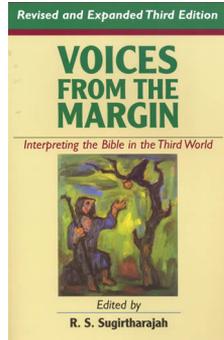


○ REVIEW OF R. S. SUGIRTHARAJAH (ED.), *VOICES FROM THE MARGIN: INTERPRETING THE BIBLE IN THE THIRD WORLD* (3rd EDN)

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Sugirtharajah brings together in 37 chapters just as many concepts and authors in this rich collection of *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*. In its fifteenth anniversary, third edition, there are 17 new chapters as well as a new section on postcolonial readings of scripture.

Sugirtharajah seeks to ‘demolish the center itself and redraw the parameters’ of Biblical interpretation, a task I believe he realizes (p. 9). The most significant contribution then is the six centers or categories of interpretation laid out in the six thematic sections Sugirtharajah has organised the book around; and the voices brought to the forefront in each of those sections. In light of ‘identity hermeneutics’, as Sugirtharajah suggests, ‘[t]he question arises whether these ethnic, gender, and racial markers are not the inventions of hegemonic interpretations to keep the marginalized in their allocated places, with the master supplying the labels,’ I wonder then about his choice in the title of the book using ‘margin’ and ‘Third World’ (p. 4).

Sugirtharajah opens with his reflections on the past fifteen years, the gains and losses for Third World voices and postcolonial studies and suggests that for all the gains in the margins, there has been equal or more co-opting by Biblical interpreters, ‘a small group, largely men, representing every major faith tradition... who have appointed themselves the true custodians and interpreters of the scriptures’ (p. 3). He closes his introduction with a reminder of the tension that we all must hold to read the ‘minorities’ but not just to know about the ‘other’ (p. 9). In this light I will focus on a few of the voices that are new to this volume and that also spoke personally to me.

The first essay by Elsa Tamez on ‘The Bible and the Five Hundred Years of Conquest’ is a great essay to begin the volume with. Her history is succinct, her point equally succinct: the Bible has been used as a weapon, interpreted by the oppressors as authorising conquest in the name of liberation and salvation. What was apparently never considered by the ‘liberators’ was the

native people and what *they* thought best for *themselves*. She describes one popular justification, '*The Invaders Are the Liberators*', and illustrates: 'The Spaniards are the ones who liberate the indigenous peoples from idols and from burning in hell' (p. 15).

Tamez goes on to state that the real issue is the interpretation of the Biblical text: 'The suffering of the indigenous peoples caused by the Spanish', was often interpreted by the 'liberator' or collaborator as 'God's punishment'. For example, the Biblical texts that were used for this justification were the ten plagues that God sent to Egypt or the flood. It was not difficult for the invaders to justify their domination. Another justification that Tamez notes is that '[t]he succession of Empire is part of salvation history' (p. 16). In the conquest of Canaan, as Tamez puts it, we have '[a] Biblical paradigm of invasion' (p. 16). Invasions are almost always interpreted as 'just'. We see this in our own Global and particularly US politics today. 'Suffering as punishment or as the will of God is a biblical-theological reading... that covers up the mechanisms that cause that suffering' (p. 17).

With all of this in mind it is no wonder then that '[f]or various Indigenous peoples the Christian canon is an enemy of Indigenous life' (p. 17). The challenge then that Tamez offers is an invitation 'to recognize that God reveals God's self in other cultures, [we then] ask for their forgiveness and God's forgiveness for the disaster that our reading of the Bible has caused for so many years' (p. 23). Having taken classes from Tamez at the Universidad Biblica Latinoamericana in San Jose, Costa Rica, I was not at all surprised to see her in this edition. She certainly is one of the strongest and most well-known voices both within and coming out of Latin America.

The very next article by Renita J. Weems, Womanist Biblical Scholar, 'Re-Reading for Liberation: African-American Women and the Bible', gives us a clear next step in a hermeneutics of liberation that 'starts not with the texts but with the survival of black women' (p. 27). In this approach of reading and interpreting the Bible multiculturally, 'it forces one to face and to declare explicitly on whose behalf one interprets' (p. 29). Weems suggests a strong unwillingness to look at how we use language 'especially biblical and theological language – to mask or reinforce differences among us' (p. 29). Women of color have a more difficult time with this unwillingness as it is so much a necessity: 'reading with and reading across cultural borders' (p. 29). Weems reminds us that 'womanist hermeneutics of liberation begin with African American women's will to survive and thrive as human beings and as the female half of a race of people who live a threatened existence within North American borders' (p. 31). The experience of these women is 'privileged over theory' (p. 31).

In the same vein as Elsa Tamez, Weems asserts that the reading of the Bible as African Americans has always been interpreted 'differently from those who introduced this book to us' (p. 32). Any attempt then to understand a womanist reading of the Bible must first begin with an understanding of 'the ways in which the Bible has been (and continues to be) used to rationalize the subjugation of African people of the diaspora living in North America in general and the sexual and gender subjugation of African women of the diaspora living in America in particular' (p. 32). Therefore, Weems insists that a womanist reading of the Bible always include the empowerment of its readers to 'judge biblical texts' and when necessary to 'read against the grain', taking a stand against texts and interpretations that are 'counter to one's own vision of God's liberation activity in the world'. Liberation then is 'the work of people reaching out to one another across the gulf of their real flesh-and-blood painful gender, racial, national, religious,

and geo-political differences' (p. 37). Weems complements Tamez's reminder that context and personal story are more relevant than historical critical method.

In the entirely new section of Sugirtharajah's book, 'Postcolonial Readings', the reader is brought to concrete terms with Empire. In 'Reading for Decolonization (John 4.1-42)' Musa W. Dube, Associate Professor of NT at the University of Botswana and a leading African Postcolonial Scholar, brings to light the subversive strategies, goals and values of the Empire as she sees them at work in the Biblical text. She opens her essay with a compelling popular African saying, 'When the white man came to our country, he had the Bible and we had the land. The White man said to us, "let us pray". After the prayer, the white man had the land and we had the Bible' (p. 297). I imagine that most indigenous peoples around the world could say the same thing.

Dube begins with a history of Imperialism as 'an ideology of expansion that takes diverse forms and methods at different times, seeking to impose its languages, its trade, its religions, its democracy, its images, its economic systems and its political rule on foreign nations and lands' (p. 297). Both parties involved in colonialism, the coloniser and the colonised, are complicit, and all parties involved suffer, just in significantly different ways. Dube highlights both several imperialist movements as well as the strategies used in domination. After her thorough outlining of the movements and the leader's particular word choices and associations, the reader can see the writing on the wall. For example, many emperors were called, or called themselves, 'King' and or 'Saviour', words we see used much later in the Biblical text itself. Dube details how Alexander the Great appropriated through association *The Iliad* for a model or justification of his conquests. Again, just as Tamez and so many other postcolonial readers have done, Dube points out that 'the violence of imperialism was depicted as a redeeming act for the benefit of the subjugated, or the so-called "duty to the natives"' (p. 298). The detail of history that Dube provides is stimulating and enlightening.

She then deconstructs the cultural literary texts that support imperialism, dealing with a number of classic texts including the Bible. She posits, 'texts that legitimate and authorize imperialism include most canonized classics of ancient and contemporary times... Reading the Bible and other cultural texts for decolonization is, therefore, imperative for those who are committed to the struggle for liberation' (pp. 301-303). Dube then reads John 4:1-42, the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, for decolonisation, highlighting the many nuances that support imperialistic ideologies. She then outlines some keys to look for in a decolonizing reading. As an example of this approach, Dube includes a South African woman's rewrite of John 4:1-42 arresting all the imperialising aspects within the story and telling a thematically similar, but dramatically different story of the woman at the well, one that is as empowering to the woman as it is to the prophet. Dube concludes her critical essay by stating: 'biblical critical practice must be dedicated to an ethical task of promoting decolonization, fostering diversity, and imagining liberating ways of interdependence' (p. 314).

Sugirtharajah concludes with his 'Afterword: The Future Imperfect', where he stresses the importance of taking seriously the concerns raised in this book. He stresses that many scholars and non-scholars are and will continue moving toward more obscure, increasingly technical, politically reactionary, and so on scholarship. 'The discipline is strongly marked by paradigms set by a few Western scholars, paradigms that are limited by their biases' (p. 494). The voices raised in this book are attending to other more pressing matters, i.e. globalisation and their own collapsing economies. Reading these voices, we are interested, but at a significant risk of losing

them. An option that current biblical scholars must engage in is ‘emancipat[ing the Bible] from its narrow exclusivism’ (p. 495). Many third world church leaders however are using the Bible as an ‘uncaring, mean-spirited and cruel book by using it uncritically, especially in the vilification of gays and lesbians’. He summarises that ‘the imposition of one’s culture on others is plainly unacceptable’ (p. 495).

Sugirtharajah continues to awaken the spirit and open the eyes and ears of western readers, while at the same time encouraging the voices from the Third World as well as giving them voice in his monumental work. It is hoped that in another 15 years Sugirtharajah would introduce us to another 17 or more Voices from the Margin.