Alissa Jones Nelson

*Power and Responsibility in Biblical Interpretation: Reading the Book of Job with Edward Said*

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*Power and Responsibility in Biblical Interpretation* is the published version of the author’s doctoral dissertation (2009, St. Andrew’s University; supervisor: Mario I Aguilar). The work takes its starting point in the observation that there is a(n institutionalized) distance between “academic” and “vernacular” approaches to and interpretations of Scripture, which is also characterized by the (self-)marginalization of the latter, which raises “important ethical, praxiological, and theological questions” regarding the interpretation of Scripture and the appertaining pedagogy (1–3, see the examples on 3–11). Nelson intends to seek a way forward, that is, “the project of closing the gap between academic and vernacular hermeneutics” (11). Key to this project is the hermeneutics of Edward Said, specifically his concept of “contrapuntal reading,” which is both outlined in Nelson’s book and also applied in a number of ways to the book of Job. This is done as follows.

Chapters 1–3 present the “conceptual bases upon which [the book’s] project will be founded” (12). In chapter 1 this takes the shape of an insightful discussion of the main characteristics of Edward Said’s interpretative concerns and concepts, focusing specifically on his understanding of subjectivity, power, intellectual responsibility, and the secular (19–52). Helpfully, Nelson also gives an interpretation of Said’s rather misleading
(and strongly biographically colored) notion of the “religious” in this context, which for him “represents the anti-intellectual, the uncritical acceptance and veneration of the devoted individual. It typifies a propensity to accept and uphold a system or status quo; a religious critic is one whose critical position is necessarily restrained by belief or by adherence.” (41) Indeed, as Nelson notes, the “religious need not be religious” (52), given that Said is not arguing against devotion as such but (only) uncritical devotion; even his own “secular” approach to interpretation can become “religious” in the pejorative sense of the word that he employs. The discussion of Said’s work continues in chapter 2 (53–86), which focuses on Said’s method of “contrapuntal reading,” the process of reading and rereading of (especially influential or classical) texts from different (previously marginalized) contexts in order to expand their interpretation and to prevent the hegemony of single or dominant and potentially oppressing interpretations. “The point of contrapuntal reading is not to distil a single, agreed-upon meaning from a given text, but to allow different streams of meaning to coexist, to recognize that difference does not necessarily entail conflict, and that ‘truth can be opposed to truth.’ This does not mean that all interpretations are legitimate, but rather defends the possibility of multiple legitimate interpretations that cannot, or should not, be systematized, harmonized, or forced into continuity” (85; quite rightly, Said’s musical point of reference is not so much the harmony but the atonal composition). When having to choose what does and does not constitute a legitimate interpretation, Nelson notes that Said refers to ethical criteria, in which she follows him, noting that “[t]he recognition of the ethical implications of the work of biblical scholars … is still manifestly inadequate to the needs of the contemporary world. Intellectual curiosity and professional advancement too often take precedence over issue of ethical responsibility in the realm of academic hermeneutics” (86). Next, in chapter 3 (87–119), Nelson reviews a number of attempts to bridge the gap between academic and vernacular approaches to Scripture, covering the work of Kwok Pui-lan, Elsa Tamez, Gerald O. West, Justin Ukpong, Fernando F. Segovia, and R. S. Sugirtharajah. She finds them all lacking either in practice (no real dialogue is achieved) or because the self-marginalization of vernacular approaches remains in place (118): “Although these scholars have proposed a variety of approaches in an attempt to bridge [the] gap, what has yet to be taken is the elimination of the gap through the creation of a mutual space for hermeneutical interaction” (118). This, the elimination of the gap, is, however, precisely what Nelson intends and for which she seeks to employ Said’s contrapuntal hermeneutics, given that it allows us to view biblical interpretation from a frame of entry that does not resort to binary oppositions between trained and untrained readers, between academic and popular readers, between West and Rest, or between centre and margin. It provides a shared space between academic and vernacular hermeneutics which
eliminates the opposition, although not the differences, between the two. It also indicates an approach to questions of idea versus experience which views such questions not linearly but contapuntally, as the result of a cyclical relationship rather than of a simple hierarchy or historical progression. This involves the recognition that idea and circumstantial reality mutually shape, expand, limit and exchange each other. (118)

Having outlined her approach, Nelson turns to the book of Job, which is particularly suitable to test contrapuntal hermeneutics on, given the different voices in the text itself, the broad variety of interpretative voices that have addressed the text, and the topics that are touched upon in the text that are “demonstrably resonant across a wide variety of contexts and disciplines as well as across the gap between academic and vernacular hermeneutics.” (124) These considerations lead into chapter 4 of the book, in which the interpretations of Gerhard von Rad and Gustavo Gutiérrez of Job 38:1–42:6 are brought into dialogue (125–65), that is to say, a contrapuntal relationship with one another (with minor roles for the voices of David J. A. Clines, Elsa Tamez, and Enrique Dussel, 146–56). While each of these authors takes as his or her starting point the Joban text, his or her own theological concerns, and the interpretation of others, and no consensus is reached, reading them as standing in a contrapuntal relationship to one another and as interacting “across the boundaries that separate them” leads to a situation in which “the text takes on a depth and dimensionality that far exceeds any of these interpretations taken individually…. Ultimately none of [the] interpreters is able to definitively overcome the challenges posed by the opposite perspective, but the very existence of a counterchallenge is what makes hermeneutics possible” (164). In fact, Nelson seems to agree with Clines that “the book of Job was intended to subvert closure,” which would make contrapuntal hermeneutics an approach that agrees well with the intention operis (164–65) as well. In other words, “like wisdom literature at its best, the juxtaposition of critical voices demonstrates that ‘truth can be opposed to truth’ and that this dissonant opposition can be a positive rather than a negative factor in biblical interpretation.” In the subsequent chapter 5 Nelson addresses a next set of interpretations, placing them in contrapuntal relations to one another: “Psychology, Physiology, Society, and Spirituality: Interpreting Job with Insight from Psychological and HIV-Positive Perspectives” (166; 166–200). Having surveyed both a number of psychological approaches and of interpretations determined by the HIV pandemic, Nelson concludes that “[t]he process of boundary crossing entailed in this contrapuntal conversation leaves us with an interpretative voice which insists that the answer to this question [What is the person of faith to do when faced with the reality of suffering?] is not prescriptive but prohibitive. The book of Job does not tell the reader how one should talk about God in contexts of suffering, but it does inform the reader how not to talk of God” (199). Again, Nelson considers this
conclusion, which can have a liberating and healing effect on those afflicted by suffering, as both positive and as a vindication of contrapuntal hermeneutics (200). The sixth and final chapter of the book then treats “The Integration of Chaos and Order: Exploring Asian Interpretations of the Book of Job” (201–27). These Asian interpretations are seen by Nelson as providing “unique interpretative insight from which academic voices can learn. We have seen that both academic and vernacular voices in Asian contexts … find evidence in the book of Job for the necessary balance between chaos and order in God’s creation.” (226) Though not explored by these Asian voices, nor by her, Nelson notes that this particular exercise in contrapuntal hermeneutics also points to further interpretative horizons, particularly when placing the book of Job in relation to yin-yang hermeneutical perspectives (226).

Having both laid out her research question and theoretical framework and worked her way through three exercises in contrapuntal hermeneutics, Nelson focuses in her conclusions on the pedagogy of biblical studies in particular (229–34). A first conclusion is that “the pedagogical structure of courses in biblical interpretation must be adapted to contemporary contexts” (231); second, “vernacular” approaches to Scripture must be fully integrated into the “standard curriculum” and not be treated any longer as optional extras (232); third, such changes “should not be permitted to harden into a new pedagogical canon,” but “re-evaluation and adaptation should be continual” (233). Nelson looks forward to seeing the effect on all of this in the perceptions of students (234).

*Power and Responsibility in Biblical Interpretation* is, for various reasons, a valuable book. First of all, it offers a good introduction to the work of Edward Said and the notion of contrapuntal hermeneutics, as well as to the functioning of this approach. I could well imagine that students from a variety of disciplines—transcending biblical studies as such—could benefit from reading this study in the context of their explorations in critical theory and hermeneutics. Also, the book is valuable because it brings together and takes seriously a very broad range of interpretations of one key biblical text, which raises the reader’s awareness of the broad reception of Scripture and the productivity of canonical texts. In that context, I would underline Nelson’s suggestion that a contrapuntal hermeneutics in fact continues the hermeneutics inscribed into the biblical texts themselves (not unlike James A. Sanders’s notion of canonical hermeneutics). Criticism, of course, is also possible, though not along the lines of other reviews that have argued that Nelson has little original to offer concerning the interpretation of Job, which, as far as I can see, is not the main point of the book; rather, I would challenge the author to further develop the notion of the ethical responsibility of the interpreter and to lay out her own ethical framework for the interpretation of Scripture (including her positive reception contrapuntal hermeneutics); this would complete the exercise in contrapuntal
hermeneutics that *Power and Responsibility in Biblical Interpretation* constitutes even further, as it would allow her to take full responsibility for her work and approach.