

Uncanny World, Uncanny Self: Re-imagining the Encounters with the Gibeonites (Joshua 9-10), the Sleepers and the Mainlanders through the Lens of Homi K. Bhabha

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Before Israelites entered the promise land, YHWH has made it crystal clear that they “must utterly destroy” the Canaanites and the like, “make no covenant” with them, and “show no mercy” to them (Deut. 7:1-2). It appears that if the Canaanites were allowed to exist on the same land with Israelites, the latter were destined to turn their back against YHWH and serve other gods. It is thus assumed that intermarriage between Israelites and people from other nations would inevitably lead to betrayal to YHWH. As a matter of fact, it did happen before in Shittim (Num. 25:1-18), and continues to happen even in the post-exilic community (Ezra 9:1-2). Even if the betrayal is not an immediate outcome of the intermarriage, it is basically a “snare” that lures Israelites into their doom (Deut. 7:16).

Nevertheless, there are cases of positive outcome even when Israelites are in close contact with non-Israelites. The most striking of those cases is the Moabite Ruth who managed to adapt to the Israelite society, and eventually became the great-grandmother of King David (Ruth 4:18-22). Her migration to Bethlehem was a successful one perhaps because she was willing to confess to a new faith, as her expression “your God my God” indicated (Ruth 1:16).¹ She was also committed to Naomi and the people of Israel as shown in the covenantal expression that was once used by Jehoshaphat (1 Kgs 22:4; 2 Kgs 3:7).² Another positive encounter is the one between Rahab the renowned prostitute of Jericho and the two spies sent by Joshua. They made a pact that could save the lives of Rahab and her family on a conditional offer (Josh. 2:12-21). In exchange, the two spies managed to finish their task and return to Joshua safely. Joshua did honor the pact made between them and allowed Rahab and her family to live in Israel (Josh. 6:25). Although these two incidents are in direct contravention to the strict policy of “utterly destroy,” “no covenant,” and “no mercy,” they seem excusable as the non-Israelite parties had fulfilled the conditions, whether verbally expressed or culturally implied, set by the Israelites. The encounter between Israelites and Gibeonites in Joshua chapters 9-10 can as well be added to the list of exemption from the discriminative policy. In this article, by means of post-colonial theory proposed by Homi K. Bhabha, I argue that these imposed conditions are actually Israelites’ attempts to dominate over the non-Israelites and that this kind of perspective towards non-Israelite communities is manipulative and detrimental to each other. Then I will explore further through the lens of uncanny on two more encounters, namely the one between Charles Wesley and his audience at St. Mary, Oxford, and the other between Hong Kong people and the Mainlanders.

¹ “Ruth, II.22” in *The Midrash Rabbah*, vol. IV, 5 vols., New Compact ed. (London: Soncino Press, 1977).

² Mark S. Smith, “‘Your People Shall Be My People’: Family and Covenant in Ruth 1:16-17,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 69 (2007): 256-257.

The Portrayal of Gibeonites

Gibeonites are contrasted with the kings of the Hittites and the like in their reactions to Israelites' triumph over Jericho and Ai. As Stone rightly points out, the disjunctive waw at the beginning of Joshua 9:3 highlights the different response made by Gibeonites: "rather than fight, they concede Yahweh will give Israel victory and try to save their own lives."³ But was Gibeonites' response really that different from the others? By comparing the descriptions of the kings who were beyond the Jordan, the Gibeonites, and King Adoni-zedek of Jerusalem, we observe a similar three-stage pattern. First, they hear of Joshua's triumph over Jericho and Ai (Josh. 9:2, 3). In case of King Adoni-zedek of Jerusalem, he also hear of the pact made between Israelites and Gibeonites (Josh. 10:1). Second, they are in "great fear" as the God of Israel has given the Israelites all the land, and is about to destroy all the inhabitants of the land (Josh. 9:24). Although we are not told that the kings in Joshua 9:1-2 are frightened, their reaction to gather together and fight is the exact same response as in King Adoni-zedek of Jerusalem (Josh. 10:3-4). We may thus assume that the kings are too in great fear. Third and final, they act on their fear and respond either by fighting or with cunning. Joshua 9:3-15 describes in details how the Gibeonites deceived Joshua and the Israelites. They take worn-out sacks, wear worn-out clothes and sandals (Josh. 9:3-4), and claim that they have traveled a very long journey from a far country (Josh. 9:6, 13). Their deception and the resulting covenant with Israelites saves them from being utterly destroyed, which would have been its fate especially because one of the Gibeonite cities, Kiriath Yearim, was once associated with the Baalistic cult (Josh. 15:9-11).⁴ The covenant even saves them from the assault of the joint military forces of the five kings (Josh. 10:1-15). After all, the Gibeonites are not so different from the others: they are living in a region under Baalistic cultic influence, and respond with cunning because they fear for their life.

However, the Gibeonites still cannot escape from slavery for the entire Israelite congregation and the house of God (Josh. 9:21, 23, 27). The only difference between the fates of the Gibeonites and the others is that the former are not being utterly destroyed. Ironically, Israelites have not done what YHWH asks them to, but have done what they have not asked YHWH for permission in the whole process of covenant making and enslaving the Gibeonites. Joshua contends that the Gibeonites deserve being cursed and shall always be slaves (Josh. 9:23). The combination of נָרְאָה and עָבֹד occurs only twice in the Hebrew Bible. Apart from the present text, Genesis 9:25 mentions the sober Noah curses Canaan for his father Ham has seen Noah naked. The reason behind the cursing of one's son for one's act may still be debatable.⁵ Our concern here is the enslavement as cursing and a result of someone's action. Now we must turn to Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory of uncanny and then we will re-visit the encounter between the Israelites and the Gibeonites again.

³ Lawson G. Stone, "Ethical and Apologetic Tendencies in the Reaction of the Book of Joshua," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53 (1991): 30.

⁴ Mark Leuchter, "The Cult at Kiriath Yearim: Implications from the Biblical Record," *Vetus Testamentum* 58 (2008): 531-532.

⁵ John Bergsma and Scott Hahn's article suggests the possibility of maternal incest, in the light of the traditional views, namely voyeurism, Ham's castration of Noah, and paternal incest, as the reason behind the cursing of Canaan. See J. S. Bergsma and S. W. Hahn, "Noah's Nakedness and the Curse on Canaan (Genesis 9:20-27)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124 (2005): 34-39.

Bhabha's Theory of Uncanniness

Post-colonialism aims to expose “the relationship between center and margin, metropolis and periphery, on a global political scale – the imperial and the colonial.”⁶ Nevertheless, the identity being at the center or margin could be relative and fluid. Israel was once the periphery to the west Asian superpowers like Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia or Persia.⁷ It has also become a conqueror to the indigenous Canaanites, who in Joshua chapters 9-10 fear for their lives.⁸ Whoever gets at the center claims to uphold one’s superiority and control over the others at the margins by providing things that they need, for example, security, shelter and the like.

The uncanny is originally a psychoanalytic concept, which describes a “feeling you get when you have a guilt-laden past which you should really confront, even though you would prefer to avoid it.”⁹ The feeling of uncanny will involuntarily recur and remind one of certain familiar yet frightening experience. Homi Bhabha further develops the concept of uncanny in his analysis on cultural studies. He contends that culture can be canny (*heimlich*), whereas cultural authority can be uncanny (*unheimlich*). Culture is canny when one is trying to generalize and represent a homologous and stable environment. Cultural authority is uncanny because one has to differentiate and translate a culture in order to make it “distinctive, significatory, influential and identifiable.”¹⁰ When one tries to differentiate, the culture being represented changes. The dual nature of culture is “rather like colonial discourse.”¹¹ While every colonial discourse aims at fixing the colonized in a frozen misrepresentation, the colonized are still able to reclaim their subjectivity by mimicking the colonizer, thereby exposing the slippage and ambivalence of the stereotype. Bhabha cites the “double use of the word ‘slave’” in Locke’s Second Treatise as an example. The word “slave” may suggest ownership, but it also refers to an intolerable and violent use of power.¹² Thus, it is this “double-ness” of a culture or a colonial discourse that gives the powerless, the marginalized and the colonized a chance to resist. The more the colonizer wants to maintain the homogeneity and stability of its discourse, the harder the repercussion it gets from the colonized.

The concept of uncanny is relevant to our re-reading of the encounter between the Israelites and the Gibeonites in two particular ways. Firstly, the dispossession of Gibeonites’ land generates a sense of uncanny in their relationship with the land. The uncanny experience of the Gibeonites is comparable to the relationship of the Aboriginal with the colonized Australia. As David Huddart rightly puts it, “the land is both theirs and uncannily not theirs in the wake of European colonization.”¹³ Thus the feeling of uncanny always urges the indigenous people to rethink the ownership of the land, and resist the colonizer’s discourse. Secondly, as Israelites possess the promised yet foreign land, the uncanniness that Israelites experience is a constant

⁶ Fernando F. Segovia, “Postcolonial and Diasporic Criticism in Biblical Studies: Focus, Parameters, Relevance,” *Studies in World Christianity* 5 (1999): 180.

⁷ Ulrike Sals, “The Hybrid Story of Balaam (Numbers 22-24): Theology for the Diaspora in the Torah,” *Biblical Interpretation* 16 (2008): 318-319.

⁸ John J. Collins, *The Bible After Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 65-66.

⁹ David Huddart, *Homi K. Bhabha* (London: Routledge, 2006), 55.

¹⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 195.

¹¹ Huddart, *Homi K. Bhabha*, 56.

¹² Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 122-123.

¹³ Huddart, *Homi K. Bhabha*, 57.

reminder that only openness can allow any nation or people “to maintain a fragile but real sense of coherent national identity.”¹⁴ This fragile identity of a nation or people is surprisingly uncanny to oneself because no nation or people exist independently by oneself, but interdependently with others. Suddenly, this very nation or people become a stranger to oneself and has to adapt to one’s new identity. This is also the case for Israelites.

Re-imagining the Encounter with the Gibeonites

We have observed from Joshua chapter 9 that the Gibeonites respond with cunning to Israel’s occupation of the land. Nevertheless, the Gibeonites have already embraced their new identity as Israel’s “servants” (עֲבָדִים; 9:8, 9, 11) before Joshua realizes their deception and curses them to be “slaves” (עֲבָדִים; 9:23). They are apparently willing to enter into a relationship of master and servant, in order to secure their right to stay on the land that they once possessed. It seems totally justified for Israelites to dispossess the Gibeonite land and enslave the people, because they too accept the fact that YHWH has given all the land to Israelites and that Israelites are supposed to utterly destroy the people on it (Josh. 9:24). Now the authority of Israelites as master is established, but the master-slave relationship soon changes as the development of the narrative takes an uncanny twist in Joshua chapter 10. The one who is supposed to be “hewers of wood” and “drawers of water” asks for Israel’s military help. The Gibeonites still need saving, but only this time thing is not quite the same. The Israelites as the master are now bound by the covenant they have made (Josh. 9:19-20; 10:6). To maintain their authority as a master, Joshua and Israelites have no option but to fight for the Gibeonites (Josh. 10:7). Ironically, the Gibeonites are in fact living in “a large city, like one of the royal cities,” and their men are all “warriors” (Josh. 10:2). They are actually strong enough to frighten King Adoni-zedek of Jerusalem, which reminds us that the Israelites, the “master” of the Gibeonites, presumably provoke a similar fear in all the kings of the Hittites, the Amorites and the like (Josh. 9:1-2). Through the lens of Bhabha’s theory of uncanny, the identity of Israelites as the master becomes fragile. The Gibeonites are not just Israel’s “slaves,” but has also become their responsibility, if not liability, that shake the very foundation of Israel’s domination.

Moreover, Israelites, who have the divine sanction to occupy the land and destroy the people, become strangers to themselves when facing the joint military forces led by King Adoni-zedek of Jerusalem. The phrase “do not fear/be afraid” (אַל-תִּירָא/תִּירָא; Josh. 10:8, 25) alludes to the fear that the Gibeonites and King Adoni-zedek of Jerusalem once had. Only this time it is the Israelites who are afraid of the assault. They respond to the emotion by stepping on the necks of those kings and proclaiming almost like a ritual the phrase “do not be afraid” (Josh. 10:24-25). The fear, after all, is mutual. There is an inescapable uncanniness whenever one is willing or forced to face the others. In a sense, Israelites are not quite different from King Adoni-zedek of Jerusalem. The divine sanction does not make Israel any better or more superior. When Israel confronts their own uncanny, they can finally see the possibility of tolerating the uncanny in others.

¹⁴ Huddart, Homi K. Bhabha, 58.

Encountering the “Sleepers”

“Sleepers” is a term that Charles Wesley used to address the audience to whom he preached at St. Mary, Oxford on April 4, 1742. Wesley defines the term as people who are unaware of yet satisfied in their sins, like a sick person who “fancies himself in perfect health.”¹⁵ They may live like a Pharisee who has an outward form of godliness, earning one’s justification by work not by faith. On contrary, Wesley asserts that such a person is “an abomination in the sight of God,” and that person is spiritually “dead unto God.”¹⁶ Consequently, “sleepers” are incapable to discern spiritual matters, and are actually “a child of the devil.”¹⁷

Wesley is extremely confident on what he was preaching. He is convinced that the audience at St. Mary is the “sleepers,” and that God was speaking through his mouth.¹⁸ He has used rhetorical questions in most of the second section of his sermon, forcing his audience to wake up from their dream of worldly happiness, to receive Holy Spirit, and arise from the spiritual death.¹⁹ However, Wesley’s sermon was poorly received. Thomas Salmon, a historian who was among the audience, criticized that his sermon was four times longer than expected, and that he had insulted and abused the audience in all degrees.²⁰ Wesley refuses Salmon’s allegation outright in his Journal for April 15, 1750, and maintains that he has delivered the sermon properly.²¹

The encounter between Charles Wesley and the audience at St. Mary turns out clearly not what he would intend. From the perspective of post-colonial theory, it does not appear that Wesley is trying to assert his own authority and force his audience to be subordinated to him. Wesley seems genuine when he claims “God calleth thee now by my mouth.” Perhaps this very sermon, which is delivered after Wesley evangelical conversion in 1738, is under heavy influence of his doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit.²² Since his seventh undisputed sermon, Wesley’s doctrine of the Holy Spirit, according to Jason Vickers, begins to take a significant role in understanding how a Christian life should be shaped and guided.²³ To be a true Christian, one has to partake in the divine nature by receiving the Holy Spirit. This doctrine of Holy Spirit has become the defining, if not definitive, criterion to differentiate a Christian from hypocrites. Such a robust differentiation is unfortunate through the lens of uncanny. Not that one should not draw a line between Christian faith and the others, but the stereotypes employed in Wesley’s rhetoric can be dehumanizing and even demonizing. Only by imagining the rivalry between the supporters and opponents of such differentiation model is already disturbing, not to mention that there would be any common space to begin a dialogue. Nevertheless, Wesley’s doctrine of the Holy Spirit are actually set in the context of popular preaching and lay leadership movement during the eighteenth century. The “populist

¹⁵ Albert C. Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1, *Sermons I: 1-33* (Nashville: Abington, 1984), 143.

¹⁶ Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, 144-145.

¹⁷ Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, 146.

¹⁸ Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, 147.

¹⁹ Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, 148-152.

²⁰ Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, 112, n. 12.

²¹ Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, 112, n. 13.

²² Jason E. Vickers, “The Making of a Trinitarian Theologian: The Holy Spirit in Charles Wesley’s Sermons,” *Pneuma* 31 (2009): 219-220.

²³ Vickers, “The Making of a Trinitarian Theologian,” 217.

tradition” inevitably shakes the foundation of the authority of the ruling or elite class in the church and society.²⁴ Thus, Wesley is in fact the one at the periphery, and the audience at St. Mary is actually the one that has the authority to appoint or dismiss its preachers. The encounter between Wesley and the audience at St. Mary is an example to show again how fragile one’s identity can be through the lens of uncanny. One can formulate one’s discourse at one point and define a person or a group of people as a child of God or devil. The same discourse can bring a sense of uncanny to a power center, shaking it from its ground.

Encountering the Mainlanders

The feeling of uncanny always happens on both sides of the people of Hong Kong and the mainlanders. Recently, several incidents have made things severely heated up on both sides. A web-based group of Hong Kong residents have expressed their discontent with the mainlanders in a local popular tabloid, calling them “locusts” that has taken up all kinds of social benefits and welfare from Hong Kong. One of the issues that has provoked the people of Hong Kong is the influx of mainland mothers, who try in every way to give birth in Hong Kong, so that her child could enjoy a better, if not the best, healthcare and education in China.²⁵ Disgruntled Hong Kong residents, who live in the northern part of the city, are also complaining about the mainlanders stocking up baby milk formula for various reasons. This issue has made some people concerned over shortages of milk powder. Some even sign up in a petition to the White House, asking for international support and assistance.²⁶ To make the situation worse, a professor named Qingdong Kong at Peking University calls Hong Kong residents “bastards,” “thieves” and “dogs of British imperialists,” because only a third of the Hong Kong residents regard themselves as Chinese.²⁷ One critic suggests that the reason behind Hong Kongers’ dissatisfaction toward mainlanders may be related to the “discontent over the Communist government’s control” since reunification of Hong Kong to China fifteen years ago. On contrary, despite the fact that racial or social injustices happen during British colonization, Hong Kong people actually misses the old days when there was more freedom of speech and press than nowadays.²⁸ During the election of the Chief Executive of Hong Kong in 2012, an opinion piece was unjustly edited and distorted by the Sing Pao Daily News, favoring one of the candidates running for election under the pressure of the Central Government of China.²⁹ A survey conducted by the Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies of the Chinese University of Hong Kong shows that 66 percent of 878 persons who took part in the survey are in favor of the British

²⁴ Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley*, 18-20.

²⁵ BBC News, “Hong Kong advert calls Chinese mainlanders ‘locusts,’” 1 February, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-china-16828134> (accessed 15 July, 2013).

²⁶ Bettina Wassener, “Mainlander Shoppers Met With Protests in Hong Kong,” *The New York Times*, 11 February, 2013, <http://rendezvous.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/11/mainlander-shoppers-met-with-protests-in-hong-kong/> (accessed 15 July, 2013).

²⁷ Jonathan Watts, “Chinese professor calls Hong Kong residents ‘dogs of British imperialists,’” *The Guardian*, 24 January, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jan/24/chinese-professor-hong-kong-dogs> (accessed 15 July, 2013).

²⁸ Vanessa Ko, “Trouble Down South: Why Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese Aren’t Getting Along,” *Time*, 24 January, 2012, <http://world.time.com/2012/01/24/trouble-down-south-why-hong-kong-and-mainland-chinese-arent-getting-along/> (accessed 15 July, 2013).

²⁹ Rosa Trieu, “Honkongers’ Press Freedom Threatened by China’s Creeping Influences,” *Forbes*, 25 June, 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/rosatrieu/2012/06/25/honkongers-press-freedom-threatened-by-chinas-creeping-influence/2/> (accessed 15 July, 2013).

Colonial Government than the Communist Government because they believe that the former did a better job.³⁰ In short, Hong Kongers' resentment toward the mainlanders ranges from a personal to a political level.

The identity of Hong Kong residents seems to be Chinese without dispute. However, the uncanny complex of Hong Kongers tends to reject the Chinese identity that is imposed by the Communist Government. They are still missing the British Colonial Government. Some of them even have held up the colonial flag during the recent July First annual pro-democracy rally.³¹ Since the present Hong Kong government has failed to address the concerns of its citizens, especially on the aspect of political reform, some of them would rather go back in time and embrace the colonial's rule. At the same time, Hong Kong has been playing an important role as an international trading and investment center in the region. The financial growth in the retail sector of Hong Kong is said to depend on mainland tourists.³² The Central Government always reminds Hong Kongers that the city's stability and harmony is the utmost priority for economic growth. Yet from the lens of Bhabha's theory, the demand for stability and harmony is in fact a kind of colonial discourse. For the sake of the benefits and economic growth, the people of Hong Kong are seemingly bound by a domination-subordination relationship. Now with the anti-mainlander sentiment boiling hot, the Hong Kong and the Central Government are menaced and trying to keep the people calm and subordinated.³³

The relationship between Hong Kongers and mainlanders to some extends echoes the one between the Gibeonites and the Israelites. To Hong Kong people, the land is what defines their identity. The feeling of uncanny will always emerge when the land is run by other powers besides the Hong Kong people themselves. Just as the dispossession of the Gibeonite land urges them to rethink the ownership and resist the colonial discourse, the influx of mainlanders will always generate the same effects on Hong Kongers. Moreover, as the Central Government continues to interfere the matters of Hong Kong, the uncanny repercussion will only get worse. Only if the mainlanders and Central Government realize that they are generating the feeling of uncanny, and that they could be open to discuss and change, then the tension between the two could perhaps be lessened.

Conclusion

In this article, I have re-visited the three encounters between uncanny people through the lens of Bhabha's postcolonial theory. The encounter between the Gibeonites and the Israelites was initially heading toward a typical domination-subordination relationship. But when the Gibeonites ask for help in face of King Adoni-zedek of Jerusalem, the identity of Israel as master is shaken. The Gibeonites

³⁰ Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, "Survey on How Hong Kong People feel about the Status Quo after Handover to China since 1997 (2011),"

http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/hkiaps/tellab/pdf/telepress/11/Press_Release_20110628.pdf (accessed 15 July, 2013).

³¹ BBC News, "Hong Kong marchers demand China uphold democracy pledge," 1 July 2013

³² Jeanny Yu, "Hong Kong still No 1 for mainland Chinese tourists," *South China Morning Post*, 13 November, 2012, <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1081729/hk-still-no-1-mainland-tourists> (accessed 15 July, 2013).

³³ Alfred Wu, "Mentality of Hong Kong people has become not that inclusive," *China Daily*, 12 June, 2013, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hkdition/2013-06/12/content_16609217.htm (accessed 15 July, 2013).

are no longer mere “slaves,” but also Israel’s responsibility to rescue. By re-imagining through the theory of uncanny, Israel’s encounter with the indigenous people on the promised land could turn out to be more than just destroying or being destroyed. The encounter between Charles Wesley and his audience at St. Mary, Oxford is not quite the same as the first one. The popular preaching that Wesley employed is a two-edged sword. Its uncanniness can challenge the people who are at the power center yet spiritually dead. When it is in the hands of authority, such rhetoric can be demonizing. The last encounter is the one between Hong Kong residents and the mainlanders, which resembles the first encounter. The uncanny feelings generated during the encounter always remind us of the potential distortion to a domination-subordination relationship. A certain openness may does wonder in facing the uncanny experience.

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