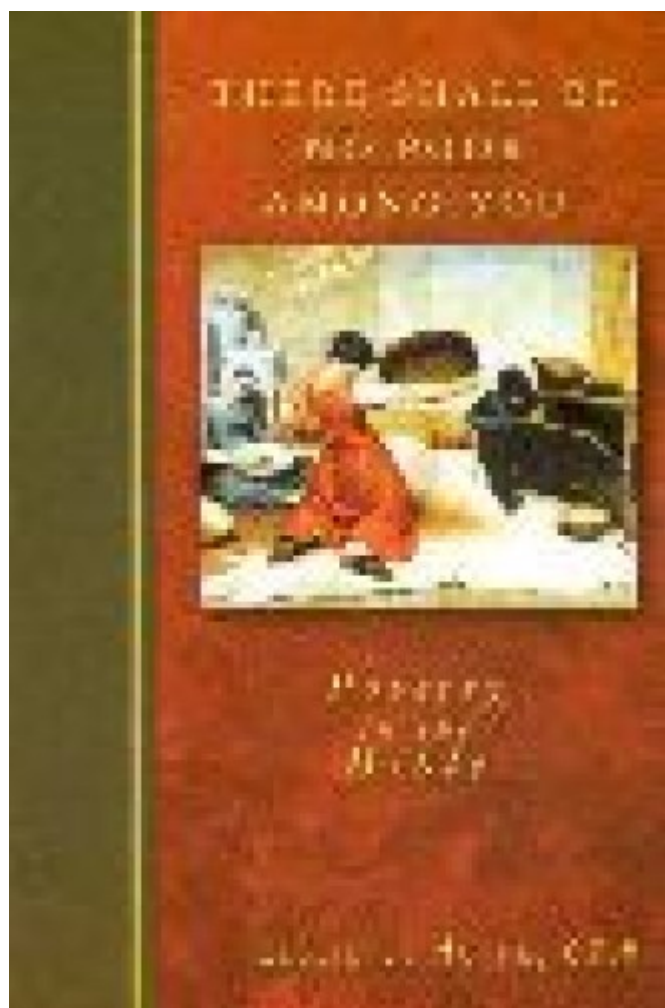


Tabled agenda

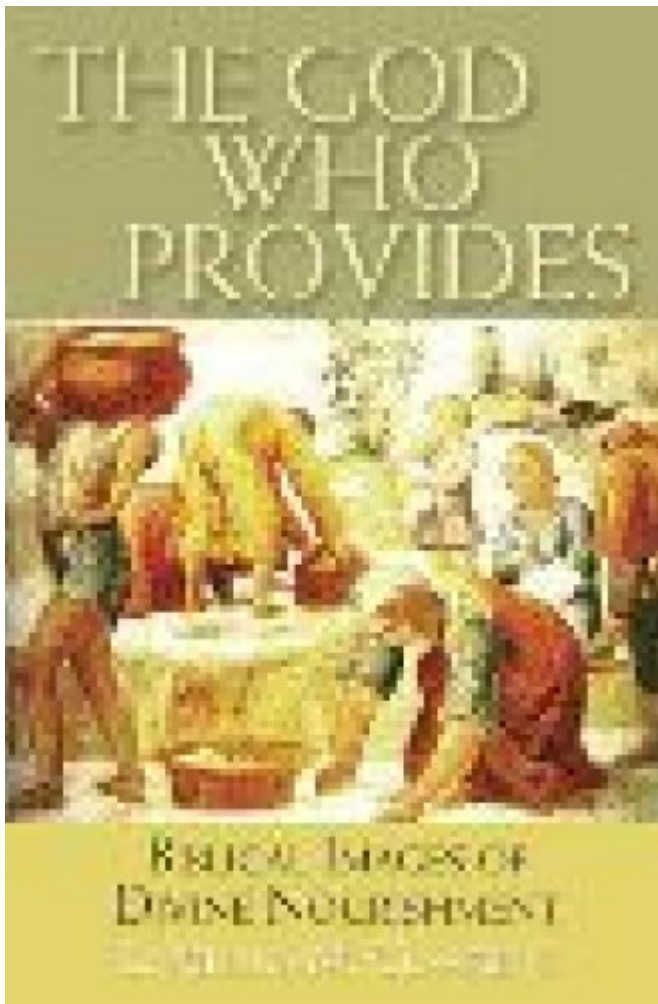
By [J. David Pleins](#) in the [April 19, 2005](#) issue

In Review



There Shall Be No Poor Among You: Poverty in the Bible

Leslie J. Hoppe
Abingdon



The God Who Provides: Biblical Images of Divine Nourishment

L. Juliana M. Claassens
Abingdon

As my car careened around the corner, the words screamed at me from a sticker plastered on a phone pole: “Who would Jesus bomb?”

With this loaded theological question an anonymous political vigilante was taking aim at misguided U.S. foreign policy. As the faith-based bazooka went off, I imagined conservatives blazing through the intersection trying to dodge the biblical bullet while liberals roared onward with triumphalistic smiles. After a few days the sticker was summarily torn down, and those moments of theological reflection came to an end. Once again the drive through the intersection was no doubt accompanied by talk radio’s endless chatter about a presidential election that hinged on “moral values.”

Needless to say, the sticker did not change the outcome of the election. Talk radio won. Conservatives got their “man of faith.” Liberals lapsed into disillusionment. Moral values took center stage.

While pundits dispute the extent to which moral values shaped the election, we can be certain of one thing: the conservative political victory was not built on what Leslie J. Hoppe, professor of Old Testament studies at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, calls “traditional Israelite moral values”—prophetic anger at economic oppression, rampant hunger, the indebtedness of the poor and fraudulent interest taking.

Conservative Christian political rhetoric these days finds little support in or genuine inspiration from scripture. The incessant calls for beefed-up defense spending, bombing the heck out of other countries in God’s name, stricter homeland security, hatred of gays, school vouchers and anti-immigration laws have no counterpart in Hoppe’s Bible.

But if God’s politics are not right-wing fundamentalist politics, what sort of justice does the Bible demand? In what way are the poor on God’s agenda?

Hoppe takes us into the world of ancient Israel’s poor, where injustice masquerades as charity, the hopes of the poor must be deferred until after apocalyptic wars, and the rich have to be cajoled into aiding the needy. It is a world of debt, landlessness and forced labor; of tyrannical monarchs and the ruthless rich on the prowl; of mouths unfed, wages withheld and peasants plotting rebellion; of toppled governments and the vain hope that tyranny will not rise again; of cannibalizing oppression, social cleavage and religious infidelity.

Despite occasional rumors of a coming renewal, and despite a temporary upheaval under Jesus, the victims of injustice in the Bible remain trapped century after century, knowing like the long-suffering Job that their fate is undeserved. The suffering of the Bible’s poor is not some nostalgic, noble, spiritual picnic. It is no surprise that the great plaint of the poor is “How long, God?”—that spare phrase that captures the “authentic cry” of all who are oppressed.

Hoppe portrays a world too much like our own for us not to heed the dire warnings trumpeted by the Bible’s prophets. How can we remain comfortable ignoring the radical legislation of the Torah, which calls for cancellation of debts, interest-free lending to the poor and restoration of land to those who have been shoved off their

ancestral domains?

Hoppe's book is a much needed corrective to conservative Christian political pabulum. With such a pervasive scriptural proclamation of liberation, one wonders how so many miss the message, or spiritualize poverty as something noble, or think the Bible has nothing to do with radical politics, or use scripture to justify crusades to the Middle East (ancient and modern!) in the name of God.

It may be that many have not actually read the text.

Or perhaps the problem goes deeper. Perhaps the Bible isn't simply a liberating document. What about its hegemonic codes that legitimate political domination, authorize sexism and promote ethnic cleansing? This is a side of the tradition we cannot afford to ignore.

Fortunately, L. Juliana M. Claassens, a Presbyterian pastor who splits her teaching and preaching between South Africa and the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, has found a way out of this theological labyrinth.

Her Ariadne's thread consists of stories like those of God's provision of manna in the wilderness, texts that portray God as the mother who feeds all her children—equally and with justice. Similarly, the goddesslike Woman Wisdom holds a banquet that brings life, knowledge and justice to a broken world—an image that underlies Christian Eucharist. The thought of a full-breasted God in scripture is shocking; the image undermines the pretensions of the predominant male metaphors of the text.

But as Claassens knows, the metaphor contains a dark side: the mother God who fails to feed her children, who gives them over to famine, cannibalizes them, even abuses them.

Can the images of the feeding God and Woman Wisdom defuse the darker male and female images of God in scripture?

While Claassens thinks we must learn to live in tension with the Bible's more disturbing images for God, it seems high time not just to call these images into question but to dismantle them entirely. In a world where most terrorists are male, we don't need a motherly metaphor that "balances" the disciplinarian warrior-God image of scripture; we need to dismantle the archetype of divine violence once and for all.

If Claassens does not go far enough in this dismantling project, she does provide signposts to guide us through treacherous theological terrain. "There are things to be done," she writes, "to ensure that God will feed again." If we don't stand in solidarity with those in need, God will fail to liberate the poor through us. We ourselves are the answer to the social dilemmas that gnaw at us.

Claassens has disrupted the patriarchal monopoly on God. Her alternative moral vision of the God who feeds is a metaphor that threatens to liberate both the Bible and our world. It is a vision that gives conservative "moral values" a run for their money.

We can only hope Hoppe and Claassens are right.