

○ REVIEW OF ELISABETH SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA, *THE POWER OF THE WORD: SCRIPTURE AND THE RHETORIC OF EMPIRE*

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For those who have followed Schüssler Fiorenza's work since *In Memory of Her*, the new content here is in the last two chapters; for all others, the nuggets in this book could be seen to comprise a 'best of' her contributions to both the theoretical approaches to and the ethos and purpose of biblical studies. In case that first sentence did not make it clear enough, I am predisposed to appreciate and value Schüssler Fiorenza's work; this bias, however, does not keep me from critical engagement with it. This project is intended to encourage scholars, preachers and Christians who read these scriptures to be able to see the connections between 'the rhetoric of scripture and contemporary global struggles for justice and well-being' (33).

In the introductory chapter, 'The Rhetoric of Empire', Schüssler Fiorenza notes the growing interest in the studies of religions and of postcolonial criticism within religious, the*logical and biblical studies (her designation 'the*logical' is in keeping with her choice of 'G*d' in reference to the Divine), and problematizes the 'empire studies' of the past that have tended toward rehabilitation of the writings instead of being conducted in a self-critical manner. 'Historical arguments overlook that even resistance literature will re-inscribe the structures of domination against which it seeks to argue' (4). In other words, we ought to be more conscious of the power of language and the imagery it uses and the socio-political structures and power relations it draws upon and thus perpetuates. The endeavors of biblical interpretation can no longer read with the language of the texts but must be 'a rhetorical-emancipative inquiry into biblical and contemporary religious world-constructions and their political deployments today' (9).

She situates her feminist rhetorical critical method beginning with Nancy Fraser's reconstruction of the trajectory of second-wave feminism: 'redistribution' was focused on the social well-being of wo/men; 'recognition' sought the acknowledgement of cultural differences; and the 'representation' which takes the discussion into the transnational frame (22–23). From there, Schüssler Fiorenza notes that a feminist transnational decolonizing method of interpretation would include 'historical *redistribution*, ideological *deconstruction* and ethical-political as well as religious-the*logical constructive *representation*' (25).

In chapter 2, 'The Power of Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire,' Schüssler Fiorenza notes the connection between American expansion on a global level and the religious rhetoric that helps to justify it, and she addresses how we can see the 'tools of the politics of domination' in turn inscribed in and thus justified by scripture (37). This being the case, she suggests that a new ethos and practice of biblical studies is called for, and the remainder of the book explains what this would look like.

The issue, instead of debating whether or not G*d exists, becomes one of assessing what *kind* of G*d is described, worshipped and proclaimed in religious communities. Not only does the name of G*d function, but the character of G*d functions to define the actions and kinds of

power that the followers of this G*d embody (54–55). She addresses this issue of G*d-discourse in depth in chapter 6.

Chapter 3, 'Empire and Ekklesia,' could be a fantastic chapter, as she addresses a significant piece of her current work that has been often misunderstood: the ekklesia of wo/men. For example, Musa Dube's *Feminist Postcolonial Interpretation of the Bible* (2006) egregiously misrepresents both the egalitarian nature of Schüssler Fiorenza's ekklesia of wo/men and the extent to which her scholarship has responded to the criticisms from sisters of color and from members of the two-thirds world, etc., over the past two decades. In so doing, Dube – presumably unaware – presents a *less* emancipatory and *less* inclusive community than what the ekklesia of wo/men is intended to be. I cannot be a member of what Dube envisions, for instance, though I am certain that it is empowering for the women of certain contexts for whom she writes and to a certain extent represents.

Thus, I find it disappointing that this chapter is uncharacteristically disorganized and thereby frustrating to try to follow the train of thought within it. Nonetheless, the pieces included in this chapter do clarify the political, democratic, egalitarian nature of what she envisions when she refers to the ekklesia of wo/men, and for this reason it is an important contribution to this book.

Chapter 4, 'Toward a Critical Feminist Decolonizing Interpretation,' focuses on the 'theoretical intersections' of her own work of feminist critical interpretations and rhetorical analyses with postcolonial theory(ies). In the process, she addresses other postcolonial work in biblical and theological studies, both praising the positive contributions of various colleagues (e.g. Kwok Pui-lan, Musa Dube, and Stephen Moore), while simultaneously noting the dualistic systems that she sees their critiques operating out of and therefore perpetuating. This kind of analysis stands in stark contrast to what Schüssler Fiorenza has been proposing for several years, and most explicitly here, which is a kyriarchal analysis of multiple systems of domination, none of which in themselves function dualistically. She repeatedly comments that her intention behind raising critical questions of other scholars' work is not to distance herself from it/them but simply to engage it. With that said, I do find it odd that her critique of Dube's work is primarily relegated to the footnotes. A critical engagement of it within the main body of her work might have been appropriate.

Schüssler Fiorenza then applies her critical feminist decolonizing interpretation to parts of Revelation, particularly in terms of going beyond the two essentializing dualistic systems typically addressed: gender and imperial relations.

Anyone interested in an explanation of how to do such a critical feminist decolonizing interpretation should read chapter 5, 'Empire and the Rhetoric of Subordination.' The seven steps of her 'dance of interpretation,' also explicitly described in *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, are here specifically applied to 1 Peter, rendering a 'critical process of detoxification and conscientization' (181).

Chapter 6, 'The Rhetoric of Empire and G*d-Talk: Decolonizing the Divine' opens acknowledging that G*d-discourses, as forms of ideological communication enmeshed in power relations, are promulgated primarily in the religious-liturgical realm, which 'functions as one of the "technologies of the self" that foster kyriarchal internalizations of empire' (195). Thus, in this chapter Schüssler Fiorenza seeks to identify G*d language that does not reinscribe kyriocentric language; to engage her method of 'reflective mythology'; and to discuss how to overcome the

monotheism/polytheism dualistic construction by bringing in the Wisdom figure in its various manifestations, including Kannon/Kuan Yin, from Asian traditions.

The final chapter, 'Transforming Biblical Studies,' reads something like a prophetic call for justice and liberation, directed toward all biblical scholars and especially those who have hitherto not seen the extent to which the rhetoric of empire – language that perpetuates systems of oppression and domination – permeates biblical texts. She suggests that biblical studies ought not be understood as 'doctrinal, scientific-positivist, or relativist but rather seen in rhetorical-ethical terms' (253). This change is called for because of four significant factors: diverse populations within the field, the globalization of knowledge, the fact that religious and 'the*logical' studies are not value-neutral but take place within specific socio-political locations, and the emergence of extremist religious fundamentalist movements over the past twenty years. Divine Wisdom engenders enriching creativity, strength and self-affirmation, and these are what biblical studies, and graduate education therein, are called to illuminate.

One final comment about the book: there are numerous typos, several instances of unorganized sections of chapters, and even an omission of a reference. These technical issues noted, the argument overall is one that biblical scholars would do well to become familiar with and to allow to inform their own engagement with these texts or participation in graduate biblical studies.