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Chapter 10

Marianne Moyaert, “Wrestling with scripture and avoiding violence in the university classroom”

Introduction

This is a discussion guide for Marianne Moyaert’s chapter in Julia Snyder and Daniel H. Weiss (eds.) (2021). *Scripture and Violence*. London: Routledge.

Summary of Chapter

Marianne Moyaert describes her experiences discussing scripture in the university classroom. She describes some university students whose approach to scripture leads them to engage in “conversational and relational violence” (p. 124) against people who read scriptures differently, aggressively dismissing any readings that depart from their own sense of what the text “means.” She reports that in her classroom, some such students are religious and claim to be defending the revelatory status of scripture, while others set themselves up as guardians of critical science. In both sets of students, Moyaert finds a tendency to assume that scripture “speaks for itself” and a failure to recognize “the dynamic interaction between reader and text” (p. 127), in which “the context from which one reads matters” (p. 131). To counteract these dynamics, she has her students discuss scriptural texts with others from a range of backgrounds and perspectives. She writes, “The prolonged practice of reading scripture with others enables students to begin to realize how their context impacts how they read a particular textual portion, makes them more conscious of the fact that there are various reading strategies that can be applied to scripture, and helps them grow in their ability to empathize with others” (p. 135). This also helps them become less aggressive toward other readers.

Understanding the Argument

As you read Moyaert’s chapter, answer the following questions. These questions are designed to help you understand her argument.

1. Moyaert speaks of “a dynamic that manifests among some of my students: the tendency to approach scriptural texts with a closed-off interpretive stance, immediately dismissing any readings that depart from one’s own sense of what the text ‘means’” (p. 127). She describes two forms of this tendency: “a closed-off religious stance” and “a closed-off historical-critical stance.”

- a. What does she mean by “closed-off religious stance” and “closed-off historical-critical stance”? What does she find problematic about these stances?
 - b. From Moyaert’s perspective, are all “religious” approaches to scripture problematic? All “academic” or “scientific” approaches?
2. Moyaert argues that “there are no ‘neutral’ or decontextualized readings, and if the (complex) location from which one reads is not consciously reckoned with, biases have a free hand” (p. 131). What does she mean by that?

Digging Deeper

After discussing questions 1-2 above, take some time to reflect more broadly on the following issues:

3. Moyaert asks her students to reflect on how their gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, cultural background, etc. shape the way they read scriptural texts (p. 132). As an example, read the passage from the Hebrew Bible printed below.

Genesis 21:9-19 (translation: New Revised Standard Version)

⁹ Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac.

¹⁰ So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son [i.e., Ishmael]; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.”

¹¹ The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son.

¹² But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. ¹³ As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.”

¹⁴ So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

¹⁵ When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶ Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept.

¹⁷ And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ¹⁸ Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.”

¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

After reading the passage from Genesis, answer some of the questions that Moyaert poses to her students:

- a. How do you think your individual social location or identity affects how you read this passage? Think about your gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, cultural background, nationality, age, life experiences, etc.
 - b. Where did you learn to read scripture as you do?
 - c. Reading often serves particular group interests and disregards other interests. Who benefits from your reading of the passage? Who might be damaged by it?
4. Moyaert has her students engage in a practice called Scriptural Reasoning, in which people from different religious backgrounds read and discuss scriptural passages together (pp. 134-136). If you discussed the passage in the previous exercise with other people – even if they were from the same religious tradition – answer some of Moyaert’s additional questions:
- a. What new insights did you develop from reading the scriptural text together with others?
 - b. Did the conversation challenge your understanding of the passage? How?
 - c. Did other people in your group offer interpretations that you found unacceptable? In what way?
 - d. Did other people in your group offer unexpected interpretations that you found appealing? In what sense?

Suggestions for Further Reading

- To learn more about “historical-critical,” feminist, and other approaches to scripture, see, e.g.:
 - o Sarah Shectman, “How Do Biblical Scholars Read the Hebrew Bible?” *Bible Odyssey* [online]. Available at: bibleodyssey.org/tools/bible-basics/how-do-biblical-scholars-read-the-hebrew-bible.
- To learn more about the practice of Scriptural Reasoning, see scripturalreasoning.org. This website is hosted by the Rose Castle Foundation, who can help you find or start a Scriptural Reasoning group in your own local area.