The world having become a global village has implications for the interpretation of biblical texts. Feminist and womanist critics from various ethnic and social groupings remind us that there can no longer be claims of dominant feminist readings since all readers, as products of their times and contexts, bring to the text their struggles and experiences. An and Darr’s book illustrates this hermeneutical principle in offering five essays by women theologians representing different cultural, ethnic, social and sexual orientation perspectives.

From an African-American perspective, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes gives an intriguing overview of African-American orature – the oral tradition of their enslaved African ancestors. In “Resurrection in Prophetic Context”, she analyses the biblical texts that inspired Negro spirituals and folkloric stories. The lyrics of negro spirituals are usually reinterpreted stories and parables from the King James Bible, affectionately called “King Jimmie”, sung and performed by the slave community to empower and inspire them amidst the realities of everyday life. The song “The poor man Lazarus” is a spiritual that became central in the community’s canon, giving them hope that, like Lazarus, they will eventually reach heaven and their oppressors held accountable by God.
Kwok Pui-lan, Asian American feminist, offers a postcolonial reading entitled “Sexual morality and national politics” in which she analyses the use of religious rhetoric during the 2004 presidential election in the USA. The election, she says, focused on God, guns and gays, or put differently, faith, war against terrorism and moral values, of which the latter, based on the Bible, determined the outcome of the election. Women and gays are often the scapegoats when family values and sexual morality are seen as threats to the nation – justified by a right wing literalist reading of the Bible. The political ideology behind interpretations of the story of Rahab serves as illustration.

Eminent German-American New Testament scholar, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, wrote an essay on “A critical feminist emancipative reading” in which she gives a general overview of the theoretical ingredients and interpretive strategies of this approach. Her definition of the f-word, invariably seen, even by women, as a negative label, is simply: “Feminism is the radical notion that women are people” (82). She sees the task of feminist interpretation not just to understand biblical texts, but to change the way the Bible is read in order to transform women’s self-understanding and cultural patterns of oppression. Feminist theology takes the experience of women as point of departure; it challenges mainstream biblical interpretations by reading the text with suspicion while searching for and challenging its covert ideology; it takes up the case for “non-persons” who have been marginalised and dehumanised. Concerning biblical authority, she describes biblical texts as: “rhetorical communication that needs to be evaluated rather than accepted or obeyed” (90). In her typical way Schüssler Fiorenza puts unrelenting questions to the text. Through her critical hermeneutics, feminist scholarship has made major inroads into biblical studies to become a field of biblical criticism which is no longer ignored.

To my mind the boldest essay in the book is that of Carter Heyward, a lesbian feminist theologian. Entitled “A path wide open”, her essay deals with different perspectives on biblical authority. She challenges the notion that the Bible contains the authoritative, unquestionable “Word of God.” It is both a resource for spiritual growth and inspiration but on many issues it is undeniably wrong. We ought to disrupt biblical authority and “shatter its hold over us” (110). We as Christian theologians have a moral obligation to reinterpret or reject texts with an oppressive character and offer liberating interpretations or read the text against itself – not a difficult exercise with the Bible filled with contradictory statements. She uses examples of anti-semitic texts (Matt 27:24-26), texts that demand domination and exploitation of the rest of creation (Gen 2:26) and texts that have a sexist and heterosexist ordering of gender relations (Rom 1:26b-27). Her appeal on readers to be honest with the Bible and resist
the assumption that simply because “the Bible says so”, we are reading God’s will, is in itself a honest approach that makes theological sense.

Here we have a publication with an idea whose time has come. For readers involved in multicultural community praxis it is a useful book with study questions following each chapter. Those interested in an exposition of feminist hermeneutics will find Schüssler Fiorenza’s essay an excellent reference. With the authority of the Bible and gay marriages always on the agenda, Carter Heyward offers a refreshing approach. Do not be misled by its non-academic appearance.

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