

## **In Memory of Her – Leticia Guardiola-Sáenz**

I first met Leticia in November 1996 at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, where she was a Ph.D. student with Fernando F. Segovia. He had invited me to present a guest lecture, prior to the SBL Annual Meeting in New Orleans, with his original invitation to present a paper in the Johannine Literature section. My lecture was on “Reading and Rereading the Samaritan Woman’s Story. Characterization and Social Location”, my first social location paper and also first autobiographical piece, in which border crossings played an essential role. It was, therefore, a great joy to meet other border crossers on this occasion, and foremost to encounter Leticia, the border woman – due to her social location, her Mexican-US hybrid identity, but also with regard to her approach to Scripture and the methods she applied in biblical studies. Not everything was obvious to me at this very first encounter, of course, but was revealed gradually as we engaged in conversation and eventually deep friendship. During the week I spent at Vanderbilt, I lived in the same house as Leticia, and we had some precious talks during our informal encounters. It was the beginning of a pleasant and fruitful exchange, regarding our biblical work, particularly on John, our Beloved Gospel, and our personal stories. This happened mainly at the Annual Meetings, and through email contacts in between.

One encounter that has vividly remained in my memory occurred at the 1998 Annual Meeting in Orlando, FL, right in the heart of Disneyworld (which, I thought, was a funny location for a biblical conference). I had presented a paper on Lazarus’s death and resurrection (“Untying Lazarus – A Sisters’s Task?”) and my edited book “The Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation” had just appeared and was one of the volumes honored with a special reception by Routledge. After that, I met with Leticia, engaged in vivid discussion of Lazarus’s story and my reading of the Samaritan woman’s story, “Border crossing and meeting Jesus at the well”, published in the “Personal Voice” volume. Amazingly, Leticia had not only got a copy of the book but had already read, among others, my chapter and provided a passionate response, indicating that it was in fact a “re-writing” of the story. And she was perfectly right. Conversations like this, about our respective work, is what I most vividly remember.

When I prepared a volume for Brill's Biblical Interpretation Series on "Transformative Encounters. Jesus and Women Re-viewed" with a wide range of authors and approaches, it was, of course, clear that I wanted to include Leticia in this global project, with her unique voice of a Hispanic woman. Her chapter "Border-crossing and Its Redemptive Power in John 7:53–8:11: A Cultural Reading of Jesus and the *Accused*" offered a completely new and fascinating interpretation of the Johannine story and was an eye-opener also to me, beginning with the designation of the woman as "the *Accused*", over against "the adulteress" (with the woman's condemnation implied), and my delight in Leticia's terming the Johannine Jesus as "an alien non-resident" (a designation that, only a year later, was applied to me, too, when I was Visiting Professor at the GTU Berkeley, and with great amusement I recalled Leticia's concept). Leticia, the border woman, had the appropriate lenses, due to her birthplace and upbringing in the Mexican–US borderlands, to view Jesus likewise, in his hybrid identity in the borderlands between heaven and earth. Leticia's chapter was, slightly revised, reprinted in a volume titled "John and Postcolonialism. Travel, Space and Power", edited by Musa W. Dube and Jeffrey L. Staley, two other fellow border people (the first also encountered at my Vanderbilt lecture).

In November 2019, 23 years after our first encounter, Leticia and I met again, this time only in virtual reality, on another special occasion. My volume "Interfigural Readings of the Gospel of John" was just completed and ready to go into print with SBL Press, and planned to be presented at the Annual Meeting in San Diego. Leticia had received the invitation to write a blurb text for the volume, at very short notice. At the time, as I learned a little later from herself, she had, of course, many other obligations, teaching and otherwise, and the time was really short. It seemed to be an impossible task. However, last minute she decided to compose the text, because of her affection for me and her interest in my work. I was deeply touched when she told me, via email. The blurb text was so amazing. Leticia, once again, had understood what my work was all about, my vocation as a biblical scholar. And just to imagine that she had read the entire script nonstop in one night, finishing at 3 am! She was so fascinated, she later told me, so that she simply could not stop reading. Shortly afterwards, she went to San Diego for the Annual Meeting, where she presented several papers on border crossings, since the meeting was located so close to the Mexican–US border, as she informed me beforehand. And she hoped to meet me there. Alas, I did not make it. As it turned out, Leticia could not stay to the end, including the presentation of my book, because she had to return to Seattle to prepare for her surgery on

Thanksgiving Day. It was on this very same day that I received an email informing me of her situation. I was touched beyond what words can convey to learn that Leticia had not only spent a night reading my script and write an endorsement, last minute, despite all her other obligations, but after being diagnosed with cancer and an impending surgery! And she did not even tell me, until later. Leticia is one of the most amazing people I have ever met: strong, powerful, compassionate, with a listening heart, not focused on herself but reaching out to others. She crossed many borders, but also transcended them, in her personal life and her biblical work.

In her career as professor of New Testament and Early Christianity she found herself in a situation that was described in her Faculty Profile thus: “No doubt, Sophia works not only in mysterious ways but has a sense of humor! Although Leticia was not allowed to preach the Bible from a Baptist pulpit in Mexico, for being a woman, she now gets to train others (women and men) to read (and preach) the Bible in new and liberating ways so they can bring about a better world where everyone is included.” In this experience, once again, Leticia and I were united, as I, too, trained students (both female and male) for their future career as pastors in their respective churches, while I myself (as a Roman Catholic woman) was excluded from all church offices. However, had both Leticia and I been able to follow a vocation to the priesthood, we would never have met, as I once told her, and I believe we have chosen the better part, becoming biblical scholars, and meeting across continents, coming from our respective borderlands.

“Kitzberger takes us into a fascinating intertextual journey, ingeniously intertwined with the Synoptic Gospels, discovering inventive ways of interpreting John. Not only does she enter the Gospel of John as a real-flesh-and-blood reader, but she comes out of it, as if hand in hand, with the Samaritan woman, Mary Magdalene, Jesus, Lazarus, and Nicodemus, among others, as real characters from the first century, bringing the gospels to life for today.”

This part of Leticia’s blurb text for my book has stayed with me and I have greatly enjoyed it ever since. I have imagined myself coming out of the Gospel of John, Leticia’s and my favorite Gospel, hand in hand with these prominent characters, which have accompanied me for decades in my biblical work and personal life’s journey. Now that Leticia has joined the “alien non-resident” Jesus, and all the other Johannine characters, on the other side of life, I imagine her coming out, hand in hand, as it were, with all of them, for a cheerful final good-bye to all of us, who have walked with her at different stages in her life.

It was the fourth Sunday of the Lenten season, which, in the Catholic tradition, is called “Sunday Laetare” that I received, somewhat belated, but thank God through a dear friend, the sad news of Leticia’s passing earlier this year. “Laetare” is Latin for “rejoice”, “Laetitia” means “Joy”. It was a special joy and grace to have met Leticia, who was always so full of joy, even amidst her own challenges and even sufferings. As we are heading towards Holy Week and Easter Time, for sure Leticia has already reached the final goal of her life and will be able to celebrate this Easter being happily resurrected and united with Jesus, the former alien non-resident having returned home, forever. Resting in peace and eternal life are contradictory, as the writer Reinhold Schneider remarked in his diary book, “Winter in Wien,” his last work completed shortly before his passing. He was right: you either rest in peace, or you enter into eternal life. For sure, Leticia is not resting in peace, but alive as ever, vivid and witty, in the eternal heavenly realm. But so sorely missed on this side of life.

“In Memory of Her” – Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s ground breaking work, “A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins,” has inspired so many of us, especially the first generations of feminist biblical scholars. The title is based on the story of the unnamed woman who anointed Jesus at Bethany, beforehand for his burial (Mark 14:3–9). “Truly I tell you,” Jesus commented in his concluding prophecy, “wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her” (v. 9).

Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger

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