

**Lynne St. Clair Darden, *Scripturalizing Revelation: An African American Postcolonial Reading of Empire*
Semeia Studies, 40
Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015**

**Lynn R. Huber, *Thinking and Seeing with Women in Revelation*
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Greg Carey, Lancaster Theological Seminary

Two recent books on Revelation, one by Lynne St. Clair Darden and one by Lynn R. Huber, differ significantly in their orientation, their critical methodologies, the objects and aims of their reflection, and their implications. Both projects take seriously questions of race, gender, and empire, albeit with differing degrees of emphasis. Both perform heavy cultural lifting. Read alongside one another, they raise pressing questions concerning how biblical scholars relate to critical theory, how theory relates to the work of interpretation, and how theory and personal identity resonate in ways that influence both reader and theory.

Darden and Huber alike transgress the norms of conventional historical and literary scholarship that still largely determine our guild. Both take seriously Revelation's historical context and literary shape, but their interests move far beyond considerations of historical excavation and textual explication. Darden's scripturalizing project speaks directly to African American identity and community formation in a contemporary context. Drawing upon contemporary metaphor theory and cognitive science, Huber identifies her study primarily as an interpretation of Revelation, but she accomplishes this end by bringing her own reading into conversation with those of four other readers, two medieval and two modern. Race figures most prominently in Darden's project, gender in Huber's. And while Huber's theoretical model largely (but not entirely) follows her theoretical guides, Darden sorts her way through African American literary and biblical hermeneutics and postcolonial theory to develop her own hermeneutical model.

Exegetically, Darden's reading focuses upon the throne scenes in Revelation four and five. Direct critical investigation of these scenes takes up only eight pages. Although John indeed resists Roman hegemony, he does so by transferring categories from the Roman ruler cult, influenced by both Persian and Greek antecedents, into the heavenly throne room. The twenty-four elders recall the Roman court and priesthood; those familiar with Greek worship would recognize their white robes and crowns. Kneeling before the emperor was mediated to Rome by Persian and Greek influence. The seven Asian cities sponsored choirs to sing hymns to the emperor. And just as Jupiter authorized the emperor to conduct war, so does the one on the throne authorize the Lamb's violent campaign in

Revelation. The upshot of this analysis: John's anti-imperial resistance is compromised by his re-inscription of imperial ritual.

Darden's reading rests upon her reading model, which she identifies as "scripturalization." Scripturalization has to do with the practice of crafting meaning out of scriptural resources. She could not be more clear:

The task of the African American biblical scribe in the twenty-first century and beyond is to open the eyes of the community to the challenges and pitfalls involved in accommodating to a social, political, and economic system that is founded on social inequality, exploitation, and an unfair distribution of wealth (5).

Scripturalization is active, not passive. It rejects "exegesis" in the sense of reading in order to explicate an author's intention; indeed, Darden is clear that her reading practices are subversive, even oppositional. Among African American readers, her project stands out by calling attention to African Americans' ambivalent relationship toward both society and the Bible. African American scripturalization calls for a deadly serious combination of playfulness and constructive critique. Postcolonial criticism's contribution is essential – terms like hybridity, ambivalence, and mimicry figure prominently in this analysis – but African American readers need a practice that acknowledges their distinctive cultural experience, what Darden calls "the strangeness of home." Darden critiques previous African American interpretations of Revelation for a failure to appreciate that Revelation travels with oppressive baggage. Revelation indeed voices active resistance, but it does so in ways which ultimately prove harmful by essentially legitimating the discourses of domination and violence. "The more subtle ways of the beasts" (157), namely racism and sexism and their tendencies to insinuate themselves even into faithful resistance, require constant vigilance.

If only eight pages of her project belong to "exegesis," the rest consists largely of theoretical engagement and ethical-theological analysis. I found these sections delightful: inventive, critical, and constructive. Here is a critic who has done hard work and earned the right to take her own position. Far more deeply than most biblical scholars, many of whom "use" but do not inhabit postcolonial perspectives, Darden grasps fine nuances of those conversations. Darden's distinctive voice comes through in her "call and response" assessment of Revelation's historical and cultural contexts. Darden outlines the supposedly neutral consensus view, then supplements that understanding by way of African American scripturalization. She chooses not to undermine the consensus but to re-conceptualize it. For example, in the context of African American scripturalization John's total resistance to Rome is in the end "unrealistic, ineffective, and detrimental" (123).

I would offer only one significant criticism of Darden's project. Between 1995-2005 several major projects engaged Revelation from postcolonial perspectives, also with ambivalent results. (Full disclosure: my own work, 1999, is among them.) Darden almost never discusses that and closely related literature. Names like Robert Royalty (1998), Christopher Frilingos (2004), and Tina Pippin (1992) do not appear in this volume; Jean Kim (1999) is mentioned in an obscure footnote. Shannell T. Smith's revised dissertation (2014) emerged too late for Darden's attention. Darden's untimely death in the spring of 2017 saddens all of us

who knew her as a friend and colleague. We would all have benefitted from her ongoing work in scripturalization as well as from her generous personal presence. I lament that we cannot see her interaction with those works.

Huber situates her study as an internal reading of Revelation, but her work eventually lands as an exploration of metaphor and the actualization of texts in diverse contexts. Following upon her earlier work (2007), Huber maps how Revelation and four of its readers employ a finite set of gendered metaphors to interpret human experience and the sacred realm.

In Huber's project several threads emerge and then interweave, often in unpredictable patterns. Her reliance upon conceptual metaphor theory stands forth most prominently. A metaphor is more than a comparison; it actually creates meaning. Metaphors juxtapose one reality against another, helping authors and audiences come to understand and experience the world in fresh ways. Huber maps out how Revelation and some of its readers "think with" the women who appear in the book. We might consider how Revelation and its readers depict women as *containers* (wombs, cities), *mothers*, *brides*, and *whores*. Huber's theoretical approach is richly complemented by good, old-fashioned historical context: what *bride* would have evoked among ecclesial communities in Roman Asia may differ greatly from what the term means to a medieval mystic or a New Orleans preacher-artist. Huber's four selected readers – the medieval Hildegard of Bingen and Hadewijch of Brabant and the modern artists Sister Gertrude Morgan and Myrtice West – all adapt Revelation's woman imagery in diverse ways. And there's the matter of ethical assessment. Huber never wanders far from the classic debate among feminist interpreters: can Revelation's gendered imagery do any earthly good, or is the book fatally flawed? (Huber identifies Tina Pippin and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza as primary contributors to this debate.)

Huber shows that in Israelite and Roman cultic and political discourse female symbolism applied to victory and peace as well as to domination and defeat (45). Female symbolism also functions as an index of moral and social health (48). Several metaphorical clusters revolve around women as *containers*, spaces of safety when all is well or danger when disorder is present. Huber then examines two key metaphors in Revelation, Babylon and the New Jerusalem. When a metaphor combines *woman* with *city*, both dimensions of the metaphor now inform our thinking. This is the key insight of conceptual metaphor theory. With respect to Babylon and the Holy City, garments signal moral integrity or corruption. The characterization of Rome as Whore "builds antipathy toward Rome and challenges" Roman gender and family norms (73). In the end, Huber acknowledges Revelation's "patriarchal paradigms" but invites readers to understand how those metaphors work within Revelation and its readers. We might regard this as a mediating position in the debates among feminist interpreters, its contribution lying in Huber's demonstration of the multivalent potential of Revelation's metaphors.

Like John, Huber's four readers all identify themselves as visionaries. Huber's venture into reception criticism distinguishes itself by its insistence that readers do teach us about texts. In this case the goal is to see how Revelation's metaphorical mappings open the potential for new, diverse readings (90). Hildegard, for example, adapts the *container* metaphor to imagine wombs and birthing, something John does not apply to the Bride. While Hildegard tends to understand the Bride as the church, Hadewijch reads the Bride as the individual soul. The two twentieth

century studies are both Southern American artists, Morgan, an African American preacher and singer, and the white West, more exclusively a painter. Both read Revelation's woman imagery through their own dramatic life experiences. In a visionary experience Morgan came to understand herself as the Lamb's bride, after which she wears white in her paintings. While Revelation depicts the Bride's marriage in terms of domestic *concordia* and Hadewijch exults in the Bride's erotic connection with the divine, "Morgan emphasizes affection and happiness" (125). Huber also notes that Morgan tends to depict Jesus as a white man, possibly a sign of the marriage's other-worldly status given the norms of Jim Crow culture. (I wonder whether Morgan might also have contributed a measure of cultural critique.) Compared to Morgan's depiction, West's bride comes across as "passive and submissive" (164). Together, these four visionary interpreters reveal the multivalent potential of Revelation's gender imagery. Huber's conclusion is as helpful, as concise, and as evocative as one will hope to find.

Both books contains rich bibliographies and helpful indices, and Huber adds an index of "conceptual metaphors and blends," the most distinctive feature of her approach. Both books would benefit from more thorough copy-editing.

How does theory inform reading, and how do readers relate to theory and to texts? We might generalize that Huber is more interested in *applying* theory toward the interpretation of cultural artifacts, while Darden is more engaged in *shaping* critical practice. Thus, most of Huber's book amounts to explication of Revelation and its readers, while little of Darden's does. Huber appropriates the work of sociolinguists and cognitive scientists, leaving room for creativity in her own application. She shows how conceptual metaphor theory illuminates our readings of both Revelation and its readers – and how readers also have much to teach us about the text. Darden's theoretical approach almost determines her reading results: ambivalence echoes throughout the project. One could make too much of these comparisons. Both critics affirm the agency of real readers. In the end, however, Darden's reading is more directive than is Huber's. Darden maintains that straightforwardly liberationist appropriations of Revelation are inadequate, even dangerous. Huber claims that both metaphor theory and actual readers open the potential for diverse, even conflicting assessments of Revelation's female imagery.

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