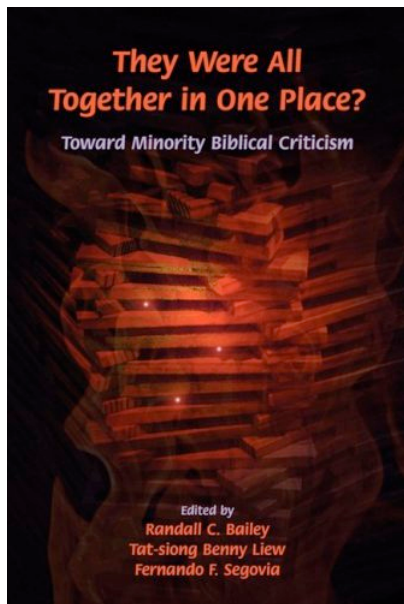


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They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism

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It is not often that a book of essays by various scholars makes an important breakthrough, but this one certainly falls in that category. For a start, it is the fruit of a genuine scholarly partnership—a joint project where the scholars have clearly interacted and influenced each other in a creative way, without sacrificing their own integrity, so that the sum is greater than the parts. Second, while it originates in what may be broadly called “postcolonial discourse,” it begins to address the unspoken issues that have been masked by that discourse in the United States, namely, the power dynamics between participants who are white, mother-tongue English speakers and those American scholars who have experienced a marginalization because of their race, culture and/or language. The participants in this project describe this as “‘minoritization’ or the process of unequal valorization of populations groups, yielding dominant and minority formations and relations, within the context, and through the apparatus, of a nation or state as a result of migration, whether voluntary or coerced” (ix). Accordingly, they have chosen, out of many possible terms—all of them problematic—the term “minority criticism” to characterize their interpretations of the Bible. This is spelled out in the extensive introduction by the editors, Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia, “Toward Minority Biblical Criticism: Framework, Contours, Dynamics.” It is a task of no mean proportions to pull together a team from very diverse and often competitive traditions, since “racial-ethnic

minority groups exist in dynamic and shifting relations of interdependence, contradictions, and competitions” (16). Quite rightly, as a project aimed at taking seriously the material, cultural, and social differences of the different minority groups, the participants opt for a “conversation without necessarily the aim of reaching consensus or overcoming difference” (17). The Bible is, in many ways, an appropriate venue for minority intercultural “conversations” because of the complex but central role it has played in legitimating white Western conquest and domination of other peoples and the subversion of their cultures. Within this interpretive theoretical framework, the editors note four possible strategies that may be adopted in minority criticism: contextualization “puncturing objectivity and universality”; “border transgression”; “interruptive stock-taking”; and “the interdisciplinary turn” (26). I would like to state up front that the result of this discourse is a very rich and intriguing tapestry of methods and interpretations that complement, deepen and sometimes contradict each other by being placed “alongside.”

The structure of the book shows right away that most of the participants adopt the first approach of contextualization as their starting point—the strategy of denying any universal legitimacy or priority or objectivity to the traditional tools of biblical criticism in the West. The role of the reader in the process of interpretation cannot be “bracketed out” to produce a “neutral reading.” The traditional self-effacement of the reader in biblical criticism masks the real interests and agenda of the academic establishment, privileging the rich and the powerful and punishing those on the margins. As South African readers, this recognition was forced on us by the way in which traditional “objective” biblical scholarship played into the hands of the apartheid state. Opposition to the *status quo* forced scholars aligned with the liberation movement who supported the *Kairos Document* of 1985 to adopt “contextual exegesis,” in which the viewpoint of the reader in the interaction with the text was determinative for the production of meaning. There is no neutral reading and no way of avoiding “taking sides” in a context of struggle for justice, since “neutrality” is a vote for the power holders. By the same token, a contextual reading problematizes the Bible itself, since it was written by the victors of historical struggles and systematically marginalizes the vanquished. It often lends support to oppression both by its silences and by what it says explicitly. The papers in the first section thus conduct a dialogue “of love” with a problematic partner! In this category, Cheryl B. Anderson offers an African American reading of the prohibition of intermarriage in Ezra 9–10 in terms of race/ethnicity, class, gender, and the impact this attempt to solidify group identity by the returning exiles had in the exclusion of the “other” then and now—“a cautionary tale that reminds us of the damage caused if we ignore our past (and our present) when we open the Bible” (61). Jean-Pierre Ruiz provides a “bi-focal” reading of the reconstruction of Jerusalem in Neh 13—one from a reconstruction project in Brooklyn and one from Puerto Ricans, for whom “the intersections between language, ethnic identity, and

colonization remain as complex for immigrants in the twenty-first century C.E. as they were during the fifth century B.C.E.” (89). Frank M. Yamada reads the power dynamics in the loss of Eden in Gen 2–3 in the context of the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II and questions the traditional readings of a just God and immature humanity: “One must either decide between the harsh realities of a life that is not human—a life without knowledge or wisdom—or face the penalty for noncompliance in an atmosphere of divine suspicion” (115). Gale A. Yee examines the position of Ruth as the perpetual foreigner, exploited by those who “appropriate her labor and her body” (134) but never assimilated, from the experience of Asian Americans as a “model minority” in the U.S.A. Jae Won Lee questions the universalizing of Paul’s statement that “in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek” from a Korean American perspective, focusing on the “strong” and the “weak” in Rom 14:1–15:13, to argue that “Paul advocates a politics of difference with equality” (152).

The following two sections have only one contributor each, indicating that they stand somewhat on their own. In a section entitled “Expanding the Field,” Gay L. Byron demonstrates how Eurocentric the currently fashionable analysis of “empire” has been in Western scholarship and what a difference it makes when the New Testament is read Afrocentrically, from the point of view of the Axumite Empire in Ethiopia rather than from the vantage point of the Roman Empire. The powerful Axumite Empire was a major player in the ancient world and also became an important center of Christianity, so that Byron sees its marginalization from scholarly discussions as demonstrating the *subjectivity* of what is intended to be *objective* research of the ancient world. She then reads the story of the Ethiopian in Acts 8:26–40 as “a *locus classicus* for exploring the intersections between postcolonial biblical criticism, race and ethnicity theories, and ideological reading of biblical texts” (176). Fernando F. Segovia attempts in the section “Problematizing Criticism” to define the contours of “Latino/a American Biblical Criticism”—indeed, he is the only one of the contributors to foreground such a pressing theoretical task in the development of a “minority criticism” that makes location on the periphery its starting point. Scholars engaging in this task require, first, “an overt and active connection between the scholar and a community” (198). Second, this location is seen as significant for reading and teaching the Bible. Third, it involves a commitment by “minority scholars” to collective work in order to define the objectives and strategies of the struggle against the majority “predominantly white” establishment. Becoming a Latino/a American “minority biblical critic” involves both membership of the racial-ethnic grouping by birth and a commitment to the process of conscientization. Segovia’s essay, drawing on the tools and insights of culture criticism, demonstrates both the imperative and the difficulty of the identity construction he attempts. On the basis of his study, he

sets out the threefold goal of minority criticism as “critical vision,” “critical engagement,” and “critical purpose.”

In a section entitled “Taking an Interdisciplinary Turn,” three rather different studies explore the race/gender interface in the exploitation of minorities. Randall C. Bailey offers a case study of “the inters(ct)/(x)ionality of race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality” in Esther, seen as a “dangerous” book. In what is often taken as a heroic tale of a “straight” woman who uses her acquired status as the emperor’s choice to save her people, Bailey sees a sordid saga of seduction, homosexual rape, treachery, and genocide, in which Esther is a “willing participant in [the] game” (240). He sees parallels with the “othering” of blacks in the U.S. by stereotyping black gender and sexuality in opposition to stereotypes of white gender and sexuality. Tat-siong Benny Liew, on the other hand, uses queer theory to analyze “John’s engendering and transgendering Word across different worlds” (251), based on the slippage between *sophia* and *logos* and Jesus’ “incestuous” relationship with the Father. Jesus’ use of the “seamless robe” is seen as a marker of “his drag-kingly concern to conceal his body in order to perform masculinity” (258). Hence, “Jesus’ gender indeterminacy and hence his cross-dressing and other queer desires that put out of place everything that the *Ioudaioi* treasure, particularly those that relate to their racial-ethnic, masculinist, and heterosexist nationalism” (278–9). A somewhat more traditional reading of the gift of the Spirit in Acts 2 is provided by Demetrius K. Williams. It is difficult for me to see why this paper was included here rather than in the first “contextualization” section. Williams notes that, while the prophecy of Joel cited by the text of Acts and implied by Gal 3:28 foresees the overcoming of the barriers of race/ethnicity, sex/gender, young/old, class/status in the eschatological age now dawning, Luke-Acts and Paul only develop the category of race/ethnicity. Paul “*only fully worked out a sustained solution to the Jew/Greek question, not the woman and slave question*” (295). Likewise, Luke only upholds “the virtues of social order and masculinity” (302). African Americans were able to read Acts 2 as affirming them in their struggle against racism and inequality, undermining white claims to supremacy. However, Luke’s deficient interpretation of the Pentecost prophecy/event highlights the “insterstructuring” of social hierarchy and oppressive categories of race/ethnicity, class/status and sex/gender, which continue to affect the African American community in the U.S.

The effectiveness of this “minority-critical” discourse is then evaluated by three scholars, one from each of the three minorities represented, external to the discipline of biblical studies. The first is by the constructionist theologian Mayra Rivera, who emphasizes the contingent and contextual nature of scriptural meaning and sees the search for unchangeable truths as “betray[ing] the desire for a paradise of unmediated knowledge of God” (316), which has to be deconstructed to avoid reductionism of both God and cosmos. Instead, she argues for “the divine mystery to infuse our understanding of the

created world at all levels” by “developing a thoroughly incarnational theology as a ground for a truly embodied hermeneutics” (324), a “hermeneutics of hope.” Evelyn L. Parker provides a critique of racism in the “white” classroom based on implicit or explicit notions of white supremacy, which produces silence and alienation of minorities and argues for aggressive conscientization of students and the production of a “pedagogy for color consciousness.” James Kyung-Jin Lee affirms the need for racial subjects “to demand to be placed, if only provisionally, at the center of analysis to make legible just how much damage has been inflicted, how much pain we feel” (349). Placing the “minority project” within the global setting of the U.S. warfare-based economy, Lee points to the ambivalence of its locatedness within the global power center and of the danger of complicity even in the process of resistance. These three studies broaden the focus of “minority criticism” of the Bible and set it within the larger project of resisting white English-speaking cultural and linguistic hegemony based on an implicit or explicit ideology of racial superiority. Finally, in a lucid concluding reflection, Fernando Segovia pulls the various strands of the contributions into a synthesis, reflecting on its achievements and “lacunae.”

My own response to the book was enthusiastic but ambivalent. Many of the contributions were deeply moving personal reflections, others more concerned with hermeneutical issues, while some seemed more concerned to explore the anger and pain occasioned by their experience of oppression based on a book—the Bible—that they can neither fully trust any longer nor fully put aside for ever. My ambivalence comes from my own locatedness in a newly marginalized “visible minority” as a white South African in the new South Africa. The guilt and shame of our locatedness at the “intersectionality” of power in the long history of oppression makes the process a fraught one, but in a country with many and complex visible minorities and a history of racism, there would seem to be an urgent need to explore and negotiate what minority status might mean within the shifting and intricate balance of hegemonies in our context—especially in relation to a Bible that has been used on all sides, both in the service of oppression and resistance. Finally, one important lacuna in this minority discourse, which is referred to briefly in a footnote (4 n. 2) and nowhere taken up again, is the absence of the voice of Native Americans, possibly the most marginalized minority in the U.S. A “serious shortage of Native American scholars in biblical studies” hardly justifies this; the same has been said—unjustly—in the past with reference to the three groups represented here. Likewise, their exclusion on the basis of land claims “prior to and independently of the U.S. government” is hardly convincing, since the same claim is advanced elsewhere in the book with respect to Latino/a dispossession of large tracts of the American south and west. One would hope that this silence might be addressed in the further development of minority criticism.