

WHAT ABOUT THE MARGINS? BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP FIFTEEN YEARS AFTER *VOICES FROM THE MARGIN ...*¹

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Abstract

This review article engages some of the critical issues raised in the revised and expanded edition of RS Sugirtharajah's, Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World 15 years after its first publication. The brief review article argues among other things, that fundamentalism remains the biggest challenge to genuinely critical biblical scholarship; that even though men still dominate the enterprise of biblical studies women such as those within the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians are still making their voices heard; that if we are going to interpret from the margins, that we are going to have to take those that inhabit the margins seriously and not simply interpret from the margins as a fashion statement; and that conscientisation and activism must be the cornerstone of the discipline of marginal hermeneutics if we are to make a meaningful contribution to the transformation of not just the academy but the world as well.

Key Words: Marginal hermeneutics, Experience, Authority; Biblical values; Activism

'Talking Serpents': Marginal Hermeneutics and the Challenges of the Authority of the Bible and of Experience

Nathan, my eight-year-old son, was learning the difference between fact and fiction at school. His teacher gave him homework based on the lesson, providing him with statements and asking him to tabulate the differences between fact and fiction by drawing a line down the middle of a page and placing each statement in the correct column. I cannot recall all the statements, but they were basically true and false statements. Nathan identified most of them correctly until he put the statement "The talking horse" into the fact column. I asked him why he did that and he insisted it was because it was a fact. Of course, I insisted, a "fact" was a piece of information or evidence that was deemed "true," whereas "fiction" was an invented story or imaginary tale, and was therefore deemed "false." Somewhat agitated, Nathan pulled his face at me, and retorted, "We learnt in Sunday school that the serpent spoke to Eve and nobody said that was fiction!"

For me, this anecdote raises one of the biggest challenges facing marginal hermeneutics today – fifteen years after the publication of the first edition of RS Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, (London: SPCK, 1991). In a

¹ This paper was originally presented at a special session convened at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting in Washington DC, 2006. The session was entitled "Still at the Margins: Biblical scholarship fifteen years after *Voices from the Margin*" and I together with about six or seven other presented reflections on the book *Voices from the Margins*.

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comprehensive new introduction to the revised and expanded third edition,³ Sugirtharajah clearly outlines the developments that have taken place in marginal hermeneutics since the volume's first appearance. In all, he identifies five important developments, the first of which relates to my anecdote above. In what follows, I want to explore this point a little deeper and then use the other four developments as springboards from which to make some related comments and observations.

Margins: Crowded and Complicated

The first development which Sugirtharajah notes is that the margins have become crowded and complicated, mostly by a small group of men representing every major faith tradition (Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh), who have appointed themselves as the custodians of marginal hermeneutics, who instead of probing its ideologies and implications for society, have tried to tame and domesticate the scriptural texts of their respective religious tradition. The point made by Sugirtharajah that male scholars are still "hijacking" biblical interpretation – evidenced by the fact that after fifteen years of *Voices* men's voices are often the only ones being put forward or heard and women's hermeneutics are more often than not still relegated to the margins in the academy, certainly has some merit. Notwithstanding this, I would want to argue that at least in Africa, a substantial body of marginal biblical hermeneutics has emerged from the pioneering work of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians (*hereafter*, the Circle), who have been at the coalface of pushing boundaries, challenging systems, and generally making their voices heard. The volume edited by Musa W Dube: *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, (Atlanta/Geneva: SBL/WCC Publications, 2001) and another jointly edited by Musa W Dube and Musimbi RA Kanyoro, *Grant Me Justice: HIV/AIDS and Gender Readings of the Bible*, (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001), bear ample testimony to this. A forthcoming volume, *The African Women's Bible Commentary*, which Musa Dube, Velma Love and I are currently involved in editing adds further to the contention that the "irruption within the irruption" has not been in vain, but continues to yield much fruit.

For me, the issue is not that more marginal voices – particularly those of women – are being silenced; but, more simply, "What are these voices saying? Sometimes, as Sugirtharajah has argued, because the margins have become so crowded it has become complicated to the extent that there may be a move to homogenise these voices, making them less critical of the bible and dare I say, even more reliant upon it. Indeed, some of the work emerging from the margins may be from people who actually do believe that the serpent spoke to Eve!

The Bible's Status has Changed

The second development which Sugirtharajah notes is that of the bible's changing status since the first publication of *Voices*. In which arena has the bible's status changed? Is it simply within the academy, or should we be taking note of the way in which it has changed within faith communities?

In what he referred to as a "manifesto for biblical studies," Roland Boer, who specialises in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, recently suggested to me in a personal communication that the church's relationship with the bible is becoming decidedly "dirtier." My own research in the South African context – particularly within the Indian com-

³ RS Sugirtharajah, "Introduction: Still at the Margins. Pages 1-10," in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, Edited by RS Sugirtharajah. (Third edition, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006).

munity – has revealed that biblical interpretation among grassroots faith communities in this rapidly globalising age are becoming more and more politically right-wing and Evangelical than ever before. These ideas are found in sermons, church bible studies, paperback books and pamphlets, derived mainly from North American right-wing Evangelical/Pentecostal ministry organisations, easily accessible on the internet and other sources. These resources seek to impose a biblical literalism with regard to a range of issues such as male headship, homosexuality, HIV and AIDS etc. As a result, an overt form of injustice pervades within the church, cloaked in that most iniquitous of terms, “biblical values.”

Locating our Marginal Mouths

Why then, was I busy last July having my children baptised in the church? Why, as an academic, do I choose to stay within the walls of the church as one who fights long and difficult ideological and political battles? I believe I have found something of a solution for my predicament in the work of Yvette Abrahams, a South African gender activist. Her description of womanism greatly impressed me. For Abrahams, Womanism:

Like Marxism, [it] is a body of theory, which must be tested in practice. In epistemological terms, we may say that its ultimate truth test lies in revolutionary practice. Womanist hermeneutics may look great on paper. That is not the issue. The worth of womanist theories will only be seen in the ability of womanists to change the world.⁴

I have come to see that marginal hermeneutics can be understood in the same way as Abraham’s thick description of womanism. Therefore, while admitting that the church’s relationship with the bible has become increasingly “dirtier,” it has seemed to me that those who claim to practice marginal hermeneutics must “put their money where their marginal mouths are” and work with faith communities to change the systems of abuse. Failure here will result in marginal hermeneutics becoming no more than a fashionable academic statement. Hence, although those who read the bible on the margins for liberation may do so out of a clear respect for those who use the text as a means to sustain life and hope, it is of grave importance that the conscientisation motif must never be lost. In other words, those whose hermeneutic seeks to meet the pastoral needs of the faith community in which they serve, and who engage therefore in populist readings, should never be satisfied with a bland “listening to the voice of the other.” The risk, when one sacrifices conscientisation as a motif on the one hand, and valorises interpretation from the community on the other, is that marginal hermeneutics itself becomes as fundamentalist as the interpretation(s) it wants to counter. Again, a disclaimer: This is not to argue that popular interpretations do not possess the potentiality for criticality or that they do not enjoy merit. All I am giving emphasis to here is that in the current climate of global biblical and cultural fundamentalism, one has to be cautious about falling into the trap of conservative or what Sugirtharajah calls fascist biblical interpretation, simply because one wants to take the voice of “the other” seriously.

Atomisation of the Discipline

The third development that Sugirtharajah has noted is the atomisation of the hermeneutic discipline and fragmentation of the theological audience and readership. Here he makes reference to the increase in identity-specific hermeneutics, raising the question as to whether identity-specific readings such as, *Dalit*, *Minjung*, or *Bosadi* (in the African context), simply provide ammunition for those at the centre to label such readings as “exotic”

⁴ Yvette Abrahams, “Learning by Doing. Notes towards the Practice of Womanist Principles in the “New” South Africa.” *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity – African Feminisms I*, 50 (2001), p. 71.

or “sentimental” while they carry on with “business as usual.” In South Africa, we would say somewhat curtly, “Ag shame, those poor people with the problem of caste – now let’s get back to the real objective meaning of this text. What did the author intend?”

Although I think the danger that Sugirtharajah is raising concerning the “exoticisation” of identity-specific readings is real and has merit, I would want to go further and argue that it has yet to run its full course. Identity-specific readings are still needed and should be desired, but not simply from those scholars interpreting from the margins. The guild should insist that all biblical scholars unmask and expose the identity-specific nature of their own readings, and if they do not, then those working on the margins should call them to account by exposing the ways in which their identities, whether, white, male, Euro-American etc., inform their interpretive practices. It is here, within interpretive practices, where the shared values which Sugirtharajah seeks for lie. These identity-specific readings cannot promote what Kelly Brown Douglas calls a “vulgar relativism”⁵ but have, in their interpretive practices, to use those common tools of biblical scholarship which those in the guild share, not just those from the centre, but from the margins as well.

Further to this, I would suggest that, it is not just the identities of the biblical scholars which need to be unmasked, but the identities of those with whom we work as well. This is particularly true for those of us who base our research on the communities of faith within which we work. It is simply not enough to label these readers as “other,” “ordinary” or “poor and marginalised.”

Contours of Theological Landscape: Liberation Theology vs. Postcolonialism

The fourth development which Sugirtharajah cites is that of the shifting contours of the theological landscape. He notes that marginal hermeneutics has perhaps moved its home from liberation theology to that of postcolonial hermeneutics. The difference, he argues, is that while liberation hermeneutics sought to tell the truth about the powerful to the poor, postcolonial hermeneutics seeks to tell truth to power. As enticing as this comparison is, I think it is overly-simplistic, and to some degree, Sugirtharajah admits as much. I would suggest that marginal hermeneutics actually may – at least to a large extent – have their feet in both homes! Again, I am reminded of the rich variety of what is arguably some of the most cutting-edge scholarship emanating from the Circle. With the exception of Musa Dube – who explicitly embodies postcolonial interests in her work – the majority of its members still embrace the liberation paradigm.

Diasporic Hermeneutics

Fifth, and finally, Sugirtharajah cites the emergence of diasporic hermeneutics and intellectuals as forces to be reckoned with in marginal hermeneutics. He thus poses the important question as to who’s interpretive interests are more authentic: those who remained at home, or those in the Diaspora? For Sugirtharajah, the hermeneutic discourse of those who remained at home, and those who interpret in the Diaspora are different. While the language of those who remained at home is punctuated by interests such as HIV and AIDS, poverty, caste, race, development and free trade; in the Diaspora it is punctuated by deconstruction, the end of history, carnival, body-politics, etc. This is a point that I cannot agree more fully with Sugirtharajah on, although I would add that this is not just the condition of those in the Diaspora vs. those at home. In my own experience, this is a condition that can be detected

⁵ Kelly Douglas Brown 2001. “Marginalized People, Liberating Perspectives: A Womanist approach to Biblical interpretation. *Anglican Theological Review* (Winter): 41.

even among scholars who live and work on the African Continent. There are those whose starting points for research is theory, while there are others who would argue that experience (i.e., experiences of poverty, HIV and AIDS, genocide etc.) is the only valid and legitimate starting point of interpretation. The difference I would argue comes down to one of epistemology. Again, I adapt Abraham's assertion concerning womanism to marginal hermeneutics, where I would argue that a marginal hermeneutic:

...values emotional knowledge as highly as it does intellectual knowledge. This follows naturally from an activist position: when you strive to change the world, you need to work with people. In order to do so successfully, you need to understand them and speak their language. Being human, people are reached and influenced as much through the emotions as through the intellect. It would not help us to devalue that form of knowledge.⁶

Whether in the Diaspora or not, those who choose to theorise about oppression without seeking to change those systems which sustain and promote oppression, undertake an enterprise as empty as the so-called value-free and positivistic interpretations they fought so hard to overcome in the first place. This is the truth-test of marginal hermeneutics, fifteen years after *Voices* was first published: The ability to change the world and the suspicion that another world is possible!

⁶ Abrahams, "Learning by Doing," p. 73.