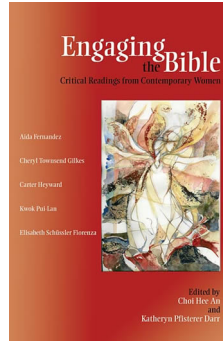


○ REVIEW OF CHOI AND DARR (EDS.), *ENGAGING THE BIBLE*

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Carolyn Sharp reviews Hee An Choi and Katheryn Pfisterer Darr (eds.), *Engaging the Bible: Critical Readings from Contemporary Women*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006. Pp. x + 150.



This engaging volume offers essays by contributors distinguished in the fields of feminist, womanist, postcolonial, and queer theology and hermeneutics. The catalyst for this project was a lecture series on multiculturalism sponsored by the Anna Howard Shaw Center of the Boston University School of Theology in 2003–04. The purpose of the book, per Choi Hee An's helpful introduction, is to model ways in which biblical interpreters can equip scholars, churches, and communities to employ multicultural interpretive strategies and to bring their own 'struggles and experiences into dialogue with biblical traditions' (viii). In this constructive endeavor, sexism, racism, imperialism, heteronormativity, and biblical authority are interrogated in specific biblical texts and in interpretations of those texts. Each essay lays a methodological foundation based on a liberationist, reader-focused hermeneutics and then reflects on a particular biblical text as it may engage the lived realities of contemporary women. Each essay is followed by five discussion questions about the intersections of biblical interpretation and the life experiences of readers.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes describes ways in which the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16) is used in Afro-American spirituals, sermons, and prayers, arguing that these appropriations of Scripture are grounded in a prophetic call for justice that makes the 'meaning of the resurrection contingent upon relations of equity and justice in everyday life' (10). Kwok Pui-lan reads the story of Rahab (Joshua 2) in conversation with Pauline sexual ethics (Romans 1), employing a postcolonial hermeneutics that challenges North American imperialism and the marginalisation of women and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people. Aida Irizarry-Fernández describes a creative approach to Bible study that incorporates dream analysis and artistic responses to the biblical text as part of an empowering action-reflection praxis that honors Latina/o identity. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza presents a rigorous exposition of feminist emancipatory hermeneutics and the process of conscientisation, illustrating her method through a resistant reading of the

imperial rhetoric of domination in 1 Peter. Finally, Carter Heyward draws on the cultural critiques offered by Jewish theologian Marc Ellis and Latino and Black liberation theologians in order to frame Bible studies of Gen 1:26, Matt 27:24-26, and Rom 1:26-27, urging that we read the Bible against itself to destabilise biblical anthropocentrism and heterosexism and promote peaceable relations of kinship and mutuality.

This slim volume is well suited for those undergraduates, seminary students, and parish leaders who have not encountered feminist, womanist, postcolonial, or queer reading strategies before, or who have a basic understanding of those interpretive postures but have never applied them to the Bible before. The essays here are written in a clear, accessible style. What makes the volume marvelous for novices – namely, its collation of a variety of creative approaches and exegetical work at a basic expository level – may, however, make it less than fully engaging for scholars who have any depth of understanding in the subject areas. Another tricky aspect of implied audience has to do with the demonising of theologically conservative readers: two essays in this volume seem to lump theological conservatives in with ‘fundamentalists’ as irredeemably beyond dialogue, although the articulate and generous conclusion by Katheryn Pfisterer Darr goes some distance toward remedying this. One might remark that the volume stops short of engaging the troubled intersections among traditional Black liberation theologies and feminist readings. Or again, some powerfully emancipative theological readings in the past two decades have omitted queer liberation from the scope of their transformative hermeneutical praxis. Awkward though it may be, these areas of ongoing friction must be dealt with honestly if our readings are not to reinforce certain oppressive hegemonies even as we speak of liberation.

As is inevitable with any collection, readers may object to one or another aspect of these essays. Those sensitive to *mujerista* insights may be jarred by one author’s use of ‘Latino’ throughout her piece to refer to girls and women as well as males. This arguably minor semantic issue is reinforced by that author’s engagement with nine male theologians and cultural figures in her essay but no females, enacting (however unintentionally) a subtle androcentrism that is surprising given that the purpose of the book is to highlight the agency of women in interpretation. The excellent piece by Schüssler Fiorenza is the densest in theoretical terms and scholarly notions; her discussion of the ‘ekklesia of wo/men’, ‘kyriarchy’, and ‘kyriocentric’ texts and her skillful holding together of multiple levels of rhetorical inquiry may prove to be conceptually challenging for readers who are not already familiar with her groundbreaking work.

My chief disappointment with this very fine book has to do with a missed opportunity regarding critical inquiry into Scripture. The actual engagement with Scripture in some of the essays ranges from bland description to simplistic free association to mining for isolated motifs, three kinds of engagement that arguably do not constitute critically informed methodologies. (The essays of Kwok and Schüssler Fiorenza, I should note, are exemplary in their hermeneutical sophistication.) Much important work has been done on the nuances of complex biblical texts. For one example relevant to the goal of emancipatory hermeneutics: how should contemporary readers understand the Hebrew prophets? The prophets indeed call us to justice, but they also perform devastating critiques of their own people’s ignorance of biblical tradition, the lack of accountability of those in leadership positions, and the gullibility of people who trust in narcotic words of *shalom*. The prophets use gendered rhetorics of sexual shaming to offend and emasculate their (male) implied audiences, something that is problematic for many readers and thus requires careful critical framing. The prophetic books – especially Isaiah and Jeremiah – are riven by bitter

internecine disputes and ideological positions that threaten the ruthless annihilation of dissenters. Thus the prophets speak a fractured and problematised divine Word to reading communities today. It may no longer be adequate, at least for some readers, to encounter a romanticised view of the prophets as simple advocates for justice.

Theologians and ethicists need not slog through tomes of technical Biblical scholarship to see this. What I have mentioned is clear from a straightforward reading of the biblical text itself. But one must read the entire biblical book in question thoughtfully, rather than culling just a favorite verse or two. Consider the violence against the Levite's concubine that we see in Judges 19. The book of Judges has positioned that story strategically at the climactic point of a narrative trajectory ironising Israel's charismatic leaders (Gideon commits apostasy; Samson is a vengeance-crazed, sex-obsessed boor who dishonors his Nazirite vows). Judges 19 does not promote violence against women – the narrative works quite to the contrary. This is not a new suggestion: fully nineteen years ago, feminist scholars Lillian R. Klein and Mieke Bal did an excellent job of elucidating the ironies in Judges. Yet one still encounters naïve readings that reject the text because it depicts violence against women. Heyward suggests that while proof-texting is 'bogus' and 'intellectually lightweight', many readers of Scripture do it, so readers interested in emancipatory hermeneutical praxis might as well become skilled at it too (114). She may be right in pragmatic terms, but the more urgent task is to invite readers to appreciate the dynamic complexity of Scripture so that ideological sloganeering can find less and less purchase in our interpretive debates.

Those who are vulnerable to the debilitating pressures of racism, misogyny, economic oppression, imperialism, and homophobia already know that real life involves anxious contradictions, the pathos of silenced voices, and violent arguments about what constitutes hope for a marginalised community. (Let us not forget the virulent disagreements that raged among Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey during the North American civil rights movement, for just one example.) For Bible study to be fully relevant, readers need to take account of the tensive sites of conflict and undecidability within Scripture itself as a crucial part of any liberatory biblical analysis. Biblical textual performances of struggle and ambiguity are indispensable sacred resources for current debates about gender, race, sex, power, and the (re)construction of community.

That noted, I would emphasise that the passion of these writers for justice-making hermeneutics is nothing short of inspiring. The goal of the volume is commendable, and the essays are gracefully integrative in their theological and exegetical concerns. Pastors, lay leaders, and students will find much here to mull as they wrestle with the riches and risks of Scripture in their own lives and in communities that take the Bible seriously.