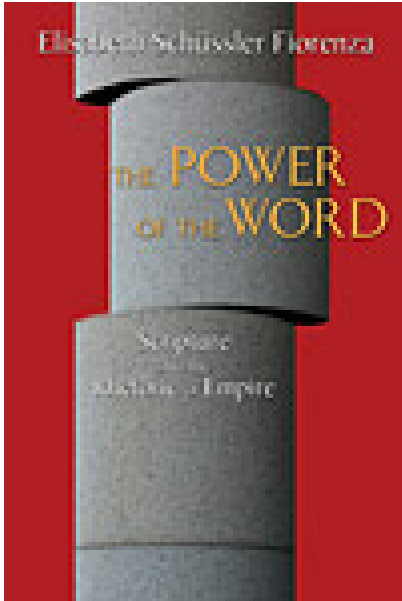


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Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth

The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire

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In her latest book and building on previous work, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza focuses on the reality of empire, past and present, as she continues her call for ethically responsible, public, biblical interpretation. The complex and rich theoretical discussions engage Paul, Revelation, and 1 Peter.

The programmatic chapter 1, entitled “The Rhetoric of Empire: Introduction,” begins by noting a renewed focus on empire studies in Christian Testament scholarship. Schüssler Fiorenza argues that these studies, especially those of the somewhat neglected Paul and of Revelation, have tended to emphasize the oppositional stance of Christian writings to the empire. In so doing, they have overlooked the text’s reinscribing of structures of domination, and they have often focused on the past, neglecting the present function of imperializing language for G*d and obedience-requiring rhetoric for readers. Such language and rhetoric, determinative for Christian identity and praxis today, need deconstructing so that contemporary readers and biblical studies, conscious of this reinscription, can engage the public task of resisting empire, “constructing a scriptural ethos of radical democracy, which provides an historical alternative to the language [and praxis] of empire” (7). For this work of recognizing kyriarchal domination in all spheres (“power over”) and constituting a radical democratic egalitarian vision (“power for”), a

critical, transformative, transnational, political, decolonizing feminist hermeneutics is necessary.

The subsequent chapters elaborate this agenda. Chapter 2, entitled “The Power of Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire,” explores understanding and reading scripture in the context of global empire with its dynamics of domination and exploitation, including the rise of the fundamentalism that offers certainty and creates hostility toward various “outsiders.” She argues that, instead of interpreting the inscriptions of empire as anti-imperial language that nevertheless reinscribes violent empire as “power over,” a feminist decolonizing reading employing an emancipatory-rhetorical paradigm that emphasizes “Divine Wisdom Sophia’s power for life” is necessary. Chapter 3, “Empire and Ekklesia,” claims that this evaluative reading is possible in the decolonizing space and feminist horizon of the “ekkllesia of wo/men.” She constructs this “ekkllesia of wo/men” (70–75) as a radical democratic notion (Sandoval) comprising egalitarian and just relationships that is an alternative to empire and that provides a hermeneutical space whereby a critical feminist reading that emphasizes more egalitarian and just interactions occurs (Arendt; Mohanti). She develops this analysis in a discussion against readings that privilege or identify with Paul, along with interpretations of Paul and empire that reinscribe empire.

Chapter 4, “Toward a Critical Feminist Decolonizing Interpretation,” begins by discussing feminist critical and postcolonial (feminist) readings. Moving to the book of Revelation, Schüssler Fiorenza examines the “feminine figuration of Babylon/Rome.” She concludes that these two approaches, used apart from each other, result in the former essentializing gender while the latter degenderizes imperialist domination. In chapter 5, “Empire and the Rhetoric of Subordination,” Schüssler Fiorenza therefore proposes “an intersectional kyriarchal analysis” that can decode and detoxify the biblical inscription of power through decolonizing interpretation. She presses this analysis of kyriarchy (a synonym for empire and its domination in antiquity and modernity) with reference to household passages (regrettably omitting Matt 19–20) and subsequently in relation to 1 Peter. Her double focus on past and present engages both these texts’ ancient context and the contemporary U.S. appeal to scripture by right-wing political rhetoric concerned to maintain divine sanction for the subordination of wo/men and the differentiation of the sexes in condemning same-sex relationships. Her method of detoxification or decolonization and conscientization (so Freire) comprises seven hermeneutical moves embracing experience, domination, suspicion, critical evaluation, memory and remembering, imagination, and transformation (163–64, 181–93).

Chapter 6, “The Rhetoric of Empire and G*d-Talk: Decolonizing the Divine,” moves beyond the influence of the rhetoric of empire on Christian ethics to engage its influence on the central issue of Christian the*ology, namely, how to talk about G*d. Schüssler

Fiorenza argues that this language is not only androcentric (as feminist analysis has made clear) but also (as liberationist and postcolonial feminist analysis establishes) kyriocentric in being centered on the emperor, lord, master, father, husband, and so forth. She argues that this language functions in Revelation as “anti-language” (M. A. K. Halliday). Further, she discusses the dualistic model of monotheism and polytheism to show how both have sanctioned imperial power. She proposes three approaches for talking about the divine. One identifies language that does not reinscribe kyriocentric language of empire. The second draws on Asian traditions to employ the wisdom figure Kannon/Kuan Yin to overcome the dualism of monotheism and polytheism. The third employs traditional notions of *via negativa*, *analogica*, *eminentiae*, and *practica* to destabilize all language for the divine.

Chapter 7, “Transforming Biblical Studies,” makes the obvious argument that, to engage matters of empire in the biblical texts and in contemporary interpretation and appropriation, a new paradigm of biblical studies is needed. This paradigm concerns not only interpretations of biblical texts but practices of interpretation in a contemporary context marked by diverse populations, changing electronic media, and multiple methods. Of special concern is the work of doctoral programs in shaping scholars and teachers who can function not only in the academy but also in public discourse and spaces, in religious (confessional) communities, and in an interreligious world.

Evident throughout this stimulating and provocative book is Schüssler Fiorenza’s passionate concern to nurture “scholars, preachers, and Christian readers who are able to identify the rhetoric of empire inscribed in scripture and to make the connections between the rhetoric of scripture and contemporary global struggles for justice and well-being” (33). Three goals are important here. The first is the recognition of the inscription of empire in Christian Testament texts. The second is attention to contemporary imperialism and the role of scripture within it. Schüssler Fiorenza’s well-placed insistence on this second goal leads her to criticize work that has focused on the first goal. Her point that the two must inform each other is well-taken, but the criticism of work focused on the first goal seems somewhat precipitous, given that much scholarly work identifying imperial inscription and negotiation in the Christian Testament is very recent and remains either neglected or strongly contested by parts of the guild and the church. The fact remains that without step one there is no step two, and step one, despite increasing scholarly attention and growing sophistication, is by no means at all widely recognized in the guild or the church, as anyone engaged in imperial-critical work knows very well. But beyond this, it should also be recognized, as much pedagogical experience and hermeneutical theory attest, that attention to the inscription of empire in Christian texts inherently means attention to contemporary imperialism, given that interpreters do not leave their worlds and interests behind in the task of interpreting texts. The third goal, the

shaping of scholars, preachers, and Christian readers to undertake this work, is important. Schüssler Fiorenza's book is not an easy read, and its dense language, rich conceptual mix, and relentless pursuit of the arguments to their pragmatic conclusions will put the book out of reach of some of these readers. But for those who persevere there is much helpful wisdom here and a compelling vision for life-giving but discerning engagement with the Christian Testament and the contemporary imperialized and imperializing world.