

Jacob encounters Job, on the streets of Manila

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Reading out of place

Reading can heal, mend and repair -- as in the Hebrew word *tikkun* -- it also involves crossing boundaries, of texts and of contexts, which can result in the dislocation of readers, texts and contexts. This paper too is an exercise in reading across boundaries, including the expectations of what contextual reading is about.

First, I read across boundaries in the sense that I am a layperson when it comes to reading visual art. I am neither trained in nor a student of art history or art criticism. And I am almost a virgin when it comes to smearing paint on canvas, for I have *once* had that privilege. So in focusing on some of the artworks by Emmanuel Garibay (who has given me permission to use images of his work) in this paper, I am crossing disciplinary boundaries, in other words, I read out of context and out of place. So be warned, this paper is an attempt by a reader of literary texts to read visual art.

Second, by focusing on the works of a Filipino artist whose homeland I have visited only *once*, I am guilty of reading through the colonizing gaze of a tourist. I do not pretend to know a whole lot about the streets of Manila, or of any city for that matter, nor do I assume that Garibay represents all which are worth seeing in and from the underside of Manila. I use “streets of Manila” in the title



for my paper because many of Garibay's paintings put the reader in the back of a jeepney (which I have ridden more than once!). The jeepney is a form of transport that is a step up from walking or taking the bus. It is poor people's means of getting around and across town. To appreciate Garibay's artworks, it seems to me, the reader needs to be in movement, to be on the streets, with other people, of the streets, especially the poor; in other words, one needs to be out of place (which I distinguish from being outside).

On both issues raised above, I am, and so I read, out of place. This paper is therefore a boundaries-crossing contextual reading, a reading out of place. I do not read in order to determine what is right or wrong about a text, whether with words or with paint, nor do I read in order to locate a text in a context or to adapt what is out of place. Rather, I read in order to celebrate that which is out of place.

Being out of place, I argue, is inherent to the biblical subjects on whom I focus in this paper, Jacob and Job. (So one of the dilemmas for my reading is how to give an out of place reading of characters who are, also, out of place. What will/should an out of place reading do to out of place characters?) I will be dealing with the part of the story of Jacob when he returns with his family and properties from the house of his uncle Laban and wrestles with [a man of] G*d in Gen 32, outside of his home and the home of his wives. Jacob was out of place, even though he is "in the in" as far as the narrator is concerned. Job also is both "in the in" and at once out of place (see also Nelson, 2009), but in different ways from Jacob, as far as his friends, Elihu, Yhwh, Ha-Satan, and the Joban narrator are concerned. Job and Jacob were out of place, but I can't say that they are the

out of place characters *par excellence*, for that might blind me to the abuse and mistreatment of many women and foreign subjects in the bible.

Moreover, I hesitate to think that Jacob and Job were on the ‘outside’ (see Bailey *et al*, 2009 about margin, marginal, marginalized and so forth). They were pushed, and they pushed back, in different ways, with arms and words, but neither was ousted, excluded, as far as biblical memory is concerned. They were out of place, but not outside of place.

Art of reading art

Reading artworks inspired by biblical characters and texts is tricky business, for one is reading the creative reading of artists (cf. O’Kane, 2005), one reads readings, seeking to bring into words what artists brought/skewed into picture, crossing from text to canvas to text, in processes that can burst with “conflicting meanings” (Bal, 1991:9). Readers are invited, teased, drawn, tricked, by the creative artists to see biblical characters and texts differently, and that is the joy of this

Artists take different strokes when they read and respond biblical texts and characters -- some are more traditional art-historical illustrators than others -- as they awaken the imagination of readers from their habits of forgetfulness. As readers of biblical art interpret active readings by artists, they are drawn into the artwork as if into a game in which they experience what Gadamer called *fusion of horizons*. Readers enter at the point where the horizons of the text and of the artist intersect, and this process is *an event*: “We experience truth in art when the work draws us into its play of meaning and allows us to see something previously hidden to the everyday world in which we live” (O’Kane, 2005:341). O’Kane favors intersecting Gadamer’s *fusion of horizons* with Berdini’s *visual exegesis*, which is “a process that allows the text to reveal multi-level meanings

that exceed literality while unveiling the existential conditions of the reader” (O’Kane, 2005:347).

There is a political side in reading art, for “the masters” (e.g., Rembrandt, Rubens, Michelangelo, Gentileschi *et al*) and their “high art” get more attention, maybe because they are now dead so they can no longer touch up and play with their works. Their works are “finished” (even though there is the view that an artwork is never finished), signed off for readers to do their creative analysis. Reading art is similar to reading biblical texts, the canonizing of which shift responsibility for their journey from the horizon of the author to the horizon of the reader (in the church, academy and public). With art, likewise, if it is true that an artwork is never finished, readers and their creative readings participate in the process of ‘bringing into picture’ in exchange with the artist and her/his artworks. Luckily for me, the Filipino artist whose works I engage in this paper is still alive, and the two key works that I will read had not been signed when I started reflecting on them.

A second side to the politics of reading art is the realization that the process of reading “can be a form of censorship in itself” (Bal, 1991:13). Whether one reads literary text or artwork, one needs to come to terms with the power and politics of reading. Maybe this is why the dead masters get more attention, because readers have the freedom to decide what they and their works were about. This is in part why Mieke Bal wrote of “Rembrandt,” the subject in the minds of art critics and readers rather than the actual artist himself (Bal, 1991). For this reason, I appreciate the recent attention to Samuel Bak and his works, for Bak is still alive and he joined the conversation that focused on his life, journey, and imagination, in the work edited by Danna N. Fewell *et al.* (2008).

While there are elements of censorship on the works of Bak, readers need to ‘bring into picture’ how several artists, including Bak himself, affirm the need for a *tikkun* – a repair, a mending, a healing, a transformation – of the subjects of their works, such as the cultures of the holocaust. This kind of attitude, in the end, raises the question of whether the spirits of censorship need a *tikkun* also.

Artists have the courage to address the brokenness of our contexts and lives, and in sharing their works they present readers with the responsibilities of interpretation of both the subjects of their works and of the artworks themselves. To read art is thus to respond to a double call to interpret and to *tikkun*. I see this double call as the metaphorical angel figures that sit on the shoulders of out of place readers, as I shall attempt in the readings in this paper.

Sketching Emmanuel Garibay

To introduce a living artist, who still moves and shifts, is also tricky business, given the limits of introductions. One cannot present a person with words, just as there are limits to trying to share [readings of] a text or to describe an artwork. One can only introduce, bearing in mind that a person, a text and an artwork, are more than the words offered. So, I continue!

Emmanuel Garibay grew up in a Methodist home and instead of joining the ministry, for which he received theological training, he decided that he can preach better with his hands and his artworks (see some of his works posted on www.emmanuelgaribay.com). Emmanuel’s works are better known in Asia (see Singgih, 2005), and this paper attempts to bring them into SBL consciousness, which is indeed a dislocating exercise, seeing that

SBL has its sophisticated systems of censorship. This paper might therefore end up being a reflection of the shepherd in Psalm 23 who (following David Clines' reading) is trusted



to lead the sheep into the temple, the place where a sheep is usually sacrificed.

Given that Emmanuel is an artist, it is appropriate that I draw attention to three of his works. These will better portray the kind of preaching that Emmanuel

prefers, as well as say something about who he is as a person and an activist in one of the homes of *People power*.

First, *The Arrival (in his image)* (2004). In this work, Emmanuel brings to picture the mindset and expectations of early missionaries. The colonizer arrives carrying an image of himself, as the Christ, with a crown of thorns on a tilted head, and his right hand gives the [gun-pointing] sign that he, in



his mind, is beautiful. The man of the cloth, who comes wearing a hooded red robe, as if to remind readers of the wolf in the Red Riding Hood story, leans on the cross and the colonizer. The Pinocchio-like nose of the missionary is longer than that of the colonizer, and they arrive as a team, supporting one another. Upon their arrival, a half-naked woman greets them, representing the natives, who were supposed to be grateful and to come bearing gifts to the bringers of civilization. The feminizing of the natives suggests

that our ancestors were penetrable, and so friendly that they would lie back and welcome the missionary positions of the European visitors. The natives were the exotic object of, simple and available for the taking by, the missionary and colonial interests.

There are more to this painting, and other readers might have different reactions to how Emmanuel reads the Christian mission (see also Havea, 2008). Notwithstanding, this work invites readers to the responsibilities to interpret and *tikkun*.

The second work is *Emmaus* (n.d), which offers an alternative view, albeit out of place, to popular depictions by some of the western masters (e.g., Caravaggio and Rembrandt) of the moment of revelation during the journey on the Road to Emmaus. Emmanuel presents



the Risen Christ with a female body, across the table from the reader. Though Emmanuel has other works on this subject (most recently, the Risen Christ wears a revealing red dress, which will be on the cover of a forthcoming book by Nicola Slee on *Christa*) but I prefer this one because it invites the reader to the table. As a reader, I am torn between reaching ‘into the picture’ to slap the men who seem to laugh in ridicule, especially the one to the right, closest to the reader, rather than being in awe as in Rembrandt’s work, and on the other hand joining in the laughter. Others might respond differently, but Emmanuel does an effective job of bending the gender of Christ.

And third is *Akademiko* (2009), which depicts academics (the apple suggests that the subject is a teacher, but there are other ‘apple’ stories of course) as people who are blind when they remove their spectacles. The eyes of *Akademiko* are stuck to his glasses, suggesting that he can read but he can’t see anything other than as an academic. The shoulders fall, as if to say that this character has no strength, so one can’t trust him to carry weight or burden. He has the shoulders of an academic, rather than those of a laborer. The hand holding the apple is tempting, for it could be the hand of another person (an observation I owe to Ian Ferguson), who is testing a character who is blind without his spectacles. Is *Akademiko* the tempter, or the tempted?



This work is critical of academics, and Emmanuel is targeting a specific kind of academics (he is critical of theologians and interpreters in other works), whom Gramsci called “traditional academics.” There are other kinds of academics, such as Gramsci’s “organic intellectuals,” who would probably have broader shoulders, whom Emmanuel respects and who would probably join Emmanuel’s laughter! This view of Emmanuel echoes Edward Said’s argument, that the role of the intellectual “has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone ... whose *raison d’être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug” (Said, 1994:9; cited by Nelson, 2009).

The brief introduction of the three works above aim to introduce Emmanuel to readers, and to stress the responsibilities of interpretation and *tikkun*. The pictures sketched in this section, in the end, remain unfinished. And I move to read Emmanuel's works on Job and Jacob.

Emmanuel's Job

Emmanuel's *Job* is rich with meanings and it invites the interpretation and musings of readers. At the foreground of the work, demanding the attention of the reader, is a naked figure squatting with his backside on the ground. His marked body shields his hairless head from the heat



of the burning buildings behind him, and his hands come around as if to fold and wrap up his body. As flame and smoke rise at the background of the artwork, raising the temperature on the forehead of the reader, the figure twists its head so that its face turns toward the reader but his eyes roll back, in this first reading, toward something behind him. The figure faces the reader, and draws her/his attention to what is at the background. The body of this figure, however, blocks the reader from seeing what it is to which it is drawing attention, as if to invite the reader to see things through its body.

The artwork is definitely hot! The fiery colors flow from the buildings, pouring out from the door on the right side of the painting, toward the squatting figure. Emmanuel's *Job* invites readers to ponder the biblical story of Job in relation to more recent events, such as the 9/11 Twin Towers of New York, the attacks at hotels and streets of Mumbai in November 2008 (around the time when Emmanuel sent me the first electronic image of

this work), or the devastation that Israel launched against Gaza in December 2008 to January 2009, or the many bushfires that ravage homes in Australia, Americas, Europe and beyond. A multitude of people from those settings would have felt heat and despair similar to that which Emmanuel portrays at the background of his *Job*.

Despite the desperate fiery situation, and the pain that the boil scars suggest, the face of this figure exhibits a look of content. The teeth showing through open lips give the face a grin (esp. if the reader looks at the image upside down). The calm face embodies the way many readers perceive Job: a patient man who was at peace with terrible and undeserved suffering. Emmanuel's *Job* manifests the words of the biblical Job: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21).

The calm face draws my attention to the head. How can it be possible to take and hold the posture of this figure? It looks as if the head has been detached from the body and shifted from its central position on the shoulders. It seems to me that this Joban posture is possible only in two conditions: first, the person is so flexible that his head can bow down and turn around (I have seen Rwandan and Indian dancers doing movements whereby their heads rotate as if they are detached) or second, the neck has been broken and so the head turns freely.

Emmanuel's *Job* returns me to an ideological conviction: to take on the Joban perspective, which includes holding a peaceful face in the midst of suffering, requires one to be extremely flexible and to accept the reality of death. This is possible for people on the streets, out of places. I saw such calm and peaceful outlook on the faces of poor and desperate mothers and children in some of the slum communities in Manila. They live as

if their necks have been broken, living the lot of Job each day. Herein is a challenge: for ones who wish to see things as Job did, who would like to take on the Joban perspective, they need to be flexible and to be unafraid of the gifts of death. They need to metaphorically “break their necks” in order to see. This is not a call for suicide or murder, but for alternative perspectives that are not too heady or heavily materialistic.

The placement of the hands is intriguing. So I add a second observation: Note that the left hand touches the place where the head should be while the right hand touches the joint at the right ankle, as if to suggest that the head has moved from the shoulders to the legs. In this regard, the Joban position requires relocating the anchor or referent point of perception to one’s feet. One needs to see with one’s feet and so be praxis oriented. The hands calls attention to what the feet are not doing -- standing, walking, moving.

Finally, I must admit that Emmanuel’s *Job* fooled me. When I first viewed the electronic image of this artwork, I immediately thought of the biblical character Jonah. He was the character who did not like G*d’s change of mind concerning the Ninevites, so we went outside of the city where he sat and fumed about G*d. I could imagine a grin on Jonah’s face if smoke rose from Nineveh. At this juncture of my reading, I wonder what Jonah would say about Emmanuel’s *Job* or how might Emmanuel introduce Job to Jonah.

Emmanuel’s Jacob

While I wait for Emmanuel’s Jonah, Emmanuel’s *Jacob wrestling with God*, which I received in the same email with *Job*, obliges me (see also Havea, 2009). (So it is not because of creativity on my part that I propose to read Job with Jacob, but the consequence of receiving



the two works in the same email.)

At the foreground of *Jacob wrestling with God* is a demonstrator who raises a placard (which looks like a shovel that has been flattened) with his right hand while his left hand reaches to the shield of a riot police. The work suggests that the demonstrator represents Jacob while the character of the riot police represents “the man” that wrestled Jacob, and whom Jacob saw as G*d (Gen 32:22-32). The riot police wears a helmet that shields his face from the reader, bringing to mind Jacob’s explanation for why he named the place Peniel: “For I have seen G*d face to face, and yet my life is preserved” (32:30b).

At first viewing, the two figures appear to cast their shadows as the silhouette figures on the background. But light is coming from behind the two figures, so they are not casting their shadows behind them. Rather, they are the reflection of the shadowy figures (from the past). In other words, the struggles of contemporary demonstrators and activists reflect the struggle of Jacob in the Genesis story. And the riot police on the streets of Manila, and elsewhere, are acting as G*d, whom one might see as the chairperson of the Board of Censors.

Because of the lighting also, with brighter colors behind the demonstrator, and the way the demonstrator’s body leans over the riot police, this artwork suggests that the demonstrator is winning, even if the riot police has backup (at bottom right hand corner). This is a fair reading of the Jacob story, for even when his hip was put out of joint (32:25-26) he had the upper hand and he decided when to let G*d go. It was G*d who asked to be released from Jacob, but not the other way around. Though disjointed, Jacob held on and demanded a blessing. In this reading, the giving of the new name and blessing was

G*d's way of surrendering to Jacob. In the streets of Manila, and the movements of People Power, Jacob/demonstrator has a chance to win.

Job meets Jacob

Having read Emmanuel's works once, I now move to see how they, as it were, might bring Jacob and Job to



face one another on the streets of Manila. First, as the demonstrator looks intently into the



helmet of the riot police, I imagine Jacob daring to see

the face of G*d. In this connection, I see a second reading of Job's eyes. They were not just rolling back behind him. The fire behind him is only part of the problem. Job's eyes are also rolling up, drawing the attention of the reader to something above. His eyes point upward to another part of the problem, from which he appears to be "taking a duck," and that is the badgering between Yhwh and Ha-Satan (Job 1-2). Emmanuel makes Job appear to know more about what happened in Yhwh's realm than the narrator wants us to believe. In this regard, Emmanuel's *Job* invites us, for instance, to bring *tikkun* to the useless wager between Yhwh and Ha-Satan. Was the second round of test necessary?

Second, in contrast to the upstanding Jacob, the crouching Job looks like one who has been pushed down to the ground. The crafty Jacob stands to resist, while the blameless and upright Job is shoved down. This is the classic case of innocent suffering. But is Job completely innocent? The juxtaposition of the two artworks, about two stories, two

characters, from different spaces and cultures, obliges readers with the responsibility of further interpretation.

Hence, a third reading, this time allowing Jacob to influence my view of Job. In Yhwh's realm, according to the narrator, Job is a wealthy and devout worshipper, a God fearer and family man who is blameless and upright. There is a point of contradiction here for me, for I can't understand how a rich person can be blameless. My experience tells me that a rich person is rich because s/he has taken advantage of others, so it is mind boggling to think of Job, a rich man, as if he is also blameless. He might be a caring father and employer, a devout worshipper and the best there is of the God fearers, but it is hard for me to imagine him as blameless and innocent. Job would have been more crafty than Jacob, for he carried himself well in the cycles of debate with his three friends (Job 3-31), in the face of the charges of young Elihu (Job 32-72) and even in Yhwh's thundering speech from the whirlwind (Job 38-41). I say that he carried himself well because I have an out of place understanding on Job 42:5-6, which I am borrowing from Monica J. Melanchthon. Job 42:5-6 is usually read as Job giving-in to Yhwh, surrendering in dust and ashes. In speaking from the whirlwind, G*d overwhelmed Job into responding,

“I had heard You with my ears,
But now I see You with my eyes;
Therefore, I recant and relent,
Being but dust and ashes” (42:5-6; NJPS)

Of what did Job recant and relent in 42:6a? In 42:5, the “You” who is the object of the verbs refers to G*d. But “recant” and “relent” in 42:6 do not have an object. One possibility is that Job recants and relents G*d, who is the You-object of 42:5. In this reading, Job despises and regrets G*d. This view of Job, at the other bookend of his story,

pulls him from the ground (in Emmanuel's painting) so that, like Jacob, he would wrestle with G*d.

Finally, I can't say that Job is completely innocent because he has influenced both philosophers and organizers of mass murder (Galbraith, 2008). In this regard, Job has become the riot police (recall Emmanuel's work on Jacob). This also obliges readers with the responsibilities of interpretation and *tikkun*.

Reading is not finish

This reflection ends here, as I am already late for the deadline set for papers to this session. My reading however is not finish, just yet, as if a reading, like a work of art, can ever be finish. But a reading can of course be finished.

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Abstract

This presentation will focus on two paintings by the Filipino theologian and activist, Emmanuel Garibay: *Jacob wrestling with G*d* (2008) and *Job* (2008). The juxtaposition of the artworks raises critical questions about both biblical characters: How could Job, a wealthy slave-owner, be blameless and righteous? Why should Jacob, who cheated his brother, father and uncle, and prevailed over G*d (whom Garibay portrays as a riot police), respect anyone? What are the consequences of identifying with Job (especially in the works of liberation critics) and Jacob? The inspiration for Garibay's works is the struggles of people in the corrupt and violent contexts of the Philippines, and I (conditioned by oceanic upbringing and crosscultural migration) will read his works contra-textually with the biblical account. The upshot is a call for reexamination of traditional perspectives and readings, for solidarity with demonstrators and activists in the struggles of oppressed people, and for the courage to confront and question G*d. The presentation will cross several contexts, from the bible to the streets of Manila and Gaza, and the rising seas in Oceania, from literary to visual imagination, and telling, from the stories of Jacob and Job to the story of Jonah, and more.

Contextual Biblical Interpretation Group

In line with the goal of this group and of its book series *Texts@Contexts* (Fortress Press; volumes on Genesis and The Gospel of Mark, forthcoming, 2009), we seek papers on *contextual* biblical interpretations; i.e., readings of the Bible that take the reader's context into account in some way. Particularly (but not exclusively) we are interested in contextual readings of the books of the Pentateuch/Torah; the Gospels. These papers need to make explicit their "contextual" strategies (including inculturation, inter(con)textualization, and reading with "ordinary" readers) and methodologies. For general format see

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