

living against the grain (including reading against the texts) of the dominant kyriarchal society.

The task becomes even more complex when one proposes to carry it out within a theological framework in the church or in a Christian theological seminary. There the grain against which one is moving is often that of Christian doctrine and tradition. If the challenge is to be heard in such places, the move toward a counter-reading must be carried out in the name of the same theological center that undergirds both that tradition and the commitment to a feminist interpretation. To put the matter another way, belief in a God who is at home in women's realities, who participates in women's experience and who is committed to the vitality and wholeness of all women and men, is challenged by the institutions and systems within which people live. But that is just the beginning of the challenge. Such belief is also contradicted by the dominant interpretations of the Scriptures that are said to bear witness to God and to the divine intent for humankind. At times belief in such a God even seems to stretch the boundaries of those Scriptures themselves.

Negotiating the challenges of the vocation of critical, feminist, theological interpretation of the Bible is a constant fact of my life. I was thus delighted with the opportunity to explore what that process might mean relative to Phil. 2.5-11.² My intention in this study is to offer a constructive analysis of the text, not to engage the specific arguments of other scholars or of other interpreters of this much-studied passage, and hence the absence of references to commentaries or other scholarly literature about it. I conclude this study with reflections on its implications for learning the art of critical, feminist, theological interpretation.

A Case Study: Reading *Philippians* 2.5-11

Identification of Questions and Concerns

Instead of following the precise instructions given for this assignment—to interpret the assigned text, then discuss how my own multi-contextuality shaped that interpretation—I found I must begin at the opposite end, with an acknowledgment of those aspects of my identity and context that are engaged as I read through the assigned

2. The opportunity came in the invitation to participate in a panel on multi-contextuality and feminist readings of the Bible that was convened by the Feminist Theological Hermeneutics of the Bible Group of the Society of Biblical Literature at its meeting in 1994. This article is a reworking of the paper I presented on that occasion.

AN APPROACH TO A CRITICAL, FEMINIST, THEOLOGICAL READING OF THE BIBLE

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Introduction

A critical feminist reading of the Bible entails perspective, experience and commitment. The perspective is that of the multi-faceted social location occupied by women. Perspective is largely a given of the data of one's existence: gender, race, class, ethnicity, physical condition, relationships in which one is involved, and so on. Those data are transformed into experience as one becomes aware of how the data of social location intersect with events of personal, local and global history to result in suffering or wellbeing, inclusion, or marginalization, participation as the subject of one's own life or merely as the object of others' decisions and actions. The commitment that makes a reading from such a perspective and experience specifically 'feminist' is commitment to the physical, psychological, and social wellbeing of all women through the unmasking, revisioning and transformation of the institutions, social systems and ideologies that define women's lives in 'kyriarchal' social realities—that is, those in which a small group of elite males is dominant over all women and many men.¹

Such a feminist interpretation is neither simple nor easy. It is not simple because of the very complexity of women's realities, and because for most women that complexity results in a degree of 'status inconsistency' (for example, power or some degree of autonomy in one area of life, coupled with powerlessness or dependence in another). It is not easy because of the effort that must be expended to analyze the experience that results from one's reality, and, most of all, because commitment to the vitality of women's lives requires

1. A particularly clear and challenging discussion of such a feminist project can be found in 'Transforming the Legacy of *The Woman's Bible*', Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's introduction in Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the Scriptures*. I. A *Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), pp. 1-24.

text, and that influence the questions that shape my investigation. Indeed, motifs of power, exaltation, humility and obedience in the text touch on the status inconsistency that marks my own life. As a woman I find my defenses going up when I encounter themes of humility and obedience in the Bible, given the way such attitudes and conduct have been imposed on me and other women. As a white, middle-class, North American professor, I also find my defenses going up when the Bible talks about humility and obedience, but my nervousness then comes because I have learned that such texts frequently take aim at the place of privilege I have come to enjoy.

When I read this text from the two contexts of solidarity that also define my life—that of survivors of domestic violence, and that of marginalized people of Central America—I find myself similarly pulled in different directions. The process of *kenosis* or emptying is one that has reinforced the pain for persons already lacking power, especially when it is urged prescriptively upon them. On the other hand, I am drawn to explore the implications of this hymn that celebrates God's own move into history at the side and on the side of these same persons on the margins.

In addition to these aspects of my context, several moments of my past history with this text also shape my reading. This text is deep in my unconscious in the form of the hymn 'At the Name of Jesus', which is a much-loved hymn in my church. (In fact, the melody of that hymn was running through my head the whole time I worked on this project, and I found myself typing to its rhythm.) I am an ordained minister, and this passage was the text assigned for exegesis as part of my ordination process. That previous encounter has predisposed me to read the text with a spin toward questions of 'vocation', both in the professional sense and in the sense of the call common to all people to live out their full humanity.³

The hymn in Philippians 2 is also a text that was thrown in my face repeatedly during my years as an assistant pastor. It was cited by a senior pastor who intended its words to shame me into obedience and into the effacing of my own will in favor of his, as part of a syndrome of emotional battering that nearly succeeded in putting a permanent end, not only to my wilfulness, but also to my life. As a result, I have had to fight against using the distancing effects of abstraction, generalization and professional *artificio*—skill, cunning and deceit—as insulation in this reading.

3. This human calling is how I understand the Christian expression, 'to live in Christ'.

Occasion of the Letter

Contexts of suffering that in my experience cluster around this text as if around a magnet echo what I understand to be Paul's own situation in prison at the time of writing, and that of the community to which he wrote. It is not clear what was happening to them, but the letter itself portrays a part and consequence of their suffering as anxiety that the partnership in ministry they shared with Paul would be terminated should he not survive his imprisonment (Phil. 1.18b-25).

I am struck by Paul's way of addressing that suffering by an accent on 'joy' and 'rejoicing' throughout the letter, and by his incorporation of a hymn into the letter in ch. 2, and perhaps in a paraphrase in the very singable 'Rejoice in the Lord always' (4.4-7). Perhaps they were indeed hymns sung in worship by the congregation at Philippi. Paul may have cited them here much as African American preachers incorporate into their preaching hymns that retell and celebrate the principal truths and stories of the faith, and thus tap into a reservoir of strength and courage that they can then develop in the specific analysis of the sermon.

Literary Context

The hymn in 2.5-11 functions as the sharp midpoint of a three-part ring structure in the first two chapters of Paul's letter. Following the greeting and thanksgiving (1.1-11), the first section of the chiasmus (1.12-2.4) acknowledges the realities of his context and theirs and of the anxieties that haunt them. Paul thus presents his own solidarity with them in their suffering, as well as the solidarity of Christ, as the reason they can rejoice regardless of what befalls them or him. The hymn (2.5-11) then sketches in the spare language of poetry the theological key that will empower them to survive the present sufferings, namely Christ as the one in whom they are to find encouragement—*παράκλησις*. The remainder of ch. 2 then identifies specific steps they can take as a community to see them through.

Close Reading of the Text

The clue of how to sing the hymn is given in v. 5. Just as ch. 1 and the beginning of ch. 2 pointed to the intertwining of the Philippians' story with Paul's story in a pattern of community wellbeing and unity for the sake of Christ, so now they are urged to share in Christ's own stance toward life. Τοῦτο φρονεῖτε ἐν ὑμῖν ὃ καὶ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ ('Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus' [NRSV]) is not an invitation to abstraction and the intellectual escapism to which I found myself fleeing. Instead, the etymology of the verb draws us

not to the head alone, but to head and heart together as the organizing center of the human person, where thought, attitude, and concern come together. The point is not that one should think about or understand the world the way Jesus did, but rather that one should come as an integrated whole to life as Jesus did. The hymn explores that center.

In brief, the formative center or 'mindedness' is the story of the movement of Christ Jesus:

- A. . . from primordial identity in the form of God (2.6)
- B. through appropriate actions to live out that identity (2.7a-b)
- C. to incarnation as truly human (2.7c-d)
- B'. through appropriate actions to live out that identity (2.8)
- A. to the result (δὲ καὶ) of realizing God's purpose:
God exalts and gives the name above all names so that
(ὡς) humanity, in turn, bows and confesses (2.9-11).

Scholarly debate about this hymn centers on its provenance, assuming that Paul himself was not 'moonlighting' as a hymn-writer. Is it principally Jewish Christian or gentile Christian in the imagery by which it speaks of Jesus? The debate remains unresolved. The principal lexical discussion turns on the words *ὁμοίωμα* ('likeness') and *σχήμα* ('shape' or 'outward form'⁴). The debate is whether these words place the hymn writer in a gnostic or docetic context, saying that Jesus only *seemed* to be human (or as I put it in introductory classes, the divine ducking into a phone booth to zip on a human suit that only covers but does not change the real super-hero identity), or whether they should be understood in Paul's usage as affirming Jesus' full humanity—without, of course, the sinfulness of the rest of us. Strangely enough, a similar debate does not surround the meaning of the word *μορφή* ('form'), despite the paradoxical affirmation of Jesus as being in the 'form' of God, then taking the 'form' of a slave. Or perhaps the silence on a matter related to slavery is not surprising among interpreters who come in large majority from the dominant culture, whose wont is to spiritualize such references instead of examining their potential social implications.

Engaging the Text

My close reading of the text suggests that the extant lexical discussions and debates about the hymn's provenance are red herrings

4. The NRSV's use of 'form' to translate both *σχῆμα* (found only in the last phrase of v. 7) and *μορφή* (found in v. 6 and earlier in v. 7) obscures the fact that two distinct words are used in the Greek.

diverting us both from the conformity of the hymn to the gospel encountered elsewhere in Paul's letters and in the canonical Gospels, and from a social reading of the language (which in fact might be enhanced by further work on the implications of the word *μορφή*). The pursuit of that reading involves both literary and theological analyses of the hymn itself and the exploration of what might be called a 'dynamic intertextuality' that entails, not direct citation, but theological transposition into the christological 'key' of this hymn.

The hymn begins with the affirmation that Jesus (like other human beings?) bears the divine image. The route from that primordial formal identity with God to incarnation in full humanity is what is encompassed in the double step of self-emptying and identification with the most marginalized of people, one who is enslaved. This dynamic mirrors God's engagement with Israel, as seen in the Exodus traditions that portray a God who met God's people, not when they were riding the crest of power and national prestige, but when they were enslaved in Egypt. The new key of the hymn, however, marks a shift from the community's history to Jesus, the Anointed One, as the locus of divine presence among humankind, or what might be called God's historical project.

From that central fact (κήρυγμα or κήρυγμα) of incarnation follows the vocation or *κλήσις* of life in conformity with God's historical project. That vocation is not humiliation and subjection (as v. 8 has often been read prescriptively), but rather a life in solidarity with people who are most lacking in honor and prestige. In terms of the narratives of the canonical Gospels, that same vocation is unfolded in a life of commitment to God's βασιλεία—the sort of historical project that would lead to Jesus' crucifixion by forces operating out of a different value structure. In the hymn as in the Gospels, God is affirmed not to allow death to carry the last word, which belongs instead to the life that overcomes death. In the hymn the proclamation of resurrection comes not through the narratives of the empty tomb and appearances of the risen one, but in the form of a liturgical celebration echoed throughout the cosmos (Phil. 2.9-11).

The movement or dynamic of the hymn, from its beginning in v. 6 to the glorious confession in v. 11, suggests that the Philipians to whom the letter was addressed may well have been persons of power and prestige, whom Paul was calling to recognize a different model of human life than the one that prevailed among them. Their old model appears to have equated success and wellbeing with the sort of financial security and social honor that they apparently enjoyed prior to the troubles that recently beset them. The new model does not

appeal to evidence of worldly security and comfort, but rather reminds the Philippians that the way and truth of God are sufficient to see them through their present sufferings.

Engaged by the Text

As a theological key, the hymn offers not an abstract, universalizing Christology but a celebration of Jesus' incarnation into a life clearly centered on—'minded' toward, if you will—the logic of divine identity and commitment central to the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament alike. According to this hymn, Jesus is portrayed as in no way the innocent victim forced to accept humiliation and abasement as somehow good for him, or denoting the mark of a holy life. Rather, Jesus acts at the acme of power, from an integrative center of his life that makes him a trustworthy companion especially for those who suffer.

The drama sketched in the hymn is not that of human achievement striving toward God, but rather that of the Christ as God's full identification with humanity, leaving the safety of divine identity to join the most vulnerable of human beings. Being humble and obedient does not mean groveling, but moving in deliberate solidarity and commitment with God's own logic, called elsewhere God's *βασίλεια*. At work within the text read in this way is what Rita Nakashima Brock calls the 'hermeneutics of wisdom', which recovers the tales that have sustained one's culture, rejects innocence in favor of survival skills that benefit the whole community, and requires preservation of a multi-layered self that keeps its options open.⁵

In short, the text conveys a summons to commitment to a vocation of full humanity that will not compromise even to cheat death. According to this hymn, the result of such a life is not a personal reward for good behavior, but God's emphatic 'yes!' to, and celebration of, life; and God's 'no!' to death's claim to speak the final word.

Reading this again from the multiple contexts I identified at the outset, I continue to rage at the misuse of this text by persons with power to abuse and intimidate persons without it. I am struck by the common note in this account of the life of Jesus as the Christ and in the synoptic Gospels—a note which sounds the clear tone of solidarity with, and commitment to, persons pushed to the margins of life and of society as the human echo of God's presence. It is Exod. 3.17—God who hears the cry of God's people—transposed into a new key,

or a new tune discovered for a beloved hymn text.

Where the threat appropriately comes in singing this hymn is when I sing it in the taffeta and velvet robes of academia or other trappings of power and prestige, for its melody of a 'mindedness' that is the product not of a PhD, but of solidarity and identification with those on the margins, strains the heart if not the throat.

Conclusion

Insofar as the above study takes into account the multifaceted reality of women's lives experienced in the light of particular events and circumstances, in commitment to the physical, psychological and social well-being of all women and men, and in the framework of confession of and response to a divine reality sharing that commitment, it does represent one critical, feminist, theological reading of Phil. 2.5-11. It is clearly not the *only* possible reading that would merit such a label. Those controlling principles, however, as well as the limits defined by the language, literary form and social context of the text itself, prevent the likely plurality of readings from dissolving into the relativism that considers any and every reading acceptable. In particular, the commitment to the life and wellbeing of all women and men, and the affirmation of the theological significance of that commitment, mandate that those who engage in a reading conformed to those values do so in a community of critical engagement one with another about the interpretations each would offer.

The communal dialogical context, the critical reflection on the interpreter's social location and experience, and the commitment or engagement needed for such interpretation represent factors not usually recognized as essential dimensions of the introduction to biblical studies. In fact, despite the contextual hermeneutical challenges brought to the discipline of biblical studies from many quarters in recent years, such factors are often explicitly disallowed—particularly in introductory courses and discussions—in favor of a critical methodology that incorporates ideals of objectivity and value-neutrality, and tools supposedly able to support such ideals.

Perhaps the most significant challenge brought to biblical studies by critical, feminist, theological interpretation is that it is not a single methodology that can be described or learned, and then applied in all circumstances. Rather, it is an art which, while it may be encouraged by a book or article, can only be appropriated in a process of accompaniment and mutual engagement of teacher—learner and learner—teacher with the texts of life and the life of texts.

5. Rita Nakashima Brock, 'Dusting the Bible on the Floor: A Hermeneutics of Wisdom', in Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the Scriptures*, I, pp. 64-75.