

Review of Alejandro F. Botta and Pablo R. Andiñach, eds., *The Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation*. Semeia Studies 59. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009.

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This collection shows that the religious left, at least at a scholarly level, is alive and well and somewhat vibrant. It also shows that all those obituaries for liberation theology were premature. Edited by a professor at Boston University (Alejandro Botta) and another from Instituto Universitario ISEDET, Buenos Aires (Pablo R. Andiñach), it brings together contributions that cross the globe: two from Africa (Musa Dube and Gerald West), three from the USA (Theodore Jennings, Alejandro F. Botta, an immigrant from Argentina, and Ada María Isasi Díaz, originally from Cuba), three from Western Europe (Luise Schottroff, Hans de Wit, and Erhard Gerstenberger), one from a Tongan teaching in Australia (Jione Havea), and one from Argentina (Mercedes García Bachmann). Three are women and the rest men. I highlight the list not only because the editors make much of the politics of global distribution, but also because I will return to it later.

The collection sets out to deal with the Bible in liberation theology, though only three of the papers engage in detailed biblical exegesis (Havea, Botta, and Bachmann). The rest offer more synoptic views of biblical materials (Dube, Jennings, Schottroff, and Díaz), surveys of the selected scenes, whether in South Africa after liberation (West), a specific project called “Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible,” based in the Netherlands (de Wit), or a very useful survey of oppositional, if not revolutionary movements that drew their inspiration from the Bible (Gerstenberger).

I shall outline some highlights of the volume before focusing on some critical issues. Perhaps the best quotation comes from Carlos Mesters, via de Wit (p. 42):

The Bible appears to be a spice, suitable for every meal. People use the Bible for everything ... union conflicts and organizing strikes, building chapels and barracks together, for criticism of the clergy and their own lives, political and party meetings, the struggle for land and the defense of the Indian, letters to support people and demonstrations against injustice, processions with saints and protest marches ... commemorative journeys and pilgrimages, workers strife and pickets at the gates of factories, hunger strike and resistance against the armed mercenaries (*pistoleiros*) of inhuman big land owners.

Not only does this quotation reveal the continuing role of biblically-framed worldviews, but it also reveals the sheer diversity within liberation theologies. West also emphasises this diversity, with his survey of black theology, African theology, contextual theology, confessing theology, African women’s theology, and HIV-positive theology. All the same, this diversity can still be contained with what one senses to be the assumed model, voiced best by Jennings: “The question of a liberative reading of biblical texts has its origin in Latin America” (p. 147). In other words, such readings began in Latin America in the late 1960s and 1970s; from there they spread to the rest of the world. What of the independent developments of black, feminist, and queer liberation theologies, one wants to ask? Fortunately, this model is virtually exploded by de Wit and West, among others.

Gerstenberger’s article also questions the historical claim to originality of Latin-American liberation theology. Rather than *creatio ex nihilo*, liberation theology becomes one of a long list of resistance movements finding a ready resource in the Bible. Gerstenberger shows how even in Germany—the bastion of “scientific” biblical exegesis by privileged professors—the Bible has been integral to the history of Christian opposition to the state, power, and oppression (Max Horkheimer

of the Frankfurt School would have been proud!). My one small quibble here is that Gerstenberger has not availed himself of some of the earlier proponents of his argument outside biblical and theological circles, namely Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Kautsky.

Beyond these three survey pieces, the detailed and less-than-detailed textual readings make some hard-hitting conclusions: Havea on using the “currents of island life,” storytelling and counter-telling (*talanoa fakatatau*) in order to develop new ways of reading that are not subservient to Atlantic models: his specific effort is to dip “the vision of Obadiah into the waves of *talanoa fakatatau*” (p. 92); Bachmann on the vast differences between the ruling and ruled classes with respect to fasting; Dube on Sub-Saharan interpretations, which she calls “*talitha cum hermeneutics*” (Mark 5), namely the “art of continually rising against the powers of death—the powers of patriarchy, the powers of colonial oppression and exploitation, the powers that produce and perpetuate poverty, disease, and all forms of exclusion and dehumanization” (p. 137-138); Schottroff on the need to read the parables in a non-allegorical fashion, inspired by liberation theology, feminism, and the Jewish-Christian dialogue (very pertinent in Germany); Melanchthon, whose piece seems to have strayed from the articles to the responses, on the Bible as a hurdle for Dalit Christians seeking some form of liberation in India.

However, the highlight for me in this section (apart from that of Gerstenberger earlier) was the item by Botta. In a careful analysis of class sin in the Hebrew Bible, Botta asks how the specific sins of a class can be so easily universalised. The answer: sin is universalised precisely by those who seek to remove the specificity of their own sin—the ruling class. In Botta’s words: “How is it that the sin of the elite became a universal sin? The answer is similar to that puzzle presented in the title of my essay: you hide an elephant on Fifth Avenue by filling it with elephants, and you hide the sin of the ruling socioeconomic political class by making sin universal” (p. 112). This is a deeply Marxist analysis without actually using that term—still problematic in the neo-McCarthyist era in the USA—for it offers an analysis that shows the pertinence of Marxist biblical analysis today without getting bogged down in the problematic and potentially exclusive category of the poor beloved by liberation exegetes. This article also implicitly counters the facile dismissal of “classical Marxist” analysis by West (via his interlocutor, Per Frostin), which tends to echo the tendency of liberation theology and exegesis to hold Marxism at arm’s length; suitable for a little social and economic analysis perhaps, but off limits when it comes to matters of salvation.

The question of salvation raises one of the most obvious and potentially problematic features of this collection: its deeply confessional nature. A few quotations:

A *mujerista* interpretation is rooted in Latinas’ religious faith and the role it plays in our daily life experiences, in *lo cotidiano* (Díaz, p. 181).

This volume of Semeia Studies, as it could not be otherwise, is about “Christian” hermeneutics—from Christians and for Christians. As Christians—even though the vision and the intention is inclusive and universalistic—the authors assume a starting point, an obligatory reference, namely, Jesus the Christ. Implicitly or explicitly (Arias, p. 225).

Neither text quoted sees this confessional basis as a point of possible criticism but as assumed common and beneficial ground. For me, at least, this confessional nature of the volume shows that the religious—or, more specifically, Christian—left is truly alive and kicking. And a damn good thing it is too! But it also raises a problem: what of those who do not share this confessional assumption? Is liberation theology and thereby liberation exegesis out of reach for them? Must they convert in order to share this particular liberation? What of the politics of alliance, with non-religious and non-Christian liberation movements?

Finally, let us return to the list of contributors with which I opened this review. The editors have worked hard to come up with representative contributors, so it would be uncharitable to ask why

no-one from Eastern Europe or Asia is present. Instead, I would like to point to another feature: the *movement* of critics. Only one is still based in South America, apart from an editor; three have moved to first-world institutions; four have moved from first-world institutions to teach elsewhere for a while, but are now reasonably firmly ensconced back home. I make this point not as a personal criticism of the individuals involved, where job opportunities and personal factors may play a role, but as a tendency for imperial centres to absorb the best and brightest from elsewhere, as the British Empire once did, and the fading American Empire still tries to do.

A crucial footnote (pp. 90-91 n. 5) by Havea raises this issue in another way. He begins by noting the way Pacific interpretation of the Bible is tied to Western (I prefer Atlantic—keeping the oceanic focus) models. Even contextual theology, he points out, only becomes worth doing when it is taken up in Atlantic institutions and then applied in the Pacific—students are told to take their own context seriously by Atlantic scholars in a way that perpetuates the colonial dominance. Or, I would add, third-world students travel to Atlantic institutions in order to study contextual theology, gain the much-prized credentials from such an institution and then return home to propose this new way of interpreting the Bible. Does the same apply to liberation theologies? Now that it has been blessed by Atlantic academe, does it threaten to become another form of theology and biblical interpretation that serves to reinforce Atlantic dominance? I hope not.



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