Biblical Interpretation in the Context of Church and Ministry

A Perspective on “Theology for Christian Ministry”

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The editor’s questions as to how my exegetical-historical work has been done in the interest of church and ministry raises an important question with respect to not only self-understanding but also the allegiance of biblical scholarship. It asks how experience and analysis, world and word, society and church interact in the process of a biblical interpretation which can empower students to Christian ministry.

During the time of my theological studies in Germany, this question was literally a non-question. In the late fifties and early sixties Roman Catholic biblical scholarship still had to struggle for its relative independence and theological integrity. Although it also adopted the stance of objective science, it did not embrace the anti-theological posture of positivist science but sought to provide biblical resources for the renewal of the church and its ministry. My professors themselves or their teachers had to face the anti-modernist oath required from anyone seeking ordination or a doctoral degree in theology. Nevertheless, they took for granted that biblical scholarship had to serve the church and its ministry. The question was not whether but how it could do so with intellectual integrity. Biblical scholarship, they argued, could serve the church not by acquiescing to doctrinal strictures but by exploring what the biblical authors sought to communicate in the past and to us today.

Biblical courses at the university were not oriented primarily toward satisfying the needs of doctoral students or taught from a disengaged comparative religions perspective. Rather, they sought to prepare candidates for ordination to the priesthood and to equip future high school teachers of religion. In lectures and seminars professors not only freely commented on the historical meaning of the text but also sought with more or less skill to draw out its contemporary significance. Whereas they had to restrict themselves to irrelevant philological or archeological historical questions during the anti-modernist period, now they dared to stretch the limits and broaden the horizons of their historical and theological interpretations.

The following experience can highlight what I mean. After I had finished my theological studies in 1962/63, I intended to do a dissertation on a Synoptic problem. However, my Doktorvater insisted that I do my research on the “priesthood of all believers in the New Testament.” This biblical theme was strongly present in the theological discussions of the Second Vatican Council that were at the time taking place in Rome. He argued that I had to write a dissertation on this topic, since he could not ask one of his clerical students to do so. My protestations that “the priesthood of the baptized” was a central “dogmatic-confessional” topic...
but only marginal to the New Testament (1 Peter and Revelation) were to no avail. If the ecclesial discussions of the day required that such a topic be seriously researched and scientifically discussed, who was I to object?

Consequently the topic challenged me to develop a method and approach that could do justice to historical-critical analysis as well as to the theological elaborations of this question. I ended up by writing two dissertations in one, each of which had at first glance not much to do with each other. The first part of the dissertation sought to review and adjudicate the debates on “the priesthood of believers” in Roman Catholic and Protestant theological literature. The second part sought to trace the motives of kingship and priesthood in the theological vision of the Book of Revelation. By attempting to interrelate two very disparate discourses, I gained invaluable methodological and theological insights that have determined my future work not only on the Book of Revelation but also on a critical feminist theological hermeneutics.

I also learned in the process that theologians who are not bound to ecclesiastical interests in and through ordination have a greater range of inquiry and freedom of thought. At the same time we do not receive the same support and recognition as those who are not only biblical and theological scholars but also clerics and “churchmen.” My own experience confirms this. Since scholarships for doctoral candidates in theology were very scarce, I was not recommended for one because, as one of my professors stated, as a woman you have no future possibilities for becoming a professor of theology.

Coming to this country in 1970 and beginning to teach Christian Scripture as a woman in a traditionally male clerical field was not so much a “culture shock” as a challenge to my “theological” self-understanding. It determined my work in two very significant ways: It enabled me first to define myself explicitly as a theologian rather than just as a historian of religions and second to understand myself as pioneering a different biblical and theological scholarship that does not hinder but empowers feminist ministry and church.

I. BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: THEOLOGY FOR CHURCH AND WORLD

Entering the American academy I was struck by the general lack of biblical-theological knowledge among my students and the general public. Moreover, I was equally puzzled by the antiquarian and positivist ethos of many of my colleagues. For instance, students who had several years of Roman Catholic schooling and three or four college level theology courses behind them located “New Testament Times” in the fourth century C.E. or had never heard of the Synoptic Problem. At Christmas the local newspaper subtitled a picture of a creche with “The Nativity Scene according to St. Mark.” In the first year or so I listened with fascination to a kind of literalist biblical preaching on radio and TV which I had never heard before.

My M.Div. students in turn exhibited great resistance to exploring historical-critical questions in a theological fashion. They tried to hide their own anxiety in the face of critical biblical interpretation by invoking the proverbial woman in the pew who would be scandalized by the results of historical-critical exegesis, conveniently overlooking that I also was the woman in the pew to whom they preached.

Yet, some of my colleagues seemed not to be concerned with such a lack of critical biblical-theological knowledge. When I wrestled, for example, with the question of how to approach a class of seniors most of whom had been called to serve in Vietnam after graduation, a
colleague advised me: “Elisabeth, never let the question of ‘relevance’ or ‘significance’ rear its ugly head in your classroom. Your task is to communicate disinterested scholarship. Any student who asks me what the significance of the prophets is for today is in danger of failing the course.”

At one of my first professional meetings I met a distinguished colleague whose work I had admired during my student days. I was baffled when he insisted forcefully that he was not interested in theological questions but instead had dedicated his life to the pursuit of scientific exegesis, history, and philology. Other colleagues would look at me strangely when I insisted on raising theological-hermeneutical questions in an exegetical discussion, as if I had said something very improper. Such questions might be appropriate for a seminary or divinity school setting but were out of place in the academic context of the academy. I was puzzled by such reactions, since my doctorate in New Testament was a doctorate in theology and at the same time a university degree.

It only dawned on me slowly that many American colleagues restrict theology to dogmatic theology and consider biblical scholarship as a philological-historical enterprise free from dogmatic restraints. They understand theology to be the systematic exploration of biblical and church teachings on doctrine and morals. Biblical, historical, and religious studies, in contrast to such a doctrinal or confessional conception of theology, have developed their own self-understanding and ethos as critical science in terms of the modern research university. Freed from the fetters of doctrinal commitments and ecclesiastical controls, academic biblical scholarship claims to pursue critical inquiry with utmost value-neutrality, detachment, and objectivity. It is descriptive rather than valuative. The so-called “hard sciences” such as biblical and historical studies distinguish themselves from theological studies in terms of descriptive objectivity over and against theological eisegesis and confessional commitment. Although this posture of scientific positivism has been thoroughly challenged by philosophical hermeneutics, the sociology of knowledge, and critical theory, the discipline in general has failed to apply a critical analysis to its own rhetorical practices and institutional interests.

In his very influential and often misread article on biblical theology which appeared in 1962,1 Krister Stendahl sought to address the tensions and problems in the relationship between biblical scholarship and communities of faith. He proposed two distinct tasks for doing biblical theology. The primary task of the exegete is to give an objective description and scientific analysis of what the text meant in its historical context. The task of the theologian and preacher in turn is to attempt a translation or application of biblical meanings to situations today. Yet how to move from historical considerations to theological judgments has remained an open question.

Stendahl introduced this division of labor in order to safeguard the integrity and rights of the biblical text in the face of contemporary abuses. However, the division of labor between exegete and theologian or scholar and preacher has not only tended to eclipse critical hermeneutical reflection as an integral part of biblical interpretation, but it has also reinstated the split between academic disinterested scholarship and engaged theological practice, between an antiquarian scientific detached understanding of biblical texts and the contemporary emotional-spiritual use of the Bible in communities of faith.

My presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature2 sought to deal with this
problem by proposing an “ethic and rhetoric of biblical interpretation” that could decenter this
dualistic paradigm of biblical interpretation in such a way that critical inquiry and theological
valuation are no longer seen as exclusive of each other. When engaging in a hermeneutical
theological process, exegetes and preachers must become conscious of the political, institutional,
clerical or academic interests that they serve. They must take responsibility for the interpretations
and constructions of biblical texts which they promote. Texts are circumscribed and polyvalent at
the same time. Meanings of texts are not static, fixed, or given but are always produced and
constructed by and for people with specific experiences, interests, social locations and
perspectives. This is true both for the meanings and interpretations encoded in the Bible but also
for those engendered by contemporary interpretations. Therefore it becomes all-important that
one identifies the “authors” of such meanings as well as spells out who is meant by the terms
church and ministry if one claims that biblical interpretation is done for enabling ministry in
service to the church and the world.

In a world and church that is characterized by structures of exploitation and oppression, it
does not suffice to bring out the intended meaning and message of biblical texts. What becomes
necessary is also to assess critically and evaluate theologically the symbolic universe and ethos
articulated in these texts. One has to do so in order to understand their possible historical as well
as contemporary functions in systemic oppression or in struggles for liberation. Such a need for a
critical weighing of sources according to historical criteria has always been recognized by
biblical scholarship. Similarly, the need for a critical ethical-theological

1“Biblical Theology, Contemporary,” Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, vol. 1 (New York: Abingdon,
1962) 413-432.
2“The Ethics of Interpretation: De-Centering Biblical Scholarship,” Journal of Biblical Literature
107/1 (1988) 3-17.

II. A CRITICAL FEMINIST THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

My own experience and work, however, is not just characterized by the tension between
critical scholarship and ecclesial commitment but also by the fact that I have sought to do my
work as a woman in a traditionally clerical, male-defined discipline, exclusive of women. For
centuries women have been silenced in the churches, prohibited from articulating theology and
from deciding church policy. Therefore until very recently we have been excluded from
theological schools and academic ranks. For instance, in 1962 I was the first woman in Würzburg
ever to complete the full theological curriculum. In the early sixties some professors in German
universities still refused to examine women students or to accept them as doctoral candidates.
Even today not a single woman theologian yet holds a professorship at one of the established
Roman Catholic theological faculties. Moreover, only a handful of women professors teach on
Protestant faculties in West Germany.

Since I found myself caught up in the contradiction of being a woman in a traditionally
clerical, male-defined field, my licentiate dissertation in practical theology, published in 1964, sought to explore the theological foundation, actual practice, and unexplored possibilities of women’s ecclesial ministry in both Roman Catholic and ecumenical contexts. In writing the thesis I became acutely aware of the irreconcilable contradiction between theological arguments in support of exclusive male clerical structures and those for women’s full citizenship in the church. Yet, it was only the explosion of feminist scholarship and my participation in the emerging women’s movement in the churches during the seventies that allowed me to question androcentric cultural scientific frameworks and to articulate my own theological work and perspective as that of a critical feminist theology of liberation. Such a critical feminist theological framework redefined my scholarly work in biblical interpretation. Placing women’s struggles and their ministry in society and church at the center of my attention has allowed me to develop a critical process of biblical interpretation that can replace the dualistic interpretative model which fashions a dichotomy between disinterested scientific exegesis and committed theological interpretation.

Such a critical process of interpretation for liberation is not fueled by either apologetic-doctrinal or antiquarian-scientistic interests. Rather it seeks to analyze how biblical texts function either to support racism, sexism, and other structural sins of oppression or to challenge such patriarchal sinful structures. Insofar as its focal center is the struggles of all women, especially those on the totem-pole of the patriarchal pyramid of exploitation, this process seeks to engender a ministerial praxis of liberation and transformation in the church envisioned as a democratic discipleship-community of equals. In doing so it seeks to foster values and visions that are crucial in a democratic society—equality, dignity, freedom, self-determination and the well-being of all.

Such a recasting of biblical interpretation in terms of public ecclesial discourse rather than doctrinal proof-texting or historical-theological application has several goals: It seeks to foster a process of biblical interpretation that not only can engage in an ideological critique of the world of the text and of our own readings of it, but also recover biblical history as ecclesial memory and cultural-religious heritage. Second, this public ecclesial and societal discourse it pursues accountability for those values and visions which biblical texts, historical reconstructions, and ecclesial proclamations foster. Finally, such a critical process of interpretation for liberation seeks to reshape our historical and theological imagination by amplifying, retelling and ritualizing those elements and remnants in biblical texts which authorize values and visions of liberation, transformation and well-being for all.

Insofar as such a model for a critical process of biblical interpretation explicates its interests in liberation and transformation of social and ecclesial structures, it often faces severe criticism from both scholars in religion and theologians in divinity schools. Theologians charge that a feminist and liberation theological biblical interpretation is guilty of functionalizing biblical texts for ideological purposes rather than submitting in obedience to the authority of the biblical text. According to them such an interpretation thereby undermines the doctrinal and existential authority of the bible as the word of God.

Such an accusation, however, overlooks the necessity that a critical model of interpretation for liberation submits *all* theological interpretations of God and the world,
including its own readings and assumptions, to an ongoing ideological critical analysis for theological reasons. It insists that the “true” biblical God is not a God of exploitation and oppression but a God of salvation who wants the well-being of all. Since the bible speaks of God in the androcentric languages and patriarchal framework of its times, its historical, literary, and social interpretations call for theological valuation and judgment. Theological criteria and truth are not derived directly from the biblical sources but emerge from a religious community’s reflections on its struggles for liberation and against sinful oppressive structures. At stake is, therefore, not that community’s theological character but its conceptualizations of God, of Christian revelation and of ecclesial identity as well as its theological articulations of the relations of church and ministry to society and world.

The second objection against a critical feminist model of interpretation for liberation comes usually from academic biblical scholarship which charges that not just a feminist theological but any explicit theological interpretation of the bible relinquishes objective inquiry and so abuses the text for ideological reasons. A feminist theological interpretation, they charge, cannot but engage in a feminist apologetic of the Bible. This accusation seeks to protect the integrity and rights of the text and to prevent the usurpation of the past for contemporary ecclesiastical interests. Yet, such an indictment represses the truth that scholars always bring their view of the world to the interpretation of the texts which they seek to understand.

Unlike apologetic readings or doctrinal proof-texting, a critical interpretation for liberation does not seek to make the texts say something different in order to be theologically acceptable. Rather its theological evaluations of biblical texts depend on careful socio-historical and socio-rhetorical analyses. It is vitally interested in reconstructing the historical world of the text, which is often quite different from ours, as well as in elaborating a multiplicity of textual meanings that cannot be reduced to a single meaning. As any historical or literary scientific analysis it derives its theoretical models of interpretation from contemporary experience and theoretical articulations of the world. Yet the key difference is that it does so by utilizing not only the experience of white educated men but also that of women and other marginalized people as analogy for its historical reconstruction. At stake is, therefore, not the scientific character of a critical feminist interpretation for liberation but its theoretical view of the world and its experience of religion.

This critical feminist model of biblical interpretation for liberation which I describe requires a reorientation of biblical scholarship and theological education. As ideology-critical investigation and valutative public discourse it redirects biblical research towards the questions of contemporary communities of faith as well as towards the problems of societal communities steeped in Western cultural traditions that have been decisively shaped by the Bible. Therefore, it seeks to overcome exclusive disciplinary boundaries within theological studies themselves as well as between the human and social sciences and religious studies, for to open up the reading of biblical texts and the historical reconstruction of their worlds to public discussion compels its practitioners to traverse not only the boundaries of theological disciplines but also those of other intellectual and practical disciplines.

Right-wing political biblicism has been on the increase in society and church. Such political and religious fundamentalism feeds antidemocratic authoritarianism and fosters personal
and institutional prejudices. Therefore, students in ministerial theological studies and in the academic study of religion must learn to engage in a disciplined reflection on the societal and public values promoted by biblical texts and interpretations. Insofar as biblicist fundamentalism asserts the public claims and values of oppressive biblical texts, biblical scholarship, education and preaching can no longer restrict their purview to the in-house discourse of academy and clergy. Rather they have the responsibility to make their interpretive research available to a wider societal and ecclesial public. By placing at the center of its attention feminist and liberation theological concerns, however marginal they are still considered to be, biblical scholarship also will recover its task to empower Christian ministry and church for serving the well-being of an emerging global world society.