

## **An Initial Reading of Luke 7:36–50: Anti-Asian Hate and Intersectional Interpretation**

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### **Abstract**

Intersectional analysis can make a key contribution to Asian American biblical interpretation. With its critical examination of the multiple interacting systems and structures of oppression and privilege that shape the contexts in which communities live, intersectional analysis leads Asian American hermeneutics to illumine multiple dimensions of biblical texts and interpretation as well as the complex structures that shape Asian American communities and experience. The essay illustrates intersectional Asian American interpretation by initiating a reading of Luke 7:36 - 50 which takes as its starting point the rise of anti-Asian hate in the United States unleashed by the COVID-19 global pandemic.

### **Key Words**

intersectional, Asian American, Gospel of Luke, Gale Yee

### **Talk with the President: Gale A. Yee**

It is an enormous honor to engage Dr. Gale A. Yee's Presidential Address at the 2019 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in this special issue of *Bible & Critical Theory*. Thank you to Jione Havea - and the co-chairs of the Annual Meeting sections: Asian and Asian-American Hermeneutics; Contextual Biblical Interpretation; Islands, Islanders, and Scriptures; Minoritized Criticism and Biblical Interpretation; and Postcolonial Studies and Biblical Studies – for the invitation to participate in the “Talk with the President” panel at the 2020 SBL Annual Meeting.

I cannot begin without first recalling how the 2019 Annual Meeting of the SBL felt like a weekend-long celebration of-and-with Gale – and if you know her, you know how much fun it is to eat, laugh, and dance with Gale! We celebrated Gale's year of service as the first woman of color and the first Asian American to be elected President of the SBL, something which, as she noted [at the opening of her address](#), felt somewhat “daunting.” She followed that opening comment by quickly identifying, as she had in recent publications, how her social location “as well as growing up in one of the poorest sections of Chicago's South Side” had, in significant ways, given shape to her Presidential address (Yee 2020, 7). Specifically, she observed that “(t)he triad of gender, race, and class – my Chinese American ethnicity, my lower-class origins, and my female gender – have made deep marks on my interpretation of the biblical text, whether I consciously knew it or not” (7) Similar reflection permeates her contribution to the volume on women in the SBL, edited by Nicole Tilford, where Gale describes the arc of her gradual integration of

these key aspects of her identity in her work. Sure enough, many of us have had the pleasure of reading essays and books by Dr. Yee that stand out because of her sharp and nuanced attention to ways gender, race, and class illumine biblical texts. As she noted in her Presidential address, it is her class background and her “profound concern about the rising inequality between the rich and the poor in today’s neoliberal world” that especially animates her examination of “inequality in its various forms in the Bible.” (2020, 7)

It is because of these compelling concerns that Gale found herself turning to intersectionality as a mode of biblical criticism. But in relation to biblical studies, she also rightly observed that “(a)lthough there have been some recent attempts at intersectional analyses, primarily in the New Testament, intersectionality has not made a significant dent as a conceptual framework in biblical studies, except, not surprisingly, among scholars of color.” (2020, 8-9) Among these, Mitzi J. Smith and Jin Young Choi’s co-edited volume, *Minoritized Women Reading Race and Ethnicity: Intersectional Approaches to Constructed Identity and Early Christian Texts* (2020) stands out as a prime example of biblical interpretation that is explicitly intersectional in both method and purpose.

As intersectional analysis has extended its reach into multiple disciplines, it has demonstrated, as Gale has argued, “the fundamental point that we all have many important facets to our identities that are impacted differently by multiple interacting systems of oppression and privilege depending on the various aspects of our identities.” (2020, 11) In Gale’s skilled hands, then, intersectional analysis is a tool for assessing systems of power and how they combine to create and maintain social inequalities in the story of the unnamed widow in 2 Kings 4:1-7. Her intersectional reading, distinguished by her attention to “the male power of the state in the economics of widowhood” (26) renders the story anew in breathtaking fashion.

As Gale reflects, her reading of 2 Kings follows the lead of Asian American attorney Mari Matsuda who urges interpreters to always “ask the other question.” Gale cites Matsuda:

When I see something that looks racist, I ask, “Where is the patriarchy in this?” When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, “Where is the heterosexism in this?” When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, “Where are the class interests in this?” Working in coalition forces us to look for both the obvious and non-obvious relationships of domination, helping us to realize that no form of subordination ever stands alone. (Matsuda 1991, 1189, as cited in Yee 2020, 26)

Through intersectional interpretation that unearths the power dynamics in the text, Gales asks us as her colleagues in the field to keep pressing “the other questions” (2020, 26).

As I've thought about the implications of Gale's charge to the SBL, I've been reminded of the clarity of Patricia Hill Collins' observation that "(t)he term intersectionality references the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities" (Collins 2015, 2). What Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Leslie McCall call "a nodal point" rather than a system or specific method (2013, 788), Collins characterizes as "a broad-based knowledge project" (Collins 2015, 3) or "as a *constellation* of knowledge projects that *change* in relation to one another – *in tandem with changes in the interpretive communities* that advance them" (5). Collins' reflections, together with Gale's address, lead me to inquire into two facets of intersectional analysis that relate to Gale's work as an Asian American interpreter and to biblical studies more generally.

### *Asian American Interpretation and Intersectionality*

First, taking Gale's cue from her reading of 2 Kings, I wonder how explicitly intersectional analysis might advance Asian American biblical interpretation, in which, of course, Gale has been a leading voice. On one hand, her Presidential Address makes clear the direct relationship between Gale's social location, her Chinese American identity, and how she sees, examines, and interrogates the text. Yet by calling her Presidential Address an intersectional reading and not an Asian American one, I wonder what constitutes and distinguishes one or the other?

Surely Asian American hermeneutics employs aspects of intersectionality. On the other hand, intersectionality asks for analysis of systems and structures that Asian American hermeneutics does not always engage. How will the integration of such analysis impact Asian American biblical interpretation, and how will the complex and changing particularities of Asian American communities be brought into greater light by the nuances of intersectionality? The question has taken on even greater urgency since Gale's address, which, unbeknownst to all of us at the time, just preceded the Covid-19 pandemic that would first impact the world just a few weeks after that 2019 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. The pandemic has been accompanied by a flood of anti-Asian hate incidents in the U.S., bringing Asian American hermeneutics to the fore.

The concept "Asian American," with its origins in the 1968 founding of the Asian American Political Alliance, was created to forge a pan-Asian consciousness among persons of Asian descent residing in the United States. Given the diversity of those who stand under the vast umbrella of Asian America, a more intentional, intersectional hermeneutic will enable us to see the complex ways in which race, class, gender, ethnicity, nation, etc. are mutually but *differently* implicated by *variously* interacting systems of oppression and privilege. A striking requirement of intersectional analysis is its demand for specificity and embodied reading. In order to see the entanglements of race, class, gender, etc., one has to look closely, and

looking closely means looking both at how texts represent the social and how we as readers are not merely located but *embedded* in actual and very complex communities. In the context of Asian American interpretation, intersectional analysis takes us beyond matters of identity to look at the specific discourses and structures of power which give shape to it in the first place and in which we may find ourselves implicated.

It seems to me that any consideration of these matters must also concern a key observation from Patricia Hill Collins. Drawing on Edward Said's 1983 essay and subsequent reflections on traveling theory, Collins considers what specific disciplines take from intersectional theory and what they let fall to the wayside. She notes how the academy has already elided key aspects of what constitutes intersectionality, commenting that "(d)espite the centrality of both Black feminism and race/class/gender studies to social justice projects both inside and outside of the academy, contemporary narratives concerning the emergence of intersectionality increasingly situate its origins as a field of study within academia" (Collins 2015, 10). A case in point is Kimberlé Crenshaw's well-known 1991 Stanford Law Review essay, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," which is credited in academic circles as intersectionality's point of origin. Collins reminds us that the essay:

develops important connections among the core ideas of community organizing, identity politics, coalitional politics, interlocking oppressions, and social justice. Yet these ideas remain overlooked in favor of a common practice across contemporary intersectional scholarship of mentioning Crenshaw's "coining" of the term intersectionality as the point of origin for intersectionality itself. . . Intersectionality seemingly was not of value until Crenshaw both discovered it and, through the recognition that her Stanford Law Review article received, aligned it more closely with, in Audre Lorde's words, the "master's tools" in the "master's house" (Collins 2015, 10).

### *Biblical Studies and Intersectionality*

Although intersectional analysis did not originate as a mode of interpretation for disciplines like biblical studies to use, Gale Yee notes in her Presidential Address that it is scholars of color in biblical studies who have led the way in engaging it. Her citation of this fact undergirds her call to others in the discipline also to begin thinking intersectionally and to interrogate privilege as well as "the ideologies of white supremacy and the structures that legitimate and sustain them" (Yee, 13). Her charge is to do more than draw on a new hermeneutical method. What will make biblical studies' deployment of intersectionality important and worthwhile is its relevance not only to the academy but to real world communities.

As I think about SBL's increasingly public-facing work, I wonder if our field's capacity for public engagement could distinguish intersectional analysis in biblical studies. Generally speaking, direct interaction between biblical scholars and public audiences over the years has largely focused on translating scholarly insights for non-academic audiences. Here again, it is scholars of color who have most often been the exception, actively bridging community and academy. In the U.S. context, the operating assumption used to be that if scholars were to engage the public, they would be interacting with biblically literate audiences. Though it is clear that that is no longer a safe assumption, the Bible nonetheless remains an important presence in the public square. It is regularly cited, quoted, deployed, and weaponized in public debate. For better and for worse, the Bible remains relevant in the public square. But biblical studies, not so much. Could intersectional interpretation help us connect our field to various publics? Can we make the connections between "seeing" the interlocking systems and structures of power at work in the text – and in our current contexts? When, for instance, we see the inequities that have been starkly revealed by a global pandemic, how can we not see anew our own task as biblical scholars?

For those seeking to make biblical studies a more publicly engaged, collaborative enterprise to be done alongside or in community, and for those aiming to direct biblical studies towards social change and the common good, intersectional analysis and its potential to integrate the concerns of real communities in scholarship may be key to moving forward. As Collins reminded those attending the Korean Biblical Colloquium session that was held at the 2020 Annual Meeting of the SBL, intersectionality is never simply an academic theory or strategy to "use." Rather it is a "knowledge project of resistance in the making" that should always be accountable to real communities" (Korean Biblical Colloquium, Annual Meeting of the SBL, 11/29/2020).

### **Asian American Intersectional Interpretation: An Initial Reading**

To examine the possibilities of an Asian American intersectional biblical hermeneutic is to read for both a community and the text in focus, and to bring into view intersecting structures of power and inequity that may otherwise go ignored. For this very brief foray into Asian American intersectional biblical interpretation, I begin with the rise in anti-Asian hate in the U.S. that the Covid-19 global pandemic has unleashed. In the year 2020, alone, reported incidents of anti-Asian hate rose by 150% across the U.S. (Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism 2021). For most of 2020, the organization Stop AAPI Hate regularly cited the rise in aggression and violence against persons of Asian descent, but it was not until late 2020 that the mainstream news media began taking notice. Still, such attention did nothing to stop increasing anti-Asian hate. In a press release dated August 12, 2021, Stop AAPI Hate announced that since it began tracking incidents of hate reported since March 19, 2020, there have been 9,081 incident reports, with 4,548 of those occurring in

2020 and 4,533 happening in 2021 through to June 30 (Braun 2021). In relation to these incidents, women are reporting at a disproportionate rate, accounting for 63.3% of the total.

Whether or not these figures indicate a disproportionate number of incidents against women, as well as a greater percentage of reporting by women, Asian American women are voicing in unprecedented numbers how embattled and at risk persons of Asian descent living the U.S. feel. The outcry has given rise to the demand for a retelling of American history, one that includes the stories of Asian Americans and the long history of anti-AAPI hate. The urgency of this need became abundantly clear in the aftermath of a mass shooting at three massage parlors in Atlanta on March 16, 2021 that claimed the lives of eight people: Soon Chung Park, Hyun Jung Grant, Sun Cha Kim, Yong Ae Yue, Xiaojie Tan, Daoyou Feng, Delaina Ashley Yaun, and Paul Andre Michels. Of the eight victims, six were Asian women. While authorities investigated the attack, seeking to determine the gunman's motive, the death of these six Asian women only tapped into the fear that the AAPIO community had been experiencing in heightened intensity for over a year.

When the shooter tied his actions to an effort to assuage what he described as a sex addiction, many rightly pointed to the fetishization of Asian and Asian American women, arguing that race, gender, and class could not be disaggregated from the self-reported motive. The shooter killed women marginalized in society by stigmas associated with race, gender, migrant work, and sex work. Although massage parlors are often licensed to offer clients massage that has nothing to do with sex work, the assumption by the shooter and by many in the media and general public was that the women were sex workers because they were Asian. Presumed to be sex workers, they were also considered by some to be less human than the white male shooter who killed them. Thus a spokesman for the Cherokee County Sheriff's Office, Captain Jay Baker, felt it appropriate to assert that the shooter, who suffered from what he called a sex addiction, was "pretty much fed up and kind of at the end of his rope. Yesterday was a really bad day for him and this is what he did" (Chappell, Romo & Diaz 2021). In the murder of eight human beings, the dehumanizing and deadly fetishization of Asian women in the American imagination was fully revealed. Soon social media was showing screenshots of Baker's Facebook account selling T-shirts exhibiting the very anti-Asian hate that the pandemic was fueling. The T-shirts read, "Covid-19 IMPORTED VIRUS FROM CHY-NA" (Chappell, Romo & Diaz 2021). What happened last March and anti-Asian hate, more generally, can only be understood intersectionally. Intersectional perspectives, in turn, help us see biblical texts in new light.

Anti-Asian hate is an urgent context for Asian American intersectional biblical interpretation. In relation to the killings that took place in Atlanta in March 2021, the connection between the fetishization of Asian women and anti-Asian hate looms especially large. An Asian American intersectional reading can be particularly attuned to the degradation of women in biblical texts and their interpretation. Take,

for example, the story we find in Lk 7:36–50, which narrates what takes place at a meal that Simon the Pharisee hosts for Jesus. After Jesus takes his place at the table, a weeping woman enters the scene, which functions as a commentary on the interactions between the three figures. Carrying an alabaster jar of ointment, the woman proceeds to bathe Jesus’s feet with her tears, dries them with her hair, kisses them, and anoints them with ointment (v. 38). Simon is aghast. What the story illustrates depends in part on how readers position the characters they encounter in it.

In this regard, multiple components of the scene are key. First, the table fellowship that figures so prominently in Luke’s story establishes the setting and context for evaluating the interaction between the characters. The theme of “place,” with Jesus taking “his place at the table” in the opening verse (v. 36) and with the narrative’s repeated interest in the woman’s place, both literally (she stands behind Jesus in v. 38) and figuratively (in v. 39, Simon presumes to know just “what kind of woman this is”), emerges. Second, the passage focuses repeatedly on the unnamed woman’s character and reputation. Establishing a sharp distinction between Simon the Pharisee and the woman, the text draws the reader’s eye to its description of the woman. She is identified not only as “a woman,” but as a woman “in the city who was a sinner” (v. 37). The narrative also juxtaposes Simon’s thoughts and dialogue with Jesus with a focus on the woman’s physical interaction with Jesus. The rhetoric leads the reader to “see” the woman in their mind’s eye. Thus, Jesus asks Simon in v. 44, “Do you see this woman?” Third, the concentrated description of the woman’s actions in v. 38 emphasizes the physical, even sensual, nature of her interaction with Jesus. Furthermore, the narration of Simon’s thoughts in v. 39, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner,” encourages the reader to view the woman with disdain and her actions as offensive. Simon’s assessment of the woman also determines his unfavorable view of Jesus, who, in Simon’s eyes, has proven himself not to be a prophet. The passage features sharp commentary in vv. 44–46 that reframes the woman’s actions as expressions of hospitality. Jesus’ words reveal the abundant love that the woman demonstrates (v. 47) and implicate the biases implicit in Simon’s own thinking. As the scene draws to its conclusion, it repeats the motif of forgiveness (vv. 48–50) and love (v. 47) that first appears in the brief parable which Jesus tells in vv. 41–43. Thus, what begins as a story hinting at scandal ends as a tale of love and gratitude. Finally, with Jesus’ final words to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (v. 50), the scene establishes the unnamed woman as an exemplar of faith. With its emphatic reference to the woman’s acts of love (“she has shown great love,” v. 47) the account aligns faith with wholeness through the acceptance of forgiveness and the response of love.

Luke 7:36–50 is most often read as the story of a city woman who is either a sex worker, an adulteress, or, at the very least a “loose woman.” Reading through Simon’s eyes and seeing the woman with disdain, interpreters have most often read

their own assumptions and fetishizing tendencies into the story, seeing the gestures she makes with her hair as sexual in nature (Reid 1995). Yet, as Charles Cosgrove (2005) has argued, while it is possible to interpret the woman's loose hair in such light, this is by no means the necessary or even most likely reading that a first century context would yield. It makes much more sense to read the woman's gesture as one of "grief, gratefulness, propitiation, or pleading," not only because such meaning aligns more closely with first-century understanding, but also because it makes sense of Simon's contempt for Jesus' prophetic failure to recognize that she is indeed a "sinner" (Cosgrove 2005, 688). In other words, the woman's gestures cannot in-and-of themselves be clear indication of her "sin." Jesus, if he is a prophet, is to know the woman's sin through less obvious means. Moreover, as Barbara E. Reid notes, use of the imperfect verb, "used to be," in verse 37 indicates that the woman used to be a sinner (1995, 41).

That contemporary readers so easily assume that the woman's gestures and, by extension, her sin, are sexual in nature and render her permanently marked, reveals more about our society than anything about the text. It speaks to the assumptions that readers project onto women, discursive meanings that are embedded in social structures that not only place women in impossible and marginalized positions but blame women for being there in the first place. To read the woman in Luke 7 in this way is no different from projecting onto the women who were murdered in Atlanta a host of assumptions grounded in bigotry attached to dominant notions of gender, race, migration, and class. Such assumptions are degrading, dangerous, and deadly.

A full intersectional interpretation of Lk 7:36–50 would not end here but would proceed to interrogate the marked and unmarked rhetoric of religious identity, ethnicity, and social status. It would do so not only to illumine the text, but to reveal what shapes our own readings and what prevents or allows us to see one another as fully human. It would also examine more closely the significance of Simon's house and the characters' presence there. Intersectional reading gets to the heart not only of how we see, as Reid so deftly demonstrates, but of how the systems and structures we create function to keep individuals and groups in particular spaces, often in ways that perpetuate inequity.

The women who were murdered in Atlanta and the woman in Luke 7 had to negotiate their presence in particular spaces that rendered them vulnerable on every level. Even in parlors where workers provide therapeutic massage only, they face threats of sexual and other forms of violence on a daily basis because of social structures that allow them. To read intersectionally is to pursue the too easily unseen dimensions of a text that can render visible what is left invisible by the systems that shape the stories we read and the social contexts in which we live. To read intersectionally is critical not only for biblical interpretation but for real Asian American lives. We owe a debt of gratitude to Gale Yee for calling us to see and read anew.



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