

Review of Jione Havea, Margaret Aymer, and Steed Vernyl Davidson (eds.), *Island, Islanders and the Bible: RumInations Semeia Studies 77*. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015

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If readers are seeking a clear example of contextual, cultural, and postcolonial biblical criticism, *Island, Islanders and the Bible: RumInations* offers a compelling reflection on themes and texts from assorted island perspectives. In the introduction, Jione Havea, Margaret Aymer, and Steed Vernyl Davidson cast a broad net, bringing readers into island space with island keywords, metaphorical contemplations of island experiences, and fresh proposals for future studies. Centre/periphery space is troubled as the reader is compelled to rethink each “hermeneutical thing” of biblical scholarship, even those considered axiomatic.

From their constitutive descriptions of the roominess of larger island geographies (Aotearoa and Australia) to their review of socio-economic and socio-cultural challenges facing island countries like the Western Isles of Scotland, Tonga, and ancient Tyre, Havea, Aymer, and Davidson put to rest any misgivings about the centrality of missiological critique in their work; it is anything but superficial and strictly imaginative. Within these pages a dynamic foray into the “reality of islands” is on full display (11-12). In three waves, *Islands, Islanders and the Bible* accomplishes its intended goal while actively engaging the notion of an exoticized, romantic, or exploited island. What adds to the credibility of this text is that it does not naively take a utopian, apologetic, or non-self-critical tone. While the contributors write from insider or near-insider perspectives, due to factors of rootedness and uprootedness via migration, assimilation, and (in some cases) political domination and marginalization, the writers know that a purely “indigenous discourse” is impossible (6). Rather, theirs is a “view outside of the island” and, as such, “a reactionary discourse” among internationals (6). They refuse binary thinking and adroitly navigate the in-between spaces of island hybridity. As thinkers who understand (albeit with varying degrees of limitation and vulnerability) both insider and outsider spaces, each author critically converges the watercourses of island hermeneutics with biblical criticism in talanoa (storytelling) style (147). The end result is a book that challenges the classically-trained biblical interpreter with new lenses through which to experience the Bible.

RumInations has three parts: an initial set of essays followed by two sets of responses. The “First Wave” cascades in nine essays. These chapters examine the “roominess” of the interstitial space between insular islands and the fale-‘o-kāinga (or mutual reciprocity and respect) shared with land, sea, and mainland economics and resources (60). The First Wave challenges the mythic fantasies popularly

associated with island geographies as remote, virgin, underpopulated, and morally unaccountable. Instead, the book creates “transpatial realities” that more properly inform the reader of the physical environment of island life and, moreover, how island perspectives contribute to each author's biblical hermeneutic (4).

The “Second Wave” is articulated with a sense of accountability to the “I” in *RumInations*. In these chapters, no stone is to be left unturned. In order to safeguard against a parochial discourse arising from any notion of academic monopoly or exploitation of the island space, the Second Wave shuffles the first nine chapters and distributes them for commentary by Roland Boer (of Australia), Aliou C. Niang (of French Senegalese Island, Gorée) and Andrew Mein (of Scotland and the British Isles).

Boer poses an important question to the editors: “Is the colonial narrative one of the relations between continent and island, or is it also between islands and islands?” (166). Next, Boer enters the Caribbean islands with Steed Vernyl Davidson whose arenology (study of sand) shows readers the importance of sand as a key feature of islandness for both natives and tourists. Sand inhabits two spaces. For Davidson, it is sifted and shifted through the inbound and outbound movement of waves. For Boer, it is also an essential building material for constructing foundations. Davidson’s exegetical section instructs the reader on the manner of shiftiness, insularity, vulnerability, and possibility, which, like sand, can be explored in Genesis 38 and Daniel 8. I find Boer’s interest in positioning Davidson’s readings in terms of the narrative capital of thalassophobia (the fear of the sea) quite insightful. How can thalassophobia feature in how we understand the economically and politically sifted and shifted Tamar, who is an unstable “wife and mother to dead brothers” (169)?

The work accomplished in Nāsili Vaka’uta’s definition of Fale-‘o-Kāinga carries much weight for the editors’ opening chapter. Boer is right in describing Vaka’uta’s chapter as “an oceanic manifesto” that is clearly and sharply delineated with persistent militancy (170). The idea of reciprocity and economic relations of mutuality plague Vaka’uta in terms of the similarities in dependencies of Oceania islanders to each other and the dependencies that lie between Oceania biblical interpreters and the predominantly “Eurocentric and colonial” biblical scholarship guild (62). Finally, J. Richard Middleton’s “Island in the Sun” overtures a creation theology that does not collapse into prosperity entitlements or capitalist abuse of the land. I found his island hermeneutic very compelling with regard to how he articulates practical ecological approaches that might be explored in an ecclesiastical setting.

Next, Niang muses upon Aymer’s interpretation of Robert Nesta Marley’s “Rastaman Chant” and Louise Bennett-Coverly’s well-known message of cultural accommodation. She calls Jamaicans to proudly embrace regular usage of Jamaican English (or patois). John Berry’s work on four-fold migration strategies carries much currency for Aymer’s development of these themes into an island hermeneutic on John of Patmos in Revelation. Theorizing from Samia Mehrez’s culturo-linguistic layering and Homi Bhabha’s hybridity, Mosese Ma’ilo contemplates the science of translation in the Samoan Bible. Tied to his concerns

about how Jesus is constructed as Tamaalepō (“child of the dark”) or Mary’s pregnancy as tofale (a premarital, fatherless pregnancy), Ma’ilo hails for the legitimization of translations inspired within the indigenous vernacular and cultural variableness of the Samoan culture. Niang defends this thesis, yet identifies it further as an example of a linguistically-hybrid Bible (181).

Responding to Althea Spencer Miller’s musings on Glissant’s construction of creolization and a personal encounter with African-style drummers at a Methodist function in Jamaica, Niang challenges Miller’s point that “creolized singing is a verbalization of Caribbean sacredness ... a Caribbean version of disestablishmentarianism” (89). While Miller’s point is well taken, an interplay of these ideas with biblical texts like Lamentations and Psalms mark places in which her themes of “displacement, suffering, alienation, resistance, and innovation” might be applied (182).

As a European islander, Andrew Mein offers a British perspective. He takes up Havea’s talanoa concept of stories born from island experiences, but adds that such stories might rightly be conceived as islands in themselves, connected within an archipelago of similar stories that cascade together giving definition to indigenous culture. Aware that Britain’s political expediency was supplied chiefly by its access to the sea, Mein comments further on Japan’s imperialistic history in response to Hisako Kinukawa. Kinukawa elucidates the story of the Syro-Phoenician woman found in the Gospel of Mark. Like Britain and Japan, with access to the sea, the ancient island of Tyre was associated with political might, enough to oppress its maritime neighbours. Kinukawa argues from a postcolonial mindset that Jesus’s response to the Syro-Phoenician woman was appropriate when examined through the visage of a people oppressed by their elite colonizers. Yet because of this woman’s economic state, Mein’s critique of Kinukawa’s thesis is well heard. This begging woman might after all have more multidimensional layering than that of an oppressor (188).

From here, Grant Macaskill’s chapter on Scottish Gaelic psalmody continues to eviscerate stereotypes about domineering British superpowers. His theology of place carries the sounds of the insular crofting culture located in the Outer Hebrides. Dependency on place and dependency on God are themes he sees specifically amalgamated within Gaelic culture. But Mein asks, while Macaskill’s Highlanders seems humble and wholesome, does the Iolaire tragedy betray innocence? Now memorialized for the tragic way they lost their lives, had not these same men just then received military discharge from their posts as imperial instruments of war (193)?

Finally, the Third Wave cascades ruminations from Elaine M. Wainwright (of Australia), Daniel Smith-Christopher (of New Zealand), and Randall C. Bailey (who muses from the perspective of an African American, berthed in the remote island of biblical scholarship). Each of these responses offer further illumination of the first nine chapters. Wainwright captures a kaleidoscope of Aymer’s sensitivities to location, Ma’ilo’s lens of hybridity, and Kinukawa’s pessimism about virgin island space. Smith-Christopher acknowledges that each island articulation of Miller, Macaskill, and Middleton are not a *fait accompli* (211). But do Smith-

Christopher's broad monochromatic strokes overreach his point with, "After all— islanders know the sea as mainlanders know the roads" (209)? Does this statement put at risk our now learned sense of island variegation? Bailey ends with sound advice for Davidson, Vaka'uta, and Havea, and more ostensibly, to all the writers of this anthology. Using Audrey Lorde as his foothold, Bailey invites the authors to engage island biblical interpretation not only from the more accepted points of discourse (postcolonialism, feminism, ideology), but from other more contentious perspectives of oppression and marginalization such as gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation (222-3).

This book is both complex in the ideologies it addresses as well as the manner in which its *RumInations* cascade. It is a refreshing addition to conversations of space/place, empire, ecology, political theology, diaspora, migration ... and islands, islanders, and the Bible.



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