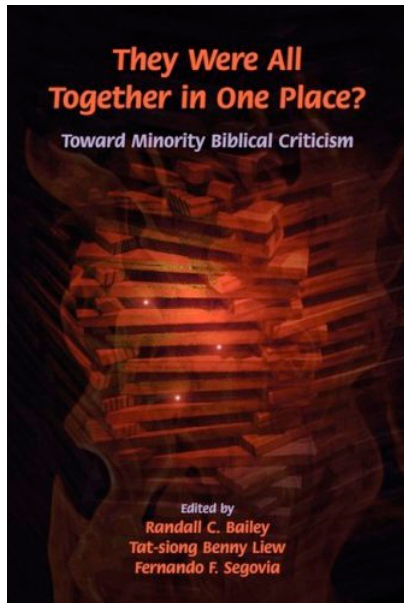


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They Were All Together in One Place?: Toward Minority Biblical Criticism

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This is a rich and complex volume that sets out to chart an emerging form of biblical criticism. The frame of the volume is what provides a sense of the emerging form, while the essays in-between are “the stuff” of contemporary racial/ethnic biblical criticism in the United States of America. The volume is clearly located within the “implied-hyphen-American” context, focusing on African American, Asian American, and Latino/a American biblical scholarship. While there is an attempt in some of the essays to dialogue with work outside of the U.S., and while there is an acknowledgement “that minority dialogue has a long history, even or especially if it took place beyond the national limits of the U.S.” (19), and while there is recognition of the need for an emerging minority biblical criticism to engage with “the areas outside of the U.S. from which the groups came” (24), the volume is firmly rooted in U.S. social and even institutional realities. Indeed, the Society of Biblical Literature lurks in the background of the framing introductory essay. But this is not simply another parochial U.S. project, with Americans talking to each other, imagining that those on the periphery of their empire are eagerly eavesdropping. The book, and the larger project and vision of which is a part, is keenly aware of its location within “the neocolonial hegemony that the U.S. exercises around the world” (15) and so yearns not only to transform biblical studies but much else as well.

The frame, as I have said, is what provides the volume with its “minority biblical criticism” orientation. The introductory essay, a collaborative product of the three editors, Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia, locates the volume within its larger project and vision. The larger project is a Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion project entitled “Reading and Teaching the Bible as Black, Asian American and Latino/a Scholars in the U.S.” The larger vision is the emergence of an “enterprise” that pursues the “goal of crossing the “color line” in order to work out a disciplinary coalition or alliance with transformation in mind” (5). As someone who has often wondered why there is so little collaborative intent across the range of marginalized-“minoritized” (ix) forms of biblical criticism in the U.S., this kind of commitment is wonderful to see so clearly articulated.

Yet there is no easy route to this enterprise, as the editors carefully acknowledge. Their introductory essay identifies and analyzes “the strategic character of the enterprise,” “the diverse nature of the enterprise,” and “the problematic character of the enterprise” (5). Though a little uneven in places, this framing essay is a superb orientation to the emerging contours of minority biblical criticism. It interrogates notions of “minority,” favoring the verbal form “minoritized,” emphasizing that “minority” “is really less about number and more about power” (6). It then goes on to consider what it might mean for minorities in the U.S. to be “partners in a common cause” (9). Throughout words such as “coalition,” “collaboration,” “alliance,” and “movement” are used.

The introductory framing essay then goes on to explore the ground that has already been prepared for this common enterprise, before going on to analyze some of the distinctive emphases of each of the three main (in this volume) forms of minority biblical scholarship. Finally, in an extensive and detailed final section, the essay by the three editors frames the volume by identifying and describing four “rhetorical dynamics” or “critical strategies” (25) that might characterize minority biblical criticism and that provide the analytical sections of the volume. The four strategies are: puncturing objectivity and universality by foregrounding contextualization; pushing aside and moving beyond the established boundaries of the discipline; calling for critical conscientization by turning criticism upon itself in a quest for self-awareness and self-reflection; and taking the interdisciplinary turn.

Each of these rhetorical strategies is used by the editors in part 1 to provide four subsections. The first subsection, “Puncturing Objectivity and Universality,” begins with an essay by Cheryl B. Anderson on “Reflections in an Interethnic/Racial Era on Interethnic/Racial Marriage in Ezra.” As with each of the essays, this essay begins with a fairly detailed social-minority location. Anderson sets out to explore the interpretive challenges posed by Ezra 9–10, in which certain “foreign women” who are married to

Jews and the children of such marriages are expelled from the community, for African American Christian communities.

The essay by Francisco O. García-Treto, “Exile in the Hebrew Bible: A Postcolonial Look from the Cuban Diaspora,” begins with an autobiographical reflection and then goes on to use the notions of bilingualism and exile to interpret Lam 1–2, before going on to set this interpretation alongside a novel by Daína Chaviano.

The next essay in this subsection is by Jean-Pierre Ruiz, entitled “‘They Could Not Speak the Language of Judah’: Rereading Nehemiah 13 between Brooklyn and Jerusalem.” Using a personal narrative, Ruiz recounts how two different social locations have shaped his read of Nehemiah, the first with a hermeneutic of trust and the second a hermeneutic of suspicion. Like the essay by García-Treto there is here a substantial engagement with the role of language in the politics of ethnic identity.

The essay by Frank M. Yamanda, “What Does Manzanar Have to Do with Eden? A Japanese American Interpretation of Genesis 2-3,” reads the etiological tale in Gen 2–3 from the perspective of the internment experience of Japanese Americans in the 1940s. Like García-Treto, this essay uses notions of exile and displacement as interpretive categories.

Gale A. Yee’s “‘She Stood in Tears amid the Alien Corn’: Ruth, the Perpetual Foreigner and Model Minority” is the essay in this section that is most self-consciously about “minority criticism.” It is also an essay that quite deliberately locates itself within a “global conversation,” reaching beyond the boundaries of the U.S.

The final essay in this subsection is by Jae Won Lee, entitled “Paul and Ethnic Difference in Romans.” The author raises the important question for minority criticism, via Rom 14–15, of whether and to what extent Christians, in order to belong to this community, have to forfeit their ethnic identity. Her entry point to this question is as a Korean American woman who empathizes with *minjung* theology.

The next subsection is “Expanding the Field.” The only essay in this section is by Gay L. Byron, who, somewhat against the grain of the predominant tendency in postcolonial studies, asserts the importance of empire, given that there are marginalized empires. “Ancient Ethiopia and the New Testament: Ethnic (Con)texts and Racialized (Sub)texts” recovers the importance of the Axum Empire, as she moves beyond the boundaries of the world of Western Christianity and appropriates “lost Christianities.” Her specific focus is the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26–40, reading it from an Axumite

perspective. Byron is also explicit, as are Anderson and Ruiz, about her extra-academic faith-community social location.

The third subsection is “Problematizing Criticism,” and it, too, has only one essay, by one of the editors, Fernando F. Segovia, entitled “Toward Latino/a American Biblical Criticism: Latino(o/a)ness as Problematic.” In his useful, careful, and systematic manner Segovia situates his essay—the only essay in the volume to do so—within “minority biblical criticism.” He begins by sharing why he finds “all-minority projects” such as this enticing, complicated, and demanding. He then provides a “first sortie” in characterizing how a particular minority form of biblical criticism, in this case Latino/a biblical criticism, might both characterize itself and its place in the common project.

The fourth and final subsection of part 1 is “Taking an Interdisciplinary Turn.” Randall C. Bailey’s essay, “‘That’s Why They Didn’t Call the Book Hadassah!’: The Interse(ct)/(x)ionality of Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality in the Book of Esther,” explores “ways in which ethnicity plays a part in the book on the narrative level, with examination as to how the range of questions in this area are conscribed by the race/ethnicity of the interpreters.” He then goes on “to explore the ways in which gender and sexuality are utilized as signifiers for ethnicity and racist politics of the narrator of the book.” Like some of those mentioned above, Bailey also makes an overt link with how this kind of work contributes to the appropriation of the Bible in local churches within his own social location. Again, as someone who has wondered at the reticence of U.S. biblical scholars, particularly those who come from robust faith communities, to talk about (in their scholarship) the links between their work and these faith communities, such reflections provide a significant potential site for collaboration beyond the boundaries of the U.S.

Bailey’s essay is followed by that of Tat-siong Benny Liew, “Queering Closets and Perverting Desires: Cross-Examining John’s Engendering and Transgendering Word across Different Worlds.” Like Bailey, Liew insists on “the multiple convergences of race, gender, and sexuality.” Central to Liew’s exploration of John’s Jesus as a possible transgendering traveler are “the echoes or relations that exist between a female Wisdom and a male Word or Logos.”

The final essay in this subsection is by Demetrius K. Williams, “‘Upon All Flesh’: Acts 2, African Americans, and Intersectional Realities.” This essay “seeks to explore how an examination of Acts’ treatment of the traditional categories of race, class, and gender through the Joel-prophecy paradigm can be instructive for understanding historically African Americans’ rhetoric of ‘equality.’” As with some of the essays above, this essay

also explicitly engages with how actual minority communities have interpreted biblical texts, in this case the Pentecost story of Acts 2 by African American faith communities.

Part 2 of the volume is a collection of three essays in the area of minority criticism, but outside of the boundaries of minority biblical criticism. The essays are “Incarnate Words: Images of God and Reading Practices,” by Mayra Rivera Rivera; “Teaching for Color Consciousness,” by Evelyn L. Parker; and “The Difference That Damage Makes: Reflections of an Ethnic Studies Scholar on the Wabash Consultation,” by James Kyung-Jin Lee. The best guide to how these essays contribute to the volume, because the essays themselves make very little attempt to engage overtly with the enterprise of minority criticism in general or the essays in the volume in particular, is the concluding essay by Fernando F. Segovia.

Segovia’s concluding essay, in its own fourth part, provides the other end of the frame for this volume. While there is a preliminary engagement with each of the essays in the volume (though not the essays in part 2) in the introductory essay by the three editors, it is here in Segovia’s concluding essay that there is a detailed engagement with each of the essays in the volume, including those in part 2. Segovia’s essay has the title “Toward Minority Biblical Criticism: A Reflection on Achievements and Lacunae.” Interrogating, as it were, both the preposition “toward” and the question mark of the primary title of the volume, Segovia carefully and systematically assesses to what extent the work gathered is “in one place” and to what extent the essays chart a course “toward” something that might be a common enterprise.

This is a remarkably complex volume, offering us a comprehensive range of literature and analysis. An index would have been useful, given the limited self-awareness across the essays of being part of a common project. But Segovia’s conclusion does offer one cross-referencing form of index. My copy of this book is full of pencil marks, for there is much here that I will return to. I am sure that others who take up this book, and it does have relevance beyond the U.S., will also find much to engage with.