

## HONOR YOUR PARENTS: A COMMAND FOR ADULTS

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**Abstract:** *Among American evangelicals, the command to honor one's parents (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16) has usually been interpreted as a command for young children to obey their parents. However, close study of this command reveals that it was primarily a command for adult children to care for their elderly parents. First, adult land- and slave-owning males were the implied audience of the Decalogue rather than children. Second, honoring and fearing parents in the ancient Near East was most commonly associated with adults and consisted primarily of physical support of elderly parents. Third, the other texts in the OT that describe the parent-child relationship clearly show the importance of honoring parents by caring for them. Fourth, NT texts and mainstream church tradition support this interpretation. The paper ends by looking at implications of this interpretation for today and some practical ways for adult children to care for parents in the modern world.*

**Key words:** *honoring parents, obedience, fear, curse, children, Ten Commandments, adoption, elderly*

During the third year of my doctoral program at Wheaton College, my family faced an important decision. My grandfather had passed away during my first year in the program, and my grandmother did not deal well with the stress of running the family business without her beloved husband. In the midst of worsening health and the beginning of dementia, she became suicidal, contemplating her husband's service revolver from the Second World War as a way to end her struggles. We put her in an assisted living home and began the process of cleaning out her home of forty years (including a \$20,000 hazmat bill to clean out the laboratory in their garage!), traveling three hours to her home in Wisconsin almost every weekend for four months. I distinctly remember sitting at her desk on a cold winter weekend and wondering what her future would be. Would she stay in an assisted-living situation? It did not seem that she would have the financial means to do so, and she was not adjusting well in that context. But the other options did not seem much better. Would she live with her step-daughter (my mother)? Would my wife and I care for her, along with our young children? What were our responsibilities as Christian children and grandchildren? These questions drove me to consider what the Bible might say about the parent-adult child relationship.

Among North American evangelicals, attention towards the parent-child relationship has focused primarily on the time when the child is young. Innumerable books on parenting young children have been written, and churches have so focused on families that singles have sometime felt left out. In this kind of context,

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the command to honor one's parents in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16) has often been interpreted as a command for young children to obey their parents. When a young child grows older, they move past the realm of this command.

However, I will argue in this paper that this command is not primarily about younger children obeying their parents. I will begin by arguing that a study of the command in its original context reveals that it is primarily for adult children rather than young children, an understanding that is already culturally present in many places today (such as Asia and Africa). Then I will bring in evidence from other ancient Near Eastern cultures to help us think about the meaning of the command before moving on to study other texts on the parent-adult child relationship in the OT and NT. The paper will conclude with some practical applications of the command for us in the modern world, focusing in particular on college students.

### I. ADULT CHILDREN

The first step of my argument is to show that a close reading of the Decalogue encourages the interpretation that the command to honor parents was specifically for adults. It appears at first that the Decalogue was directed to a broad audience, as it consistently uses the second person masculine singular, viewing the nation as one person. These commands are for every person in Israel.

However, a closer reading shows that the target audience is actually more specific than all Israel. This is seen most clearly in the Sabbath and the coveting commands. The Sabbath command forbids the work of sons, daughters, male servants, female servants, livestock, and sojourners on the Sabbath (Exod 20:10).<sup>1</sup> The coveting command prohibits coveting a neighbor's house, wife, male servant, female servant, ox, donkey, or anything that belongs to the neighbor (Exod 20:17).<sup>2</sup> When I ask my students to think about the target audience of the Decalogue, a few bright students quickly realize that the list is missing some important entries. Most prominently, the command does not include the prohibition of coveting your neighbor's husband, showing that the target audience of these commands is the males of Israel. The other items in the lists contained in the Sabbath and coveting commands show that they were primarily directed at land- and slave-owning married adult males with children.<sup>3</sup>

However, the Decalogue was relevant for more than this group of land- and slave-owning married adult males with children: The omission of "neighbor's hus-

<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy adds "ox" and "donkey" to the list (Deut 5:14).

<sup>2</sup> The list in the Deuteronomic version is similar, except that it separates out neighbor's wife as a separate command and adds "field" to the list (Deut 5:21). For more on the reasons for these changes, see Daniel I. Block, "'You Shall Not Covet Your Neighbor's Wife': A Study in Deuteronomic Domestic Ideology," *JETS* 53 (2010): 449–74.

<sup>3</sup> Harry Jungbauer, "*Ehre Vater und Mutter*": *Der Weg des Elterngebots in der biblischen Tradition* (WUNT 2/146; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 99–100; Daniel I. Block, *Deuteronomy* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 161; Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 174–75.

band” from the coveting command does not give permission to the women to covet their neighbor’s husband. The Decalogue was given primarily to the adult land- and slave-owning males with children since they were the leaders of the community. It was then their responsibility as heads of households to contextualize the commands for others in their household. Part of this contextualization would be for their children: Do not covet your neighbor’s toys, for example.<sup>4</sup>

Coming back to the command to honor one’s parents, contextualizing the command for children would include obeying their parents while they were young, but this was not the fundamental idea of the command. Instead, this command focused primarily on something that adult children would do for their older parents. If that is the case, what then does it mean for an adult child to honor a parent? A look at comparable texts throughout the ancient Near East will help to clarify the meaning of the command.

## II. ANCIENT NEAR EAST

While a comparable command to honor one’s parents is not found in the ancient Near East, the idea and the terminology appear frequently. The evidence from these texts shows us that honoring parents usually meant caring physically for one’s parents when they were older. In the ancient Near East, nursing homes were not available to care for the elderly and the government did not provide Social Security for the retired. The only way for the elderly to be cared for when they were older was through their family. Since this required work and inconvenience for the children, it would be easy to disregard this social expectation for one’s own benefit.<sup>5</sup> In Mesopotamia, the most common way to ensure that an elderly person was cared for when they did not have children was to adopt someone who would care for them in return for receiving an inheritance when the elderly person died.<sup>6</sup> For example, an adoption contract recorded that Lu-Nin-šubur adopted Mumu, and

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<sup>4</sup> For more on this patricentric view of authority in a family, see Daniel I. Block, “Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel,” in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World* (ed. Ken M. Campbell; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 40–61.

<sup>5</sup> Indirect evidence exists for support for the elderly apart from their families in a few places. In Babylon, a general social support system might have been based in the temple system of Babylon, but it is unclear how exactly it worked. Most likely, destitute people could present themselves to the temple (or be presented to the temple by their former owners if they were slaves), and the temple would care for them if they worked for the temple. See G. van Driel, “Care of the Elderly: The Neo-Babylonian Period,” in *The Care of the Elderly in the Ancient Near East* (ed. Marten Stol and Sven P. Vleeming; Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East 14; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 164–65. Ancient Egypt also had a few ways of providing for the elderly besides their family, including a position called “Staff of Old Age” (in which an assistant was appointed to perform the actual duties of a job while the elderly person holding the position continued to be paid for the job), appointment to positions that did not have any responsibilities, the transfer of official property to personal property by officials (through statue cults) and investment in a temple (which would then provide a steady income for the donor). See A. McDowell, “Legal Aspects of Care of the Elderly in Egypt to the End of the New Kingdom,” in *Care of the Elderly in the Ancient Near East*, 201–7.

<sup>6</sup> For more on adoption in the ancient Near East, see Victor H. Matthews, “Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East,” in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, 18–21. This was very rare in Egypt, as noted in McDowell, “Legal Aspects of Care of the Elderly in Egypt,” 217–20.

Mumu was to supply him monthly with an oil ration and 100 liters of a barley ration. Mumu was not adopted because he was a child (the reason for adoption in the modern world), but to care for Lu-Nin-šubur in his old age.<sup>7</sup> Here is another example from the Old Babylonian period of Šilli-Amurru adopting Amurru-nāšir.

Amurru-nāšir (is) his name, the son of Šilli-Amurru; he has adopted him. He shall support him as long as he lives. Field, house and garden of Šilli-Amurru he shall inherit. If Amurru-nāšir says '(You) are not my father', he forfeits the property of Šilli-Amurru. If Šilli-Amurru says '(You) are not my son', he does not forfeit ...<sup>8</sup>

In some cases a slave could support their master in return for acquiring their freedom when the master died, though records of court cases also have been found in which the children of the master contest these arrangements.<sup>9</sup>

Most commonly, the elderly were cared for by their adult children. In the Ugaritic text Aqhat, Dan'el desires a son to perform the standard tasks of a son.

To set up his Ancestor's stela,  
The sign of his Sib in the sanctuary;  
  
To rescue his smoke from the Underworld,  
To protect his steps from the Dust;  
  
To stop his abusers' spite,  
To drive his troublers away;  
  
To grasp his arm when he's drunk,  
To support him when sated with wine;<sup>10</sup>  
  
To eat his portion in Baal's house,

<sup>7</sup> C. Wilcke, "Care of the Elderly in Mesopotamia in the Third Millennium B.C.," in *Care of the Elderly in the Ancient Near East*, 54. For another example of such a contract, see K. R. Veenhof, "Old Assyrian and Ancient Anatolian Evidence for the Care of the Elderly," in *Care of the Elderly in the Ancient Near East*, 129.

<sup>8</sup> M. Stol, "Care of the Elderly in Mesopotamia in the Old Babylonian Period," in *Care of the Elderly in the Ancient Near East*, 61.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 83–84. For an example of a contract in which Etel-pī-Amurru freed his slave Šamaš-rabi in return for his support, see Klaas R. Veenhof, "A Deed of Manumission and Adoption from the Later Old Assyrian Period," in *Zikir Šumim: Assyriological Studies Presented to F. R. Kraus on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday* (ed. G. van Driel et al.; Leiden: Brill, 1982), 362.

Etel-pī-Amurru, son of Puḫānu, manumitted his servant Šamaš-rabi. As long as Etel-pī-Amurru, his father, and Aḫatu'a, his mother, live he will support them (*wabālum*, Gtn) and take good care to obey (*palāḫum*) them. After (the death of) Etel-pī-Amurru, his father, and Aḫatu'a, his mother, he will receive 18 *iku* of land in the agricultural district of Ababat (and) 1 ox. If Etel-pī-Amurru reclaims him (as slave) he will pay 2 minas of silver. If Šamaš-rabi repudiates Etel-pī-Amurru and Aḫatu'a and departs, he may be sold for silver in the commercial district of any town where he is spotted. The oath to Aššur, to Adad, and to king Šamšī-Adad (was sworn); none of them will raise claims.

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps this is part of the sin of Ham when he did not help his drunken father? For this speculation, see K. van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia* (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1983), 14.

His share in the house of El

To daub his roof when there's [mu]d,  
To wash his stuff when there's dirt.<sup>11</sup>

The D-stem of the Akkadian cognate *kaḅātu* functioned in a similar way as the piel of כָּבַד in Hebrew: showing honor, often through a concrete gift.<sup>12</sup> While not directly speaking of parents, a Babylonian wisdom text (The Counsels of Wisdom) speaks of charitable deeds in this way: "Give food to eat, beer to drink, Grant what is asked, provide for and honour (*ku-ub-bit*)."<sup>13</sup> The Akkadian word *palāḫū* ("to fear" or "to respect"), while often referring to an attitude, also refers to children providing in physical ways for their parents. Mesopotamian texts indicate that this support consisted primarily of barley, wool, and oil.<sup>14</sup> Contracts also sometimes contained other obligations; an old Assyrian contract included the requirement that the child mourn and bury their parents.<sup>15</sup> One contract that referred to fearing a parent involved Ḫuššutum giving her property to Erištum if she gave certain things to Ḫuššutum: "360 liters of barley-rations, 6 litres of oil-rations, 6 mina of wool; at six festivals one bread, three (pieces of) meat (each time) she shall give. And as long as Ḫuššutum lives, Erištum, her daughter, shall 'fear' (*palāḫum*) her."<sup>16</sup> While some scholars argue that fearing is something in addition to the provision (such as obeying),<sup>17</sup> examples throughout Mesopotamian history show that this fearing sums up the practical care of the child for the parent. For example, a contract from Elam records that "the son who serves (*palāḫum*) her will live with her and inherit all her goods."<sup>18</sup>

The children who did not provide for their parents were shamed. In Egypt, a parent had the power to disinherit children if they did not care for the parent in their old age.<sup>19</sup> Esarhaddon described chaos in Babylon with a few concrete pic-

<sup>11</sup> Lines i.26–33 of CAT 1.17 in Simon B. Parker, "Aqhat," in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, ed. Simon B. Parker (SBLWAW 9; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1997), 53. This list is repeated several times in the text.

<sup>12</sup> For examples referring to parents, see *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary (CAD)* K 17–18 (6b); Stol, "Care of the Elderly in Mesopotamia in the Old Babylonian Period," 62–63.

<sup>13</sup> Lines 61–62 in W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960), 102–3.

<sup>14</sup> Stol, "Care of the Elderly in Mesopotamia in the Old Babylonian Period," 63.

<sup>15</sup> Veenhof, "Old Assyrian and Ancient Anatolian Evidence for the Care of the Elderly," 125.

<sup>16</sup> Stol, "Care of the Elderly in Mesopotamia in the Old Babylonian Period," 110.

<sup>17</sup> Stol argues that since this clause appears after the practical provision, fearing is something in addition to the food. See *ibid.*, 62. Likewise, Veenhof argues that fearing is something in addition to the idea of serving; defining it more narrowly as "obeying." See Veenhof, "A Deed of Manumission and Adoption from the Later Old Assyrian Period," 378–79.

<sup>18</sup> MDP 24:379 in *CAD* P, *palāḫū* 5c, 46. See there for many other examples as well. In fact, *CAD* labels a subsection of its entry for *palāḫum* as "to serve, to care for, to perform (filial, etc.) obligations, to perform service." *CAD* P, *palāḫū* 5, 45–47.

<sup>19</sup> McDowell, "Legal Aspects of Care of the Elderly in Egypt," 215–16. See also a Sumerian composition that highlights the nature of a misbehaving son: While other sons are providing grain, oil, and wood rations for the fathers, this son did not. Stol, "Care of the Elderly in Mesopotamia in the Old Babylonian Period," 60–61.

tures, including a son who “cursed his father in the street.”<sup>20</sup> A document from Ugarit (written in Akkadian) describes the penalty for dishonoring a parent.

The father states, “Now of my two sons, Iatlinu is the elder and Ianḥamu is the younger. Whichever of them enters into legal proceedings with B. [their mother Bidawa] and shows disrespect (*qalālu*, D) towards B., his mother, shall pay 500 shekels of silver to the king, place his garment on the (door) bolt [i.e. a sign of total severance], and depart outside; but whichever of them shows respect [*kabātu*, D] to B., his mother, to him shall she deed it [i.e. the inheritance].”<sup>21</sup>

Honoring parents also involved caring for them after they had died. After the death of his father Ramses I, Seti I wrote that he was a son who honors his parent, which he demonstrated through keeping the name of his father well-known, protecting his father’s body (through mummification), preparing festivals for him, and providing water and flowers for his cult chapel.<sup>22</sup> This was a duty not only for kings, but for others as well. For example, an army scribe named Userhat during the time of Seti I commissioned a stela in honor of his mother: “It is her son who perpetuates her name, (namely) the scribe Userhat.”<sup>23</sup>

In sum, some of these texts might indicate that obedience was expected of the children, but it is indisputably clear that throughout the ancient Near East children were expected to honor their parents by caring for them in practical ways, leading us to wonder whether we will find a similar expectation in the OT.<sup>24</sup>

### III. OLD TESTAMENT

The OT evidence also supports interpreting the idea of honoring one’s parents as physically and materially caring for them when they are older. In the command itself, the second part of the verse (with its promise of long life in the land) supports this interpretation, as long life reminds us of the necessity of someone to care for us in old age. If the Israelites live a long time in the land, then who would care for them except for the children? This also sets up a parallel with YHWH: as Israel lived long in the land, YHWH would care for them as long as they cared for their parents.<sup>25</sup>

The word translated “honor” in the Decalogue is the piel of כבד, which appears 38 times in the OT. The stem sometimes refers to literal heavy weight,<sup>26</sup> but

<sup>20</sup> Line i.15’ of Esarhaddon 108 in Erle Leichty, *The Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria (680–669 BC)* (RINAP 4; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 220.

<sup>21</sup> S. M. Paul, *Studies in the Book of the Covenant in the Light of Cuneiform and Biblical Law* (VTSup 18; Leiden: Brill, 1970), 67. The second and last instances of bracketed material are Paul’s; the first and third instances are mine.

<sup>22</sup> RITA 1.54 Seti I in K. A. Kitchen, *Rameside Inscriptions: Translated & Annotated: Rameses I, Setbos I and Contemporaries* (Rameside Inscriptions 1; Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 95–96.

<sup>23</sup> RITA 1.128 in *ibid.*, 261.

<sup>24</sup> For other ancient Near Eastern texts that support this idea, see R. Albertz, “Hintergrund und Bedeutung des Elterngebots im Dekalog,” *ZAW* 90 (1978): 356–64.

<sup>25</sup> Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus* (NAC 2; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 461–62.

<sup>26</sup> “Abraham was very heavy in livestock, silver and gold” (Gen 13:2) or Moses’s heavy hands (Exod 17:12) or Eli’s weight (1 Sam 4:18).

it more often refers to the metaphor of a heavy weight, such as making an experience more intense (a “severe” famine [Gen 41:31] or the “strong” army of Edom [Num 20:20]). With this background, we could gloss the piel form of the word as something along the lines of “treating someone with heaviness (i.e. dignity).”

The word “honor” is often used without specifying the exact content,<sup>27</sup> but many texts connect honor with concrete and material actions. This can be seen in texts where a human honors another human. Balak sought to honor Balaam through giving him money (Num 22:17, 37; 24:11). David honored the deceased Ammonite king by sending comforters (2 Sam 10:3; 1 Chr 19:3).<sup>28</sup> The connection between honor and concrete and material actions is also seen in honoring YHWH. In particular, “the one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies [honors] me” (Ps 50:23 ESV). The author of Proverbs commands the audience to “honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce” (Prov 3:9 ESV). One can honor YHWH by being generous to the poor (Prov 14:31).<sup>29</sup> In sum, honoring usually implies some kind of concrete action.<sup>30</sup>

However, honoring is more than just actions. Isaiah warns of a false honoring when he said the Israelites “honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me” (Isa 29:13 ESV). Malachi also rebuked the Israelites concerning their honor. If God was their father, why were they not honoring him? Their lack of honor was expressed through the selfishness of the sacrifices they offered when they only gave the worst of their possessions to God (Mal 1:6). Like the rest of the OT law, honoring parents involves actions that flow out of a correct heart attitude.<sup>31</sup>

The OT also describes the child-parent relationship in others terms. Other laws speak of revering a parent (Lev 19:3), using the common Hebrew word for fearing (אָרַא).<sup>32</sup> As is often the case in the OT, the word does not refer to terror,

<sup>27</sup> For example, people were to honor the righteous (Ps 15:4) and God (Ps 22:24[23]; 50:15; 86:9, 12; Isa 24:15; 25:3). Wisdom will honor the one who embraces her (Prov 4:8). Even wild beasts will honor YHWH (Isa 43:20). YHWH promised to honor the follower of YHWH (Ps 91:15) and Zion (Isa 60:13).

<sup>28</sup> Other examples include Saul requesting that Samuel honor him by walking with him, which has a social connection since the elders would see this action (1 Sam 15:30). The king of the north would honor a previously unknown god through gifts (Dan 11:38).

<sup>29</sup> Isaiah accused Israel of “not honoring YHWH through your sacrifices” (Isa 43:23). The Israelites could honor the Sabbath day by acting godly that day (Isa 58:13).

<sup>30</sup> This idea is also supported by looking at honor/shame cultural dynamics; see Dan Wu, “Honour Your Father and Your Mother: Culture, Covenant, Canon, and the Fifth Commandment” (presented at the annual ETS meeting, Atlanta, 2015).

<sup>31</sup> The work of Daniel Block is very helpful in understanding the Torah; see in particular the essays in Daniel I. Block, *How I Love Your Torah, O LORD! Studies in the Book of Deuteronomy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011); idem, *The Gospel according to Moses: Theological and Ethical Reflections on the Book of Deuteronomy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> The command appears near the opening of a chapter that begins its exhortations with the command to “be holy because I am holy” (Lev 19:2). However, instead of moving on directly to prohibiting idols as the first example, fearing parents heads the lists (the idol prohibition comes in the following verse).

but to admiration.<sup>33</sup> Two OT texts speak of obeying parents. First, a proverb curses the one who mocks a father and despises obedience (יקהה) to a mother (Prov 30:17).<sup>34</sup> Second, Deut 21:18–21 refers to a rebellious son.

If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and, though they discipline him, will not listen to them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gate of the place where he lives, and they shall say to the elders of his city, “This our son is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.” Then all the men of the city shall stone him to death with stones. So you shall purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel shall hear, and fear. (Deut 21:18–21 ESV)

This law is harsher than the parallel law in the Code of Hammurabi, which only commands the cutting off of a hand (CH 195).<sup>35</sup> Some commentators suggest that this law was never put into practice and served as “extremer Fall aus der Kindererziehung” (“an extreme case of child education”).<sup>36</sup> The obedience here in these two texts seems to imply obedience from an adult child and relates to a general call to live godly lives. This is particularly clear in the Deuteronomic text, as the disobedience of the child (called rebellion and stubbornness) was not directly against their parents, but was located in fundamental lifestyle choices (gluttony and drunkenness). The words “rebellion” and “stubbornness” often appear as attitudes against God, so most likely this resistance to the parents implies resistance against God.<sup>37</sup> The position of the honoring parents command in the Decalogue at the transition between the commands focused on God and the commands focused on humans also highlights this connection: while parents are human, how children treat them is often indicative of how they treat God.<sup>38</sup> This is the kind of son who will not take care of his parents.

<sup>33</sup> Jungbauer, “Ehre Vater und Mutter,” 67. The construction here involves a direct object, which implies respect (see also Prov 24:21) according to Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 5; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 310.

<sup>34</sup> The word יקהה appears elsewhere only in Gen 49:10, where it speaks of the obedience of the nations to the one from Judah.

<sup>35</sup> For the law, see Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; SBLWAW 6; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 120.

<sup>36</sup> Rainer Albertz, “Altes und Neues zum Elterngesetz,” *Zeitschrift für Gottesdienst und Predigt* 3 (1985): 24. See also Jungbauer, “Ehre Vater und Mutter,” 57. Rabbinic literature tended to follow this interpretation as well; for references see Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 197; Caryn A. Reeder, *The Enemy in the Household: Family Violence in Deuteronomy and Beyond* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 121–23.

<sup>37</sup> Jungbauer, “Ehre Vater und Mutter,” 58; Reeder, *Enemy in the Household*, 40–45; Carolyn Pressler, *The View of Women Found in the Deuteronomic Family Laws* (BZAW 216; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993), 18. It should also be observed that while this law provides great authority to the parents, they must have their decision validated by the community, as noted in Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 196.

<sup>38</sup> For more discussion of the position of the command in the Decalogue, see Thomas B. Dozeman, *Exodus* (ECC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 493–94; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, 311; Byron L. Sherwin, “Honoring Parents,” in *The Ten Commandments for Jews, Christians, and Others* (ed. Roger E. van Harn; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 96–97; Mark F. Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century* (NAC Studies in Bible & Theology; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2010), 104–5.



This connection is made clear in Proverbs, where the son is exhorted not to associate with drunkards and gluttons, and the very next proverb is an exhortation not to despise parents (Prov 23:19–22). To use a metaphor, the parents were calling on the child to go a certain direction on the highway, and the child needed to follow those instructions since this is what God desired for all his people. However, this obedience did not include which lane to use on the highway, as God has given his people freedom within his broad guidelines.<sup>39</sup> The obedience called for in these two texts is not total obedience in every sphere of life, but a general obedience related to following God.

Mistreatment of parents is described in a variety of ways in the laws and proverbs of the OT. The punishment of death for striking a parent (Exod 21:15) seems more understandable when it is recognized that this law refers to adult children beating their elderly parents.<sup>40</sup> Describing a similar situation, Proverbs 19:26 says that one who does violence (דָּדַשׁ, *piel*) to his father brings shame to his family.

However, the death penalty for cursing one's parents has struck many as overly harsh (Exod 21:17; Lev 20:9; Prov 20:20; 30:11).<sup>41</sup> Thinking that a child would be killed for calling a parent a bad word seems a bit extreme for us today. However, the Hebrew word for curse is קָלַל, often translated as “dishonor” or “treat lightly.” In other words, cursing is the exact opposite of the command to honor parents. The command has a parallel with how one treats YHWH, as the one who cursed God was to die (Lev 24:10–16). Like honoring, cursing has an active aspect to it. Cursing the deaf is parallel with putting a stumbling block in front of the blind (Lev 19:14). Cursing Abimelech meant cutting ties with him and no longer serving him (Judg 9:27).<sup>42</sup> The one who cursed their parents has effectively repudiated them, denying their obligation to care for them.<sup>43</sup>

The book of Proverbs often refers to the mistreatment of parents. One proverb prohibits “despising” (בֹּוֹיָא) a mother when she is old (Prov 23:22).<sup>44</sup> Another proverb condemns robbing (גָּזַל) parents and then claiming that “it is no transgression” (Prov 28:24). These proverbs speak powerfully to the duty of adult children to care for their parents when they are older. In narrative literature, examples of caring for parents might be found in the Jacob story when his children provided

<sup>39</sup> This metaphor comes from Barnabas Piper, *The Pastor's Kid: Finding Your Own Faith and Identity* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2014), 54–57.

<sup>40</sup> William H. Propp, *Exodus 19–40: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 2A; New York: Doubleday, 2006), 211. For a reference to a Babylonian case of a son being held because he struck his mother, see Toorn, *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia*, 14.

<sup>41</sup> See also Deut 27:16, where the one who treats their parents with contempt (קָלַל, *hifil*) is cursed. This is the only *hifil* occurrence of קָלַל, but it seems to be closely related to קָלַל.

<sup>42</sup> YHWH promised never to curse the ground again, which meant that he would not send another flood on the world (Gen 8:21). Balaam was hired to curse Israel, which had very practical consequences (Deut 23:5[4]; Josh 24:9). When Elisha cursed the ones mocking him, they were killed by bears (2 Kgs 2:24).

<sup>43</sup> H. C. Brichto, *The Problem of “Curse” in the Hebrew Bible* (Journal of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 13; Philadelphia: SBL, 1963), 133–35; Stuart, *Exodus*, 488–89.

<sup>44</sup> Despising is contrasted with generosity in Prov 14:21.

food for him (Genesis 27)<sup>45</sup> or Joseph providing for his father.<sup>46</sup> The main point of these narratives lies elsewhere, but the worldview assumed in the story reflects adult children caring for their parents.

However, the command to honor parents was not absolute in the OT. Following YHWH was always more important than honoring parents, and if the two came into conflict then service of YHWH was more important. In the blessings of Moses, he described Levi not regarding his father and mother, referring to the Baal Peor incident in which the Levites killed many Israelites to stop the plague (Deut 33:9). Although it does not mention parents specifically, Deuteronomy 13 exhorts the Israelites to reject any family members who encourage them to follow other gods than YHWH. Asa put this into practice when he removed his mother from being queen mother (1 Kgs 15:13). Ezekiel calls on the Israelites not to follow the pattern of their idolatrous parents (Ezek 20:18).<sup>47</sup>

Honoring parents was also viewed as less important than loving one's spouse, as seen in the creation account where the man is to leave his father and mother and cling to his wife (Gen 2:24). The leaving of father and mother is not to be taken literally, as ancient Israelite society was patrilocal (new couples lived with the parents of the groom). It was standard for many generations of the family to live together in the same house.<sup>48</sup> Instead, the command was metaphorical, reminding the groom that he was to value his relationship with his wife above that with his parents. However, unlike a modern North American viewpoint that sometimes uses this verse to deny any responsibility for parents, this was only a relative leaving of parents, not an absolute departure. While this verse cannot be used as an excuse, in some situations the paradigm of Gen 2:24 can be invoked when thinking through care for parents that might unduly interfere with care of immediate family.

In sum, honoring parents in the OT included both the physical care of parents as well as a proper attitude toward them.<sup>49</sup> The Talmud records the following story of a sinful son to illustrate how both the action and the attitude were important. "A man once fed his father on pheasants [i.e., the most expensive food]. When his father asked him how he could afford them, he responded, 'What business is it of yours old man, grind [i.e., chew] and eat.'<sup>50</sup> Even though he was supporting his father financially, the man expressed his sin with a derogatory attitude toward his father.

<sup>45</sup> Edwin Zulu, "Reverence for Ancestors in Africa: Interpretation of the Fifth Commandment from an African Perspective," *Scriptura* 81 (2002): 478.

<sup>46</sup> Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 184–85.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 199–201.

<sup>48</sup> Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (LAI; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 36.

<sup>49</sup> Stol, "Care of the Elderly in Mesopotamia in the Old Babylonian Period," 60; Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 181–93; Albertz, "Hintergrund und Bedeutung des Elterngebots im Dekalog"; Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, 311.

<sup>50</sup> Y. Qidd. 1:7; quoted in Sherwin, "Honoring Parents," 94 (bracketed material original).

## IV. NEW TESTAMENT

Moving ahead to the world of the NT, the duty of adult children to support their elderly parents remained a priority. In the Greco-Roman world, a letter from a son to a father illustrates this duty: “Nothing truly will be dearer to me than to protect you for the rest of your life in a manner worthy of you and of myself, and if the fate of mankind befalls you, to see that you enjoy all due honours; this will be my chief desire, honourably to protect you both while you live and when you have departed to the gods.”<sup>51</sup>

In the Jewish world, Tobit commanded his son Tobias in the following way:

My son, when I die, give me a proper burial. Honor your mother and do not abandon her all the days of her life. Do whatever pleases her, and do not grieve her in anything. Remember her, my son, because she faced many dangers for you while you were in her womb. And when she dies, bury her beside me in the same grave (Tobit 4:3–4, NRSV).

The Sibylline Oracles describe the actions of the impious as follows: “as many as abandoned their parents in old age, not making return at all, not providing nourishment to their parents in turn” (2.273–275).<sup>52</sup> The Talmud explicitly identified honoring parents with physical care for them when they were elderly (Qidd. 31b). Sirach also speaks clearly to this issue.

Do not glorify yourself by dishonoring your father, for your father's dishonor is no glory to you. The glory of one's father is one's own glory, and it is a disgrace for children not to respect their mother. My child, help your father in his old age, and do not grieve him as long as he lives; even if his mind fails, be patient with him; because you have all your faculties do not despise him. For kindness to a father will not be forgotten, and will be credited to you against your sins; in the day of your distress it will be remembered in your favor; like frost in fair weather, your sins will melt away. Whoever forsakes a father is like a blasphemer, and whoever angers a mother is cursed by the Lord. (Sir 3:10–16, NRSV)

The NT texts on parents lean towards the interpretation that involves caring for parents when they are older. In the Gospels, the command appears several times, such as when Jesus reminded the rich young ruler of the command to honor parents (Matt 19:19; Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20). Jesus condemned those who gave Corban rather than help their parents (Matt 15:3–6; Mark 7:11–13). Apparently adult children were giving money to the Temple and then refusing to help their parents financially, a practice that drew Jesus's wrath and clearly showed that honoring parents meant caring for them in concrete ways. Jesus reflects this honoring in his actions as well, such as when he healed Peter's mother-in-law, who apparently lived with them (Matt 8:14–15).

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<sup>51</sup> Peter Balla, *The Child-Parent Relationship in the New Testament and Its Environment* (WUNT 155; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 65. See also pp. 64–68 for more on this duty in the Greco-Roman world.

<sup>52</sup> For more on this duty in the Jewish culture, see *ibid.*, 94–95.

However, on the other hand the Gospels also contain what appears to be an anti-family strain, a theme helpfully explored by Peter Balla in his book *The Child-Parent Relationship in the New Testament and its Environment*.<sup>53</sup> For example, Jesus instructed his disciples that if they came to follow him but did not hate their father and mother, then they could not be his disciples (Luke 14:26). This would certainly have been a shocking statement in the culture at the time. Coming from the Jesus who healed Peter's mother-in-law, he is clearly not commanding his followers to universally hate their parents. Jesus's use of hate in John 12:25 helps us understand his sentiment about parents: "Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25 ESV). Jesus is not calling his followers to commit suicide because they hate their life in this world, but he is calling for them to view it as less important than eternal life. Biblical teaching is clear that life in this world is a good thing,<sup>54</sup> but it is not the ultimate good. Likewise, honoring parents is a divinely ordained command, but for a very small number of people there might come a time when it interferes with the ultimate good of following God.<sup>55</sup>

Although Paul cited the command to honor parents in the context of instructing children to obey their parents (Eph 6:1–3), this is likely a contextualization of the original command to the lives of young children. Elsewhere, Paul stressed the importance of caring for one's family: "But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim 5:8 ESV). The word "provide for" is a relatively rare word, but it usually refers to looking forward into the future about something, which then can often refer to caring for someone or something in a practical way.<sup>56</sup> Paul exhorts the church with Timothy to honor their parents by caring for them in practical ways. Paul includes not only parents, but also others in the household, such as siblings, children, and uncles and aunts (Lev 18:12–13; 21:2; 1 Sam 10:14).<sup>57</sup>

Several Church Fathers also identify honoring parents with physical care. Origen said "Of this honor to parents one part was to share with them the necessities of life, such as food and clothing, and if there was any other thing in which it was

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<sup>53</sup> Balla, *Child-Parent Relationship in the New Testament and Its Environment*. Jacob Neusner highlights this disregard as one his main arguments with the Jesus of the Gospels in Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks With Jesus* (rev. ed.; Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 53–72. However, he does not address the texts in the OT discussed earlier in this paper that contain the same theme.

<sup>54</sup> Paul notes that "no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it" (Eph 5:29 ESV).

<sup>55</sup> Balla, *Child-Parent Relationship in the New Testament and Its Environment*, 130–55; Miller, *Ten Commandments*, 213–20.

<sup>56</sup> It appears in parallel to honor in Dan 11:37–38. For another example of the idea of caring for someone, this speech from 2 Maccabees illustrates it: "Since you are acquainted, O king, with the details of this matter, may it please you to take thought for our country and our hard-pressed nation with the gracious kindness that you show to all" (2 Macc 14:9 NRSV).

<sup>57</sup> These verses in the LXX employ the same word that Paul uses in 1 Tim 5:8 when he refers to the household.

possible for them to show favor toward their own parents.”<sup>58</sup> Jerome stated, “[The Lord] declares that [this commandment] is to be interpreted not of mere words, which while offering an empty show of regard may still leave a parent’s wants unrelieved, but by the actual provision of the necessities of life.”<sup>59</sup> This interpretation has continued throughout church history. A study of the Decalogue in the medieval world says that “it is unquestionably adult children who are to honour their elderly parents, by showing them the reverence that age should be accorded and by providing them with the necessities of life.”<sup>60</sup> Luther continues this theme.

Third, you are also to honor them by your actions, that is, with your body and possessions, serving them, helping them, and caring for them when they are old, sick, feeble, or poor; all this you should do not only cheerfully, but also with humility and reverence, doing it as if for God.<sup>61</sup>

## V. HONORING ONE’S PARENTS TODAY

In contemporary terms, the command to honor one’s parents has been complicated by our modern world, especially in individualistic North America. Instead of children caring for their parents, the elderly are supported monetarily by the government and live out their final years in nursing homes. Instead of saving money for their children, most today save money for their own use in retirement and take out long-term-care insurance policies. In the individualistic culture in the West, parents often do not want their children to help them, but desire to remain as independent as possible. If they need help, many would prefer to be dependent upon strangers than upon their children. In this context, how is a command to physically and materially care for parents relevant for us today? A North American commentator stated the following: “There is probably no culture save our own that does not place a supreme value upon respect for one’s elders.”<sup>62</sup>

For adults in general in North America, the command to honor parents, understood as caring for them when they are older, is still very relevant for our lives today. When the average cost of nursing home care is currently about \$50,000–\$100,000 a year, many are having second thoughts about paying someone else to care for their parents. The number of families in which multiple generations live in the same house is rapidly increasing. My family is an example of this. We eventually decided to move my grandmother into our house, and she has been living with us for six years. (Along with her, both my mother and my mother-in-law have also moved into our house in recent years, making the grand total of people in our house nine.) It has been a very difficult experience. When my grandmother moved

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<sup>58</sup> Joseph T. Lienhard, ed., *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (ACCS, OT 3; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 105

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 106. Bracketed material is Lienhard’s

<sup>60</sup> Lesley Smith, *The Ten Commandments: Interpreting the Bible in the Medieval World* (Studies in the History of Christian Traditions 175; Leiden: Brill, 2014), 108.

<sup>61</sup> Martin Luther, “Large Catechism,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 401.

<sup>62</sup> Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 178.

in with us, she was suicidal and cast a dark pall on the house for the first year. Since she cannot be left alone, our social life has never been quite the same. My grandmother's dementia has been steadily worsening, and as her physical health is also declining my wife cares for all of her daily needs. When we were first thinking about having my grandmother join us, we almost universally were advised against it, even by Christians, as they said that it would affect our family negatively. But we felt that this was something God wanted us to do, and over the past years it has been a transformative experience.<sup>63</sup> My grandmother's attitude has improved greatly due to being around the children, we have learned about service and compassion, and the children love having three grandmothers in the house. Even though it has been (and continues to be) difficult, we would not change what we decided.

Having shared our story, I do not necessarily think it is paradigmatic for every family.<sup>64</sup> Nursing homes and assisted living can be a good answer for some families. Even though I am convinced that my grandmother would have withered and died in a nursing home, other elderly flourish in those situations. But even if elderly parents are in these institutions, the children's responsibility to honor their parents is not over. My wife worked in a nursing home for a time and collected many stories about interactions between children and parents. Some of them were wonderful, such as the man who would visit his mother every day, even though she could no longer meaningfully interact with the world. Unfortunately, most of the stories were negative, such as the young lady who only visited her mother to take her to the bank to withdraw money and returned her to the steps of the nursing home, not even accompanying her back to her room. These kinds of stories remind us of the evil of elder abuse, which unfortunately continues in our day. Due to the difficulties of definition and reporting, the rate of elder abuse is difficult to determine, but it appears to be happening to about 5% of the elderly population, usually through financial abuse and neglect.<sup>65</sup> The majority of the abusers are relatives, such as children. The church needs to act as advocates for the elderly in their congregations.

I also do not think that the death of the elderly parent ends the obligation of the adult child to honor them. As we saw earlier in the ancient Near East, an important part of honoring parents was ancestor worship, a practice that still continues today in parts of Asia and Africa. While the OT does not call for this,<sup>66</sup> North

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<sup>63</sup> This is a common experience among God's people; for one example see the work of Henri Nouwen among the disabled and how that experience changed him (my thanks to Hank Voss for this observation and reference).

<sup>64</sup> This is true even for my own family; another one of my grandmothers currently resides in an independent living apartment. For an interesting discussion of some of these problems in the context of medieval Judaism, see Sherwin, "Honoring Parents," 91–95.

<sup>65</sup> For details, see organizations such as the National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse and National Center on Elder Abuse.

<sup>66</sup> However, burying parents seems to be part of honoring parents, as seen in Ruth's proclamation to Naomi that not even death would separate them (Ruth 1:17). For a defense of this translation, see Edward F. Campbell Jr., *Ruth* (AB 7; New York: Doubleday, 1975), 74–75; Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *The Book of Ruth* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 120–21.

American Christians have shifted too far in the other direction and it would be good for them to learn from the global church and continue creatively honoring our parents even after they have died. Not only would truly doing so hopefully cut down on the family squabbles after the death of an elderly parent, but it would also more tightly bind together the generations and provide identity for the younger generations. In my own family, since my father passed away before my children were born, I began a ritual to honor my father. Every year on the day he died, we gather as a family to eat Dutch apple pie (the last food I fed him before he died), look at pictures of him, and share stories about him to help my children enter into a relationship with their grandfather they never knew.

As far as college students, it is good for them to begin thinking about how to honor parents as adult children. As a professor I exhort them to remember that they are beginning a new phase of following this command rather than graduating from it. As a way to help students think through their responsibilities as adult children, I give one of my classes an assignment to honor their parents, which consists of three parts. First, they must pray for their parents consistently for a week.<sup>67</sup> Second, they must have an “adult” conversation with their parents. Third, I tell them to honor their parents in a practical way beyond their normal interaction with them to help them put this interpretation into action. I enjoy grading these assignments to see what kind of creative ideas the students come up with. Some of them are clearly just fulfilling a duty for requirement, but many take it to heart and do not take the easy road. Some have talked to their parents for the first time in years; others have changed how they approached conversations with their parents, going out of their way to treat their parents as actual people. Another aspect to honoring parents for many young people to think about is how they will respond to their children honoring them in the future. Even though those in the West live in independent-minded societies, we need to learn when we are young how to graciously accept help from others.

Of course, honoring parents is difficult when one has difficult parents. Does one honor parents who are not Christians? Parents who are emotionally draining? How about manipulative parents? Parents who train their children to act in evil ways? Parents who abuse their children?<sup>68</sup> For insight into these difficult questions, I recommend Jan Frank’s *Honoring Dishonorable Parents*, who writes as a therapist and

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<sup>67</sup> For more on praying for parents, see Anatheia E. Portier-Young, “Response to ‘Honoring Parents,’” in *The Ten Commandments for Jews, Christians, and Others* (ed. Roger E. van Horn; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 105–6.

<sup>68</sup> Early Jewish tradition already discussed the issue of obeying corrupt parents. The Sifra (section Kedoshim) says “‘You should each revere his father and mother and keep my Sabbaths: I am the Lord your God’ (Lev. 19:3)... . One might think that a person is obliged to obey one’s parents, even if they ask one to transgress a commandment of the Torah. Therefore, Scripture says ‘and keep my Sabbaths,’ i.e., all of you [parents and children] are obliged to honor Me [i.e., God].” This is quoted in Sherwin, “Honoring Parents,” 90 (bracketed material original). In other words, the context of the command to honor parents in the Torah implies that obeying parents only goes as far as it can within obedience to God. If a parent desires to teach a child to become a con artist, then the child should not obey that parent.

the daughter of a father who deserted the family when she was five, a step-father who sexually abused her, and a mother who did nothing to stop the abuse.<sup>69</sup> She helpfully lists several things that honoring parents does not mean: pleasing them; pretending that bad things did not happen; subjecting yourself or your children to harm; becoming entangled in unhealthy relational patterns; being overly responsible; or ignoring illegal, immoral, or toxic behavior.

What about manipulative parents? We do not have clear answers here, and advice must be given on a case-by-case basis. In some relationships, the child must intentionally move away from the parents. With a few students I have counseled, their parents had an extremely high level of control of the children's lives based on a desire for control. However, in other cases, adult children can deceive themselves into thinking that their parents are manipulating them, when in reality their parents are employing tough love to help them mature.

Medieval Jewish exegetes debated whether to honor morally problematic parents, ranging from some who said that the child was always to honor and revere parents to those who said that if a parent taught a child to act in sinful ways then the child was freed from honoring that parent.<sup>70</sup> I side with the former opinion: All parents are worthy of honor. However, what exactly this honor will look like in each situation is different. This is both the bane and the beauty of OT law. Since it is largely based on attitude rather than specific action, it can be applied in a wide variety of contexts. However, just because it is an attitude does not mean that it does not involve actions. There might be cases where an abused child cuts off a relationship with a parent. But even in this context such a parent can be honored by prayers offered for them, at the very least. In most difficult cases some level of honoring greater than this would be appropriate.<sup>71</sup>

The question of adult children obeying their parents is difficult. In North America, most people would never even consider obeying their parents as an obligation; many of my students have a hard time even asking their parents for advice, let alone following their instructions. Conversely, in less individualistic cultures worldwide the obedience of adult children is commonly expected. Although the path forward probably lies between these two views, this is an issue that evangelicals will need to continue to think about more deeply given the complexity of the role of cultural influence on praxis and the paucity of biblical evidence.

What is clear is that the command to honor parents still involves practical care for parents. While it is surely applicable to young children, it reserves its greatest impact for those of us who are adult children. It challenges us in both our atti-

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<sup>69</sup> Jan Frank, *Honoring Dishonorable Parents: Helping Heal and Restore Family Relationships* (Leipers Fork, TN: Grace Chapel, 2014).

<sup>70</sup> See discussion in Sherwin, "Honoring Parents," 91.

<sup>71</sup> Frank suggests the following categories in the context of difficult relationships: showing kindness and respect, speaking the truth in love, setting a pattern of loving behavior, and seeking to settle issues.



tudes toward our parents as well as the sacrificial actions that God calls many of us to take on behalf of our elderly parents.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> My thanks to those who offered comments on various drafts of this paper, including Rob Price's Fall 2015 Talbot research seminar, audience members at the presentation of this paper at the 2015 annual ETS meeting, and a reading group (Uche Anizor, Bob Lay, and Hank Voss).