



Review of Avaren Ipsen, *Sex Working and the Bible*.
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In *Sex Working and the Bible*, activist and biblical studies scholar Avaren Ipsen sets about the important task of bringing biblical scholarship into conversation with the political concerns of sex worker activists. The discussion group with whom Ipsen worked consisted of a core group of ten women whose ages ranged from their twenties to thirties and whose economic, educational, religious, sexual, and racial social locations were widely varied. Her project's interdisciplinary commitment spans not only biblical studies and political activism but also significantly relies on the hermeneutic of indecency from queer theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid and on standpoint theories from feminist scholars such as sociologist Dorothy E. Smith and philosophers Nancy Hartsock and Sandra Harding.

By recounting her ethnographic — participant observer — work in which she discussed biblical texts with a sex worker activist group — Sex Worker Outreach Project (hereinafter cited as «SWOP») — in Berkeley, California, Ipsen highlights several critical correctives that the practice of reading with sex workers can bring to biblical scholarship about prostitution. After laying out the scope of her project — its commitment to feminist and postcolonial ideological and structural critique — in her introductory chapter, the second chapter moves to elaborate the history and activism of SWOP as well her book's feminist and liberationist methodological orientation. Chapters three through six compare the analyses of SWOP members with biblical scholarship on scriptural texts that contain themes of prostitution. The final chapter ties together the theological, political, and economic criticisms and new horizons of interpretation that emerge from SWOP's readings that expose the decenting tendencies of various scholarly interpretations of biblical texts on prostitution.

Following in the line of other feminist and queer liberation theologians, Ipsen calls into question the liberation theology's option for the poor for its failure to take seriously the marginalization of sex workers or prostitutes — who are often a significant subclass of poor women. Crucially, Ipsen describes the tension in Gustavo Gutierrez's work where he asserts the church's option *for* the poor that privileges a spiritual poverty — acting *on*



behalf of others — while simultaneously wanting to allow the experience of those «from below» to challenge the church's own implication in structures of oppression. Ipsen asks, «[W]hat might be the limits on the Church's reception of the critiques of religious and cultural ideological justifications of poverty that are offered by poor women in Latin America?» (p. 17). Her work identifies various problematic treatments of prostitution within biblical scholarship and theology to be such a limitation in need of critique «from below» as such interpretations depend on and uphold structures of «decency» or «respectability» that stigmatize sex workers or women who are deemed to be «whores.»

The most significant constructive and critical proposals of Ipsen's work are found in her four chapters comparing biblical scholarship to the insights of the SWOP discussion group on biblical texts that thematize prostitution: the story of Rehab, the two prostitutes before Solomon, four accounts of women who anointed Jesus, and the whore of Babylon. Ipsen structures these four chapters by first considering — primarily descriptive but with some analysis — key concerns and interpretations from relevant areas of biblical scholarship, especially feminist, liberationist, materialist, and postcolonial analysis. She then offers the SWOP standpoints — including points of disagreement or debate between SWOP members — on the texts, followed by an analysis of the major points of contention or parallel between the biblical scholars' and SWOP's perspectives. She concludes each chapter with a collage-style recounting of the biblical story in question by interweaving quotations from the SWOP discussion. While creative, the collage retelling can be difficult to follow and often decontextualizes the quotations of SWOP from the conversations in which they were embedded. Ipsen's accounts of the SWOP discussions are most effective when she situates, for example, the numerous incisive remarks of SWOP members about the intersections between gender, poverty, and sex work in conversation with a particular materialist reading (for example, p. 107) or when she provides larger block quotes of SWOP members to give nuance and context to their contributions.



Through Ipsen's practice of reading texts with SWOP, she notably practices what Althaus-Reid calls «indecenting,» or «denouncing the real hard-core sexual nature» of systematic theology and the Bible «while announcing gender and sexual deconstructions which could carry precious meaning in our lives in relation to the sacred» (Althaus-Reid, 2000: 93). For example, Ipsen cites Scarlot who rejects the «bully» God of Joshua's army against Jericho (p. 79). Or, Ipsen details a conversation discussing the textual violence and misogyny of Revelation where Veronica notes how sex workers are «blamed for everything, for whatever is going on: serial killers, drugs, crime, bad neighbourhoods, drug problems, moral decay of the family, husbands cheating on their wives; that's all laid at the feet of the whore,» and Gayle responds that this is the kind of «scapegoating» that sex workers frequently face (p. 180). Other SWOP members note how the text about the whore of Babylon in Revelation is used to legitimize violence against prostitutes (p. 181). In this way, Ipsen and the SWOP discussion group reveal the multiple forms of violence operative within biblical and theological texts against prostitutes and challenge biblical scholars and theologians to confront these violences in their own work.

The themes of sacrifice and martyrdom run throughout Ipsen's work, but her reflection upon sacrifice remains inconsistent and lacks adequate analysis. Ipsen is attentive to and cites various feminist critiques of substitutionary theories of atonement as symptomatic of scapegoating in Christian theology. However, she argues that it is precisely the failure to see the problematic aspects of this doctrine that prevent people from «comparing Jesus and prostitutes as scapegoats,» rather than implying that such a critical stance toward substitutionary sacrifice would cause people to be wary of such a comparison in the first place (p. 195).

Moreover, although Ipsen delineates how some SWOP members note the problematic demand for mothers — such as the two prostitutes mothers who appeal to Solomon — to be completely self-sacrificial, Ipsen retains self-sacrifice as principal to the definition of a prostitute (p. 100). She goes as far as to affirm «the primary SWOP definition of a prostitute as one who sacrifices to sustain her family» (pp. 108-109, see also p. 103). Ipsen's lack of sustained analysis of these conflicting narratives and her



privileging of the narrative of sex workers as fundamentally sacrificial risks discursive violence in her own analysis by valorizing and normativizing self-sacrifice for sex workers.

Overall, Ipsen's work serves as an exemplary intervention into the field of biblical studies to challenge biblical scholarship to reconsider prostitution in terms of its political and economic positioning within society. Ipsen reminds us, «What prostitutes urge us to see is that if the exploitation is to end, sexual decency and the economic system it supports needs to be questioned» (p. 116). Her work emphasizes the importance of considering how the social stigmatization of sex workers serves to obfuscate the deeper systemic political problems of «the economic social hierarchy of in/decenty» (p. 210). Ipsen's dialectical ethnomethodology can serve as a foundation for further scholarship into the concerns she and the SWOP discussion group unmasked in their biblical interpretations.

Bibliographic Reference

Althaus-Reid, Marcella (2000). *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics*. New York, NY: Routledge.

