

Editors' Note

With this issue, the review section of Bible & Critical Theory begins a new series of "Books and Culture" review essays. Alongside traditional scholarly book reviews of select new titles in biblical studies, these review essays will feature critical, scholarly engagements, written by established biblical scholars, of books and general culture which are not, per se, directly addressing "biblical scholarship." At times, the intersection with biblical studies will arise because of an author's use of Bible—implicit or explicit—in a creative or literary work. Others, however, will feature books that closely intersect with history, literature, economics and cultural studies, critical theory and philosophy, or other fields of scholarship of interest to readers of Bible & Critical Theory. Leading off the series is Peter J. Sabo's fine engagement with Karl Knausgaard. We welcome your suggestions for books of interest and hope that you find these essays stimulating. Please address your comments and suggestions for future titles to review (or reviewers of interest) to the Book Review Editor, Robert Paul Seesengood, at the address provided by the journal. We hope you enjoy this series.

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Of Squawking Seagulls and the Mutable Divine: Karl Ove Knausgaard's *A Time for Everything* (With Reference to *My Struggle*)

Books & Culture Review Essay

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An albino, reclusive Noah; a raving, delusional Abel; an asthmatic, kind-hearted, but misunderstood Cain; a solipsistic, hermitic Ezekiel—these versions of biblical characters (among others) can be found in Karl Ove Knausgaard's *A Time for Everything*. This novel is idiosyncratic and defies rigid definitions. It reads, for instance, more like a composition of disparate sources than a rigidly unified whole, as it includes biographical details of Antinous Bellori (a fictional sixteenth-century theologian obsessed with angels), essayistic reflections on biblical exegesis, an assortment of imaginative retellings of biblical stories, and an enigmatic coda that abruptly transitions into contemporary times.

On the level of literary mimesis, it is an odd combination. The stories of the Bible are famously terse and filled with background, while Knausgaard is known for his minute analysis of things—he readily admits that he needs “300 to 400 pages to say something significant” (Fassler 2015). This Proustian style is the hallmark of Knausgaard's six volume, novelistic-memoir titled *My Struggle*, which has brought the author to international attention (and has made him a literary sensation in his native Norway, where one out of every nine Norwegian adults have read the book).¹ In these volumes, Knausgaard describes his most banal,

¹ See Hughes, 2014. Four out of the six volumes of *My Struggle* are available in English (and by the time this review will be published the fifth volume should be out as well). In the Norwegian versions, the volumes are simply titled by number (*Min kamp 1*, *Min kamp 2*, etc.), and Archipelago

quotidian, and often humiliating experiences in meticulous detail. There is, moreover, a deep connection between *A Time for Everything* and *My Struggle* (particularly the first two volumes); the former was written just before the latter and at several points throughout *My Struggle* Knausgaard includes details of his writing and researching process involved in *A Time for Everything*. More importantly, key stories, themes, and symbols flow back and forth between the two books. And in examining this connection one can detect Knausgaard's distinct relation to and regard of the Bible and its stories, and how he employs this in his literature.

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A Time for Everything is framed by the life story of the aforementioned Antinous Bellori. Lost in a dark forest as young boy, Bellori stumbles upon two angels in a river. These angels are neither the white-cloaked, haloed type nor rosy-cheeked, baby-like cherubim, but rather wild-looking creatures who shake uncontrollably, emit shrieks of terrifying loneliness, and have slender wrists, claw-like fingers, and deep eye sockets. This encounter leads to a life-long obsession with angels, culminating in Bellori's single major work titled *On the Nature of Angels*. This close study of the 189 angelic manifestations that Bellori identifies in the Bible leads him to his principle claim that humans are immutable, while the divine is changeable. Angels are caught in between the human and the divine, and thus it is *their* history that best displays this fact.

However, the mysterious narrator of *A Time for Everything* (who fluctuates between a biographical, limited perspective to an omniscient third person point of view) does not provide us with the finer details of Bellori's argument but instead transitions into lengthy retellings of the stories of Lot, Cain and Abel, Noah, and Ezekiel. In these retellings the basic plot of each biblical text is kept intact—thus the story of Cain and Abel revolves around fratricide and that of Noah revolves around the flood—but almost everything else is given a twist. The setting of the stories, for instance, is no Mediterranean desert or coastland, but Scandinavian forests and plains, whose dwellers have tools, guns, and other forms of technology. The emphasis, moreover, is on the inner lives of the characters, their conflicting emotions and thoughts. The reader is given insight, for example, into the way that Cain slowly develops and cultivates a murderous disposition toward Abel. The flood story is similarly an exemplar in narrative slowness and extended exploration of the human psyche. It is told from the perspective of Noah's sister, Anna, who struggles to keep her family, marriage, and sanity intact as the flood waters rise day by day, inch by inch. In most of the stories there is very little theological comment, but each one, in its own way, enforces Bellori's theology—humans stay the same while God changes and the intermediary angels slowly devolve. “The human soul is a clearing in a forest,” states Knausgaard's narrator, and the “struggle” of which the Bible speaks is “the darkness that descends again and again on person after person, generation after generation, century after century” (25).

Books, the American publisher, follows this (*My Struggle: Book 1*, *My Struggle: Book 2*, etc.). However, the United Kingdom publisher, Harvill Secker, has offered additional titles to the first five books: *A Death in the Family*, *A Man in Love*, *Boyhood Island*, *Dancing in the Dark*, and *Some Rain Must Fall* (an additional title will presumably be added to the sixth volume as well).

After the biblical retellings, *A Time for Everything* returns to the life and angelology of Antinous Bellori. From posthumous papers and a few other secondary sources, the narrator is able to reconstruct the final episodes of the theologian's life. We know, for instance, that Bellori continued his search to find angels throughout the last years of his life and eventually encountered another group of angels who were the likely cause of his death (his corpse was found mutilated in the woods after his last recorded journal entry notes that he was setting out to the forest to find the angels again). We also know that Bellori had an existential and philosophical crisis in which he concluded that after Christ's crucifixion God was dead and the angels were left imprisoned here on earth. After the death of God, both angels and humankind are left to face the blind materiality of the universe.

The narrator then expands upon Bellori's observations and comments on the history of angels in the centuries since the time of Bellori. Concerned that more and more humans will find them out after Bellori's discovery, they change their feral form to that of human, baby-like beings in order to emphasize innocence and purity. This change worked for a while and the angels proliferated throughout Europe, but their slow degeneration could not be stopped—they eventually lose their halos, shrink in size, and feathers sprout not only on their wings but over all their bodies. After a few generations, the angels become indistinguishable from seagulls and the connection between these birds and their divine ancestors slips from collective memory.

The coda for *A Time for Everything* abruptly transitions into the life of a disturbed and melancholic man named Henrik Vankel who has exiled himself to a remote Norwegian island. His sorrowful existence consists of watching the lives of the few other inhabitants of the island, dwelling on his haunted past (particularly childhood memories of his father), and defending his garbage cans against pesky seagulls. It culminates in a gruesome scene in which Henrik cuts his chest and face with shards of glass in a desperate attempt to achieve transcendence over pain—and there the novel ends.

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Analyzing the connection between the coda and the rest of the novel draws out some of the major themes in *A Time for Everything*. Indeed, the shared themes, motifs, and symbols between its diverse parts are ultimately what holds this book together (a literary technique, of course, that is also employed in biblical narrative).

Take seagulls. *A Time for Everything* proper ends with historical summary of how angels turned into seagulls while the coda commences with a short history of these birds and their origins on the coast of Norway and then transitions into Vankel's first-hand narration which begins, "when I grew up in the 1980s, there were seagulls everywhere" (455). It then continues with scattered references to the constant presence of seagulls in Vankel's life, from the previously referred to rummaging through his garbage to their endless squawking in the sky above. Most significant is a story that Vankel recounts regarding a childhood crab-fishing expedition with his father. The scene is filled with tension between father and son—at one point, after the crabbing is finished and they sit around a campfire, the father shines the light from a torch in his son's face and asks "are you scared of me?" (465). It is there, at the campfire, that the boy finds a dead seagull and his father informs him that seagulls were once angels. As if to emphasize the point the

father picks up the dead bird and brushes back the wing to reveal the remnant of a small hand with fingers, telling Henrik that seagulls don't need these appendages anymore and thus they will soon disappear. The scene passes by without comment and simply carries on into Henrik's modern, inner world of turmoil and anguish. The allusion, however, is unmistakable: Henrik's encounter with angels is of a completely different kind than that of Bellori's. Bellori's encounter is filled with fear and trembling and instigates a life-long obsession with angels and the divine; Henrik's is filled with associations of family dysfunction in which any traces of the divine are so minuscule they are on the verge of disappearing.

The seagulls are a symbol of the modern world; the angels of the pre-modern world. And the division between these two worlds is a key theme in *A Time for Everything*. At several points, for example, the narrator emphasizes how important it is to understand the precise historical moment in which Bellori was writing, when the modern view of the world began to split from the pre-modern view: the point at which science and philosophy began to separate themselves from the theological mindset of the Middle Ages. Bellori is the type of thinker who lost out to the pioneers of the Enlightenment like Descartes, Pascal, and Newton. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the modern worldview had achieved its decisive victory, but it was in the sixteenth century (the time of Bellori) that the real "struggle" took place (Knausgaard 340). The point of showing the roots of this divide between the pre-modern and the modern, according to the narrator, is that it prompts one to wonder what the world might look like if Bellori had won through and not vice versa, for "our world is only one of many possible worlds, something of which the writings of Antinous [Bellori] and his contemporaries remind us in no small measure" (7). Angels, and all they represent (the divine, the sacred, and so on), do not have a place in Henrik's world, rather, they belong to the world of the past.

The Bible and its stories likewise represent the gap between the modern and the pre-modern world in *A Time for Everything*. There are no Bible stories in the coda as there are in the main body of the novel—however, there are subtle allusions. Henrik's purposeful isolation, for instance, is reminiscent of Knausgaard's biblical characters: Cain lives solitarily in a house in the forest, Noah lives away from society on a mountain meadow, and Ezekiel lives for years under self-imposed house arrest. The closest connection is to Cain, as Henrik's mutilation of his chest and face echoes the mark that God set on Cain.

In order for the allusion to the biblical story to be complete, one needs to extend outside the world of *A Time for Everything*, for Henrik's mutilating act actually has its origins in Knausgaard's life (or at least his literary life). In *My Struggle* Knausgaard writes of an experience in his late twenties in which, after being spurned by a woman with whom he was obsessed, he cut up his face with shards of glass (it is notable that the woman eventually becomes his wife). The worst part of this act for Knausgaard is the now visible shame that he would have to carry with himself: "I couldn't hide it. Everyone would see. I was marked, I had marked myself" (2013, 176). Knausgaard and Henrik share with Cain the fate of living in ignominy with their mark, or as the narrator of *A Time for Everything* puts it, Cain's punishment is to be "sentenced to life" (130). The difference, however, is that Knausgaard and Henrik have no God to mark them—their act is simply a masochistic one (see Ley 2016). Thus each story of marking (from Cain to Henrik

to Knausgaard) can be read intertextually in relation to the other, thereby allowing for this fleshing out of detail.²

The same applies for the symbol of seagulls, as they make frequent appearances throughout *My Struggle* (again, this applies particularly to the first two volumes). The references, however, are for the most part fairly inconspicuous and unremarkable, Knausgaard will simply note that he sees seagulls circling in the sky or taking off from the steps of a house. Even at times when the bird is more consciously a part of the narrative, as in the semi-tame seagull who continuously appears at Knausgaard's grandmother's house after the death of his father, there is no reflection on what these birds mean to Knausgaard. When such references, however, are read in conjunction with the symbolism associated with seagulls in *A Time for Everything* they take on an entirely new meaning. They point to traces of the pre-modern (the divine and the sacred) in the modern (secular) world of *My Struggle*. These shrunken angels, who have been condemned to screech and scavenge their way through life, are everywhere in *My Struggle*, as they are in our world, and yet because of this sort of omnipresence they blend unassumingly into the background. In the final pages before the coda of *A Time for Everything*, the narrator asserts that the connection between angels and seagulls has slipped from collective memory; in *My Struggle* Knausgaard acts out this slippage of memory.

Such conscious literary artifice (overt doublings, recurring symbols, and so on) warrants the label "novel" as much as "memoir" to the *My Struggle* series. By emphasizing this point my purpose is not to veer into issues of genre criticism (such generic distinctions are bound to blur into each other in any case), but rather to show that the connection between *A Time for Everything* and *My Struggle* is so substantial that the former may be considered a part of, or at the very least a transition into, the latter. One could think of *A Time for Everything* as a literary overture to *My Struggle*—especially in view of the coda in which the world of Henrik Vankel seamlessly transitions into the world of *My Struggle*. The theological and historical world of *A Time for Everything* and the secularised and personalised world of *My Struggle*, which initially appear to be so distant from each other, are thereby brought together and in some ways become uncanny, reflections of each other.³

² In many interviews Knausgaard has compared Cain to Anders Breivik, the perpetrator of the 2011 Norway attacks that left seventy-seven people dead and many more injured. According to Knausgaard, Breivik's "countenance fell," like Cain's (Gen. 4:6), which means he turned away from society, isolated himself, and fell prey to his own feelings of shame. In this way, Cain becomes the biblical figure who casts the longest shadow over *My Struggle*, as discussion of Anders Breivik ends the sixth volume of *My Struggle*. And Breivik, moreover, is discussed in comparison to Adolf Hitler, the major subject of the sixth volume, who also had a fallen countenance (and whose *Mein Kampf* is the antecedent to Knausgaard's *My Struggle*). See Barron, 2013; Fassler, 2015; Knausgaard, 2012b.

³ Immediately after the campfire scene in the coda for *A Time for Everything*, Henrik ruminates on the death of his father fifteen years later. The exact manner of the death is not elaborated upon—only that it was so violent that it altered not only the future but also the past. Here again we find a connection to *My Struggle*, as it is no coincidence that the subject of the first volume is the death of Knausgaard's father, which is brought about by the father's (seemingly purposeful) addiction to alcohol.

It is also noteworthy that in the middle of Henrik's rumination on his father's death, one finds direct elucidation on the title of the book: "And it's a disquieting thought that not even the past is done with, even that continues to change, as if in reality there were only one time, for everything, one time for every purpose under heaven" (465). The reference, of course, is to Ecclesiastes 3,

With this in mind, the overt reflections that Knausgaard provides in *My Struggle* regarding *A Time for Everything* take on added significance and read as much more than mere autobiographical details. Consider the following excerpt from the first volume of *My Struggle* in which Knausgaard contemplates what drew him to the topic of angels:

The fact that things other and mysterious were relevant to us had led my thoughts to angels, those mystical creatures who not only were linked to the divine but also to humanness, and therefore expressed the duality of the nature of otherness better than any other figure. At the same time there was something deeply dissatisfying about...[angels] since they...belonged to the past in such a fundamental way, the part of the past we have put behind us, that is, which no longer fitted into this world we had created where the great, the divine, the solemn, the holy, the beautiful, and the true were no longer valid entities but quite the contrary, dubious or even laughable. (2012, 223)

Encapsulated in these thoughts are some of the major themes of *A Time for Everything*—for example, the peculiar position of angels with regard to the divine and the human and the relegation of things mysterious and mystical to the past. And although it is less conspicuous, these are some of the themes of *My Struggle* as well. As Knausgaard continues in his quote above, he ponders the effects of this eclipse of the divine in ways that echo the world of Henrik Vankel. Humans have “swallowed up everything,” and “[o]ur world is enclosed around itself, enclosed around us, and there is no way out of it. Those in this situation who call for more intellectual depth, more spirituality, have understood nothing, for the problem is that the intellect has taken over everything” (2012, 225).

The latter half of this quote shows that Knausgaard is not simply bemoaning the loss of the divine in the world, but presents a more complex secularised worldview in which the individual is now everything and nothing, in which one must contemplate feelings like shame in a world enclosed on itself. Knausgaard categorizes himself in *My Struggle* as an atheist, and a “materialist in [his] heart of hearts,” and from time to time will even speak of his fervent anti-Christianity since his early teenage years (2013, 400). On the other hand, there are times in which Knausgaard contemplates angels, ruminates on the divine, and speaks of his studious reading of the Bible over the last years (he was even an invited consultant on the New Norwegian translation of the Bible). In one odd scene, Knausgaard finds himself taking communion at his daughter’s christening and does not quite know why. In explaining his actions, his thoughts turn toward *A Time for Everything*:

Then there was what I had been working on over the last year. Not what I wrote, but what I was slowly realising I wanted to explore: the sacred. In

Qohelet’s famous verses on the totality and variety of time. In the context of *A Time for Everything*, Knausgaard places the significance of this on the way that the past is never fixed and finished, the present will always color our vision of it (just as the past colors our vision of the present). This reflection—with its biblical allusion—provides insight into the way that Knausgaard uses the Bible in his work, as the ancient stories of the Bible flow into the life of Henrik Vankel and the literary Knausgaard (and vice versa).

my novel I had both travestied and invoked it, but without the hymnic gravity I knew existed in these tracts, in these texts I had started to read; and the gravity, the wild intensity in them, which was never far removed from the sacred...for it was about flesh and blood, it was about birth and death, and we were linked to it through our bodies and our blood, those we beget and those we bury, constantly, continually, a storm blew through our world and it always had, and the only place where I knew this was formulated, the most extreme yet the simplest things, was in these holy scriptures. (2013, 400)

Thus Knausgaard returns to the Bible in *My Struggle*; its presence, of course, is not nearly as overt as in *A Time for Everything*—much like the presence of seagulls between the two books.

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In the preface to *The Great Code*, Northrop Frye famously asks why the Bible, this “huge sprawling, tactless book sit[s] there inscrutably in the middle of our cultural heritage like the ‘great Boyg’ or sphinx in *Peer Gynt*, frustrating all of our efforts to walk around it?” (1982, xviii).⁴ The question is asked somewhat rhetorically, as Frye has just spent the previous pages pointing out the central place that the Bible plays in Western collective consciousness. The emphasis in Frye’s analogy then is obviously on the immovability and imposing stature of the great Boyg. Knausgaard offers us another analogy, one that contains the same basic idea but with a different emphasis—the Bible is like the squawking seagulls circling above us. Both are still everywhere, but their form has changed from their distinguished and grandiose past.

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⁴ I have chosen purposefully Frye’s reference to Henrik Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*, as Knausgaard repeatedly mentions the works of the Norwegian playwright throughout *My Struggle*—and even makes notes of Ibsen’s comment that he only reads the Bible (see Knausgaard, 2013: 143).

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