

Avaren Ipsen. *Sex Working and the Bible*. London: Equinox, 2005. 237 pp. [isbn: 13:978-1-84553-333-5]

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This book is not about the historical practice of prostitution and the way understanding that might inform our reading of the Bible. Rather, this book is a powerful example of cultural/ideological criticism from the standpoint of North American sex workers (p. 6). Ipsen's work emerges from a Bible study group formed with ten sex workers all of whom "have an elaborated standpoint and politic" (p6), that is they are also sex work activists. While this makes sense with regards to Ipsen's methodology it does mean that the resulting readings emerge from sex workers who view sex work as a choice and who are engaged in political advocacy. This possibly creates a disconnection with the experience of many contemporary sex workers (those working under compulsion and those without political agency) and certainly creates a disconnection with the experiences of sex workers in ancient times, most of whom were slaves (something Ipsen is aware of, p. 126).

Ipsen's primary targets are liberation and feminist hermeneutics against which she applies Marcella Althaus-Reid's decency/indecency binary. She argues that both discourses have allowed a patriarchal "decency" to exclude sex workers from their liberative programs. A significant second target is the tendency of biblical scholarship to overlook the place of prostitutes in early Christian history (pp. 5–6), to dichotomise the spiritual and the sexual (pp. 43, 159), and to "utterly separate whore metaphors from real prostitutes" (p. 172). Her criticisms are telling and cogently argued throughout the book.

After an introduction (ch. 1) and methodology chapter (ch. 2) the book treats four Biblical texts: Rahab and the Spies (Josh 2; 6:22–25), Solomon and the two prostitutes (1 Kgs 3:16–28), the woman who anointed Jesus/ Mary Magdalene (John 12:1–8; Luke 7:36–50; Mark 14:3–9; Matt 26:6–13), and the whore of Babylon (Rev 17:1–19:10). A concluding chapter suggests amendments to liberation hermeneutics and an appendix contains the discussion questions used in the reading group.

Each exegetical chapter begins with a review of scholarly interpretations of the passage. Ipsen then takes the insights gleaned from the reading group and makes historical and theological arguments for their validity as readings. Ipsen intends "to show how a sex worker standpoint can crack open these texts in a new way" (p. 12). Ipsen then analyses the differences between the readings of the scholars and the sex workers. Finally, a commentary on each passage is produced from verbatim extracts of the reading group. She certainly succeeds in her aim. In particular, the sex workers' readings of the story of Rahab and of Solomon and the two prostitutes clearly expose the extent to which traditional biblical scholarship has sanitised or ignored the presence and implications of the sex workers in these texts.

This is a book that will be hard to read for many people. There is no prudishness or polite academic censoring of the material. Each discussion reveals much about the realities of sex work, especially in relation to their own negative experiences of religious and legal authorities (e.g. pp. 45, 76, 115). The sex workers'

own words are particularly humanising. One recounts how Christian family members were unhappy about her going to a Bible study group (p. 150). This was both illustrative of “decency” in action (the assumption that prostitutes were not clean enough read the Bible) and of the exclusion sex workers experience from the Christian community. Such experiences inevitably lead to responses to the texts which many Christians will find diametrically opposed to their own.

For some of us this is surely where the value of a book like this is found. Although some important insights are produced, most of the scriptural interpretations are not convincing in a historical-critical respect. Indeed, Ipsen takes care to state that she is not claiming to be producing “one correct reading” (p. 7) and neither does the group consistently produce a homogenised reading. Ipsen does not hide the group’s frequently divergent interpretations. Rather the value is in sensitising us to the way that our cherished sacred texts can be received by those with radically different experiences and assumptions to us.

Ipsen argues that many of the injustices that sex workers experience stem from biblical and religious foundations. These readings, then, also invite the church to critique its own teaching and practice around the politics of sex work (legalisation, etc) and its ministry (if any) to sex workers. If our texts can be read in a way that is harmful to sex workers, which Ipsen’s work demonstrates they can, then at the very least we have a responsibility to mitigate that harm when those texts are used in Christian worship and study. It is a powerful reminder that the words and stories of scripture can be interpreted in more ways than one, and that if we are engaging with people from different cultures and life experiences we cannot assume the meaning we intend is the one someone else will receive.

Ipsen writes clearly and presents the sex workers’ voices sympathetically. While the targets of this work are particularly feminist and liberation hermeneutics and biblical scholarship in general, it will also be invaluable for those churches and Christian ministries who connect with sex workers in their communities. Ipsen does not give us a Christian reading of the Bible, but a reading by politically-conscious excluded and oppressed sex workers. In doing so we are challenged about our own blindness to and assumptions regarding sex workers in both the Bible and in our communities. Few other books can offer such an education.

William C. Gaventa, *Disability and Spirituality: Recovering Wholeness*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2018. (338 pp.) [ISBN: 9781481302791]

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William Gaventa’s *Disability and Spirituality: Recovering Wholeness* is a compelling blend of interdisciplinary engagement, robust scholarship and insightful pastoral commentary. Having spent his life in chaplaincy and advocacy roles with disabled people, their families and support workers, Gaventa’s book reflects his commitment to building understanding across the health and human services and navigating fresh ways of reflecting on the lived experience of disabled persons. Whilst not exclusive in nature, there is an underlying