

What Shall We Tell Our (Sons and our) Daughters?
A review of C. Anderson's *Ancient Laws and Contemporary Controversies*

In a world where human flourishing seems challenged at every turn, the work of theological educators and congregational practitioners can be life-giving or death-dealing. This is especially true for those who 'handle' the Bible because so many people in our communities ascribe a great deal of moral, ethical and spiritual weight to this text. For many in the church and the academy, who continue to rely on the Bible and the church to help them make meaning of their lives, new and imaginative approaches to reading the Bible that honor their unique voices and experiences as well as highlight the connections between them and the characters in the biblical text are critical. These connections are critical because they remind people that they are 'fearfully and wonderfully made,' and – like everything else God created - they are 'very good'. Cheryl Anderson's book, *Ancient Laws and Contemporary Controversies*, offers its readers the opportunity to make these sorts of connections.

In the next 10 minutes or so, I will review the third chapter of Anderson's book with an eye towards its usefulness for interpreting the Bible inclusively in the academic and ecclesial classroom. I will provide a general overview of the contents of this chapter and then reflect upon how I might utilize its resources in classroom settings. Finally (and quickly), informed by Anderson's project, I will challenge those of us in this room –religious educators and congregational practitioners - to revisit and perhaps revise our engagement of the biblical text.

In her third chapter entitled, "Ruth and Esther as Models for the Formation of God's People," Anderson sets out to engage critiques of the dominant portrayals of Ruth and Esther offered by feminist/womanist, queer and postcolonial readings of their stories. She presents the challenges these critiques pose to conventional readings of these texts and identifies

important themes within these texts. In her final move, Anderson offers an interpretive approach that allows Ruth and Esther to be read as models of Christian formation that is inclusive and enriching. Anderson points the reader to alternative ways of engaging and interrogating these texts that honor the voices and experiences of persons often marginalized in our communities. Although Anderson offers three broad reading strategies, for the purposes of this time-constrained review, I will focus my comments on her treatment of feminist/womanist scholarship.

Anderson attends to persons marginalized because of their gender, in the sections entitled, "Ruth: A Woman, a Daughter-in-Law, and a Moabite" and "Esther: A Woman, a Queen, and a Minority." In the Ruth portion of the chapter, Anderson highlights how the story can be read as a positive one for women by surveying the work of select feminist and womanist scholars. Generally, Madipoane Masenya, Julie Chu and Saronjini Nadar read Ruth positively. Kwok Pui Lan however, challenges the patriarchal and heterosexual structures found in the text that link the two women's economic security to a man. Another challenge is offered by Anna May Sa Pa who points out the notions of submission, self-sacrifice and obedience found in treatments of the text that often work to the detriment of Asian women.

In the Esther portion of the chapter, Anderson focuses the reader on the work of Sidnie Ann White Crawford, Susan Niditch, Itumeleng Mosala and Nicole Duran who challenge Esther's appropriateness as a feminist model. These scholars argue that Esther's story is not radical enough because it does not challenge the patriarchal status quo. Traditional readings that have not challenged the erasure of certain characters and circumstances are also treated in this

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portion of the chapter. Here, Linda Day takes up the manner in which Vashti's character is 'erased' in the narrative and Saronjini Nadar points to the erasure of the reader's awareness of the sexual violence against females which is authorized by the text.

Commendably, in keeping with her theme of inclusivity, Anderson highlights the works of South Africans, Taiwanese, Indian, Burmese and Euro-Americans in her feminist/womanist treatments of Ruth and Esther. I suspect that many of these scholars do not have the same sort of broad name recognition as biblical scholars like Amy Jill Levine, Mieke Bal and Renita Weems. So again, Anderson's choice to highlight the work of these international scholars mirrors her concern of inclusivity. Because scholars like Levine, Bal and Weems have written on Ruth and Esther however, readers may have been aided had Anderson mentioned their works in the body of this chapter.

Also, had Anderson provided some general definitions and markers of the different reading strategies and their practitioners in the introductory portion of this chapter, general readers may have found the chapter more accessible. This sort of 'mapping' may have mitigated any confusion associated with Itumeleng Mosala's inclusion in the feminist/womanist section of the chapter without any attention to his gender. Armed with an understanding about feminist and womanist reading strategies, the reader might appreciate Anderson's move to include this male voice in this section of her chapter. Moreover, noting the work of scholars like Randall Bailey and Jon Berquist in the body of the text would have modeled a type of inclusiveness that is thematic for Anderson's book.

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Anderson has done the 'heavy lifting' for her readers as she has surveyed the scholarly contributions of feminists, womanists, queer and postcolonial readings of the stories of Ruth and Esther. Further, her survey can be useful for at least two types of classrooms. As a facilitator in either an academic or ecclesial classroom, I would introduce this material by asking the students to retell the Ruth and Esther stories and reflect on their current understandings of, concerns about and questions around these narratives. Based upon their responses, I would establish the importance of acknowledging and valuing a variety of perspectives and by outlining the evolution or academic genealogy of the four reading strategies. To supplement in-class discussion, I would have the students read excerpts from projects like Adam's *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation*, McKenzie and Haynes' *To Each Its Own Meaning*, and The Bible and Culture Collective's *The Postmodern Bible* to provide them with a general understanding of the reading strategies. I would then assign each class member one of the four reading strategies and have them revisit the Ruth or Esther text with an eye towards the goals, presuppositions and concerns of their assigned strategy. Here, I would use Anderson's chapter as required reading and provide samplings of some of the pieces Anderson references in her chapter. Finally, I would lead a discussion on how their assignment impacted their understanding of the text and influenced their understanding of others in their communities. I would make these four pedagogical moves in order to highlight the value that inclusive voices bring to readings and readers of the biblical text.

As a seminary student, I used to hear clergypersons speak suspiciously of those in the academy and I used to hear theological educators speak condescendingly of ecclesial leaders. The divisive (whether organic or contrived) relationship between 'the church and the academy'

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seemed tantamount to the legendary feud between the Hatfields and McCoys. As a young 'un with affinities for both 'families', I worked to stealthily navigate this contentious terrain in the hopes of not being wounded by 'friendly fire'. I have seen far too many 'walking wounded' and 'casualties of war' in academic and ecclesial settings and I believe that many of these injuries could have been avoided.

As long as we, women and men of the religious guild who have found success and acceptance in the church and the academy, continue to cause ourselves and others harm by not challenging ways of reading the Bible that devalue women, homosexuals and those whose territories are ruled by others thru our teaching and our preaching, we run the risk of co-signing on the oppressive structures of sexism, homophobia and colonialization that so many fought to dismantle and we insult the bold integrity, erase the rich history and tarnish the honorable legacies of the very named and unnamed persons whose sacrificial acts made our current positions of academic influence and ecclesial power possible. As long as we continue to insult, erase and tarnish the humanity of the persons whose sacrificial acts made our current positions of power and influence possible, we run the risk of dismantling the very foundations upon which we have built our holistic understandings of who we are intellectually, physically and spiritually and we reject the wonderful work of The Divine that is our being. When we reject the wonderful work of The Divine that is our very being, we are no different than the many men and women whose faces are immortalized in the 1930 photograph of the lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith which inspired Billie Holiday's popular song, "Strange Fruit."

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Because of the contribution of Cheryl Anderson, we do not have to cause this type of harm in the classrooms and in the pews by not challenging ways of reading the Bible that devalue women, homosexuals and foreigners thru our teaching and our preaching because we do not want to loose our place of prestige in the faith communities to which we feel a deep sense of loyalty. Because of the work of feminist, womanist, queer and postcolonial biblical scholars like those highlighted by Anderson, we have the critical tools to challenge readings of the text that devalue females, members of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and intersexed communities and immigrant persons. When we use the material found in Anderson's book, especially in its third chapter, to challenge dominant readings that devalue others, we can begin healing old wounds and we can prevent further harm such that those in our classrooms and our pews can come into the full knowledge and understanding that they are, indeed "very good."