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| Institution: University of Exeter |
| Unit of Assessment: Theology and Religious Studies |
| Title of case study: Biblical texts and archaeology: research that challenges and informs religious and political beliefs |
| <p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Research carried out at the University of Exeter into the ancient religious traditions reflected in biblical texts has been at the centre of two major TV documentary series. Advised and, for one series, written and presented by the main researcher, Francesca Stavrakopoulou, the documentaries contributed to the content and delivery of public broadcasting and greatly extended public understanding of the evidence concerning foundational aspects of the Jewish and Christian faiths. These documentaries, each episode of which was seen by over 1.5 million viewers, became the subject of intense public debate, generating much discussion and response in both national and international media. Stavrakopoulou, dubbed “the BBC’s new face of religion” by the <i>Telegraph</i>, also communicated the research in numerous other broadcasts and public events.</p> |
| <p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Certain figures and stories from the Hebrew Bible – such as Abraham or King David, or the story of the Garden of Eden – are familiar to most people, yet their historical and cultural contexts are still being explored and only just beginning to enter public consciousness. Biblical history, too easily dismissed as marginal in a secular age, remains highly pertinent to modern convictions and conflicts, as these biblical stories are central to both the Jewish and Christian faiths, and highly relevant to present-day territorial disputes in the region popularly known as the Holy Land.</p> <p>It is on this aspect of ancient history and religious practices that Francesca Stavrakopoulou, Professor of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Religion in the Department of Theology and Religion, has focused much of her research. Appointed to a lectureship at Exeter in 2005, she took up her current role in 2012. Primarily concerned with the cultural contexts of the Bible, both ancient and modern, her interdisciplinary research combines analysis and assessment of archaeological reports, textual analysis of biblical and other West Asian literature, critical theory from disciplines including anthropology, sociology and archaeology, and literature reviews.</p> <p>Stavrakopoulou’s research into biblical portrayals of history and religious practices has included investigations into aspects of ancient Israelite and Judahite religion and culture that are of great significance for modern religious claims and convictions. In 2007 Stavrakopoulou was awarded British Academy grant funding (3.7) to support her work on a monograph exploring ancestral claims to territory and land-ownership, a topic highly pertinent to continuing land disputes in Israel/Palestine (3.1). The monograph, which sold out of its first printing within two months of publication, showed how an essential element of territorial ideologies plays on the belief in the post-mortem existence of the dead, including renowned figures such as Abraham, Moses and David, and highlighted the close correlation of ancestor veneration and biblical land claims. Stavrakopoulou has also pursued research into the religious and political ideology of the Garden of Eden (3.2; 3.6).</p> <p>Stavrakopoulou has collaborated with a number of international experts, including John Barton, Martti Nissinen and Susan Niditch, to explore the nature and extent of religious diversity in ancient Israel and Judah, leading to a co-edited volume (3.3) and a forthcoming special issue of a journal. Her chapter in this co-edited volume (chapter 4) looks particularly at the social contexts of polytheism in ancient Israel/Judah, including claims about the belief that God had a wife, and a new OUP monograph based on this research is currently in preparation.</p> <p>In addition, Stavrakopoulou has undertaken research into death rituals, burial and corpses in ancient Israel/Judah, which has included articles published in peer-reviewed international academic journals (3.5; 3.6). This research identifies and analyses the significance of the corpse and its social location in these ancient religious contexts. In 2011 she was awarded an Early Career Fellowship by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for a research project on</p> |

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the social agency of the corpse in the biblical world, comparing ancient and modern perceptions of death and the corpse (3.8), and a monograph based on this project is forthcoming.

From 2006-2009 Stavrakopoulou was Co-Investigator on a project funded by the AHRC examining uses of the Bible in environmental ethics (3.9), and co-editor of one of the project's main outputs.

3. References to the research

Evidence of the quality of the research: peer-reviewed for academic journals or by academic presses, supported by research grant funding, and submitted for REF assessment (as indicated for individual items below).

1. F. Stavrakopoulou, *Land of Our Fathers: The Roles of Ancestor Veneration in Biblical Land Claims* (New York & London: T&T Clark International, 2010) [Supported by BA grant funding; peer-reviewed; panel-review at SBL Annual Meeting; submitted for REF2014]
2. F. Stavrakopoulou, 'Tree-Hogging in Eden: Divine Restriction and Royal Rejection in Genesis 2-3', in M. Higton, C. Rowland & J. Law (eds.), *Theology and Human Flourishing: Essays in Honor of Timothy J. Gorringer* (Eugene, Oregon; Wipf & Stock, 2011), pp. 41-53 [Supported by AHRC grant funding]
3. F. Stavrakopoulou and J. Barton (eds.), *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah* (New York & London: T&T Clark International, 2010) [Submitted to REF2014]
4. F. Stavrakopoulou, 'The History of Israel', in J. Barton (ed.), *Princeton Guide to Ancient Israel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming)
5. F. Stavrakopoulou, 'Gog's Grave and the Use and Abuse of Corpses in Ezekiel 39:11-20', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129 (2010), 67-84 [Peer-reviewed journal; submitted to REF2014]
6. F. Stavrakopoulou, 'Exploring the Garden of Uzza: Death, Burial and Ideologies of Kingship', *Biblica* 87 (2006), 1-21 [peer-reviewed journal]

Grants awarded to Stavrakopoulou to support her research are:

7. F. Stavrakopoulou (PI), 'The Roles of Ancestor Veneration in Biblical Land Claims', British Academy Small Research Grant, 2007-2008, £7,110
8. F. Stavrakopoulou (PI), 'The Social Life of the Corpse in the Biblical World', AHRC Early Career Fellowship, 2011, £45,560
9. D. Horrell (PI) and F. Stavrakopoulou (CoI), 'Uses of the Bible in Environmental Ethics', AHRC Research Project, 2006-2009, £196,333 plus c. £45,000 PhD studentship

4. Details of the impact

- **Shaping the content of public broadcasting**
- **Extending and enhancing public understanding of issues of major religious significance**

Stavrakopoulou's research has been brought to the attention of the general public through two high-profile TV documentary series, both of which caused widespread discussions in the national press and other media, especially concerning aspects of the research which challenge traditional Jewish and Christian beliefs. Her research has also been used to inform international policy and legal decisions. A document produced by the Supreme Court of the United States in relation to the high-profile case of the picketing of funerals of US soldiers by members of the fundamentalist Westboro Baptist Church (5.1) cites as evidence Stavrakopoulou's 2010 publication on corpse abuse (3.5 above). This publication discusses examples from biblical texts of the dead being "subjected to anti-ideal treatments," (p. 69), and is included in the legal document to contextualise the Westboro Baptist Church's biblically-based hostility towards the veneration of corpses.

In 2009 Stavrakopoulou acted as an academic expert for Channel 4's *The Bible: A History* – a documentary series exploring the religious significance and impact of the Bible. She advised on the

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content of and appeared in two episodes on Abraham and Moses, drawing directly upon her research into the religious significance of these cultural ancestors of Israel (3.1 above). The episodes achieved viewing figures of 0.8 million and 1.0 million respectively. Stavrakopoulou also wrote an accompanying article, entitled 'Abraham's Inheritance', for Channel 4's website. Reviews of the programmes, broadcast in February 2010, included one in *The Telegraph* (5.2) which highlighted Stavrakopoulou's contribution and her suggestion that Moses was merely a mythical, territorial ancestor of Israel (3.1 above, chapter 3).

Subsequently, Stavrakopoulou was invited to write and present three hour-long documentary programmes for BBC2 based on her academic research and expertise. *Bible's Buried Secrets*, broadcast in March 2011, again raised questions about the biblical portrayal of religion and history which challenged beliefs central to Judaism and Christianity, such as whether the empire of the biblical King David ever existed (episode one; 3.4 above), and whether the ancient Israelites worshipped a goddess (episode two; 3.3 above, chapter 4). Episode three also drew on Stavrakopoulou's research on the Garden of Eden (3.2 and 3.6 above). Stavrakopoulou's writing of the programmes in collaboration with BBC staff meant that her knowledge and expertise directly impacted upon their content, format and presentation, and during the making of the series she gave an in-house seminar for staff at BBC TV Centre about the research used in the making of the programmes. A statement from the BBC's series' executive producer comments that: "Francesca's research expertise was crucial to the shaping of *Bible's Buried Secrets*. First, she was able to advise the BBC to drop certain programme ideas that were not credible subject areas for the series; second... she was able to find a focus that would make for an original and compelling documentary in what is after all a highly sensitive area." (5.3).

The documentaries were screened in a primetime slot, achieving viewing figures per episode of 1.95 million, 1.62 million and 1.56 million. They have since been posted on *YouTube*, attracting audiences from the UK, the USA, Canada, Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Singapore and the Solomon Islands, with the most popular extracts achieving over 488,000 views and 3,800 comments (5.4). The programmes have also been franchised to BBC Worldwide, and broadcast in countries including Sweden and Australia.

The programmes were widely previewed in the national press, with the idea, presented in episode two, that the God of the ancient Israelites might have had a wife (3.3 above, chapter 4) attracting particularly widespread coverage. Reviews of the series appeared in the *Telegraph*, the *Independent*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Times HE Supplement* as well as on *Time* website (5.5). A number of religious publications have commented on the controversial content of the programmes, with the *Catholic Herald* featuring an article (5.6) discussing Stavrakopoulou's research findings, shown in episode three, about the Garden of Eden (3.2 and 3.6 above), and the Catholic website *Protect the Pope* responding to episode one, which called into question the existence of King David (3.4 above). The *Mormon Dialogue* discussion forum demonstrates the further impact of the third episode on religious communities (5.7), while the *Guardian* has included comment on the implications of Stavrakopoulou's research for the future of the Mormon Church (5.8). The *Guardian* has also produced an edition of their 'Passnotes' series featuring Asherah (5.9) in response to episode two of the documentaries. The Spring 2011 broadcast of the BBC TV's viewer reply programme *Points of View* (Spring 2011) carried a main feature on the series, and BBC Radio 3's *Night Waves* (14th March 2011) has included a discussion of it, while Stavrakopoulou's BBC TV blog post about the programmes attracted 322 comments during the short period in which readers were able to post responses to the blog.

As a result of the content and impact of the documentaries, Stavrakopoulou has appeared several times as a panellist on BBC1's religion and ethics programme *The Big Questions*, appeared as a guest on BBC1's *Sunday Morning Live*, contributed to a televised discussion programme on BBC4, appeared on the US History Channel's documentary series *Secrets of the Bible*, been interviewed on BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour*, and participated in Radio 4's panel show, *Museum of Curiosity*. One episode of *The Big Questions* to which Stavrakopoulou contributed has since been posted on *YouTube*, where it has received over 100,000 viewings and attracted nearly 3,500 comments (5.10). In July 2011, she presented her research on the suppression of the Asherah tradition in Hebrew Bible interpretation (3.3 above), which featured in episode two of the documentary series, at the Modern Church conference, an event mostly attended by non-academic liberal Anglicans.

Also in 2011, her monograph (3.1 above) was discussed by a panel at the annual conference of the US Society of Biblical Literature, which exists to foster biblical scholarship, but also make resources available to the wider public.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. US Supreme Court case citing Stavrakopoulou's work as an authority: Albert Snyder v. 'Fred W. Phelps, Sr.; Shirley L. Phelps-Roper; Rebekah A. Phelps-Davis; and Westboro Baptist Church, Inc.'. www.abanet.org/publiced/preview/briefs/pdfs/09-10/09-751_Respondent.pdf (accessed 05.09.2013)
2. Example of a media article evidencing Stavrakopoulou's contribution to *The Bible: A History*:
'The Bible: a history, Channel 4, review', *The Telegraph*. www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/7168164/The-Bible-a-History-Channel-4-review.html (05.02.2010; accessed 05.09.2013)
3. Correspondence on file from Executive Producer, BBC Religion and Ethics.
4. Search results for YouTube postings of and comments on *Bible's Buried Secrets*:
www.youtube.com/results?search_query=bible%27s+buried+secrets&oq=bible%27s+bu&gs_l=youtube.3.0.0l5j0i5.196.1279.0.1857.8.6.0.0.0.0.379.1109.1j3j1j1.6.0...0.0...1ac.1.11.youtube.zEGCi-P1NXc (accessed 05.09.2013)
5. Example of a feature about *Bible's Buried Secrets*:
'BBC's new face of religion claims Eve has been "unfairly maligned as the troublesome wife"', *The Telegraph*. www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/8366537/BBCs-new-face-of-religion-claims-Eve-has-been-unfairly-maligned-as-the-troublesome-wife.html (08.03.2011; accessed 05.09.2013)
6. Example of a review highlighting controversial content of *Bible's Buried Secrets*:
'Last night the BBC's biblical scholar made a crucial and sloppy mistake about Christian belief', *Catholic Herald*. www.catholicherald.co.uk/commentandblogs/2011/03/31/last-night-the-bbc%e2%80%99s-biblical-scholar-made-a-crucial-and-sloppy-mistake-about-christian-belief/ (31.03.2011; accessed 05.09.2013)
7. Discussion of Episode Three of *Bible's Buried Secrets* on the *Mormon Dialogue* discussion forum: www.mormondialogue.org/topic/55794-god-had-a-wife/ (accessed 05.09.2013)
8. *Guardian* article commenting on the implications of Stavrakopoulou's research for the future of the Mormon Church:
www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2011/jul/06/gods-wife-heavenly-mother-mormon-church (06.07.2011; accessed 05.09.2013)
9. *Guardian* 'Passnotes' edition featuring Asherah:
www.theguardian.com/world/2011/mar/08/pass-notes-gods-wife (08.03.2011; accessed 08.10.2013)
10. YouTube posting of *The Big Questions* featuring Stavrakopoulou, first broadcast January 2012:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=sb1N9WQd4KU (06.03.2012; accessed 31.10.2013)