

Mitzi J. Smith and Michael Willett Newheart. *We are All Witnesses: Toward Disruptive and Creative Biblical Interpretation*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2023. 166 pages. \$35.

We Are All Witnesses is an introductory text on biblical interpretation intended for college and seminary students. With an emphasis on how the context of the biblical writer shapes what is written and the context of the reader shapes interpretation, the authors disrupt the history of white, supposedly objective ways of doing interpretation that ignore the plight of the oppressed. The goal of the book is “to model how to engage in critical justice-oriented disruptive interpretation that places the testimonies of the vulnerable of our world, and our own testimonies, in conversation with the testimonies in biblical texts” (8).

In the Prologue, both authors offer their “Testimony about Testimony” (1). Mitzi J. Smith reflects on her experiences in the Black Seventh-Day Adventist and African Methodist Episcopal traditions and points to places where testimony happens in the wider Black Community (e.g., rap music). Michael Willett Newheart shares experiences of testimony as a White male in various Baptist contexts and the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). Both describe testimony as “storytelling that is constructive and disruptive, as well as subjective” (11).

Chapter 2, “Context is Everything,” spends two pages explaining “context” in familiar terms. The authors then offer testimonies about their “personal contexts as leaders,” “theological trajectories,” and “hermeneutical journeys” (22). Newheart shows us a “Conversion Testimony” he wrote nearly fifty years ago and interprets it, revealing its original context and the different context from which he reads it now. Smith speaks about the influence of her mother, who was raised to love patriarchy but managed to avoid worshipping it or the biblical interpretation and church that grew out of it (40). Smith also speaks about the challenges of being a Black woman in the academy who refuses to perform or center whiteness. Both testimonies show us by concrete example the difference the reader's context makes in interpretation.

Chapter 3 claims that “the Bible is testimony” (50). The complexity of that testimony includes the Bible’s male authors and the largely cisgender male scholars who translate (interpret) that testimony into English. Diverse people are, in some contexts, invited to the translating table; however, they are expected to use White methods at that table. Consequently, their presence and concerns do not impact the translation. “Power determines whose testimonies are shared and heard, how or if they are constructed, shared, and heard, when and where, and who hears and shares them” (51). In response, the authors encourage readers to do their own responsible translating if possible and to employ a “deconstructive and/or oppositional justice-focused hermeneutical perspective,” including a “counter-testimony” whenever the wellbeing of all is not being promoted (58).

In chapter 4, Smith walks students through a process of interpreting Luke 13:10-17 (Jesus healing a woman with a spinal deformity). She acknowledges her womanist and African American approach and names that her reasons for choosing this text are connected to being “raised by a Black mother confined to a wheelchair” (66). She asks questions about how chronic illness in mothers impacts children and communities and recommends related resources for students to read before turning to the biblical text. In her textual turn, much would be familiar to those trained in biblical exegesis, including an emphasis on saving the commentaries for the end so as not to surrender one’s “interpretive agency” (84).

Chapter 5 walks us through Newheart’s analysis of John 18:33-38 (Jesus’s conversation with Pilate). He names his background as a John scholar and current context as an interim pastor framing his present interests as pastoral. After his playful interpretation of the text, he puts it in

conversation with his congregation's mission statement and asks questions about it. Chapters Six through Nine take similar approaches to the previous two with different texts.

Many chapters include poems and artwork by the authors. Readers are sometimes invited to pause their reading to watch a short comedy clip or to stand and read a poem aloud. The authors encourage artistic engagement and creativity. They also speak directly to readers by asking many questions, inviting students to ask their own, and pointing to many resources inside and far outside biblical studies.

As the authors state, "context is everything." I can imagine this text being a breath of fresh air for progressive members of marginalized groups and allies. It would serve as a more challenging entry point for students coming from more moderate and conservative contexts who might raise concerns about biblical authority, eisegesis, and God's role in interpretation. The disruption this would cause is, in some ways, precisely the authors' point. The professor would simply need to be ready to navigate that conflict with compassion.

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