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1. An Interpretive Model of Privileged Contempt

Understanding Disdain Toward Those of Lower Status, from Ancient Israel to the New American Politics

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Abstract

Biblical studies has made strides in drawing meaningful connections between systemic poverty in the biblical worlds and today. However, perhaps just as important as connecting the tools and effects of these systems is understanding a human trait that makes their implementation possible: our propensity to act cruelly toward those of lower status. This essay draws upon psychological research on privileged contempt to offer an interpretive and heuristic model that responds to Job's lament, "those at ease have contempt for misfortune." The model of privileged contempt is first deployed as an exegetical tool through which to consider the potential psychological underpinnings of biblical texts that admonish abuses of privilege. Its lens is then shifted to offer a biblical critique of the anti-poor and anti-marginalized attitudes found in the new politics of Trumpian Republicanism.

Keywords: Bible, politics, psychology, privilege, liberation, exegesis, hermeneutics

Introduction

My primary areas of research draw upon economic-anthropological models to reveal the connections and disparities that exist between systemic poverty in the Ancient Near East and today. Over the past two years I have discovered that the field of psychology has the potential to effectively compliment anthropological interpretations of biblical texts that chastise corruption. Whether the corruption is political, religious, or economic – it is often a combination of these three tightly entwined worlds – recent psychological discoveries offer new paths through which to both understand these ancient texts, while also enabling them to more effectively address abusive power dynamics in the modern world.

The interpretive model offered here is rooted in social-psychological studies that reveal a human propensity to show contempt toward those of lower status, leading to callousness and unethical behavior when engaging with those of lower status. This *psychology of privileged contempt*, which appears to be rooted not only in cultural traits but also in human neurological makeup, has the potential to open numerous biblical texts in fruitful ways. Exegetical and hermeneutical interpretations of law codes, prophetic oracles, and narrative stories in the Bible that condemn abuses of power against perceived inferiors can be expanded upon through this psychological discovery. In an earlier essay (Coomber 2019), this psychological model was employed to revisit Hebrew Bible texts that attack those who weaponized their privilege to take advantage of their societies' most vulnerable members. This essay turns the interpretive lens in another direction: considering how this social-psychological model might assist modern biblical readers in more effectively addressing systemic injustice in their communities.

Upon receiving an invitation to contribute to the 2020 Kripke Symposium on Religion and the New Politics, set in a time of family separations at the U.S.-Mexico border, it seemed pertinent to turn this model toward Trumpian policies that display contempt for those of lower status. Since the symposium, the Trump administration's responses to the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter demonstrations that followed police killings of several African Americans have offered additional examples of Trumpian politics' contempt for the poor, oppressed, and vulnerable to which numerous biblical texts might speak.

In no way does this essay include any attempt to psychoanalyze Donald J. Trump or any of his associates. Even if the author had direct access to these individuals, such a task is far beyond his areas of expertise, and any such exercise would be reckless. Rather, the objective of this essay is to demonstrate how the psychology of privilege can shine a heuristic light on connections between the abject cruelty exhibited by certain Trump policies toward those of lower status and comparable attitudes and actions found in the Bible.

Studies on the Psychology of Privileged Contempt

The idea of employing the psychology of privileged contempt as an interpretive model arose when a student related Job 12:5a, "Those at ease have contempt for misfortune," to having witnessed a food-stamp recipient being shamed at a grocery store. Asking the class how someone with means could be so callous toward someone with so little, the other students offered several hypotheses, ranging from sociopathy to an unintended side effect of the American Dream: the assertion that anyone in the United States can achieve financial independence if they are willing to work for it. The class did not think that they had

satisfactorily answered how business executives can sleep after further enriching themselves by exporting their workers' jobs or how those in luxury can demand yet more at the expense of the poor. Perhaps Job's acknowledgement, "Those at ease have contempt for misfortune," provides an essential foundation for addressing systemic poverty: taking the reader directly to its roots.

Paul Piff, Stéphane Côté, Michèle Lemont, and Michael Kraus are among those who study how social-class standing uniquely shapes people's feelings, behaviors, and unconscious thoughts toward others. While a casual observer can list numerous examples of people using their status to take advantage of others, research on privileged contempt uncovers the deep psychological mechanisms that drive this behavior: mechanisms that alter human thought patterns and skew perceptions.

The notion that behavioral disparities exist between different social classes is not new. Information pertaining to a person's class status can be readily deduced with a degree of accuracy by verbal cadence and vocabulary, dress and social mannerisms, as well as by gait and posture. As early as the first half of the nineteenth century, Émile Durkheim and Karl Marx had drawn connections between social class and cross-class social engagement (Kraus and Piff 2012, 546). Later psychological studies revealed that a number of these behaviors had been influenced by income. Today, a current strain of social psychological research focuses not on *whether* social class shapes an individual's behavior, but on *how* it alters that individual's psychological processes.

According to Piff (2014), there are two primary influential markers of those who live at the higher end of the class spectrum: elevated rank and access to ample resources. These markers derive from the following advantages:

1. greater control over one's life;
2. a higher degree of protection from external financial influences, such as unexpected shifts in the economy or a sudden loss in employment, and;
3. lower levels of anxiety attributed to long-term concerns, such as the need to save for retirement or for educational expenses.

The effects of these factors result in a greater degree of personal choice for people of elevated rank, leading them to exhibit greater independence, heightened self-focus, and higher levels of narcissism due to an increased sense of entitlement. The effects of these factors on the human psyche translate into five primary characteristics that tend to separate those on either side of the class spectrum:

1. Self-focused patterns of thought and behavior;
2. Lowered awareness of others;
3. Disregard for the consequences of one's actions toward others;
4. Feelings of entitlement;
5. Decreased ability to identify others' emotions (Piff, Stancatoa, et al. 2012, 4086).

In addition to affecting privileged people's perceptions of others, psychologists find that these traits also shape elites' strategies for coping with societal stress. Piff et al. find that those who live in societies' upper echelons tend to turn to an accumulation of material wealth as a primary mechanism for coping with social chaos and perceived threats to their social environments (Piff, Martinez, et al. 2012, 950). At the other end of the class spectrum, the primary means for independently coping with societal stress involves the development and maintenance of social connections, leading to greater interdependent and other-focused behavior. Lower-class members' community-focused strategies are the result of a number of factors.

The subordinate rank of lower-class individuals, coupled with limited access to such resources as surplus capital and education, leads to lives lived with fewer choices. The result, laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic, is that those of low-class status tend to be far more vulnerable to external influences, including unforeseen health costs, sudden loss of employment, and downturns in local and national economies. Living with increased vulnerability results in a person's psychological development being set in an environment of highly limited personal choice. Consequently, the preferred mechanisms for dealing with societal distress are found in a greater orientation toward community structures (Piff, Martinez, et al. 2012, 950). Interestingly, many of these processes are also prevalent among non-human primates: perhaps indicating that the effects of privilege have been with humans since the dawn of their psychological development.

Referring to research of our non-human primate cousins, Kraus and Piff write:

In stable hierarchies within non-human species, low ranking individuals tend to show higher chronic levels of cortisol, increased aggression, and reduced access to group resources. In contrast, high ranking non-humans tend to enjoy more grooming partners and increased reproductive opportunities. (2012, 548)

Also in common with the behavior of other primates, humans sort themselves into positions of lower and higher ranks that are based on such dimensions as physical attributes, social behaviors, and enduring traits like intelligence and extroversion. Such class-based patterns affect numerous areas of a human's psychological makeup, including their overall psychological health (Kraus and Piff 2012, 548). If people's responses to privilege are rooted in early human development – even prior to the emergence of *homo sapiens* – this would explain why privileged contempt is a cross-cultural phenomenon.

These characteristics and class members' perceptions of others – whether higher or lower – are both amplified and also reinforced along with their psychological development as humans divide, isolate, and raise their children within the class hierarchies into which they were born. The result tends to be a profound internalization and solidification of class perception. Kraus and Piff write, “Social class is not simply a trait along which individuals vary, but is instead a social context that individuals inhabit in enduring and pervasive ways over time . . . [spending] the majority of their daily lives in contexts that are sorted largely in terms of social class” (2012, 547). This welding of class status into a child's psychological development can have profound effects on the human psyche. Numerous experiments – detailed below – have drawn the same general conclusion: people who are raised with higher-class status tend to display contempt for those of lower status. At the same time, the continual reinforcement of ideas about their own societal potential and roles often leads those of lower

status frequently to share a similar level of contempt for themselves, although this trait is not ubiquitous.

Evidence for the Psychological Effects of Privilege and Lower-Class Standing

The theory that privilege alters the psyche in ways that lead to increased narcissism and an elevated sense of self-entitlement dovetails with the research of Michèle Lamont. In her sociological studies on the moral perspectives of working-class American men, Lamont found that lower-class individuals exhibited an increased sense of duty when it came to spending time and energy on taking care of one's neighbors, resulting in strong social networks for the provision of mutual aid (2002, 109). At the same time, her research revealed that people from the other side of the class spectrum tended to value independence and exhibit less motivation to engage in supportive networks.

In regards to community interactions between lower and upper-class individuals, Lamont references a mechanic by the name of Richard Wrong, who offered a perspective on the social gulf that he saw between himself and upper-class members of his society. Wrong believed that the divide was largely the result of disparaging attitudes that the wealthy had toward the working class; he believed that the rich saw him and his peers as both inferior and also weaker than the wealthy (Lamont 2002, 109). Tim Williams, another laborer, perceived a disparity between the ethical conduct of higher- and lower-class individuals, which he attributed to the competitive nature of those of higher status. Williams spoke of wealth in the terms of a disorder that might resemble an addiction. He told Lamont, "When you get that almighty dollar, you hate to lose it. So you step on somebody's feet, or somebody's hand, or somebody's head to make sure you stay on top, which is not the greatest thing in the word [sic] . . . The lower middle class people, they got nothing to lose by being honest" (Lamont 2002, 109–10). These workers saw connections between the competition and ambition they saw among the upper class and the violation of "much-valued aspects of traditional morality, such as honesty" (Lamont 2002, 110).

Research conducted by Piff unearths the degree to which those of higher status will abandon their morals, and has produced intriguing results. Piff's work not only supports Williams' observations on connections between upper-class status and immoral behavior, it also demonstrates just how quickly one's morals may be jettisoned when status is achieved: even in cases in which the status is artificial. The following subsections present experiments that demonstrate the power and scope of privileged contempt.

Presenting Subjects with Hypothetical Situations

Controlling for sex, age, and ethnicity, Piff's test subjects were given eight scenarios in which a person either unjustly takes something or unjustly benefits from a particular situation. Each of the test subjects, who had reported their social class using the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status, were then asked whether or not they would be likely to act in a similar manner. The experiment concluded that members of the upper class had an increased propensity to act unethically as compared with lower class test subjects (Piff, Stancato, et al. 2012, 1).

Observing the Driving Patterns in Relation to Class Status

Another one of Piff's experiments focused on a seemingly mundane activity in the United States: driving a car. This study sought to determine the effects of privilege through the driving behaviors of upper- and lower-class motorists. On three separate occasions between two and five o'clock in the afternoon at a busy intersection in the San Francisco Bay area, observers recorded the behavior of 152 drivers as they approached a marked – but unprotected – pedestrian crosswalk.

Blind to the purpose of the study they were conducting, the observers positioned themselves outside of the motorists' direct lines of sight and recorded their reactions to pedestrians either about to enter or activity crossing the marked crosswalk. In the state of California cars are legally obligated to yield (Piff, Stancatoa, et al. 2012, 1). In order to mitigate either ethnic or gender bias, the sex and ethnic background of the observer-pedestrians were alternated and recorded. The experiment's observers cataloged the perceived status of the approaching vehicles, as determined by their make, age, and physical appearance. The observers also recorded the drivers' perceived sex and age and whether or not she or he appeared to have seen the pedestrian (Piff, Stancatoa, et al. 2012, 4–5). To further root out potential factors that could confound the experiment's results, observers noted whether or not the automobile was in the lane closest to the pedestrian, ensured that the pedestrian was alone at the crosswalk, and that the pedestrian entered the crosswalk when the approaching vehicle was fifteen meters away. Observations were only conducted with cars that were not behind a vehicle, which could obstruct the driver's line of sight to the pedestrian who was about to enter into the crosswalk.

The experiment revealed that regardless of either the driver's age and gender or the amount of traffic present and time of day, motorists driving high-end vehicles were about two-times as likely to cut off other drivers and nearly four times as likely to cut off pedestrians in the crosswalk – thus breaking California state law – than were drivers of low-end vehicles (Piff, Stancatoa, et al. 2012, 2).

This experiment is of particular value in that it reveals that privilege's effects on moral and legal conduct is not limited to situations in which clear hierarchical parameters have been established, such as through the floor plan of a work-place environment or the visible status that comes with living in a gated community. Privileged contempt, as demonstrated by drivers of higher-status vehicles, can be observed in a scenario where a system of laws gives clear socioeconomic equality to all drivers sharing a city street.

Observing the Effects of Imaginary Privilege

Unlike the previous two experiments, which measured the behaviors of those with real privilege, Piff and his colleagues conducted an experiment that tested the behavior of individuals who were given imaginary privilege for a finite period of time: a fifteen minute game of the Hasbro classic, *Monopoly*. Described in his TEDx Talk episode, "Does Money Make You Mean?" Piff (2013) and his associates engaged more than one-hundred pairs of strangers who were made to play *Monopoly* with the odds highly stacked toward one player's favor.

Prior to the start of the game, a die was cast to determine which player would sit on which side of the table. What had not been revealed to either test subject was that one of the chairs was given greater privilege than the other. The player in the less privileged chair would play with a single die and receive \$1,000 of play money each time they passed the “Go” square. The player seated on the privileged chair was given two dice with which to play – both allowing greater coverage of the board and more opportunities to pass the “Go” square, for which the player received double the amount of play money: \$2,000. Although it was obvious to both players that the privileged player’s privilege was neither real nor earned, it took an average of four minutes for the more privileged player to exhibit signs of contempt toward their opponent. More obvious signs of contempt included trash talking and avoiding eye contact with the less privileged player, even though the players were strangers who did not share a rapport that would ensure such taunting was received as amicable and socially acceptable. A subtler sign of disrespect was demonstrated by accident. Those running the test had left a snack bowl on the game table for the participants, and while not a part of the planned study, observers noticed that the more privileged players were more likely to indulge in the snacks and with greater frequency, even so far as moving the snack bowl closer to themselves and away from their less-privileged opponent (Piff 2013).

The three experiments described above neither prove that an individual of privilege will behave with contempt or unethically toward a lower-class neighbor, nor can they show that a lower-class individual will behave with greater integrity than a higher-class peer. The results of these experiments do, however, build upon a growing body of evidence which indicate how increased privilege – either real or imaginary – results in a greater frequency of self-interest, heightened disregard for the wellbeing of others, and an increased propensity toward unethical behavior towards one’s less privileged neighbors.

Why Studies on Privileged Contempt Are Beneficial to Biblical Studies

Similar to the sentiment of Job’s lament in Job 12:5a, social psychologists have found that *those at ease* tend to have contempt for the marginalized and vulnerable. In addition to shedding new light on texts that condemn abuses of power and privilege in the Bible, these studies have the potential to reveal new avenues through which biblical texts can confront privileged contempt today.

Exegetically, the idea that privilege not only alters a person’s perception of their lower status peers but also leads to an erosion of one’s ethics – including a greater propensity toward cheating and lying for personal gain – offers a new perspective through which to interpret the numerous biblical texts that condemn the cruelty of rulers, priests, and judges toward their subordinates. The psychology of privilege also has the potential to offer new insight into those biblical stories in which people become callous and unethical as they climb in status and power: consider either the disempowered Joseph of Genesis 37 as compared to Joseph the slaver and Vizier of Egypt in Genesis 47, or David the virtuous shepherd boy of 1 Samuel in contrast to 2 Samuel’s King David, who rapes Bathsheba and has her husband murdered to conceal his

treachery.¹ Hermeneutically, studies into privileged contempt have the potential to reveal connections between anti-poor sentiment in the biblical and modern worlds. Considering both the rise of biblical economics as an important sub-field of biblical studies and also increased research into how biblical poverty can connect with modern justice concerns,² the discovery of such a tool is timely.

In addition to addressing contempt itself, biblical texts that condemn privileged abuses of the vulnerable also offer warnings against the many spiritual and societal dangers that come with social stratification: a psychological model based on privilege contempt has much to offer readers of these texts. A social-psychological model of privileged contempt is beneficial for interpreting prophetic oracles, histories, and wisdom literature that condemn elites who abuse their subordinates, or for interpreting legal texts that curb privilege, like jubilee (Leviticus 25) and sabbatical (Deuteronomy 15). The following section looks to a few of these texts to consider how such a model might be applied to both the interpretation and also the reception of biblical texts.

Privileged Contempt in the Bible

Unlike in the field of psychology, biblical scholars who work to understand the motivations behind ancient texts do not have the luxury of engaging live subjects: both the biblical authors, and even their original texts, were reduced to dust millennia ago. Thus, a psychological study of biblical subjects could easily be dismissed as a fool's errand. The author would be the first to concede that any search for definitive conclusions as to the psychology of the biblical authors would be foolhardy. While archaeology offers evidence of social stratification through city planning and personal possessions, the ancients' attitudes and thought processes are elusive. Those who wish to discern the psychological underpinnings of biblical texts face numerous challenges. However, the psychological model proposed here makes no such attempts; rather, it employs psychological research as a heuristic tool to ask new questions as to the meanings and potential applications of biblical texts.

A culture's societal challenges are often reflected in their texts, which is certainly true for the Bible. As to the problems that privileged contempt can cause for vulnerable citizens, the adage "where there is smoke, there is fire" can be applied to the Hebrew Bible. The authors of the Hebrew texts wrote laws, stories, and oracles that condemned those in power who used their status to unjustly extract land (1 Kings 21; Micah 2:2–4; Isaiah 5:8–10), goods (Isaiah 10:2; Amos 5:11), and even the lives (Genesis 47:13–26; Proverbs 22:7–8) of their subjects. Rather than treating these issues as exceptions to an otherwise just system, the authors often addressed these offences in systemic terms, as found in the prophetic complaints that are spread throughout Amos and Micah. Furthermore, the theme of those in power abusing the vulnerable is continually revisited by biblical authors, suggesting a recognition of connections

¹ It must be noted that this comparison was not the intent of the authors: two different texts written for two different purposes. As read narrative, however, such a transition makes for an interesting and relevant comparison.

² A brief list of scholars includes Roland Boer, Marvin Chaney, Norman Gottwald, Crystal Hall, Davis Hankins, Richard Horsley, Monica Melanchthon, Kelly Murphy, Hugh Page, Ronald Simkins, Robert Wafawanaka, and Gale Yee.

between the perpetuation of systemic poverty and class status.³ The New Testament continues the tradition of addressing privilege contempt toward vulnerable neighbors. The Gospels, Epistles, and the book of Revelation all contain passages that chastise elites' disregard for those of lower status and, as in the Hebrew Bible, offer systemic solutions to either curb or eradicate such callousness.

For the purposes of this essay, two Hebrew Bible examples that push back on the mistreatment of those of lower status by their higher-status peers are offered: the sabbatical law of Deuteronomy 15 and the story of Bathsheba and David in 2 Samuel 11–12.

The Deuteronomistic Code

In Deuteronomy 15, the Deuteronomistic code sets out a radical expectation for life in the land of Israel: after entering the land being promised by YHWH, every Israelite was to have all that they needed. In the deity's voice, the authors of Deuteronomy 15:4–5 proclaim,

There will be no poor among you – because YHWH your god will bless you in the land that YHWH your god is giving you as an inheritance to possess – if only you listen to the voice of YHWH your god, to carefully preserve this entire commandment that I charge to you today.

However, it is only a few verses later that the deity foresees that people will fail in their charge to listen to YHWH's voice – there will be those who neglect to listen and break those laws that the deity established to both mitigate and also alleviate poverty. To this end, YHWH proclaims that “the poor will never cease to be in your land” (Deuteronomy 15:11). Here the authors acknowledge that any economic system – even one designed by YHWH – is destined to be abused. The authors of Deuteronomy 15:11, elites themselves, addressed the problem of systemic poverty with eyes wide open; those in power will use their power to benefit themselves at the cost of others.

Whereas Deuteronomy 15:11 is frequently interpreted as a resignation that there is nothing that can be done about poverty – an interpretation that particularly serves the interests of those in power – Norman Gottwald (2014) argues that Deuteronomy 15:11 is a call to action in a perpetual struggle against the exploitation of the vulnerable. Addressing a failure by biblical readers to consider the economic forces behind Deuteronomy 15, Gottwald writes,

For instance, the reading of Deuteronomy 15 is regularly perverted by highlighting “the poor will never cease out of the land” (v. 11) to the neglect of the accompanying dictum, “but there will be no poor among you” (v. 4). Far from justifying poverty as a virtual natural phenomenon, the text is clearly saying that there will always be people who fall into poverty, but they must be cared for by an open-handed and open-hearted community (vv. 7–10). (2017, 7)

This statement is made all the more poignant upon considering that the original audience of many texts were among the elite. Sheila McGinn, Lai Ling Ngan, and Ahida Calderón Pilarski

³ M. Chaney's collection of essays and bibliography (2017) offer several studies of the systemic nature of poverty in the Hebrew Bible.

address the afterlives of Deuteronomy 15:11 in the New Testament, including a connection to Mark's, Matthew's, and John's accounts of the woman who was chastised for anointed Jesus with precious oil, which could have been sold to help the poor (Matthew 26:8–9; Mark 14:4–5; John 12:4–5). Rejecting a belief among some Christians that their mission to the impoverished is done as long as they have brought them the *word* of the gospel (no feeding required), McGinn et al. write that Jesus' invocation of Deuteronomy 15:11 in Mark 14:7 was “not a rebuke of the concern being voiced, but its intensification: the poor are always in need, and thus constitute a ceaseless claim on the faithful” (McGinn et al. 2014, 1–2).

With an acknowledgement that abuses of power were inevitable, the authors of the Deuteronomic Code mitigated the *bite*⁴ of debt systems by establishing the sabbatical year, in which all debts were to be canceled. From the viewpoint of those who found themselves needing to depend upon borrowing to get through financial crises, this dedicated year of remission, which was set to take place every seven years, offered much needed relief: it meant that debts would be a temporary burden, not a permanent one, which can happen if interest continues to build and becomes unpayable.

In a move that addressed underlying attitudes toward those in need, Deuteronomy 15:7–10 warns against engaging contemptuously with those of lower status. In YHWH's voice, the authors wrote,

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, “The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,” and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur guilt. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.

What is of particular interest in this passage is how it moves beyond simply instructing the lender to engage in certain acts: particular attention is given to the lender's attitude toward the borrower. Not only are those who are privileged enough to lend to do so *liberally* and with an open hand, they are to be careful that they neither show nor experience contempt for the person who comes to them for help. Considering that modern social-psychological studies on privileged contempt are thought to be universally human, it is arguable that Deuteronomy 15 was addressing such psychological reactions toward those of lower status, even if the authors could not have articulated this in psychological terms. In addition to offering insights as to why the stipulations set out in Deuteronomy 15:7–10 may have been necessary, a model of

⁴ The Hebrew word for *bite* (*neshek*) – as in the bite of a dog – is the same word used for the taking of interest on debts.

psychological privilege helps to connect this ancient text to modern instances of privileged contempt.⁵

King David's Contempt for Bathsheba, Uriah, and Israel

As with legal texts, the psychology of privileged contempt has much to offer biblical narratives that portray elites who act contemptuously toward those of lower status. A particularly interesting example is found in the story of Bathsheba's rape by David in 2 Samuel 11–12. The story of David and Bathsheba offers a powerful example of the consequences that can arise when those in positions of privilege act contemptuously toward people of lower status. This story from 2 Samuel is a particularly interesting case-study in that it involves a back story that reveals a transformation in ethical and moral conduct between an individual who had little privilege but was then thrust into a seat of great privilege: King David.

Prior to becoming the second king of Israel, David was born of relatively low status as the youngest son of either seven or eight sons of Jesse, depending on the source,⁶ and is characterized as both an extraordinarily humble and pious servant of God. The story of 2 Samuel 11–12, which is set after David takes the throne, reveals the tyrannical behavior of a king who abuses his power to commit rape and murder, leaving no small number of secondary deaths and destruction in his wake. The numerous sins committed by David are born out of the contemptuous ways in which he dealt with those beneath him in status. The first sin involves the breach of an Ancient Near Eastern expectation that kings go into battle alongside their soldiers. As Israel put the Ammonites under siege during the battle of Rabbah, David not only remained at his palace in Jerusalem, he engaged in lechery from his rooftop, during which he saw a woman bathing: Bathsheba, the wife of one of David's soldiers, Uriah the Hittite (11:1–3). Through his desire for Bathsheba this series of his sins come in rapid succession, revealing David's murderous disregard for those beneath him.

First, David has Bathsheba brought to his palace where he rapes and impregnates her. While the authors may not have considered this attack to have been a crime against Bathsheba but against her husband – usurping Uriah's right to sexual and reproductive control over his wife – with modern understandings of sex and power relations, readers should not consider the encounter consensual. The power disparity between a king and the wife of a soldier, who was most likely foreign and out of her cultural element, renders David's act as comparable to having sex with an inebriated person. As a man who could easily determine whether or not Bathsheba and her husband live or die, Bathsheba was in no position to freely refuse the king's advances.

Realizing how Bathsheba's pregnancy could compromise the king's standing, David showed contempt toward his victims – Bathsheba and Uriah – by attempting to cover up his transgressions through bringing Uriah home from battle and ordering him to “go down to

⁵ The Priestly law of jubilee in Leviticus 25 offers another example of a Hebrew legal text that has much to gain through the lens of privileged contempt. For a treatment on that passage, read through the light of the heuristic model presented here, see Coomber 2019, 95–96.

⁶ 1 Samuel 16:10 and 17:12 state that David was one of eight brothers, and 1 Chronicles 2:12–16 claims he was the youngest of seven.

your house and wash your feet” (2 Samuel 11:8).⁷ This attempted coverup breached a cultural taboo of the authors’ time: usurping a man’s family lineage. The attempt fails, however, as Uriah refuses David’s command to go home to his wife. Uriah says to his king:

The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing. (2 Samuel 11:11)

Uriah’s response creates a stinging contrast between King David and his subordinate; Uriah’s reasoning highlights David’s depravity by exemplifying the sort of loyalty that a pre-monarchical David would have shown toward his comrades. However, the shame King David should have experienced through Uriah’s words fails to reach him, and the king’s contempt for his subjects takes yet another sinister turn.

With complete disregard for either Bathsheba and Uriah’s marriage or his soldier’s life, David enacted a battlefield conspiracy to hide his crimes. In a plot designed to have Uriah killed at the hands of the Ammonites, David’s conspiracy victimized more than David’s intended target: the plot led to the death of other soldiers, presumably leaving widows and orphans behind. After a bereaved Bathsheba completed her mourning ritual, the war widow was forced to marry her rapist and the man responsible for her husband’s murder. The story culminates with its final victim in 2 Samuel 12: the infant boy who was born out of David’s attack on Bathsheba dies as a direct result of his father’s sins.

The work of social psychologists on privileged contempt has much to offer a story such as that of David and Bathsheba. A psychological condition that renders those with increased privilege more prone to decreased empathy and an increased propensity for acting unethically toward those of lower status can help modern interpreters to draw more meaning out of this story. This psychological model offers insights as to how a humble and unassuming character like the younger David, found in 1 Samuel – who both believed in and also adhered to a moral matrix – was transformed into the sort of ruler that readers find in 2 Samuel 11. Additionally, a psychological approach offers an explanation as to how status could have blinded David to the degree to which he had fallen – when the prophet Nathan confronts the king in 2 Samuel 12:13, David rather stupidly replies what is painfully obvious to the audience: “I have sinned against YHWH.”

In addition to offering new understandings of the story of David and Bathsheba, the psychology of privileged contempt can also emphasize the warning that is found within the tale: power and privilege do not only have the power to corrupt, but they can corrupt even the best of us, as occurred in the case of Jesse’s youngest son, David. The following section considers how the psychological model presented here and in tandem with the new politics of Trumpian Republicanism can provide effective interpretive tools through which to confront the various forms of injustice that stem from the callousness that leaders, like King David, all-too-often display toward their subjects.

⁷ The Hebrew word for “feet” (*regel*) often served as a euphemism for genitalia, creating a double entendre.

Biblical Contempt for Misfortune and Trumpian Republicanism

The Bible is able to offer useful lenses through which to consider modern societal challenges, regardless of the reader's faith or non-faith perspective, because so many of the challenges it confronts are timeless. While the world of the Trump Presidency was vastly different from that of King David, the contempt that rulers tend to demonstrate toward the marginalized are not far afield. Instances of elites feeding an insatiable hunger for even greater levels of power and wealth at the cost of those who struggle to keep their families alive is a predominant feature of ancient and modern societies alike. Whether in the ancient villages of Judah or among the vast metropolises of modern China, examples of privileged contempt exist all around us. This section considers the prevalence of such contempt in the context of Trumpian Republicanism, and how a psychology-of-privilege-hermeneutic might provide a new foundation for biblically-rooted challenges to such persistent problems as income-disparity and other political realizations of anti-poor sentiment.

There are two primary reasons that Trumpian Republicanism provides an interesting case study for considering how a model of privileged contempt can open new avenues for confronting injustice through a biblical lens. First, when it comes to programs and proposals that cut aid to the poor and redirect those funds toward the wealthy, this administration rarely offers a lofty rationale. Whereas previous administrations attempted to convey noble motives behind simultaneously cutting aid and giving gifts to elites as noble, President Trump bypassed hollow appeals to a greater good.

The second reason that Trumpian Republicanism makes for an interesting case study is that this form of politics does not appear to follow any discernable political or moral ideology. Whereas the Republican Party has prided itself on fiscal conservatism and Christian moral piety, such features have become tangential. Beyond an *anything goes* attitude pertaining to moral conduct – including attacks on women, the disabled, and racial and ethnic minorities – clearing demonstrators to hold a Bible in front of cameras appears to be about as confessional as the executive gets.

As to Trumpian Republicanism's political philosophy, it appears to be rooted entirely in *self-interest* and *self-preservation*; even winning elections appears to have become secondary, as seen in Trump's primary takedowns of fellow Republicans who dare to disagree with him. This unmooring from the complexities involved in adhering to a discernable political philosophy enables one to focus on self-enrichment and other interests, as seen in President Trump profiteering off of his political position, including the use of his hotels and golf courses for official political events. Such an indiscernible political agenda combined with the open disdain that the Trump administration has displayed toward those of low status shines light on both the issue of privileged contempt and also potential ways in which biblical texts might be brought into the conversation.

Trumpian Republicanism and an Open Disdain for the Poor

Trumpian Republicanism is not unique in showing contempt for the poor; consider President Bill Clinton's welfare reforms during the 1990s, in which he transferred the flow of aid for the impoverished to state coffers, where they are frequently withdrawn to close holes

in state budgets rather than aid those in need.⁸ What makes the Trump administration's actions unique is the aforementioned openness with which they display contempt for those of lower status. Even with a casual look at President Trump's initiatives and statements, including disparaging the arrival of Latin and African immigrants who come from "shithole countries" (Dawsey 2018), it is not difficult to discern a celebration of the powerful and a callousness toward suffering of marginalized groups. There are many examples upon which to draw, including the separation of refugee children from their parents – which is proving to be permanent, in many cases – and the slashing of benefits for disabled citizens to an inability to empathize with protests calling for racial justice. A particularly poignant example is found in cuts to America's anti-poverty programs.

Cuts to Anti-Poverty Programs

The Trump administration's blunt approach to cutting services for impoverished Americans is found in current efforts to reduce access to food stamps and Medicaid, which reveals a break from previous administrations, which have used compassionate rhetoric to soften the reality of their actions.

Since the 1980s, removing money from social-welfare programs has been cloaked in talk of concern for the vulnerable. When President Ronald Reagan cut funding for anti-poverty programs, he did so under the guise of protecting the nation's safety net so as to preserve it for the use of the *truly needy*. Reagan's stated concern was that there were too many working Americans who were taking funds from the nation's assistance programs, thus endangering access for those who could not survive on their own. To correct this stated issue the Reagan Administration made almost any wage, no matter how meager, a disqualifier for receiving government assistance. Such a move ignored the plight of those struggling under low wages and limited employment, inadvertently rendering joblessness a more secure means of survival than working low-wage part-time jobs. While President Reagan's rhetoric was that of ultimately aiding the poor, the funds that were saved from these aid cuts did not go to improve employment assistance or career training. Rather, the money saved was redirected to fund a massive tax cut for America's wealthiest citizens.

Under the Clinton Administration, Newt Gingrich enacted a similar positively-spun strategy in defunding anti-poverty programs. Arguing from the opposite direction of President Reagan's concern that these programs assisted Americans with jobs, Gingrich complained that "only a small fraction of cash assistance recipients worked while they received aid" (Super 2019). The concern had switched from *employed* Americans receiving aid to *unemployed* Americans receiving aid. But Gingrich's image of the lazy non-working citizen receiving free handouts at the tax-payer's expense did not align with reality: most welfare recipients of that time were indeed actively seeking and finding work, but were then thrown off the assistance rolls once they became employed, whether or not their employment was sustainable. Reagan and Gingrich's stories about lifting millions of Americans out of poverty may not have

⁸ The bill's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grants created through the 1996 Welfare Reform Act replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. With underfunded TANF work programs, states have been redirecting funds allocated to TANF into other budget priorities (Burnside and Schott 2020).

matched the facts on the ground, but as Super (2019) points out, “Mr. Gingrich had a story . . . The Trump administration does not.” The Trump Administration makes no such rhetorical efforts. Often mixed with anti-poor sentiment, President Trump and his officials have sought to cut funds by either claiming that the poor are cheating the system or that there are no longer enough poor people to justify maintaining certain welfare programs, thanks to the successes of President Trump’s policies.

One example of the Trump Administration’s denial of a need for welfare was found in his plan to lower the federal poverty line, designed to purge millions to tens of millions of Americans off of Medicaid, school meals, energy assistance, and other assistance programs, including the Children’s Insurance Program, which would affect more than one million children (Conley 2019). In April 2019, the administrator of the Centers of Medicare and Medicaid, Seema Verna, cited President Trump’s successes as the rationale behind making these cuts. Claiming that low unemployment and wage growth had led to fewer people relying on public assistance, Verna stated, “That’s something to celebrate” (Cunningham 2019). Less need for public assistance would be worth celebration, but the claim is difficult to reconcile with the fact that the number of children unable to access health insurance rose by four-hundred thousand between 2016 and 2018. This faulty reasoning is also reflected in President Trump’s own words: “Record low unemployment and steady economic growth mean there is no time like the present to nudge people off federal assistance” (Fadulu 2020). Furthermore, at the January 2020 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Trump proclaimed, “Millions and millions of people don’t need food stamps anymore; they have jobs. They’re doing really well” (WhiteHouse.gov 2020). This reframing of reality is where President Trump diverges from the tactics of the Reagan administration. Whereas Reagan’s policies gave states the capacity to grant special assistance to those in dire need, the Trump Administration plan removes all such rights from the states and transfers the power of allocation to the federal level: a tactic used to enact drastic cuts to the United States’ most impoverished citizens.

Family Separation as Political Strategy

While President Trump took numerous actions to prevent refugee children from entering the United States – including the 2017 termination of the Central American Minors act, which aided lawfully parents in requesting refugee or parole status for their children – perhaps the most famous act of callousness toward those of low status is found in the Trump administration’s Family Separation Policy. While there were instances in which families suffered separation under President Obama’s administration, these instances were rare and were not policy; under Trump’s zero-tolerance policy for unlawful entry into the United States, the forcible removal of children from their parents became a psychological strategy of deterrence. As Donald Trump simply stated, “If they feel there will be separation, they don’t come” (WhiteHouse.gov 2018).

Regardless of a person’s political views on immigration and the need to protect U.S. borders, the policy adopted by the Trump administration, and supported by many of his fellow Republicans, is particularly cruel. In addition to intentionally separating children from their parents as a method of deterrence and a means of expediting the deportation of parents, no viable plans were made for reuniting the families after either processing or deportation. The callousness of such a strategic decision is amplified when one looks past the initial trauma

caused by being removed from one's parents and focuses on the long-lasting effects of such a policy on childhood development and wellbeing.

The condition of *threatened attachment* occurs in children facing forced separation from parents and can disrupt a child's ability to form bonds with others later in life. Leading to a psychological condition in which the child detaches from the parent and enters a "perceived state of 'fear without resolution,'" a child may treat their parents as strangers when reunited, take on the belief that the trauma they experienced was somehow their own fault, and experience damage to further relationships in their lives (Wood 2018, 3). Furthermore, the *toxic stress* resulting from such separations carries its own set of damages for a victim of child separation, including long-term organ damage, which can follow a child for the rest of her life. According to Wood,

A child with high adversity exposure [of this type] has triple the lifetime relative risk of lung cancer, 3.5 times the relative risk of ischaemic heart disease and up to 20-year reduction in life expectancy. Cancers, diabetes, autoimmune disease and numerous other health problems are associated directly with toxic stress (not only secondary to unhealthy coping habits, i.e., smoking). (2018, 3–4)

These name just a few ways in which children are placed in harm's way by such a policy of psychological deterrence, and one that entirely disregards the wellbeing of some of the world's most vulnerable people. Despite the obvious trauma that such a scenario would inflict on children – pediatric expertise, aside – as recently as October 2019, President Trump's former Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielson has asserted that she has no regrets over the policy (Holpuch 2019).

From Anti-Poor Sentiment to Anti-Poor Action

In addition to highlighting these examples of anti-poor sentiment and callousness toward vulnerable people, it is important to consider them in contrast to the Trump Administration's treatment of the financial elite. It is difficult to reconcile drastic cuts to support for the United States' most vulnerable citizens and the plight of those who seek protection from foreign harm with the administration's continual gifts to those who already enjoy more than their fair share of America's wealth: including the president, himself.

At the same time that the Trump Administration proposed \$220 billion in cuts to food stamps and \$25 billion to social security, American taxpayers gave \$1.5 trillion in tax cuts to the wealthiest Americans and largest corporations and paid \$115 million for President Trump to play golf at his own resorts. Another example of resources and care being given to those who already have so much is found in the tax gift given to financial giant, Amazon, which paid little to no taxes (Rubin2019). It is arguable that a company like Amazon, which procured a \$11 billion of profit in the fiscal year 2018–2019, could have afforded to pay its share into the national coffers. From slashing taxes for the wealthy to pardoning political allies and friends who have been convicted of crimes ranging from corruption to lying to Congress, there are numerous examples of the current administration simultaneously making large cuts to public benefits while gifting massive amounts of money and favor to America's wealthiest citizens.

While these examples neither can nor should be used to analyze the psychological makeup of an individual – nor would the author be trained to engage in such a practice – an

understanding of the psychology of privilege offers a heuristic tool for looking at the Trump presidency from a new direction and creates new avenues for biblical responses. Time and again, Trumpian policies appear to show, in Job's words, "contempt for misfortune": a sort of contempt to which many biblical texts direct their ire, and perhaps share a similar psychological root. It is these connections that could open ways through which numerous biblical texts on privileged contempt could confront not only this administration, but ruling elites everywhere.

Conclusion

The words of Job 12:5 ring as true today as they did in the ancient world. Millennia before psychologists explored the effects of privilege on the human brain, ancient biblical authors perceived the dangers of privileged contempt and, for various reasons, adopted earlier subsistence traditions into their legal codes, cautionary tales, and prophetic oracles to address such callousness. Research conducted by twenty-first-century social psychologists provides an opportunity to read these ancient texts with new insight and an increased understanding of their underpinnings. In addition to better understanding the importance of these biblical texts in their own time, reading biblical laws, oracles, and stories through a lens of the psychology-of-privileged-contempt illuminates their value for challenging privileged contempt today.

An interpretive lens of privileged contempt can help to connect biblical authors' attacks on those who abuse those of lower social or economic status – as found in the example of David's treatment of Bathsheba and Uriah, given above – to a propensity for cruelty toward others in our own time, be it a food-stamp recipient forced to endure public shaming or President Trump's efforts to deny health-insurance benefits to impoverished children. The psychosocial model laid out above has the potential to give numerous biblical texts greater relevance and potency in addressing modern instances of callousness toward those of lower status.

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