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Review of Avaren Ipsen, *Sex Working and the Bible*, London: Equinox 2009. 248 pages. ISBN 9781845533328 (hb) or 9781845533335 (pb).

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In this volume, biblical scholar Avaren Ipsen reads the Bible with ‘prostitutes’ using both a liberation and a feminist materialist framework. She reads it with ten activist sex workers from Berkeley, California, who have been actively involved in the decriminalization of sex work. Ipsen’s feminist framework draws from Marcella Althaus-Reid’s concept of decency-indecency, which refers to a patriarchal construction of sexual morality that controls behaviour that is admissible for women, silencing those women who are regarded as indecent. Ipsen highlights that both liberation and feminist frameworks have operated within the ‘decency’ patriarchal constructions of sexual morality, and hence failed to take an option for sex workers. The hermeneutical stance of the ‘option for the poor’, characteristic of liberation theology, has often shied away from an ‘option for sex workers’. Feminists’ biblical interpretations have often chosen to read from the position of abolitionists rather than from the decriminalization of sex work. Feminists’ investments into the patriarchal decency constructions is evident in the tendency to erase the sex worker from the biblical text through strategies that tend to: a) re-read sex workers as patriarchal constructions of stereotyping women, hence re-constructing them as ‘decent women’; b) deny their historical social status

as sex workers by reading them as literary metaphors; c) dismiss sex worker activists' demands for decriminalization as false consciousness and internalization of oppression. The overall impact of these feminist readings is to silence the agency of sex workers, to erase the historical presence of sex workers in sacred texts and to distance sex workers from the historical Jesus, primarily because feminist readers are heavily invested in the patriarchal construction of decency in sexual morality and family.

Consequently, the author chose to read with activist 'prostitutes' to exegete biblical stories featuring sex workers to retrieve their liberational presence in the Bible and to re-read the text for their decriminalization. 'The goal of the book is to provide a preferential option to sex workers, and emphasize sex worker liberation ... and to engage liberation oriented scholars in further dialogue for purposes of creating solidarity' (p 7). The method of reading with sex workers from a feminist materialist perspective is applied to four biblical stories featuring sex workers: Rahab (Joshua 2); Solomon's wisdom and the two sex workers (1 Kings 3,16-28); The anointing woman (John 12,1-8; Luke 7,36-50; Marc 14,3-9; Matthew 26,6-13) and the Whore of Babylon (Revelation 17,9-18). The reading goes as follows: a) reading of the text; b) review of scholarly interpretations; c) sex workers' engagement with both scholarly and biblical text; d) re-readings from sex workers' feminist and liberational standpoint. In conclusion the book suggests five hermeneutical steps for the amendments of liberation hermeneutics. Namely, 1) not to erase the identity of 'prostitutes' in the biblical text; 2) to make visible women's participation in the economy, whether paid or not, including sex work; 3) to question conventional mores of sexual decency that cloud vision when it comes to studies of sex work; 4) to try to identify with 'prostitutes' since the whore stigma affects and is used to control all women; 5) to get comfortable with the idea of sex workers as agents with ideas and strategies that are different from that of the 'non-prostitute' experts on 'prostitution.'

The book is a major contribution to the feminist liberation journey and agenda of reading for liberation. It is highly credited for bringing voices of sex workers to the fore in the feminist and liberational reading of the Bible, for encouraging more suspicion of the patriarchal sexual morality of in/decency and for constructing liberating sex worker readings of the Bible.

While the constructive side of the books seems much stronger, the deconstructive aspects of the books will require further conversations and research. First, it is notable that the sex worker activist readers of this project are based in California and argue that sex work is a choice. Is there a nation-based class even as to sex work? Are all sex workers the same

everywhere? The generalization and absolutization of sex workers into undifferentiated women by disregarding their class, race, ethnicity, age and nationality is problematic. Even though the identity of sex workers is differentiated, their differences do not inform the reading outcomes. The author has not seriously interrogated why sex work is a largely gendered industry, featuring more women than men. Second, while feminist readers are criticized for inadvertently subscribing to the patriarchal construction of in/decent sexual morality, it is not clear how sex workers construct a different family model that is not based on patriarchal ethics. The book presents sex workers as martyrs of the family, without spelling out how the family they sacrifice themselves for is different from the patriarchal one. Third, feminist readers have constantly underlined that reading a biblical text is reading a male book, hence the need to be suspicious of stories featuring any woman. This emphasis seems to be given up on in the bid to reconstruct. Fourth, while the book advocates a materialist feminist reading, it embraces damage reduction, which is not transformative but reformatory. Lastly, the book celebrates Rahab as the epitome of sex worker martyrs for family. However, it does not sufficiently take into account that it was in a war context that Rahab engaged in sex work: a context where, both in history and contemporary times, many women do not choose sex work but get forced into it in one way or another.

While this book undoubtedly makes an important contribution to a feminist hermeneutics of liberation, it is best regarded as an important resource for beginning worldwide conversations on sex work and religious circles. These conversations need to be both between feminist scholars and sex workers, and liberation scholars and sex workers. Sex workers, that is, of different nations, classes, races, ethnicities, and age groups.