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VERENA SUCHHART-KROLL (HG.)

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THEOLOGY: BIOGRAPHICAL – CONTEXTUAL –
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Inhalt

Marianne Heimbach-Steins, Judith Könemann, Verena Suchhart-Kroll

Einführung	7
Introduction	15
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12334-8	

TEIL 1:

BIOGRAPHIEN – INTERSEKTIONAL GELESEN / BIOGRAPHIES – FROM AN INTERSECTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Jadranka Rebeka Anić

Biographical Intersection of Religious, National, and Feminist Identity in Socialist and Post-socialist Croatia	25
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12335-5	

Tina Beattie

Running in Order to Stand Still. A Personal Reflection on the Challenges Facing Feminism in Times of Radical Change	39
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12336-2	

Ini Dorcas Dah

A Voice for the Voiceless. Developing Practical Theology from Personal Experience	53
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12337-9	

Ma. Maricel S. Ibita

‘What Does the Lord Require of You?’. Memorializing Miriamic Presence	71
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12338-6	

Adriaan van Klinken

Intimate Entanglements. Embodied, Ethnographic, and Theological Reflections on Intersectionality	91
DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12339-3	

TEIL 2:

INTERSEKTIONALITÄT – THEOLOGISCH GELESEN /
 INTERSECTIONALITY – FROM A THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Judith Gruber

A Rag Rug of ‘Petites Histoires’. Autobiography – Intersectionality –
 Theology 109
 DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12340-9

Carolin Hohmann

“The Personal is Political.” Approaches to an Intersectional Theology ... 123
 DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12341-6

Dina El Omari

Der politische Charakter des Theologietreibens am Beispiel des
 islamischen Feminismus in Ägypten 141
 DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12342-3

Gary Slater

The Border and the Map. Exploring Intersectionality’s Relevance for
 Christian Social Ethics 161
 DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12343-0

Égide Muziazia

Wahrnehmung und Interpretation von Körper und Körperlichkeit –
 in fremden kulturellen Kontexten 177
 DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12344-7

ERTRAG / SUMMARY

Marianne Heimbach-Steins, Judith Könemann

Theologie und Intersektionalität. Ein Resümee 199
 Theology and Intersectionality. A Résumé 221
 DOI 10.17438/978-3-402-12349-2

Die Autor*innen und Herausgeberinnen / The Authors and Editors ... 241

‘What Does the Lord Require of You?’ Memorializing Miriamic Presence¹

MA. MARICEL S. IBITA

Abstract

Dieser Beitrag führt aus, wie Biographie, Kontexte und Intersektionalität die Theologie beeinflussen und inwiefern die Theologie auch als Linse genutzt werden kann, um die eigene Biographie, Kontexte und intersektionale Identität kritisch zu bewerten, zu überprüfen und zu vergegenwärtigen. Der Beitrag untersucht diese Wechselbeziehung in drei Schritten. Zunächst schildert die Autorin ihren eigenen historischen Kontext: Sie wuchs in einer philippinischen Gesellschaft auf, die durch Jahre der Kolonialisierung und die anschließende Diktatur geprägt war. Die Autorin reflektiert diese spezifische sozioökonomisch-politische Situation, die ihr kritische Ansätze im Kampf gegen die Diktatur und – durch ihre Ausbildung als Krankenschwester – Kompetenzen zur detaillierten Analyse biblischer Texte lehrte. Vor diesem Hintergrund fragt sie, wie sich die soziale Verortung auf die eigene Identität als Theolog*in und die spezifische Art des Theologisierens auswirkt.

Der Beitrag unterstreicht die Relevanz, die spezifischen Sichtfelder und blinden Flecken der eigenen Identität zu kennen, und schlägt Möglichkeiten vor, wie der ergänzte pastorale Zyklus diese Perspektiven erweitern kann. Anschließend analysiert die Autorin die Menschen, Ereignisse, Orte und Konzepte, die ihre Art und Weise, Exegese und Theologie zu betreiben, beeinflusst haben. In diesem Teil geht sie der Frage nach, wie Theologie kontextbezogen, umfassend, integriert und transformativ betrieben werden kann, und nennt als Beispiel die Bedeutung der Erinnerung an die *zidqot JHWH* (Heilstaten des Herrn), *chesed* (unerschütterliche Liebe) und die Prophetin Miriam als Begleiterin. Die Autorin stellt dar,

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wie das eigene Theologisieren wiederum die eigene Intersektionalität, den Kontext und die Biographie auf dem Weg zu einem gerechteren, nachhaltigeren und inklusiveren Planeten nach der COVID-19-Pandemie formen kann, und liefert einige zeitgenössische Beispiele für ‚miriamische Präsenz‘, einschließlich ihres eigenen theologischen Engagements im Bereich der *sustainability hermeneutics and theology*.

This chapter expounds on how biography, context, and intersectionality influence theology and on how theology can also be a lens to critically evaluate, review, and envision one's biography, context, and intersectional identity. This chapter investigates this interrelation in three steps. First, the author gives an account of her own historical context, growing up in a Philippine society shaped by years of colonization followed by a dictatorship. She reflects on this specific socio-economic-political situation, which taught her critical approaches to fight for democracy against the backdrop of their history of dictatorship and, through her training as a nurse, the rigors of analyzing biblical texts in detail. Against this background, she further asks how social location affects one's identity as a theologian and their specific way of theologizing.

The chapter underlines the importance of knowing the lenses and blinders one has as aspects of their identity and suggests how the enhanced pastoral cycle complements them. The author then reexamines the people, events, places, and concepts that influenced her manner of doing exegesis and theology. This part includes the question of how theology can be done in a contextual, inclusive, integrated, and transformational manner, citing as example the importance of remembering the tzidqôṯ YHWH (saving acts of the LORD), hesed (steadfast love), and companionship with Miriam the prophet. In presenting how one's theologizing, in turn, forms their intersectionality, context, and biography towards a more just, sustainable, and inclusive postCOVID-19 pandemic planet, the author provides some contemporary discernible examples of Miriamic presence, including her own theological engagement in sustainability hermeneutics and theology.

Introduction

“What does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God”, a traditional translation of Micah 6:8, was my response to our retreat guide years ago on the bible verses that guided our lives. This text led me to my own method of biblical interpretation and theologizing and will steer this contribution on *Theology: Biographical – Contextual – Intersectional*. I posit that the trajectory of this theme runs in both directions. Biography, contexts, and intersectionality affect the identity and methods of the theologian. Likewise, one's theology impacts one's rereading of their biography, contexts, and intersectionality. I explore this interrelation by, first, explaining a bit about my own historical context and how social location affects my identity as a theologian and my way of theologizing. I then present the people, events, places, and concepts that shaped my exegesis and theology, focusing on remembering the *tzidqôṯ YHWH*, *hesed*,

and Miriam the prophet. Finally, I examine how theologizing influences one’s intersectionality, context, and biography, shaping it for a more just, sustainable, and inclusive postCOVID-19 pandemic planet accompanied by a discernible Miriamic presence.

1. The Golden Years? Justice in Critical Times

While one’s past is unchangeable, being able to embrace it makes a difference in the now and in the future. When I was born with my twin sister, Ma. Marilou or Malou, in 1972, the Philippines was undergoing geopolitical unrest after the Cold War (cf. Fraser 2013), an aftermath of three centuries of Spanish colonization followed by around fifty years of subjugation to the United States. Thus, our names have Spanish roots and refer to the newly-imposed martial law in the country that our grandfather wished to remember, unaware of the terrors to come. Inspired by the flower power and activism in the West, reformists intensified protests against Ferdinand Marcos’ fraud-ridden 1969 re-election. The dictator imposed militarization as a counter-insurgency measure, akin to America’s propaganda against communism and social unrest in third-world countries (cf. Reyes 2018: 461–462). While political persecution, disappearances, tortures, killings, ballooning internal-external debt, poverty, and hunger abounded in this dark period of Philippine history (cf. Coronel 2022: 60; 63–64), the Marcoses indulged in extravagance, junkets, and building landmark infrastructures (cf. Ricordeau 2015: 1). Marcos loyalists call this era the “golden years” (De Dios et al. 2021: 1). As children, we had to memorize the regime’s propaganda songs and its so-called achievements. Our choice of university course, nursing, and the opportunity to work abroad was shaped by the 1974 institutionalized labour export policy as Marcos’ regime was unable to provide local jobs and tended to extract more taxes from the various application fees and leaned on the foreign remittances only permitted through public banks (cf. Maca 2018: 5).

As impunity ruled, the 1983 assassination of opposition Senator Benigno Aquino, Jr. intensified the rallies against Marcos. The mobilizations led to the snap 1986 presidential election, which, because of the repeated massive electoral fraud, ignited the peaceful EDSA People Power that eventually ousted Marcos. However, the newly-installed government of Corazon Aquino, the widow of the slain senator, suffered a lot of attempted *coup d’états* instigated by military men hostile to civilian rule (cf. Reyes 2018: 468). As military coups marked our university days, our elders forbade us from joining political rallies for safety reasons.

We came to better understand the socio-economic-political situation of Marcos’ dictatorship during our graduate studies in theology at the Institute of Formation and Religious Studies (IFRS). The Association of Major Religious Superi-

ors in the Philippines (AMRSP), which fought against the regime, ran the IFRS. Here, we critically considered the Scriptures, Catholic social thoughts, and their pastoral implications. My master's thesis on the prophetic text of Micah 6:8 and its literary form, the *ryb* or lawsuit of the LORD against Israel (Micah 6:1–8), which recalls the Exodus and YHWH-Israel covenant was grounded on this theological formation. With Helen R. Graham, MM, an American missionary, exegete, and one of the founding members of the Task Force Detainees of the Philippines during Martial Law and the longest-serving IFRS professor as mentor, I realized that, when acting justly is inadequate, the Exodus narrative impels believers to proactively seek justice through biblical interpretation, advocacy, and protests. IFRS transformed my idea of who is and what it means to be a theologian. The books our parents bought us on the Bible, other nations' cultures and traditions, and the writings of our national hero, Jose Rizal, against the Spanish colonizers became seedbeds for our love for the Bible and narrative criticism. In addition, our proficiency in analyzing the pathophysiology of diseases and the independent-interdependent nursing actions equipped us with transferable key skills for the rigours and ethical demands of exegesis and theology. These various contexts intersected with my identity as a theologian and my way of theologizing.

In line with Christian identity formation and methods of doing theology, the study of Pollefeyt and Bouwens (cf. 2010) on empirically quantifying the Catholic identity of an institution facilitates the articulation of reflexivity. Their three theoretical models are the post-critical belief scale, the Melbourne scale, and the Victoria scale. The post-critical belief scale measures the what (belief and unbelief) and how (symbolic or literal) of regarding transcendence (cf. Pollefeyt/Bouwens 2010: 194–199). In this scale, *literal belief* is defined as an affirmative stance that assumes instant and direct access to the divine through words and rituals, so a literal believer may hold that the Exodus event really happened. *External critique* rejects transcendence and questions the immediacy of God through words or rituals. Thus, without the support of archaeological proof, the Exodus event is considered unbelievable. *Relativity* or *contingency awareness* approaches religiosity symbolically without believing in transcendent reality. Hence, Exodus becomes just one of the stories of the formation of nations. *Post-critical belief* holds that transcendent reality should be regarded as symbolic stories, rituals, etc. In turn, faith follows the critical interpretation of these symbols. Therefore, Exodus is perceived symbolically, and various interpretations are welcomed that deepen people's faith.

The Melbourne scale measures the Catholic identity options against cultural secularization, detraditionalization, and pluralization of faith traditions (cf. Pollefeyt/Bouwens 2010: 199–204). In the 1960s, when knowledge of the Christian salvation narrative was common, it was easier to relate it to cultural processes through *Christian Values Education* (CVE) as ethics provides a link be-

tween them. However, as secularization grows and faith traditions multiply, CVE loses efficacy because the values of justice and freedom are found in both Exodus and other cultures and religions. Thus, institutions can become *secularized* and critically reject Catholicism, for example, by challenging how women are regarded in the Church or how Miriam’s role in the Exodus is ignored in favour of Moses. Schools can also *reconfessionalize*, the narrow-minded defence of and promotion of Catholicism to the detriment of pluralism, for instance, by insisting that the status of women be based on the Bible and tradition. *Recontextualization* opts to deliberately create a dialogue between Christianity and culture, reinterpreting faith and scriptures today in order to make them relevant such as by tracing the societal treatment of women in Jewish-Christian beliefs, highlighting their roles, and demanding more involvement as was done in the Synod on Synodality report (cf. Wooden 2023).

The *Dialogue School Scale* measures personal-institutional Christian identity and solidarity with societal issues (cf. Pollefeyt/Bouwens 2010: 205–208). The *Colourless School* stands for minimal Christian identity and minimal solidarity so the role of women may not be a concern. The *Colourful School* shows minimal affinity with Christianity but maximum solidarity in relation to the feminist advocacies from various faith traditions. The *Monologue School* mindset displays maximum Christian identity but less solidarity, so the roles of women are based on the Jewish-Christian tradition but not necessarily with a feminist lens. The *Dialogue School* practices both maximum solidarity and Christian identity so that women’s concerns and roles in society and faith communities are advanced.

Self-reflection shows how I often embrace *post-critical belief*, *recontextualization*, and the *Dialogue School* in my way of theologizing through the pastoral cycle or the see-judge-act method popularized by Joseph Cardinal Cardijn (1882–1967). To “see” means to observe and immerse oneself in the lives of the community or one’s experience using the five senses and awareness of verbal-non-verbal cues (cf. Sands 2018: 3). To “judge” refers to individual-communal discernment towards more effective liberating actions (cf. Sands 2018: 4). Here, natural and social sciences dialogue with the Scriptures and Catholic social thought before a discerned “act” is done. This method is used in *Mater et Magistra* (John XXIII 1961: 236) and *Laudato Si* (Pope Francis 2015: 15). While Latin Americans added two more steps, “evaluate” and “celebrate”, Malou and I pair the last step with “ritualize” when limits or failures are experienced (cf. Talavera 2020; Ma. Marilou Ibita 2021: 49–50). Through an Asian lens, Pilario (2016: 83–92) insists that in the “judging” step, a (re)formulation of Christian dogma and pastoral structures must be reconsidered based on grassroots experiences and that “acting” must include the “taken-for-granted daily resistance” of the marginalized. An additional nuance in the pastoral cycle is intersectionality. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a black woman attorney in the United States, first coined this term in 1989, and it has since then

expanded into the *intersections* of a person's experiences of inequality in race, ethnicity, sexuality and gender, social class, education, disability, etc. (cf. Crenshaw 1989). Below, I explore the theological repercussions of biography, contexts, and intersectionality.

2. Influences and Intersections: Remembering the *tzidqôt* YHWH with Miriam the Prophet

At IFRS, we learned of the global socio-economic-political contexts of theologizing, met Church figures who resisted Marcos, and discovered various means of nation-building. We heard first-person accounts from political detainees and the role of theology in the fight for democracy. As Missio scholar of IFRS and as the documentation officer for the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Commission (JPICC) of the AMRSP, I realized in my study of Micah 6:1–8 that its most important message is to *zakar* (remember) the *tzidqôt* YHWH (saving acts of the LORD) through Moses, Aaron, and Miriam (cf. Micah 6:3–5). Sr Helen introduced me to *The Revelatory Text* (Schneiders 1999). Therein, Schneiders combines H.-G. Gadamer's "fusion of horizons" and Paul Ricoeur's idea of four "distanciations" that happen to written discourses. Distanciation distinguishes between the written discourse (the text) and the conditions of speech (cf. Thompson 2016). The first distanciation refers to how the actual speech event can be outshone by the meaning one gets from reading the written text. The second refers to the contrast between the original speaker's converging intention and the message which is not always easily perceivable in a written text. The third occurs when a speech is addressed to a specific recipient although anyone who can read can understand the written text. The last happens when a speech has some degree of referential specificity that is not shared in the written text. Accordingly, Schneiders suggests that a written text can inhabit three "worlds" which, for me, may correspond to various biblical interpretation methods (cf. Pontifical Biblical Commission 1993; Schneiders 1999; Ibita 2018). The world *behind* the text includes the world of the ancient authors, editors, readers, and audience that can be studied by historical critical methods (textual, source, genre, tradition, and redaction criticisms). The world *of* the text synchronically explores the world presented in the written text from a literary lens using, for instance, semiotics, rhetorical, and narrative criticisms. The world *before* the text delves into the relevance of the text for the current reader. A contextual approach using liberationist, feminist, or ecological hermeneutics is helpful here.

With these concepts, I discovered that the prophetic use of the *ryb* or covenant lawsuit metaphorically brings YHWH as plaintiff-judge against Israel as defendant, with the natural elements serving as witnesses (cf. Micah 6:1–8). While

form critics debate *ryb*'s origin in the cult, the court, or the international treaties, I ascribe to the last option as the covenant between YHWH and Israel parallels the suzerain-vassal treaties (cf. Huffmon 1959: 285–295). I support this choice with the biblical social value of patron-client relations in which the patron/suzerain provides for and protects the client/vassal who promises loyalty in return (cf. Malina 2009). Patronage also relates to honour and shame as fidelity to the covenant, protection, and sustenance honour both parties while disobedience brings shame to either party or the patron's wrath against the client (cf. Benjamin 1991; Hobbs 1997). As I wrote my thesis, these learnings guided my work at JPICC (cf. Ibita 2003).

In addition to these conceptual frameworks and theological methodology, our IFRS dean, Niceta Vargas, OSA, an exegete from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium, and a woman of insight and vision, implemented the four pillars of IFRS' formation for mission: contextual, integrated, inclusive, and transformational (cf. Vargas 1998). These pillars greatly influenced my theologizing and ministry (cf. Ibita 2021).

2.1 Contextual

The intersections of birth dates and places, race, social and educational status, gender orientation, etc., have different impacts on the interacting systems of domination, that is privilege, discrimination, and oppression (cf. Crenshaw 1989; Yee 2020: 7). For example, my exegesis and theologizing are shaped by my being a middle-aged female Asian, Filipino, who was trained in Europe and works at one of the premier universities in the Philippines. These intersections provide me with privileges (scholarships for women from the Global South) while at the same time marginalize me (exposure, resources, age limits for grants, etc.). When intersectional dominations underlie the structure of society, oppression becomes organized and justifies hegemonic thinking, disrupts interpersonal dynamics, and pervades various aspects of life (cf. Yee 2020: 16).

These intersecting dominations affect and are affected by the critical times we live in. Postpandemic society can be characterized as post-global in its political-economic system that marginalizes communities, resulting in internal-external or post-national migration that is compounded by the planetary crisis or post-human ecological challenge (cf. Segovia 2015: 20). The COVID-19 pandemic widened the intersectional gaps in the personal, communal, and global levels even more as socio-economic-political and health systems failed. Finally, post-truth, or the spread of wilful disinformation designed to fuel extremes of emotions through social media and artificial intelligence, purposely created confusion

and was wielded by populist-autocratic regimes to weaken democratic processes (cf. Ibita 2021: 140).

These biographical, contextual, and intersectional circumstances influence my post-critical belief, recontextualization, and Dialogue School reading of Micah 6:1–8. I can infuse historical critical methods into my characterization of Miriam's words and deeds and apply liberationist, feminist, and ecological lenses to her interaction with non-humans in the *tzidqot* YHWH. The results can enter into dialogue with the socio-political-economic-medical challenges brought by COVID-19 and the hazards of the Pacific Ring of Fire, which geographically exposes the Philippines to ecological disasters.

These interwoven contexts serve as both blinders and lenses when reading any text. Acknowledging them can reveal various power relations of inequality and identify unheard or silenced voices within and between matrices of dominations in texts (cf. Yee 2020: 7; 14). While there are timeless truths in the Bible, time and space bound its authors, editors, readers, and interpreters, so probing Schneiders' three worlds of any text is crucial. The backstories of biblical narratives can guide our work today toward the future that God dreams for us. One example is the rich meaning of *hesed* in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Sakenfeld 1978), which, in Micah 6:8, could mean tenderness, loyalty, mercy, or steadfast love. In my KU Leuven master's thesis, I discovered that its domain use in the *ryb* includes international law and covenantal relations (cf. Ibita 2007). In my PhD dissertation on the poetry of the pericope and the roles of the non-human creation in Exodus and in my current research on how Miriam relates with bodies of water, I realized the importance of historical critical methods in exegesis but also, that they are *not* enough. Literary and contextual methodologies should complement them to provide a broader interpretation and recontextualization of *hesed* today.

2.2 Inclusive

Language has a world-making capacity and research shows that using inclusive language builds more inclusive cultures (cf. Perales et al. 2022). This means acknowledging and including the marginalized voices and presence in the Scriptures. In Micah 6:4, for instance, YHWH names Israel's leaders, "I sent before you Moses, Aaron *AND* Miriam" (cf. Bietenhard 2012: 429; Wacker 2012: 180). While Moses is prominent in Exodus, feminist critics of Miriam's role are becoming "more central, gaining in power and acceptance" (Bach 2013: 423). There are now various methods for better studying biblical women's roles (cf. Wacker 2008). Miriam's part in Israel's freedom is highlighted, rabbinic studies on her are critically appreciated, her dissent in Numbers 12 is being scrutinized, and new traditions about her are being honoured (cf. Adelman 1994; Bach 2013: 419–427;

Lederman-Daniely 2016; Fisher 2017). This wider interpretation of Miriam's character from a feminist lens and her vital role in the liberation of God's people stem from considering the various contexts of Miriam's women interpreters. As Schüssler Fiorenza explains, "Feminist biblical scholarship has its roots not in the academy but in the social movements for the emancipation of slaves and of freedom of women" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1988: 7). Reflexivity in who we include and those whom we exclude or are marginalized by our biblical interpretation is a must. If thinking contextually means being aware of how our intersectionality informs how we read the Bible, inclusivity widens our range of vision and spheres of influence as theologians and global citizens.

2.3 Integrated

As registered nurses, we were trained in disease analysis, management, and interpersonal skills in medical settings. With these transferrable skills, we as scholars are, therefore, open to inter-, multi-, and transdisciplinary approaches (cf. Choi/Pak 2006) to theology, exegesis, and hermeneutics. These skills and disciplinary approaches are helpful in recognizing the intersectionality of the person and method of theologizing of the exegete-theologian. McKenna's (1994: 225) interpretative questions are valuable in this matter: "How do you feel?" personalizes the story; "What is true in the story?" universalizes it; and "What is disturbing in the story and why?" challenges people to more perceptively read the text and generate alternate insights. In a complementary way, Moore and Koosed's (2014: 384) introduction to "affect theory" in biblical interpretation affirms how emotions allow our understanding of the incredible, tragic, painful, and destructive configuration of things as well as how it fuels systems of knowledge, history, memory and circuits of power. Therefore, they posit that "affect intersects with feminist and queer studies, psychology and psychobiology, philosophy and sociology, cultural theory and literary theory" (Moore/Koosed 2014: 383). In our literary context, Micah 6:1–8 relates a marvel of various emotions of the LORD, the prophet, and Israel. The pathos of the characters as seen in the parallelism and metaphors in the text heighten its poetic and prophetic recontextualization (cf. Ibita 2015). Affect is also vital in reading laments, imprecations, and other more disturbing images of God, such as in the flood story (cf. Gen 9–11) (cf. Ibita 2019; 2020). With the COVID-19 pandemic, the ecological disasters, and the democratic threats we face as Filipinos, Malou and I have sharpened our doing of theology. We now complement CELEBRATING with RITUALIZING in order to express failures, limits, and other uncomfortable emotions that form part of the Exodus story and biblical *shalom* (cf. Ma. Marilou Ibita 2021: 62–64). The measure of our success as scholars should be the flourishing not only of the privileged, but more so of those

who struggle because of class, race, and location. Therefore, we must reframe our values of diversity, inclusivity, and tolerance (cf. Reinhartz 2021: 10) in line with a more transformational theologizing.

2.4 Transformational

Transformational theology is concerned with our desires. In Ignatian spirituality, desire is that self-transcendent, totalizing force that leads the believer to the service of others and brings the world and the planet in line with how God envisions it (cf. Fernández-Hart 2022: 116–117; 125). Desire, expressed in our sighs and hopes, is our response to the Spirit that filled Jesus in his ministry (cf. Lk 4:16–20) and that Jesus, in turn, breathed into the disciples when missioning them (cf. Jn 20:22). The same Spirit enables us to sense the signs of the times and discern actions according to what the natural and social sciences say vis-à-vis the Scriptures and teachings of the Church for planetary and societal well-being. Desire is a revelatory process – it is God’s self-revelation to us, which occurs while we are revealed to God and ourselves. So we must ask, “Who is served by our exegesis and theology?” (cf. Bieringer/Elsbernd 2010: 19–22). Contextual approaches in biblical interpretation and theologizing such as liberationist, feminist, ecological, trauma, disability, postcolonial, political exegesis, etc., become ethical imperatives because they have life-and-death consequences. Serious consideration and inclusion of the experiences of the readers in the ongoing recontextualization of the Bible and theology provide an impetus for justice, sustainability, and inclusivity. Today, desire has to do with how we envision a postCOVID-19 pandemic world. It is similar to how Miriam’s faith in the LORD’s *hesed* for Israel allowed her to see what is beyond the bank of the Nile as she watched the safe fate of the baby unfold and bravely arranged his care with the Egyptian princess (cf. Exod 2), what freedom was like beyond the Red Sea (cf. Exod 15), and what was beyond the perils of the desert wanderings (cf. Num 20). Miriam’s alternative vision of *hesed* filled another Miriam and inspired her to proclaim the Magnificat (cf. Lk 1:46–55). Mary in the New Testament also imagined a world where God’s remembering of intergenerational mercy/*hesed* means scattering the proud, bringing down the mighty from their thrones, lifting up the lowly, feeding the hungry, and sending the rich away empty handed (cf. Lk 1:50–55). It is a world where there is a balance of power, possibilities, and resources, and where the God of Exodus, who defeated the Pharaoh of Egypt, also battled the Caesars of Rome.

3. Walk Humbly with God: Sustainability as Critical Hope with Miriam

Following E. Schillebeeckx, I believe that theology is mystico-political (cf. Ibita 2000). While one’s biography, context, and intersectionality affect one’s theology, one’s way of theologizing also frames one’s biography, contexts, and intersectional identity. Exegesis and theology are not unbiased, nor are they carried out with utmost objectivity. In “Fostering Biblical Scholarship Worldwide: The Contribution of the International Cooperation Initiative” on 8 August 2017 at the International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Berlin, E. Gerstenberger, an exegete-theologian who has authored dictionary entries in the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* series, explained how his immersion in Latin America later in his career made him reflect on the influences of World War II geopolitics in his research. He insisted that even dictionaries are not so objective. Thus, the subjectivity of exegesis and theology lies in many intersecting contexts of the exegete-theologian and their ethical repercussions are tremendous (cf. Schüssler Fiorenza 1988: 3–17). Indeed, they can be either vital or fatal.

Even as a lifelong learner and teacher of theology, a university researcher, and the current president of the Board of Trustees of the Catholic Biblical Association of the Philippines, Micah 6:1–8 still challenges me. From investigating the exhortation to “act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with God”, my academic formation and journey as an exegete-theologian impel me to sense the world in a contextual, integrated, inclusive, and transformational manner. Rooted in historical critical methods and enriched by literary interpretation of the text, my PhD dissertation at KU Leuven led me to identify ecological hermeneutics as one way of recontextualizing my research results as a theological resource against the intensifying climate emergency (cf. Ibita 2015). While writing my dissertation, super-typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda devastated the Philippines in 2013 with more than 7000 deaths (cf. Morella 2018). Then, days after my doctoral defence, Pope Francis published *Laudato Si* (2015).

Recently, my own exegetical theologizing has evolved into sustainability hermeneutics. Inspired by the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG), Malou and I worked with our colleagues Ekaterini Tsalamponi and Tina Dykesteen Nilsen at The Bible, Ecology, and Sustainability Research Unit of the European Association of Biblical Studies in 2023. The new direction to our research that emerged has an eschatological component based on the normativity of the future approach of interpreting religious and non-religious authoritative texts. Reimund Bieringer and Mary Elsbernd (cf. 2010) developed this approach with the aim of inviting the interpreter to participate in the building of God’s dream of a more just, inclusive, and sustainable planet (cf. Ibita 2022). Globally and locally, we have also worked with Bieringer on various UNSDG and gen-

der equality-themed Open Faculty-Global Minds projects.² Two of our projects scheduled from 2020–2022 were delayed but were nevertheless continued because of their relevance to the management of COVID-19 pandemic. Staff exchange provided avenues for co-learning and sharing of expertise between Belgium and the Philippines,³ for interdisciplinary and multistakeholder co-learning activities on the UNSDGs with our academic and urban poor partners (cf. Upward Up APOAMF), and for theologizing and interpreting biblical texts through liberationist, feminist, and ecological lenses – just like Miriam in the texts of Exodus and Micah so that she can still be a companion for believers today.

The postpandemic vision to build a more sustainable planet and inclusive society was also the impetus behind the active participation of many in the Philippine May 2022 national polls. Leni Robredo, our candidate, was the “sitting Vice President with a FINE RECORD of public service and no taint of corruption. On paper, Leni Robredo should be a dream candidate” (Johnson/Head 2022). From being a “spare tire” of the presidency, Robredo transformed her office into a proactive public service, contributing significantly to women and youth empowerment, healthcare, education, sustainable development and training programs, rural development, housing and settlement, disaster relief and rehabilitation, and

- 2 We first had “Strengthening Human Dignity and Human Rights for Sustainable Development in the Philippines: An Explorative Mission in Preparation for an IUC 2019 Submission in View of Capacity Building and Exchange” in 2018, followed by “Memory and Visions, Conversations and Actions: Mainstreaming Multi-disciplinary Gender Perspectives on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in Belgium and in the Philippines” in 2019. In 2020, we had “Well-being, Inclusivity and Sustainability: Exchanges Between North and South (WISE)” with Global Minds as well as Urban Poor Women and Children with Academics for Reaching and Delivering on UNSDGs in the Philippines (UPWARD-UP) funded by the Flemish Interuniversity Council/Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad/VLIR-University Development Cooperation/Universitaire Ontwikkelings-samenwerking/UOS.
- 3 We cooperated with colleagues from KU Leuven’s Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies (R. Bieringer, A. Dillen, T. Knieps, J. De Tavernier), Leuven Institute of Criminology-Faculty of Law (S. Parmentier), Institute of Media Studies-Faculty of Social Sciences (L. D’Haenens), Geography and Tourism-Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences (C. Parra), and the Clinical and Experimental Endocrinology-Department of Chronic Diseases and Metabolism (C. Matthys). Our local cooperators come from various Ateneo de Manila University departments such as Theology (Maricel Ibita, R. Mendoza, R. Sanchez, J. Badión), Sociology and Anthropology (M. Racelis), Asian Center for Journalism-Department of Communications (L. Rimban), the Ateneo Human Rights Center (R. P. Santiago), and the Health Sciences Program (N. D. Marquez). We also worked with the Department of Theology and Religious Education-De La Salle University (Malou Ibita and Agnes Brazal) and the St. Vincent School of Theology-Adamson University (D. F. Pilario). UPWARD-UP was also a multisectoral project with our non-government organization partner Community Organizers Multiversity (COM) and the Alliance of Peoples’ Organization along the Manggahan Floodway (APOAMF).

her multi-pronged COVID-19 response had much support from the private sector as her office had only a meagre budget (cf. Antonio 2022). Her election loss to the son and namesake of the dictator occurred, according to some observers, because the election was “not free, honest or fair” (Famatigan 2022), and because of a well-funded, massive, coordinated disinformation campaign against her that was, simultaneously, favourable toward the Marcoses, touting the period of martial law as the golden age (cf. Devlin 2022). While the Marcos, Jr. government is planning a postCOVID-19 recovery (cf. SDGs Secretariat 2023), political analyst Heydarian (2022: 73) predicts that the country will have a “liminal authoritarian regression toward a hybrid regime in which politicians’ proxies coopt the media, disinformation dominates political discourse, and semi-competitive elections are used to give the ruling coalition a thin coating of legitimacy”.

Given the post-global marginalizing economics and politics, post-national migration, post-human climate emergency, democracy-weakening post-truth because of disinformation and persecution of truth-tellers and the COVID-19 pandemic, what is required of us is that we put women and girls ever more at the centre of our recovery efforts (cf. Guterres 2020), including in theology and exegesis. To put women and girls at the centre of rebuilding is to find hope (cf. Gogoi 2021) and be empowered. It is to break the intersections of domination by detecting where power lies in the civic arena and redefining it. Eric Liu’s (cf. 2014) insights can help address these challenges of biography, context, and intersectionality. He talks about the main sources of power, its laws, and how to read and write it. Liu lists six main sources of power: physical force and capacity for violence, wealth, government, social norms, ideas, and numbers (of people). In my work, I harness the power of ideas to transform social norms and communities. As Liu expounds, there are also three laws of power. First, power is never static: either we act on it or we are acted upon by it. Second, power is like water and policies are ways to freeze or perpetuate its flow. Articulating what is being silenced in authoritative texts means allowing alternate pictures of characters, especially women, to emerge, subtly freezing the limited view of them, and perpetuating a new way of knowing them. Finally, power compounds, that is, power begets power and the same is true with intersectional powerlessness. Limiting the abuse and concentration of power entails participating in the dynamics and policies of power by refining methods of interpretation to democratize hermeneutics and promote intersectional readings. Furthermore, in order to address power in civic life, Liu suggests learning how to read power (where, when, who, why, how, etc.) and how to write it so one can be an author of personal and communal change. Thus, putting women and girls at the centre of rebuilding a more sustainable and inclusive postCOVID-19 future requires rediscovering biblical women like Miriam as companions.

To humbly walk with God is to relive the Exodus narrative and attach our story to it in a Miriamic presence or manner. In the biblical texts about her, cul-

minating in Micah 6:1–5, Miriam “comes to us as a woman complete unto herself in her relationship with God and with her people,” with “her communal life-sustaining function” (Eliassen 2021: 61). The Miriamic presence in Micah 6:4 is part of the command to “remember” (*zkr*) the *tzidqot* YHWH (cf. Micah 6:5). Even as an unnamed sister in Exodus 2, she already expressed her loyalty to her brother, her bravery to face the Egyptian princess, her wisdom to link the birth and adoptive mothers in raising the baby as a Hebrew. Miriamic presence also means having the vision of the surety of freedom from slavery, the freedom to sing and dance beyond the Red Sea and to bring a tambourine as they escape slavery to celebrate freedom (cf. Tung 2022). Eliassen’s interesting study on Numbers 12 and Deuteronomy 24:9 deviates from the idea of God punishing the frank Miriam who questioned Moses’ leadership. Eliassen (2021: 59) proposes that every time God asks the people to “remember”, it is related to the celebration of the Sabbath (cf. Exod 20:8) and the consolation that God brought them out of slavery (cf. Deut 5:15) and led them through the desert (cf. Deut 8:2). She compares Miriam’s skin disease in Numbers 12 to a deep encounter with God’s presence akin to Moses’ skin disease which was an assurance of God’s presence before he was sent to free the Israelites (cf. Exod 4:6) (cf. Eliassen 2021: 60). Indeed, to “remember” what happened to Miriam in Numbers 12 and Deut 5:15 ties in with the celebration of the Sabbath and the consolation of the freedom from slavery (cf. Eliassen 2021: 59). The ancient custom of drawing and drinking water from a well during the Sabbath hopes to find Miriam’s well, a tradition linking Miriam with bodies of water in the journey of the freed Hebrews (cf. Shurpin). These narratives of Miriamic presence remind us of the *tzidqot* YHWH – from the Nile to the Great Sea, through the presence and absence of water in the desert, from slavery to freedom. Miriam dealt with crises, slavery, threats of death, disease, and isolation. Yet, in whatever may lie ahead, “it cannot be a return to Egypt” (Eliassen 2021: 61). Miriam’s companionship changes us, the world, and the planet.

Conclusion

By reliving my journey, I discovered how biography, contexts, and intersectionality influence theology *and* how theology can be a critical lens through which I evaluate, review, and envision my biography, contexts, and intersectionality. In remembering the *tzidqot* YHWH with Miriam the prophet as a companion, I reread my journey as an exegete-theologian. As Bock (2016: 11) has observed, “[T]he role of theologian is the same as the role of the biblical prophet: interpreting in light of current events, leading with one’s life and actions, and holding together hope and fear, critique and meaning-making”. Memorializing the *tzidqot* YHWH with Miriamic presence means imagining a better nation, world, and planet for

future generations – a critical hope in critical times (cf. Segovia 2015: 6–29; Bock 2016: 11–30; Ibita 2022). We may not have won the questionable election and we grieved for our nation like Micah (cf. Bietenhard 2012: 427), but we will not lose our fight for freedom and the fullness of life. Eyes that have seen how we can rebuild and progress together postCOVID-19 need no longer shut themselves to the false claim of the Philippine “golden age”. Through the contextual, inclusive, integrated, and transformational lens of a theology that is post-critical, recontextualizing, and in dialogue with the needs of the world, I hold on to the challenge, encouragement, and promise of the LORD: I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam that you may know the *tzidqôṭ* YHWH (cf. Micah 6:4–5). This divine oath and the Miriamic presence inspire, encourage, and energize us to do justice, to love *hesed*, and to walk humbly with God in building a more just, sustainable, and inclusive society and planet for generations to come.

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