

## REREADING THE BIBLE: A DIALOGUE WITH WOMEN THEOLOGIANs FROM LATIN AMERICA, AFRICA AND ASIA

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To read the Bible as Motswana African woman is to read a Western book and to relive painful equation of Christianity with civilization.<sup>1</sup>

Is the Bible a western or a universal book? Is it a patriarchal book or does it also have a liberating message for women? The Bible is still a unifying source of Christian theology across cultural borders, not in the last place thanks to its presupposed authority. But its very concept of authority gets questioned in multicultural and multireligious contexts with a plurality of holy scriptures. At the same time the biblical canon is vigorously under discussion because of its androcentric character.

These issues bearing in mind, I will portray in this article women theologians from three different continents.<sup>2</sup> Elsa Tamez, a Mexican (born 1950), is Professor of Biblical Studies at the Universidad Biblico Latinoamericano in San José, Costa Rica. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, born in Ghana in 1934, has worked for the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva and the African Conference of Churches (ACC). She was on several occasions a visiting scholar in Europe and the USA.<sup>3</sup> Kwok Pui-lan, Hong Kong Chinese by birth (1952), currently teaches in Cambridge, Massachusetts. First I shall give a short introduction to the particular ways each of them reads the Bible, especially how they understand the authority of the Bible. I shall then discuss commonalities, divergences and cross-fertilizations between their hermeneutical concepts. In this dialogue the western theologian is the fourth silent participant. Issues, which intrigue me as western listener, will be raised in the last section.

Whereas Elsa Tamez rereads stories of both parts of the Christian Bible as a biblical scholar, Mercy Amba Oduyoye is using biblical phrases to express her anthropological and ecclesiological interests, while Kwok Pui-lan's focus lies on hermeneutics.

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<sup>1</sup> Musa W. Dube, *Toward a Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, St. Louis MO: Chalice Press, 2000, 11,13

<sup>2</sup> For more biographical information: Virginia Fabella, M.M., *Beyond Bonding. A Third World Women's Theological Journey*, Manila: Institute of Women's Studies, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Mercy Amba Oduyoye has received an honorary doctoral degree in theology from the University of Amsterdam (UvA) in 1991.

*Elsa Tamez: Women Rereading the Bible*

The Mexican theologian Elsa Tamez<sup>4</sup> deliberately gives attention to often neglected and unnoticed biblical women such as Hagar, the Egyptian slave of Sara. In a worship service at the first general assembly of the fifth conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Women Theologians (EAT-WOT) in New Delhi in 1981, she compared Hagar to women in the Third World.<sup>5</sup> Hagar, who is in the margin of the salvation history, suffers like many women in the Third World from a threefold oppression. She is discriminated because of her sex (as a woman), because of her class (as a slave), and because of her race (as an Egyptian) and thus she is the 'oppressed of the oppressed'. Yet, Tamez points out that a great future was promised to her and her son.

The first – predominantly male – generation of liberation theologians primarily used sociological tools in referring to and selecting a certain canon of biblical texts. Thus, they took the story of the Exodus, the Prophets, and the historical Jesus. Tamez, however, interprets texts that within the context of liberation theology are considered rather unpopular such as the letters of Paul, the letter of James or Qohelet. In her doctoral dissertation she challenges the doctrine of justification. As a Protestant theologian she asks whether this Protestant formula that was inherited from American and European missionaries, could be of any interest for Latin America, a continent suffering under economic debt. It is difficult to understand the message of justification of the sinner in a setting where people suffer deadly from the consequences of sin and injustice.<sup>6</sup> In a context like Latin America this would seem as if God were a God of injustice. Paul himself had been imprisoned unjustly by the Romans. When he suffered with his own body under the destructive logic of the Roman Empire, the forensic vocabulary of the Apostle turned into political language. Paul who was humiliated from bodily tortures called for liberty (Gal 5:1). God's justice stands up against the injustice of the world (Rom 1:18). In a Third World context, the Mexican theologian writes that justification must be interpreted as "God's solidarity with the excluded."<sup>7</sup> In this way it becomes a liberating message with social and cultural impacts. In her analysis Tamez shows that in the ongoing social and political struggle against oppressive structures in times of neo-liberalism and globalisation, it is

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Elsa Tamez, Sun Ai Park, et al., 'Worship Service: This Hour of History', in: *Irruption of the Third World. Challenge to Theology*, ed. by Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll: Orbis Books) 1983, 181-187, 183-185.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Elsa Tamez, Sun Ai Park, et al., 'Worship Service: This Hour of History', in: *Irruption of the Third World. Challenge to Theology*, ed. by Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll: Orbis Books) 1983, 181-187, 183-185.

<sup>6</sup> Elsa Tamez, *The Amnesty of Grace: Justification by faith from a Latin American Perspective*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Elsa Tamez, Art. Justification, in: *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, ed. by Virginia Fabella, and R.S. Sugirtharajah, Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000, 116-118.