Course Reading


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Until Vatican Council II most Catholics encountered the Bible almost exclusively in the Sunday liturgy, which was the only time the liturgical readings were in the vernacular. The Roman Missal did not present even the New Testament completely or in systematic fashion. Furthermore, the biblically based homily was a rarity, the readings serving most often as a convenient point of departure for moral exhortation that often had little to do with the biblical text. Thus the average Catholic had at best a cursory and fragmentary acquaintance with the Bible and practically no real formation in Scripture.
The remote preparation for the postconciliar biblical renaissance among Catholics began with the publication in 1943 of Pius XII's encyclical on biblical studies, *Divino Afflante Spiritu.* This document belatedly permitted Catholic scholars to use the historical-critical methods of biblical study that had long been current in Protestant biblical scholarship. The pope encouraged Catholic biblical scholars to make their new findings available in the church, especially to theologians and pastors. Consequently, by the time the Council opened in 1962 there was a solid body of Catholic biblical scholarship available to the Council participants and a corps of trained biblical scholars ready to aid in their work. Despite the deficiency that the complete absence of women among the scholars or Council participants represented, the Council constituted a watershed in Catholic engagement with the Bible.

Vatican II's Dogmatics Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum,* was published at the very end of the Council, November 18, 1965. Although as a compromise document it contained inconsistencies and even some virtually irreconcilable tensions, it introduced some genuinely new emphases that had a profound effect on the life of Catholics.

First, it laid to rest the two-source theory of divine revelation, which most Catholics since the Council of Trent regarded as doctrine. According to this theory Scripture and tradition constituted two parallel and equal sources of divine revelation. And, since the insistence on tradition was a uniquely Catholic tenet proposed and defended against the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* or Scripture alone as the source of revelation and the norm of faith, the *de facto* polemically inspired position in Catholicism was the practical if not theoretical superiority of tradition to Scripture. For most Catholics the "teaching of the church," which for all practical purposes meant the current position of the Vatican on any given theological or pastoral question, was equivalent to tradition and constituted all one really needed as a norm of faith and morals. The Bible was viewed as a sourcebook for church authorities who alone had the training and divine guidance necessary to interpret it correctly and who communicated, in the form of official teaching, whatever of its contents the ordinary Catholic needed to know. *Dei Verbum* recognized that there is only one source of divine revelation, Jesus Christ who is "the mediator and the sum total of Revelation (DV 1.2). Therefore, the interplay of the biblical text and ecclesial tradition in witnessing to and mediating this unique revelation in Jesus had to be thoroughly reconceptualized.

Second, in attempting to explain the interaction between Scripture and tradition the Council made it clear that the "Magisterium [that is, the teaching authority of the church] is not superior to the word of God, but is its servant" (DV 2.10). Thus Scripture, which during the four centuries since the Protestant Reformation had been reduced to an arsenal of prooftexts in the theological enterprise of the church and to a source of Sunday liturgical fragments for the average Catholic, reemerged as an indispensable and critical factor in theology and pastoral practice.

Third, Scripture was recognized as a rich resource for the spiritual life of Catholics. In the Scriptures, *Dei Verbum* taught, God comes to meet and commune with us. Therefore, "all the preaching of the Church, as indeed the entire Christian religion, should be nourished and ruled by Sacred Scripture" (DV 6.21). Scripture, long a *term incognito* for Catholics, must be "open wide to the Christian faithful" (DV 6.22). This requires committed effort on the part of biblical scholars to make the meaning of the text clear so that it might function as the very "soul of sacred theology" and the content and form of all pastoral activity and especially of the celebration of the liturgy (DV 6.23-24). The biblical text, translated in a graceful vernacular and supplemented by accessible notes, belongs in the hands of all the faithful. Catholics, in short, were to become "people of the book" in a way they had not been since before the Middle Ages.

The response of Catholics to the Council's teaching on the Bible was astonishingly enthusiastic. Bible study groups in parishes, summer courses in Scripture, lectures by Catholic biblical scholars, and Bible based retreats and workshops proliferated and were habitually oversubscribed. Catholic publishers brought out new translations of the Bible and a wide array of study tools. Liturgical musicians created a repertoire of hymns based on biblical texts, and the biblical homily replaced the Sunday sermon and became a common feature of both daily liturgy and biblical prayer services of all kinds. Catholics discovered the biblical text as a mediator of the encounter with God that was, as the Council had suggested, parallel to the Eucharist (DV 6.21).

Women, both lay and religious, were among the most enthusiastic students and promoters of the Bible in the immediate wake of the Council. But the Council closed just as the "second wave" of feminism broke on western shores. It was only a matter of minutes, metaphorically speaking, before feminist consciousness and the renewed love of Scripture clashed. Once women began to read the whole of Scripture rather than
listening to a few selected passages and began to hear it in contemporary vernacular rather than in Latin or in an archaic English made innocuous by overfamiliarity, they began to find the beloved text highly problematic.

THE TENSION BETWEEN THE BIBLE AND FEMINISM

The tension between the biblical text and women whose feminist consciousness was rising began with particularities of the text and progressed to theoretical problems about the Bible itself. Two broad areas of difficulty emerged as women studied and prayed the Scriptures.

First, the scriptural presentation of humanity not only privileged the male as the normative human but presented women (insofar as they were featured at all) as inferior in themselves, subjected to males by divine design, marginal to salvation history, and far more marked by and responsible for sin and evil in the world than men. As women biblical scholars, whose numbers increased dramatically after the Council, examined the Bible they were forced to conclude that this text, which was presented by the church as good news of salvation for all people, was actually a book written largely if not exclusively by men, about men, and for men. Women appeared in Scripture in much the way they appear in church and society, as support systems for males, used and abused by men for the latter’s purposes, and most often relegated to the margins or total obscurity.

Feminist biblical scholars began to develop a vocabulary and theoretical framework, suggested by feminist theory in other disciplines, for talking about the problematic masculinity of Scripture. The biblical text, like most texts in world history, arose in a patriarchal historical setting, that is, in a society and culture in which ruling males owned and dominated other people and most property and used them with impunity for their purposes. Patriarchy is the term that refers to the ideology and social system of “father rule,” which was the virtually universal pattern of social organization in the world of the Bible. The biblical text pervasively reflects this domination-subordination pattern in human relations and often legitimizes it as divinely ordained. Religiously legitimated or sacralized patriarchy is called hierarchy. Not only did the Catholic church not repudiate or condemn patriarchy in general, but it also taught that hierarchy was willed by Jesus as the only appropriate form of organization for the church. The legitimation of patriarchy in family and society follows logically from this theological premise.

Patriarchy, both as ideology and as social system, proceeds from and nourishes a pervasive privileging of males and male reality. The term androcentrism, that is, male centeredness, denotes this obsession with the masculine at the expense of the feminine. Feminists regard androcentrism as not only socially pernicious but idolatrous. Affirming the intrinsic superiority of the male assimilates masculinity to divinity and implies a masculinizing of God. When the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith argued that women could not be ordained because they lacked a “natural resemblance” to Christ, it unwittingly made explicit the heretofore unacknowledged, and heretical, presupposition that underlies much antiwoman theory and practice in the church: that God became human in male form because the male human is a more adequate image of God and this likeness is specifically sexual.

The attitudinal and behavioral consequences of androcentrism and patriarchy is called, collectively, sexism, that is, the conviction, and its consequences in every sphere of life, that men are superior to women simply because they are male. In its more virulent forms sexism betrays its roots in misogyny, fear and hatred of women. The innumerable forms of discrimination, marginalization, exclusion, oppression, and abuse of women and their dependents is sexism in action, often fueled by misogyny.

As women studied Scripture carefully it became increasingly clear that the Bible is an androcentric text that arose in and from a patriarchal culture. The text is frequently explicitly sexist and even misogynistic in its depiction of women, and the actual inferior status of women in contemporary Christian family, church, and society is corroborated by the biblical text. In other words, it was not simply painful and repugnant to women’s religious sensibility to find themselves so negatively presented in Holy Scripture; it was evident that Scripture stood squarely in the path of the feminist agenda of full personhood and equality for all persons, including and especially women. What many Christians believe to be in some sense “the word of God” is, in some important respects, very bad news for women because it legitimates and promotes male oppression of women.

The second problem concerned the biblical presentation of God in overwhelmingly male terms. The biblical metaphors for God are frequently patriarchal: father, lord, king, landowner, slave master, leader of armies. Even the less domineering metaphors such as shepherd reflect an androcentric social universe. Although there are feminine metaphors for God in Scripture (mother, bakerwoman, female householder, mother bear or hen, midwife), and even more importantly a remarkable and sustained personification of God in feminine gestalt as Holy Wisdom, the masculine presentation of God is so pervasive that the theological and
liturgical tradition of the church has virtually excluded the feminine from divinity. The language about and to God in public prayer, preaching, theology, and spirituality has been exclusively masculine, and even the most recent attempts to translate the Bible in more inclusive terms have generally stopped short of modifying exclusively masculine language for God. Although male church authorities maintain that God is Spirit and therefore the category of sex does not apply to God, they continue to insist that only male language is suitable for talking about or to God, at least in public worship.

This problem of a male-gendered God is exacerbated by the fact that God's ultimate self-revelation in human history is a human being, Jesus of Nazareth, who seemed to prefer to address God as “Abba,” a caritative form of father. The New Testament as it is actualized in the church's ritual and teaching is the story of a father-God who sent his son as a male human being to redeem all “men” and make them “brothers” and “sons of God.”

Within a couple decades of the Council, many Catholic women, as their feminist consciousness developed, moved from enthusiasm for the Bible as a privileged locus of encounter with God to vague discomfort, rising anger, deep alienation, and finally rejection of the Bible as a hopelessly oppressive tool of historical and contemporary patriarchy. The problem was no longer simply how to handle individual misogynist narratives (like the rape and murder of the concubine, Jgs 19:22–30) or sexist images (like the comparison of unfaithful Israel to a whore, for example, Hos 2) or patriarchal injunctions (like the banning of women from liturgical leadership, for example, 1 Cor 14:34–35) or even pervasive masculine language for God and humans. The nature of the text itself as revelatory had become a burning question. How can a text that contains so much that is damaging to women function authoritatively in the Christian community as normative of faith and life?

Not all Catholic women have followed this path, nor have all who walked it ended in alienation and rejection. But the theology of the Bible is under enormous pressure from feminist interrogation, and the outcome of the struggle is not a foregone conclusion. A major step forward, however, is the increasing recognition that the problem is not superficial or trivial but theologically substantive and that it must be engaged honestly and rigorously by the best scholarship available. The oppressive character of the text is neither the figment of a paranoid imagination nor the unhappy accident of maladroit translators or exegetes nor an understandable cultural peculiarity like drachmas. The problem is in the text itself, and only a theology of Scripture that takes the problem completely seriously can hope to reclaim this text for women as the “pure and lasting fount of spiritual life” as Vatican II claimed it is (DV 6.21).

REFORMULATING THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

A christological analogy has often been invoked to talk theology about Scripture: as Jesus is the Word of God made flesh, truly divine and truly human without diminishment or confusion of either nature, so Scripture is God's self-communication in human language, truly divine revelation and truly a human text without diminishment or confusion. The shorthand for this faith affirmation is the confession that the Bible is the “word of God.” If this expression is taken literally and reductively the result is biblical docetism, the reduction of the human text to a linguistic disguise for divine speech, absolutely inerrant and authoritative in every detail.

Although Catholics in general do not tend to embrace the theories of verbal inspiration or divine dictation and resultant inerrancy associated with Protestant fundamentalism, they often enough arrive at the same practical conclusions about biblical authority on the basis of a naive literalism in regard to the text. Where such a theory of the inerrancy and infallibility of the biblical text reigns, those who find themselves denigrated by the text, for example, women, have little choice but to accept their inferiority as divinely revealed or to take their religious quest elsewhere.

Three theological questions are raised by this impasse. First, what exactly is meant by calling Scripture the word of God? Second, what are the implications of the answer to the first question for the status of the Bible in the church? Third, is the Bible materially normative for post-biblical Christians?

1. What Does It Mean to Call Scripture the Word of God?

Language, as contemporary linguistic and philosophical studies attest, is a much more complex phenomenon than is often thought. Words, which might be naively assumed to be a system of labels designating in relatively unambiguous fashion the concrete realities of everyday experience, are in fact often used in nonunivocal and nonliteral ways. This means that in order to understand language one must recognize the kind of language being used and understand how such language functions.
The linguistic character of “word of God”: Metaphor. The term word of God is not univocal or literal when it is used to speak of the Bible. First, word of God designates not only, or even primarily, Scripture. It denotes first of all the second “person” of the Trinity and that person made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. From this it is immediately apparent that word of God is not a literal designation, for Jesus is obviously not a unit of language in bodily form but a human being. Second, theological reflection supports the observation that word of God is not a literal designation for the Bible. God is spirit and therefore does not have the physical apparatus of speech, does not think discursively, and is not limited in self-communication by the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of language. In short, nothing about language, which is a human phenomenon, is literally pertinent to divine self-disclosure.

The foregoing leads to the realization that the term word of God, whether applied to Jesus or to the Bible, is linguistically a metaphor. Sallie McFague, with other modern theorists of language, insists that genuine metaphor is not primarily a rhetorical decoration or an abbreviated comparison. It is a proposition (explicit or implied) constituted by an irresolvable tension between what it affirms (which is somehow true) and what it necessarily denies (namely, the literal truth of the assertion). For example, the proposition “Individualism is a cancer of American society” creates a tension between the true affirmation that individualism is a pernicious, even ultimately destructive, characteristic of American culture, and the necessary denial that individualism is a physical pathology. The metaphor is, at the literal level, absurd, but obviously it intends serious meaning. It forces the mind to reach toward meaning that exceeds or escapes effective literal expression.

Effectively used, metaphor is one of the most powerful forms of human language. It carries more meaning and generates deeper and more holistic response than literal language because it appeals not only to the mind but also to the imagination. Because true metaphor is not a stand-in for literal language but the only way to express some complex of meaning that defy adequate literal expression, effective metaphors cannot be translated into univocal, literal language.

The linguistic tension that constitutes metaphor destabilizes the literalistic mind. This is its purpose and power. But because that destabilization is uncomfortable, keeping the mind “in motion” when it would like to “land” in literalistic concreteness, there is an ineradicable temptation when confronted with metaphor to literalize it. A powerful example of how the literalization of a metaphor can wreak intellectual and affective havoc in the religious imagination is the metaphorical proposition “God is our Father.” Obviously, God is not literally a father because God is not a male sexual being who copulates with a female sexual being to beget offspring. God does not literally beget, generate, or father. But so imaginatively entrenched is the literalization of father, a necessarily masculine metaphor for God, that most Christians are genuinely shocked by the use of feminine metaphors, such as mother, for God. The idolatrous result of this literalization can be traced through church history in the patriarchalization of Christian faith.

The temptation to literalize the metaphor word of God is particularly strong in relation to the biblical text precisely because, unlike the second person of the Trinity or Jesus Christ, the Bible is actually composed of human words. It is literally a linguistic reality. Consequently, the mind is not immediately arrested in the process of literalization the way it is when we call Jesus the Word of God incarnate. The literalization, however, results not only in fundamentalistic conclusions about the inerrancy and authority of the biblical text falsely imagined as God’s actual speech, but also in the kinds of complicated and unsatisfactory theological theories of inspiration that both Catholic and Protestant Christianity have generated to explain how God speaks through human words and what the theological implications for faith might be. We will return to this issue shortly.

The referent of “word of God”: Revelation. Obviously, God does not literally speak, but the metaphor word of God certainly intends meaning. Its referent, what it points to, is the entire domain of reality that we call divine revelation, that is, the self-disclosure of God as it is perceived and received by human beings. The ultimate and definitive received self-communication of God, according to Christian faith, is Jesus himself. In Jesus the divine self-gift and human receptivity perfectly coincide in a person who therefore can be called, in truth (though not literally), the Word of God incarnate.

Nature, history (especially that of Israel and the church), and Scripture are also called “word of God” because of their revelatory character. In the wonders of nature, the saving events of history, the words of Scripture, and especially in Jesus, God’s self-gift is offered to and received by human beings. But none of these realities is literally God’s word because, as we have seen, God does not literally speak. One implication of this is that they are not carriers of propositionally formulated (or formulatable) divine information. Revelation is not the communication of otherwise
unavailable facts about God or creation but the loving encounter of God and humans in which the self-disclosure of God invites the responding self-gift of the believer resulting in a shared life, a participation of the human being in the divine life of God as God has shared our life in Jesus. The correlate of this realization, in regard to Scripture, is that the only sense in which the term word literally applies to the Bible is the human sense. The Bible is literally a human linguistic artifact. This statement must be taken with absolute seriousness, just as the affirmation that Jesus is a human being must be taken as literally and fully true. Just as Jesus’ humanity is not a disguise laid over his divinity, so the human language of the Bible is not a veneer, a semantic shell for divine meaning. Nor is it the alienated discourse of a human secretary taking divine dictation. Scripture is really, truly, and insofar as it is language, only human discourse.

The human discourse that constitutes the Bible (but does not necessarily) mediate the encounter with God that we call revelation. But when it does so it is not in spite of the human discourse that constitutes the text but in and through that discourse. Recognition of the truly human character of the text opens up the theological possibility of acknowledging the limitations and mistakes, even the untruths and the oppressiveness in the text, without attributing these shortcomings to God or investing them with divine authority. Inadequacy, distortion, error, and even perversion are intrinsic possibilities of human language that cannot escape the weight of the historical situation in which it occurs or the incapacity of the human agents who use it. We will return shortly to the implications of this realization, namely, the absolute necessity of interpretation, including ideological criticism, if the biblical text as human discourse is to mediate the revelatory encounter.

2. The Special Status of the Bible in the Church

Inspiration and canonicity. The theological question about the special status of the biblical text in the church, that is, its role as sacred Scripture, is usually framed in terms of inspiration, the divine influence in the production of the book, on the resulting text, and in the process of its interpretation, and canonicity, the church’s recognition of this text and no other as its sacred Scripture. Many people are under the erroneous impression that these two categories are related as cause and effect: The church accepted the biblical text as canonical because it recognized this text, and only this text, as divinely inspired. In fact, the situation is virtually the reverse. The church holds that the biblical text is inspired because it has accepted this text as canonical.

The process of canonization (official ecclesiastical acceptance) of the seventy-two books that make up the Bible took several centuries. The earliest Christians regarded the Jewish Bible, which Christians now call the Old Testament, as sacred Scripture inspired by God (cf. 2 Tm 3:15-17). But within twenty years of the death of Jesus the community of his disciples had begun to produce and circulate writings of its own, first letters and then narratives of the life and death of Jesus as well as apocalyptic literature and theological tracts, some of which eventually came to be regarded as Scripture equal in status to the Jewish Bible, which the church continued to regard as Scripture. The path to canonization of the various Epistles, Gospels, and apocalyptic writings composed in the early churches was complicated, but by the fourth century the church had arrived at relative unanimity about which Christian writings, along with the Old Testament, constituted the church’s Bible. However, only at the Council of Trent in 1546, under pressure from the Reformation’s questioning of the canonical status of certain books (notably, in the New Testament, the Epistle of James), did the Catholic church dogmatically define its biblical canon, the list of seventy-two books that alone can and must be considered by all Catholics to compose the Holy Scriptures or the Bible.

The long and complicated history of the acceptance of some books of the Bible and the eventual exclusion of other books, some of which for many years had been regarded as canonical, makes it obvious that there was no litmus test, such as inspiration, by which to establish the canonicity of a text. If such had existed it surely would have been used. Rather, the canonicity of the Scriptures was established by the believing community as it tested the fit between certain ancient texts and its faith. Those texts that were virtually universally accepted by the authorities in the churches as expressive of the faith, often signified by a widespread belief in the apostolic authorship of the book, found their way into the canon. The church expressed its faith in the divine influence on and through these texts by claiming that they were divinely inspired. Consequently, the issues of canonicity and inspiration, although related, are quite distinct.

The Bible’s special status for feminists. Feminist scholars have begun to raise questions about the process and product of biblical canonization. Like the canon of literary classics that has governed education in the Western world since the Renaissance, the biblical canon was established by men
who selected writings by men that men found valuable since they reflected male experience, interests, and theological positions, because these male authorities obviously thought that male experience was equivalent to human experience.

There is little doubt that early church leaders were suspicious of the initiative and authority of women and tended to regard as heretical any literature created by women or that exalted the position of women in the church. Some feminist scholars have suggested that the biblical canon needs to be expanded and/or supplemented by some of the apocryphal literature (early Christian writings not included in the canon), such as the Gospel of Mary, Pistis Sophia, and the Acts of Paul and Thecla, which present women such as Mary Magdalene and Thecla as confidantes of Jesus or Paul and as apostles.

While an actual expansion of the canon is not likely, if indeed it is even possible, scholars in general are tending to pay increasing attention to the noncanonical literature of earliest Christianity, such as the Gospel of Thomas, as indispensable supplemental data for interpreting the canonical literature. Even literature emanating from nonorthodox circles such as Gnosticism can help in the work of reconstructing the largely obliterated history of women in early Christianity.

Furthermore, “heresy” as a condemnatory and delegitimizing category is beginning to be examined and criticized for its ideological agenda rather than being simply accepted as a straightforward and objective theological judgment. Sometimes heresy is whatever challenges the position of those currently in power. In other words, heresy might be simply the definition of the “historical losers” by the “historical winners.” Consequently, feminist scholarship calls for a reexamination of literature excluded or condemned as incompatible with divine revelation but that contains provocative material about women in early Christianity.

The notion of inspiration, although distinct from that of canonicity, is related to the latter in that inspiration is predicated of canonical texts and is a way of talking about their authoritative and normative character. Inspiration has been variously understood in the course of the church’s theological development. The earliest theological understanding of inspiration was based on the Old Testament model of prophetic oracle in which “the word of the Lord came” to the prophet to be delivered to the people (for example, Jer 30:1–2). This ecstatic model of inspiration virtually equated it with revelation. God (quasi-miraculously) communicated the content that the biblical author, for example, Moses or Jeremiah, committed to writing.

It is precisely this virtual equation of inspiration with revelation that, although not theologically defensible, raises the feminist question about inspiration. If all and only the canonical books are inspired, are these the final and sole sources of divine revelation? If these sources are injurious to women, can women continue to regard these texts as authoritative and normative for their religious experience? Women have an interest in maintaining the distinction between biblical inspiration and revelation because the fact that the biblical canon is regarded as inspired does not necessarily entail that all and everything in these texts is revealed by God as authoritative and normative or that no extrabiblical texts can be regarded as revelatory.

In the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas refined the prophetic model of inspiration by using the categories of primary efficient causality and secondary instrumental causality from Aristotelian metaphysics. He explained how God could be the true author of the biblical text by using the human author according to the latter’s own nature (including finitude and fallibility) to effect God’s design. For example, God, through the human instrument Jeremiah, authored (in the primary and ultimate sense) the book of Jeremiah, which was written (in a secondary but real sense) by the prophet. The Reformers were reluctant to tie the notion of inspiration and/or revelation so closely to a philosophical system, but Catholic theologians continued to use this explanation of inspiration until the second half of this century. In fact, although the scholastic metaphysics underlying this medieval explanation of inspiration is not generally accepted today, it did help to emphasize the reality of the human dimension of the biblical text with which we are still struggling.

A new period of speculation on the topic of biblical inspiration was precipitated by the discoveries resulting from the so-called higher criticism or historical-critical exegesis. As it became clear that most of the biblical books, especially in the Old Testament, were composed over fairly long periods of time during which multiform traditions were used by successive redactors, it became more and more difficult to envision inspiration according to the prophetic model of personal divine communication to a particular individual author or even divine primary causality acting through a particular secondary cause, the author. Furthermore, as the discrepancies between the findings of science and history, on the one hand,
and some of the data in the biblical text, on the other hand, became apparent and indisputable, the virtual equation of inspiration with revelation created serious problems. How and why would God have communicated erroneous information to the biblical authors and/or permitted them to misrepresent the divine mind? Obviously, a more refined theology of the biblical phenomenon was necessary.

Essentially there were two possible responses to the conundrum raised by the findings of historical criticism. Fundamentalists invested enormous energy in the effort to use the tools of historical criticism to establish the congruence of the biblical material with the findings of contemporary science, an effort that has not proven convincing to most of the academy or to the mainline churches. The second response was to rethink the theological category of inspiration, attempting to explain in more philosophically nuanced and historically realistic ways the interaction of divine and human agency in the production of the biblical texts.

In the period immediately before and after the Council there was considerable ferment among Catholic systematic theologians and biblical scholars around the question of inspiration. None of the resultant theories of inspiration has gained general acceptance. Scholarly attention gradually has turned away from the subject of how biblical inspiration occurred or is to be explained. While no one denied the notion of biblical inspiration, there seemed no generally convincing way to establish its location (the text, the author, the reader, the interaction among them?) or its mode of occurrence (individual prophetic or social historical), although Catholic teaching has tended to favor assigning inspiration primarily to the text and to favor a more historical and/or social explanation of its mode.

As theological interest in the question of inspiration waned, attention turned to the more important question of revelation, increasingly seen to be much more inclusive and less propositional than was previously thought. While fundamentalists, mainly in Protestant circles, continued to insist on the plenary verbal inspiration and consequent inerrancy of the biblical text, Catholic scholars began to reframe their questions. The really important issues were how God communicates with us and how we participate in that communicative encounter. The Bible is neither the sum total of that communication nor its only mode. Therefore, it is important to understand how the Bible functions in the encounter between God and humanity. As we will see, interpretation mediates this encounter.

The normativity of biblical subject matter: A final question basic to feminist questions about the Bible concerns the relation of biblical material to subsequent church life and thought. Early feminist biblical scholars shared with current church officials the conviction that the New Testament testimony to women's roles was materially normative for later church practice. Thus, for example, if women did not preside at Eucharist in the early church they cannot be ordained today, whereas, if it could be established that women did preside, their ordination would be legitimate and even mandatory. Consequently, great efforts have been made to prove either that women did or did not exercise certain roles in early Christianity. Despite the 1976 finding of the Pontifical Biblical Commission that the New Testament by itself does not provide an answer to the question of what roles women may or may not play in the contemporary church, the magisterium has argued that because Jesus included no women among the Twelve (who are erroneously considered to have been ordained by Jesus and to be the actual predecessors in office of later bishops) the church is not free to ordain women. Some feminist biblical scholars, implicitly granting the premise that early church practice is materially normative for later church discipline, have attempted to counter this argument by establishing that women did, in fact, exercise the roles of apostle, community leader, liturgist, prophet, evangelist, and so on, which would adequately ground their exercise of the contemporary roles, such as ordained ministry, that are the successors of these early positions.

This type of argument seems ultimately futile. The church cannot hold itself to material imitation of early Christian practice or even of the practice of the earthly Jesus, without getting itself into untenable positions. Are we, for example, to continue to defend the legitimacy of slavery because Paul accepted it (cf. Eph 6:5–8)? Obviously, the church has and must continue to modify its teaching and practice in terms of its developing insights into what is good, true, and just, what is in accord with the good news of salvation, even if the early church had not yet arrived at such realizations or Jesus did not explicitly teach them. Consequently, establishing that women did or did not play certain roles in the early church does not settle the question of what roles they may play today.

Elisabeth Schüessler Fiorenza has offered a much more important argument for the careful investigation of early materials about women,
especially the New Testament material. It is crucial to the religious identity of contemporary Christian women, she argues, that they be able to find themselves in the history of Christianity from the beginning. Furthermore, it is crucial to Christianity that it realize and value the important role of women, largely obscured and suppressed, in its development. The feminist reconstruction of Christian origins has as its purpose, not the legitimation of current inclusion of women in church life, but the restoration of their Christian history to women and of women to Christian history. This project, Schüssler Fiorenza maintains, is important even for women who are not believers, because Western society is thoroughly impregnated with biblical history and tradition. Furthermore, much of the sexism that marginalizes and oppresses women in family and society as well as in the church is based on the interpretation of the Bible that legitimates patriarchy.

In the next section of this chapter I will suggest how a contemporary theory of interpretation can supplement ideologically sophisticated historical criticism in subverting the appeal to the biblical text for the legitimation of patriarchy. However, it is also necessary to develop a more adequate understanding of the relationship between the biblical text and its subject matter and between the biblical text and its readers. In other words, feminist biblical studies must develop a position on the question of the normativity of the Bible for contemporary church teaching and practice if it is to be able to make nonoppressive use of Scripture as normative for contemporary church life.

In brief, two presuppositions underlie a more adequate theory of this relationship. First, the biblical text is an authoritative testimony to the Christ event in Jesus of Nazareth. As human testimony to revelatory experience it is subject, as all testimony is, to the limitations of the human witness and process of testifying. Acceptance of the testimony entails both an acceptance of its substantial authority in regard to the proclamation of salvation in Jesus and a recognition of its fallibility in the offering of that testimony. Second, accepting the authority of the Bible does not entail material imitation or replication of the arrangements of first-century Christianity any more than the imitation of Christ entails being a carpenter, a Jew, a male, or an itinerant preacher. The normativity of the Bible cannot be reduced to materialistic replication. Consequently, the discovery, insofar as it is possible, of the roles of women in early Christianity, important as this is for the feminist agenda, cannot be used posi-

The Bible and Feminism

Interpretation

If, as I have tried to show, the biblical text is not a straightforward communication of divinely guaranteed propositions that are materially normative for later generations, then the text, if it is to function salvifically within the believing community, must be interpreted. Interpretation is the process of coming to understand any phenomenon, including a text. Interpretation is especially necessary when the phenomenon, for some reason, resists understanding. The biblical text resists understanding because it was written in an ancient culture, in languages most moderns do not command, according to literary genres that differ among themselves and often from modern genres, about events that sometimes do not correlate with contemporary happenings, and because it makes claims that require adjudication. Anyone who claims that the biblical text can be read "at face value," without interpretation, does not understand the nature of texts in general or of this text in particular. The question is not whether to interpret the text, for this is the only way it can be understood, but only how to interpret it.

Contemporary scholarship regarding textual interpretation, known as the field of hermeneutics, is vast in scope and immensely complex. It is possible here to invoke only those conclusions from this field of theory that are immediately useful for the question of feminist interpretation of the Bible. Essentially, interpretation is a dialectical process that takes place between a reader and a text and culminates in an event of meaning. This definition has several important implications.

First, it implies that a text does not have one right meaning, which was put into it by its author and is to be extracted by the reader. Rather, the text is a linguistic structure that is susceptible of a number of valid readings by different readers or the same reader at different times. The truth of this statement is clear to anyone who has ever seen a film with a group of friends, each of whom interprets it in a recognizably valid but somewhat different way, or who has read a novel a second time and found a great deal more (or less!) in it in the second reading.

Second, and correlative, meaning is not "in" the text but occurs in the interaction between text and reader, just as music is not "in" the score but occurs as an event when the score is performed. This implies that the
reader makes a genuine contribution to the meaning rather than being simply a passive consumer of prefabricated meaning.

Third, the meaning is not finally under the control of the author. Although the author obviously meant something when he or she wrote the text and intended to convey that meaning, once the text is completed it means whatever it means, regardless of what the author intended.\(^{35}\) It is common experience that we often say more (or less) than we intend and that our words can mean very different things in different contexts or to different people. This is even more true of texts that are separated by thousands of years from their authors.

The process of interpretation, then, is not merely a matter of extracting the meaning intended by the author from an inert text, but a matter of interacting with the text in the effort to achieve meaning. In this process both the text and the reader are affected, that is, both change. It is more obvious to most people that the reader is affected by what he or she reads. A powerful text expands our horizons, deepens our humanity, challenges our assumptions, raises questions about reality, enhances our perception, and so on. But the reading of a text by successive generations of readers also affects the text. For example, the text “all men are created equal” in the American Declaration of Independence means much more in the late twentieth century than it did in the eighteenth century when it was written. The founding fathers clearly meant by men only adult, white, property-owning, free males. Today men in this text includes children, people of color, the poor, and women, while the category of slave has been banished from the national vocabulary altogether precisely because of the ongoing interpretation of this foundational text. Such an understanding of the way meaning occurs in the interaction between reader and text opens up the possibility that the biblical text, in interaction with feminist readers, might be susceptible of a liberating interpretation, even of its patently patriarchal and sexist texts. The fact is that the believing community, like the American people in relation to the nation’s founding documents, has grown and developed on the basis of its founding documents beyond the narrow perspectives of the original articulators of the Christian vision. From the gospel of Jesus, Christians learned to repudiate the slavery Paul accepted. From the gospel, Christians have learned that women for whom Jesus died are not inferior to men for whom he died, and that when Jesus condemned the attempt of his followers to lord it over one another he was also condemning the patriarchalism that is the foundation of sexism, clericalism, colonialism, classism, and all the other forms of domination that have marred the Christian tradition. In other words, the biblical text has equipped us to call into question some of the material content of the Bible itself.

The major problem facing feminist interpreters is how to engage the biblical text in such a way that the oppressive potential of the Bible is neutralized, while its liberating power is invoked on behalf of the victims of church and society. One approach has been either to excise from the Bible those texts that are oppressive or to deny revelatory status to them.\(^{36}\) Neither of these strategies is satisfactory. The Bible is so permeated with patriarchalism that excising texts that are actually or potentially damaging to women would leave such massive lacunae that the kerygma would be difficult to discern in what remained. Denying the revelatory status of oppressive texts is equally problematic. First, what is oppressive to one group or at one time or from one point of view might be an important resource in other circumstances. But more importantly, the revelatory character of Scripture cannot be attached to individual texts in virtue of their semantic content without implicitly reintroducing a propositional understanding of revelation. It is Scripture itself, as a whole, that either is or is not the medium of divine self-disclosure. Just as we cannot regard nature as divinely revelatory only when the sun shines and reject it when it erupts in earthquakes or fires, we cannot confer revelatory status on certain biblical passages while rejecting others.

To claim that the biblical text is revelatory is not, as has been argued above, to claim that the text delivers true propositional information that must be accepted as the divine will for the community. Rather, the text is a linguistic structure with which successive generations of Christians interact within the ever-widening horizon of understanding of the Church. Because the text is human language giving voice to human experience of God in Christ, as well as to the experience of the early community in all its weakness and sinfulness, the text, even though it is inspired (written and read under the influence of the Holy Spirit) is as capable of error, distortion, and even sinfulness as the church itself.

Interpretation is the process of discerning what the text means in relation to the issues that exercise the contemporary community by interacting—from within the contemporary context—with what the text says in its own compositional context. This means that the community might experience a particular text as an object lesson in and warning against
evil, rather than as a formulation of the divine will. For example, we might derive from Paul's restrictions on women in the liturgical assembly not a warrant for oppressing women today but a warning of how deleterious it is to sacrifice the good of some members of the community to a fear of offending the powerful.

Biblical interpretation, especially of problematic texts, is always a process of wrestling with the text. Just as nineteenth-century interpreters realized that they had to struggle with strange literary genres, ancient customs that seemed bizarre and even uncivilized, a nonscientific cosmology, and forms of social organization for which they had no contemporary analogs if they were to understand the meaning of these ancient texts, so the contemporary interpreter who has become conscious of the ideological obstacles in the text must struggle with androcentric, patriarchal, sexist, and misogynist material if she or he is to liberate the message of salvation for today's readers.

Feminist biblical scholars have developed an impressive program for wrestling with the text, although none would be ready to claim that the problem is solved or even that it is clear that, in the long run, it can be solved. Among the hermeneutical approaches that have been developed are the following: scrupulous translation that helps to defeat the gratuitous linguistic masculinizing of biblical material that is actually inclusive; using the liberating traditions in the Bible, such as the prophetic tradition or the original plan of creation of male and female in the image of God, to criticize the oppressive material; retelling misogynist biblical stories such as that of Jephthah's daughter or the rape of the concubine in memoriam, as texts of terror rather than as an acceptable part of the history of salvation; pressing the silences of the text for the hidden story of women; using rhetorical analysis of oppressive texts such as Paul's disciplinary injunctions against women to establish women's actual roles and practice in early Christianity; reinterpreting with feminist sensibilities texts dealing with women, such as the story of the Samaritan woman in John 4, which have been distorted or trivialized in the male-dominated exegetical and homiletic tradition; discerning the liberating trajectories opened up within texts, such as Paul's injunction that husbands are to love their wives, even though those texts are, in their current form, still oppressive.

The practice of liberating interpretation by scholars must be supplemented by a pastoral practice that avoids, first, the public proclamation—without counter commentary—of oppressive texts and, second, the development of inclusive-language liturgical texts that take proper account of the difference between the intention of a text read as history of an ancient community and the same text proclaimed as kerygma to the present community.

CONCLUSION

Although it is not by any means clear or certain that the Bible can or will continue to function as revelatory for women whose feminist consciousness has been raised, there are at least three motives for making every possible effort to develop a theology of the Bible and a hermeneutical theory that will enable it to do so. The first is theological. The Bible, especially the New Testament, is the normative witness in the Christian community to the Christ event in Jesus of Nazareth. It is also the linguistic mooring of the present community of believers to its foundational past. To surrender the Scriptures as irredeemably patriarchal and sexist and therefore destructive of women is to relinquish our history and therefore, to an important degree, our identity as Christians.

The second motive is ecumenical. The primary common faith resource of the still-divided Christian communities is Scripture. If we are finally forced, by our integrity as self-respecting human beings, to abandon our relationship to this foundational text, we will have surrendered the major shared inheritance around which we might someday regather in unity.

The final motive is perhaps the most important: spirituality. If Scripture is the sacrament of the word of God, the pure and perennial source of the spiritual life that Vatican II called it, and the one sacramental medium of revelatory encounter that men do not control, it will be tragic indeed if women must renounce it as hopelessly oppressive.

As long as the biblical text is regarded as a semantic container of propositional revelation, its clearly oppressive material cannot function salvifically for women. But if the text is understood as a text, that is, as human witness in human language to the human experience of divine event, then all the flexibility and power of the process of interpretation can be mobilized to liberate the text from its own limitations and women from the oppressiveness of the text. If it is true that the word of God is not bound (cf. 2 Tim 2:9) and that all Scripture is written for our instruction and edification (cf. 2 Tim 3:16), then there is still hope that Christian women will be able to affirm both themselves and this text as revelatory.
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NOTES

1. This situation was implicitly recognized in “Sacerdactum Concilium,” the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of Vatican II 2:31–32, which decreed that the “treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly... for the faithful” (31) and that the homily should consist in expounding the faith “from the sacred text” (32). The documents of the Council are available in Documents of Vatican II, ed. Austin Flannery (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 2 vols. “Sacerdactum Concilium” is found in 1:1–40.


6. The most recent and complete Catholic Bible study resource is Donald Senior, ed., The Catholic Study Bible (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990). This one-volume study resource contains general introductory articles, reading guides to every section of both testaments, and brief introductions and notes to each book as well as material on the use of the Bible in the lectionary, and on biblical archaeology and geography. It includes the full text of both testaments.

7. The NJBC is a more detailed resource supplying a commentary on every book of the Bible as well as lengthy topical articles on such topics as canonicity, inspiration, and hermeneutics.

8. For a succinct history of the feminist movement, see Maria Riley, Transforming Feminism (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1989), esp. 14–42.


12. This point has been made most clearly and convincingly by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in numerous writings such as In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins (New York: Crossroad, 1983), esp. xiii–40. See also her collection of essays, Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).


18. See Mary Catherine Hilkert, “Can the Center Hold?” in this volume.


20. A good example of this trend is the best-selling volume by John Dominic Crossan, The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jew (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991), which reconstructs the gospel tradition from all canonical and non-canonical sources supplying records of Jesus’ life and work.


23. The standard definition of inspiration up to Vatican II was that of Leo XIII in “Providentissimus Deus,” the encyclical on the Study of Holy Scripture of November 18, 1893 (available in English in Megvern, Bible Interpretation, 191–220): “For, by supernatural power, He [God] so moved and impelled them to write—He so assisted them when writing—that the things which He ordered, and those only, they, first, rightly understood, then willed faithfully to write down, and finally expressed in apt words and with infallible truth” (216). Vatican II follows this theology, although it is less explicit about the mode of inspiration and more insistent on the effect: “To compose the sacred books, God chose certain men who, all the while He employed them in this task, made full use of their powers and faculties so that, though he acted in them and by them, it was as true authors that they consigned to writing whatever He wanted written, and no more. [Therefore] the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully and without error, teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures” (DV 3:11). Dei Verbum here refers in a footnote to Providentissimus Deus.


27. The Vatican Declaration against the ordination of women gives, as its second argument, the attitude of Jesus in excluding women from apostolic roles (see Swidler and Swidler, Women Priests, 39–40). The position paper “Women and Priestly Ministry: The New Testament Evidence,” of the Task Force of the Catholic Biblical Association, which had been appointed to study the issue of biblical data pertinent to women’s roles in the early Church, adopted essentially the same premise in concluding “that women did in fact exercise roles and functions later associated with priestly ministry. [Therefore] the NT evidence, while not decisive by itself, points toward the admission of women to priestly ministry” (published in The Catholic Biblical Quarterly 41 [October 1979]: 688–689).

28. The Pontifical Biblical Commission did a two-year study, requested by the Vatican, of whether the biblical data permitted the presbyreal ordination of women. The results of the study, completed in April 1976, were never officially published, but the final votes were leaked to the press in July. The members of the PBC voted 17–0 that the New Testament does not settle in a clear way the question of whether women can be ordained and 12–3 that Christ’s plan would not be transgressed by such ordination. For a copy of the unofficial report see “Appendix II, Biblical Commission Report. Can

29. Women Be Priests?” in Swidler and Swidler, Women Priests, 338–46. Serving on the commission at that time were conciliar luminaries such as Albert Deschamps, Jean Dominique Barthélémy, Pierre Benoit, Raymond Brown, Henri Cazelles, Stanislas Lyonnet, Carlo Martini, and David Stanley. Stanley resigned from the commission in protest of the congregation’s ignoring of this study in its declaration.


31. Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, xiii–xxv.


34. The best short explanation of this process, in my opinion, is Paul Ricoeur’s lectures, Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning (Fort Worth: Texas Christian Univ. Press, 1976), esp. chap. 4.

35. See Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory, 29–37.

36. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, in many places, espouses the latter position. See, for example, In Memory of Her, 33, or the more nuanced expression in Bread Not Stone, 60.


