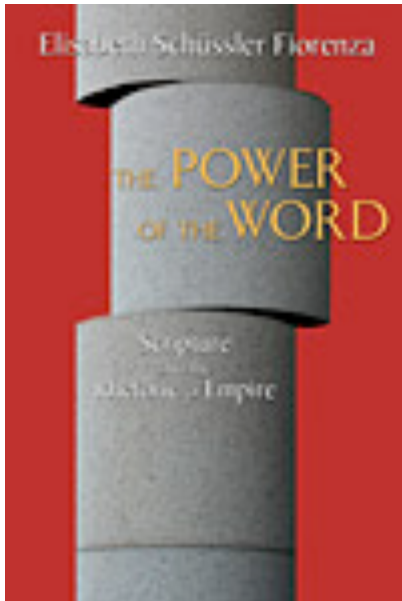


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Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth

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

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In *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire*, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza lays out her agenda for biblical studies in an age where imperial powers and fundamentalist religionists pose a threat to democratic societies of liberty and equality. Drawing from vocabulary in her feminist and liberationist lexicons (which take a while to get used to), she promotes a “th*ology” that empowers “wo/men” (people) to reject kyriocentric applications of the Bible and opt for a socially transforming democratic reading.

In chapter 1, “The Rhetoric of Empire,” Schüssler Fiorenza describes her work as a feminist contribution to predominantly “malestream” empire studies, which heretofore has neglected to highlight the impact that the “language, imagery, and message” of the Roman Empire has had on the Bible and its interpreters. What is needed today is “a scriptural ethos of radical democracy, which provides an historical alternative to the language of empire.” (7) This is achieved by applying a “rhetorical-emancipative” ethic, whose usefulness transcends the Christian context and can be applied to “cultural-political” discourse. It also calls for a shift from seeing things through the lens of a dual systems analysis and embracing a complex analysis that recognizes “interstructured and multiplicative dominations.”

The application of a critical political feminist hermeneutics goes beyond postcolonialism's deconstructionist quest and requires a liberating reconstruction that can detect the invisible story of woman in the text. Schüssler Fiorenza suggests that this type of reading is possible when biblical studies are no longer seen as historical or literary studies but as "reframing representation." Ultimately, she seeks to provide an alternative hermeneutic to kyriocentric Christian fundamentalism by using scripture to develop a "radical democratic vision."

Chapter 2 deals with "The Power of Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire." Writing during the final days of the Bush presidency, Schüssler Fiorenza takes on the religious right's endorsement of a *pax Romana*-motivated militarism and capitalism that is legitimized by a literalistic reading of scripture. What is needed is a "reshaping" of biblical studies as the Western intellectuals who have dominated the field and perpetuated an imperial agenda are confronted. In order to gain cultural relevance, biblical studies must begin to ask new questions from the text that go beyond the positivistic pretense of fundamentalist and historical critical readings. The interpretive quest should not be stifled by attempts to discover what texts "mean" but what they "do to those who submit to the vision and power of imagination in various contexts that also determine the meaning of the text" (60).

Schüssler Fiorenza further proposes that we return to the etymological meaning of theology and see it not as a system of propositional truths but as a way to speak about God. This involves a shift in the way in which the "power" of scripture is often understood. The traditional practice of submitting to the text gives the scriptures a "power over" the reader, an imperial *potestas* that cannot be questioned and leads to imperial abuse. However, liberation takes place when the scriptures are allowed to give "power to" the reader, a democratic *potentia* that empowers the reader to utilize the Bible to critique the empire.

Chapter 3, "Empire and *Ekklēsia*," contains a thorough explanation of what Schüssler Fiorenza means by "*ekklēsia* of wo/men." She utilizes *ekklēsia* in its classic sense to depict an egalitarian assembly based on a democracy that values every voice. The concept has political, linguistic, community, and global-spiritual dimensions that reflect a democratic ideal and opposes the kyriachal connotation of church (*kyriakē*). In several instances, she terms the phrase an oxymoron, since churches have historically been male-dominated institutions that oppress women. However, the use of the term wo/men serves as an attempt to re-create a vision of what *ekklēsia* should be as it articulates a radical democratic ethos. The qualifier is necessary as long as women remain second-class citizens and androcentric language prevails.

The *ekklēsia* of wo/men is empowered to debate Paul's use of imperialistic language, which has sustained the rhetoric of "othering" and encourages malestream kyriarchy. The negative effects of seeing the "other" as evil/wrong has created a dualism that has legitimized persecution and intolerance in the name of religion. Schüssler Fiorenza believes that scholars are actually doing a disservice to women when they try to liberate Paul by assigning kyriarchal texts to the interpolation heap. This silences the voices of the women behind the text who necessitated the injunctions in the first place. What is needed, she pleads, is an approach that accepts the text at face value but instead "re-imagine[s] this space as the *ekklēsia* of wo/men that is 'already' and 'not yet'" (101).

Chapter 4 moves "Toward a Critical Decolonizing Interpretation." The process of decolonizing is necessary, since the *ekklēsia* is an "alternative" system founded on egalitarian democracy and not a "counter" empire based on the hierarchical chauvinism of its predecessor. With careful and courteous sensitivity, Schüssler Fiorenza explains to her postcolonial colleagues why a new method is needed. Postcolonial criticism (malestream and feminist) has been very effective in critiquing ideologies of European superiority but have remained an academic exercise. Part of its impotence, she suggests, lies in its dualistic fixation on the West and the rest, which "does not leave room for the complexity of world politics." (114) Decolonization draws on postcolonial issues but also draws on other methods and theories as it concerns itself with all "intersecting pyramidal structures of domination," (127) by mining "emancipatory discourses" from the kyriarchal texts.

The chapter ends with a decolonizing interpretation of the book of Revelation that focuses on "feminine figuration" in the book. Schüssler Fiorenza contends that, although some of the language in Revelation is "sexually charged," it is political, not genderized. For instance, the prostitute of Rev 17 and 18 is a symbol of the capitalist empire that is to be replaced by a new world symbolized by the bride of chapter 21. Although Schüssler Fiorenza recognizes a liberating theme in Revelation, decolonization also demands that she highlights the potential danger of the reinscribed imperial language that is used to convey its anti-imperialist rhetoric, which can lead to a dualistic reading that supports oppressive structures and ignores the rhetorical-political reading that challenges them.

In chapter 5, Schüssler Fiorenza discusses "Empire and the Rhetoric of Subordination." The empire concept is based on a kyriarchy that in the Roman context placed power (*potestas*) in the hand of the *pater familias*, who was ultimately under the power of the emperor. The kyriarchal concept is reflected in the *oikos*-ethos that undergirds the New Testament teachings of male headship. Nonetheless, she asserts, these texts should be seen as prescriptive rather than descriptive and need to be detoxified through a decolonizing reading. She undertakes this reading with 1 Peter as she applies seven hermeneutical strategies: (1) experience; (2) domination; (3) suspicion; (4) evaluation; (5) imagination;

(6) remembrance; and (7) transformation. These strategies reject a “hermeneutics of acceptance” and seek to discover what must have been going on behind the scenes.

According to Schüssler Fiorenza, 1 Peter is saturated with a rhetoric of subordination that centers around the *oikos* image. However, the use of imperial terminology should be viewed as crafty rhetorical strategy aimed to keep the persecuting authorities at bay in the aftermath of the Jewish wars. Schüssler Fiorenza reminds us that, although the author appropriated kyriarchal language as a survival strategy, it is still oppressive language. Notwithstanding, the text provides an opportunity to hear the voices behind the text, which probably exposes a tension between “the Messianic ethos” and the “ethos of submission.” Instead of duplicating the kyriarchal language of expedient survival, modern readings should seek to resurrect the early Christian ideal. This decolonizing approach not only values the experiences of the victims of imperialism but actively imagines a transformation that is also inherent in the text.

Titled “The Rhetoric of Empire and G*d Talk: Decolonizing the Divine,” chapter 6 discusses gender-based language in discussions about God. Schüssler Fiorenza reasons that the tendency for people to portray God in the masculine has more to do with their view of the divine than the reality of the divine itself. As a corrective, feminist studies have traditionally promoted alternative gendered designations or sought an alternative figure in the “Goddess.” Schüssler Fiorenza believes that what is really needed is an entirely new way to refer to God that must be preceded (accompanied?) by a deconstruction of the Western gender system, which is socially constructed. In the quest for new language, all must recognize that human terms about the divine function analogously.

A rejection of kyriocentric God language not only demands the abandonment of imperial language but calls for a reassessment of the very concept of monotheism. Evoking the violent wars wrought in the name of monotheism, Schüssler Fiorenza proposes that this hurdle can be overcome via a postmodern rhetorical understanding of monotheism that also allows for a complementary polytheism. She believes that the possibility for this transformative way of viewing God is offered by the biblical Wisdom, whom she sees as a transreligious figure whose cultural parallels include the Egyptian Isis, the Greek Athena, and the Buddhist Kuan Yin. Naming God in an inclusive multicultural world is an ongoing process and can be aided by the application of four rhetorical strategies from traditional theology: *via affirmativa*, which affirms God as liberator and source of dreams to which humanity aspires; *via negativa*, which acknowledges that we cannot really say is *not*; *via eminentia*, which recognizes the limitations of human language to describe God; and *via practica*, which locates God language “in the praxis and solidarity of anti-kyriarchal, transnational, societal, and ecclesial liberation movements” (237).

The final chapter presents Schüssler Fiorenza's proposal for "Transforming Biblical Studies." Until recently, biblical studies programs have sought to produce "professionals" who have been shaped in the mold of a Eurocentric agenda that "equates elite male reality with human reality" (244). The stress on the scientific acquisition of knowledge and positivistic search for the "true" meaning of the text resulted in a discipline that reinforced the "discourse of domination." With the advent of postmodern hermeneutics, a system was born that "successfully destabilized the certitude of the scientific objectivist paradigm in biblical studies" (253). However, as far as Schüssler Fiorenza is concerned, postmodern hermeneutics has failed to move the discussion from the text to the contemporary context, which is why a rhetorical-political paradigm is needed. This paradigm takes seriously the ethical and political dimensions of rhetoric and calls for the academy to utilize the Bible as an emancipatory tool that prophesies against "kyriarchal inequality and oppression."

Schüssler Fiorenza suggests that the new approach to biblical studies should be both ecumenical and interfaith. The aim should not be so much on the accumulation of knowledge but the production of scholars who are able to evaluate critically the expanding hoards of knowledge that are increasingly accessible via the Internet. Biblical studies should promote democratic values that are able critically to assess language of empire and counter tendencies toward fanatical fundamentalism. To get this started, Schüssler Fiorenza invites us into the "open house of Wisdom" where "spirit matters." This space does not serve as a fortress to protect kyriarchal readings but as an open sanctuary that fosters "critical thinking, ethical accountability and intellectual self esteem" (263). As a result, the Bible will be emancipated from imperial manipulation and embraced "as an open ended prototype rather than as an archetype that has to be repeated in every generation." (265)

This study raises several pertinent issues that are accompanied by several pertinent questions. I will address three. As she has done for over two decades, Schüssler Fiorenza has challenged the way in which God and gender are discussed in the academy. She has correctly denounced the gendering of God and continues to sound a prophetic voice in a society that so easily accepts the scenes of economically, physically, and politically abused women who are relegated to the bottom of the hierarchical imperial pyramid. Among other proposals, this study offers as remedies the abolishing of human gender categories (which she sees as a social construct) and the renaming of the Divine. However, if the ultimate goal is to move beyond gender, why the emphasis on Sophia, Ruach, Shekinah, Chokmah, and "goddess" figures from other religious traditions?

Another laudable aim of the book is Schüssler Fiorenza's attempt to rescue (wrestle?) the Bible from the hands of those who manipulate it for their own oppressive ambitions. Both

the literalist fundamentalist and the scholar claiming scientific certainty have abused the Bible in their efforts to support national, ethnic, or ecclesiastical imperialism. However, while I concur with her concern about the presence of kyriarchal language in a document that promotes egalitarianism, I wonder how much thought she has given to the way in which her suggestion would impact colleagues who share a similar emancipatory vision but also hold to biblical authority. In the light of her own suspicion of dualistic categories, is it possible for a scholar to accept the Bible's *potestas* while receiving its *potentia*?

Finally, Schüssler Fiorenza correctly recognizes the shift in the ways in which biblical studies are conducted. However, the growing attraction of postmodern hermeneutics should be seen as a succession and not a supersession of historical criticism. As Etta Linnemann long recognized, historical criticism's decision to don scientific garb created an environment that opened the gates to hermeneutical anarchy, and postmodern pluralism is the natural offspring of a discipline that encouraged the use of long leashes that only gave the *Doktorvater* the illusion of control. While claiming her emancipation via her decolonizing hermeneutics, throughout the work Schüssler Fiorenza pays homage to the "scientific" system that molded her. True, she does not hesitate to challenge the unwitting culprits whose redaction-critical excising is interpreted as silencing the already-silent feminine voices; however, I wonder how much thought she has given to the fact that the same kyriarchal system that empowered them to determine the authentic Paul has influenced her notions of deuterio-Paul and pseudo-Peter?

I have no doubt that many will heed the anti-imperial call and seek their place in the *ekklēsia* of wo/men where they can use the Bible to advance their understanding of social, economic, and political justice. I also know that others who disagree about the authority of the Bible on certain issues will not be welcome. Nonetheless, I suggest that, before anyone engages in the "democratic" process of "detoxifying" the biblical text, they first make an effort to detoxify self from kyriocentric illusions that don egalitarian garb.