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## What has Coruscant to Do with Jerusalem? A Response and Reflections at the Crossroads of Hebrew Bible and Science Fiction

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**WHAT HAS CORUSCANT  
TO DO WITH JERUSALEM?  
A RESPONSE AND REFLECTIONS AT THE  
CROSSROADS OF HEBREW BIBLE AND  
SCIENCE FICTION**

JAMES F. MCGRATH  
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I consider it an honor to have been invited to respond to the articles in this special volume of the *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, dedicated to exploring the intersection of two of my research and teaching interests: the Bible and Science Fiction. The articles consistently surprise with their creative breaking of new ground. I find myself so appreciative of the insights and perspectives offered by the authors, that I fear I may risk failing to offer the kind of response that academic readers hope for, one that takes what seem like sound proposals and tries to undermine them, stirring up hornets' nests and sowing doubt and confusion. This response will be less of a counterpoint or debate, and more an attempt at synthesis. If there is one shortcoming of the contributions to this volume, it is only the inevitable one, namely that they were not able to interact with one another, having all written independently at the same time. Yet time and again, the articles pass through the same territory in different directions. And so, if I will not often disagree with these authors, I can genuinely hold out the hope that I might build interesting things at the crossroads of the trails that they blazed, which become possible precisely in light of a collective consideration of the work that each has undertaken independently.

If there is a dangerous pitfall at the intersection of religion in its various forms, and contemporary popular culture in its various forms, it is the tendency to merely notice interesting similarities and parallels, and perhaps to create superficial connections between the two, in ways that do justice to neither the religious literature nor the Science Fiction stories under consideration. While the articles in this issue do note interesting similarities and parallels, they are always ones which emerge naturally from the material being studied. Moreover, the contributors to the volume are never content to merely make note of connections, but dig deeper, to investigate what these connections can lead us to learn about each subject area or piece of literature in its own right. And so, as there are numerous themes which emerge time and again across the multiple articles, it will be my aim in responding to emulate their example, and to never be content to notice merely the obvious but superficial points of contact. It is rather my hope to draw connections in ways

that bring the contributors into conversation with one another, as well as with myself.

One point of intersection between the articles, as between the Hebrew Bible and Science Fiction, is around the foundational concept of canon. The very notion of defining a canonical corpus is always in the background, and often in the foreground, in the academic study of the Bible. This is especially the case when scholars who are also educators seek to make students aware that not only do the biblical texts they study have a prehistory, but so too does the process whereby they became a compilation. Students of literature, whether biblical or science fictional, often enjoy immersing themselves into the stories far more than they appreciate learning about the processes that went into their production, redaction, selection, or transmission. Drawing students' attention to these things in connection with the Bible is rather like exposing them to earlier drafts of their favorite novels, movies, or TV shows, or informing them about tensions between cast members, screenplay writers, producers, television network executives, and others whose influence can often be perceived in the final form of a movie or episode, once one has been made aware of it. Looking behind the curtain (or underneath the hood if one prefers an automotive analogy) reveals a messiness that some find detracts from their enjoyment. Part of the magic of cinema and television, of course, is the realism of the end result. But as with a good magic trick, learning how special effects were accomplished ought to enhance our appreciation, rather than spoiling our enjoyment. Until we understand the processes whereby stories that we love came to exist, and came to be found side by side with other texts, we cannot appreciate them fully. We at best enjoy only one facet of them, the finished product. And so the comparison of canon in relation to Bible and Science Fiction will bring methodological matters into the picture. There is a longstanding divide between academics using diachronic and synchronic approaches, and scholars in one field will benefit from considering whether the same divide exists in the same way in relation to other texts, and whether, to the extent the divide exists, there might be some benefit to building bridges across it.

The notion of canonicity looms large not only in the definition of Science Fiction itself as a genre, but also in relation to particular franchises. In relation to *Star Trek*, some may find problematic those movies or spin-offs about which Gene Roddenberry expressed reservations, or which were made without his involvement. And by way of contrast, many fans of *Star Wars* have been more enthusiastic about J. J. Abrams' *The Force Awakens* than about the prequels made by George Lucas himself. These specific examples connect with the broader discussion of canon referenced by Frauke Uhlenbruch, who uses recent controversy over the Hugo Awards as an example. We have witnessed in many domains, how those who previously were able to control the process of canon-

definition have resisted their loss of authority. The history of the biblical literature is no different, as we see that the widespread popularity of works lead to the inclusion of particular texts within the canon—and, conversely, as we see that the exclusion of certain works from the canon does not inevitably lead to their loss of popularity or influence.<sup>1</sup>

Many of these points are explored or at least touched on in Harold Vedeler's article, which seeks to at least engage with significant samplings relevant to the entire process not just of producing a canon, but preserving and using it. The fact that canons include details which are awkward fossils of a previous era creates issues for fans and believers, whether one is talking about slavery in the Bible or sexism on *Star Trek*. Vedeler writes,

[W]e must make a distinction between a canonical narrative and the readers of that narrative. A narrative may be closed and governed by the "invisible hand" of an author or editor, but the reader, and especially groups of readers, remain open systems who will reinterpret the text to suit their needs, including ignoring some aspects of the canon that do not suit them. . .

In each case both the canon and its interpretation evolved in response to social changes taking place among the fans/worshippers, since what was normal and acceptable when the first canon was written has been replaced by new needs and beliefs. Canonical evolution, therefore, as opposed to specific narratives, is an open system. Other forms of evolution take place outside the canon, including things like fan fiction, midrash, and interpretation. From this evolution come new narratives, some more open than others, as the whole system moves forward and does what it is intended to do: help humans, with our complex, ultrasocial brains, deal with extremely complex problems, including cultural ones.

It is good that similarities between the ways canons are established, and the roles they play, in Biblical Studies and Science Fiction is getting more attention. What the similarities tell us, and what importance the differences have, is less clear. Just as we cannot be satisfied to note vague similarities between biblical archetypes and comic book heroes, we should not be satisfied just to notice the similarities with respect to canon. Vedeler takes some pioneering first steps in the direction of comparative canonical criticism, and other contributors to this issue also touch on this topic. But what is less clear is whether the canons of Science Fiction and Bible serve similar functions in relation to those by whom and for whom these canons are defined. Are Science Fiction fandom and religious

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<sup>1</sup> I explore the subject of canon in relation to the Bible and Science Fiction in more detail in my forthcoming volume, *Theology and Science Fiction*, in the Cascade Companion series.

observance so different as to undercut any insights gleaned from comparison? Or is canon in the realm of Science Fiction closer to the biblical meaning than other genres of literature? As Ian D. Wilson notes in his chapter, discussing Darko Suvin's definition of Science Fiction, "ancient Judeans certainly did not conceive any of their texts as literature of cognitive estrangement." And it is to Wilson's credit that he spends a significant amount of time warning about the dangers of anachronism and of imposing an alien and thus inappropriate framework borrowed from elsewhere. Wilson thus also devotes significant attention to providing justification for the comparisons that he makes. He writes,

[T]here are literary features in the prophetic books that display an affinity with certain brands of SF literature, and, in my view, one can therefore use SF criticism as an analogue—a heuristic tool—for thinking about the ancient sociocultural milieux of the prophetic books. As a historical critic (or critical historicist), this is my primary interest: to probe the prophetic books as literary artifacts from ancient Judah, to improve our knowledge of the sociocultural discourses of this ancient society on the periphery of empire, and in turn to help us think about and learn from cultural interactions between societies in general. Some aspects of SF and its criticism, I think, can be helpful in this academic pursuit.

Because this kind of comparison has been engaged in so infrequently in the past, it is far too soon to judge the long-term fruitfulness thereof. But one key element that emerges in both Vedeler's discussion of canon and Wilson's discussion of superheroes is exciting, namely that, in the very act of comparing the genre that they study most frequently in a professional capacity, with another genre that lies further afield, the interpreters are forced to become even more conscious of the methods and tools that they are using, and the assumptions that they bring with them, than is characteristic of scholars who remain more solidly within their disciplinary confines. If such self-awareness were to be all that resulted from working on Bible and Science Fiction together, that alone would more than justify the endeavor.

The theme of transcendence is another thread that runs through both the biblical literature and Science Fiction, and which also connects various articles in this issue. Francis Landy focuses in on the figure of Enoch, who can serve as an example of a human who transcends a mundane and sinful way of life by walking with God, transcends the terrestrial world by being taken up above, and eventually transcends human limitations as he takes on attributes of a celestial being in later Jewish mystical texts and traditions. Each of these points is mirrored in Science Fiction: transcendence of the ordinary, of the planetary, and of the human. And so it is perhaps not surprising that "apocalyptic" denotes a genre of Science Fiction story as well as a genre of biblical and extrabiblical literature—even

if some may balk at the suggestion that the two may in fact ultimately belong to one and the same genre at the end of the day. In connection with this theme, Landy explores whether the genre of self-conscious *fiction* separates the two. This question is important, both inasmuch as it may allow us to better understand the way fans of Science Fiction turn to their beloved stories seeking guidance for their lives in the present and hope for the future of our species, and also as it may enable us to envisage ancient authors doing something similar to modern ones in exploring realms of the imagination, not because they believed them to be true, but because they hoped them to be possible, or at the very least, because they knew that the very act of imagining a human being transcending the realm that normally circumscribes the sphere of the human, is itself an act of self-transcendence. The issues of pseudepigraphy and pseudoprophecy have made the scholarly study of apocalyptic literature controversial in the eyes of some conservative religionists. The possibility that they may belong to the genre of fiction, in a manner comparable to other literature that is widely appreciated in our time, is unlikely to set the minds of those individuals at ease, but it might help others to understand and appreciate challengingly difficult and often obscure apocalyptic texts in a new light, and once again, these comparisons may be even more helpful in the *teaching* of these materials, as in the context of our in-house scholarly conversations. Finding something familiar and contemporary as a starting point for comparison with things from other times and cultures has an established pedagogical usefulness that deserves mention in this context.

If words like “canon,” “transcendence,” and “apocalyptic” are immediately recognizable as straddling the domains of Bible and Science Fiction, the word “monster” may appear to belong to one exclusively, or at least far more so than to the other. For this reason, it is useful that Wilson’s chapter on superheroes and supervillains in the Bible and Science Fiction is placed before Ryan Higgins’ chapter. Both deal with the liminal realm in which monsters dwell. One thing that can make something seem monstrous is if it resides in the “uncanny valley”—that situation of being human enough that the entity’s inhumanness is deemed “creepy.” Supervillains are sometimes monsters in the sense of being repulsive and inhuman in their physical appearance. But more often they disturb us because of the fact that they look just like us, and yet seem to lack our moral sensibilities and values. Placing biblical characters ranging from God to the king of Israel to Satan on these spectrums, these chapters highlight how key plot elements in both the Bible and Science Fiction mirror one another. The Aqedah story is mentioned in this issue primarily in connection with an exploration of its updating in graphic novel form, and we shall return to it in that context later. But here we may note that Abraham’s binding of Isaac also resides in the uncanny valley, with him and his son recognizably human, and yet Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice him

seeming monstrous to modern readers (as well as many in generations before ours). Higgins even asks questions which engage in psychoanalysis of the character of God in the Bible: does God experience the uncanny valley, when dealing with entities that are not quite divine and yet neither are they entirely other? Is God “creeped out” by humans made in the divine image, in the way that we sometimes are by the robots we create in our own? But we must take another step further back and ask another layer of questions: If we detect psychosis or revulsion in the character of God, does that tell us about the divine, or only about the human authors who depicted God in this way? And what is the role of historical contextual analysis in this? Is attempting to understand the mind of an ancient character, or an ancient author, as unlikely to succeed as an attempt to understand a freshly-arrived alien from another planet?

There are few if any obvious tensions between the perspectives of the contributors to this issue. But many of the contributions are about tensions that arise not just at but across the intersections their articles explore. Often these tensions are not dichotomous, but three-way, as for instance in the case of the intersection between the Bible, science, and fiction. If science is defined in a manner that focuses on the discovery of that which is real and true, then fiction might seem more radically antithetical to it than the Bible does, as a compilation which includes fiction but also other genres besides. And where do the Bible and Science Fiction fall in relation to notions such as the paranormal? And when we turn our gaze upwards, where do gods and aliens, angels and superhumans, stand in relation to the Bible, science, and Science Fiction?

There are some who read either the Bible or Science Fiction expecting a glimpse of the way things really are. But one of the most important things that comes out of bringing the two together is a reminder that both are imaginative human products, which only tell us about the universe inasmuch as human art, born out of human insight, provides genuine clues about reality. Both explore matters of *transcendence*, and both do so through story. The articles in this issue provide some particularly helpful guides for those interested in surveying and studying these explorations in a comparative manner. That stories involving the divine bring transcendence into the picture is not surprising. But throughout history, including in very noticeable ways in our time, stories which evoke and explore the transcendent have come to be used to confine and constrain, placing limits on human exploration. Both sets of literature, to be sure, give voice to dogmatism in places.<sup>2</sup> But they do so as part of a larger conversation. And in both cases, the stories bring characters and scenarios into the picture, in conjunction with

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<sup>2</sup> See the discussion of the treatment of religion in the original novel and also subsequent film versions of H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, in D. E. Cowan, *Sacred Space: The Quest for Transcendence in Science Fiction Film and Television* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010, ch. 4).

humans, which break into the realm of the mundane, upending and challenging it from beyond and in particular from above.

Of course, the difference between the pre-scientific context of the Hebrew Bible, and the emphatically scientific context of Science Fiction, should not be downplayed. But Science Fiction is as renowned for what it imagines despite little hope of realization, as for what it rationally expects might be feasible. Warp drive and transporters come to mind, as two updated models of fiery chariots that might whisk a twenty-fourth-century Elijah from Earth to some unexplored celestial realm. But so too do aliens who speak our language, at least in the presence of technology that instantly overcomes the likely hurdles in communication that would present themselves in a real-life encounter. The Jewish mystical tradition, taking the Hebrew Bible as its starting point, envisages humans ascending to encounters with heavenly things that words cannot express or hope to describe. As humans have found technological ways of physically ascending into the realm above, and taken our first few such steps in that direction, some have viewed this as a transgression into the divine sphere, akin to the building of the Tower of Babel. But in fact, such explorations have taken the divine and heavenly and shifted them into other dimensions and planes of existence altogether, so that they are now much more likely to be thought of as transcending human existence in more than a merely spatial way, as “high and lifted up.” The highest heavens, physically speaking, are now known to be much further away than ancients imagined. And so whether one places God beyond the physical limits of our universe, or beyond physical existence altogether, transcendence has been enhanced through our space explorations. And as the physical journeys of astronauts are brought into intersection and comparison with the mystical journeys of the rabbis, we find that each offers a perspective that the other can learn and benefit from. If the astronomical crashes through the firmament and shows us light from faint distant galaxies, the mystics suggest that whether in space or in spirit, reality includes not just more than human words have expressed, but more than they can ever hope to express.<sup>3</sup>

The Hebrew Bible and Science Fiction are also close competitors when it comes to stories of supermen. If Samson and Superman got into a fight, who would win? Who traveled further, Enoch or Hal Jordan (better known as Green Lantern)? Could the Hulk have brought the walls of Jericho down as effectively as Joshua did? Or are such comparisons focusing on the wrong data? Is it Superman that is the focus of strength, or something outside him, whether that be Kryptonian genes he inherited, or energy from the

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<sup>3</sup> On the connection between religion and spaceflight, see the recent volume edited by P. Levinson and M. Waltemathe, *Touching the Face of the Cosmos: On the Intersection of Space Travel and Religion* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).



yellow sun in our solar system? A pair of scissors is easier to obtain than a piece of kryptonite, to be sure. But each in their own way, these stories highlight not only human strength, but also human weakness and dependence on outside forces beyond our control. And many of them express the longing not merely for an encounter with a power greater than ourselves, but for some of that power to be bestowed upon us. And in both kinds of stories, questions are asked about whether people who are fortunate enough to have such power would use it wisely.

The Hebrew Bible, like much ancient and/or religious literature, is often viewed with derision, both within Science Fiction narratives and by fans of the genre. This is primarily because of the element of the supernatural in the Hebrew Bible. Yet that term is noticeably absent from the texts in question, and even in the act of eschewing the supernatural, Science Fiction regularly embraces the *paranormal*, which may or may not be exactly the same thing in practice. As a result, apart from the matter of direct involvement of a single supreme God or the lack thereof, the differences are much less marked. Indeed, the kind of magical naturalism that was taken for granted by ancient people, and which has fallen out of favor in scientific circles, is embraced repeatedly in the realm of Science Fiction. If we can just find dilithium crystals, or kyber crystals, or a stargate built by aliens, we will be able to travel to other worlds, or wield a sword of light. The Jewish wisdom tradition, especially as taken up and explored further outside the Hebrew Bible, viewed the discovery of special properties of plants and other objects, and the study of celestial movements, as providing the potential to bring healing and insight, and perhaps more.<sup>4</sup> The hope was that through exploration and a process of trial and error, we might find substances, formulas, and/or incantations that would not only enhance our well-being, but give us power over other forces and other persons. This hope has been found at times in both the scientific and the religious realm. But as real-life science has made such discoveries increasingly unlikely, Science Fiction and religion have increasingly been placed on the same side, together with fantasy, in their common willingness to imagine that which research suggests is regrettably impossible.

Yet (as Landy reminds us in his chapter) there is also an element of suspicion towards and even demonization of science in the Bible and its reception history as well. The Bible attributes developments in metallurgy and music to the descendants of Cain (Gen 4:17–22). In the further exploration of the story of Enoch outside of the canon, more specific technological developments are attributed to teaching that is offered by rebellious angels. This isn't necessarily an indictment of science and discovery per se. Indeed, it is a scenario that has been explored time and time again in Science

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance the Testament of Solomon, and also Wisdom of Solomon 7:17–21.

Fiction, namely the revealing of more advanced technology to people who have not yet developed it on their own. The fallen angels might be said to have violated a celestial “Prime Directive” which mirrors Starfleet’s rule. And there are stories throughout the *Star Trek* franchise which have explored the negative impact of those who throw caution to the wind and become bestowers of magic, or even become gods, to the inhabitants of a planet that misinterprets the significance of their technological power. The Bible and Science Fiction have both managed to broach this topic in a nuanced way, warning of dangers inherent in certain kinds of transgressions of boundaries and rules, but also recognizing that such transgressions may at times be in the interest of the greater good.

The distinction we introduced earlier, between the supernatural and the paranormal, breaks down in practice, and not only when space travelers encounter gods known to past generations of humans. Why should faster-than-light travel be embraced as something that today seems impossible but one day might seem otherwise, and yet the possibility of divine action in miracles be rejected? When it comes to the realm of *stories*, neither involves greater suspension of disbelief than the other. But perhaps it is because of the very tendency of some modern readers, often referred to as fundamentalists, to insist on the literal truth of certain imaginative stories in the Bible, that those stories are viewed with hostility by others who enjoy their own more recently composed set of imaginative stories.

Human storytelling regularly hopes for the seemingly impossible. But speaking in this way about the matter privileges a particular scientific perspective. Vedeler’s article on the narrative mode highlights the relevance of the work of psychologist Jerome Bruner to the subjects under discussion here. The approach of science looks for the universal and uniform, while storytelling has other functions, exploring the specific, the contextual, and the personal, focusing in on the connections between persons and events. There have been many debates about the legitimacy of other “ways of knowing” besides the natural sciences in recent years, with key proposed alternatives being religion and the arts.<sup>5</sup> And so the question of whether Science Fiction—apart from any purported science that happens to be embedded in it—provides access to something that can be called knowledge, is very timely indeed. By its very nature, this genre of literature and film must stand on the side of arts and religion in such a debate. Reality, Vedeler’s article empha-

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance the discussion in several places in *Science, Religion and Society: An Encyclopedia of History, Culture, and Controversy*, edited by A. Eisen and G. Laderman (New York: Routledge, 2015). For an example of an atheist scientist’s polemic against the claim that religion may be another “way of knowing,” see J. Coyne, *Faith vs. Fact: Why Science and Religion are Incompatible* (New York: Viking, 2015), esp. ch. 4.

sizes, is complex, too complex to deal with as a whole. And so, while the element of transcendence and the mystical (discussed earlier) seeks a connection with that whole, however ineffable, we also seek to find ways to subdivide and delineate smaller segments of reality in the hope that we may be able to speak meaningfully about them, whether in the form of a chemical formula or a well-told tale. As Vedeler writes,

[S]ince the physical universe is made up of a nearly infinite number of interconnections between open systems, the empirical world therefore runs the risk of overwhelming the brain (which is finite, after all) with information, and so animals with brains have also evolved to edit this data down to a manageable level.

His article highlights a number of important points related to the scientific and narrative approaches to the world, and the relation between them. But what are we to make of the fact that, on the one hand, our brains are so wired as to be emotional first and rational second, if on the other hand, Western society tends to favor that which *sounds* scientific, irrespective of whether it genuinely is or not? Does this suggest that science may have come to predominate in our society in the way that it has not because of rational argument, or even because of its practical effectiveness, but because of *storytelling* related to science, such as we find in Science Fiction? And while Science Fiction and other science-related narrative has tugged at our heart strings and won our hearts, some religious apologists have focused on making what they claim are *rational arguments* for their religious beliefs. Perhaps perspectives from neuroscience and psychology, brought to bear on the Hebrew Bible and Science Fiction, will show that, however ironic it may seem, because narrative and emotion trump science and logic, sciency-sounding tales packing an emotional punch may have won victories for science, while dispassionate-sounding arguments in favor of religion may have undermined its persuasiveness, precisely by trying to show religion to be rational rather than emotional in character. As Landy writes in his chapter, “The oxymoron ‘Science Fiction’ is indicative. The more ‘science’ lays claim to the real, the more it is fictionalized, becomes the subject of the human imagination.”

In addition to providing helpful analyses drawn from a range of disciplinary approaches, the articles in this issue also offer a great deal of helpful terminology, some of it borrowed from earlier scholarship, but others perhaps being new innovations that deserve to be adopted—such as the notion of a “Shareware Bible.” Shareware refers to software that may be freely downloaded and circulated, much of which is open source. The access programmers grant to the source code of software of this sort distinguishes it from that which has stronger proprietorial claims on it, and which can only be accessed and modified through hacking. And so it is

through the lens of this computer programming analogy that Uhlenbruch's chapter asks us to reflect on the Aqedah—the story of the binding of Isaac in Genesis—and its science fictional retelling in graphic novel form. Midrashic reimagining of stories is a longstanding practice, one that sometimes reworks the details of the story itself, but more frequently re-envisioned by adding details and filling in gaps. This possibility of adapting and recreating the biblical story does indeed suggest that the Bible is “shareware”—and not just in the sense that it is not under copyright. The Hebrew Bible has retellings and alternate versions embedded within its very pages. And so the question of canon can be brought into the picture once again. But in both biblical and Science Fiction canons, the choice of works for inclusion does not seem to aim at achieving a unified consistent whole that is free from contradictions. By including multiple different versions of stories, both kinds of narratives seem to invite readers to not merely read, but write, taking creative liberties as the stories become a starting point for their own explorations and reflections. The inclusion of multiple versions of the same story within the canon reveals the source code behind the texts, that these are not fixed divine words which have dropped down from the sky, but human products which include the flexibility to bend and shape them in new ways. And, in keeping with contemporary Maker culture, if the existing story cannot be adapted to your needs, you are invited to create one of your own, using the prototypes provided, or breaking their mold.

We suggested earlier that the Aqedah story might be said to reside within a kind of narrative “uncanny valley.” Abraham the protagonist looks human enough to us that his willingness to sacrifice his son becomes that much more disturbing. Historical study can help us make sense of the story, to a certain extent. On the one hand, imagining ourselves into the realities of ancient life, in which the forces of nature were understood as expressions of the divine, and humans struggled to survive at their mercy, and children tended to die young, offering one's firstborn in a desperate attempt to appease the divine and ensure the survival of one's other children might seem to make a kind of sense. And on the other hand, as we listen to other voices within the Hebrew canon, we find that the Israelites once practiced child sacrifice, and later voices sought to stop the practice. This leads us to the possibility that, in this story, Abraham is being co-opted in support of that later stance, being made to serve as an example that ultimately argues against rather than for the practice of child sacrifice. But neither of these historical attempts at finding solutions ultimately resolves the problem that, within the framework of the story, Abraham is applauded not for his abandonment of an abhorrent practice, but for his willingness to engage in it. Its troubling character may be the very reason why the story is retold in so many different ways, and continues to provoke us to interact with it over and over again. Some retellings, of course, simply eliminate the elements that make

the biblical prototype so disturbing, becoming merely stories about the willingness to sacrifice one's child in the more modern sense of the word, in circumstances which make more rational sense to modern readers than Abraham's do. In one sense, such reworkings might seem to resolve the problem. Yet in another sense they leave the original every bit as mysterious, and perhaps render it even more so, precisely because the contrast with retellings that make better sense to us and which are more comprehensible further heightens the strangeness of the Genesis tale.

The climactic moment in the Aqedah story is of course when the angel of the LORD calls to Abraham to stop him from killing Isaac. This element—the *deus ex machina*—is discussed by characters in Cory Doctorow's novel *Makers*, where it is suggested that those kinds of endings, popular in antiquity, are no longer appreciated. But why are they no longer appreciated? Uhlenbruch's comment on this is noteworthy: "Divine intervention may be out of fashion or out of epistemology." The worldview of the present day tends to expect humans to need to sort things out for ourselves. Salvation may emerge, but typically it will come from within the process rather than outside it. As Uhlenbruch observes, "Divine intervention may not be *en vogue* in contemporary story-telling, but networked individuals and the emergence of something bigger than a sum of parts is a very popular topos." And yet nevertheless, the desperate hope for outside assistance—whether in the discovery of the power of a substance, or contact with a personal alien or deity—to effect longed-for salvation, remains with us, as seen time and time again in the attention given to biblical stories of this sort, and the composition of new Science Fiction stories along similar lines. The response by readers to stories of this sort not only in the past, but also in the present, suggests that we may not have changed as much as we sometimes like to think. But who or what we expect to save us makes a difference, as does whether we think we are being saved from a force outside ourselves, or from our very selves. Be that as it may, in the very act of retelling the story, Uhlenbruch suggests, the reader retakes control, claiming an agency which was something that Abraham seems to have sacrificed long before the story about the Isaac incident.

For the critical scholar, exploration of the Hebrew Bible's theological perspectives is, in a sense, a study in idolatry. Although these texts are famous for their polemic *against* idolatry, it can be argued that the attempt to turn the absolute into story, into words and ideas that the human mind can comprehend, is every bit as idolatrous as the depiction of God using stone and metal. As Landy writes in his article, "We imagine and create omnipotent forces that control us." And yet, just as we are deluding ourselves if we think that by avoiding the making of physical images we can avoid mental idolatry, so too we would be deluding ourselves if we thought that we could simply avoid thinking, imagining, or telling stories about the divine. Indeed, perhaps the issue with idolatry pertains

less to thinking or narrating, and more to the tendency after we have imagined or narrated to fix what our minds have made as hard and fast as if they were literally set in stone. The Bible sets its legal prohibitions of idolatry within a narrative framework of stories about God, hinting that, while fixed images seek to constrain God and so constrain us, our imaginations, and our possibilities, the narrating of God, when approached in an open-ended manner, invites us to explore, reflect, and grow. Theologies have the potential to be freeing or captivating. In his article, Landy echoes Henri Bergson's reference to "the essential function of the universe, which is a machine for the making of gods."<sup>6</sup> More precisely, the universe seems to be a machine for the making of people who make gods. And it is a machine for the making of people who make stories, about the divine and about ourselves. If some Science Fiction has attempted to desacralize the cosmos and remove the divine from the picture, the very act of imaginative storytelling, it may be argued, cannot but serve as symbol and sacrament pointing towards transcendent mystery.

Not that Science Fiction always succeeds in doing that, any more than biblical texts do. Science fiction has used tired narrative clichés just as religious literature has, and both kinds of literature have managed to produce works that continue to provoke and engage. Science fiction has the potential to disturb us every bit as much as ancient religious literature does, and sometimes in relation to the same topics. If Science Fiction asks whether we could tell if our deity were simply a powerful alien, religious literature—however much it may offer reassurances in places about the character of God—tells stories which make us wonder what sort of entity we are dealing with too. As mentioned earlier, Higgins' chapter explores the uncanny valley in which gods and angels reside, as like humans and yet disturbingly unlike us, but also the uncanny valley from the perspective of God as narrated in Genesis. Humanity is made in God's image, according to Genesis, and humans in turn try to envisage God in terms of our own image and likeness. Thus caught in an endless spiral, we find ourselves overwhelmed by the numinous and repulsed by the grotesque that is glimpsed at the edges of the cosmos and at the same time found lurking in the dark recesses of our hearts and minds. This is true in both Science Fiction and in the Hebrew Bible. And when two sets of literature turn humanity's gaze in the same direction, provokes reflection on our deepest questions, and evokes the same kinds of emotional responses both positive and negative, can there be any doubt that these genres, which might seem to some polar opposites, are in fact two sides of the same coin? It is with this same coin that we pay the price set for the redemption of our firstborn, expressing our

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<sup>6</sup> H. Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1935), 317. The reference to Bergson had been made in J. Kripal's work, which Landy was discussing.

gratitude for existence as contingent beings, and it is with this same coin that we pay our entrance fee to see a hopeful future for our children depicted on an enormous screen.

I suspect that some who study the Hebrew Bible will have reacted with dismay at the connection of as serious a subject as theirs with something as trivial as Science Fiction. And I suspect that some who study Science Fiction will have reacted with horror at the connection of as serious a subject as theirs with texts they associate with superstition and a variety of other things seemingly antithetical to the spirit of Science Fiction. Neither reaction is appropriate. Even if stereotypes and instinctual revulsion are connected with particular subjects, scholars should pay attention to them all the more. Moreover, these very prejudices are the kinds of things that cry out for serious academic study in their own right, not by scholars of ancient Hebrew texts or of popular culture, but perhaps of the sociology and the psychology of religion. Our desire to desacralize and to re-enchant, to find security and to explore, to understand and to stand in awe of mystery, find expression in a great many different kinds of stories that we tell. The enjoyment of them is part of our effort to understand ourselves. So too is our study of them.