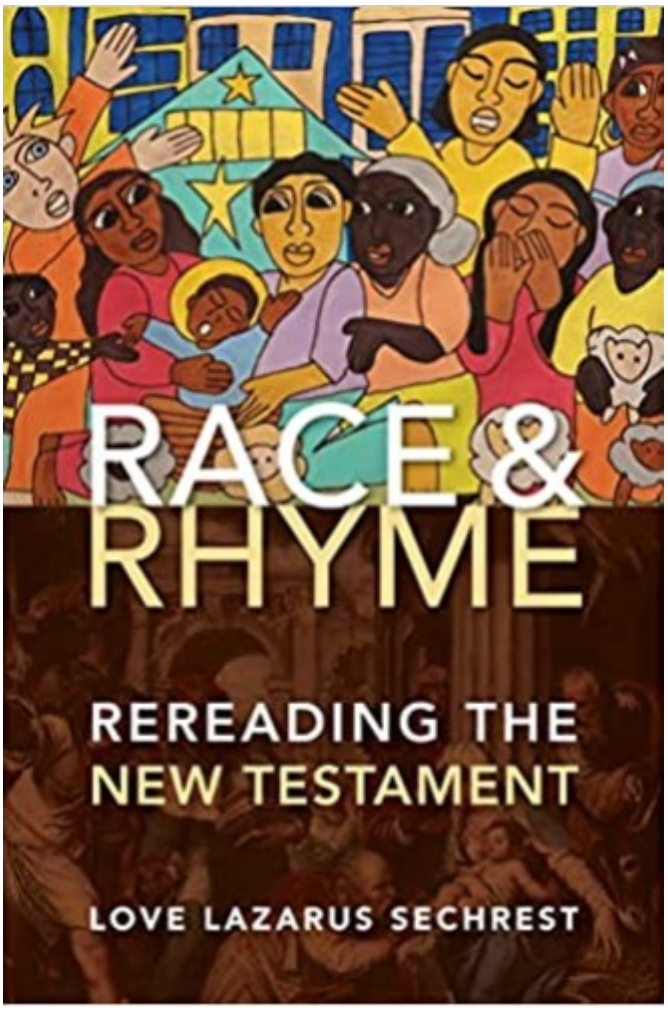
Reading the Bible with Love Sechrest

In *Race and Rhyme*, associative hermeneutics finds its roots in deep, communal, and highly developed wisdom.

by Greg Carey in the February 2023 issue

In Review



Race and Rhyme

Rereading the New Testament

By Love Lazarus Sechrest
Eerdmans
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Love Sechrest has gifted us with a unique book. She introduces a distinctive proposal for biblical interpretation, *associative hermeneutics*, a model she develops through critical race theory and womanist sensibilities. Sechrest frequently identifies this model with “rhyming”: identifying appropriate analogies between biblical texts and contemporary questions. She models her approach by applying it to much of the New Testament: Matthew, Luke, John, Acts, 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Revelation. Sechrest’s passion for teaching shines throughout: the book concludes with a sample assignment for students.

Few books apply an innovative reading model to a wide sample of texts. Even fewer do so by identifying a distinctive theological standpoint. Further, each chapter opens by explicating a challenging issue from contemporary life, all backed by impressive amounts of research.

Sechrest opens by linking rhyming to race. “As long as they have been preaching,” Black readers of scripture have established associations between their lives and biblical texts. So do most Christian readers of other races, but Black readers habitually read their own stories through biblical ones. Sechrest aims to lend rigor and discipline to that process by spelling out how readers may identify resonances between their interests and biblical texts—and by assessing the limits and problems of those associations.

Once at home in evangelical institutions, Sechrest has clearly moved on from understanding the Bible as offering direct guidance on all questions. As a womanist, Sechrest approaches the Bible with race, gender, and class in mind. This intersectional approach draws upon the wisdom of generations of Black women.

I applaud the effort to build analogies between biblical texts and our lives while acknowledging the “profound cultural dissimilarities” between them. But I have a reservation.

At one point in the book, Sechrest draws several insights from Acts 6:1–6 (the selection of men to administer food distribution to widows), including the suggestion that “if we choose leaders with godly character . . . the people’s economic well-being flourishes.” But is that true? At another point, she acknowledges that 1 Timothy 2:8–15 restricts women from church leadership, excludes that lesson as bound to its ancient context, and then elevates from it a more basic principle: believers should not bring public shame upon the church. One could readily imagine many lessons from these two passages, some of them fanciful or harmful, and I am unsure how Sechrest’s model would support these two particular readings over others. Meaningful interpretation requires just the kind of disciplined imagination Sechrest models, but I suggest that what generates her interpretations is a deep, communal, and highly developed wisdom more than a methodological sequence of operations.

Methodological quibbles aside, throughout the book Sechrest models attentive and critical analogical reasoning. John presents the Samaritan woman in chapter 4 and the woman caught in adultery (7:58–8:11) in ways that challenge conventional stereotypes, Sechrest shows, with implications for how we imagine sex, marriage, and crime.

Matthew encourages love of enemies but doesn’t consistently demonstrate that value. And womanist readers understand how “love your enemy” can feed cycles of oppression. Sechrest examines how Matthew frames potential enemies—the demon-possessed Gadarenes and the pigs unworthy of pearls, alongside the centurion and the Canaanite—as case studies for how marginalized people may assess their own marginalized neighbors, potential allies, frenemies, and foes.

Sechrest reads Luke as constructing a “blended family” that brings together Jewish and Gentile sensibilities. The Gospel bears lessons regarding intergenerational tensions related to cultural assimilation. The apostolic council of Acts 15 models the kind of compromise necessary for intercultural competence, respecting traditional cultural values while looking out for “vulnerable newcomers.” Here Sechrest cautions that newcomers can’t integrate into a new setting through one decisive meeting; they require both time and help to do so. Luke’s ideal family is diverse and intercultural.

Sechrest reads Ephesians against our current political polarization, emphasizing the epistle’s image of spiritual leaders who hold the church together like ligaments (4:16). At the same time, she takes account of interracial churches where White

norms tend to prevail and argues for the benefits of models where leadership is plural and distributed.

In 2 Corinthians, Paul grounds his self-defense in the cross, using arguments that honor the value of Jesus' suffering and of human embodiment. Sechrest acknowledges that cross theology often valorizes suffering for its own sake, deepening the oppression of already victimized groups. She then judges that Jesus' way requires giving ourselves for others—a lesson particularly apt for those who enjoy privilege, while oppressed groups must discern whether to appropriate Paul's model of self-giving or to emphasize his boldness in confronting injustice.

She reads Revelation's fierce critique of Rome against Paul's command to submit to the governing authorities (Rom. 13:1–7). Both texts, she argues, challenge readers to assess our relationship to empire and privilege. Throughout, she maintains that racism lies at the heart of empire.

Christians with some education in biblical studies will find great value in this book. Sechrest writes with students and teachers in view. Yet her deep exegetical argumentation results in chapters of 40 pages or more. For that reason, I worry that scholars will be her primary audience. I am still wrestling with whether to assign this book to my students.

Sechrest understands and demonstrates that appropriating the Bible for our own contexts requires acts of disciplined imagination. The Bible does not speak for itself, no matter how much we may want it to. Instead, we must build imaginative bridges between the Bible and our world, sifting them critically for their appropriateness. Sechrest models this process with a rare degree of thoroughness and with frank, gracious talk about race.