

**Review of Marchal, Joseph A., ed. *After the Corinthian Prophets: Reimagining Rhetoric and Power*
Semeia Studies, 97
Atlanta, Ga.: SBL, 2021**

Jaeda C. Calaway, Illinois College

Looking beyond Paul, what voices and actors shaped Paul's letters? How much should one identify with Paul's voice, and to what degree can one consider his varied Corinthian interlocutors? Through a rhetorical analysis of 1 Corinthians, Antoinette Clark Wire's *The Corinthian Women Prophets* historically reconstructed a subset of Paul's interlocutors; namely, the Corinthian women prophets. The contributors to *After the Corinthian Prophets*—Shelly Matthews, Jorunn Økland, Cavan Concannon, Joseph A. Marchal, Arminta Fox, Anna Miller, and Antoinette Clark Wire—reflect upon and expand Wire's frame by applying it to other letters, complicating it through intersectional and queer readings, and, with a dose of posthumanism, reconsidering other ignored *actants* beyond human interlocutors.

In a programmatic introduction, Marchal lays out Wire's contributions, her scholarly impact or lack thereof, and how one can build upon her analysis. Three decades ago, Wire painstakingly reconstructed women through the biases of a male writer. Nonetheless, like other pathbreaking women scholars, Wire is often ignored, missing from bibliographies on Paul, Pauline rhetoric, or Corinthians. One reason proposed by Marchal is that many modern scholars identify with Paul, while projecting negative qualities onto his audience. Wire, however, recovers the perspectives of Paul's interlocutors without stereotyping them. Marchal writes, "simply thinking of the women and other recipients of these letters alters not only the interpretive angle on, but also the political resonance of, Paul's intracommunal argumentation" (20). When considering multiple constituencies in Corinth, one does not need to identify with any of them, even while engaging in the difficult rhetorical and historical work of reconstructing their voices.

Matthews expands Wire's contributions through gender, queer, and intersectional theories that have "expanded and complicated women as a category" (47), focusing on the intersection of enslaved women prophetic embodiments as an example. Matthews summarizes Wire's methods, noting how Wire disentangles points of both agreement and disagreement between Paul and his interlocutors based upon the arguments Paul does and does not make. One point of conflict, for example, derived from status-change differences created by joining the Christ community: Paul experienced joining the community as a debasement; the Corinthian women prophets as an elevation with the baptismal abolishment of gender distinctions (Gal 3:28). Unfortunately, much of mainstream scholarship has missed out on these methodological insights. As Matthews notes about scholarship on 1 Corinthians after Wire, "Wire does not 'teach or have authority over any man,' but is rendered invisible, indeed, nonexistent" (53).

Wire's argument relies upon 1 Cor 14:34-35 being an original part of 1 Corinthians and not a later scribal edition. Økland, therefore, discusses the

reception histories of 1 Cor 14:34-35 and of Wire's discussion of these verses, arguing that "Wire's conclusions regarding 1 Cor 14 and gloss theories are the logical, persuasive outcomes of her sustained rhetorical approach and feminist imagination" (69). Wire demonstrates that 14:34-35 is original, while Øklund deconstructs objections to Wire's work.

Concannon places Wire's work within feminist conversations that decenter Paul, resist his binaries that other scholars redeploy, and open up space to hear other voices. Concannon indicates we must be careful about how we make "the voices haunting the margins of Paul's letters speak," potentially valorizing them without considering the ways they were both complicit with and resistant to their own imperial situations. Concannon thinks Wire evades this critique by choosing a small subsection of the Corinthian interlocutors that cannot represent the whole. Concannon then turns to a posthumanist reading that widens the possibilities to those who are not human, looking at the interaction between flesh, body, and *pneuma* (spirit, breath, wind). *Pneuma*, a nonhuman actor, connects different bodies together in the body of Christ and dwells within each body. As such, the human body cannot exist in itself, but only exists in connection with other human bodies through nonhuman agents.

Marchal despairs of reconstructing fleeting voices and voices anxieties of speaking for the voiceless, the problems of having only half the conversation, and the slight, ephemeral traces of Paul's interlocutors. So they turn to ephemera of the queer archive. Real-life actions leave residual evidence; these footprints are "ephemera." Ephemera, though, are incidental, so they represent the particular or specific rather than the typical or norm; you cannot use ephemera to reconstruct a statistical average. Marchal compares this to the ephemeral materials of grassroots archives of modern queer movements that include within them mementos of nostalgia, fantasy, trauma, and personal memories. An example is the letters in Leslie Feinberg's semi-autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues* and the Lesbian Herstory Archives. This situates Paul's letters as alternative, marginal, and ephemeral. Examining the rhetoric of 1 Corinthians 7, Marchal argues that the practices described are "lesbian-like": "They resisted sex and marriage (with males), they flouted prevailing expectations of sexual propriety, they collaborated with other females, they altered their gender comportment in their clothing and bodily practices" (135). Marchal also draws upon 11:2-16 to discuss the ancient practices of head shaving as "well-known images of gender variation" (137).

Fox extends Wire's method into 2 Corinthians 10-13, where Paul defends his own authority to Corinthian interlocutors, some of whom were women. Paul stresses his authority by characterizing himself as a masculine warrior who effeminizes his communities on behalf of his emperor (God); as a jealous patriarch who worries about his daughter's (community's) virginity; and as weakly and slave-like. His slave-like weakness is a means to bolster his argument, critiquing Corinthian claims to wisdom. In contrast to Paul's chip-on-the-shoulder blustering, Corinthian women and slaves likely experienced the Christ movement as equalizing. Fox argues that both Paul and his interlocutors appropriated and discarded kyriarchal imagery and language as it suited their immediate purposes; their gendered constructions of self and each other were ongoing and evolving.

Miller argues that the Corinthian *ecclesia* was a public assembly that valued bold speech rather than a private home, making the presence of free and enslaved women leaders even more striking. Miller questions the two-sphere model derived from Enlightenment thinkers and applied to the ancient world that equated women with private and free men with public. When scholars use this model, they mask “the robust political participations of marginalized groups within the ancient world” (166). While situating democratic discourse within the early Roman Empire, Miller dismantles the private/public model in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy. 1 Timothy seeks to reinscribe private/female and public/male, but provides evidence of “contest and struggle that substantiate women’s participation in a communal, public sphere” (166; cf. 187).

In her response to the essays in this volume, Wire examines multiple *actants*—marginal humans and non-human agents—that shaped 1 Corinthians. Wire focuses on *hypotassein* (to subordinate) and *hypotage* (subjection) with men, Christ, women, God interacting in hierarchies of subordination that serve to undermine women’s speech and agency. Other *actants*, including rulers, authorities, powers, and death, all become subordinate to God. Other *actants* also include demons, sin, foolish things, weak things, and despised things. These *actants* work together, against each other, or otherwise, but all shape the Corinthian correspondence. Wire considers God’s and Christ’s agencies, through *charis* (grace) and *zoe* (life) respectively. For Paul’s letters and for posthumanists, all beings are entitled to their own agency, all function in networks that are continually renegotiated, and this system is vulnerable.

This slim volume is important for multiple reasons. By examining and developing the work of a single monograph, this book has unusual focus for an edited volume, leading to consistent quality among the contributions. As these essays make clear, Wire’s original historical reconstruction through rhetorical analysis in *Corinthian Women Prophets* was a methodological event, though a routinely ignored one. Part of the importance of this book is to put Wire’s original book back into the scholarly conversation, placing it alongside other feminist pathbreaking works, such as Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s *oeuvre*, which the contributors also regularly cite.

Even so, one cannot just apply Wire’s method without awareness of its benefits and limitations. The contributors, therefore, repeatedly note potential, yet avoided, pitfalls as one applies her method to other letters (2 Corinthians and 1 Timothy) and contexts (*ecclesia* as public). The multiple ways these essays update Wire’s analysis along intersectional lines, especially in terms of economic status, race, ethnicity, gender theory that complicates gendered categories, and queer theory seem to me necessary tasks.

Nonetheless, if Wire’s original method sought voices of forgotten interlocutors who sometimes agreed with and sometimes resisted Paul, then I find the posthumanist gesture of seeking nonhuman *actants* that shaped the letters as related to, but engaging in a different kind of analysis from finding other voices through rhetorical analysis. For example, Karen Barad, a posthumanist theoretical physicist who theorizes material agency, develops the concept of intra-activity: entities emerge and exist through their iterative intra-action. If we think of these as intra-actions, it is easier to demonstrate how the tense interlocutions that

shaped these letters, in turn, impacted Corinthian women (prophetic, slave, free, or freed) than how they would, in turn, impact *pneuma*, *charis*, or *zoe* that shaped it. These forces shape the letter but do not seem to be as shaped by it except insofar as they also become embodied in human *actants*. At this point, for this reader, the question begins to shift from what interlocutions shaped the letter - and how do we reconstruct them - to what intra-actions allow *pneuma*, *charis*, and *zoe* to emerge and continue to exist? I do not think this is a drawback, but want to mark this as less a methodological updating and more as a departure. At this point, the analysis sprouts new lines of flight, which may explain why Wire herself seemed excited at its prophetic possibilities. There is much in this volume for those wishing to revisit Wire's original analysis as it now intersects in new ways with current critical perspectives.

Reference List

Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meeting*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)