

**Society for Cultural Anthropology
Cultural Horizons Prize**

SCA is proud to award the eighth annual Cultural Horizons Prize to:

Omri Elisha
(Queen's College, CUNY)

for his article

**"Moral Ambitions of Grace:
The Paradox of Compassion and Accountability in Evangelical Faith-Based Activism"**

(Cultural Anthropology 23, no. 1 (February 2008): 154-189).

This year's doctoral student jury, consisting of Hannah Appel (Stanford U), Emily Yates-Doerr (NYU), and Mareike Winchell (UC Berkeley), writes:

“Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great,” begins Omri Elisha’s article, with this quote from Luke. In “Moral Ambitions of Grace: The Paradox of Compassion and Accountability in Evangelical Faith-Based Activism,” Elisha traces the mutually-constitutive and at times irreconcilable ethical demands of compassion and accountability as they shape the work of evangelical activists in Knoxville, Tennessee. Elisha uses rich and convincing ethnographic material to show that evangelicals themselves “explicitly recognize the paradox” between compassion and accountability, seeing the relation as dialectical rather than contradictory. Elisha’s attention to this paradox and his informants’ awareness of it illuminates not only the everyday practices of the evangelical activists, but also informs much larger projects of care and compassion—be they humanitarian, governmental, religious, or even anthropological. As Elisha notes, the “unsettling indeterminacy” introduced by these competing and dialectical demands relies on and in turn creates specific objects of intervention – “obstacles and hardships” – ones that “reinforce narratives of embattlement.” That such languages of embattled gifting create vertical relations of accountability rather than empowerment raises provocative questions about the daily intimacies not only of evangelical activism but also of international humanitarian work, philanthropy and democracy-serving military action.

The strength of Elisha’s analysis comes in his nuanced understanding of evangelicals as ethically-situated actors, an approach that diverges from too facile critiques of informants in antinomic relation to the interests anthropologists have historically held (Marcus 2008). Moving beyond a repetitive ethnographic trope in which intended altruism in fact only deepens class and race divides—where analysis then rests in the disjunction of intention and action—Elisha pushes for an understanding of the unreconciled ethical ground from which these evangelicals act, one of which they are themselves aware. His analysis forces readers to think through what it means that evangelicals *know* that vertical accountability “is unilateral and paternalistic,” but are still unable to find an alternative (mutual, horizontal) way to act. By showing us an ethnographic situation in which people act meaningfully from within existent structures of power and

inequality and an explicit concern with the challenges they pose, Elisha shows us that critique is not enough. His article asks us to think *past* critique *with* our interlocutors.

In the interview with George Marcus that inaugurated the 2008 volume of *CA*, Marcus said that anthropology should not just study up, but instead engage seriously with informants who are also interlocutors. “This inevitably means,” Marcus says, “realizing scenes and terrains of fieldwork by engagements with those from whom we would have distanced ourselves previously, in sympathy with the subaltern, as “elites.” With his emphasis on the way that white evangelical activists in Tennessee themselves grapple with their positioning vis-à-vis the impoverished and overwhelmingly African-American neighborhoods they serve, Elisha has heeded Marcus’ call. Elisha’s article also turns to what Ann Stoler calls the “dissociated and dislocated histories of the present,” and especially to the “actual imperial residues and remnants that may elude our chartings.” Elisha’s detailed ethnographic work not only charts the entailments of such residual forms, “the material and social afterlife of structures, sensibilities, and things,” but also attends to the emotional and relational fields in which they unfold.