Book Review


Anne Elvey presents an unsettling account of the Magnificat (the subversive song of praise by Mary in the Gospel of Luke) in colonial Australia. Grounded in feminist and ecological approaches that Elvey has long championed, this book is part textual analysis, part poetry, part history, and altogether a challenging and evocative reflection on how biblical texts, and this song in particular, can operate at many levels in their historic contexts. Elvey chooses the Magnificat as the impetus text because of its ‘complex relation to the resistance of colonial, imperial logic’ (p. 10). She provokes a ‘reading trajectory’ to argue for a suitable post-colonial reading (p. 3). That reading, she postulates, might be a form of biblical interpretation that relies on conversation and creative engagements, opening it to a ‘counter-colonial ecological ethic on someone else’s Country’ (p. 4). To achieve this Elvey is informed by Kuan-Hsing Chen’s description of ‘method’ as a ‘deimperialising mode where contextualized experience becomes method’ (p. 6).

Elvey’s stated intention is to ‘re-read the Magnificat as an unsettling of the whiteness of reading’ in the hope of opening out a counter-colonial reading: one that is compassionate to Indigenous suffering (including via the misuse of this very text), and alert to contemporary ecological trauma (preface, n.p.). She rightly notes that settler academics have no place in recounting Indigenous experiences of trauma nor in retelling ancient stories. However, we do have a responsibility to consider them in our contemporary academic and social worlds and to listen for their wisdoms. Elvey attempts this balance in a book that both unsettles, subverts, and challenges. It is also a book of leaning in to hope, resilience and creative forms of protest: all of which Elvey explores in the focal text of the Magnificat.

The book comprises six chapters that first describe Elvey’s hermeneutic of ‘reading on country’, or an approach to engaging with biblical text that acknowledges and honours the tension of colonial interpolation
of text onto an ancient land that has sung its own songs for millennia before the arrival of the Bible. Elvey both raises the voices of Indigenous women in response, along with her own voice which intentionally listens to country and to those very women. She then provides an historical account of the Magnificat’s reception, uncovering some gems of newspaper-published poems and responding to them in her own poetry. The third chapter moves into an interrogation of race, species, gender and sexuality as they intersect with the text of the Magnificat and Mary’s own historical context, drawing on Luce Irigaray’s process of ‘mediating nature and culture’ to allow for fresh creative expressions of knowing (p. 90). ‘If the Magnificat is a song of protest in a woman’s voice under ancient empire’, she says, then ‘it should prompt in its readers a listening to contemporary women’s voices in the ongoing imperial, colonial system of invasion, and then allow such listening to speak back to interpretation of the biblical song’ (p. 91). Elvey interjects her own rereading of the hymn as a creative response to that intellectual work. Chapter 4 continues this deconstructing and reconstructing work via other poets, texts and icons.

The book makes an important shift in the final two chapters where Elvey intentionally listens to the song of birds through deep time. These are remarkable chapters where Elvey demonstrates her profound integration of ecology, biblical studies, and social theory, with her creative talent as poet. She enlists biosemiotics to articulate how all of life, characterized by a propensity to communicate, is involved in the telling of the gospel and the story of country. The songs of the birds in the book of Luke already predate the song of Mary by tens of millions of years, just as the songlines of this land we call Australia predate colonial texts and messages by countless millennia. Elvey’s reliance on songbirds to sing the textual message of subversion and hope is an extraordinary completion to this monograph and justifies the cover image of the magpie painted by Elizabeth Gould. In some ways, the book is Elvey’s own response to Kate Rigby’s argument for an interspecies response to ecological trauma and environmental catastrophe (p. 171).

Elvey is acutely aware of the tension of writing about a text that was complicit in the colonization and trauma of a settled land. Her acknowledgement of this tension also includes her recognition of her work being a partial reading; a more complete reading, she states, would be a collaborative reading, a conversation between First Nations readers and settlers (p. 174). Just as Marcia Langton has described ‘Indigenous Art’ as a settler construct (p. 175), Elvey recognizes that Indigenous engagement with biblical texts has been and will continue
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to be sometimes critical and resisting, sometimes otherwise. That engagement is best defined and described by Indigenous scholars and communities themselves (p. 175). What Elvey does here is a self-aware and counter-colonial re-reading of the Magnificat that is historically and culturally informed. It is an important contribution but also a beautiful, meditative read, engaging the mind and soul.

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