

○ GALE YEE'S *POOR BANISHED CHILDREN OF EVE*

Judith E McKinlay, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, Otago University. PO Box 56, Dunedin. New Zealand

This is a book review of *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* by Gale A. Yee. (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2003. ISBN: 0-8006-3457-8)

Yee's interest in this work is the way in which the female figure in certain conflict situations is employed as 'the incarnation of moral evil, sin, devastation, and death in the Hebrew Bible' in a politics of gender that 'interconnects with the issues of race/ethnicity, class, and colonialism' (p.1). While her theoretical basis is necessarily drawn from a range of disciplines – and indeed the interdisciplinary nature of the theoretical background is a major strength of this work, with a comprehensive list of bibliographical references in the footnotes – she chooses as her primary methodological tool a materialist Marxist analysis. Further strengths of the book are the introductory chapters where her discussions of ideological and social scientific criticisms are models of clarity, to be recommended for students making their first entries into these fields. Although the major interest is in the male use of the female figure, Yee begins by setting this in the context of the male/female world of Israel, acknowledging 'the manipulative, disruptive, and covert exercises of women's informal power' (p. 48). I liked her use of 'resistance' as 'a diagnostic of power' (p. 49), which she adopts from the work of Lila Abu-Lughod on Bedouin women. It is always a moot point whether and to what extent one can draw parallels between contemporary and ancient societies, but Yee is aware of this tension. Stating that '[f]eminist ethnographies of Middle Eastern societies can help us imagine the female world about which the biblical text is mostly silent', she continues in the next sentence to provide the qualifier: '[I]f analogies ... are correct ...' (p.54), which allows the observation that '[g]ender segregation can afford women opportunities for veiled acts of autonomy from and defiance of male authority ... (and) allows women to become arbiters of their own morality' (pp. 55–56), to apply equally to women's lives in Israel.

The investigation of the 'evil woman' begins in chapter four. The decision to employ a Marxist materialist approach means that Yee has to supply an historical context for the texts that she is exploring, even if this is not an exact chronological pin-pointing. Consequently Eve in Genesis 2-3 is discussed in relation to the move to a 'native-tributary mode of production typical of the preexilic monarchy' (p. 60). In view of the present and continuing uncertainty surrounding the dating of the Pentateuchal sources, albeit acknowledged by Yee, this is a little problematic. While the scenario she provides is persuasive, I suggest that it has to remain speculative. While the garden of Eden *may* represent 'the civilized order of the state' and 'a primordial time when there was no rift between the king and his people' (p. 69), this is by no means the only possible referent. The conclusion that the purpose of the pivotal prohibition in Genesis 2 reflects the ideology of the ruling elite, namely, to keep the peasant in a state of ignorance (pp. 69–70), flows logically from the scenario Yee presents but that alone does not guarantee its historical coherency. Reading the poetic passage against the background of the monarchy, rather than, for example, of the early highland settlement time proposed by Meyers, provides a quite different understanding of the man's punishment of hard labour, which is now to be seen 'in contrast to the relative leisure of the state' (p. 75). This is a strongly argued class relations reading,

although Yee sees Eve employed to express ‘the theological breach between the man and his God’ as well as ‘the political breach between the peasant and his King’ (p. 78). While she is also employed to shift ‘the point of conflict’ from the public to the private domain, in being set as subordinate to her husband, this also serves a political agenda, namely ‘to stress the nuclear family’ as against the extended lineage and other power authorities that could threaten the monarchical state (p. 78). This ideological reading is nicely nuanced.

The focus moves to faithless Israel in the chapter on Hosea’s use of the evil woman. Here again I found myself wondering whether it was the need to read against a carefully delineated context that was responsible for Yee’s move away from her previous reading of Hosea as a highly redacted work, for here she is assuming one coherent work, largely comprising original eighth century Hosean oracles. Once again Yee’s contribution lies in her conviction that to understand the imagery one must also understand a material context in which Israelite religion, politics and foreign affairs were so closely interwoven as to be inseparable. She provides a strong case, although there are areas where one wonders whether a hermeneutic of suspicion might have provided a different reading of the situation. I have long puzzled over the apparent fact that Hosea did not explicitly target Asherah worship and wonder over Yee’s suggestion that this was because it ‘did not intrude in royal matters of public politics in the northern kingdom’ (p. 97). Assuming, with Yee, that Asherah worship was still a factor in Israel, I am still wondering about this, especially given the association of Jezebel with Jezreel that could be presumed to have brought Asherah to the mind of the text’s audience. Did Asherah worship really have no political ramifications in the eighth century? It is a small point, but I am still wondering. A more significant question is whether the close fit that Yee presupposes between text and historical reality tends to deny any possibility that the ideology may be that of a later period, employing its early religious tradition(s), such as those of Elijah, for its own ends. Yee’s overall point, however, is that the eighth century Hosea is reacting ‘against an oppressive mode of production’, a point which she argues has not been given its due weight by previous scholarship whose interpretations tend to have ‘isolated Israelite cult from state interests.’ This meant, for example, that the crucial connections of Gomer’s lovers with Israel’s foreign nations ‘with whom the elite are economically and politically entangled’ were not sufficiently appreciated. Such a change of focus is welcome, but necessarily glosses over others; studies on Hosea’s use of imagery have multiplied in recent years, and it would have been interesting, for example, to have had some engagement with the highly nuanced readings of Yvonne Sherwood here.

Chapter six explores the infamous passages in Ezekiel 16 and 23. Here Yee employs a feminist postcolonial lens, neatly describing Ezekiel 23 as a ‘gendered narrative ... originat[ing] from a masculine historical memory, an emasculated humiliation, and remasculinized hope for a restored priestly hegemony’ (p. 112). But Yee uncovers a further textual strategy: this is a postcolonial lens with a built-in trauma component, so that ‘chapter 23 is Ezekiel’s attempt to work through and integrate his traumatic experience of colonization, conquest, and exile’ (p. 120). It is in keeping with Yee’s politically nuanced materialist reading that her concern is not so much with Ezekiel the traumatized individual, as with Ezekiel as representative of a traumatized male priestly elite, whose interpretation of that experience was to ‘become normative in the formation of the Hebrew canon’ (p. 121). The parallels between Ezekiel’s descriptions of Oholibah’s punishments and Ashurnasirpal’s historical capture of a city are well cited to illustrate the trauma. Yee describes Ezekiel’s trope of woman as an ‘act of transgendered self-blame’ (pp. 122, 132), but suggests

that he avoids blame 'by ducking behind a woman's body' (pp. 122, 134) and so 'acquits himself of any institutional complicity in the actions of his male class' (p. 132). Is this a case of to blame or not to blame? But certainly the result is a text where 'male conflicts between victor and vanquished are played out on the bodies of women' (p. 122). Bringing these chapters into the current academic discourse of postcolonialism, with its 'triangulation of gender, race/ethnicity, and class', is a significant contribution.

With the 'Other Woman' of Proverbs 1-9, the historical context can be assumed with some assurance. Here too Yee's concern is with the mode of production and the imperial and economic policies during the span of Persian colonialism. The urban elite background of the Proverbs scribes has long been recognized but the Marxist observation that they are assuming, if not inventing, a 'myth of the classless society' makes an even sharper point. Yee makes an interesting connection between the native-tributary mode of production established by Solomon, to whom the book of Proverbs is attributed, and the foreign-tributary mode, with elements of the former, operating during this Persian period, which puts the supposed authorship into high ideological relief. Interpretations both of the Wisdom figure and of the *'issa zara* are many and varied as Yee acknowledges; as symbolic figures they are necessarily multivalent, and indeed may well have functioned in different ways from their beginnings. Yee's materialist interpretation, however, sets them firmly within the context of the postexilic marriage issue, which is nicely summed up in the statement 'the elites practiced exogamy to obtain the land and endogamy to keep it' (p. 145). Against this background, Yee proposes that the personifications both of Woman Wisdom and the Other Woman were male constructions specifically related to marriage choices. So Wisdom is the 'correct' or 'acceptable' woman to marry – namely, a woman from a wealthy *golab* family ... This financially sought-after *insider* woman is juxtaposed with a financially attractive *outsider* woman ... Sexually and financially desirable she will nonetheless bring death ...' This adds a further interpretive possibility which coheres well with its historical context, and will need to be included in future engagements with these 'awesome' (p. 135) figures. My caveat is that this needs to be seen as one, and only one, reading or dimension of these figures; their awesomeness is surely in part due to the fact that they may be viewed in different lights from many angles. Tying them so closely to a father's marriage advice brings them a little too solidly down to one patch of earth.

The conclusion emphasises the ethical concern that undergirds this study: the 'urgency for an ethics of reading the biblical text that confronts injustice and tyranny in its many obvious (and not-so-obvious) forms' (p. 164). As a study that is attempting to provide such an ethic, this is indeed timely. There is also, however, a polemic at work. Yee reiterates throughout a call to resist 'any privileging of gender as the fundamental category of analysis' (p. 164). Yet, as she herself indicates, gender analysis is not a disengaged enquiry but requires an investigation into the thick web of ideological assumptions and provocations that are part of the life of texts. Her own readerly investigation directed towards the material, classist and colonialist interweavings is a significant reminder of this.