

Review of Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, *Contextualizing Gender in Early Christian Discourse: Thinking Beyond Thecla*. London/New York: T & T Clark, 2009.

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Feminist biblical research has flourished since the 1980s and become an important and influential voice within the discipline of Biblical Studies. But apart from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's groundbreaking and sustained efforts in developing a distinct methodology for feminist exegesis, few have attempted such an endeavour. In this book Vander Stichele and Penner outline a method for studying early Christian texts which they have called a *gender-critical approach*. Specifically targeting students, they develop an interdisciplinary, ideological-critical method that broadens earlier feminist approaches to early Christian texts by including postcolonial and intersectional perspectives in its 'reading (for) gender' (p. 7).

As the title signals, drawing up different contexts – historical as well as contemporary – for understanding issues of gender in early Christian texts is important for the authors. In chapter 1 the theoretical context of the approach is outlined. With historical-critical scholarship on the New Testament as their starting point, they then draw on Foucauldian discourse theory and Butler-oriented feminist epistemology, interspersed with postcolonial theory and postmodern historiography. Chapter 2 delves into the Greco-Roman context of New Testament and early Christian texts, in particular Greco-Roman ideas about gender and sexuality. In Chapter 3 the authors take a closer look at early Christian discourse, with a particular interest in the definition of ecclesiastical and canonical boundaries. They show how gendered and racial categories are used in Christian identity formation, for example in the effeminization of heresy and the racializing of Jewish and gentile 'others.' Chapter 4 turns to our modern-day contexts and analyzes how, why and from where we – as a scholarly community – do our research. In chapter 5 we get a 'hands-on' application of the gender-critical method: three texts/pericopes (1 Cor 11:2-16; Acts 18:1-18; the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*) are analyzed as examples of how a gender-critical approach can be carried out. Finally (and appropriately, considering ch. 4) there is an epilogue entitled '(Dis)closure,' where Vander Stichele and Penner situate themselves and disclose some of the reasons why they find meaning in the interpretation of ancient texts.

Each chapter starts with a citation of a passage from the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. The passage is then used to exemplify the topics of the chapter, hence the subtitle, 'Thinking beyond Thecla.' The chapters also have individual notes and bibliography and are headed by a chapter outline. All these features function well pedagogically and help structure the chapters.

Students are singled out as the primary target group for *Contextualizing Gender* (p. 3). Our experiences from teaching this book in an interdisciplinary Master's course tell us that the authors have managed to engage and challenge students. They balance several concerns that our students found relevant. On the one hand, they argue for the importance of studying history: 'A society that forgets its history is in danger of becoming totalist/izing, as knowledge of the past stimulates the development of a critical spirit, helping us to passionately, sensitively, and creatively engage our present world in substantive and formative ways' (p. 228). But they also point out how 'knowledge of the past' may be (mis)used to support traditional views on gender, sex, and sexuality. The students also appreciated that the authors incorporate and develop the clarifying reading concept of the three worlds of the text (the world *behind*, *in* and *in front of* the text), and that they

demonstrate what impact such readings may have (pp. 193-219). The ideal reader of this book, in our opinion, is a student with some basic knowledge of gender theory and biblical studies, but we would also recommend it to colleagues who need an introduction to – or an update on – gender issues in early Christian discourse.

In the epilogue, the authors are quite clear about their aim in studying ancient texts: ‘our gender-critical approach [...] has an acute political focus: it is not just interested in analysis, it seeks change, especially a shift away from essentialized identities and the methods and discourses that sustain those identities’ (p. 228). Two major areas are defined as places where the scholar can communicate her/his knowledge and thus make a difference: the classroom and the guild (in our case, Biblical Studies) (p. 229). In contrast with Vander Stichele and Penner, our understanding of the scholar’s arenas for communicating knowledge is somewhat broader. This may be due to our academic situation at a Scandinavian theological faculty. The issues and reflections outlined in the book are useful to us not only with respect to students and colleagues, but in other areas as well. In our context the biblical scholar can (and should) use his/her gender-critical knowledge by engaging with the contemporary scene in a broader sense, for example in (inter)religious discourse, cultural critique, and politics.

As noted, Vander Stichele and Penner single out the guild of biblical scholarship as one of two main arenas for their gender-critical engagement (p. 232). In chapter 4 they discuss the power dynamics of the guild and, by tracing the historical lines from its birth in the Enlightenment, show how it is both gendered and racialized. They suggest that ‘gender criticism can explore how gender, sex and sexuality inform not only the rhetoric and ethic of but also practices of self-legitimation within Biblical Studies, including elucidating the boundaries that are likely to be crossed and the ones that are not, as the guild plays an important self-regulating role in maintaining its power structures’ (p. 160). By discussing the current situation in the field, particularly the relationship between center and margin, they undertake a brave, revealing, and highly needed exercise. However, we find the discussion hard to follow because it seems to require a certain amount of insider knowledge about interpreters and institutions, which we do not possess. Maybe it is our place ‘at the margins’ (Scandinavian hermeneutical practices are listed as ‘other’ together with African, Asian, and Latino, p. 172) that makes this debate about North American scholars inaccessible? The focus on the guild is somewhat surprising, considering that the book is written ‘with our students in mind rather than our peers’ (p. 3). Students will likely have a similar feeling of encountering ‘tribal language’ in this chapter. In addition to a chapter about the guild, a chapter on gendered and sexed practices in the classroom would perhaps have resolved this dilemma.

Finally, we would like to discuss the use of the terms ‘gender,’ ‘sex,’ and ‘sexuality.’ Early on the terms are defined as ‘three components of one’s identity’: ‘we define ‘gender’ as referring to the performative aspect of being a ‘man’ or a ‘woman,’ the cultural role models one adopts to act as one or the other. The second term, ‘sex,’ is understood here to refer to the physical aspects of being identified as ‘male’ or ‘female,’ while ‘sexuality’ refers to one’s sexual orientation, if one is heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual’ (p. 4). Throughout the book, these three terms recur, always linked together as in ‘gender, sex and sexuality’ (e.g. pp. 23, 103, 117, 153), ‘gendered, sexed and sexualized’ (p. 22), ‘gender, sex and sexual performance’ (pp. 121, 161) or ‘gender, sex and sexual divergence’ (pp. 229). These variations on the long criticized sex/gender distinction demonstrate how the various categories intersect and overlap, but also generate some new, complicated questions. Although Judith Butler is discussed at some length (pp. 21-25), the book would have benefited from a problematization of this repeated triad. In our opinion, Toril Moi’s theoretical reflections balance off Butler’s in a good way (see e.g. *What is a Woman? And Other Essays* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999]). Further, linking ‘sexuality’ to issues of sexual orientation also seems too limited when dealing with texts from antiquity.

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Overall, the authors succeed in their attempt at laying out a theoretical and methodological basis for gender-critical analyses of early Christian texts. We regard this book as a voice worth listening to in the ongoing interdisciplinary theorizing about gender and sexuality as well as a significant methodological contribution within the field of Biblical Studies.