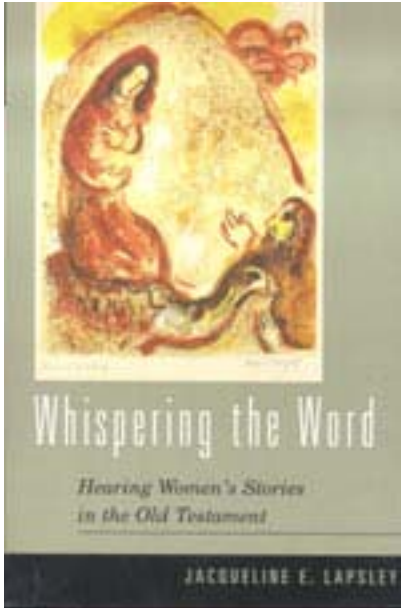


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Lapsley, Jacqueline E.

Whispering the Word: Hearing Women's Stories in the Old Testament

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005. Pp. xii + 154.
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In a compact volume (only 108 pages of text), Lapsley lays out a system of reading the Hebrew Bible text in a way that is faithful to her Christian roots and honest to her feminist commitments. She provides readings of familiar texts, texts that have been read and reread by feminists (the Levite's concubine, Ruth, the women of the exodus). The one not-so-often-read exception is the story of Rachel stealing Laban's gods. But, according to Lapsley, she is not offering just another reading but rather "a guide to *how* to read women's stories (and finally any biblical story) *faithfully*, as a word from God to us" (1). This stated goal is ambitious on two fronts: just the problematic phrase "word from God" is fraught with a landmine of concerns, many of which seem at odds with feminism (e.g., authority, truth); and "how to" books often miss their mark.

The introduction itself is a reading. Lapsley condenses both biblical feminist work and literary criticism into a concise, readable, understandable chapter that students new to biblical work, and to feminism and literary criticism, will be able to follow along. Her footnotes are full of rudimentary work in these areas and provide readers with trails to follow from where she herself wishes to go. Her footnotes are guides without being unduly cumbersome or overly scholarly. Her brief introductory reading of Adam and Eve "taking the fruit" and becoming morally responsible for their choices provides a model

for the reader's responsibility. So, Lapsley argues, "eating from the tree enables one to become an interpreter—a moral interpreter—of one's world" (15). In the garden, according to her reading, humans become both godlike and vulnerably finite in the same moment. Advocating for a hermeneutic of "informed trust" rather than the classical feminist hermeneutic of suspicion, Lapsley says that "biblical interpretation will thus require our interpretive judgment, and it presupposes that we will sometimes make mistakes at it. But it also suggests that the text will sometimes be extremely subtle, because it assumes that we have the capacity to interpret subtlety" (18).

Lapsley hopes to bridge the gap between deconstructive feminist readings and traditional readings by providing a reconstructive, theological lens for seminarians and other people studying the texts as devotees to follow. For Lapsley, to read faithfully means to read as a feminist (2). She locates herself among those biblical feminists labeled "revisionists," such as Phyllis Trible, who listen for counter voices and counter traditions within the texts. She reads as an Anglican. In the book, she offers three ways to read the text: attending to women's words in the text by reading Rachel's speech to her father (ch. 2); attending to the narrator's perspective in the Levite's concubine story (ch. 3); attending to the values implicit in the story in the exodus (ch. 4). In chapter 5 she provides a reading that takes all these strategies into account for one comprehensive reading of the book of Ruth.

The longest chapter is, not surprisingly, chapter 3, which provides a reading of Judg 19–21. This chapter also is the least convincing. Lapsley's belief that subtlety and discernment may be used in understanding the text pushes a reading of the narrator's hand further than is plausible for me. Lapsley wants readers, specifically Christian readers, to understand how a text can be "horrifying and Scripture" at the same time (35). It is so nuanced a reading that it requires Christian faith. She is, of course, reading for the church and for the church's professionals, so in the end this comment may be a plus rather than negative.

Lapsley employs intertextuality with aplomb, however. She connects this story of the Levite's concubine with the rapes of Dinah and Tamar as lenses through which to see the link between rape and violence against women and the disintegration of community. But when she must answer the question of theodicy (Where is God in all this violence?), she resorts to this subtlety that is muted, not a whisper, but a silence. And, she leans in toward what Stephen Breck Reid called "the Jesus punch line"; that is, when the Hebrew biblical text is too problematic, interpreters go to the cross and a theology of suffering. My major critique of the book, then, is that this chapter is so subtle as to be almost obtuse.

My only other major concern with the book is that it seems to end abruptly. The final chapter, in which Lapsley brings together her three types of reading into one reading of

Ruth, is a fine example of what she has demonstrated throughout the book. The summation of the book is a very brief paragraph at the end of chapter 5. I would have wanted a bit more of Lapsley's own self-reflection on the work she has presented. In addition, I wanted more on the implications of her proposals. She does say that the usefulness of her strategies "is not limited to Old Testament stories about women; many biblical texts might be helpfully read by employing them." I believe this statement is true. Given her own observation, a "for instance" might have been helpful for readers who would want to follow in her footsteps.

The book is scholarly, clearly so, but it is not so dense that a neophyte would be lost. I believe this book will make an excellent introduction to the field of biblical feminist hermeneutics, whether or not one agrees with Lapsley's commitments or whether or not one agrees with the methodology. I believe it will be especially helpful in seminary settings where students are charged with learning how to preach even as they study the texts academically. Coupled with the work of other scholars, the book will lead to interesting discoveries and discussions for students and teachers for years to come.