

Module TRDL7072: The Bible: Contemporary Approaches

Assignment Two

Are Feminist Concerns and Biblical Authority Mutually Exclusive?

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Are feminist concerns and biblical authority mutually exclusive? There are many, both within and outside the church who would answer with a resounding yes. But that is by no means the only answer to be found. After defining some terms and briefly considering the problem, I will look at several different approaches which attempt to hold on to both the authority of the Bible and the validity and importance of women's experience in varying ways. Ultimately, I will suggest, along with Phyllis Bird and others, that the authority of the Bible is to be found in its unique nature as the Word of God speaking through human words. It is interpreted anew in each new context and has authority as each particular community hears the Word of God speaking to them, and the person and mission of God revealed to them in and through this text. When biblical authority is understood in this way, it becomes possible to see the Bible as a source for the liberation of women and other oppressed groups that is so central to feminism rather than simply as a weapon of oppression. Indeed, I would go so far as to say it can only have true authority when understood in this way.

I: Defining Terms

At the outset, it is important to clarify what is understood by certain key terms. As Ann Loades points out in her introduction to feminist interpretation, there is no "one thing" meant by the term feminism. However, key to the understanding of this concept is the idea that a feminist will "seek change for the better in terms of justice for women" and that this "requires detailed, unremitting attention to women's perspectives... [in order to] dislodge the androcentrism which defines males and their experience as the normal or neutral standard and females and their experience as a variation on or even deviation from that norm."¹ Whilst I will use the terms feminist and feminism throughout this essay, I wish to acknowledge here that some white, western feminists have, in a similar way to the androcentric patriarchal structures which they criticize, been guilty of making their particular female experience into the universal female experience. Although as a white western female I cannot speak to the experience of those women who are BIWOC² or who

¹ Ann Loades, "Feminist Interpretation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation* (ed. John Barton: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 81-82.

² Black Indigenous Women of Colour

live outside the western hemisphere, the terms feminism and feminist as used here are understood more broadly as incorporating also the experience and concerns of those women, who would often define themselves as womanist rather than feminist. Feminist concerns are therefore understood here as relating to the struggle for emancipation, justice and equality for all women everywhere, and as we will see, by extension, for liberation of all those who are oppressed.

Biblical authority is certainly harder to define. As Brown notes, it “means different things to different people from different contexts.”³ However, it is perhaps helpful to categorize the different ways in which people understand and speak of biblical authority. Mary Ann Tolbert has proposed the following three forms: narrative authority for the individual, formational authority for the community and doctrinal authority for the institution. For each of these forms, the Bible’s holiness and authority is located differently: “in the text or stories of the Bible, in the social or symbolic meaning of the Bible, or in its divine origin and status.”⁴ It is the third form which is most often debated in discussions of biblical authority and which causes the most potential difficulty for feminist interpretation. However, I would argue that both narrative and formational authority are equally important and equally legitimate forms and deserve more attention in the discussion. Brown himself writes that “biblical authority is reader responsive... dynamic and life shaping.”⁵ Michael Joseph Brown believes that “any interpretation we arrive at and any authority we ascribe to it find their confirmation within our communities.”⁶ That I believe is key. The authority of the bible is essentially contextual. It has its primary authority, if not its only authority in the communities which canonized it and which continue to read and interpret it today. After all, authority must be acknowledged in order to truly be authority.

³ William P. Brown, “Introduction,” in *Engaging Biblical Authority: Perspectives on the Bible as Scripture* (ed. William P. Brown; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), ix.

⁴ See Korte’s discussion in Anne-Marie Korte, “Recapturing the Sacred: Feminist-Theological Hermeneutics and the Authority of Holy Texts,” *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research* 12 (2004): 16ff.

⁵ Brown, “Introduction,” xiii.

⁶ Michael Joseph Brown, “Hearing the Master’s Voice,” in *Engaging Biblical Authority: Perspectives on the Bible as Scripture* (ed. William P. Brown; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 16.

II: Feminist Concerns and Biblical Authority: The Problem

Beginning in the 19th century and continuing to the present day, there has been a growing recognition of the patriarchal, androcentric nature of the Bible, from its composition and canonization through to much of the history of its interpretation. Rosemary Radford Ruether summarizes:

“The Bible was shaped by males in a patriarchal culture, so much of its revelatory experiences were interpreted by men from a patriarchal perspective. The ongoing interpretation of these revelatory experiences and their canonization further this patriarchal bias by eliminating traces of female experience or interpreting them in an androcentric way. The Bible, in turn, becomes the authoritative source for the justification of patriarchy in Jewish and Christian society.”⁷

How then is it possible for women, or men, committed to liberation, justice and equality for women in all areas of life to consider the Bible as an authoritative document, or even as the Word of God? Letty Russell formulates the dilemma as a choice between faithfulness to the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures or faithfulness to one’s integrity as a whole human being.⁸ It is a dilemma which primarily faces those women who identify both as feminists and as women of faith, or at least those who study the sacred texts of Judaism and Christianity. For those outside the faith community, the Bible has primarily been dismissed as a document of female oppression which need not be engaged with. This, as Bird notes, only intensifies the dilemma for feminists within the faith community.⁹ Ruether writes that “Traditions die when a new generation is no longer able to reappropriate the foundational paradigm in a meaningful way; when it is experienced as meaningless or even as demonic.”¹⁰ Thus, if the message of the Bible was experienced by women as “pointing them only toward continued victimization and not redemption, it would be perceived as false and demonic in this way,

⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Letty M. Russell; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 116.

⁸ Letty M. Russell, “Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, (ed. Letty M. Russell; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 137.

⁹ Phyllis A. Bird, “Biblical Authority in Light of Feminist Critique,” in *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1997), 249.

¹⁰ Ruether, “Feminist Interpretation,” 112.

and women could no longer identify themselves as Christians.”¹¹ And yet, we are far from that. Increasing numbers of female (and male) scholars are engaging in feminist theology and feminist interpretation of the Bible. There are increasingly signs of progress within the church on issues of justice and equality for women. And the question of the relationship between feminist concerns and biblical authority is one which continues to be discussed. It is a question which has been essentially unavoidable for all those engaged in feminist interpretation of the Bible and has thus been likened by some to the relationship between King Midas and gold: “Whatever we touch turns to the question of authority.”¹² It is to this question which we now turn.

III: By Whose Authority: The Authority of Scripture and the Authority of Women’s Experience

One of the central issues, if not the central issue, in discussion of biblical authority from a feminist perspective concerns the place of women’s experience and the authority given to that experience in reading and interpretation of the Bible.¹³ Feminist interpreters, with their recognition of the impossibility of an objective interpretation uninfluenced by one’s context and experience, are particularly concerned with attention to experience in interpretation, and as feminists, with attention to the experience of women in particular. But how exactly is the experience of women, for so long silenced and ignored, to be related to one’s understanding of the authority of the biblical text? Among feminist interpreters, there are three main positions on this issue, each of which will be discussed below.

III (i): Women’s Experience as Primary: Schüssler Fiorenza’s *ekklesai gynaiikon*

The first position is best represented by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. For Fiorenza, the authority of the Bible has to be subordinated to the experience of women, and more specifically “the personally and politically reflected experience of oppression and

¹¹ Ruether, “Feminist Interpretation,” 112.

¹² Sharon H. Ringe, “The Word of God may be Hazardous to your Health,” *Theology Today* 49, no. 3 (1992): 369.

¹³ See Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, “Feminist Perspectives on Bible and Theology: An Introduction to Selected Issues and Literature,” *Interpretation* 42, no. 1 (1988): 6ff.

liberation.”¹⁴ The Bible itself, as a fundamentally patriarchal and androcentric book, which continues to be interpreted in a manner which is oppressive to women, cannot be made the authority or central norm of the Christian faith. Fiorenza locates this authority wholly outside Scripture, and indeed outside the tradition of the patriarchal church. The place of divine revelation and the central norm for the Christian faith is “the *ekklesia* of women... not simply “the experience” of women but the experience of women (and all those oppressed) struggling for liberation from patriarchal oppression.”¹⁵ It is this “woman-church” which has the authority to proclaim biblical texts as the word of God, or not, based on whether or not they are experienced as useful to the cause of women in their fight against oppression: “only the nonsexist and nonandrocentric traditions of the Bible and the nonoppressive traditions of biblical interpretation have the theological authority of revelation.”¹⁶ For Fiorenza, the Bible is not so much an authority to follow as it is a resource which, despite its patriarchal character, can be and is used by women in their struggle for liberation. That ultimately is what endows it with authority, not a normative authority but an “experiential enabling authority.”¹⁷ Some of course would respond that Fiorenza, with her total emphasis on the authority of women’s experience in their fight for liberation, has gone too far. Within the church certainly there are many who would identify as feminists and yet are uncomfortable locating the source of authority for the Christian faith totally outside the Bible and church tradition. Fiorenza redefines the Bible’s authority to the extent that it is, for some, unrecognizable and unacceptable.

III (i): Women’s Experience as Subordinate: Johnstone, Scanzoni and Hardesty

At the other end of the spectrum are those who, while not denying the importance of experience in interpretation and the unavoidable subjectivity of each interpretation, certainly make such experience subordinate to Scripture in some way. Sakenfeld, in her

¹⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 32.

¹⁵ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Will to Choose or Reject: Continuing our Critical Work,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Letty M. Russell; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 128.

¹⁶ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “A Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics: Biblical Interpretation and Liberation Theology,” in *The Challenge of Liberation Theology: A First-World Response* (eds. L. Dale Richesin and Brian Mahan; New York: Orbis Books, 1981), 106. Cited by Letty M. Russell, “Introduction: Liberating the Word,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Letty M. Russell; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 16.

¹⁷ Fiorenza, “The Will to Choose or Reject,” 136

survey of feminist biblical scholarship locates the literature of the evangelical wing of American Protestantism at this end of the spectrum, taking essays presented at the 1984 Evangelical Colloquium on Women and the Bible as illustrative of this.¹⁸ Robert K. Johnstone, one of the contributors to the colloquium, recognizes the importance of a hermeneutic which is sensitive to the reader's experience but seeks to protect such an approach from what he terms "destructive subjectivism" through consideration also of the diverse range of Christian perspectives across culture and through history, the "canonical check" of Scripture and the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation.¹⁹ As a further example, Sakenfeld points to work of Scanzoni and Hardesty who follow the Methodist quadrilateral. For them, Scripture is always the first source of theology, but the interpretation of Scripture always requires the other three sides of the quadrilateral: tradition, experience and reason. Notably, the definition of experience is different to that emphasized by Fiorenza. Where her focus is on women's experience of oppression and their struggle for liberation, Scanzoni and Hardesty define experience more broadly as "our own personal religious experiences and those of people we know."²⁰ While they insist that women's religious experience be taken into account in interpretation, they do, in contrast to Fiorenza, formally subordinate those experiences to the authority of Scripture.

III (iii): Scripture and Women's Experience in Partnership: Russell and Ruether

A middle ground between these two perspectives can be found in the work of Letty Russell and Rosemary Radford Ruether.

For Ruether, "human experience is both the starting point and the ending point of the circle of interpretation."²¹ Those engaged in feminist interpretation of scripture will of course pay particular attention to women's experience: it becomes an interpretative key for feminist hermeneutics. How then does this relate to the authority of the Bible? Noting the extent of

¹⁸ See Sakenfeld, "Feminist Perspectives," 7-8.

¹⁹ "Biblical Authority & Interpretation the Test Case of Women's Role in the Church & Home Updated" in *Women, Authority & the Bible* (ed Alvera Mickelsen; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 29-41. Cited by Sakenfeld, "Feminist Perspectives," 8.

²⁰ Letha D. Scanzoni, and Nancy A. Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be: Biblical Feminism for Today* (rev. ed.; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 31. Cited by Sakenfeld, "Feminist Perspectives," 8.

²¹ Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation," 111

the patriarchal bias in the Bible, Ruether argues that we would be forced to reject it as normative altogether if not for the correlation to be found between feminist critical principles, drawing on the key of women's experience, and the biblical critical principle. This biblical critical principle she identifies as "the prophetic-messianic tradition."²² This she defines not as a "canon within the canon" but rather "a critical perspective and process through which the biblical tradition constantly reevaluates, in new contexts, what is truly the liberating Word of God, over against both the sinful deformations of contemporary society and also the limitations of past biblical traditions."²³ Time and again in Scripture, as God speaks through the prophets, it is to critique rather than to sanctify the status quo. Ruether sees strong parallels between this biblical principle and feminist critique which "likewise examines structures of injustice toward women, unmask[s] and denounces their cultural and religious sanctifications, and points toward an alternative humanity, an alternative society, capable of affirming the personhood of women."²⁴ To those who would argue that feminists push the prophetic-messianic critique too far when they apply it to feminist concerns for the liberation of women, and that they do so without biblical authority, Ruether responds that "the prophetic tradition remains true to itself, to its own impulse and spirit, *only by engagement in constant restatement in the context of the issues of justice and injustice in its times.*"²⁵ It is not static but in an ongoing state of renewal. Ruether finds examples of this renewal within the biblical text itself, such as in Jesus' reinterpretation of the text of Isaiah 61 in Luke 4.²⁶ And just as one can see the limitations and deformation of the prophetic traditions at certain points in Scripture, so too can modern liberation movements, feminism among them, suffer from the same limitations and deformations.²⁷ It is this correlation between the prophetic-messianic tradition and feminist critique of patriarchal oppression in all its forms which allows both scripture and

²² Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation," 117.

²³ Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation," 117.

²⁴ Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation," 118.

²⁵ Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation," 118 (emphasis added).

²⁶ See Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation," 120-122.

²⁷ See Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation," 119. She compares the way in which the prophets seem to be oblivious to the injustice suffered by certain groups (women and slaves) to the way in which white, middle-class feminists have often not recognized the needs and experiences of black or lower-class women.

the experience of women to hold on to their authority and to exercise it in partnership for their mutual benefit.

The image of biblical authority and the authority of women's experience in partnership is even more clearly presented by Letty Russell. She writes:

"The Bible has authority in my life because it makes sense of my experience and speaks to me about the meaning and purpose of my humanity in Jesus Christ. In spite of its ancient and patriarchal worldviews, in spite of its inconsistencies and mixed messages, the story of God's love affair with the world leads me to a vision of the New Creation that impels my life."²⁸

Russell's own particular experience is central to the development of what she terms her "interpretive key" namely "the witness of scripture to God's promise (for the mending of creation) on its way to fulfillment."²⁹ But she finds in the Bible a different, perhaps deeper, authority than that ascribed by Fiorenza's "women-church." She notes that she does not seem to be able to give up on the Bible as normative for her theology, even as she rejects as unauthoritative its patriarchal context and those parts of the Bible which "den[y] this intention of God for the liberation of groaning creation in all its parts."³⁰ Russell seeks to redefine the paradigm of authority so that it is no longer understood as domination. This, she writes, is the "prevailing paradigm of authority in Christian and Jewish religion... [in which] all questions of authority are settled with reference to the "hit parade of authority.""³¹ Instead, she calls for an understanding of authority as partnership, in which multiple authorities are able to enrich rather than outrank one another. This kind of authority is exercised in community and values diversity as enrichment of the whole rather than rejecting it as a threat to the status quo. Russell suggests that this understanding is perhaps not unlike the early church community's understanding of consensus: "a consensus in the shared story of God's love in Jesus Christ rather than doctrinal consensus."³² This understanding of authority as partnership means that we are not forced

²⁸ Russell, "Authority and Challenge," 138.

²⁹ Russell, "Authority and Challenge," 139.

³⁰ Russell, "Authority and Challenge," 139.

³¹ Russell, "Authority and Challenge," 143.

³² Russell, "Authority and Challenge," 144.

to choose between locating our “interpretative key” or central norm of the faith inside or outside the biblical canonical tradition. It is no longer a choice between prioritizing either the authority of Scripture or the authority of women’s experience. Instead, experience, tradition, the witness of the bible and intellectual research are able to enrich each other in our understanding of God and God’s presence with us rather than being submitted to a hierarchical order of authority and importance.³³ Russell’s answer to the question of the relationship between biblical authority and the authority of women’s experience is that “The two belong together, as communities of struggle and faith in every age respond to the invitation to partnership with God in the mending of creation and discover that their lives and their understanding of the biblical witness have been changed.”³⁴

IV: The Word became Flesh and Dwelt Among Us: A Contextual Authority and an Ongoing Conversation

One aspect highlighted in particular by Russell and Ruether is the importance of contextuality. Ruether’s prophetic-messianic tradition must continually be restated for each new context. Russell’s framework of authority as partnership is one that is worked out anew in each community of faith in every age. It is not difficult to see that the experience of women is necessarily contextual. I would argue that the authority of the Bible is similarly so. It cannot, or at least should not, be separated from the context of the community which reads and interprets it:

“For what is at issue with respect to the Scriptures is not what lies behind the text in the form of an (always elusive) original meaning but what lies in front of it where the interpreter stands. The Bible always addresses itself to the time of interpretation... If the text does not apply to us it is an empty text...We take the text in relation to ourselves, understanding ourselves in its light, even as our situation throws *its* light upon the text, allowing it to disclose itself differently, perhaps in unheard-of ways.”³⁵

³³ Russell, “Authority and Challenge,” 145-146.

³⁴ Russell, “Authority and Challenge,” 146.

³⁵ Gerald L. Bruns, “Midrash and Allegory: the Beginning of Scriptural Interpretation,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 627, 633. Cited by Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Feminist Revision and the Bible* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 62.

To find support for this within the biblical text itself, one need look no further than the prologue to John's Gospel: And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (1:14). In the incarnation, the God whom Scripture claims to make known takes on human form and enters a particular human context. When we speak of the Word of God in Scripture, I suggest that we also see it entering our particular human context as we read and interpret. And it is in this context that it has authority. Sharon Ringe points out that "If what a speaker or author says is to have authority, it has to find an echo in his or her audience's experience or longing."³⁶ And in contexts in which those experiences and longings have to do with women's oppression and their desire and struggle for liberation, justice and equality, the Bible can be considered authoritative only if it is found to speak to those experiences and longings. That it does precisely that is what Russell, Ruether and countless others have found to be true.

Phyllis Bird writes of the difficulty inherent in the nature of the Bible as the Word of God in human words: "How do we identify the divine within the human, distinguish eternal truth from transient and fallible human claims? How do we apprehend the Spirit in a work of ink and paper, papyrus and parchment?" And her response too is that it is contextual: "That is the problem of every generation and every reader, and every solution is partial and fleeting. Every effort to separate Spirit from flesh, the timeless from the time-bound, falls short and cannot escape the trap of its own time."³⁷ That is the pitfall which feminist understandings of biblical authority must seek to avoid. To return to Tolbert's classification of the three forms of authority, feminists must take care that in reappropriating the narrative and formational authority of Scripture, we do not seek create a new fixed doctrinal authority and apply it comprehensively. Every time we seek to do so, "the result is a straitjacket on the reader/believer – and on the Spirit, which usually manages to escape anyway and manifest itself in strange places, like the feminist movement."³⁸ The contextual nature of biblical authority necessitates an ongoing conversation. Bird again:

³⁶ Ringe, "The Word of God may be Hazardous to your Health," 368.

³⁷ Bird, "Biblical Authority," 253.

³⁸ Bird, "Biblical Authority," 262.

“If we have rightly understood the conversation within the canon of Scripture, we must continue it. For it is a conversation about a God who is alive and not dead, and about a world that is God’s creation and the place of God’s encounter with humankind...We cannot return to the biblical world, nor can we make it speak our language or endorse our concerns. It has no feminist message, in my view, but it does have a message about the nature of our humanity and the requirements of justice that in our day must be translated into terms of full equality of women in order that the image of God may be fully revealed.”³⁹

Concluding Remarks

To summarize, I suggest that feminist concerns and biblical authority are not mutually exclusive, but an emphasis on the experience of women and due attention to the harmful and oppressive ways in which the Bible has been (and in some contexts continues to be) interpreted and imposed upon women requires a reconsideration of our understanding of biblical authority. It is possible for women’s experience and the witness of Scripture to form a partnership of authority. And as the Bible is set free to speak and be heard and understood anew in each context, to reveal the Word of God in that context, it is able to retain its authority. For “ultimately the Bible’s authority rests on its ability to reveal its Author in a way that enables us to recognize Her in our own day... the word of God cannot be contained in any document; nor can it be comprehended apart from the Word made flesh, which is both the center and the norm of Scripture.”⁴⁰

³⁹ Bird, “Biblical Authority,” 263.

⁴⁰ Bird, “Biblical Authority,” 264.

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