

Whose Text Is It?

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It was exactly twenty years ago that Professor Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza gave her landmark presidential address entitled “The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship.”¹ There she argued for the need for biblical scholarship to “continue its descriptive-analytic work . . . for understanding of ancient texts and their historical location” while also “exploring the power/knowledge relations inscribed in contemporary biblical discourse and in the biblical texts themselves.” In such an approach, the work of those “traditionally absent from the exegetical enterprise would not remain peripheral or non-existent for biblical scholarship,” but “could become central to the scholarly discourse of the discipline.”² My address to you this evening is intended to further this call for a shift in our self-understanding of our scholarly work. We have made progress in the past twenty years, but work remains to be done.

My particular focus was provoked in a session I attended at the SBL annual meeting two years ago. In introducing a session on feminism and postcolonialism, a moderator reported that she had been asked why the session had been organized around a book on African women’s voices published a few years earlier (i.e., not hot off the press), to which her response had been “because nobody seems to be listening.” The authors experienced their claim to ownership of the text, at least within the guild, as being discounted or overridden. Attempting to listen to global feminist voices within biblical studies has been a key theme of my own work, but devel-

¹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship,” *JBL* 107 (1988): 3–17; reprinted in *Presidential Voices: The Society of Biblical Literature in the Twentieth Century* (ed. Harold W. Attridge and James C. VanderKam; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 217–31; subsequent references are to the reprint edition. For a more extensive and updated treatment of her perspective, see her volume *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

² Schüssler Fiorenza, “Ethics of Biblical Interpretation,” 230–31.

oping viable modes of engagement between white Euro-Atlantic feminists and global feminism remains a challenge. That challenge, however, is but one component of the much larger question of how we all as scholars engage one another over a wide range of dividing lines, since we all claim texts as our own through our acts of interpretation.

I will first approach the question of “Whose text?” and competing claims to ownership in a wide-sweeping overview and then turn more specifically to feminist postcolonial interpretation as a particular example. Before launching into the overview, let me note that I will use more “I” language and anecdotal material than is usual for the presidential address. I want the style of my speaking to reflect my perspective that being more self-consciously contextual, more public rather than less so about the personal in our work, is critically important to a way forward in any mutual engagement across dividing lines.

I. “WHOSE TEXT?” IN OUR DESCRIPTIVE ANALYTICAL WORK

The question “Whose text?” as I am posing it has two principal dimensions: first, who claims a particular text as important; and, second, how are competing interpretive claims to be negotiated when more than one group has a stake in the same text. I find it helpful to remember that the question, thus conceived, has actually been with us for a long time in our traditional descriptive and analytical research. In the field of text criticism, for example, the degree of differences among manuscript families, as well as evidence of intentional scribal emendations, has led to theories of different schools or centers with different manuscript choices. Here interpretive claims are expressed through variations in the text itself, and scholars ask what kind of contextual hermeneutical and identity claims may lie behind the different manuscript traditions.

Studies of canon formation whether of the TNK or the NT are a second, well-established locus of exploration of “Whose text?” The emphasis on Judaisms (plural) of the Second Temple period and beyond, and our knowledge of the many extant Christian writings as well as those that were lost to us and not canonized, provide rich fodder for exploring ancient ownership claims to different texts and competing interpretive claims for texts held in common.

A third example of our scholarly historical inquiry into “Whose text?” is found in the recent heightened interest in the history of interpretation. Biblical scholars are increasingly collaborating across disciplines of history, music, and art to discover more about the religious-social-political-cultural contexts that have affected interpreters’ selection of and perspective on texts over the centuries. The good questions that we have tried to ask and answer over many decades about the ancient biblical texts in their own compositional contexts are now being asked about subsequent readers and readings.

In short, the question “Whose text is it?” with its attendant issues of contested identities and hermeneutics is scarcely new to our discipline. But the question has seemed safe so long as it applied to the past and so long as the question of why we ourselves as scholars choose to study particular texts or ask certain questions or reach certain conclusions was not part of the discussion. However heated the debates about the ancient world of the texts and their meanings within that world of the past (and we know those debates can be fiery), the conversations about our own places in relation to our work turn out to be more difficult.

II. “WHOSE TEXT?” THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE

Recent discussion of our own places in relation to our work is multidimensional; I have organized it under five headings, each of which represents a major fault line across which issues of ownership (“Whose text?”) are in tension. These five are academic methods; religious/secular interpretation; Jewish and Christian/other readers; sociocultural traditions, including cultural, ethnic, gender, economic, and political dimensions; and “ordinary”/“expert” readers. This schema is obviously porous, and after commenting on each of the five I will hasten to reiterate the inevitability of their interaction.

The first set of divisions concerns academic methods. None of us would even pretend to be able to control all of the subspecialties of method in biblical scholarship, even if we restricted ourselves to a particular smaller corpus of the material such as pentateuchal narrative or Johannine literature. I include this category not because we are unwilling to recognize the expertise of others, but to raise the question of how we value that expertise. To the extent that hermeneutics says to textual criticism, “I have no need of you,” or vice versa, a fault line is made visible. To the extent that those engaged in comparative study of ancient texts speak of literary critics as too lazy to learn cognate languages, or literary critics disparage or ignore possible illumination from extrabiblical sources, a fault line is present. Perhaps the widest fissure in method lies between those who are committed to focusing on identity hermeneutics and those who are disinterested in this broad approach or continue to question its academic value.

My second category, the division between religious and secular interpretation, is sometimes also described as between confessional and nonconfessional or between devotional and academic interpretation.³ Whatever the nomenclature, the

³ For confessional/nonconfessional language, see, e.g., Philip Davies, *Whose Bible Is It Anyway?* (2nd ed.; London: T&T Clark, 2004), esp. 13–15, 33–35. For devotional/academic language, see, e.g., “The Bible and Public Schools,” in *Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Schools* (ed. C. C. Haynes and O. Thomas; rev. ed.; Nashville: First Amendment Center, 2007), 121–33. Online: <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/PDF/FCGchapter>

central issue is how (and, for many people, whether) the text can be introduced, discussed, and interpreted in a manner that does not privilege the perspective of a particular religious or faith tradition. Our Society for many decades has sought to provide a forum for such a nonconfessional approach, and much of our work as a Society has been predicated upon the assumption that we can engage in such work. Here in the United States, we associate this fault line also with the controversies around teaching the Bible in our public (government-owned and funded) schools. The SBL is currently cooperating in efforts to help local communities discern what the academic study of the Bible apart from contemporary religious claims might look like in local high school classrooms. Yet we are aware that many of us are adherents of Judaism or Christianity, and that a great many of the college undergraduate teaching posts in our field in the United States exist because students (mostly Christian in this case) want or are required by their church-related institutions to learn something “academic” about the basic document of the Judeo-Christian tradition.⁴ How this divide between religious and secular interpretation should be maintained and whether that is even possible are matters of continuing and sometimes heated debate.

My third broad category takes note of the fault line between those who acknowledge biblical texts as a part of their own faith heritage and those who study biblical texts out of curiosity about a religious tradition other than their own and often from a culture other than their own. Here I have in mind particularly the divide between Jewish and Christian (but predominantly Christian in terms both of numbers and of cultural influence) interpreters, on the one hand, and readers from other cultural and religious traditions, on the other; I include the question of how biblical interpretation may be informed by comparative work growing out of other living religious traditions and their texts. What place do readers from other cultural and religious traditions have at the table of biblical interpretation? And what responsibility do Christian and Jewish biblical scholars have to become more engaged with other religious texts and traditions? The matter is of theoretical scholarly significance and also of practical import, here in North America, but especially in a global perspective. Scholars as diverse as Wayne Meeks and R. S. Sugirtharajah have identified this as a key frontier, urging its importance upon Western biblical scholars.⁵ Those of us who teach in North America and Europe are challenged

11.pdf (accessed Nov. 11, 2007). The SBL is one of many signatories to the position statement on this topic printed in this chapter.

⁴ See American Academy of Religion, “AAR Survey of Undergraduate Religion and Theology Programs in the U.S. and Canada: Further Data Analysis: Summary of Results” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the AAR, Atlanta, Nov. 24, 2003). Online: http://aarweb.org/Programs/Department_Services/Survey_Data/Undergraduate/dataanalysis-20040309.pdf (accessed Oct. 25, 2007).

⁵ See Wayne A. Meeks, “Why Study the New Testament?” *NTS* 51 (2005): 168–69. In numerous publications, R. S. Sugirtharajah has urged the importance of comparing selected biblical

to prepare our students to engage rather than to ignore this divide. This fault line points us in two directions: it points back to my previous consideration of the debate about a secular or nonconfessional academic discourse; it also points ahead to my fourth category of sociocultural divides. Religious differences could be theoretically erased under the former category or incorporated into the latter; I have lifted out religious pluralism for separate notice to underscore the need for more sustained attention to other sacred texts and to perspectives from other religious traditions.

My fourth fault line, then, is sociocultural, which may include diverse religious traditions but in which I am focusing, as I indicated earlier, on the broad range of racial-ethnic, political, economic, gender, and cultural differences among interpreters and the resulting multifaceted tensions in claims to “ownership” of texts. If the dividing lines internal to my first four broad categories were complex, here they become even more so, since each interpreter, whether using one academic method or another, whether working in a religious or a secular context, whether working with his or her own faith documents or other texts, participates in this whole range of dimensions of sociocultural experience. The issue is not whether any one of us participates, but how that reality impacts our work. Among those who speak and write from a perspective of identity hermeneutics, fragmentation of perspectives is on the increase. No longer, for example, are categories such as Asian voices or even Southeast Asian voices adequate, but groups and individuals from different subcultures of many regions are distinguishing themselves. It is my own judgment that such fragmentation is a positive sign, even as it was a positive first step when black or liberation or white feminist interpretations (categories that we now recognize as quite broad) initially arose some decades ago. Ever smaller and more focused groups are considering their identity in relation to and/or in resistance to the text, seeking to make their own meaning and challenging what could become hegemonic interpretations even by their nearer neighbors. In the face of such fragmentation, however, constructive mutual engagement becomes even more difficult to achieve.

The fifth and last fault line that I would identify is that between so-called ordinary and so-called expert readers. The more usual discussion of this fault line has identified “expert” readers as those such as ourselves (members of the SBL) who have special academic training in the guild’s methods of approaching biblical texts. Depending on our particular training we may rightly be viewed as more expert than ordinary interpreters in our various technical specializations. Gerald West, Musimbi Kanyoro, Hans de Wit, and others remind us, however, that all readers bring some sort of expertise to the text.⁶ Thus, this divide may be better identified

themes and motifs to materials from Asian religious texts (see, e.g., *Postcolonial Reconfigurations: An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology* [St. Louis: Chalice, 2003], 107–8).

⁶ See, most recently, Gerald West, ed., *Reading Other-Wise: Socially Engaged Biblical Schol-*

as between academic and nonacademic readers, recognizing that even with such a label there will be a continuum. Nonacademic or ordinary readers bring their own life experiences to the text, offering expertise often very different from ours, and the experiences of these nonacademic, sometimes nonliterate, readers may open up remarkably fresh avenues of analysis. Vincent Wimbush's important Institute for Signifying Scriptures project is drawing our attention to the significance of this approach to expertise in all cultural settings, including North America.⁷

As I indicated at the outset, these five categories of fault lines are heuristic and reflective of major threads of discussion in recent literature about the character of biblical scholarship for the twenty-first century. I expect that most of you have found your own resonance with the question of "Whose text?" primarily in one or two of the categories, although the interpenetration of the categories should be apparent.

In the face of this complexity it is a natural temptation for each of us to proceed with doing whatever interests us without worrying much about these fault lines. I say "for each of us," but I think that temptation, such as it is, is mostly for those of us who find ourselves by reason of birth and circumstance in relatively more privileged positions as part of the white Eurocentric academy. For many others in our midst, however, the struggle to find a venue for their work, and the struggle to have it taken seriously, is part and parcel of their academic life. It is their experience that, again in the words of the moderator of that panel two years ago, "Nobody seems to be listening." The effort to gain recognition for their claim to ownership of the text remains an uphill battle.

III. A POSSIBLE WAY AHEAD

In acknowledgment of that uphill battle, I want to focus now on possibilities for recognizing the claim to ownership of those who are not part of the privileged majority, for having their interpretive voices taken seriously, with special attention to the global context of our work.

Our Society has taken structural steps in the right direction. Subsidies for bringing international scholars and specifically international women scholars to the North American annual meeting are to be applauded, although six to eight

ars Reading with Their Local Communities (SemeiaSt 62; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), esp. 1–3; Musimbi R. Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002); Hans de Wit et al., eds., *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004). West emphasizes that among "ordinary readers" his particular interest is in "the poor, the working class, and the marginalized" (p. 2), and de Wit offers an extended discussion of the category of "ordinary reader" (pp. 5–19).

⁷ See the Institute's Web site at <http://iss.cgu.edu/about/index.htm> (accessed Nov. 12, 2007).

guests among several thousand attendees hardly form a critical mass. Our international meetings are potentially another step, insofar as they do not simply export Eurocentric presentations to holiday locations, but rather enable scholars from outside the West to participate in more significant numbers. We have begun a project of making scholarly papers in native languages from across the world available electronically on our Web site, with the selection process conducted by local or regional associations of biblical scholars in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Beyond such structural steps, what strategies may be helpful?

In approaching this question I recall one of my most difficult evenings in Asia. The women who joined me for conversation had agreed to be present as a courtesy to my host, but they were nonetheless quite frank. "We are tired of Westerners coming to tell us what to think," they said, and then added, "we are equally tired of being asked what we think. We need dialogue, a two-way conversation." On that we were agreed, but how to proceed eluded us. What might enable us to meet, as Kwok Pui-lan eloquently puts it, as equal subjects for sharing of our treasures?⁸ In my subsequent experience, focusing conversation around a particular text has proved to be one helpful way of addressing such an impasse. With that in mind, let me sharpen my question of "Whose text?" Thus far in asking "Whose text is it?" I have spoken about "text/texts" rather generically. It is my conviction, however, that we can often proceed further toward mutual engagement if we focus the question of "Whose text?" not on the Bible as a whole (whatever its boundaries in various religious traditions) but rather on individual texts, or on much smaller bodies of texts that introduce particular characters or political or sociocultural topics.

IV. A TEST PROBE

Given this perspective on the value of a focal text, I turn now to offering a brief postcolonial reflection on a particular biblical story and character. As postcolonial feminists from among the colonized are calling for women like myself (and men as well) to engage their work and their approach,⁹ I as a first-world, white feminist can perhaps best make clear my sense of my place by describing myself as a "pro-postcolonial feminist" (on the analogy of a "pro-woman man" entering into white feminist biblical interpretation). I emphasize that I am making no claim to "having it right" in what follows. My goal is to model publicly the risk that I invite

⁸ For the image of shared treasures, see Kwok Pui-lan, "Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World," in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah; new ed.; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 303; reprinted from *Semeia* 47 (1989).

⁹ See, e.g., Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 127, 167; Musa W. Dube, "Toward a Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretation," in *Reading the Bible as Women: Perspectives from Asia, Africa, and Latin America* (ed. P. A. Bird et al.; *Semeia* 78; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 20, 22.

other first-world interpreters to take: recognizing global ownership of biblical texts by attempting to engage biblical interpretation across difficult dividing lines.

I have chosen for my test probe Judges 4–5, the story of Deborah and Barak, Sisera and Jael, chapters that have received extensive treatment by numerous white first-world feminists. Although postcolonial feminist writers have produced already an impressive body of work on selected biblical texts, most notably within the OT on the story of Rahab and on the story of Ruth, Naomi, and Orpah, I have not yet uncovered publications from a specifically postcolonial perspective on Judges 4–5.¹⁰ It is possible that this apparent lacuna is not a reality, since the sources included in database searches are still limited largely to North Atlantic languages and publications (yet another sign, of course, of the hegemonic interpretive context I am highlighting here).¹¹ There may well be publications in Asia, Africa, or Latin America that do deal with Judges 4–5 from a postcolonial perspective, and there may be various forms of oral communication to which access is even more difficult.

My choice of this text and of the figure of Jael in particular may be an awkward selection. For me as a white, first-world feminist to offer any postcolonial reflection before others have spoken may seem out of place. Yet I choose this text because of a prior experience that does place it for me squarely in this domain, with the hope that postcolonial feminist writers will choose to explore it further in response and correction. That experience, as I have recounted elsewhere, took place some years ago in discussing this story with Korean women church leaders.¹² I expressed the discomfort that I and many women peers in North America experience with Jael's murder of Sisera, to which the response came swiftly: "your place as a U.S. woman

¹⁰ On Ruth, see, e.g., Musa W. Dube, "The Unpublished Letters of Orpah to Ruth," in *The Feminist Companion to the Bible*, vol. 3, *A Feminist Companion to Ruth* (ed. Athalya Brenner; FCB; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 145–50; eadem, "Divining Ruth for International Relations," in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (ed. Musa W. Dube; Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship 2; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 179–95; Laura E. Donaldson, "The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes," in *A Feminist Companion to Ruth*, 130–44; on Rahab, see Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), esp. 76–80, 121–24.

Uriah Y. Kim considers the significance of postcolonial interpretation for Judges generally but without focused attention on chs. 4–5 ("Who Is the Other in the Book of Judges," in *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* [ed. Gale A. Yee; 2nd ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007], 161–82).

¹¹ Hans de Wit observes the tendency to overlook Spanish-language scholarship in his comparison of Latin American and non-Latin American treatments of Judges 4 ("Leyendo con Yael," in *Los caminos inexhaustibles de la Palabra: Las relecturas creativas en la Biblia y de la Biblia: Homenaje de colegas y discipulos a J. Severino Croatto* [ed. Guillermo Hansen; Buenos Aires: Lumen-ISEDET, 2000], 11–66).

¹² See my "Deborah, Jael, and Sisera's Mother: Reading the Scriptures in Cross-Cultural Context," in *Women, Gender, and Christian Community* (ed. Jane Dempsey Douglass and James F. Kay; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 13–22.

is with Sisera's mother, waiting to count the spoils." In retrospect this was surely a postcolonial (or neocolonial economic) reading and challenge, although none of us marked it as such at the time. I note also, and not insignificantly, that this observation was offered by a so-called ordinary (i.e., nonacademic) reader. She was not a biblical scholar; she had never to my knowledge studied Hebrew. But she was certainly an expert in relating the text to her life and the political context of our two nations.

With her response in mind, let me explore further how I imagine the story might be viewed through a postcolonial lens. My hermeneutical strategy, following a range of postcolonial writers, will be to explore possible points of contact between biblical actors and contemporary readers, even as did my Korean conversation partner in pointing me to Sisera's mother. This approach resonates, for instance, with the concept of "story field" as a locus for negotiating readings as proposed by postcolonial interpreter Laura Donaldson.¹³ I choose it also because it fits closely with the way in which many "ordinary" (i.e., nonacademic) readers typically engage the Bible, thus providing an important bridge of contact across that divide.

I begin by stepping back from the character of Jael in order to problematize the place of Israel relative to the Canaanites. To be sure, these chapters, like the OT generally, view the situation through Israelite eyes. But the situation in Judges is not exactly the same as the picture in the book of Joshua, where the invading Israelites are taking control of Canaanite land. In Joshua, the experience of the Canaanites provides a connecting point of identity for contemporary peoples whose land has been or is being taken over by outside forces. As Robert Alan Warrior, among others, has emphasized, this is the Joshua narrative's portrayal of Israel and Canaan, regardless of what happened historically, and this has been the portrayal used as warrant by land-grabbing colonizing powers.¹⁴ The scenario in Judges, however, is potentially more complicated. From the narrowest viewpoint on our narrative, it is now the Israelites who are under the oppressive hand of the Canaanites, without regard for how the Israelites came to be present. At this narrative level, a contemporary subject people might read this story in a liberationist mode alongside the exodus story and identify with the Israelites in their effort to throw off an oppressive yoke, even if those same readers have identified themselves with the Canaanites in the context of Joshua.¹⁵

¹³ Laura E. Donaldson, *Decolonizing Feminisms: Race, Gender, and Empire-Building* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 139.

¹⁴ Robert Alan Warrior, "A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians," in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah; 3rd ed.; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 235-41; reprinted from *Christianity and Crisis* 49 (1989).

¹⁵ De Wit finds examples of such liberationist readings of Judges in Latin American sources ("Leyendo con Yael").

Such an initial view of Judges 4–5 is immediately complicated, however, by the theological framing of the text, since it is Israel's deity who has allowed Israel's oppression, and it is Israel's deity who will accomplish Israel's deliverance. Does this theological stance inevitably make Israel actually the dominant cultural and political power in the story? I would propose that this is not necessarily the case; the story can still be read as a story of a weak Israel rejecting the temptation to participate in the Canaanites' religious-cultural hegemony, to which they have thus far succumbed, and trying to stake out their own sociocultural as well as physical space. On the other hand, we know enough of modern colonial history to see how readily the story of Judges 4–5 can be read from the perspective of Israel's dominance, all the more so as the theological framing ties the themes of Judges back to Joshua. The image in Judges is still one of recent arrivals, now pictured as a weaker/small group, trying to establish themselves in the midst of powerful but despised native inhabitants, inhabitants who have temporarily, but only temporarily, overrun the intruding outsiders. In such a reading, the colonized are again the Canaanites. Parallels are legion to modern stories of "settlers" who described themselves as "beleaguered," and to original inhabitants who have resented and resisted their presence.

Thus far I have suggested that it might be possible for contemporary postcolonial subjects to identify with either of the two sides in the conflict, depending on what level of the narrative and what points of contact are selected. The corollary is that those like myself who live on the side of Empire, of the colonizers, historically and/or at the present moment, must consider our own place.¹⁶ On my first, narrower level of reading, we may find ourselves as Canaanites, as my Korean respondent had powerfully pointed out. At the second level, however, we will find ourselves instead as Israelites, participating in a sociopolitical and even religious community that imagines itself as rightly called to the role of colonizer even while experiencing a temporary setback. I suspect that for those of us who are a part of Empire yet seek to resist its impulse this latter identification with Israel is more difficult. To be a Canaanite in this story, for me to be Sisera's mother, means to be in the wrong: reading with the grain of the text, the Canaanites are in the wrong, and the connection is straightforward. However, to identify myself as an Israelite in this story while maintaining a postcolonial lens requires first that as a colonizer I view Israel's weak and overrun position nonetheless as one of Empire, already a difficult mental step for a relatively privileged first-world reader to hold on to, and second

¹⁶ Postcolonial scholars have varying ways of distinguishing between imperialism and colonialism, as well as neocolonialism; see, e.g., Dube, "Toward a Post-Colonial Feminist Interpretation," 15; R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 16–17. None of these concepts, of course, is precisely parallel either culturally or geopolitically to the situation of the Israelites and Canaanites as portrayed in Joshua-Judges. The issues of control of land and resources, emphasis on cultural distinctiveness, and regarding the other as inferior are features shared by the biblical narrative and imperial/colonial impulses.

that I must choose whether and how to resist that identity for the sake of the Canaanites. As one who is immersed in the Western Judeo-Christian faith tradition, the mental gymnastics of standing within yet against ancient Israel as it seeks to defeat Jabin and Sisera are complex, to say the least.

These potential connecting points are subject to even further complication if we ask after ancient Israel's own possible perspectives on the story and how Canaan may have been a cipher for imperial powers for some ancient hearers. If we undertake an experiment in historical imagination, overhearing the story late in the monarchy in the era of Judah's King Josiah, we find Judah as a small blip on the world scene dominated first by the Assyrian Empire but soon by the rising Babylonians.¹⁷ Perhaps, as Judah dreams of some degree of independence from Mesopotamian might and Egyptian pressure, we can imagine the story of Deborah and Barak as a warrant for Josiah's mysterious decision to go to battle against Pharaoh Neco at Megiddo. A people and leader who have recently turned afresh toward devotion to יהוה, at least as the narrator of 2 Kings portrays them, seek to throw off a foreign yoke. This time, however, the battle ends in quite the opposite way with the death of Judah's leader rather than defeat of the enemy, and Judah's status as puppet or pawn of imperial powers remains unchanged.

If we move ahead in our imagination into the Persian era, when Judah is officially part of another empire, a standing army is no more, and prophecy has taken a quite different shape, perhaps the story becomes colonized Judah's nostalgia for bygone days, or perhaps a call to repentance in hopes of restoring former glory, or perhaps even part of the Persian colonizer's strategy for maintaining order¹⁸—if Judah's deity has not sent another Deborah in these latter days, then submission to Persia/Canaan must be the intent of Judah's god. Each of these readings equates ancient empires with Canaan, but now there is no deliverance for the subjugated. Even if the story wants to portray Israel as the powerful center, even if it is resistance literature rather than a tool of Empire, it is preserved in a community that experiences its life as colonized and without serious prospect of change. Attention to historical context seems to make a pipe dream of the hope implicit in an anti-colonial reading. In the absence of prospects for change, Empire becomes more

¹⁷ For an important treatment of Josiah and 2 Kings from a postcolonial perspective, see Uriah Y. Kim, *Decolonizing Josiah: Toward a Postcolonial Reading of the Deuteronomistic History* (Bible in the Modern World 5; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005). For a more abbreviated interpretation of Jael, along with Rahab and Ruth, from the perspective of colonized Judah, see my "Postcolonial Perspectives on Premonarchic Women," in *To Break Every Yoke: Essays in Honor of Marvin L. Chaney* (ed. Robert B. Coote and Norman K. Gottwald; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 192–203.

¹⁸ For an approach suggesting that some biblical texts functioned to support the interest of the Persians, see Jon Berquist, "Postcolonialism and Imperial Motives for Canonization," *Semeia* 75 (1996): 15–36; idem, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), esp. 131–36.

secure, and the effort to resist complicity with Empire, whether from within or from without, becomes correspondingly more difficult.

Thus far my proposed patterns of reading have bypassed Jael and the Kenites; I turn now to the question of Jael's social location. Jael is presented to us in the usual rendering as the wife of Heber the Kenite, who is not Israelite yet by tradition would be affiliated with Israel as a descendant of Moses' father-in-law. Yet Heber had separated himself from his kinfolk, moved his tent into Canaanite territory, and "made peace" (4:17) with the king of the Canaanite forces. Heber (who never personally appears in the story) is thus a borderland figure, both geographically and ethnically, one who cannot belong fully to either side, who has eschewed his ties even to his own liminal Kenite group, and who apparently has chosen to align himself with the seemingly dominant side (Canaan) rather than with the kinship side (Israel).¹⁹ On this reading of the text, we are told nothing explicitly about the ethnicity of Jael or of her personal loyalties, despite the assumption of many commentators that she is a loyal Kenite. It is conceivable that Heber had married outside his clan, either an Israelite woman or a Canaanite woman.²⁰

Some scholars have argued that the word *Heber* is not a proper name but a common noun.²¹ In this case Jael would be presented to us clearly as a Kenite, but with no reference to her marital status. For my purpose here, however, the central point is that none of these readings suggests that Jael as a woman had any part in the decision to encamp away from other Kenites or from Israel or to join in alliance with Canaan. The text does not tell us anything about her loyalties. No matter which ethnicity we presume for Jael, Israel's victory in battle and Sisera's appearance at her tent force her to make a choice.

Although white feminist interpretations of Jael are enormously diverse, a number tend to interpret her killing of Sisera as an act of self-defense. Themes include Jael's defense of herself against a male intruder into women's private space (especially in the poem) and thus against a threat of rape, and Jael's defense of herself against being discovered harboring the enemy (especially in the prose account), and thus against a threat of death.²² This "defense" or implicit justification of Jael's

¹⁹ Baruch Halpern has suggested that the Kenites may have been working for Israel, despite appearances ("Sisera and Old Lace: The Case of Deborah and Yael," in *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988], 85–87).

²⁰ If we imagine Jael as a Canaanite, we might align her intertextually with Rahab; if we imagine her as Israelite, connections with Judith of much later tradition might be more apt. For comparison of these other characters, see Musa W. Dube, "Rahab Says Hello to Judith: A Decolonizing Feminist Reading," in *Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza* (ed. Fernando Segovia; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 54–72.

²¹ See Susan Ackerman, "What If Judges Had Been Written by a Philistine?" *BibInt* 8 (2000): 37–38, and bibliography there.

²² For the former, see Ann Wansbrough, "Blessed Be Jael among Women: For She Challenged Rape," in *Women of Courage: Asian Women Reading the Bible* (ed. Lee Oo Chung et al.;

need to kill Sisera for her own survival serves to defuse some readers' discomfort (even revulsion) with the tent-peg scene, but it also can lead to downplaying the poem's explicit celebration of Jael's action—"most blessed of women be Jael" (5:24). The "defense" theme also stands in contrast to oral reports of women from other cultures who compare Jael to women in their own traditions who are celebrated for assassination of enemy leaders in times of military crisis.²³

As my Korean conversation partner suggested, women who champion the overthrow of oppressors can identify with Jael. Given Jael's complex liminal status and its possible permutations, however, I would covet more conversation about Jael with women reflecting on their varied positions as postcolonial subjects. Imagining us gathered around a table, I hope we could consider questions such as these: Stepping back from the specific circumstance of war and murder/assassination, how might Jael's liminality illuminate ways in which you find yourself caught between colonizer and colonized because of gender structures in either or both cultures? Where does Jael's lack of agency in finding herself placed between Israel and Canaan resonate with you as an individual or with the circumstances of your community as colonized? When may your circumstances have meant that you have found no home on either side? In the moment of crisis, does Jael's action represent genuine agency or only forced choice? Does Jael's predicament mirror choices you have been forced to make, and what have been the possibilities and costs of refusing to choose? Is there reason to resist identifying with Jael simply because she takes sides so quickly? Does her action simply reinforce and reinscribe the construction of "absolute, incompatible contrasts"²⁴ that postcolonial analysis seeks to dismantle?

And what of myself, or of other first-world white feminists? Is our only place with Sisera's mother? I hesitate to consider any additional option without postcolonial conversation partners at the ready to correct my blind spots. I have asked myself whether I dare to claim any place with Jael as a woman whose tent inevitably lies between the camps. I can interpret my catalogue of questions about Jael in a way that allows me to speak of my own liminal place in a kyriarchal world.²⁵ But the risk of taking over (colonizing) yet again a space that may better belong rightly to my colonized sisters seems great. So for now I ask instead whether there is another place of liminality that could arise from committing oneself to hearing and advo-

Seoul: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, 1992), 101–22; for the latter, see Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5," *JAAR* 58 (1990): 396.

²³ I heard such comparisons from several groups of Asian women; Gale A. Yee also reports such a comparison ("By the Hand of a Woman: The Metaphor of the Woman Warrior in Judges 4," *Semeia* 61 [1993]: 106).

²⁴ See John J. Collins, "The Zeal of Phinehas: The Bible and the Legitimation of Violence," *JBL* 122 (2003): 18.

²⁵ The term "kyriarchy," coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, gathers up the multiple and intertwined hierarchies of a world of Empire.

cating for the Jaels of the postcolonial world. Might there be an unnamed woman of Israel, or of Canaan, depending on where a first-world white woman places herself in the story, an unnamed woman who supports Jael in some small way by resisting the power and the strategies of her own people? Such a midrash I would like to explore with the guidance of my postcolonial sisters.

Whose story is it? Whose text is it? I have claimed this particular text for myself in the hope of giving it away, and in the hope of receiving eventually a gift from other interpreters in a mutual sharing of treasures.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let me quickly pull the zoom lens back from postcolonial feminism and this one text to the wide angle on the question of “Whose text?” with which I began. Each year as I greet new students entering my institution’s Ph.D. program, I begin with that phrase more traditionally used only at the conferral of the doctoral degree, “Welcome to the company of scholars.” In those remarks, my primary emphasis is on the word “company.” The challenge I put to them, and now to you is this: Acknowledging our need for the gifts and contributions of sister and brother scholars, let us not decide so easily that the contribution of the “other” does not count as worthy scholarship, whether because we perceive its method and data as too politically motivated (read “postcolonial”) or alternatively too old fashioned and even hegemonic (read “Eurocentric or patriarchal”) or whether because we perceive the work as nonacademic (read “too much reporting on ‘ordinary’ readers”), or whether because we reject the method as too vague or too psychological or too whatever else causes any of us to “other” that approach and its practitioners.

Each text really does belong at least potentially to all of us, and to people across the world who may never know anything of the work we do in these halls. But text by text, each text will belong to different ones of us in vastly different and sometimes painfully different ways. Given this reality, let us not be content with a state of static tolerance in which we simply ignore one another. Rather, let us be on the move toward that ethical calling to become a company of scholars who rejoice in working with and learning from those least like ourselves and who show special generosity of spirit to those whose struggle to be heard is more difficult than our own.