In *Claiming Her Dignity: Female Resistance in the Old Testament*, L. Juliana M. Claassens examines female characters’ resistance, specifically nonviolent resistance, in the Hebrew Bible in response to violence in four forms: war (chapter one); rape (chapter two); heterarchy, Carol Meyers’s problematic term Claassens prefers over patriarchy (chapter three); and precarity, a term borrowed from Judith Butler to illustrate the particular vulnerability of women to experience poverty (chapter four). She presents case studies of specific episodes in the Old Testament, such as Abigail’s hospitality to David and his men in response to the violence of war (1 Sam 25) or Tamar’s mournful behavior after being raped by her half-brother Amnon (2 Sam 13). Relying on both social-scientific and feminist research, the women’s resistance discussed by Claassens includes mourning/lament, hospitality, prayer, laughter, and trickery. Influenced by her own story of resistance as one of the first female full professors at Stellenbosch University in South Africa, she concludes with five reasons for her project: (1) to stave off forgetfulness of the acts of women; (2) to demonstrate the salvation of the biblical text in both naming one’s pain and calling upon God for deliverance; (3) to highlight the agency women have in transforming their victimization to benefit both themselves and their community; (4) to illustrate the complexity of women’s resistance, as well as its often fleeting nature; and, most importantly, (5) to offer hope that things can change.

In response to point four, while Claassens frequently admits that women’s resistance is complicated (see, for example, her discussion of how the vocal resistance of Zelophehad’s daughters makes them complicit in the Israelite imperialistic agenda [chapter three] or how Hagar’s resistance ultimately keeps her in the precarious position of servant to Abraham and Sarah [chapter four]), she still falls into the feminist trap of equating agency with resistance, assuming that all people want to be “free” in the Western, democratic sense of the word. These biblical women serve as excellent exemplars for women today, according to Claassens, because of their ability to resist. When concluding her discussion of Hagar, for example, she writes that we see “the small acts of resistance on the part of Hagar that speak of her agency, her subjectivity, her love and concern for her son… as well as the deeply human desire to claim her dignity in the face of dehumanization” (114). She would do well to look at feminist scholars who have questioned this correlation between women’s agency and resistance, such as the work of anthropologist Saba Mahmood on the Women’s Mosque Movement in Egypt. By valorizing ‘resistance’ above all other types of responses
to violence and oppression, we can actually alienate, rather than empower, women. Though Claassens hopes that the acts of ‘resistance’ presented in her volume help “victims of injustice survive” (141), she herself does not recognize the dangerous intersection of victimhood and agency she herself promulgates.

For instance, while discussing Susanna’s actions in preventing her own rape, Claassens describes this ‘resistance’ as “the deeply human reaction of refusing any onslaught on one’s physical and emotional well-being” (58), neglecting the also deeply human response of freezing or fleeing in the face of danger. Claassens mentions this in passing in her conclusion (144-45), but on the whole, she views ‘resistance’, i.e., agency, as the sole way to move beyond victimhood. This type of discourse can be especially problematic for those who have experienced rape, and actually supports the same troubling ideology of the Hebrew Bible. Deuteronomy 22:23-27, in discussing the different punishments meted out to an engaged woman who is raped, delineates between rape in town and rape in the country. If raped in town, the woman is also held accountable, while she is not in the country. The reasoning for this, as the text itself tells us, is that the woman is expected to cry out for help. Presumably, if she actually calls for help in town, she will not be raped because others will come to her aid. Both Claassens and the Hebrew Bible share this dangerous assumption that the only natural response to violence is ‘resistance’. For those wanting to use this text in the contemporary world, such a viewpoint can further victimize individuals who have experienced violence of any kind.

Despite this problematic singular focus on resistance as the ultimate form of women’s agency when faced with violence, Claassens rarely adequately explains why she classifies some actions as resistance at all, particularly the actions of mourning/lament and laughing. What makes mourning an act of resistance and when is it simply a manifestation of sorrow over a death? How is Sarah’s laughter classified as resistance and not just disbelief at the promise of a child? Is all reaction resistance? Claassens best clarifies how everyday actions like crying can be viewed as resistance in her conclusion, noting that lament “serv[es] as an acknowledgment that things are not as they should be” (142), but throughout the majority of her volume, the qualities of ‘resistance’ remain inadequately defined.

Part of her failure to effectively express why she labels an action as ‘resistance’ is likely due to her over-reliance on secondary sources. On the one hand, Claassens’s book serves as an excellent source for discovering a variety of other useful texts, particularly in the social-scientific fields and in Women’s and Gender Studies, which makes this book worthwhile for anyone interested in its practical application in the church, or elsewhere. On the other hand, this attention to the work of others obfuscates Claassens’s own opinions.