her persistence weakened her voice and health. As a *Paia* native, I resonate with her story, sharing the same heritage. Her persistence inspires *Paia*, and I adapt her standpoint as a hermeneutical lens to (re)read Ruth's tale of resilience. In light of the *Paia* woman's resilience, I probe Ruth's determination to remain loyal to Naomi. In response, I will re-read Ruth's resilience intertextually with the *Paia* woman's, generating newer ways of reading Ruth and the resilience of women in the Hebrew Bible.

Ruth's resilience: A scholarly *talanoa*

I will situate the scholarly *talanoa* among three thematic concerns that seek to highlight Ruth's resilience in the face of the difficulties she encounters. Firstly, the *talanoa* will begin with the theme of "loving kindness," where Ruth's resilience is shown through חסד (*chesed/hesed*). Secondly, the *talanoa* will drift to the theme of "loyalty," by looking at scholarly views of Ruth's kindness as imagined through her loyalty. Finally, the *talanoa* will move to the theme of "courage," where Ruth acts bravely in the face of uncertainty by showing courage in her every action.

1. Chesed/hesed (חסד)

The *talanoa* begins with the theme of חסד as posited by some scholars. Alicia Besa Panganiban suggests that Ruth's resilience amidst vulnerability is rooted in חסד (hesed).[17] According to Panganiban, "*Hesed* [is] loving kindness, a generosity beyond the call of duty, willingly and freely given without conditions, nor any ill motive."[18] In other words, *hesed* is the act of showing loving kindness through actions as opposed to words alone.[19] As Panganiban argues, "Ruth built resilience by accepting hardship and death as life's reality," and further to this, Ruth's resilience is maintained by "keeping a positive view

[15] Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Efi, "In Search of Harmony: Peace in the Samoan Indigenous Religion," in *Suesue Manogi: In search of fragrance Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi Efi and the Samoan Indigenous Reference*, eds. Tamasailau M Suaalii-Sauni, et.al., Wellington: Huia, 2018, 113.

[16] Efi, "In Search of Harmony." 113.

[17] Alicia Besa Panganiban, "Theology of Resilience amidst Vulnerability in the Book of Ruth," *Feminist Theology* 20, no. 2 (2020):182–197. See Jeremy Schipper, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 32.

[18] Panganiban, "Theology of Resilience," 188.

[19] Alice L. Laffey and Mahri Leonard-Fleckman, *Ruth,* Wisdom Commentary, eds. Amy-Jill Levine and Barbara E. Reid (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017), 29.

of herself, and having a focused sense of identity and commitment to care for someone."[20] Being positive therefore, enables one to be committed to resilience.[21] Justin Jackson suggests that Ruth's resilience stems from loving-kindness, a concept deeply rooted in the framework of a covenant.[22] In the Hebrew Bible, these covenants serve to both confirm relationships and provide a foundation for maintaining *hesed* among partners. Hassan Musa talks about Ruth's resilience rooted in loving kindness when he discusses the complexities of migration and what it means for the book of Ruth, in dialogue with a "theology of home."[23] For Musa, a "theology of home" draws on some of the negative implications of migration that result in homelessness for many migrants. Musa posits, a "theology of home" emerges from a reading of Ruth which highlights an alternative vision for a new and improved community that cares for the needs of others and promotes well-being.

2. Loyalty

According to Diane Jacobson, in the book of Ruth, "the biblical understanding of family, [centers] not on clan and blood relationships but on acts of loyalty and love."[24] Thus, Ruth's familial link to Naomi is determined by her loyalty to Naomi and her commitment to what she pledged to do for Naomi (1:16–17). The loyalty of Ruth is extraordinary given the circumstances. The patriarch (Elimelech) dies, and the two sons after ten years also die. The family is therefore left with no man to provide for the family and continue the family lineage. Dave Bland invites us to see the bigger picture of God's purpose in the book of Ruth. Bland makes an interesting observation, whereby "God is both one who sends evil and also the one who delivers from them. God sent famine and death to the family of Naomi. He made her empty (*rëqâm*; 1:21). But he also sent Ruth. And it was through her love and dedication that Naomi was fulfilled (4:14-16)."[25]

3. Courage

Julie Chu discussed that the book of Ruth gives us a different look at the roles of women and the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.[26] Women are the main characters of this book, and one of the major attributes displayed by women in the book is courage. For Ruth, "it was a long way home since people there were not friendly to Moabites. Ruth was not so intimidated by the unfriendliness at all. She tried her best to identify herself as a Jew by practicing her promise to Naomi (1:16–17) and by gleaning in the field according to the custom. Ruth's determination probably encouraged Naomi and made her initiate the daring plan for their future (3:1)."[27] Ruth's agency and courage becomes a source of empowerment for Naomi during bitterness and hardships. Despite their miserable state as widows, "they passed the constrictions of their gender and struggled actively for survival and salvation instead of waiting for the males to rescue

[20] Panganiban, "Theology of Resilience," 196.

[21] Cf. James McKeown, *Ruth*, The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2015), 31.

[22] Justin Jackson, "The One Who Returned: A Retrospective and Prospective Reading of Ruth," *JETS* 63, no.3 (2020): 435–54.

[23] Hassan Musa, "The Book of Ruth and the Theology of Home: A Quest for New Communities of Care and Human Dignity in Africa," *AJBT* 5, no. 4 (2022): 94–113.

[24] Diane Jacobson, "Redefining Family in the Book of Ruth," *Word & World* 33, no.1 (2023): 5–11.

[25] Dave Bland, "God's Activity as Reflected in the Books of Ruth and Esther," *Restoration Quarterly* 24, no.3 (1981): 135.

[26] Julie L. C. Chu, Returning Home: *The Inspiration of the Role Dedifferentiation in the Book of Ruth for Taiwanese Women* (Semei Chu: Returning Home, 1997), 47–53.

[27] Chu, "Returning Home," 51.

them."[28] Peter Lau in his postcolonial reading of the book of Ruth also contends that Ruth's resilience was built on courage, a trait highlighted by her willingness to take risks.[29] Ruth's first act of courage that shows her resilience, is her transformation from being a Moabite to an Israelite. In her transformation, she enters into a vow of devotion to be a companion to Naomi, which leads to her becoming an Israelite, and to serve Naomi's God (1:16–17).[30]

Reading Ruth's Resilience Intertextually

Using *talanoa* as a form of the intertextuality method, I want to re-read Ruth intertextually with the *Paia* woman. Drawing on the *Paia* story, I highlight the agency of women in the Samoan context and the important roles they play. Specifically, I will talk of the roles of women as *nofotane* and *tautua* to re-envisage Ruth's resilience in the narrative.

1. Nofotane as concept

The story of the *Paia* woman has a point of contention among the *Paia* villagers. For instance, the *Paia* woman's status in the village is debated by the people of modern-day *Paia*, where some villagers argue that she is a native, while others contend that she is a *nofotane*. To highlight her resilience in the story, I want to take the interpretation of the *Paia* woman as a *nofotane*. The term *nofotane* is a Samoan concept for the married woman who resides with her husband's family. To understand this further, *nofotane* is made up of two words: *nofo* and *tane*. The word *nofo* can mean "sit", "reside", or "to stay." The second word *tane* refers to man or husband. The word *nofotane* therefore refers to the Samoan tradition of the married woman (wife) who leaves her family, community, and people and goes to reside with her husband's family.[31]

The term *nofotane* also carries some negative connotations, as Latu Latai explains that *nofotane* "can be a derogatory [term] given to a female married into the family if she should err in the carrying out of her duties."[32] In other words, the term *nofotane* is used by some as a rebuke. In the Samoan context, this negative connotation of *nofotane* is prevalent, and before I progress in this reading, I want to destigmatise the term *nofotane* by highlighting two particular characteristics they may exhibit. These characteristics are those of being *fiaola* (opportunity seeker) and having *tofā saili* (searching wisdom).

1.1 *Nofotane* as *Fiaola*

For a *nofotane*, she commits her whole life to loving the husband's family, and embracing his people, identity, and cultural traditions, at the same time, she accepts his religion and often converts to that faith. The *nofotane* however does not have many rights on her husband's land apart from sharing in what is entitled to her husband and children. In many cases, the *nofotane* is, therefore, a resilient person, who often defies expectations in her husband's village, through her agency and determination. I argue that in this sense, *nofotane* can be seen as a *fiaola*, which Vaitusi Nofoaiga articulates as a person who seeks opportunities and ways to help their family survive.[33] In Nofoaiga's

[28] Chu, "Returning Home," 48.

[29] Peter H. W. Lau, "Another Postcolonial Reading of the Book of Ruth," in *Reading Ruth in Asia*, eds. Jione Havea and Peter H. W. Lau (SBL Press, 2015), 15–34.

[30] Lau, "Another Postcolonial," 23.

[31] Latu Latai, "*Covenant Keepers:* A History of Samoan (LMS) Missionary Wives in the Western Pacific from 1839 to 1979" (PhD Thesis, Australian National University 2016), 49.

[32] Latai, "*Covenant Keepers*," 49.

[33] Vaitusi Nofoaiga, "Jesus the *Fiaola* (opportunity seeker): A Hybrid Samoan reading of Matthew 8:1–17," in *Sea of Readings: The Bible in the South Pacific* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018), 166.

case, being a *fiaola* constitutes an act of survival on land that does not belong to him, as he roams around the town area "selling Samoan hot cocoa drink and collecting bottles around the town area of Apia day and night to help [his] family survive on a leased piece of land near the town area of Apia in the 1980s."[34] The *nofotane* also displays the resilience of a *fiaola*, seeking to also survive on land that does not belong to her, but to her husband and children.

1.2 *Nofotane* and *tofā saili*

The struggle of the *nofotane* and the complexities of the environment which the *nofotane* navigates, exposes her to a diverse range of situations that require a change of outlook and perspective. I contend that from this vantage point, the *nofotane* develops a *tofā saili* (searching wisdom). *Tofā* means wisdom, and *saili* means search, which means that *tofā saili* is wisdom of one who continues to search for knowledge. Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Taisi Efi points out that "*Tofā sa'ili* alludes to the idea that one is forever searching for knowledge within the ethical imperatives of humility and love."[35] Trying to navigate the tension of living on land where one's rights are limited, the *nofotane* would require such *tofā saili*—searching for knowledge—in order to survive on her husband's land. Hence, *tofā saili* aligns well with the spirit and actions of the *fiaola*. Intriguingly, Nofoaiga's discussion of *fiaola* reflects this searching nature of *tofā saili*, as he writes, "*Fiaola* is courageous, strong-willed, and strategic and is not afraid to enter unfamiliar spaces or relationships to seek help for the family."[36] In this way, the *nofotane* can be classified as a *fiaola*, acting the ways of the *fiaola*, and adapting to the context of struggle through *tofā saili*.[37]

1.3 The *Paia* woman as *nofotane fiaola* and her *tofā saili*

The *Paia* woman shows *tofā saili* through her fasting. As mentioned above, the *Paia* woman fasts so that she can raise the profile of her family. Indeed, as Efi imagines, the *Paia* woman through her *anapogi* is essentially searching for knowledge "within the imperatives of humility and love."[38] For she is humbled by the ordeal as it invites critique and ridicule from neighbouring villages, yet, out of love for her family, she persists with her *anapogi*. The *anapogi* thus is a manifestation of *tofā saili*. At the same time, the *Paia* woman is also a *fiaola* in the sense that Nofoaiga explains, because she takes up her *anapogi* for the survival of her family. Ironically, the *anapogi* weakens her voice and eventually her body. However, she understood the consequences of her *anapogi*, which points to her courage, strong will, and her strategic plan to put her family into a position of wellbeing. In sum, the *Paia* woman as *nofotane* has *tofā saili* but also proves to be resilient as a *fiaola*, defying expectations of *nofotane* and the negative stigma that is associated with it. The *Paia* woman instead shows agency through her decision to *anapogi*, which unveils her attitude of resilience and determination. Significantly, she raises the profile of the village of *Paia*, and she does so as a *nofotane.*

1.4 (Re)reading Ruth as *nofotane*

Reading Ruth as a *nofotane* requires further *talanoa*. Ruth is a Moabite, married to an Israelite whose family left Bethlehem for Moab to escape the famine there. It is clear then, that in the Samoan sense of the word, Ruth does not represent a typical *nofotane*

[34] Nofoaiga, "Jesus the *Fiaola*," 166.

[35] Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Taisi Efi, "Bio-ethics and the Samoan Indigenous Reference," in *Suesue Manogi: In Search of Fragrance* (Wellington: Huia, 2018), 259.

[36] Nofoaiga, Jesus the *Fiaola*, 166.

[37] Nofoaiga, Jesus the *Fiaola*, 166.

[38] Efi, "Bio-ethics," 259.

because she is not living in Bethlehem. However, I make the argument that Ruth does disclose characteristics of a *nofotane*. To perceive Ruth as a *nofotane*, I want to conduct an intertextual reading between Ruth and the *Paia* woman. For the purpose of this paper, I take the position of some of the *Paia* villagers who see the *Paia* woman as a *nofotane*. From this standpoint I want to re-read Ruth with a view to highlighting Ruth's resilience rooted in *fiaola.* At the same time, I want to underline Ruth's searching wisdom as a *nofotane* through *tofā saili*.

In 1:8, Naomi says to Ruth: "May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me." (NRSV) These words from Naomi, were the words of blessings for both Orpah and Ruth. Intriguingly, the second part of Naomi's blessing points to the extraordinary commitment and חסד of the two *nofotane*: Ruth and Orpah. In particular, Ruth, as a *nofotane*, gave service to Naomi's family for about ten years (1:4). Naomi recognises the kindness and faithful service of both Ruth and Orpah, as "Naomi's wish in v. 8 implies that both of her sons' brides have been kind and loyal to their husbands and to her beyond the call of duty. Naomi hopes that the Lord will follow *their* example!"[39]

Yet, what is intriguing in Ruth's case, is that she does not want to settle for YHWH's favour. She does not want her חסד reciprocated. While Naomi asks for YHWH to deal kindly with her daughter-in-law, Ruth does not need YHWH to deal kindly with her, which parallels the *Paia* woman who does not need food and instead conducts *anapogi*. Instead, Ruth "clung" to her, but why? Hubbard argues that Naomi is in a state of hopelessness as she is "Powerless to repay their kindness, her only recourse was to turn them over to God's care."[40] It might be that Ruth is aware of Naomi's hopelessness, and feels obligated to continue to care for her. I argue an alternative point. In terms of the theme of "turning" in the book of Ruth, Ruth begins her pushback against "turning" by first clinging to Naomi. Then in 1:16, she asks Naomi not to press her to leave, and not to get her to "turn back" from following her. Here, "Ruth choose[s] the opposite direction from the one Naomi has been urging in verse 15."[41] Going the opposite direction is not a rejection of Naomi's will, but from the perspective of *tofā saili*, it is a searching of knowledge, a searching for an alternative path to what Naomi had on offer.

Strikingly, Ruth is searching for an alternative path to the kindness of YHWH, which might point to Ruth searching for more knowledge about Naomi's God and land. Daniel Block notes: "How much she knew about the implications of claiming Yahweh as one's God we do not know. She had indeed been observing Naomi for more than a decade, but from what we have seen of her in this chapter she hardly qualified to be a missionary of orthodox Yahwistic faith and theology. But this is a start, a noble beginning."[42] Beginning of what? Ruth is taking up a new identity, and although she has spent ten years as a *nofotane*, she wants to learn more. Indeed, it is the beginning of her own search for knowledge about YHWH. She is also now taking up the full sense of being a *nofotane*, as she will now be residing in her dead husband's land.

As a *nofotane*, this is an incredible show of *tofā saili* by Ruth, and one which seeks to uphold Naomi's family. Like the *Paia* woman who starves herself of food for the honour of her family and village, Ruth also "starves" herself of YHWH's חסד for the honour of Naomi and her family and her God. At the same time, Ruth is the *nofotane* who exhibits the resilience of a *fiaola*, as she not only goes beyond YHWH's חסד, but also goes beyond her homeland, declaring that wherever Naomi goes, she will follow,

[39] Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer, "The Book of Ruth," *New Interpreter's Bible* 2, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 904.

[40] Robert L. Hubbard Jr, *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 103.

[41] Jr. Campbell Edward F., *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary*, AB 7 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 73.

[42] Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, vol. 6, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 641.

wherever Naomi lodges, she will lodge also. Ruth puts herself in a position of vulnerability as she ventures into the unknown, but she does so as a *fiaola*, wanting to survive on her husband's land. In the midst of vulnerability, Ruth shows resilience that is rooted in her *tofā saili*. The *tofā* (wisdom) that she was willing to use to *saili* (search) for Naomi's God and what YHWH brings for those who are resilient.

2. Ruth as a *tautua*

Our *talanoa* moves to another feature of the *Paia* woman that presents her resilience, and that is her capacity as a *tautua* (server/servant/service). In the Samoan context, *tautua* is held in high regard as the village promotes the importance of service as the path to authority. This is typified through the Samoan proverbial saying: *O le ala i le pule o le tautua*. (The path to authority is service.) For Samoans, reaching the status of *matai* (chief) is done through *tautua* (service); *tautua* to one's family, the village and the church. I want to re-read Ruth in light of *tautua*, to further highlight her resilience from a Samoan perspective.

2.1 *Tautua* as a Concept

Tautua is a Samoan word that means "service" and "servant."[43] Brian Kolia defines *tautua* "as the term made up of two words: *tau* and *tua*. The word *tau* is a multivalent word which can mean 'to strike', 'to fight', 'to strive' or 'to pluck'. The essence behind these meanings is that there is effort exerted to produce such actions, which is perhaps best explained through the Samoan expression: *'Malo le tau'* (Good effort.) The word *tua* means 'behind', or 'back', which indicates a position of humility and service, so the word *tautua* implies someone who strives from the back. *Tautua* therefore is service conducted from a position of humility (*tua*) in honour of those who sit at the front (*luma*). In the Samoan setting, service is always conducted from the back towards the elders, parents and chiefs who sit at the front."[44] To highlight Ruth's own *tautua*, I want to read against the *tautua* of the *Paia* woman.

2.1.1 The *Paia* Woman as a *tautua*

The *Paia* woman demonstrates *tautua* through her weaving of fine mats (*ie toga*) and the production of *siapo*. *Ie toga* and *siapo* are important cultural artefacts that are presented as special gifts to people of honour, but also worn by high chiefs and the daughters of high chiefs. For Samoans, *ie toga* represent "respect, prestige, gratitude, deference, recognition, [and] obligation."[45] The process of making *ie toga* is time-consuming and arduous, and can take months or years. As Peggy Fairburn-Dunlop notes, the making of *ie toga* "required the careful selection and preparation of pandanus leaves, then months of painstaking weaving to achieve a finished product whose feel and appearance was as fine as linen."[46] The care and attention to detail, as well as the meticulous process of making the *ie toga*, ensured the position of *ie toga* making as one of Samoa's most important forms of *tautua*.

Siapo is also highly valued, and was Samoan's original form of clothing.[47] The process of making *siapo* was also an extremely physical undertaking, requiring the

[43] Vaitusi Nofoaiga, *A Samoan Reading of Discipleship in Matthew* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), 34.

[44] Brian Fiu Kolia, "Qohelet and Toxic Masculinity: Towards an Ala Theology," *Zadok Perspectives* S255 (2021), 1.

[45] Malama Meleisea, *The Making of Modern Samoa: Traditional Authority and Colonial Administration in the History of Western Samoa* (Suva: USP, 1987), 52.

[46] Peggy Fairburn-Dunlop, *Tamaitai Samoa: Their Stories* (Suva: USP, 1998), 9.

[47] Aumua Mataitusi Simanu, *'O Si Manu a Ali'i: A Text for the Advanced Study of Samoan Language and Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 328.

pulling apart bark from the *u'a* (paper mulberry) tree. After, the inner surface (bast) is separated from the outer layer which is discarded. The bast is then laid on a wooden board, and kept wet for the next process, where the *siapo* maker uses a shell to scrape the bark to remove any small specks and other irregularities that might ruin the *siapo*'s final appearance. The bast is then laid out on the *tutua* (anvil) where the bast is beaten with an *i'e* (a small heavy wooden beater), which helps to straighten it out and expand it into a larger size. The beating continues until the bast measures up to the required thickness and size to form the *siapo*. As seen here, the process of *siapo* making is careful and physically demanding, which also makes it an important form of *tautua*. How extraordinary then, that in spite of the physical nature of the *tautua* and the long hours involved in producing *ie toga* and *siapo*, that the *Paia* woman chooses to *anapogi* during her work. It is a mark of radical focus and determination, but also a remarkable commitment to her craft and also to her *tautua*.

2.1.2 (Re)reading Ruth as *tautua*

The arduous *tautua* of the *Paia* woman resonates with Ruth's own laborious commitment to continue to *tautua* for Naomi. Ruth knows exactly that she must continue her *tautua* for her mother-in-law like what she did to her husband (1:8). We do not get a clear picture of Ruth's duties to show that Ruth was a good *(tautua)* servant. Yet, later in the narrative, Ruth goes to the fields and gleans among the ears of grain (2:2–3). However, Naomi's parting words in 1:8 to her daughters-in-law give us insight as to the type of *tautua* that Ruth performed. The kindness and commitment Ruth showed in her *nofotane* was praised by her mother-in-law through Naomi's parting words of blessings. Yet, despite Naomi's attempts to persuade Ruth to return, Ruth responds by refusing to turn back, instead declaring that she will never go back to her Moabite family. Sin-lung Tong notes that "One may think that Ruth has no other option, because her life depends on it. But the fact that Orpah chose to return to her mother's house indicates that there was still a chance of survival in the land of Moab."[48] I argue that in Ruth's final decision, she reveals the חסד which Naomi praises, which also forms the basis of her *tautua* (service) and this חסד provides the impetus to continue her *tautua* to her mother-in-law. Farmer argues that Ruth's show of חסדdemonstrates "lovingkindness and loyalty that extends far beyond what the law requires, beyond anything the recipient expects or deserves to receive."[49] This resonates with the spirit of *tautua* which also goes beyond anything the recipient deserves, whereby *tautua* is employed for the greater good of the community, promoting the wellbeing and prosperity of the family and village.

Further to the communal spirit of *tautua*, I am intrigued by the verb "clung" דבקה (*dā·ḇə·qāh*) which "can also be used to refer to a marriage relationship, as in Gen 2:24; 1 Kgs 11:2, or to Israel's ideal relationship with God, as in Josh 22:5."[50] In these occurrences of the verb, I am reminded of the Samoan concept of *feagaiga* which points to the covenantal relationship between brother and sister, but can also refer to marriage relationships. Here, the brother is a *tautua* to his sister by ensuring her protection and care. The sister in turn becomes the brother's *feagaiga*. For the Paia woman, her family was her *feagaiga*, and her commitment to her *feagaiga* was shown through her decision to *anapogi*. From a *tautua* perspective, Ruth "clinging" to Naomi makes Naomi a *feagaiga* for Ruth. Ruth, like a brother to his sister, will offer protection and care for Naomi.

[48] Sin-lung Tong, "The Key to Successful Migration? Rereading Ruth's Confession (1:16–17) through the Lens of Bhabha's Mimicry," in *Reading Ruth in Asia,* eds. Jione Havea and Peter H.W. Lau (Atlanta: SBL, 2015), 37.

[49] Farmer, "Book of Ruth," 904.

[50] Farmer, "Book of Ruth," 905.

Conclusion

Reading Ruth in *talanoa* with the woman of *Paia* reimagines Ruth's agency to go against the conventional path. The theme of "turning" (שוב) Ruth is profound, however her refusal to return highlights resilience amidst vulnerability. Her resilience emerges from hardship, but also from not listening to a man's instruction, showing agency to survive famine and shape her future. Like the *nofotane*, Ruth displays *tofā saili* and becomes a *fiaola* to survive and thrive. Ruth's decision to leave her gods, family, and Moab for Israel—an enemy land, reveals resilience and risk. This teaches us resilience: to push through struggle with *fiaola* and *tofā saili*, and to give prominence to uncertainty in scripture, challenging harmful conventional readings. Ruth's resilience, like the *Paia* woman's, offers profound lessons for all communities: fostering resolve and mutual support. By embracing these principles, people everywhere can navigate challenges with grace, support one another, and reflect the love of God in every aspect of life.

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Viral Theology and *Tofā*: Patristic Discernment in the Digital Age

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Abstract

In today's digital world, religious ideas travel fast and spread through social media and online platforms in ways that this article calls "viral theology". This instant access has opened up opportunities to engage with spiritual resources and connect with Christian communities around the world. At the same time, it brings a bit of risk. Theology can become shallow when messages are misunderstood, and theological confusion can spread before anyone has a chance to reflect on it; some already claim it as truth. Navigating through contemporary understandings of what has come to be described as "viral theology", this article proposes the Samoan concept of tofā - shared wisdom born through tautua (service) and collective consultation - as an effective lens for discernment. Looking at how the early Church Fathers negotiated ideas while remaining accountable to Gospel truths and the principles of 'tofā', this article illustrates how Christians can respond to rapidly circulating religious ideas.

Key Words: Patristic, discernment, viral theology, *tofā,* digital age

Introduction

In today's digital world, religious ideas travel faster than ever. A short video, a meme, or a social media post can reach thousands within minutes, shaping beliefs and practices in ways that were unimaginable just a few years ago. This phenomenon can be described as "viral[1] theology", and can bring both opportunity and risk.[2] Online platforms offer access to resources and fellowship beyond what one's local church can provide. But they also allow for superficial teaching, twisting of meanings, and outright heresy. Many in the Pacific would benefit from discernment as they learn to filter what they read online.[3] This spiritual discernment will come from Scripture, the church, and from communal wisdom.

In this context, what may be called "digital theology" begins to take shape. As Anthony Le Duc suggests, digital theology is not simply a place for theology online, but a reflective engagement with how digital environments reshape human relationships with God and with one another.[4] It recognizes that the internet is not just a tool, but also a space where faith is expressed, explored, and even contested. At the same time, digital theology must be distinguished from the broader study of "digital

[1] The word "viral" comes from the Latin word *virus,* which literally means "poison" or "venom". Originally, in English, **virus** referred to a disease-causing agent – a germ or a pathogen. Over time, the adjective **viral** started to be used metaphorically to describe something that spreads rapidly from person to person, just like a biological virus. In the Digital Media sense, it refers to content that spreads quickly online, like a "viral video" or "viral meme".

[2] Douglas Rushkoff, *Media Virus! Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture* (New York: Random House, 1996), 9-10. Rushkoff applies the virus metaphor to explain how ideas and cultural messages replicate and circulate in media culture.

[3] Something going viral operates under a certain dictate of algorithmic authority. By algorithmic authority, this means platforms that value seeing, sharing, liking and repeating rather than biblically faithful theology. Authority on these platforms is less derived from churchly guidance and more from popular opinion.

[4] Anthony De Luc, "Cyber/Digital Theology: Rethinking about Our Relationship with God and Neighbor in the Digital Environment," *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2017): 132-133.

religion", since it remains concerned with the critical study of God and God's interaction with the world, rather than only observing religious phenomena online.[5] In light of this article, digital theology provides a broader framework within which "viral theology" emerges, highlighting both the possibilities of expanded access to faith and the dangers of distortion without discernment.

The digital landscape presents particular challenges for Samoan communities. For example, a widely circulated video here in Samoa of a man aggressively destroying a Catholic statue of Mary went viral, and this act quickly attracted reactions online and exposed deep issues in the Church scene. In other examples, many have used digital platforms to initiate their own ministries or churches. However, others began without a well-developed theological foundation. These are examples of how religion can be abused so quickly and easily. This digital world we live in often prompts many to hit share and like whatever is "viral" in their circles and proclaim it as truth, rather than checking whether it aligns with the Church and Scripture. There is great spiritual enrichment that can come out of this, but theological confusion can also be heightened.

To navigate these challenges, this article will assess how the Patristics[6] addressed similar concerns. It argues that the Patristic period offers wisdom, as the Fathers of the Church developed important methods for discerning truth and protecting communities from "viral" heresies. Furthermore, they preserved faithful transmission of the Gospel. Applying these principles, along with the practices of early church leaders, will allow us, as Digital Age Christians, to interact with social media posts wisely. In this article, I make the case that although "viral theology" champions speed, simplicity, and personality, Patristics - even when read through the lens of the Samoan concept of *tofā* - can still prioritise Scripture, communal accountability, and care for salvation. The following section delves into *tofā,* a form of reflective wisdom rooted in communal deliberation and moral responsibility.

Tofā: A Samoan Lens for Theological Discernment

In the Samoan context, wisdom is expressed as *tofā*. While also meaning rest/sleeping, mats/clothing, or farewell, the word also conveys wisdom learned over time through experience and service.[7] Elders teach that someone who has *tofā* is not idle or passive. They are busy formulating ideas for improving the lives of their family, church, and village. Therefore, to have *tofā* is to have a culturally informed way of thinking through responsibility and leadership. In the digital landscape of this age, where religious ideas can spread quickly, *tofā* provides a model for measured and deliberate evaluation before accepting or sharing theological claims.

This reflective dimension of *tofā* is captured in the words of Tupua Tamasese Efi:

> *Samoa e, e tusa pe matagofie le fale ma faatumulia e tagata, ae a vasi le tofā ma faaletonu le utaga, ou te molimau o se fale tuufua. Ae pe faatauva'a le fale, ma to'agaogao tagata, a o maopopo le tofā ma le uta, o le fale o loo tu ai le mau –*

[5] Jens Dorpinghaus, "Digital Theology: New Perspectives on Interdisciplinary Research Between the Humanities and Theology," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 18 (2022): 6.

[6] From here on throughout the article, I will be alternating with Church Fathers and Patristics. They are commonly known as the Early Church Fathers.

[7] Tavita Reupena, "Suffering in Discipleship: Reading 1 Peter 4:1–19 from the Tofã Mamao a le Au-Matutua Hermeneutics" (MTh Thesis, Malua Theological College, 2022), 30-35. Discipleship is seen through Reupena's thesis through the Samoan lens of *tofā*. He further demonstrates how wisdom from our elders can guide the next generation. Specifically, in discernment, the Patristic method is used to establish truth in theology. Using *Tofā Mamao a le Au-Matutua,* he establishes the precedence of knowledgeable and authoritative voices, an idea that supports this article by showing how to discern teachings through cultural values and the Patristic lens.

> *mau i oloa, mau i mafaufau.*[8] (Samoa, a big house full of people is non-functional and unworkable if led by less wisdom or foolishness. But a small house of fewer people led by positive wisdom is a house with an abundance of blessings)

This saying illustrates that tofā is not just intellectual knowledge but practical wisdom exercised in leadership and tautua (service).[9]

Tofā functions as a practical methodology for assessing ideas and actions in both social and spiritual contexts. It emphasises communal consultation, patient deliberation, and moral responsibility, which highlight that wisdom is built through long-term service (*tautua*[10]) to family, church, and village. Like the early Church Fathers, who tested teachings against Scripture, tradition, and communal practice, *tofā* stresses the evaluation of both the content of a message and the character of those who deliver it, whether their words are depicted in their *tautua*. Therefore, when we look at it from this perspective, it parallels well with theological discernment while also guiding believers to weigh spiritual teachings not only for clarity, but also for their alignment with communal well-being and moral integrity in the truth of the Gospel.

For this reason, *tofā* becomes not only cultural knowledge but a theological imperative for the Church in Samoa. If one is unable to identify such teachings, then tradition can soon take root and pervert the Gospel, causing people to turn away from faith. Thus, *tofā* can become a defence mechanism for truth and salvation. Introducing *tofā* as the hermeneutical lens grounds this article in my Samoan context, providing a Samoan theology and a culturally coherent framework for engaging with viral content while maintaining loyalty to the Gospel.

The Patristic Period and the Practice of Discernment

The Patristic period spans the early Church Fathers (1st to 5th centuries). Christianity emerged from Palestine but considered itself the continuation and proper culmination of Judaism. Naturally, then, Christianity was born and spread throughout Jewish homelands, such as Palestine. However, Christianity did not remain in one place. With missionary activity at the time, Christianity spread quickly. It gained popularity in many neighbouring regions and across the wider Mediterranean world. This laid the foundations for the theological developments that would characterise the Patristic period.

By the end of the first century, Christianity was an established religion across the eastern Mediterranean. It had gained a significant presence in the capital of the Roman

[8] Tupua Tamasese Efi, *Fa'agaganaina oe le Atua Fetalai* (Apia: Commercial Printers, 1989), 8.

[9] Faalepo Tuisuga, "O Le Tofā Liliu a Samoa: A Hermeneutical Critical Analysis of the Cultural-Theological Praxis of the Samoan Context" (PhD Thesis, Melbourne College of Divinity, 2009), 46. Tuisuga discusses the phrase *tofā liliu* as denoting an intensive process of contemplation and deep reflection undertaken in order to arrive at understanding, sound judgment, and wise decision-making. Tuisuga also examines Aiono's explanation of the similar Samoan concept *soalaupule*. According to Aiono, *soalaupule* is defined as consultation that is done for others' benefit. In that sense, both concepts overlap, meaning that *tofā* is not individual contemplation but communal and moral exercise of judgment for others' sake. See Fanaafi Le Tagaloa Aiono, *O le Faasinomaga: le tagata ma lona Faasinomaga* (Alafua, Western Samoa: Lamepa Press, 1997), 33–35.

[10] In the Samoan context, *tautua* refers to service rendered to one's family (*aiga*), village (*nu'u*), and church. It embodies humility, obedience, responsibility, and loyalty, which is very important to *faaSamoa* (the Samoan way of life). *Tautua* is not just functional service but a moral and social obligation that shaped identity and status as well as belonging within the community. See Vaitusi Nofoaiga, *A Samoan Reading of Discipleship in the Matthean Gospel* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2017), where his work discusses *tautua* within a Samoan hermeneutical framework of discipleship. See also Vaitusi Nofoaiga, "*Tautuaileva*: A Samoan Hermeneutic to Explore Egalitarianism in the Bible," *The Journal of Samoan Studies* 10 (2020).

Empire, Rome, and as the Church expanded geographically, it also grew institutionally and theologically. Tensions emerged between influential centres such as Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch. Each of them developed their own theological emphases, and by the fourth century, as the Roman Empire divided into eastern and western regions, ecclesial and theological differences became increasingly evident, foreshadowing later divisions within the Church.

This rapid extension created fertile ground and paved the way for theological debate. Certain regions became major centres of doctrinal development. Alexandria developed a theological style deeply influenced by philosophical reflection and became known for its distinctive Christological and allegorical approaches to Scripture.[11] Antioch, along with the surrounding region of Cappadocia, had a different theological method, often emphasising historical interpretation of Scripture and contributing significantly to Trinitarian doctrine through the Cappadocian Fathers.[12] In North Africa, theologians such as Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine shaped Latin Christianity through engagement with questions of ecclesiology, grace, and orthodoxy.

Alexandria and Antioch were remarkably theologically diverse communities. This would set the tone for Patristic controversies. Alexandria interpreted Scripture allegorically and pressed for multiple senses. Antioch emphasised the literal sense, the narrative's continuity, and what was useful for life. Alexandrian and Antiochene scholarship would respectively inform controversies regarding Christology, Trinitarian theology, and ecclesiastical authority. Wisdom was needed to walk through those controversies, along with counsel, reason, and submission to authority. Such skills informed how the early Church deliberated over various contested viewpoints. Gaining insight into how the Church Fathers interpreted and defended orthodoxy can offer important context for how we engage prudently with ideas in a world where they move faster than ever, whether in the fourth century or on the internet.

This summary shows that the Early Church experienced similar situations of "viral theology"; however, unlike the digital age, these teachings were subjected to communal discernment rooted in Scripture and tradition. The Early Church empowered the body of Christ to fight these ideas through prayer, study of Scripture, and standing on the teachings of the Church. This is an important distinction for our Church today when we hear rapidly spreading theological claims. In light of this article, I will highlight only a few of the Church Fathers and the theological challenges they faced, showing how their discernment helped the Church navigate competing ideas and resist the rapid spread of "viral" teachings.

Athanasius of Alexandria vs Arius

Anything that went against the Church was marked as heresy.[13] The conflict between Athanasius of Alexandria and Arius provides a vivid example of how early Christians exercised theological discernment. Arius argued that the Son was a created being, subordinate to the Father, a claim that gained rapid traction across the eastern

[11] Frances Young, "Alexandrian and Antiochene Exegesis," *A History of Biblical Interpretation: The Ancient Period,* Vol 1 eds. Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 334-338. Young explains that Alexandria's theological style, which is exemplified by Origen, combined philosophical reflection with allegorical reading, emphasizing Christological and spiritual senses of Scripture.

[12] Alan Hauser, "Introduction and Overview," *A History of Biblical Interpretation: Volume 1, The Ancient Period,* eds. Alan Hauser and Duane F. Watson (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 46-47. Hauser notes that the Antiochene schools, in contrast to Alexandria, emphasized the plain or literal meaning of Scripture, moral and dogmatic interpretation, and the narrative logic (*historia*) of texts, using allegory when necessary.

[13] This is a belief or opinion contrary to the orthodox religious doctrine.

provinces.[14] He did not spread his teaching solely through his own written works. As Richard P. C. Hanson points out, there was a whole group of contemporaries: bishops, presbyters, deacons, priests, and monks who supported his Christology and promoted it. This shows that teachings could spread before the councils were even formed and written.[15] The way this teaching spread rapidly gives us a glimpse into "viral theology" in its infancy. Ideas can travel fast when they are persuasive, and persuasive ideas are often simple, memorable, and quotable. The danger for the Early Church was that an idea could become popular, but popularity doesn't necessarily equal truth.

Arius's personality played a significant role in the spread of his theology. Ancient historians, particularly Epiphanius of Salamis, describe him as "inflamed with his own opinionativeness," possessing a persuasive presence that drew followers.[16] Epiphanius emphasises Arius's striking physical appearance: he was tall, outwardly serious, yet carried a cunning and subtle demeanour. His persuasive, eloquent rhetoric allowed him to win followers, not just among 70 virgin women, but also priests and deacons. This allowed his teachings to reach outside of normal church channels. Additionally, under all this implied rebuke to bishops, showing that the teacher and their character also had to be examined, along with the teaching.[17] Sozomen and Theodoret take the personal factors influencing Arius's theology one step further. They attribute ambition and envy to Arius.[18] Arius had wanted to be bishop of Alexandria but was passed over. We shouldn't take this too far, but modern historians have reminded us that "authenticity in the early Church was individual and circumstantial. The evaluation had to take into account both the proclaimed message and the person delivering it.

The appeal of Arius's theology lay in its simplicity. He reduced a complex metaphysical claim about the Son's nature into a phrase that was easily remembered and repeated, making it viral across letters, sermons, and debates. His statements were so clear-cut that his movement spread rapidly. Arius proved that charisma and simple sloganeering could attract interest and followers before theologians started scrutinising their arguments. Arius's theology was "viral," if we can call it that: it spread by word of mouth, employed charm, and repeated itself. But that's also what made it poisonous. Discernment meant looking at both the message and the outcome.

Athanasius, in contrast, exercised deliberate and methodical discernment, emphasizing fidelity over persuasion. He defended Nicene orthodoxy, insisting on the

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[14] Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 31. The fourth-century Arian controversy concerned Christ's divinity. Arius believed that Christ was merely a creature and not fully God. All references in Scripture to Christ being equal with God, he taught, were titles of honor. Arius and his views, called Arianism, were declared heretical largely because they made salvation of humanity impossible due to denying Christ's divinity. See also C. FitzSimons Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy: An Affirmation of Christian Orthodoxy* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1994), 88-91.

[15] Richard P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318–381* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 27-34. Arius's Christological teaching was taken up and circulated by a network of contemporaries, including Eusebius of Nicomedia and other clergy, which helped the views gain traction and spread across the Eastern Church.

[16] Epiphanius of Salamis, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis, Books II and III, De Fide*, trans. Frank Williams (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2012), 333-335. In Epiphanius's catalogue of heresies, he describes Arius as a man "inflamed with his own opinionativeness," which led him to draw many followers.

[17] An important note, in practical theology, the preacher's personality and attitude are recognized as important to the proclamation of the Gospel, because listeners often discern and respond to who the preacher is before they hear what the preacher says. That is the nature of life. It is not just the verbal declaration of Scripture but the embodied witness of one's life in Christ.

[18] *Theodoret of Cyrus, Ecclesiastical History,* trans. New Advent, chap. 1, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/27021.htm.

full divinity of the Son (*homoousios*[19]) and highlighting that salvation depends upon Jesus Christ being truly God.[20] His methods were drawn from various sources: Scripture, apostolic tradition, liturgical confession, and theological deduction. If Arius had networks and charisma, Athanasius had coherence and the consensus of believers, plus the maintenance of the "Rule of Faith" passed down through tradition.[21] For Athanasius, discernment was fundamentally soteriological: if the Son were a creature, then salvation would not be the work of God Himself, but of something less than God. Humanity would not be united to divine life but just improved by an intermediary. Only if Christ is fully divine can humanity participate in God's life. Thus, discernment required evaluating theological claims in light of their implications for salvation.[22]

Athanasius also highlighted the importance of communal and sacramental coherence in theological evaluation. When debates arose regarding the divinity of the Holy Spirit, he rejected isolated proof-texting and instead appealed to the baptismal formula of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[23] He argued that the Spirit sanctifies and indwells believers; therefore, the Spirit must be divine. A creature cannot communicate divine life. By insisting on this holistic evaluation, Athanasius demonstrated that discernment is relational, embedded within the life of the Church, and attentive to the practices and experiences of the faithful. Theology is not tested by how easily it can be summarised or how widely it spreads; it is tested by its coherence, integrity, and capacity to safeguard salvation.[24]

The contrast between Arius and Athanasius illustrates the tension between clarity and fidelity. Arius demonstrates how theological ideas can go "viral" when they are simplified, rhetorically persuasive, and supported by influential networks. Athanasius demonstrates that discerning theology requires careful attention to Scripture, tradition, sacramental practice, and the life-giving effect of doctrine on the community. While Arius's theology spread quickly, Athanasius ensured that theological truth aligned with the Church's understanding of salvation and communal life. Discernment, therefore, is both analytical and relational: it involves evaluating content, observing its effects on the community, and ensuring fidelity to the Gospel. Moreover, the personal dimensions of

[19] McGrath, *Historical Theology,* 31–32. The Council of Nicea (325 CE) affirmed that Jesus Christ is *homoousios* with the Father, meaning "of the same substance" or "one in being." This term was central to rejecting Arianism, which held that Christ was a created being, and it emphasizes that Christ shares fully in the divine nature, a crucial foundation for Christian soteriology, since only one who is truly divine can fully redeem humanity.

[20] C. FitzSimons Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy: An Affirmation of Christian Orthodoxy* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1994), 88-94. Allison explains how Athanasius was exiled five times for his unwavering defense of Nicene orthodoxy against Arianism, repeatedly clashing with emperors and bishops who favoured a more compromising stance. The fact that he came back several times from exile teaches us that we as Christians are called to stand up for God's truth even when it is not comfortable or when others reject us. He had to return, because revelation and obedience to Jesus Christ compelled him to continue witnessing despite persecution and suffering.

[21] Alister E. Mcgrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* 6th edition (Chichester, West Sussex & Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 54-55. The "Rule of Faith" (*regula fidei*) refers to the summary of apostolic teaching faithfully preserved and transmitted by the early Church. Faced with challenges such as Gnosticism, which often misinterpreted Scripture, early Christians like Irenaeus emphasized that the Church's tradition provided a reliable guide for interpreting the Bible. The Rule of Faith was not a separate revelation but a record of the Church's consistent witness to the Gospel from the apostles onward. It ensured that interpretations of Scripture remained aligned with the historic faith and prevented individual or heretical confusion, as in the case of Arius's claim regarding the Son.

[22] Mcgrath, *Christian Theology,* 246-250.

[23] Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), 212–214.

[24] Theology was tested by not how clearly it would be summarized, but by whether it safeguarded the Church's confession that "God saves".

discernment are clear in this conflict. Arius's ambition, persuasive presence, and rhetorical skill show that theology can be shaped by personality, influence, and social dynamics. Athanasius's method, by contrast, emphasises the need for careful evaluation that goes beyond superficial appeal.

This contrast between Arius and Athanasius instructs us for today on this point: popularity does not make something true. Theological soundness and popular appeal are not the same thing. In this digital age of viral content, I believe it is vital to recover a form of discernment that privileges theological consistency and the security of salvation above all.

Augustine vs Pelagius

In the Western Church, a similar struggle over theological truth emerged in the controversy between Augustine of Hippo and Pelagius. Pelagius taught that human ability was required for moral perfection without the necessity of God's grace. Like Arius before him, Pelagius's ideas spread quickly because they were simple, appealing, and easy to adopt. Augustine responded as Athanasius did, with careful discernment grounded in Scripture, apostolic tradition, and the Church's practice, showing that human freedom cannot secure salvation.

Pelagius's theology proved infectious in the early fifth-century Western Church because it was easy to understand and appealing to many people. He taught that human beings, as they were created, had full freedom of will and could live without sin if they chose to do so.[25] This idea was attractive to monks and Roman elites who valued moral effort and self-control because it showed that humans could succeed through their own efforts. At a time of political and social uncertainty, such as the sack of Rome in 410, Pelagian teaching offered hope and a clear way to live.[26] His ideas moved quickly through churches and monasteries, often without careful examination.[27] The simplicity of his message, that people could obey God's commands and were fully responsible for their sins, made it easy for others to adopt and share.

Pelagius lived in a world very different from that of Augustine. According to Martha Ellen Stortz, he came after the era of Christian persecution and martyrdom, a time when holiness had once been concrete and visible through the suffering of the saints.[28] With martyrdom no longer an option, Christians faced the challenge of defining sin, evil, and sanctity in ordinary life. Pelagius responded by adapting the spirituality of the martyrs to the context of an imperial church. He argued that Baptism became a kind of "second baptism", marking the believer as a new creation and a saint.[29] This made holiness tangible and immediate, meaning Christians were called to live authentically, fully aware of their moral obligations, rather than wait for external acts of witness. Stortz emphasizes that in this way, his teaching offered a compelling path to spiritual perfection, which helped his ideas spread quickly among small study groups and monasteries in Rome.[30] Peter Brown observes that Pelagianism appealed to a centrifugal

[25] Mcgrath, *Christian Theology,* 334-335, 344.

[26] Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies: Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 200-201.

[27] Pelagius' Roman aristocratic background likely shaped his outlook on Christian perfection and moral effort. Raised in a culture that prized discipline, education, and social distinction, he may have viewed human ability and virtue through the lens of elite upbringing, emphasizing self-mastery and personal responsibility in ways that reflect the values of his society rather than the limitations of ordinary human experience. See Peter Brown, "Pelagius and His Supporters: Aims and Environment," *Journal of Theological Studies* 19, no.1 (1968): 98.

[28] Martha Ellen Stortz, "Pelagius Revisited," *Word & World* 8, no. 2 (1988): 134–135.

[29] Brown, *Heresies: Heresy and Orthodoxy*, 201.

[30] Ellen Stortz, "Pelagius Revisited," 135-136.

tendency in Roman society, in which individuals sought to distinguish themselves and form small groups of their own. This drive to rise above rivals and cultivate excellence helps explain Pelagius' emphasis on self-discipline and moral effort.[31]

Another factor in Pelagius's "viral" appeal was his engagement with the writings of Paul. Like many thinkers of the late fourth century, he was drawn to the apostle's letters as he sought to apply them to a Roman audience that included new converts from paganism and members of the elite.[32] Pelagius highlighted the continuity between creation and redemption: humans were made in God's image and retained the natural ability to do good. He argued that Adam's sin affected the human will but did not destroy human possibility. Through Christ and baptism, the believer could break the habit of sinning and begin a new life. This practical and action-oriented approach made Pelagius's theology easy to understand and adopt. It was a faith for ordinary Christians, not just theologians, and it offered a clear moral compass in a time of uncertainty. His world, a Rome negotiating religious pluralism, pagan traditions and the rise of imperial Christianity, possibly shaped a theology that was both accessible and persuasive, which helps explain its rapid spread.

Augustine of Hippo entered the Pelagian controversy not only as a polemicist but also as a careful discernment of theological truth, in a time when attractive, simplified teachings were spreading rapidly.[33] Pelagius's theology prompted Augustine to examine the deeper implications of these claims rather than dismiss them. His response was grounded in Scripture and the Church's tradition, insisting that any Christian must be evaluated against the entirety of biblical revelation and the Church's received understanding of salvation, particularly the doctrines of original sin and divine grace.[34] For Augustine, discernment meant accurately diagnosing the human condition: humanity, though created good, was fundamentally affected by Adam's sin and thus unable to attain righteousness without the transforming and enabling grace of God. If Pelagius's view were adopted uncritically, it would undermine the very need for Christ's redemptive work and the gift of grace.

Augustine's response demonstrates a methodical and multi-layered approach to theological discernment. Unlike Pelagius, who was raised in an elite Roman environment that prized moral effort, Augustine grew up in a Christian household in Thagaste, North Africa, and experienced firsthand the realities of sin and human weakness, which shaped his careful theology of divine grace.[35] This background gave Augustine an awareness of human weakness, making him cautious about claims that humans could achieve moral perfection through their own effort alone. Whereas Pelagius's teachings appealed to the

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[31] Brown, "Pelagius and His Supporters," 98.

[32] Martha Ellen Stortz, "Pelagius Revisited," 136. Stortz mentions these new converts had only recently left pagan practices and had little experience with disciplined Christian life. Pelagius's focus on Paul's letters not only provided moral guidance but also helped these believers form a shared understanding of faith and practice, creating a more cohesive community of Christians in a culturally diverse Rome. The fact that he placed Paul at the forefront of his theology gave his moral teaching authority.

[33] Eugene TeSelle, "Nature and Grace in Augustine's Expositions of Genesis I, 1-5," *Recherches Augustiniennes et Patristiques* 5 (1968): 96. It is important to note, throughout this time of Augustine's life, the Church faced multiple heresies that required careful discernment. In North Africa, Donatism. There were also still remnants of Arianism circulating in parts of the east. These various movements show that Augustine's careful theological evaluation of Pelagius was part of a broader effort to protect the integrity of Christ and the Church's doctrine.

[34] Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 346-351. Brown also notes that Pelagianism appealed to a universal theme – the desire of the individual to define himself and to feel free to create his own values amid the conformist routines of society – helping explain why Pealgius's teachings resonated beyond narrow circles.

[35] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 7.

confidence and autonomy of the Roman elite, Augustine combined intellectual training in rhetoric and philosophy with spiritual formation to carefully evaluate theological claims. Rather than relying on rhetorical appeal or personal charisma, he carefully weighed Pelagius's claims against Scripture, the teachings of earlier Church Fathers, and the lived experience of the Church's sacramental and communal life. Augustine also considered the motives behind Pelagius's followers, recognising that ambition, pride, and cultural values could influence how teachings spread.[36] By combining careful exegesis and theological reasoning, Augustine ensured that his evaluation of Pelagianism preserved the Church's doctrines and the well-being of the Church community, showing that discernment in theology is not simply about identifying error but about safeguarding the faithful from teachings that could mislead others spiritually.

However, this contrast also raises an important question for the Church today. Teachings such as Pelagianism gained influence not only because they were theologically problematic, but because they were simple, practical, and appealing to ordinary believers. In the same way, many forms of 'viral theology' today gain traction because they are easy to understand and emphasise human action and visible results. This suggests that the popularity of a teaching may reflect its accessibility rather than its faithfulness, and therefore calls for careful discernment grounded not only in clarity, but in the truth of the Gospel and the reality of salvation.

The 'ism's of the Early Church

The early Church faced many debates, as mentioned previously, one of which concerned the nature of Christ, as teachings like Docetism, Nestorianism, Eutychianism, and Apollinarianism challenged the understanding of his humanity and divinity. These controversies required careful discernment by the Church to protect the truth of salvation.

Docetism taught that Christ did not really suffer because He only seemed to have a human body.[37] Associated with certain Gnostic groups, it was appealing because it seemed to safeguard divine transcendence at all costs. But this belief called into question the very possibility of salvation. For if Christ was not fully human, how could His death and resurrection benefit us?[38] Church Fathers like Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus, and Tertullian fought Docetism by insisting that Christ was indeed fully human. The Nestorian controversy of the fifth century involved a similar worry about whether Christ had two natures united in one person.[39] Nestorius seemed to suggest that there were two persons, one human and one divine. The Council of Ephesus (431) had to condemn this position and proclaim that Christ is one person who possesses two natures.[40] Debates like these show that theology has never been abstract: even small compromises in our confession of who Christ is immediately impact our worship, our devotion, and our lives as the Church.

Yet other controversies continued to trouble an understanding of Christ. Eutychianism denied Christ had two complete natures after the incarnation (His human nature absorbed into His divine nature), threatening to erase his true

[36] Brown, "Pelagius and His Supporters," 95-97.
[37] Brown, *Heresies: Heresy and Orthodoxy,* 52.
[38] Brown, *Heresies: Heresy and Orthodoxy,* 53—54.
[39] Robert Merrihew Adams, "Nestorius and Nestorianism," *The Monist* 104 (2021): 366-368.
[40] Adams, "Nestorius and Nestorianism," 369-374. Nestorius, fifth-century Archbishop of Constantinople, argued that Jesus has two distinct natures: fully human in *ousia* (substance) and fully divine, united in *prosopon* (person). This allowed him to affirm Christ's divine actions without denying his true humanity. Unlike monophysites, he maintained a clear distinction between the natures, while emphasizing the unity of the person. Nestorius also stressed that the divine *prosopon* was not shared with Adam, highlighting Christ's unique role in salvation.

humanity.[41] Apollinarianism denied Christ had a complete human mind, with the divine Logos taking its place.[42] Rejected was the claim at Chalcedon (451) that Christ was partly human and partly divine. Instead, the Church affirmed that Christ has two natures in one person. Full divinity and full humanity are both necessary to affirm who Christ is. In both examples, the church came to see that small alterations to Christology threatened the reality of salvation because if Christ had not assumed it, it could not be saved. Nuanced controversies such as these illustrate how theology must attend to precisely these kinds of questions to protect the Gospel for the life of the church.

The early Church faced several Christological controversies, as mentioned: Docetism, Nestorianism, Eutychianism, and Apollinarianism.[43] We see here that even slight distortions and deviations in the identity of Christ severely affect our salvation. This requires one to be careful in this technological age. Teachings and presentations of Jesus can easily spread across the globe without being thoroughly examined theologically.

Tofā and the Church Fathers: Discernment in the Digital Age

Examining the spiritual practices of the Church Fathers shows that discernment was theological, relational, communal and soteriological. Reading their practice through a Samoan lens of *tofā* highlights their methodology as one we could fruitfully employ to combat theological confusion online.

1. Tofā revealed through character

Strong personalities often propelled the rise of heresies in the early Church. Arius was persuasive and relationally strategic. He gathered support among ascetics, which included virgins, and spread his ideas through simple theological songs that ordinary people could repeat. Likewise, Pelagius was known for his strict ascetic lifestyle and upright conduct. His emphasis on human responsibility was convincing because his life appeared exemplary. In both cases, theology spread not only through argument but through the character and their influence.

In contrast, the Church Fathers demonstrated a different kind of character in their discernment. Athanasius endured repeated exile for defending the full divinity of Christ, showing courage and perseverance under pressure. Augustine opposed Pelagius out of concern for the integrity of grace and salvation. Their lives reflected humility, resilience, and accountability to the Church. Discernment for them required moral strength as well as theological clarity. Therefore, character played a big role in the theological scene.

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[41] Samson Musa, "Eutychianism and the Chalcedonian Formula: Implications for Christological Orthodoxy in the Nigerian Evangelical Church," *African Journal of Biblical Studies, Translation, Linguistics and Intercultural* Theology 1, no. 2 (2025), 40. The Council of Chalcedon (451 AD), organized by Emperor Marcian and attended by over 500 bishops, affirmed that Christ is fully divine and fully human, "without mixture, confusion, or separation," shaping Christian theology and church organisation for future generations.

[42] Brown, *Heresies: Heresy and Orthodoxy*, 163-166. Brown says that the early Church Fathers were deeply concerned with the role of the soul and intellect in sin. They did not think sin was just a matter of the body, nor did they see the body or its appetites as inherently evil. Rather, they believed that the rebellious *nous* could only learn obedience through disciplined training of the body. In this view, it is only because Christ became fully human, sharing in what we are, that he was able to reunite humanity with God.

[43] These are some of the most prominent early Christological "isms," but they are not exhaustive. Other notable controversies included Monarchianism, which emphasized the unity of God to the point of downplaying the distinct persons of the Trinity, Monophysitism, which held that Christ had only a single nature, and Sabellianism, which blurred the distinctions among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each of these debates similarly shaped the early Church's efforts to articulate and safeguard the doctrine of Christ's nature.

Here, the Samoan concept of *tofā* deepens this insight. It is embodied wisdom revealed through the conduct and *tautua* of the Church Fathers. It not only asks about the theoretical side of things, whether a message sounds persuasive, but also whether the life of the messenger actually reflects integrity and communal accountability. One could say that the Church Fathers had *tofā* to be able to discern not only doctrine, but also the character of the person promoting it. Discernment, therefore, is not only about recognising truth but about recognising trustworthy witnesses, whose lives reflect the Gospel they proclaim.

2. Tofā is tautua of the Gospel

The Church Fathers practised theological discernment by measuring every claim against Scripture within the 'rule of faith'. Athanasius did not respond to Arius with personality alone but with a sustained biblical argument, reading texts such as John 1 and Philippians 2 within the Church's received confession that Christ is eternally divine.[44] Augustine likewise grounded his response to Pelagius in Paul's teaching on grace, especially in Romans, while insisting that salvation begins with God's initiative rather than human effort. For the Church Fathers, Scripture was not selectively quoted to support a position but interpreted within the whole narrative of salvation. The same is said about the different heresies mentioned above, where discernment required coherence and loyalty to the apostolic witness.[45]

In light of *tofā*, one can understand this as their *tautua* to the Church. They served the community by protecting the integrity of the Gospel through careful exegesis. Their wisdom was not just an abstract one but grounded in pastoral responsibility. In the Samoan sense, *tofā* is wisdom expressed through *tautua* for the good of the community. Athanasius' endurance in exile, Augustine's theological accuracy, and the rest of the Church Fathers all had different forms of service. Their discernment was an offering for the preservation of right worship and right belief. Thus, theological discernment becomes an act of *tautua* in which truth is preserved not for personal authority but for the life and unity of the Church.

3. Tofā must advocate for Salvation

For the early Church Fathers, theological discernment was never abstract; it was rooted in the question of salvation. Heresies such as Docetism, Nestorianism, Eutychianism, and Apollinarianism each threatened to diminish the identity of Christ. If Jesus is not fully human or fully divine, then the work of redemption is compromised, and salvation itself is undermined. This made careful discernment essential: evaluating doctrines was inseparable from protecting the community's access to life in Christ.

Church councils, such as Nicaea in 325, Ephesus in 431 and Chalcedon in 451, formalised this discernment. They articulated that Christ is one person in two natures, fully human and fully divine, preserving the integrity of the Gospel against simplifications or distortions. The Fathers weighed Scripture, tradition, and communal implications to reach these conclusions, showing that discernment involves both intellectual rigour and pastoral responsibility. Their work ensured that the Church maintained a clear path to salvation, despite the persuasive appeal of competing teachings.

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[44] Peter J. Leithart, *Athanasius* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 20. Athanasius went to great exegetical lengths to interpret Scripture; for example, he carefully explained passages that show Christ's human weaknesses so they would not compromise the full divinity of the *Logos*.

[45] Apostolic witness refers to the teaching, preaching, and example of the apostles as preserved in Scripture and early Church tradition. Following the apostolic witness means interpreting doctrines and practices in continuity with what the apostles handed down. See Matthew J. Grey, "The Apostolic Fathers as Witnesses to the Early Christian Apostasy," *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 6, no. 1 (2005): 75–78.

In the *tofā* lens, the Church Fathers offered their wisdom and careful judgment as *tautua* to the Church to protect the faithful teachings from misinterpretations of Jesus Christ. *Tofā* is exercised for the good of the family and the village. Similarly, the discernment of the Church Fathers safeguarded "salvation for the good of all". *Tofā* should never be for the benefit of an individual; it must always benefit the community, or, in this case, the Church. The Church Fathers and their *tautua* ensured that the life-giving promise of the Gospel reached every member of the community, showing that wisdom in *tautua* and salvation share the same communal purpose. In this way, discernment is ultimately an act of safeguarding salvation itself, ensuring that the Church remains rooted in the life-giving truth of Jesus Christ.

With "viral theologies" travelling fast and loose online without much discernment, this model of *tofā* - character, *tautua*, and salvation – can offer a necessary guide to help the Church think through what we share, what we believe and how we live.

'Viral' does not Equal Truth

The world we live in today demands careful discernment, especially in the digital age, where access to information is easier than ever. As I mentioned earlier, many ideas go viral and are quickly accepted as truth. Yet, as the early Church Fathers experienced, popularity does not equal truth. This challenge is intensified in the digital age, where, as Le Duc notes, the problem is no longer access to information but the ability to discern truth amid overwhelming, competing messages.[46] The measure of a teaching is not how widely it spreads, but whether it is faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, safeguards salvation, and nurtures the community.

Take, for example, the Samoan man who struck the statue of Mary.[47] His actions and aggressive teaching approach are not in line with what *tofā* teaches. True wisdom, as *tofā* shows us, is expressed with humility and patience while vying for peace.[48] He may have thought he was spreading the Gospel, but his methods were violent, aggressive and, to many observers, off-putting. Reading the comments on his Facebook live streams, it was clear that people were judging not just his message but also his character and past behaviour. This illustrates an important point: we always connect the message to the messenger. In digital spaces, where authority is often decentralised, individuals can gain influence rapidly without accountability, making discernment even more necessary.[49] It reminds us to return to Scripture and the apostolic teachings, and ask whether someone is actually living a Christ-like life.

The rise of mega-churches today shows a similar pattern. Some pastors and ministries go viral online with spectacles designed to entertain: zip-lining into the church, trampoline backflips, pouring syrup over the Bible, surfing over the congregation during a service, or making bold statements like "Jesus never reached his potential".[50]

[46] Le Duc, *"Cyber/Digital Theology,"* 143-144.

[47] This is mentioned above on the first page of the article. A video circulated in 2025 showing a man publicly destroying a statue of Mary to illustrate his claim that Catholics worship idols. The clip drew significant attention online, highlighting how dramatic actions can quickly go viral and spark widespread discussion about theology, practice, and character.

[48] Maggi Savin-Baden and John Reader, *Technology Transforming Theology: Digital Impacts* (London: William Temple Foundation, 2018), 25–26. The authors highlight the need for care, reflection, and the slowing down of thought in response to the pressures of digital culture, which often encourages immediacy rather than thoughtful ethical engagement.

[49] Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practices in New Media Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 2-3.

[50] Many of the videos mentioned are widely available online and can be found almost instantly through a simple keyword search. This is especially true for content related to Mike Todd, who is highly viral at the moment. However, his teachings and methods have drawn considerable scrutiny and critique from mainline churches, highlighting the tension between online popularity and theological truth.

While these acts may attract attention and create viral moments, they are not examples of *tofā* and clear discernment. *Tofā* is humility and *tautua* while also portraying the life of Christ's teachings. When the focus shifts to performance, showmanship, or personal gain – private planes, luxury houses, and elaborate stunts – the Gospel risks being used for self-promotion rather than for community transformation, just as the salvation Jesus gave us. In short, being viral does not make a teaching true. But discernment requires us to evaluate both the message and the messenger, grounding our judgment in Scripture, the example of the apostle, and the principles of *tofā,* which is wisdom through *tautua,* humility, and communal responsibility.

On the other hand, we must also realise that online spaces can be used to reach others with the Gospel and spread the mission of the Church. Countless ministries teach God's Word faithfully and fellowship across physical boundaries. Thus, the key is not avoiding what's 'viral', but learning to navigate it with wisdom. This requires continual guidance to Scripture, the witness of the apostles, and the wisdom of *tofā*.

For the Samoan people, especially in today's digital age, false or misleading content is everywhere online. It can be difficult to discern what is true and what is not. This is where the concept of *tofā* becomes important. *Tofā* teaches patience, careful reflection, and the practice of always seeking what benefits the community rather than harming others. These values were evident in the Church Fathers, who consistently advocated for Jesus Christ and the full message of salvation so that all may live. An idea shared digitally can make an influence overnight. As the Church in such a time, we must be careful not to align ourselves with what is popular, but with what is faithful.

Conclusion: Defenders of Jesus Christ

The Church Fathers stand as faithful defenders of Jesus Christ. They faced heresies that tried to infiltrate the Church and distort the Gospel - the "viral theologies" of their time - yet their love for Christ and commitment to the salvation story enabled them to resist heresies. Jesus Christ remained at the centre of theology.

So, for us in this day and age, we are called to be defenders of Jesus Christ. Guided by *tofā,* this article has shown that exercising patience, reflection, and moral responsibility while carefully discerning before accepting or sharing teachings is vital for us as Christians. True defence of Jesus Christ is not about popularity or spectacle, or even rushing to judgment, but about protecting the integrity of the Gospel and serving our communities with wisdom and humility, just as the Church Fathers did. A key principle I always consider in discernment is to ask whether a theology reflects the love of God and leads to life for you, and for others. If it doesn't, then perhaps it is best not to share it, as things in this day and age go "viral" in an instant!

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Matū Palapala: Samoan Land, Mission Spaces, Holy Ground or Enemy Territory?

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Abstract

This essay examines the historical and theological tension between Samoan customary land tenure and the concept of land as private property introduced by the London Missionary Society (LMS) to Samoa in the nineteenth century. The focus of this essay is the concept of matū palapala, a form of land gifting in which Samoans grant land as a token of hospitality for temporary use rather than permanent ownership. Through their understanding of land as a private commodity, the LMS missionaries believed that the land they "secured" would be "holy ground," immune to warfare and local geopolitics. This "securing" of land as private property was intended to establish mission stations throughout the islands. The missionaries occupied land they believed had been purchased and registered in their names as private property; however, Samoans viewed the LMS mission spaces as geopolitical assets under the authority of the original landowners. It is this cultural misunderstanding that led to the inevitable destruction of mission property during civil wars in Samoa, not out of anti-Christian sentiment, but because these structures occupied enemy territory. Ultimately, this tension in the indigenous and European understanding of land, especially the concept of matū palapala, foreshadowed the need for the LMS to abandon the isolated model (mission stations) and integrate deeply into traditional Samoan family structures in order for the mission to survive and thrive.

Key Words: History, *matū palapala*, London Missionary Society (LMS), Customary land tenure, Land alienation, Samoan history.

Introduction

A tension exists between indigenous Samoan land tenure and European concepts of private property. An example of such tension and friction occurred in 1988 in the village of Fa'ala, Palauli. The Congregational Christian Church Samoa (CCCS) parish in Fa'ala had decided to vacate its original church building on a parcel of land known as Paepaelauniu to build a new facility on a different plot. When church representatives arrived to survey the vacated Paepaelauniu site, they were instantly greeted with the threat of gun blasts by the holder of the I'aulualo title—the paramount chiefly title whose ancestral meeting grounds (*tulaga maota*) are Paepaelauniu, of which the church had once occupied.[1]

While the CCCS claimed legal ownership through a 1888 deed, the I'aulualo family argued that, under customary law, the land's authority reverted to them once the church vacated the sacred space. This modern clash over who holds the rightful *pule* (authority) highlights a profound historical misunderstanding of the terms and conditions under which the London Missionary Society (LMS) originally received lands. Historically, European missionaries believed that once they "purchased" land, locals would regard the asset/property as 'divine,' belonging to the mission and therefore immune as neutral territory, one in which the *pule* was to be associated with the mission. Ronald Crawford cites LMS missionary William Harbutt, who labored in

[1] Supreme Court of Samoa, "Board of Trustees of the Congregational Christian Church of Samoa v Pouvi [2003] WSSC 4 (14 Feburary 2003," *Pacific Islands Legal Information Institute http://www.paclii.org/cgi-bin/sinodisp/ws/cases/WSSC/2003/4.html?stem=&synonyms=&query=congregational%20christian.*

Samoa between 1839 and 1860, as noting that the "house of a missionary was considered sacred."[2] Crawford supported this European perspective by stating that "mission property was indeed, always granted immunity in time of war, so that villagers sought refuge there, or, at the least, brought their valuables to save them from pillage."[3]

However, within the context of the early missionary period, 1830–1850, this notion is both historically and theologically flawed. For Europeans, the erecting of mission stations, residences, and chapels as mission properties meant the consecration of soil, ultimately detaching the land from local *pule* and changing its status from customary land to divine mission property; however, for Samoans, the land would always remain under the *pule* of the indigenous landowners. During this era, the lands upon which chapels, mission houses, and schools were built were freely given by local converts, but they were offered with the strict mindset of temporary, conditional hospitality.

The destruction of the chapel in Leulumoega and the mission house at Palauli during the civil wars of the 1840s are prime examples of this underlying reality. These were not random acts of anti-Christian violence, but intentional military actions deeply rooted in the Samoan understanding of land tenure. Because warring factions understood their own land gifts to the LMS as temporary grants (*matū palapala*) offered to an honored guest, they logically applied that same interpretation to the LMS lands hosted by their political rivals.

Consequently, Crawford's claim that "mission property was indeed, always granted immunity in time of war" must be reconsidered. As far as indigenous frameworks were concerned during the early mission period, Samoan land could not simply become the permanent property of non-Samoans. Therefore, missionary properties during the early mission period were always subject to and vulnerable to the geopolitics of Samoan warfare. To understand this vulnerability, we must first grasp the highly relational Samoan worldview of land, political authority, and the limits of Samoan hospitality.

Stewardship, *Faiā*, and Banishment

Prior to the colonial imposition of real estate laws and the Berlin Treaty of 1889, the absolute transfer of land outside of ancestral lineages was virtually non-existent, save for the violent redrawing of boundaries through warfare.[4] When the first missionaries arrived in 1830, they encountered a deeply entrenched, highly structured landscape where all territory fell strictly under the overlapping jurisdictions of the *āiga* (extended family), the *nu'u* (village), and the *ītūmālō* (political district). Within this indigenous framework, identity and geography were inseparable. The foundational unit of Samoan society was the *āiga*, a corporate descent group bound by shared genealogy.[5] The *āiga* was represented and led by a *matai*(chief), selected through careful familial deliberation. Crucially, a *matai* did not function as an absolute landowner in the Western capitalist sense; rather, they acted as a sacred trustee or custodian.[6] The *matai* distributed land for housing and subsistence, but the ultimate authority and ownership remained vested in the collective *āiga*.

Beyond the family estates lay the broader boundaries of the *nu'u*, governed by the *fono* (the village council comprised of the representative *matai*). The *fono* exercised

[2] Ronald Crawford, "The Lotu and the Fa'asāmoa: Church and Society in Samoa, 1830 – 1880" (PhD Thesis, University of Otago, 1977), 225.

[3] Crawford, "The Lotu and Fa'asāmoa," 225.

[4] Malama Meleisea, "The Making of Modern Samoa: Traditional Authority and Colonial Administration in the History of Western Samoa" (PhD Thesis, Macquarie University, 1986), 92.

[5] Meleisea, "The Making of Modern Samoa," 26.

[6] Meleisea, "The Making of Modern Samoa," 34.

an autocratic, localized sovereignty over village affairs and uncultivated territories. This layered system of governance ensured that land was heavily safeguarded. Land was an inalienable geopolitical anchor, inextricably linked to the Samoan concept of *faiā* – the relational interconnectedness binding individuals, communities, and the environment.

Faiā dictates that all life is interconnected, holding everything together for better or for worse.[7] Before the widespread acceptance of Christianity, this spiritual interconnectedness was physically manifested in the village *malae* (the hallowed meeting ground) and the *fale aitu* (spirit houses), where indigenous deities were venerated and hosted. The immediate vicinity of a high-ranking *matai*'s residence (*tulaga maota*) was already associated with divine, religious power. By allocating space for the LMS to build chapels and dwellings, the *matai* and the *fono* were engaging in a profoundly spiritual, yet inherently political, act. They were incorporating the Christian God into their web of *faiā*. However, because the land fundamentally belonged to the *āiga* and the *nu'u*, the hosting of foreign divine entities (such as the Christian God) required communal consensus. If a single convert attempted to dedicate land or space to a new religion without the *fono's approval*, there were consequences. This was best illustrated during the mission's earliest years in the village of Lalomalava.

Within the first two years of the LMS's arrival in Samoa in 1830, a chief named Tagaloa from Lalomalava, who had learned the Gospel through frequent visits from a Tahitian Christian teacher named Boti, eventually invited the teacher to reside with him and preach at his home. Tagaloa utilized his own ancestral space to host the mission. However, the other chiefs of Lalomalava—who held equal authority in the *fono*—were furious, fearing that the indigenous spirits would be angered and bring death upon the village. When Tagaloa refused to expel the teacher, the *fono* exercised its ultimate geopolitical authority: banishment.[8] Banishment, otherwise referred to as *tafi ma le eleele* (literally meaning to be wiped off the land), and sometimes exercised through *mu le foaga* (where everything one owns is burned to the ground), is arguably the most severe Samoan punishment. The *fono* forcibly removed Tagaloa, his family, and his property, exiling them to Sapapali'i.[9] Tagaloa's banishment proves that even when an individual *matai* wished to dedicate space to the LMS, the land remained fundamentally bound to the sovereign authority of the *nu'u*. In other words, land granted to the missionaries remained under the sovereign *pule* of *āiga* and *nu'u* during the early mission period.

Matū Palapala

The treatment of mission properties as geopolitical assets by Samoans in the early mission period can best be understood through the customary land tenure framework of *matū palapala.* The concept derives from a compound of two Samoan words. *Matū* translates to "a dry garment," "to put on dry clothes," or simply "to be dry," whereas *palapala* translates to "mud," "blood," "slime," or "soil."[10] According to indigenous oral traditions surrounding the practice of hosting, the phrase originates from the ancient custom of receiving weary travelers. Upon a visiting party's arrival, the host would offer a clean, dry garment (*matū*) for the guest to wipe away the sweat and dirt accumulated during their journey. Consequently, the garment would become soiled (*palapala*). Crucially, at the conclusion of the visit, the guest was obligated to return the

[7] Fatilua Fatilua, "Faia Analysis of Romans 13: 1 – 7: Integrating a Samoan Perspective with Socio-Rhetorical Criticism" (MTh Thesis, Pacific Theological College, 2017), 11.

[8] Richard Moyle, ed., *The Samoan Journals of John Williams 1830 and 1832* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1984), 135–37.

[9] Moyle, *Samoan Journals,* 135 – 137.

[10] George Pratt, *Samoan Dictionary: English and Samoan and Samoan and English; With a Short Grammar of the Samoan Dialect* (Samoa: London Missionary Society's Press, 1862), 61, 152, 163.

garment to the host—its rightful owner—before departing.[11] A secondary oral tradition emphasizes *palapala* as 'earth' or 'soil,' suggesting that the gift is terminated when the recipient is eventually buried in the earth, or upon their death. In both interpretations, the defining characteristic of a *matū palapala* grant is its strict temporality and conditionality. It is a gift granted by a sovereign owner for the temporary comfort and use of an honorary guest. At the end of its use (as agreed upon by both the host and guest), the gift, the *matū* – the land – returns to its original owners.

Such was the implication of the land/space granted to John Williams and the LMS when they first arrived in Sapapali'i in 1830. John Williams - the optimistic missionary who labored in Tahiti, known for his infamous saying, "(I) cannot content myself within the narrow limits of a single reef,"[12] – had his sights set on spreading the Gospel and converting islanders throughout the Pacific Islands. The initial step in Samoa was to introduce the new religion to the islands through the labor of the Tahitian missionaries whom he had helped convert and train. Reflecting on his meeting with Malietoa, Williams recorded that he made his intention clear from the beginning:

> After the Chief was seated we began to tell him the object of our coming…That we had brought him some native teachers to reside on his Island with his permission to teach himself and his people the knowledge of the true God. That we wished him to take them under his Protection that their persons should not be injured nor their little property plundered. That he would allow them a house to worship in and as many of his people as thought proper to attend worship with them. That he would allow them to teach his people to read and write and that if he and his people listened to the native teachers it was very probable that Missionaries from England would be sent to his land to carry on more effectually what natives might commence…[13]

The motive was clear from Williams' point. Malietoa's response was one of warm reception according to Williams:

> The Chief answered, and said that he was exceedingly glad to see us…That he would take care of the natives we had brought and also give them the large house in which we were assembled to worship in and allow any of his people who might wish to be taught the lotu or Praying system…[14]

The 'large house' is likely the *fale tele* of Malietoa's family on its *tulaga maota* named Feagai ma le Ata. This land is situated opposite the *malae* – official land or meeting grounds of a *nu'u* and its *fono*– known as Matāniu.[15] The meeting between Williams and Malietoa, taking place in the 'large house', is a cultural protocol for hosting guests. An *āiga*'s *fale tele* is space for meeting with honorary guests, but it is also the arena in which *āiga* deliberate on issues pertaining to their everyday lives. The *fale tele* is a sacred space – just as the land is – where the deities reside with their people. This is the space that Malietoa has offered for the initiation of the missionaries' labor. In his later

[11] This oral tradition of *matū palapala* was passed on to the author by his ancestors.

[12] C. Sylvester Horne, *The Story of the L.M.S* (London: New Bridge Street, Blackfriars, E.C, 1904), 42.

[13] Moyle, *Samoan Journals,* 73-74.

[14] Moyle, *Samoan Journals,* 74.

[15] For further reading about the origins and significance of the name *Matāniu feagai ma le Ata* in relation to Samoan oral tradition and Sapapali'i, see Esera Esera, "Land, Ecotheology, and Identity in Samoa," *Samoa Journal of Theology* (2022): 100 – 111. See also, Mk. Le Mamea, *O Le Tusi Faalupega o Samoa,* 10 – Le Mamea notes that Matāniu is the *malae-fono* – meeting grounds – of the *nu'u* Sapapali'i. Malietoa's *tulaga maota* is "*Feagai ma le ata, ma Tualagi."* This is also the same names for the *tulaga maota* of the *matai* Papali'i of Sapapali'i. Esera notes that the names *Matāniu* and *Feagai ma le Ata* have one origin story. In Esera's account of the origin story, the land named *Matāniu* is opposite of the land originally named *Ata.*

writing, Williams recalls Malietoa stating:

> …In the meantime this house is yours as a temporary place in which to teach and worship; and when we come from the war we will erect any building you may require, and all the people who remain at home can come tomorrow if they please, and begin to learn about Jehovah and Jesus Christ.[16]

Williams' requests for protection, a worship space, and permission to teach literacy foreshadowed the mission's future land requirements for residences, churches and schools. Malietoa's response provided assurance for Williams. The Tahitian teachers had already been hospitably welcomed to stay at Taimalelagi's (Malietoa's brother's) home the day before, so, as far as Williams' concern, the issue of housing was addressed. However, Malietoa and his brother would eventually agree within this time frame to house four missionaries each.[17] Regarding worship and teaching, Malietoa's offering of the *fale tele* for use aligned with the Samoans' understanding of the *fale tele'*s various purposes. This was already a designated space for teaching, learning, and worship. From a theological standpoint, the approval granted by Malietoa to use the 'large house' and his hospitality and receptiveness to the LMS at Feagai ma le Ata are indicative of bringing forth the God of the missionaries into his *āiga* space. In other words, the act is a subtle replacement of the deities of Matāniu feagai ma le Ata with a new one.

Malietoa's hospitality here is the first instance of Samoans welcoming both the mission and Christianity into the sphere of *āiga*. For Malietoa, the assertion to provide the missionaries a place to stay, a place to teach, and a place to worship is no different than welcoming a stranger into the *āiga*. This intent is verified by John Williams' recollection of Malietoa's words to him on this occasion:

> This…is the happiest day of my life, and I rejoice that I have lived to see it. In future I shall consider ourselves and you as ainga [*aiga*] tasi, one family, and hope you will do the same.[18]

The phrase "temporary place" signifies that Feagai ma le Ata was the first *matū palapala* granted to the mission. The offer to "erect any buildings you may require" must be considered to mean "any buildings you may require on our *āiga* land," where Malietoa has a shared authority. This notion also implies a temporality in the gifting of land. The temporal nature of the offer is evident in the phrase "you may require." So long as the mission needs a facility, land will be allotted to the mission. And in the case where it isn't needed, the land can be redistributed for another purpose as needed by Malietoa and his *āiga.* This is the default interpretation of Malietoa's initial response.

A similar event occurred in Apai, on the island of Manono. Tuilaepa Esekia Matetau, a *matai* of Apai Manono memorialized in the journals of John Williams as Matetau, had awaited the promised return of Williams with a teacher. One of the promises made by Matetau to Williams in their farewell in 1830 according to the missionary's account was to build a chapel for the mission.[19] The first chapel built in Samoa was the one at Sapapali'i in 1831. As in the case of the Tahitian teachers in Sapapali'i, the *fale tele* of the Tuilaepa *āiga* of Apai was granted as *matū palapala* to the mission. Regarding residency, Matetau had set aside a parcel of his *āiga* land for Teava and his wife.[20] Matetau's main intention in bringing a missionary was to learn about the religion. So, from this angle, Matetau likely understood Teava's residency as temporary, as the teacher and his wife were there to teach and await further instructions regarding

[16] John Williams, *A Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Sea Islands* (London: John Snow, 1837), 90.

[17] Moyle, *Samoan Journals*, 73.

[18] Williams, *A Narrative of Missionary Enterprise*, 90.

[19] Moyle, *Samoan Journals,* 107.

[20] Faulalo Kennar, "A History of the Apai Manono Congregational Christian Church Samoa 1830–1881" (BTh Thesis, Malua Theological College, 2019), 21.

what's next. Therefore, the terms of this gifted land were to be understood in the framework of *matū palapala*. The residency was temporary and a symbol of Matetau's hospitality.

When we consider the *faiā* of Samoans with their lands and titles, then the temporary bestowal of such gifts to a non-*suli* reflects the level of respect and honor *matai, āiga, fono,* and *nu'u* have granted to their honorary guest. Therefore, the temporality of such gifts does not diminish the honor and respect Samoans afford to the recipient. *Matū palapala* of lands and title reflect the prestige of the recipient from the viewpoint of the donor.

Land gifted as *matū palapala* are granted for very specific purposes, just as *āiga* and *nu'u* land are allocated by *matai* and *fono* for very specific purposes. This is an example of the land gifted remaining under the authority of *āiga* and *nu'u,* despite the authority vested in its new temporal 'owner.' Once this purpose is fulfilled or the recipient no longer needs this land, full authority reverts to the original owners.
Matū palapala granted the *āiga* and *nu'u* the flexibility to relocate honored guests as needed, recognizing that the site was not permanently alienated. The most important characteristic of *matū palapala* land is that, once the recipient dies or no longer needs the land for the purpose for which they originally acquired it, the gift reverts to the original owners. The missionaries and their property were divine and sacred guests of *āiga* and *nu'u,* but the land beneath their chapels, mission stations, and schools was a borrowed garment, *matū palapala.*

The Printing Press and the Power of Location

In 1839, the Printing Press of the LMS was established in Falelatai in Matamatanonofo where Malietoa's relative To'oā, who was at this time the paramount chief of A'ana – Tuimaleali'ifano - resided. Tuimaleali'ifano had allocated a parcel of land for the press and named it "Peretania" to commemorate the Britain of where the missionaries were from.[21] The missionary assigned to Falelatai to commence and operate the printing press was John Stair. He also overtook leadership of the station at Falelatai from the teachers and became "recognised as pastor of the church and congregation at Falelatai."[22] The LMS noted that Stair's relocation was "in consequence of the state of his health."[23] The press at Matamatanonofo was in a declining state at Stair's removal, and therefore, the LMS Samoa District Committee (SDC) also recommended the relocation of the printing press, which required a new facility and land:

> That owing to the dilapidated state of the printing office Br Hardie, Mills, and Stair be appointed a committee to make immediate arrangements for purchasing a piece of ground at Leulumoega or Nofoalii and for erecting thereon a good stone building upon the most economical plan consistent with strength and durability.[24]

Although the mission allocated funds to 'purchase' land, Stair bypassed this by leveraging his connection with Tuimaleali'ifano, the paramount chief of A'ana.. Stair gave Tuimaleali'ifano his request, and in 1842, Tuimaleali'ifano granted as *matū palapala*, a piece of his *āiga* land known as Nu'uausala in Leulumoega.[25] Stair also built

[21] David Mafua, "A History of CCCS Matautu Falelatai from 1830–1845" (BTh Thesis, Malua Theological College, 2020), 24. "Peretania" is the literal Samoan translation for "Britain."

[22] London Missionary Society*, The Report of the Directors to the Forty-Eighth General Meeting of the London Missionary Society* (London: W. M'Dowall, 1842), 49.

[23] London Missionary Society*, The Report of the Directors,* 49.

[24] London Missionary Society (LMS), "Samoa District Committee, Minutes of Meeting," August 10, 1843, *PMB* 95, National University of Samoa.

[25] Mafua, "A History of CCCS Matautu Falelatai," 26.

his dwelling here in 1842.[26]

By the 1840's, Samoans viewed books as a source of power, and therefore the printing press was the source and distributor of this power. Books were the source of the knowledge possessed by the missionaries and teachers. Therefore, the people correlated the location of the printing press with a location of power as well. Describing attitudes Samoans had about the location of the printing press, Stair wrote:

> During the deliberations of one of the districts of Upolu, as to whether they should join in the undertaking, one speaker made an amusing proposition. After saying that he did not see why the press should be stationary, and one land honored by continually sending out books to all the others, he proposed that instead of a house, a vessel should be built, to which the printing establishment should be removed, and the vessel proceed in rotation to all the districts in Samoa, and book be printed, at each place; thus, all cause for jealousy on this head would be removed.[27]

This attitude about the location of the printing press indicates that the Samoans correlated the printing press and books with status. The land at Matamatanonofo had the printing press, therefore elevating its already significant status in the eyes of Samoans. And now that it was in Leulumoega, the 'political center' of A'ana was now even more powerful as the possessor and distributor of knowledge. The spirit of 'inter-village competitiveness' is the root of the 'jealousy.' By this point, everyone had chapels. Now everyone wants a printing press, or some element of the LMS that would elevate the status of their *nu'u.* Such views, along with the proposal by some Samoans to house the printing press on a vessel, show that Samoans in the early mission period viewed the LMS facilities as geopolitical assets, serving to elevate the prestige of a host *nu'u.*

Clash of Frameworks: The Mission-Station Strategy vs. *Matū Palapala*

The vision for the 'mission-station strategy' was to create a sort of permanent settlement, symbolizing the breaking away of a people – that is, from a theological standpoint, to be set apart for God. By the 1840's, most *nu'u* had a *matai* and *āiga,* usually the first LMS Christian converts from this *nu'u*, who had gifted land for LMS chapels. The mission stations to which the missionaries were assigned upon their arrival already had space for the LMS, and on those allotted premises, the missionaries built their dwellings and school space. The missionaries' understanding was that houses and facilities built for the LMS purpose, even on land gifted by *matai* and *āiga* and/or *nu'u* and *fono,* were automatically the property of the mission:

> …It is further our opinion that the houses of our respective stations should be considered the property of the Society and not of any individual missionary as in the event of his connection with the Society being dissolved, the house and land, in connection with his station, might if sold, fall into the hands of parties opposed to our mission and our work. If however an extra allowance be made by the Directors for house building, it will not only free us from many difficulties but secure to the Society all the houses as mission property.[28]

The LMS had allocated funds for the building of mission houses, and in some instances, the missionaries built the dwellings at their own expense. It appears that funds were dispersed to missionaries for both the house and the land on which the property was built, but, as discussed in the first chapter, the Samoans had no prior experience with

[26] James Sibree, *A Register of Missionaries, Deputations, Etc. From 1796 to 1923* (London: London Missionary Society, 1923), 42.

[27] *Samoan Reporter*, March 1845, 3.

[28] LMS, "Samoa District Committee Minutes," June 12–13, 1846.

permanent alienation. Consequently, Samoans likely interpreted the missionaries' material goods as reciprocal tokens of gratitude for temporary use-rights, not as payments for permanent land alienation.[29] However, the missionaries' understanding of private property, land ownership, and land sales persisted. This fundamental misunderstanding exposed the early mission stations to immense danger. The LMS assumed their chapels and houses were immune to local politics, but within the framework of *matū palapala*, these structures remained inextricably bound to the sovereign authority (*pule*) of the host *nu'u*.

Holy Ground or Enemy Territory?

The explosion of civils wars in Samoa during the 1840s exemplified the geopolitical realities of *matū palapala.* During these wars, mission properties were not spared as Crawford noted. However, Samoans did not view their attacks on mission property as anti-Christian sentiments; rather, they were legitimate military tactics delivered as strikes against the *āiga* and *nu'u* that hosted the LMS.

In 1843, tensions between the *ītūmālō* of Palauli and Fa'asaleleaga – the governing *ītūmālō* including the *nu'u* of Sapapali'i and Lalomalava mentioned in the previous sections – culminated in November of 1843, when Safotulafai – the 'political center' of Fa'asaleleaga, declared war on the Falelua.[30]

The missionary Alexander Maconald, originally assigned to Safune Savai'i in 1837, was relocated to oversee the Palauli station in 1839.[31] A medical expert by trade, his skills were in 'great demand,' requiring him to be at the Palauli station for most of the year so that the missions could reach him when needed.[32] However, Macdonald still proved able to conduct teachings in his mission district, visiting the neighboring *nu'u* and building rapport with *matai* and *fono* on behalf of the LMS. In October of 1840, a church was formed in Palauli. His efforts in the outstation demonstrated that he prioritized relationship-building with the *matai.* His sensitivity to the polity's cultural authority made him a revered missionary in Palauli. Upon learning of Safotulafai's declaration of war on Palauli, the Falelua submitted to the request of Macdonald to flee from their *nu'u* and take refuge elsewhere. The respect for Macdonald's wishes reflects the rapport the missionary was able to build with the respective *fono's* of the Falelua. Although the Falelua's absence prevented human casualties, it also meant their land was defenseless and at the mercy of Safotulafai:

> *O le masina o Ianuari na oo ai le taua i le Falelua. A ua manuia le aoaiga a le latou faifeau o Misi Matono, ua usiusitai le Falelua, ua latou sola…Ona faaleagaina ai lea le fanua o Palauli ma Satupaitea…a e le i gata ai, ua toe sofaia ma le fale o Misi Matono, ua faatafunaina, ua faataugaina ana puaa ma upuvaleina ana tavini.*[33]

Translation:

> In January, the war began in Falelua. But the Reverend Maconald's teachings were successful, the Falelua obeyed him, and fled…Then the lands of Palauli and Satupaitea were destroyed…furthermore, Missionary Macdonald's dwelling was attacked, burned, his pigs were wasted, and his servants were harassed.[34]

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[29] Malama Meleisea and Penelope Schoeffel, "Land, Custom and History in Sāmoa," *The Journal of Samoan Studies,* no. 5 (2015): 23.

[30] *Samoan Reporter,* March 1845, 4. The "Falelua" – two houses - is a reference to the allyship of two *nu'u* – Palauli and Satupa'itea.

[31] Sibree, *A Register of Missionaries,* 36.

[32] London Missionary Society*, The Report of the Directors to the Forty-Ninth General Meeting of the London Missionary Society* (London: W. M'Dowall, 1843), 35.

[33] *O le Sulu Samoa: March 1844.*

[34] English translation provided by author.

Fa'asaleleaga had already established chapels and dwellings for the LMS on lands allocated by *matai* and *āiga.* By 1843, Fa'asaleleaga was a mission stronghold. However, their perception of the terms and conditions of their own lands gifted to the LMS is reflected in their destruction of the LMS facility in Palauli. From their lens, the land on which Macdonald was gifted by Palauli for residence was to be understood in the same sense as the lands on which the missionaries and teachers resided in their *nu'u* and *ītūmālō* – they were allocated for a temporary use. Therefore, the land in Palauli still belonged to its individual *matai* and *fono.* This perspective is evident in their destruction of the mission dwelling, just as it was for the case of Manono and the chapel at Leulumoega.

Similarly, tensions between A'ana and Manono were renewed in May of 1847, leading to an outbreak of violence instigated by Manono:

> On the 15th June Mr. Heath was informed by the Manono chiefs that they meant to attack Fasitoo next day, unless its people would meet and fight them at a specificed place west of Aana, and neutral ground. At that time the Fasitoo people; after consultation with the Missionaries and with Leulumoega the head quarters of Aana, had abandoned their settlement and taken away most of their moveable property, and this purposely to prevent bloodshed…and on the 23rd June, determined to arm and go to Fasitoo…The war party took what talo and other eatables they chose. They greatly damanged a large number of houses by cutting supports, fastenings &c, and committed other acts deemed in Samoa, very insulting.[35]

Among the destruction was the remains of the Leulumoega chapel. In 1848, the British Consul in Samoa, George Pritchard, along with Captain Worth from the British warship, issued a fine against the Manono war party.[36] However, the LMS SDC stood in opposition of this punishment. One of the reasons for this opposition is recorded in the minutes of the LMS SDC meeting of December 1848:

> …and secondly; because we believe that many of the natives did not distinctly understand that the chapel was mission property, and destroyed it under the impression that it belonged to Aana.[37]

The people of Manono, the responsible party for the damages done to the chapel, were all too familiar with land dedicated to the mission. Tuilaepa Matetau gifted *matū palapala* for a chapel and dwelling house to the LMS in Apai. And soon after, two other *matai* and *āiga* allocated land for chapels in neighboring sub-villages. Manono's interactions with the missions, especially with the LMS, show their familiarity with Christianity. Therefore, Manono also genuinely understood the concept of granting land to the LMS, as well as the purpose of the chapels and LMS facilities. What Leulumoega gifted for the LMS in Leulumoega, Manono gifted for the LMS in Manono. Considering this shared understanding, the destruction of the Leulumoega chapel was indeed intentional; it was a strategy in geopolitical warfare, and the missionaries' reasoning for disagreeing with the fine on Manono is valid. The Manono war party knew the facility was the place of worship and activities for the LMS, but they also knew that the land the facility occupied belonged to A'ana, which led to their conscious decision to destroy the facility. Manono granted their mission land in the spirit of *matū palapala*, they understood that the land was for the temporary use of the mission, but always under their authority. So, in the eyes of Manono, they did not destroy mission property; they destroyed A'ana property because the land is always subject to A'ana's authority. Manono's actions reflect their own understanding regarding the lands that their fellow

[35] *Samoan Reporter,* September 1847, 1.
[36] LMS, "Samoa District Committee Minutes," December 3–6, 1848.
[37] LMS, "Samoa District Committee Minutes," December 3–6, 1848.

matai and *āiga* granted to the mission. And that understanding is that the authority and ownership of the lands were not intended to transfer permanently to the LMS; they were allocated for temporal use. Therefore, the *pule* remained vested in the *matai* and *āiga,* or *fono* and *nu'u.* In the eyes of the Manono and Fa'asaleleaga, they were not destroying God's property; they were destroying a temporary garment that belonged to their political rivals.

Shifting Sacred Spaces: Temporality in Times of Peace

The conditional nature of *matū palapala* was evident not only during warfare but also during times of peace, as growing congregations actively relocated their sacred spaces in response to village politics and shifting needs. People from the *nu'u* of Iva, situated in Fa'asaleleaga, were among the earliest Samoan converts of the LMS mission. Within the first decade of the LMS mission in Samoa, John Williams departed with a group of Samoans in 1839 on what would be his last missionary journey. Among the Samoan men were two individuals from Iva named Mose and Filipo.[38] Considering that the allocation of land for LMS chapels occurred at the earliest stage of the mission, it is most probable that Iva also had a *matai* and an *āiga* who had allocated land for the same. However, before the turn of the century, Iva had been conducting worship in a *fale tele* on land allocated by descendants of the early converts. The land granted as *matū palapala* for the facility was situated on the border of two *āiga* lands:

> This part of the village is where two sections of land called Poutavai and Tuanofoaga meet…The land Poutavai belongs to the extended family of Sā Sevē…one of the tulafale or orators in Iva. Tuanofoaga…belongs to the Sā Avea, one of the branches of the Tofilau family.[39]

The situation of the original chapel at Iva is unique. The early converts who gifted land for chapels did so on land under the authority of a single *matai* and *āiga.* However, this is not the case for the worship space allocated to the LMS in Iva before the turn of the century. The facility occupying the land of two separate *matai* and *āiga* hints to a possibility of a *matai* Seve and Tofilau being the first Christian converts in Iva.[40] But it also has a relational meaning from a cultural standpoint. The facility's location on these two lands can also imply a commitment by both families to equally provide and serve the LMS. There is intentionality behind the gifting of this space to the mission; it is not a random apportionment.

The obvious alternative interpretation of the placement is that it is a matter of status. If both *āiga* were the early converts who wished to provide space for the LMS, then the LMS occupying one side over the other would show that one *āiga* was more committed to the LMS cause than the next. If the LMS facility were in one location, the owners of that land would be more closely associated with the mission. However, the location of the facility is most likely a sign of equal commitment to the cause, for the gifting of land by both respective *āiga* to host one facility points to the meaning that the Christian God now occupies both spaces simultaneously.

As the congregation grew, the need for a new facility became a priority for the parish at Iva, and after deliberation, it was decided that the new facility required a new location.[41] Leauanae Timani and Leauanae Amani, holders of the *matai* title Leauanae, offered a location on the premises of their *malae* and *tulaga maota* known as Faleloa in

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[38] Oka Fauolo, *O Vavega o le Alofa Lavea'i: O le Tala Faasolopito o le Ekalesia Faapotopotoga Kerisiano Samoa* (Apia: Malua Printing Press, 2005), 69.

[39] Vaega Magele, "A History of the Construction of the CCCS Church Building in Iva from 1905 – 1913" (BTh Thesis, Malua Theological College, 2017), 8.

[40] Magele, "A History of the Construction," 8.

[41] Magele, "A History of the Construction," 10.

1905.[42] The matai Leauanae has an important role in the institution of *nu'u* politics:

> The title is also referred to as the *ao* or head of all the *tulafale* or orators of Iva… Leauanae is also the one who represents the village to the Fono a le Itumalo or District Council at Safotulafai.[43]

Just as important as Leauanae's role in Iva is the status of Faleloa within the landscape of the *nu'u:*

> Traditionally, the *malaefono* is used when the whole village meets including the sub-village of Vaiafai.[44]

The move of the chapel from its original space to the land of Faleloa was approved by the Iva congregation. The shift resonates with the customs and practices of the *nu'u,* whose political norm was for the *fono to meet* regularly at Faleloa. By the time of this decision, the permanent alienation of Samoan land had been declared illegal, although cases involving the transfer of land ownership from deals made before 1879 were still being processed. The land of Tofilau and Seve, as well as the land at Faleloa, had been dedicated for one sole purpose, the erection of an LMS worship facility. And therefore, since the facility at Poutavai and Tuanofoaga was no longer needed for this purpose, the land reverted to its traditional owners. *Matū palapala* was now in effect at Faleloa. The voluntary offer by the Leauanae *matai* was made in the context of the discussion of a new church building. The assumption then is that the land gifted is strictly for that purpose. So, if the church is no longer of use, and the congregation in their deliberation decides another church is to be built on another land, then the conditions of the granting of Faleloa are to be interpreted as terminated.

The relocation of LMS chapels and residences throughout a particular *nu'u* was common practice, proving that even when there was no violent conflict, the land upon which LMS facilities stood was never viewed as the permanent property of the LMS. The moment the facility moved, the *matū palapala* was terminated.

Conclusion

From the outset of the LMS mission in Samoa, the need for land was evident, as the mission sought spaces for worship and residency. Responding to these needs, Samoans immediately offered the mission land to fulfil such requests. From the Samoan perspective, the reason for land-usage was clear, and therefore *matai* and *āiga* gifted parcels on their premises for the cause. The terms and conditions of the gifts were clear on the part of the Samoans and arguably the Tahitian teachers as well. Land belonged to *matai* and *āiga, nu'u* and *fono,* and these pieces had been granted for the temporal use of the mission, within the parameters of the desired reasons for this space. As the mission gained momentum, Samoans allocated and designated land for the erecting of chapels to mirror and practice what they had learned from Sapapali'i. As far as they were concerned, the lands they dedicated to the LMS were simply exclusive spaces where they could host the missionaries. However, with the arrival of the European missionaries in 1836, a different understanding of these properties emerged.

Although the white missionaries were allocated funds from the Directors for building dwellings and 'purchasing' land, these supposed 'exchanges' were incomprehensible to the Samoans, who had no prior exposure to the concept of land alienation. Samoans accepted whatever they were gifted under the notion that it was either a gift of gratitude for the land they were gifted, or an exchange for giving up parcels for temporary use.

[42] Magele, "A History of the Construction," 10.
[43] Magele, "A History of the Construction," 12.
[44] Magele, "A History of the Construction," 11.

The wars happening throughout the island suggested that Samoans never viewed lands granted to the mission as an official transfer of ownership. This was evident in their destruction of "mission property" during wars. Considering that in the 1840's onwards, every *nu'u* had an LMS chapel, the acts of war are evidence that Samoans did not view these exclusive spaces as the permanent properties of the mission. Missionaries, probably due to the lack of cultural understanding, maintained the position that these chapels and dwelling houses that they built, as well as the lands that they stood on, were properties of the LMS.

The inability of some of these missionaries to attain 'titles and deeds' for these lands are exceptions to the above point. Given the relationship between someone like Stair and the paramount *matai* Tuimaleali'ifano, it appears that a few missionaries understood the Samoan customary land framework from the outset. As the LMS adopted a more culturally sensitive strategy when it transitioned from the 'mission station' method to the 'village church' model, the shaping of the Samoan Church was coming into fruition. And at the same time, the practice of gifting *matū palapala* for specified purposes, such as building churches, continued well into the turn of the century.

The assumed truth, from the perspective of Samoans, is that land is inalienable. However, it can be granted for temporary use by others as a gift if the purpose of the use is specified. This is the reason why Samoans willingly gave their land – the proposed usage was clear, and in the case where it was no longer of use, it could be redistributed to fulfil any other necessary *āiga* or *nu'u* purposes. However, well into the 1900's, the LMS missionaries were not in a mutual understanding.

The church building in Paepaelauniu Fa'ala was removed to a land known as Fatufa'asaga belonging to a branch of the Laga'aia family in the 1980's when the CCCS Fa'ala parish decided the shift was necessary. Today, the church building and minister's residence have been removed from Fatufa'asaga and now occupy a different land under the customary authority of another branch of the Lagaaia title and their *āiga*, a shift made by the CCCS Fa'ala when descendants of the *āiga* at Fatufa'asaga requested their land back.[45] Perhaps one way of interpreting the descendants of Fatufa'asaga's request is that they have caused an inconvenience or reneged on the offer of their ancestors. However, such an interpretation does not leave room to celebrate the offer of the latter Lagaaia and his *āiga*, which shows that, in the context of Samoa, the Church will never be landless in *nu'u* so long as it has a loyal and faithful commitment from the people. Many lands gifted before 1889 eventually became 'freehold' Church assets, legally overriding their original temporary or permanent intentions. However, their history offers insight into the connection between Samoan ancestors and their lands, as well as their commitment to the Church. In the historical context of the LMS's first century in Samoa, the gifting of land speaks volumes about the people's love for God and the Gospel. A love that provided a temporal space for the Mission so that the Gospel can have a permanent place in Samoa.

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Characterisation and Dream-Visions: A Character Study of Paul in His Later Personal Dream-Vision Experiences in Acts

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Abstract

This article examines how Luke characterises Paul through the four dream-vision episodes in the latter part of Acts (18:9–11; 22:17–20; 23:11–17; 27:23–25). The term 'dream-vision' was coined by Hanson[1] *to compensate for "the difficulty, if not impossibility, of distinguishing between a dream or vision" in the work of Graeco-Roman and New Testament literature. While earlier studies have explored dreams and visions in Luke–Acts from historical, theological, or rhetorical angles, this study uses Cornelis Bennema's Theory of Character*[2] *to provide a focused literary analysis of Paul's responses to divine encounters. The article argues that these scenes function not merely as miraculous interventions but as moments of character formation and revelation.*[3] *Taken together, they portray a deeply human Paul who is at times hesitant or distressed, yet he is consistently encouraged, redirected, and made bold by divine assurance. The study highlights how Luke uses these visions narratively to construct Paul's character identity and guide the reader's understanding of his mission and relationship with the risen Lord.*

Key Words: Acts of the Apostles; Paul; dream-visions; characterisation; narrative critical approach; Cornelis Bennema.

Introduction

This article examines the apostle Paul's dream-vision experiences in the latter chapters of Acts, focusing on how Luke uses these encounters to shape and reveal Paul's character. Drawing on Cornelis Bennema's Theory of Character in New Testament narratives, the study offers a close analysis of each dream-vision episode to show how Paul's traits emerge through moments of divine-human interaction.

The four visions in Acts 18:9–11; 22:17–20; 23:11–17; and 27:23–25 are considered in narrative order, allowing the development of Paul's character to be seen across various contexts, discouragement, danger, reassurance, and crisis.

Methodology

This study employs a narrative-critical approach to the four dream-vision episodes involving Paul in the latter chapters of Acts (18:9–11; 22:17–20; 23:11–17; 27:23–25). The analysis is grounded in Cornelis Bennema's Theory of Character in New Testament narratives, which provides a structured framework for examining how characters are

[1] John S. Hanson, "Dreams and Visions in the Graeco-Roman World and Early Christianity," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, Band 23/2. Halbband *Religion (Vorkonstantinisches Christentum: Verhältnis zu römischem Staat und heidnischer Religion, Fortsetzung),* eds. Hildegard Temporini and Wolfgang Haase (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 1980), 1365-1401.

[2] Cornelis Bennema, *A Theory of Character in New Testament Narrative* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

[3] Character formation refers to the way Luke uses divine encounters to shape how readers perceive a character's development, revealing dispositions such as obedience, resistance, discernment, or transformation. Character revelation refers to what the scene discloses about the character's inner state or narrative role. In this sense, Paul's response to a dream or vision functions as a literary device within Luke's narrative, showing how the character is constructed and developed in the narrative of Acts, rather than serving merely as a record of miraculous intervention.

portrayed, developed, and evaluated within a narrative world. Bennema's notion that characters should be understood both "in the text" and "in context" is adapted here to focus primarily on the selected dream-vision events, using broader historical and cultural information only where necessary for interpretation. Each pericope is examined using Bennema's three-axis analysis, complexity, development, and penetration into the inner life,[4] to trace how Luke depicts Paul's character traits in response to divine encounters. Paul is then classified according to Bennema's characterisation continuum and evaluated in relation to the implied author's perspective and the wider missional direction of Acts.

The Lord Speaks with Paul at Corinth in Acts 18:9–11

Paul in the Context and Text of Acts 18:9–11

Paul in the Context before Acts 18:9–11

Corinth was a strategic location for Paul's mission, connecting mainland Greece and the Peloponnese. Luke, instead of portraying Paul with immediate spiritual authority, emphasises his humanity. Paul works alongside Aquila and Priscilla, Jewish tentmakers recently expelled from Rome. Their shared trade forms the basis of their partnership, highlighting Paul's practicality and humility. Luke shows Paul balancing manual labour during the week with synagogue debates each Sabbath, underscoring his resilience and commitment. By embedding Paul in daily life, Luke presents him as relatable and resourceful, setting the stage for the spiritual depth revealed in later encounters with the divine.

Before the vision in Acts 18:9–10, Paul faces Jewish opposition and revilement (18:5–7). He leaves the synagogue, shakes the dust from his clothes in protest, and declares, "Your blood be on your heads! I am innocent. From now on, I will go to the Gentiles" (18:6). This act, explained by Rogers as a curse reflecting inhospitality, is followed by a pointed verbal denunciation.[5] Pervo notes that this rebuke mirrors Jesus' own denunciations in the Gospel of Luke.[6] However, Dunn observes that Paul later continues to approach synagogues first (18:19; 19:8; 28:17, 23), demonstrating inconsistency between his words here and his actions later.[7] This tension highlights the importance of the dream-vision event, which reconstructs Paul's character in Acts 18:9–11.

Paul in Acts 18:9–11

Acts 18:9–10 records a pivotal dream-vision in which the Lord speaks to Paul. "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you…" The Greek phrase μή

[4] Bennema's three-axis model evaluates characters according to complexity (the range and nuance of traits they display), development (the degree to which they change over the course of the narrative), and penetration into the inner life (the extent to which the narrator reveals their thoughts, motivations, or emotions). I apply this framework to Paul's four dream-vision episodes in Acts to show how each scene contributes to his narrative construction: the visions increase his complexity by revealing multiple dimensions of his character, mark key moments of development in his transformation and mission, and provide rare access to his inner life through divine speech and narrator insight.

[5] Thomas J. Rogers, "Shaking the Dust Off the Markan Mission Discourse," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27, no. 2 (2004): 182-186

[6] Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, *Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 453.

[7] James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*. Reprint of the 1996 Epworth commentary ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2016), 242.

φοβοῦ (Do not be afraid)[8] suggests that Paul experienced fear or discouragement when considering the encouragement not to remain silent and to continue speaking. It is an implicit acknowledgment of his human vulnerability. Although Luke does not narrate Paul's emotional state directly, the divine reassurance suggests a moment of inner struggle, likely stemming from repeated opposition and rejection in Corinth (Acts 18:6). Paul's previous gesture of shaking out his garments (ἐκτινάξας τὰ ἱμάτια) in v.6 is a prophetic act. Still, it also reflects emotional frustration and the sense of personal failure. Luke uses this moment of divine intervention to convey theological encouragement and develop Paul's character as someone vulnerable to fear and weariness. The command μή σιωπήσῃς (do not be silent) emphasises that what Paul says in v.6 (Your blood be on your own heads!... From now on I will go to the Gentiles) leads him to now contemplate withdrawal from preaching openly to the Jews, a natural human reaction to hostility.[9]

In verse 10, God's assurance, "for I am with you" (ἐγώ εἰμι μετά σοῦ), echoes divine promises throughout Scripture (Isa. 41:10; Jer. 1:8; Mt. 28:20), linking Paul's experience to a wider biblical tradition of divine presence in times of fear. The Lord adds, "no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people" (πολύς ἐστιν μοι λαός ἐν τῇ πόλει ταύτῃ). The dream-vision reassures Paul and realigns his perspective, emphasising unseen spiritual realities and divine purpose in Corinth. Luke thus portrays Paul as a character in need of reassurance, whose continued ministry is made possible not by personal resilience alone but by divine affirmation. This scene contrasts Paul's visible boldness with his internal struggle, showing his strength derived from God's sustaining presence. Scholars such as Keener and Witherington note that Luke integrates divine encounters with psychological realism, making Paul relatable while modelling faithful perseverance. The passage demonstrates how Luke's narrative theology incorporates both divine agency and human emotion, portraying Paul as a man of mission who nonetheless requires and receives encouragement to persevere.

In Acts 18:11, Luke portrays Paul as obedient to the Lord's command given in the dream-vision in 18:9–10. This obedience is emphasised by the unusual detail that Paul remained in Corinth for 18 months, the most clearly recorded length of stay in one location during his missionary journeys up to this point.[10] Luke uses this note on the duration of Paul's stay to highlight Paul's trust in the divine assurance he received, especially in a context where the mission was expected to encounter opposition. Earlier in Acts, Paul often left cities due to hostility, such as in Antioch of Pisidia (13:50–51), Iconium (14:4–7), Thessalonica (17:5–10), and Berea (17:13–15). In each case, Jewish opposition prompted him to move on. However, in Corinth, although he faced resistance again (Acts 18:6), the apostle is not reported to have left immediately; instead, Paul is said to have stayed for 18 months. Highlighting that the vision of the Lord gave him courage and clarity about his mission, affirming the presence of "many people" in the city who belonged to God. Luke thus shows growth in the dimensions of Paul's character. Paul was once driven from city to city and now stands firm, grounded by divine reassurance. His extended stay in Corinth demonstrates obedience and the spiritual maturity and stability that Luke emphasises in Paul's development.

Acts 18:6 reports that the Jews opposed and reviled (βλασφημέω) Paul. The Western text (D and h) begins with πολλου δε λογου γινομενου και γραφων διερμηνευομενων (And after there had been much discussion, and interpretations of the

[8] Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament: With Reference to Tense and Mood*, vol. 1, *Studies in Biblical Greek* (New York: P. Lang, 1989), 354. See also Rodney A. Whitacre, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, *Eerdmans Language Resources* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2021), 277-78.

[9] 1 Cor. 2:3, ἐν ἀσθενείᾳ καί ἐν φόβῳ καὶ ἐν τρόμῳ πολλῷ (in weakness and in fear and much trembling)

[10] Josep Rius-Camps and Jenny Read-Heimerdinger, *The Message of Acts in Codex Bezae: A Comparison with the Alexandrian Tradition*, ed. Mark Goodacre, vol. 3, *JSNT Sup*, vol. 257 (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 378-79.

scriptures had been given), adding weight to the opposition of Jews to Paul's witness to Jesus in 18:5. Although one early Greek papyrus 74 omits βλασφημέω, Barrett explains that it may refer to speaking evil against Paul; still, blit may also refer to blasphemy against Jesus, given the context. Considering Jewish opposition in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1–9), Beroea (17:10–15) and the tentative audience in Athens (17:32), these previous experiences of Paul add to the reader's understanding of Paul's response to the Jewish opposition in the synagogue in Corinth. Naturally, as a human character, there can be frustration on the apostle's part. The command from the Lord is "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent" (18:9). The Lord speaks to Paul's character concerning what he is to do, despite his feelings about his current situation and the opposing Jews.

In contrast, Koet argues that the function of the dream in 18:9–10 is to inform the reader that the accusations against Paul later in 18:12–13 are false. Additionally, Luke has already portrayed Paul as a significant figure. In 18:9–10, Luke shows that Paul uses biblical language and symbolic actions, such as shaking the dust from his garments, to reinforce his authority. Koet's view overlooks the humanness of Paul's character and undervalues the relationship between the human apostle and the Lord. When the reader focuses on Paul as a human character in communication with the divine (the Lord), it becomes clear that Luke presents an obedient Paul who obeys the Lord through his eighteen-month stay in Corinth.

Paul in the Context After Acts 18:9–11

As noted, Luke reports that Paul remained in Corinth for eighteen months after the vision event in Acts 18:9–10 and Paul's obedient response in verse 11. This extended period marks one of Paul's longest stays at a single location during his missionary journeys. The period between the vision and the events in 18:12–17 is significant because it sets the stage for fulfilling the Lord's promise of protection. In 18:10, the Lord assures Paul, "No one will attack you to harm you," and this promise is demonstrated when opposition arises again. The Jews bring Paul before Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, accusing him of persuading people to worship God unlawfully. However, Gallio refuses to intervene in what he sees as a religious dispute, dismissing the case and driving the Jews from the tribunal. This legal decision spares Paul from physical harm or punishment, illustrating the Lord's earlier assurance. Paul is not only protected but also validated in his continued mission. Luke reinforces the theme of divine faithfulness by highlighting this outcome after the vision and the eighteen-month ministry. He demonstrates that Paul's obedience is accompanied by God's active involvement in shaping and securing his mission in Corinth.

Analysis and Significance of Paul in Acts 18:9–11

In Acts 18, Luke presents Paul as both bold and vulnerable. His act of shaking out his garments (18:6) fits within Jewish prophetic tradition, symbolising resolve and emotional strain resulting from repeated opposition. While Paul's gesture communicates theological intent and frustration, it also reveals his humanity, marked by weariness and the risk of alienating those he seeks to persuade. The visionary episode in 18:9–10 further exposes Paul's inner fears, which are addressed by divine reassurance. God's command to keep speaking reorients Paul from rejection back to mission, showing his character as courageous yet dependent on God's guidance. Paul's decision to remain in Corinth (18:11) signals spiritual responsiveness and maturity, shaped by openness to divine initiative. Through these events, Luke strikes a balance between admiration and realism, portraying Paul as passionate, emotionally invested, and receptive to encouragement. The interplay of human vulnerability and divine reassurance establishes Paul as a developing, exemplary missionary, strengthened by his relationship with the risen Lord, and whose enduring obedience advances the Gospel beyond Jerusalem.

Paul's Account of an Earlier Vision of Jesus in Acts 22:17–20

Paul in the Context and Text of Acts 22:17–20

Paul in the Context Before Acts 22:17–20

This vision of Paul in the temple is part of a defence speech addressing an angry Jerusalem crowd who have beaten him with the intent to put him to death (Acts 21:27–40). Given a chance to speak, Paul recounts to the crowd his divine revelations, which altered the course of his life. He identifies with his Jewish audience as a zealous Jew, recounting the journey to Damascus and a particular experience with the Lord in the temple. He reports a trance (ἔκστασις)[11] he experienced in the temple after his divine encounter on the way to Damascus, recounted in Acts 9:1–19. The narrative in Acts 9 does not mention Paul's earlier vision, so the reader learns of this divine experience for the first time in Acts 22. This discrepancy in the narrative order is a traditional literary device that reveals how the writer arranges events to focus the plot. Gérard Genette refers to this discrepancy as an "anachrony". Tannehill and Dunn agree that Luke's intention to reveal Paul's earlier vision here has a powerful, dramatic effect on the narrative event at present. Although the reader can recall the familiar events of Acts 9 when Paul meets Jesus, the reader and the crowd in Acts 22:17–20 learn about a new encounter between Paul and Jesus. From his words, Paul reveals that he spoke with the resurrected Jesus Christ in the temple after returning to Jerusalem.

Paul in Acts 22:17–20

In Paul's report of an earlier dream-vision experience, recorded in Acts 22:17–21, the Lord Jesus commands him to leave Jerusalem because the Jews will not accept his testimony about Christ. However, Paul recounts that he protested this divine instruction, revealing an important aspect of his character. Rather than immediately obeying, Paul questions the Lord's decision, appealing to his personal history and knowledge of the Jewish people. This response, found in Acts 22:19–20, provides insight into Paul's early character and his strong sense of mission to his own people.

While Paul's protest might appear to be disobedience at first glance, it is better understood as a human reaction in the early stages of his relationship with Christ. The Lord's command, marked by the urgency of the imperatives σπεύσον (hurry) and ἔξελθε (leave), is met with hesitation. Luke's portrayal of Paul here reflects a complex, relatable character whose growth in obedience unfolds throughout the Acts narrative. In this perspective, the apostle Paul's protest in Acts 22 reflects the same human vulnerability seen in earlier vision accounts involving Ananias and Peter in Acts 9:13–14 and 10:14–16. In each case, the protests underscore the fundamental human concerns of God's chosen instruments.

Nevertheless, the divine will ultimately prevail in every instance.

For Paul, his resistance to the dream vision (22:19–20) does not result in disobedience. Instead, it offers a retrospective glimpse into his development as a servant of Christ. Paul recounts the vision in his speech, which serves both as a theological reflection and a rhetorical defence. By highlighting his former zeal and sincerity, Paul reaffirms his credibility before his Jewish audience. Thus, Luke presents a consistent

[11] Walter Bauer, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 4th edn., ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 274. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, vol. 5, *Sacra Pagina Series* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 390. The same term is used once in Luke's Gospel (5:26) and four times in Acts (3:10, 10:10, 11:5, 22:17). The retelling of a dream-vision experience here by Paul is like that of Peter's retelling of his 10:10 trance later in 11:5.

theme: while God's servants may hesitate or question, their faith is confirmed through submission to divine direction. Paul's response is part of this pattern of human-divine encounters in Acts.

According to Read-Heimerdinger, Paul's objection shows the difficulty of carrying out Jesus' will for the apostle and accepting that Jerusalem was no longer the goal of spiritual activity. That is, Paul's retelling of his visionary encounter is a heartfelt and regretful appeal to persuade the angry Jewish crowd.[12] It paints a picture of a character who believes he should have listened to Jesus and stayed away from Jerusalem. According to Tannehill, Paul is not retelling a regretful decision but rather expressing a hope for understanding from a familiar crowd.

The present crowd, whom he addresses as "ἀδελφοί καί πατέρες" (brothers and fathers) in Acts 22:1, are familiar with Paul's past as a persecutor of those who believed in Jesus.[13] The story of Paul the persecutor is replayed with the roles reversed, and Paul's first ministry in Jerusalem is replayed with the roles unchanged. That is, Paul hopes that by reminding the crowd of his former identity as a zealous Jewish persecutor, they might recognise the sincerity of his transformation and be persuaded by it. By openly recounting how he once objected to Jesus in a vision, Paul reinforces the authenticity of the Gospel he now proclaims, a message that includes Gentiles and is grounded in a divine encounter in the temple. The Gospel of Jesus as the Messiah that "does not conflict with Israel's calling but, in fact, is rooted in Israel's history and experience of God". Therefore, instead of a regretful character, the reader may imagine a bold character, a prisoner declaring reasonably with confidence the will of God through what he has heard from Jesus.

Paul remains undeterred by the hatred of the Jewish crowd, displaying no fear of a possible death sentence. His attention is solely on sharing his encounter with the resurrected Christ, underscoring its transformative power in his life. Note the lack of care shown by Luke, the narrator, and Paul, regarding the immediate charge of defiling the temple. To fully comprehend Paul's beliefs and reasoning, it is essential to carefully analyse his response and its relation to his faith in God. Tannehill rightly points out that "the tension [is] between Jewish origins and loyalties, on the one hand, and a mission in the Gentile world, on the other". Therefore, Paul's account of protesting against the Lord's instructions suggests his loyalty as a Jew in the past and the Lord's requirement for a mission beyond Jerusalem, which he did not ignore.

The accusation of defiling the temple is based on the belief that Paul is now an outsider to the Jewish in-group identity. That is, Paul's association with the Way associates him with the Gentiles, and thus, he has lost his way as a Jew. Therefore, the Jewish in-group identity, including all Jews who uphold the laws of the temple, with the influence of the Jews from Asia who followed Paul, moved together to punish him outside the temple. "In their eyes, he is a trespasser on the Jewish law and a threat to Jewish identity". Through Park's view, we can see that in appealing to Paul's Jewish identity and Paul's initial persecution of the Christ-believers, both Luke and Paul do not avoid the accusation of defiling the temple; instead, they address it at its root.

Paul's objection in Acts 22 draws upon his past identity as a zealous Jew, particularly his active role in persecuting followers of Jesus. His words in verse 19, "I was imprisoning and beating" (ἤμην φυλακίζων καὶ δέρων), indicate not just isolated incidents but a repeated and habitual pattern of aggression against Christians. Likewise, in verse 20, the phrases "approving and guarding" (συνευδοκῶν καὶ φυλάσσων) further emphasise his continued involvement, particularly in the case of Stephen's martyrdom. These verb forms suggest ongoing, repeated actions rather than one-time events, portraying Paul as consistently hostile toward the early church. By highlighting these

[12] Jenny Read-Heimerdinger, *Luke's Characters in Their Jewish World: Being Theophilus*, *The Library of New Testament Studies* (London: T&T Clark, 2024), 180.

[13] Stanley E. Porter, *Paul in Acts*, *Library of Pauline Studies* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 153-54.

repeated behaviours, Paul presents his former self as someone deeply entrenched in opposition to the gospel, thereby magnifying the significance of his transformation. This contrast between past and present strengthens the credibility of his testimony by demonstrating a radical change brought about by divine intervention.

The description of Paul's persecution of Christians in 22:19–20 is more emphasised than in Acts 9. The apostle's negative position identifies him with those he addresses. A clear demonstration is in the phrase in 22:3, 'just as all of you are today' (καθὼς πάντες ὑμεῖς ἐστε σήμερον·). The apostle demonstrates that this position contradicts the Lord's will and presents himself as an example. The Lord rebukes him and tells him to go and include nations far away (beyond Jerusalem). In this view, instead of saving himself by proving he did not take Gentiles into the temple, the apostle seizes the opportunity to share the good news with his audience. He presents the opportunity for the crowd, who share his Jewish identity, to become like him in obedience to the Lord, and to realise that "Jesus' identity, as witnessed by Stephen, is Israel's crucified, risen, and exalted Messiah and Saviour", who desires the Gentiles to be included.

Paul in The Context after Acts 22:17–20

Although Paul is now a prisoner, the following events record the Lord's reinforced instruction, sending Paul far away (ἔθνη) to nations and eventually to Rome. The apostle's account of the dream-vision was interrupted when he mentioned the Gentiles. The angry crowd demands that Paul be killed, but the tribune takes him away to be flogged and questioned about the commotion. We find in the narrative that Paul is neither put to death by the Jews nor beaten by the Roman authorities (Acts 21:27–22:27). In all the chaos and drama, the Jewish crowd, the tribune and soldiers get to hear Paul's witness of the living Jesus Christ appearing to him and speaking with him concerning the inclusion of the Gentiles. Whether Paul's audience accepts the message about Jesus or not, it has been brought to their attention.

Analysis and Significance of Paul in Acts 22:17–20

In Acts 22:17–20, Luke presents Paul as a reflective and developing character whose awareness of his past shapes his defence before a hostile audience. By recalling a vision, Paul contrasts his former persecution of believers with his present commitment to Christ, demonstrating a radical transformation. His dialogue with the risen Lord reveals a deep relationship, and his appeal to his past clarifies his present vocation. This vision invites readers into Paul's inner world, showing how past revelation informs his obedience and sustains his resilience.

Luke's depiction of Paul emphasises his changed identity and commitment to the Gospel. Despite past opposition, Paul now addresses the Jewish crowd with confidence, urging them to reconsider Jesus and the inclusion of Gentiles. His retelling of the vision strengthens his conviction and clarifies his mission, portraying him as a faithful servant whose perseverance advances the Gospel's expansion beyond Jerusalem.

The Lord Stood Near Paul to Encourage Him in Acts 23:11–17

Paul in the Context and Text of Acts 23:11–17

Paul in the Context Before Acts 23:11–17

Before the dream-vision in Acts 23:11–17, Paul endures several intense episodes of persecution. In Acts 21:27–22:22, he is dragged out of the temple by a hostile crowd intent on killing him. The Roman tribune intervenes in time, rescues Paul, and takes him into custody to protect him. While in custody, Paul is permitted to address the angry mob, but his speech only stirs up further outrage. His attempt to reason with the crowd fails, and their disapproval of him intensifies, prompting the tribune to bring him into the barracks for his safety.

The next day, as described in Acts 23:1–10, Paul stands before the Jewish council and faces further hostility. After he boldly declares that he has lived with a clear conscience before God, the high priest Ananias orders that Paul be struck in the mouth. Tensions escalate when Paul, recognising the division between the Pharisees and Sadducees in the council, calls attention to their theological differences. Paul's comment sparks a heated dispute, once again placing Paul's life in danger. After these repeated and distressing confrontations, the risen Lord Jesus appears to Paul in a dream-vision. In this private and decisive moment, Jesus offers comfort and encouragement, assuring Paul of his continued mission and future witness in Rome.

Paul in Acts 23:11–17

Amid Paul's ongoing trials in Jerusalem and his life being in danger, the Lord reveals himself to the apostle in prison to encourage him (Acts 23:11). The Jews' hostility reaches new heights. They seek to assassinate Paul (Acts 23:12–15). When the narrative reveals the Jews' intention, it also presents a simple act of Paul in 23:17 that gives a glimpse into the apostles' character during this ordeal. Luke does not tell the reader of Paul's immediate response to the vision of Jesus. Instead, the narrator shows Paul's courage and confidence in the following event, particularly in verse 17. The encouraging dream-vision helps the reader reconstruct Paul's character, given the previous hostile treatment and often life-threatening situations.[14] The influence of the vision on Paul's character is revealed when the reader encounters a very confident Paul in v. 17.

In 23:17, Paul calls (προσκαλέω) or summons the centurion; he does not request or ask but demands the centurion as if in a position of power.[15] Miller rightly contrasts Paul's request to speak in 21:37 with his command in 23:17 for the centurion to take (ἀπάγω in the imperative) the young man to the tribune. Johnson writes, "He [Paul] 'summons' the centurion and sends him on an errand."[16] The textual issue surrounding the Greek verb in Acts 23:17, whether it should read the aorist imperative ἀπάγαγε (lead [him] away) in papyrus 74 A C E Ψ or the simpler imperative form ἄπαγε (take [him] away) found in ℵ B 81, has drawn scholarly attention.[17] As a prisoner who has suffered some cruelty and threatening accusations to the point of death, Paul's confidence and courage are evident in the way he gives an order to a centurion. Luke shows a character in Paul that remains hopeful and confident that the Lord is with him and will protect him for the task ahead, especially following a direct personal experience with the Lord. His act in 23:17 highlights his belief that, despite the faint possibility and the confined

[14] John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: The Acts of the Apostles 14–28*, trans. John W. Fraser, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, vol. 7 of *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1966), 255–56. Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 693.

[15] The term is used ten times in Acts and four in Luke's Gospel, often by one who has the authority or is superior to the one who is called (Luke 7:18; 15:26; 16:5; 18:16; Acts 2:39; 5:40; 6:2; 13:2; 13:7; 16:10; 23:17; 23:23)

[16] Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, *Hermeneia*, 582.

[17] Pervo, 582. C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles: Introduction and Commentary on Acts XV–XXVIII*, vol. 2 of *International Critical*

present situation, his path will somehow lead him to bear witness to the living Christ in Rome.[18] Paul's confidence reflects the Lord's declaration in the encouraging dream-vision.

Before the dream-vision in Acts 23:11, Paul's defence focused on proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah for both Jews and Gentiles (22:17–21). In Acts 22, Paul recounts his dramatic conversion and divine commission to preach to the Gentiles (Acts 22:6–21). This bold testimony provokes outrage, especially when he claims that God sent him to the Gentiles (Acts 22:21). The Lord's words in the vision, "Just as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome" (Acts 23:11), confirm the legitimacy of Paul's witness. The Greek phrase ὡς γὰρ διεμαρτύρω τὰ περὶ ἐμοῦ εἰς Ἰερουσαλήμ (23:11) highlights that Paul's speeches were not merely defences, but faithful testimonies to the risen Christ. This divine reassurance affirms Paul's mission and points him toward Rome, indicating that his work in Jerusalem, though met with resistance, was part of God's plan. Paul is not to be discouraged by opposition, for his mission is far from over. Notably, after his brief instruction in Acts 23:17, Paul's following extended speech is found in Acts 24:10–21, where he defends himself before Governor Felix. There, too, he proclaims the resurrection, the central truth of the Gospel.

Paul in the Context After Acts 23:11–17

Paul narrowly escapes a Jewish plot against his life when his command to the centurion alerts the tribune (23:18–22). As a prisoner facing death threats, Paul is escorted safely by a large Roman guard and brought before Governor Felix in Caesarea (22:23–35). Throughout his trials (23:10–21), Paul continues to present Jesus as the Messiah within Judaism, aligning with the "Way." As Trebilco notes, Paul worships the ancestral God in a new manner—through Christ. His message spreads not just among the Jews but also to political leaders, including governors Felix and Festus, and King Agrippa. Though imprisoned for about two years (Acts 24:26–27), Paul enjoys some freedom and care from friends (24:23). Festus tells Agrippa that Paul's charges concern religious disputes and "a certain Jesus, who had died, but whom Paul asserted to be alive" (25:19).

Paul's testimony about Jesus' resurrection continues, as he appeals to Agrippa to believe (26:1–27). When Agrippa asks if Paul is trying to convert him quickly, Paul responds that he hopes all present will become as he is—apart from his chains (26:28–29). Agrippa remarks to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to the emperor" (26:32). Paul's character and boldness are shaped by the vision in Acts 23:11–17, where the Lord assures him that he will also testify in Rome. This divine encouragement strengthens his resolve, enabling him to proclaim Christ before various authorities, even as a prisoner. Paul's unwavering faith and obedience, despite his chains, reflect his trust in God's promise and his ongoing mission as a chosen witness on his way to Rome.

Analysis and Significance of Paul in Acts 23:11–17

Acts 23:11–17, though lacking a direct verbal response from Paul to the Lord's encouragement, reveals his resilient trust and courage through action. Despite abuse, imprisonment, and threats, Paul's confidence is grounded in his relationship with the risen Jesus. Luke presents him not as a passive prisoner but as one with inner authority, instructing a centurion and continuing to testify about Jesus. This divine assurance shapes his strength, rather than external circumstance. The vision's impact is clear as Paul's conduct in subsequent trials displays composure, confidence, and purposeful action. His dual identity as a Jew and a Roman citizen, and his unwavering loyalty to

Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, eds. J. A. Emerton, C. E. B. Cranfield, and G. N. Stanton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 1075.

[18] Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: The Acts of the Apostles 14-18*, 256-57.

"the Way," highlight his complex character. The narrator frames Paul's witness as aligned with God's plan, and his imprisonment is recast as part of a larger divine mission. Paul embodies the steadfastness of believers, his actions propelled by the Lord's assurance, and his resilience advances the Gospel narrative.

An Angel of God Assures Paul on the Shipwreck in Acts 27:23–25

Paul in the Context and Text of Acts 27:23–25

Paul in the Context Before Acts 27:23–25

The conflict between Paul and Jewish leaders led to Paul speaking about Jesus' resurrection before Governor Felix (Acts 24:10), Festus, who succeeded Felix (Acts 24:27), and King Agrippa (Acts 26). Through these tribunal appearances, Paul appeals to the emperor's tribunal and sails by sea as a prisoner to Italy. This voyage faces a violent storm (27:14,18) that leaves all aboard the ship in a state of hopelessness and despair (27:20). A setting in which Paul offers hope through his speech and reveals the source of that hope in a vision God personally showed him the night before. The personal divine revelations experienced by Paul do not surprise the reader as they have become a familiar feature of the narrative of Acts concerning the apostle's character.

Paul in Acts 27:23–25

The last vision report in Acts is during Paul's journey as a prisoner to Italy. In 27:23–25, the apostle recounts his divine experience from the previous night. The reader learns of this vision from Paul's words, as he reports that an angel of God stood by him at night. The angel's instructions to Paul in 27:24 include the phrase, Καίσαρί σε δεῖ παραστῆναι, translated "you must stand before the emperor." The main clause δεῖ emphasises the necessity of the angel's instruction. Cosgrove notes that the Greek term δεῖ, which conveys the idea of fate, is used by Luke to reflect a deep conviction that God governs the world's events.[19] Cosgrove underlines that Luke's use of δεῖ points to God's plan, as spelled out in the OT prophecies, which continues in the New Testament through Jesus and later with the apostles, such as Paul, as they follow divine assurance and intervention. This phrase not only encourages Paul and confirms his assignment to stand before the emperor, but also gives an assurance that God will see His plan through. On this view, Luke presents Paul as a man whose path is laid out by God. In return, the apostle Paul shows characteristics of one who trusts and has faith in the promise provided by the angel's instructions. This task includes ensuring the safety of all those travelling with him. Paul's thoughts about the vision are revealed to the reader through his words to those on board.

Amid hopelessness and despair, the apostle Paul declares his faith in the God he serves. Drawing courage from the Lord Himself in Corinth (18:8–10) and more recently in Jerusalem while facing Jewish opposition (23:11), it is unsurprising that Paul shows remarkable courage, gained through a vision when everyone else on the ship is in fear. The helpless and fearful state of all those present calls for hope from anyone, even a prisoner. So when Paul says εὐθυμέω, meaning cheer up, keep up one's courage, in the imperative (27:25), he commands them not to be afraid. Although Haenchen paints an image of a chained prisoner who cannot speak at will, Schnabel accurately highlights Paul's audience as those battered by the storm. In such a dire situation, where all are equally in danger of losing their lives at sea, being either free of chains or a prisoner matters as all have an equal right to speak. His audience's reaction is unclear, but they

[19] Peter-Ben Smit, "Questioning Divine Δεί: On Allowing Texts Not to Say Everything," *Novum Testamentum* 61, no. 1 (2019), 40-54.

likely did not believe Paul as the sailors attempted to escape (27:29–30). Despite the lack of clarity in presenting others' thoughts, the speech shows the reader precisely Paul's inner thoughts and attributes.

In Paul's own words, he declares his faith that God will keep his word (27:25). Calvin writes that "Paul learnt from the Holy Spirit something that no human mind could have comprehended as yet". The difference between the encouraged apostle and his helplessly fearful audience is not the chains but the God they serve, to whom Paul gives credit for the promised safety of all aboard. Luke emphasises the apostle's faithfulness to God. Paul's multiple dream-vision experiences have built up a character who can say, "I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told" (27:25).

Paul in the Context After Acts 27:23–25

Following the apostle's speech, we see signs of hope in the sailors' discovery of shallower water. However, the sailors had ill intentions to abandon the ship, leaving the prisoners, the Roman tribune, and the soldiers behind. Paul intervenes by reminding the centurion and soldiers of the angel's promise in his vision, which requires the sailors to remain on the ship.[20] Despite being a prisoner, the reader can hardly ignore Paul's influence on the decisions and course of the journey.[21] He will continue to play a leading role in the survival of all aboard the ship. He encourages all of them to eat, giving thanks to his God and breaking bread (27:33–36). He also becomes the reason for the centurion to keep the soldiers from killing the prisoners (27:42–43). At the end of the troubled voyage, all were spared and safe on land.

Analysis and Significance of Paul in Acts 27:23–25

In Acts 27, Paul is depicted as a prisoner whose courage and spiritual authority stand out amidst crisis. Despite his low social status, Paul's unwavering confidence—rooted in a divine vision—enables him to reassure his fellow passengers of their survival, commanding them to "take courage." His decisive actions, such as breaking bread and giving thanks, reflect his trust in God's promise and evoke sacred tradition, reinforcing hope amid danger. Even amid moments of doubt, Paul's steadfast faith and leadership guide the group through adversity.

The narrative presents Paul's dream-vision entirely through his own words, initially inviting questions about its reliability. Yet, Luke validates Paul's testimony by narrating the exact fulfilment of his prediction: everyone survives the shipwreck, confirming Paul as a trustworthy, divinely guided leader. This outcome affirms Paul's importance in the Acts mission, showing him as a stabilising force shaped by dependence on divine guidance. Ultimately, Paul's actions and the fulfilment of the vision highlight his role as a faithful instrument through whom God's saving purpose is accomplished, despite opposition and imprisonment.

Conclusion

The dream-visions in the latter part of Acts are presented as deeply personal experiences of the apostle Paul. This study has examined these events within their narrative contexts,

[20] Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 354. Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke–Acts: A Literary Interpretation, Volume 2: The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 333–34.

[21] Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: The Acts of the Apostles 14-28*, 293-96.

exploring how Luke characterises Paul as the human recipient of these divine encounters. By tracing Paul's responses before, during, and after each dream-vision, we have sought to understand how Luke reconstructs Paul's character for the reader and how these portrayals illuminate the function of divine communication in Acts. Using a characterisation method that moves from exegesis to analysis, classification, and evaluation, we showed how Luke presents Paul in ways that deepen the reader's understanding of these human-divine interactions.

Overall, Paul's dream-visions in the later chapters of Acts reveal deeply personal moments that profoundly shape his character and actions. Through these encounters, Luke portrays Paul as a relatable human being, capable of frustration, fear, and discouragement, yet continually redirected, strengthened, and sustained through divine communication. These visions foster self-awareness, selflessness, courage, and steadfastness, even in the most vulnerable circumstances. In these later divine experiences in Acts narrative, Paul embodies what it means to live in a personal relationship with the resurrected Jesus. His character illustrates how divine guidance can shape a human life, providing assurance and purpose amid opposition, imprisonment, and uncertainty.

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From Theodicy to Resilience: Reframing Suffering as a Site of Innovation

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Abstract

This paper investigates the theme of suffering and the origins of theodicy through a dialogical engagement between the Hebrew Bible and Samoan proverbial wisdom. Framed by the Samoan proverb e tetele a pesega ae matua i le oo ("though there is much singing, it will eventually fade"), it asks: how does the interplay between biblical laments and Samoan wisdom deepen theological and cultural understandings of suffering and resilience? The study examines Job, Jeremiah, selected Psalms, and Ezekiel 18, highlighting how these texts confront innocent suffering, reconfigure retribution, and portray divine pathos – God's willingness to suffer with humanity. In conversation with Samoan cultural expressions, these perspectives reveal adversity as a source of both lament and creativity, protest and renewal. The paper argues that both traditions resist reductive explanations and instead sustain a dynamic tension between lament and hope. In this space, resilience emerges not as mere recovery but as a transformative process grounded in relationality, faith, and communal endurance.[1]

Key Words: theodicy, lament, Pacific theology, resilience, hermeneutics.

1. A Samoan Hermeneutic of Impermanence

The Samoan proverb *e tetele a pesega ae matua i le oo* ("although there is much singing, it will gradually fade")[2] captures with poetic clarity the fragility and impermanence of human life. It evokes the image of celebration and vitality that, no matter how vibrant, must inevitably give way to silence.[3] This insight resonates deeply within the broader fabric of Samoan proverbial wisdom, where the rhythms of nature serve as a mirror for human existence. Sayings such as *a mavae timuga e fotuai mai laofie* (after rain, the skies clear) and *a mavae afā e fotuai mai maninoa* (after a storm comes peace) reflect an acute awareness of life's cyclical patterns—times of hardship followed by moments of restoration. Such Samoan proverbs function as indigenous hermeneutics. They are not merely observations of the natural world but are deeply theological reflections. They offer a lens through which life's uncertainties are interpreted and endured.

In this understanding, human existence is understood as dynamic rather than static, shaped continuously by forces beyond one's control.[4] Just as the weather shifts between storm and calm, so too do the experiences of individuals and communities oscillate between joy and sorrow, stability and disruption. This perception challenges any notion of permanence or absolute security, instead emphasizing contingency and adaptability as defining features of life. In this sense, Samoan wisdom aligns closely

[1] This paper was originally presented at the 10th NUS Measina Conference on October 31, 2025. The theme of the Conference was *E tetele a pesega ae matua i le oo: Resilience and Innovation in times of Adversity.*

[2] This proverb is relatively well known in Samoan culture, though not as widely cited as sayings such as *o le ala i le pule o le tautua.* It is occasionally quoted in public speech and sermons, and is taught in some educational and theological contexts, including schools and church settings in Samoa.

[3] For detailed version of this saying, See *Samoa Ne'i Galo (Samoa, Lest we Forget): A Compilation of Oral Traditions and Legends of Samoa* Vol 4, (Apia: The Ministry for Youth, Sports and Cultural Affairs Samoa, 2002), 17-22.

[4] See Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of Old Testament Themes* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 200-204.

with the reflections of the biblical wisdom tradition, particularly in Ecclesiastes, where the Teacher proclaims:

> "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven" (Eccl 3:1).

Here, the rhythms of time and change are not viewed as chaotic but as ordered within a larger, divinely permitted structure, even if that structure often eludes human comprehension.[5]

The convergence of these traditions (Samoan and biblical) reveals a shared epistemological humility. This is an acknowledgment of the limits of human control and the transient nature of all created things.[6] Nothing is fixed. Nothing remains untouched by time. Yet this recognition does not lead to despair. Rather, it opens a space for hope grounded in the very cycles that underscore impermanence. If storms pass and songs fade, they also give way to renewal, clarity, and new expressions of life. The fading of one moment becomes the condition for the emergence of another.

Thus, within both Samoan proverbial thought and biblical wisdom, impermanence is not merely a source of anxiety but also a theological invitation. It calls individuals and communities to live attentively within the present moment, to endure suffering with patience, and to anticipate restoration with quiet confidence. In this way, the transient nature of life is reframed—not as a negation of meaning, but as the very context in which meaning, resilience, and hope are continually rediscovered.

This shared insight provides the framework for this paper's argument. If life is inherently unstable, how then should suffering be understood – not only theologically, but also within contemporary Samoan experience?

2. Suffering in Contemporary Samoa: Context and Complexity

Moving from proverb to lived reality, suffering in contemporary Samoa must be approached as both visible and hidden. At one visible level, Samoa has experienced increasing political division, particularly in the lead-up to and aftermath of the latest electoral processes towards the end of 2025. Communities, families, and even diasporic Samoan groups have found themselves aligned with competing political loyalties, sometimes resulting in strained relationships and fractured communal harmony. While such tensions may subside after formal political resolutions, this raises a deeper question: does the fading of conflict necessarily equate to genuine resilience? If, as mentioned in the introductory section suggests, life's disturbances resemble passing storms, then the clearing skies do not always erase the damage left behind. Hence, the above-mentioned Samoan proverb reminds us that the song may fade, but its emotional resonance often lingers.

Resilience, therefore, must be understood in a more profound sense than mere recovery or return to normalcy. It is not simply the disappearance of adversity, but the capacity to endure and remain standing even when wounded. In this light, resilience is a form of moral and spiritual perseverance; to continue hoping when the "song grows faint;" to sustain life amid uncertainty; and to carry forward despite internal and external fractures. Such a definition aligns closely with both Samoan cultural sensibilities and the biblical wisdom tradition, where endurance is often forged in the crucible of suffering rather than in its absence. Yet, to reduce contemporary adversity to political division alone would be insufficient for the purpose of this paper. Beneath the surface of public discourse lies a more pervasive and often less visible struggle: mental illness

[5] Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 124–30. See also Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith*, 201.

[6] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the world* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

(particularly in the wake of the Covid 19 pandemic).[7]

Mental health challenges have increasingly become a pressing concern not only globally but also within contemporary Samoa. These struggles may not always manifest in overt social conflict, yet they penetrate deeply into the lives of individuals and families. Anxiety, depression, trauma, and other forms of psychological distress disrupt the harmony of the self and strain communal relationships. In a Samoan culture where identity is profoundly relational, such internal suffering can be particularly isolating. Spencer Leuta refers to resilience as something born out of hardship, where poverty in the village of Paia pushes people (especially women) to work hard and endure.[8] However, the closest Hebrew word for resilience is *yāṣab* (יָצַב) meaning "to stand" or "to withstand", which equivalent to the idea of resisting.[9] Here, the language of resilience becomes even more complex. What does it mean to "stand" when one's inner world feels unstable? What does hope look like when clarity is obscured by mental and emotional turmoil? Grasping the deeper meaning of the abovementioned proverb offers a profound insight for those experiencing mental distress. While the proverb traditionally highlights the unseen strength of the *oo* (core or essence), it also invites a deeper reflection: that the *oo* may be invisible, just as inner suffering is often hidden from public view. In this sense, the proverb speaks powerfully to mental health, where pain is not always outwardly expressed yet deeply felt within. At the same time, it points to an inner source of resilience and healing – an internal *oo* that, though unseen, sustains the person amid struggle. Thus, what is visible is not only the wound, but also the strength that endures and restores.

Within this context, Samoan responses to adversity are deeply rooted in the concept of *aiga* (family) and the wider network of communal belonging. Support is often found not in individual autonomy but in relational interdependence – through shared burdens, collective care, and the reaffirmation of identity within the community.[10] Prayer, patience, and faith remain central practices, reflecting a theological orientation that situates suffering within a broader horizon of divine presence and purpose. Yet, these resources must continually be re-examined and strengthened to address the complexities of contemporary challenges such as mental illness, where silence or stigma can sometimes hinder healing.

It is here that the proverb e *tetele a pesega ae matua i le oo* offers a compelling hermeneutical lens through which theology's cultural condition comes into focus. Interpreted theologically, *tetele a pesega* may signify the overwhelming abundance of struggles that characterize human life, while *matua i le oo* gestures toward the eventual movement toward rest, resolution, or even transformation. This interpretive lens resonates with the explorations of suffering found in Ecclesiastes and the broader wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible, where questions of meaning, divine justice, and human limitation are held in tension.[11] Themes such as lament, retribution, theodicy, and

7. For instance, see Mahfuzul Islam et al., "The Mental health impact of COVID-19 pandemic in Dhaka," *Academia* (2021): 1-8; Steward Mudenda, "Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and its psychological impact on Bachelor of Pharmacy Students at the University of Zambia," *Academia* (April 2021): 1-8.

8. Spencer Leuta, "The Paia Woman's Voice Weakens: A Samoan Reading of Ruth's Resilience" (BD Thesis, Malua Theological College, 2024). Here, Spencer describes the practice of *anapogi* (fasting) that reflects discipline, self-denial, prayer and a search for deeper meaning.

9. Stephen D. Renn, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (USA: Henrickson, 2014), 814.

10. Malama Meleisea, *The Making of Modern Samoa: Traditional Authority and Colonial Administration in the Modern History of Western Samoa* (Suva, Fiji: USP, 1987), 76. The communal aspect of *aiga* was also mentioned by Graham Paulson and Mark Brett in the context of Aboriginal people Australia. See "Five Smooth Stones: Reading the Bible through the Aboriginal eyes," (paper presented at the workshop in Whitley College: MCD University of Divinity, 2012): 199-214 (200).

11. Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 86-87.

divine compassion emerge not as abstract doctrines but as lived realities that echo the Samoan experience

Thus, the connection between the first and second reflections becomes clear: the cyclical, impermanent nature of life—so vividly expressed in both Samoan proverbs and biblical wisdom—provides not only a description of reality but also a framework for enduring it. Adversity, whether political, social, or psychological, is part of the "many songs" that fill human existence. Yet, within this multiplicity of struggles lies the enduring hope that they will not have the final word. The fading of the song does not signify defeat, but the possibility of renewal—of a quieter, deeper harmony that emerges through resilience, communal care, and faith. This interpretive lens invites dialogue with the Hebrew Bible, where suffering is similarly explored through lived experience rather than abstract theory.

3. Resilience in Biblical Laments

The Hebrew Bible does not ignore adversity and suffering; rather, it preserves a rich and multivocal witness to the depth and complexity of human pain.[12] Nowhere is this more evident than in its poetic and prophetic traditions, where lament emerges as a central mode of theological expression.[13] In contrast to narrative or legal materials, which often seek coherence and order, poetic texts create space for ambiguity, tension, and emotional intensity. Within books such as Psalms, Job, Lamentations, and the prophetic writings associated with Jeremiah, suffering is not explained away but voiced, wrestled with, and brought into direct dialogue with God.[14] These texts resonate profoundly with the Samoan insight articulated earlier: that life is marked by instability, and yet within that instability there remains the possibility of hope. Just as *e tetele a pesega ae matua i le oo* acknowledges both the abundance of struggle and the eventual fading of distress, so too biblical lament holds together anguish and expectation, protest and trust.

Scholars such as Claus Westermann have demonstrated, the majority of laments in the Psalter are not confessions of personal sin but protests against perceived injustice, suffering, and divine absence. This is a crucial theological point. The sufferer is not necessarily guilty, and the act of lament is not an admission of wrongdoing but an appeal to God's character and covenantal faithfulness. In this sense, lament becomes an act of relational boldness. The psalmist speaks not about God, but to God[15] – sometimes with reverence, but often with urgency, frustration, and even accusation.[16]

A classic example is Psalm 13, which form critics have identified as containing four key elements: address, lament, petition, and praise. The psalm begins with an anguished invocation:

1. Addressing God (vs 1):

"How long, O Lord (עד אנה יהוה)[17]*? Will you forget me forever* (נצח)*?" How long* (עד אנה) *will you hide your face from me?*

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[12] See Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 32-36.

[13] From my own observation, poetic books such as Job, Psalms and some Prophetic books, lament becomes a central mode of theological engagement. See also Walter Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks* (Grand Rapids; Mich.; Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans, 2014): 89-128.

[14] Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 175–177.

[15] In comparison to Samoan society, a direct criticism to authority figures such as *matai* or *faifeau*, is generally mediated through culturally appropriate forms of communication, including respectful oratory. Open confrontation is typically avoided in order to preserve the *vā tapu* (sacred space). However, it does not mean that concern or even critique cannot be expressed.

[16] Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 52–54.

[17] עד אנה – lit. 'until where'?

This repeated question "How long?" (עד אנה) captures the temporal dimension of suffering. The pain is not only intense; it is prolonged, seemingly without end.

> **2. Lament (vs 2):**
> *How long* (עד אנה) *must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart* (יגון בלבבי) *all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me* (ירום איבי עלי?)

Here, the lament deepens where the psalmist describes inner turmoil and external threat: sorrow fills the heart (יגון בלבבי) and enemies appear to triumph (ירום).

> **3. Petition: (vss 3-4)**
> *Consider and answer me. O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, 4 and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed"; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.*

The psalmist pleads for divine intervention.

> **4. Praise: (vss 5-6)**
> *But I trusted in your steadfast love* (חסד); *my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. 6 I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me.*

The psalm concludes with a surprising turn to trust and praise even amid hardship: "But I trusted in your steadfast love (חסד)." This movement from despair to confidence does not deny the reality of suffering; rather, it situates that suffering within a relationship that still holds.

A similar pattern appears in Psalm 64, though with some variation in order:

> **1. Addressing God (vs 1a):**
> *Hear my voice, O God, in my complaint;*
>
> **2. Petition (vss 1b, 2)**
> *Preserve my life from the dread enemy. 2 Hide me from the secret plots of the wicked, from the scheming of evildoers,*
>
> **3. Lament/Complaint (vss 3-6)**
> *who whet their tongues like swords* (שנני כחרב לשונם), *who aim bitter words like arrows* (חצם דבר מר), *4 shooting from ambush at the blameless; they shoot suddenly and without fear. 5 they hold fast to their evil purpose; they talk of laying snares secretly, thinking, 'Who can see us? 6 Who can search out our crimes? We have thought out a cunningly conceived plot.' For the human heart and mind are deep.*
>
> **4. Praise (vss 7-10)**
> *But God will shoot his arrow at them; they will be wounded suddenly. 8 Because of their tongue he will bring them to ruin; all who see them will shake with honour….*

Analysis

Psalm 64 begins with an address, "Hear my voice, O God", and quickly moves into petition, asking for protection from hidden enemies. The lament section vividly portrays the malicious actions of the wicked, whose words are likened to sharpened weapons (שנני כחרב לשונם). Yet, as in Psalm 13, the psalm concludes with a confident affirmation that God will act: the enemies will be brought to ruin, and the righteous will rejoice.

This structure is not merely literary; it is theological. It reflects a disciplined way

of bringing suffering before God, refusing both silent despair and empty optimism.[18] The lament gives full voice to pain, while the conclusion gestures toward hope grounded in God's justice. This pattern can also be observed in other individual laments such as Psalm 22, which begins with the well-known cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Here, the sense of divine abandonment is stark and unambiguous. The psalmist feels surrounded by enemies, mocked, and physically weakened. Yet even within this profound desolation, there are moments of remembered trust—recollections of God's past faithfulness to Israel. The psalm ultimately moves toward praise, envisioning a future in which God's deliverance will be proclaimed to the community. The oscillation between despair and hope reflects the lived reality of faith under pressure: it is neither static nor simplistic, but dynamic and heavy-laden.

More Examples

Moreover, communal laments expand this theological horizon. In texts such as Psalm 44, the community collectively cries out to God, questioning why they suffer despite their apparent faithfulness:

> "All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten you" (Ps 44:17).

Here again, the doctrine of retribution is challenged. Suffering is not easily explained as punishment for sin; instead, it becomes a mystery that demands engagement with God. Similarly, Psalm 74 laments the destruction of the sanctuary, pleading for God to remember the covenant and act on behalf of the people.[19] These communal voices underscore that suffering is not only individual but also corporate—affecting entire communities, much like the political and social tensions described in contemporary Samoa.

a. Lamentations

The book of Lamentations offers perhaps the most sustained and unfiltered expression of communal grief in the Hebrew Bible. Written in the aftermath of Jerusalem's destruction in 587 BCE, it gives voice to a people devastated by loss of land, temple, identity, and hope. In Lamentations 3, the speaker declares, "I am the one who has seen affliction," recounting experiences of suffering in vivid and painful detail. Yet even here, in the midst of overwhelming despair, there is a moment of theological affirmation:

> "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases" (Lam 3: 22).

This tension between deep anguish and fragile hope, captures the essence of lament. It is not a resolution of suffering, but a refusal to let suffering have the final word.[20]

b. Job

The book of Job pushes this protest even further. Unlike the psalmists, who often move toward praise, Job remains entrenched in his struggle for much of the narrative. He rejects the simplistic explanations offered by his friends, who insist that suffering must be the result of sin. Instead, Job insists on his innocence and demands an audience with God.[21] Job declares,

> "I will speak in the bitterness of my soul… let me know why you contend

[18.] Marie-Christine Vilmain Osco, "The Liturgy of the Hours: Praying the Psalms and Confessing the Faith," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (2015): 307-317.

[19.] See Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 15-16; See also Vilmain Osco, "The Liturgy of the Hours," 317.

[20.] Elizabeth Boase, "Multiple Layers: Insights into the Development of a Trauma Drama in Lamentations and Jeremiah," *ABR* 70 (2022): 1-17 (7-8).

[21.] See David A. Lambert, "The Book of Job in Ritual Perspective," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no. 3 (2015): 557-575.

against me " (Job 10:1-2).

This is not a rejection of God, but a radical engagement with God. Job's lament exposes the inadequacy of retributive theology and insists on the complexity of divine-human interaction. His protest is, paradoxically, an expression of faith—a refusal to abandon the relationship, even when it is strained to its limits.[22]

c. Jeremiah

The laments of Jeremiah intensify this dynamic even further. As a prophet called to proclaim judgment, Jeremiah experiences profound personal suffering—rejection, isolation, and internal conflict.[23] In passages such as Jeremiah 15:16–18 and 20:7–9, he oscillates between devotion and despair. He accuses God of deception, laments his own calling, and expresses a desire to withdraw from his prophetic task. Unlike many psalms, Jeremiah's laments often end without resolution, leaving the tension unresolved. As noted by scholars like Jack R. Lundbom, Jeremiah embodies the intersection of divine message and human pain, reflecting both the anguish of the people and the burden of God's word.[24]

Historically, Jeremiah's situation was exacerbated by the delay in the fulfillment of his prophecies. Beginning his ministry around 627 BCE, he proclaimed impending judgment for decades without visible realization. This delay led to public skepticism and mockery, as reflected in Jeremiah 17:15: "Where is the word of the LORD? Let it come." According to the law set in Deuteronomy 18:22, a prophet whose words do not come to pass may be deemed false. Thus, Jeremiah not only suffered personally, but also faced a crisis of credibility. Yet his laments persist; not as signs of weak faith, but as profound acts of faithfulness in the face of doubt.[25]

On a similar note, Walter Brueggemann and Westermann argue that lament is the language of those who still believe that God listens.[26] To cry out is to remain in relationship; to question is to trust that there is one who hears and may respond.[27] In this sense, lament challenges any theology that suppresses pain or demands premature resolution. It resists the temptation to move too quickly to praise without first passing through the depths of suffering. This insight brings us back to the Samoan proverb that frames this discussion. If *tetele a pesega* represents the many and varied experiences of suffering – political, communal, psychological, and spiritual – then biblical lament gives voice to those "many songs" in all their complexity. At the same time, *matua i le oo* resonates with the movement toward trust, hope, and eventual renewal found in many of these texts. Yet, as Jeremiah and Job remind us, this resolution is not always immediate or complete. Sometimes the song lingers in a minor key, unresolved and haunting. And yet, it is still sung.

Thus, both the Samoan cultural imagination and the Hebrew Bible affirm that

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[22.] John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 56–65.

[23.] Most scholars refer to Jeremiah as a classic prophet of judgement around 586 BCE. See for example M.J. Jong, "Why Jeremiah is Not Among the Prophets: An Analysis of the Terms and in the Book of Jeremiah," *JSOT* 35, no. 4 (2011): 483-510.

[24.] Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 106-110.

[25.] Jack Lundbom describes this in detail. See Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, 689–702.

[26.] Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*; Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*.

[27.] Seforosa Carroll, "Changing Perspectives on Faith and Climate Change in Oceania," in *Restoring identities: The Contextualizing story of Christianity in Oceania* 6, eds. U. Vaai and M. Lamport, (Suva: Pacific Theological College, 2023): 221-234. Here, Carroll describes how the colonial/mission encounter affected local theodicy.

suffering is neither denied nor simplified. It is named, expressed, and brought into relationship with God. In doing so, lament becomes not only a response to adversity but also a mode of resilience: a way of standing, even when wounded; of hoping, even when the song grows faint.

4. The Doctrine of Retribution

The biblical world often interpreted suffering through the lens of the so-called doctrine of retribution, a theological framework most clearly articulated in Deuteronomy. Within this Deuteronomistic vision, covenant faithfulness leads to blessing, while disobedience results in curse (Deut 28).[28] This moral logic was not merely theoretical but it also shaped Israel's identity, ethics, and communal expectations. To enter into a state of *oo* (peace, rest, and well-being), Israel was called to live in fidelity to the covenant. Such a worldview assumes a stable moral universe governed by divine justice, where actions produce predictable outcomes. The book of Proverbs consistently reflects this assumption:

> "The righteousness of the blameless keeps their ways straight" (Prov 11:5).

But the wicked are portrayed as inevitably ensnared by their own wrongdoing (Prov 26:27). Similarly, Psalms 1 contrasts the flourishing of the righteous - likened to a tree planted by streams of water – with the chaff-like instability of the wicked, who are destined to perish. Psalm 145:18–20 reinforces this conviction by portraying God as near to the righteous and actively opposed to evildoers. These texts together articulate a coherent theological vision: a divinely ordered world in which justice is both immediate and observable.

This retributive logic also undergirds the historical narratives shaped by Deuteronomistic theology. In books such as Joshua, Judges, and Kings, Israel's fortunes rise and fall in direct correlation with their obedience or disobedience. The cyclical pattern in Judges—sin, punishment, repentance, and deliverance—embodies this principle vividly. Likewise, the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE is interpreted in Kings as the inevitable consequence of covenantal unfaithfulness.[29] In this sense, retribution theology provides not only moral guidance but also a framework for interpreting history itself.

Yet, as both lived experience and later biblical reflection reveal, life often contradicts this seemingly neat formula. The wisdom and prophetic traditions begin to expose cracks within this theological system, raising questions that cannot easily be resolved within a strict retributive paradigm. As widely accepted by biblical scholars, the book of Job offers the most sustained critique. While Job's friends, particularly Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, defend the traditional doctrine, insisting that suffering must be the result of sin (cf. Job 4:7–8; 8:3–6), Job himself rejects this logic. He maintains his innocence and challenges the assumption that divine justice operates in a straightforward, cause-and-effect manner. Job 18:8–10, for instance, affirms a moral order in which the wicked are ensnared by their own traps, yet Job's own undeserved suffering exposes the inadequacy of such generalizations. His experience becomes a counterexample that destabilizes the entire system.

A similar tension emerges in Ecclesiastes, where the teacher/Qoheleth observes the apparent randomness and injustice of life:

> "There are righteous people who perish in their righteousness, and there are

[28] Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 320–30.

[29] Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy,* 325.

wicked people who prolong their life in their evildoing" (Eccl 7:15).

This observation is not an isolated remark but part of a broader critique of predictable moral order. In Ecclesiastes 8:14, Qoheleth again laments that the righteous receive what the wicked deserve, and vice versa. Such reflections challenge the expectation that divine justice is always visible or immediate, suggesting instead that the world is marked by ambiguity and unpredictability—echoing the earlier discussion of life's impermanence in both Samoan and biblical thought.

The prophetic tradition intensifies this critique, particularly in the laments of Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 12:1, the prophet directly confronts God: "Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?" This question strikes at the heart of retribution theology, exposing its limitations in the face of lived experience. Jeremiah's own life embodies this paradox. Despite his faithfulness to God's calling, he endures rejection, persecution, and deep personal anguish (Jer 15:16–18; 20:7–18). His suffering cannot be explained as punishment for wrongdoing; rather, it arises precisely because of his obedience. In this way, Jeremiah's laments reveal a profound tension between divine justice and human experience, a tension that remains unresolved.

Other prophetic voices echo this concern. In Habakkuk 1:13, the prophet questions how a holy God can tolerate wrongdoing: "Why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?" Similarly, Malachi 3:14–15 records the complaints of the people who perceive no benefit in serving God, observing instead that evildoers prosper and escape judgment. These texts collectively testify to a growing awareness that the moral order assumed by retribution theology does not always align with reality.

Even within the legal traditions, there are hints of complexity. While Deuteronomy emphasizes collective responsibility and covenantal consequences, other texts such as Ezekiel 18 challenge simplistic notions of inherited guilt, insisting that individuals are accountable for their own actions. This development suggests an ongoing theological reflection within the biblical tradition itself—a willingness to revisit and refine earlier assumptions in light of new experiences.

Thus, while the doctrine of retribution remains a foundational element of biblical theology, it is neither absolute nor uncontested. The Hebrew Bible preserves a dynamic sides between affirmation and critique, order and ambiguity, certainty and doubt. This internal tension reflects the complexity of human life, where suffering cannot always be neatly explained or justified. In light of the earlier Samoan proverb, one might say that retribution theology attempts to give structure to the "many songs" of life, but the reality of suffering often disrupts that harmony, introducing dissonance and unresolved chords.

Yet this disruption is not the end of the story. Just as lament transforms suffering into dialogue with God, so the questioning of retribution opens space for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of divine justice—one that acknowledges mystery, embraces tension, and ultimately sustains hope even when the moral order appears uncertain.

5. The Question of Theodicy

The recurring question: "Why do the wicked prosper while the innocent suffer?", marks my starting point for the theological discourse on theodicy. The term theodicy (from Greek *theos* [God] and *dikē* [justice] denotes the attempt to justify God's justice in the face of innocent suffering. Within the Hebrew Bible, this struggle emerges vividly in the laments of the Psalms mentioned above (e.g., Ps 13:1–2): "How long, O Lord?". Here, voices articulate the tension between trust and protest, holding together faith and anguish in a dynamic relationship rather than resolving it too quickly. This tension is not merely rhetorical but existential, arising from lived experiences of injustice that seem to contradict the covenantal promises of God's faithfulness.[30] Jeremiah pushes this even

[30.] Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 12–25.

further: "Why does the way of the wicked prosper?" (Jer 12:1). His willingness to bring a lawsuit against God reflects a paradoxical faith – one that acknowledges God's righteousness (*ṣaddîq*) even while questioning its manifestation in history. This bold form of address suggests that protest itself is an act of faith, not its negation. Unlike many psalms of lament that move toward resolution and renewed trust, Jeremiah 20:14–18 concludes in despair, underscoring the unresolved tension between divine justice and human suffering.[31]

A similar depth of struggle is evident in the book of Job (as mentioned earlier), where the righteous sufferer resists simplistic explanations rooted in retributive justice. Job's friends defend a moral order in which suffering must correspond to sin, yet Job's experience contradicts this framework. The divine response does not offer a direct answer but instead reorients the discourse toward the mystery of God's governance of creation. Together, these texts demonstrate that the Hebrew Bible does not silence the problem of theodicy but preserves it as an enduring theological tension, inviting ongoing reflection rather than easy resolution

6. Human and Divine *Pathos*

A distinctive contribution of the Hebrew Bible is its portrayal of divine pathos—God's capacity for emotion and relational engagement.[32] That means the biblical tradition does not present a detached, impassible deity. Rather, Israel's Scriptures portray YHWH as profoundly engaged in the suffering of God's people. Exodus 3:7–8 depicts a God who hears, sees, and "comes down" in response to Israel's oppression, suggesting not only awareness but active participation in human distress. Similarly, Judges 10:10–16 highlights divine compassion even within a Deuteronomistic framework of judgment, where God's response to Israel's repentance is marked by a deep emotional turning: "his soul was grieved for the misery of Israel." This theology of divine pathos—God's capacity for compassion, grief, and responsiveness—stands in contrast to Hellenistic notions of divine impassibility where the divine is often conceived as unaffected by human affairs.[33]

The prophetic literature further intensifies this portrayal. In Hosea 11, God's internal struggle is expressed in profoundly human terms: "My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender" (Hos 11:8). Here, divine judgment is not executed without cost; it is wrestled with, revealing a God whose justice is intertwined with mercy. Such texts challenge any rigid understanding of divine transcendence by presenting God as one who is both sovereign and vulnerable within the covenant relationship.

Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* (1967) and later *The Crucified God* (1974) further develop this trajectory, affirming that God suffers with humanity, most fully revealed in the cross of Christ.[34] For Moltmann, the crucifixion is not merely an event in human history but an event within the life of God, where divine love is expressed through suffering solidarity. Walter Brueggemann likewise emphasizes the tension in Israel's witness between divine sovereignty (self-assertion) and divine fidelity (self-abandonment), with God's compassion often overriding mechanistic systems of reward and punishment.[35] This dynamic portrays God not as bound by rigid structures but as relationally free, responding to human situations with mercy and faithfulness.

[31.] Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 63–65.

[32.] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 289–91.

[33.] Heschel, *The Prophets,* 289-91.

[34.] Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1967); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1974).

[35.] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 229-231.

Thus, lament itself becomes a profound act of faith. Israel's willingness to argue with God reflects trust in a covenantal relationship in which God can be addressed, questioned, and even challenged. Faith is expressed not only in obedience but also in protest, not only in praise but also in lament. In this way, divine pathos not only reveals who God is but also shapes how the faithful relate to God—honestly, vulnerably, and persistently.

7. Rewriting Retribution: Prophetic and Post-Exilic Insights

The crisis of suffering compelled Israel's theologians to revise earlier convictions about divine justice. Josiah's death (2 Kgs 23:29; 2 Chr 35:20–24) and the Babylonian exile raised unsettling questions: How could such a righteous king fall, and why did Judah still suffer after generations of reform? These events destabilised the Deuteronomistic expectation that obedience leads to blessing and disobedience to punishment. Chronicles reinterpreted these events, shifting responsibility from earlier kings like Manasseh to the final generation of Judah, thereby preserving divine justice while reassigning culpability within a more immediate historical framework.[36] This interpretive move reflects an attempt to uphold the integrity of God's righteousness without denying the reality of historical catastrophe.

Likewise, Ezekiel 18 rejected the adage that children must suffer for the sins of their parents: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge". Instead, each person is accountable for their own actions (18:1–4). This radical theological development placed responsibility on each generation, moving away from collective punishment toward individual accountability. The emphasis on personal responsibility not only redefined justice but also opened the possibility for repentance and transformation within each individual life.

Such reinterpretations reveal Israel's capacity for theological resilience. Rather than abandoning faith in the face of contradiction, Israel re-narrated its experience, integrating suffering into a renewed vision of God's justice. These post-exilic reflections demonstrate that theology within the Hebrew Bible is not static but dynamic, continually engaging new realities while seeking to remain faithful to the character of God.

Conclusion

The Samoan proverb *e tetele a pesega ae matua i le oo* resonates deeply with the biblical struggle to interpret suffering in the midst of life's uncertainties. Both Samoan traditions and the biblical witness affirm that adversity, while inevitable, is not the final word. Rather, suffering becomes a space in which meaning is contested, reinterpreted, and ultimately transformed. In both traditions, the human response to suffering is not passive resignation but active engagement marked by resilience, innovation, and hope.

The Hebrew Bible, in particular, resists any simplistic formulation of retribution theology. Through its diverse voices—lament psalms, prophetic voice, and wisdom literature—it preserves a theological discourse that is honest about the complexities of human suffering. The cries of "How long, O Lord?" and the bold challenges of figures such as Job and Jeremiah demonstrate that faith does not eliminate tension but rather sustains it within a covenantal relationship. Moreover, the biblical portrayal of a God of pathos, deeply involved in the suffering of humanity, disrupts abstract notions of divine justice and invites a more relational and dynamic understanding of God's character.

In dialogue with these biblical traditions, the Samoan proverb offers a compelling hermeneutical lens. It affirms that while the "songs" of life may falter in the face of adversity, the deeper reality of endurance, *matua i le oo* emerges as a sustaining force.

[36.] Sara Japhet, *I-II Chronicles: A Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 318-320.

This insight aligns with the biblical movement from lament to hope, from disorientation to reorientation, without denying the reality of pain. The proverb thus enriches theological reflection by grounding it in lived experience and communal wisdom.

The task of theology, therefore, is not to resolve the tension of suffering through abstract answers, but to faithfully inhabit it. It is to hold together lament and hope, protest and trust, acknowledging that the mystery of suffering remains. In doing so, theology becomes an act of resilience itself. That is bearing witness to a God whose justice is not always immediately visible, yet whose faithfulness sustains life beyond suffering.

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