

WHEN MARDUK READ ROMANS: BIBLICAL TEXTS AS A HERMENEUTIC IN HEAVY METAL, HEAVY METAL AS BIBLICAL EXEGESIS

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Abstract

This paper aims to show that interpretations of biblical texts by metals artists should be alongside the extensive work done on other types of artistic expression in conversation with biblical scholarship. Marduk's 2007 album entitled 'Romans 5:12' uses a biblical text to frame the contents of the album and as such is a piece of biblical interpretation and criticism. This paper will attempt to frame both the biblical text and the metal text in terms of their influence on one another, as inspiration, influence and interpreter.

Introduction

Biblical and religious imagery are nothing new in the world of heavy metal. From the names of bands (Black Sabbath, Behemoth, Lamb of God) to the content of songs (Creeping Death, Anjos do apocalypse) the bible has proved rich and deep source of material for those who would explore the darker side of the human condition. In the genre of Black Metal particularly, where the subject matter of Satan, Satanism and opposition to Christian religion is central, we should not be surprised to see images of biblical stories and Christian doctrine exposed within the music. And yet, when academic courses, public lectures and discussions are put together around the bible and its relationship to music, heavy metal is rarely included except in discussions of its antagonism. It can oft be seen that '*doubts about metal's political and artistic worth resurface even in ostensibly sympathetic studies, in which critics ultimately view metal as inferior to more obviously progressive forms of musical and cultural expression.*' (Phillipov, 2012, 54). In this paper my aim is to discuss the use by Marduk of the bible verse Romans 5:12 as the title for their album in a similar way that biblical scholars would approach a work by Bach, Handel or Verdi – as a positive engagement with the biblical text, rather than a mere curiosity of an extreme culture.

A discussion of method and interdisciplinary discourse

This paper is interdisciplinary by design. I am a biblical scholar, a textual exegete by training, and that undoubtedly influences my reading and understanding of this biblical text and this musical text. Much of the discussion therefore will use the focus of exegetical studies, however, this takes into account the research of cultural sociology, history, linguistics. No text exists or is created without cultural, historical context, and any resonances it has with the reader are similarly prescribed by their context. These contexts must be part of our discussion here, however, where scholars such as Weinstein, Walser and Phillipov are looking at the greater themes of cultural expression, I am looking at

the microcosm of the album and hoping this analysis can say something about the way metal engages with cultural tropes. I will be observing the lyrics of the album but also the musical setting and expression where possible and comparing that to the biblical text and its context and facets. Biblical studies is an academic discipline which uses many different skills and techniques to understand the bible as not only a text, but also its place in community and historical development, its influence on culture and the influence of culture on its composition, use and abuse. The bible has been used and received differently in many cultures and has no monolithic reading. It has always been interpreted through music and art, and this has always been less easily controlled than written interpretations. My point is that subversion has always been a part of engagement with the biblical text and so an album like this, in a genre so seemingly oppositional, should not be passed over or seen as shocking in the history of biblical interpretation. My method in this essay then is to attempt an observational analysis of one part of a hermeneutic cycle involving texts, culture and performance.

What I am *not* doing is taking part in the conversation which decides whether metal is a 'viable' way to critique culture. In Phillipov's 2012 work 'Death Metal and Music Criticism' she deftly shows that the focus when extreme metal is discussed is often the 'political questions', such as an anti-Christian, or anti-authoritarian stance, she writes '*For example, Taylor (2009) presents apocalyptic imagery and dystopian imagery in the work of bands like Black Sabbath, Judas Priest and Bolt Thrower as a form of social critique...the notion of metal as a social critique is also evident in Cordero's analysis of antichristian black and death metal, in which he sees such artists as articulating resistance to oppressive and authoritarian religious institutions.*' (pp.59-60). I wish to move the discussion sideways somewhat, taking discussion of the musical 'text' into conversation with biblical studies and its various methodologies.

It is my opinion that in engaging with a text such as the bible the metal act has already entered into the conversation between texts and cultures and that therefore, (in a similar way as scholars may do with Oratorio or Opera) the contribution of the 'metal text' to interpretation must be considered and taken seriously. I am not trying to imbue the album with value by treating it in this way, nor patronise Marduk or their fans. The album exists as a piece of cultural and counter-cultural expression and as a piece of art, this in itself makes it important in the history of reception of the bible. Whether at the end of this you consider what the band have done with the biblical text positive or negative, does not comment on the worth of the 'metal text' in question.

One further caveat – I am not asserting that what I observe here is a definitive understanding of the album, or that it is what Marduk intended the album to mean or express. It is a piece of expression which is now available for interpretation, and these is the cultural signifiers that I have found. I do not know how much biblical knowledge Marduk has though I assume the construction of the album's musical and literate elements to be deliberate and purposeful. Other assertions will be my own interpretation. In many ways I am in concord with Walser's discussion of a poststructuralist view of music which sees all signification as provisional and '*seeks for no essential truths inherent in structures, regarding all meanings as produced through the interactions of texts and readers...They articulate meanings in their dialogue with other discourses past and present and in their engagement with the hopes and fears, value and memories of the social groups and individuals. Musical analysis is itself*

the representation of one discourse in terms of another, the point being to illuminate social contexts in which both circulate.' (Walser, 1993, 30). As we are discussing the performance of a written text in the language of a different discourse, this assertion is particularly relevant to this paper. These interactions, as knotty as they may be, are what links text and culture. To put it another way, on interpretations of his work Morgan Håkansson states '*There will always be some idiots making problems, Christians or political idiots. Who cares what some lowlifes think of our art. We do what we do and if people have a problem with that they can go fuck themselves.*' (Rock Pages interview, 2007) My work sits within this context.

The verse Romans 5:12 reads 'Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.' Though the album is titled with this, it does not use the verse in quotation anywhere on the album. Rather this verse, or its reference, is used to frame and title the works included therein. It serves then as a hermeneutic key to the work in that (although the hearer of the metal text does not need to know the verse to interact with each track individually), this band have indicated that understanding this verse has some revelatory or helpful meaning for the hearer.

Framing Romans 5:12 – the album

The work of Marduk is known for its satanic, some say blasphemous, lyrics and subject matter. In the various interviews read for this paper (see bibliography) the band is described as having the aim of being the most blasphemous band in the world. Håkansson frequently talks of the band in evangelical terms 'I believe we have a message to spread.' The message is deliberately anti-Christian. In a 2013 interview on *wewither.com* he is asked a question particularly pertinent to our discussion.

Interviewer – *'there is a saying that you should know your enemy to be able to fight it. Does being a radical antichristian and not knowing the Bible and its message make sense to you?'*

Morgan – *'You definitely should know your enemy if you want to fight it right. The Bible inspires me in so many ways. My interest in reading came originally in school. First it was rather in history books, then it was the Bible. Later over the years it developed into something bigger. What really drives me is to represent the exact opposite to what Christianity stands for.'*

The artistic context of Marduk is further illuminated by being 'black metal,' part of the various genres that make up 'extreme metal'. There is no need for me to present a history of the genre 'heavy metal' here or to categorise its sub-genres here, as others can, have and will do that with better effect and accuracy to musical style (Kahn-Harris, Phillipov, Cordero etc). However, the self-definition of Marduk as 'black metal' is important and worth noting. They place themselves in an oppositional space to Christianity, and in a style of music which '*seeks to disrupt the expected conventions of pop, rock and heavy metal in an attempt to remain as inaccessible and unpalatable as possible to "mainstream" audiences.*' (Phillipov, 2012, xv). Towards the end of this paper it will be important to remember the oppositional nature of the work, and what that means in terms of interpretative context and reception of the work. If the artist means it to be critical and oppositional, can we use or interpret the work as a positive work on the text?

The biblical text as a hermeneutic key

The album itself consists of 10 tracks, with a running time of just over an hour. The subject matter is death. Giving the title 'Romans 5:12' has led critics to muse on whether this is a concept album, based on this verse. Håkansson says not, but rather that the theme is death, particularly in the baroque period. To wewither.com he says, there is 'more of a red line running through each track reflecting the title... I think that phrase really captures the spirit of the album. The lyrics don't all fit together, but they certainly all have the same basic theme.'

The biblical verse comes from Paul's epistle to the Romans, which is contained within the New Testament. The letter to the Romans is not an easy letter to understand, and yet is the basis of much theology of the post-reformation era. The finer points of Paul's arguments within the letter not only cause debate amongst the best biblical and textual scholars, but also within churches, movements and denominations for centuries.⁷² I have decided therefore to start by introducing some basic points about the letter, and then maintaining my observations based on what can reasonably be picked up from the basic text itself. This is similar to my approach to the text of the album – both 'texts' will be viewed on their own terms and then in light of one another to test what useful observations can be made about either one.

So, some basics. Romans is a letter. This seems an obvious point but it is worth highlighting the nature of the work – it is from someone, to someone else. It has a deliberate rhetoric designed for that specific audience. Much like Marduk's album, the epistle has a message: it is persuasive; it is meant to effect the reader/hearer. Despite the often familiar tone within the letter, Paul does not know the Roman community. Unlike his other letters which are written to communities which he founded, the letter to the Romans is meant to introduce the man and his ideas to this group in the hope that they will receive and support him as a leader if he visits.

Explaining the relationship between humankind, God and Christ is the thrust of chapters 1-8 in the letter, and it is within this discussion that we find our key text, Romans 5:12. In chapter 5 of the letter Paul has started to explain what he believes about the position of humankind in relation to God, and the necessity for the coming of Christ, his death and his resurrection. Chapter 5:12 is a statement of the fall of humankind and its consequences. Chapter 5:11 is a statement about reconciliation to God through Christ. The proceeding discussion twists and turns around Paul's understanding of sacred history – he continues to expand the discussion into an Adam/Christ typology by which humanity can see itself moved from one state (sin and therefore dead) to another (Christ and therefore resurrection); he comments on the place of the Abrahamic covenant with God; the imagery is of slavery (to sin and to God)(ch 6), of struggle in the body with sin (ch 7) and glory (ch 8). It is a text that does not shy away from the more down to earth issues of a life of faith.

The album *Romans 5:12* then is a small window into a whole conversation about death, resurrection and hope. It takes, expands and muses on a desolate

⁷² Discussions can be found in works such as Donfried, K (1991) *The Romans Debate*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic; Fitzmeyer, J (2007) *Romans (Anchor Bible Commentary)*. Cambridge: Yale University Press; Dunn, J (1988), *Romans 1-8 (Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 38A)*. Thomas Nelson Publishers.

statement of the position of man to God. As mentioned previously knowing this is not a requirement for interacting with the album, but there are a number of images and motifs to which it adds depth, and we can certainly observe the unity that the title brings to the album. For example the individual tracks for the album focus on death and hopelessness in different ways, however the verse in its biblical context links a number of phrases:

‘The Levelling Dust’
 ‘one birthright’ in ‘*Cold Mouth Prayer*’,
 ‘ever since the applebite, Deathened’ in ‘*Imago Mortis*’,
 ‘he of our own flesh that shall mark the fall’ in ‘*Through The Belly of Damnation*’
 ‘within sin dwellest death’ in ‘*Vanity of Vanities*’

The image of Adam, a man of dust, a fall that condemned every generation since, can be traced throughout these songs. Similarly, the hopelessness of man’s situation in the face of death. In both ‘Cold Mouth Prayer’ and ‘Imago Mortis’ the futility of position, wealth or power are hailed:

‘And in dust be equal made.
 Within the hollow crown keeps Death, his court.’
 (Cold Mouth Prayer)

‘Today King, tomorrow worms and cold in mouth,
 A reach for purity, through decay, through black soil excrements,
 None shall stand before the Lord of the Death-winged Dart.’
 (Imago Mortis)

Pauls understanding of the place of humankind helps places this futility in a wider context, and it can be claimed that Marduk are not interested in this context. However, the context allows the hearer a further engagement with the Christian material, and opens up the sarcasm of the songs to a new degree. In Imago Mortis the lyrics read
 ‘Sack of maggots, maggot sack,
 Hopeless pile of hopeless bones,
 So this was His holy plan for you?’
 (Imago Mortis)

The taunt is clear in any reading, man is merely flesh and bone, born to die; but in the context of Romans chapter 5 they offer a greater challenge. Is the plan Paul lays out – to be saved by Christ – also a foolish concept? The wider ones reading of the verse, the louder the taunt.

Biblical images are not simple, and they sit not only within a wider context of literature but also of cultural history and interpretation. Using the biblical verse as a title, and knowing that this is a biblical verse, Marduk do two important things. Firstly, they acknowledge the ubiquitous nature of the biblical text. They expect their fans to be able to recognise a bible reference and to look it up. Some element of biblical literacy is expected, even if it is only that the book is there and is special to some. Secondly, they challenge the historically accepted nature of the bible as sacred, special or to be revered. There is no reverence here, but there is acknowledgement of its special nature for some readers and a desire to challenge its statements.

These two things are important to understanding the place of the album within a western judeo-christian background, and in understanding it as a piece of

oppositional art. It also challenged preconceived notions of who 'owns' a text, and controls its use and interpretation.

This brings us to the second facet of this paper – the album as exegesis of the biblical text.

The album as an exegetical tool

Works such as Bach's St John Passion, Handel's 'Messiah', or Verdi's Nabucco are often discussed as pieces of musical exegesis of biblical texts. It is not necessary for the text to be quoted directly for this to be the case. Exegesis is a critical explanation or engagement with a text. St John's passion follows liturgical conventions, Nabucco expands the story in arias and narration, and the Messiah places scripture in light of scripture, encouraging the hearer to understand Isaiah as referencing the Messiah of the title. They are exegetical because they take the biblical text, encounter it, and then explain/describe its meaning through the use of music and performance. They comment on the meaning of the text. I assert that this is what is happening with this album.

There are a number of elements that need to be considered in looking at how the album exposes the meaning of the biblical text-musical and lyrical.

The lyrics of the album, as written, are an easy place to start in any critical comment. Every song displays a nihilism and despair at the state of humanity. In many ways this is a very protestant, reformation reading of the letter to the Romans – within man there is no hope of salvation. This makes sense of the Swedish background of the band, that the cultural understanding passed down of the Church and this passage is that humankind is hopeless flesh in the face of the wrath of God.

The lyrics of a number of the tracks encourage the reader/hearer to encounter the wider biblical context behind the verse. The track 'Imago Mortis' places the verse within the context of the Genesis story with the phrase 'ever since the applebite, deathened!' but moves the listener to dwell on the cross of Christ. The fourth stanza reads:

'Behold, one who moments ago, at the height of power,
Received worship from kneeling crowds,
Now himself cast down by death's dominion,
Bears witness to the whole world's face:
Cinis ater et ossa'

The text is read with the image of the cross of Christ. Christ's death and man's fate are framed in the same terms with the same hopelessness.

The track 'Through the Belly of Damnation' starts with a passage reminiscent of an earlier passage in the letter to the Romans itself where Paul accuses the world of ignoring the evidence of God for worship of our own form and physicality:

'Condemnation, the air lies thick with sin and dust
High on conceit, from the frantic worship of the Carnal and the Vain
And judgement came on sturdy wings,
Dressed on the ashes of yesterday's kings'

One of the most interesting intertextual references within the work is the track 'Vanity of Vanities'. Here, Marduk encourage us to hear/read Romans 5:12 (the verse) in light of the beginning of a book of the Old Testament – Eccle-

siastes/Qoheleth. The book itself is a piece of 'wisdom literature'. The writer muses on the point of creation and concludes that everything is 'vanity', or in a more up to date translation, everything is meaningless. It is a text that lends itself perfectly to a nihilistic world view. Marduk do a beautiful exposition of the subject matter of Ecclesiastes. The writer of Ecclesiastes covers the physical world, beauty, nature, the life of man, the idea of money and concludes everything is meaningless; Marduk write:

Thou fair one, behold these bones,
 Thou learned one, see these empty skulls
 Thou wealthy one, consider this dust,
 Thou thrall, see the rest,
 Thou king see the destiny

The song is related to Romans not only by the album's title but by use of the phrase 'Within sin dwellest death', a phrase which echoes Paul's writing in Romans 5:12 that death is caused by sin.

The result of this nuanced and intriguing comparison of these two texts (Romans 5:12 and Ecclesiastes 1:1) when taken out of their immediate context is a remarkable and fascinating intertextual reading. They exist together in a canon (the bible) but are rarely read in concert – Marduk here provoke the reader/hearer to understand futility read throughout the whole biblical canon. The texts are also similar in their wider context: if one reads Paul's understanding of humankind's position as futile and sinful, one needs to acknowledge the next step in the argument – that Christ is triumphant and 'saves' humankind from its fate. Interestingly this is also the conclusion of the writer of Ecclesiastes – though all is meaningless, God is not. It is only God that gives meaning to all the things that are mentioned.

We do see one nod to the traditional understanding of the letter to the Romans. In 'Voices from Avignon' the lyrics read:

'Speak through me, Speak through me.
 The sin must be washed away through blood,
 Dream through me, called to a new life through death'

The image of life through death, and that blood must wash away the sin of humankind is a classical theology of substitutionary atonement: the idea that the wrath of God must be satisfied, as the wages of sin are death. This is accomplished by the death of Jesus on the cross, and is therefore seen as a victorious image. This is a very short and inadequate explanation of the theology, however, one can see how the lyrics speak to such a theological interpretation. This final song in the album hints at a possible solution and challenges the hearer – 'but what shall you reach for when all colours fall?'

Though this focus on the lyrics has been important in understanding how the biblical text and the texts of the album are interwoven, the music plays an even more important part in the exegesis of the text. Harkansson says '*We do what we believe in, which is that our music should reflect our lyrics and the other way round in order for both to come forth as a whole*' (to John Stefanis, 2007). The use of classic elements of black metal (blast beats, dissonance, unrelenting drum rhythms, obfuscated vocals) is not happenstance but rather a conscious choice of expression that melds with the subject matter. The atmosphere of darkness and unease felt in much of the album is deliberate and important to the interpretation of the text. One cannot listen to the album and hear Romans 5:12 as a hopeful phrase, the album plays on the desperate nature of the text, leading the hearer through elements of anger, despair, beauty

and desperation. I cannot enter into a discussion of all tracks due to the length of this paper but will highlight aspects of the aural experience that struck me. Marduk vary the tempo and instruments used on the album. Where an organ playing a funeral dirge and military drums slowly move us through '1651', blast beats and a vomitus scream from vocalist Mortuus lead us into Limbs of Worship. Where a pulsing dissonance sets the scene for 'The Levelling Dust', there is no easing the hearer in to 'Cold Mouth Prayer' where the vocal tone is mocking the very idea of any hope. The listener cannot rest easy with this album or be sure of what is coming next.

Of particular interest is the use of intro's and outro's on tracks, some tracks being introduced slowly, others exploding with force and passion. The first track begins with dark, broken noise before the guitar comes in setting a scene of unease. The vocal intro is a scream with a strangled tone, again focussing the listener on the pain and strain involved. The outro is another buzzing, dissonant tone. The track 'Accuser/Opposer' however uses latin to bookend the musical expression of the band. The intro is a chant of an exorcism rite which declares the power of God, the outro a piece of Gregorian chant again which celebrates glory, this time of Christ and of Mary. The piece works as a hymn to Satan's power but the latin is proclaiming the opposite message. The hearer is distanced from the Christian words, they are unattainable even when understandable, while the plea to the opposite power is accessible, sing-able even, using a guest vocalist who creates melody.

The vocal tone is worth noting. The vocals are often 'unpleasant', reminiscent of screaming, often open throated to sound pained, stretched. The hearer of this album is not faced with totally obscured lyrics, but is guided toward terms by the clarity placed on only certain lyrics, ('Imago Mortis', or 'Accuser/Opposer'). The hearer is drawn to those particular words and the impact or tone of them. Sarcasm, such as in 'Cold Mouth Prayer' is obvious and directive to the listener as to how to hear these ideas. This listening experience would compare more to the experience of a non-latin speaker listening to Mozart's Requiem, than someone listening to a track by a more mainstream band. Where lyrics are unattainable the hearer is compelled to listen to the musical arrangement as a guide.

The vocals are only one instrument within the metal text, they do not govern the 'feeling' of the piece, rather, they play with the instruments to create one sound. They are powerful when heard and when in silence. The 'meaning' of the songs does not reside in the vocals. The 'black metal text' is not centred on understanding the words. Phillipov (2012) suggests that this distortion or confusion of sound in death metal vocals is a challenge to the 'phonologocentrism' of modern music (p.77), as it destabilises the place of connection between artist and audience in 'hearing the words' of a song.

The choice to play in these ways is fascinating and deserves more study than I can give. For this microcosm I can say that I find the fear, desperation and discomfort the music aims to engender fits remarkably well with a reformation reading of Romans 5:12. Humankind is in a disrupted state, fallen and despairing without hope if it is outside Christ. Sin has led to death. In Handel's Messiah there is a section based on 1 Corinthians 15 'For as in Adam all die', the section is slow and mournful, in a minor key and full of sustained chords. Taken on its own it is a depressed expression of one statement of biblical text. This album performs a similar expression for Romans 5:12. Though one could critique that pulling the text out of context loses the 'full meaning', it is in fact

a type of engagement that is often done by preachers and commentators, it just happens to exist in an extreme form of heavy metal.

Conclusion

There are a number of ways in which the use of the bible by heavy metal bands challenges and provokes traditional interpretations and studies, and that the bible can provide exploration of darker emotions. I hope that in this paper I have shown that the position of black metal as an extreme genre is only a small part of what makes this work interesting. The notion of this band as satanic, but engaging so fully with the text, gives us an insight into 'oppositional exegesis' and challenges notions of ownership of biblical discourse. The distinct embrace of darkness within the original text allows the exegete to see different intertextual or intercultural connections. One key area where this album challenges conventional scholarship is in the construction of the musical performance not around vocals/lyrics but around the sound as a whole. If Phillipov is right and such vocals challenge the 'phonologocentrism' of modern music, then I propose that the use of music as exegesis challenges the 'logocentrism' of classical scholarship -challenging the biblical scholar to investigate different types of meaning and expression, and challenging them to think of what constitutes a text. The history of biblical criticism has centred on the way 'words' are displayed, even when in art or music; black metal challenges the scholar to think in different terms. In fact, as the first receiving audiences of biblical texts were most likely hearers, rather than readers, this type of exposition may be more enlightening than I have expressed here.

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