BOOK REVIEW

Cheryl B. Anderson, Ancient Laws and Contemporary Controversies: The Need for Inclusive Biblical Interpretation. Oxford, UK and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, ix + 240 pp. $25.00. ISBN 978-0-19530550-0 (hbk).

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As an Associate Professor at Garrett-Evangelical and Ordained Elder in the United Methodist Church, Cheryl B. Anderson belongs to a small but distinguished group of African American women with a specialization in Hebrew Bible scholarship. Among the ranks include Renita Weems, Mignon Jacobs, Wilda Gafney and a few other up-and-coming scholars. Her further distinction lies in her in-depth background in the discipline and practice of law. The author uses biblical hermeneutics and legal theory to challenge cultural assumptions of prevailing social issues that have been biblically justified by an elite few.

Chapter one introduces the book’s purpose as to dismantle the implication of biblical objectivity as supported by the church and the academy as they both sub-consciously embrace Audre Lorde’s concept of the “mythical norm” through which they collectively claim to “follow divine mandate or scholarly methods” (28). Chapter two discloses the undermining of excluded voices through the truncation of the current ethical implications of ancient Hebrew laws by several of the leading and most revered Old Testament scholars. In chapter three, Anderson exposes the near universal practice of selective interpretations of the Bible such that status-quo supporting text receive high regards and authoritative recognition, whereas contrary passages become branded as irrelevant and obsolete. The fourth chapter contextualizes the purity laws from an inclusive perspective as problematic if the poor and marginalized lack access to ritual purity, because such laws can be used by the privileged to further promote an unjust social order at the expense of subordinate groups. Chapter five demonstrates how Luther, Calvin, and Wesley supported theological inclusivity in contrast to the modern conservative implication of an exclusive “official” Christian tradition. Chapter six provides an ethical overview of the interpretive process by pointing to the “logical leaps” of common arguments concerning issues regarding contemporary concerns such as racial subordination, homophobia, sexism, and capitalism. Chapter seven draws the conection between the “traditional approach” towards hermeneutics, and uncritical understandings of the US Constitution as the foundation of “American Civil Religion” (Robert Bellah, 1967) that supports systemic inequality.
Throughout the book, Anderson clearly argues with concrete examples how the construction of the “mythical norm” consequently hijacked biblically sanctioned social justice with biblical justifications. However, the origin and emergence of the “mythical norm” approach does not appear. Although Anderson credits Lorde several times for the use of the concept “mythical norm” in relation to “the Other” (metaphor for outside the norm with stigmatized ascribed characteristics), an additional reference to Max Weber’s Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism would demonstrate the Puritan influence for constructing a polarized culture that places a large subculture on the fringes of society. In Weber’s model, the elect correspond to the mythical norm, whereas “the other” possesses an ontological likeness to “the damned.” Anderson unintentionally fell in the trap of using exclusive language by referring to “the nation’s founding fathers” (155) that contains stated patriarchal superiority and implied extended subordination to persons of color and the poor. “Drafters of the Constitution” more appropriately conveys the same message.

The book’s greatest strength lies in Anderson’s continuous critique and redirection of right-wing and leftist interpretations alike with a liberationist approach with intriguing and unsuspected critiques such as her use of Walter Harrelson’s illuminating perspective on the narrow view of the Eighth Commandment “from the perspective of the privileged” (55). This volume raises the bar for all genres of progressive biblical literature because of its post-conventional approach towards reconstructing the ambiguous connotation of the expression “biblical authority.” This book contains multiple alternative perspectives such that a direct confrontational tone towards the theological and socially conservative and the minimally liberal alike cannot avoid re-thinking learned exclusive biblical interpretations that have previously negatively impacted individuals’ self-concept while permeating society.

Ancient Laws and Contemporary Controversies has the potential for being a classic interdisciplinary text for biblical critics, moral theologians, and social scientists because it provides a rich array of argumentative resources for developing instructional lessons applicable for units in the study of social stratification within biblical passages. The book functions as an exemplary supplement to biblical study aids such as Gorman’s Elements of Biblical Exegesis because it explores textual meaning beyond the most silenced vantage points with consideration given to the world’s variations in population by socio-economic status, gender, race, and even more controversial sexual orientations. The reader must approach the text understanding that the author has no intention to employ a radical indoctrination, but to shed light on culturally acquired ideologies that readers subconsciously use in all interpretive processes.

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