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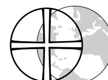

Canon and Conscience: A Feminist Perspective

TATHA WILEY

> Ideology criticism has made us aware that the biblical text contains not only historical inaccuracies, scientific errors, mythological assumptions that are inassimilable by the modern mind, but also morally objectionable positions….The hermeneutical question is how we can understand the interpretive process by which the reader identifies and repudiates the morally unacceptable subject matter of the text without repudiating the text itself and its truth claims.
>
> —Sandra M. Schneiders[1]

The dilemma that Sandra Schneiders evokes is as decisive for ordinary Christians as for critical biblical interpreters. There are, on the one hand, biblical and theological truth claims to be protected. The central truth proclaimed by the New Testament writings is that of Jesus himself. It is both a truth about Jesus, a christological claim, and a truth for us, a soteriological claim. The latter, as Paul puts it, is that in Jesus, God was reconciling the world to God's self. That truth is good news. The Scriptures affirm that God not only persistently seeks to be in relation with human beings, but also desires the good for them—freedom, equality, justice. In parables, sayings, and stories, the Scriptures announce that oppression

[1]Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) 75.

It is important not to confuse acceptance of a biblical text as canonical with a value judgment about the goodness or moral acceptability of a text. The goal of a feminist response to the question of canon is to enable discernment of authentic Christian values in the scriptural legacy.

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will be overcome, debts will be paid, and everyone will have a place at the table. Tears will be dried and the righteous vindicated. In the Scriptures—in both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament—people find truths about God, about sin and redemption, and, perhaps most surprisingly, about themselves.

GOOD AND EVIL IN THE WORD OF GOD?

But Schneiders isolates a major difficulty with Scripture: the good never arrives unaccompanied or unsullied. The same Scriptures that command human beings to "love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6:5) also command the Hebrews upon entering the promised land to "kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known a man by sleeping with him. But the young girls who have not known a man by sleeping with him, keep alive for yourselves" (Num 31:17–18). Many who have suffered bondage and subjugation have been heartened by Paul's cry, "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal 5:1), and emboldened by the God of Israel who reminds Israel that "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:2–3). But centuries of slavery were justified by texts that demanded unrestricted obedience: "Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh" (1 Pet 2:18).

The world that Scripture constructs is also hierarchical and exclusionary. It divides social reality into separate and unequal spheres of women and men, poor and rich, insiders and outsiders. It has good news, but not for everyone.

The world that Scripture constructs is also hierarchical and exclusionary. It divides social reality into separate and unequal spheres of women and men, poor and rich, insiders and outsiders. It has good news, but not for everyone. The land that God promised Israel was already occupied. It belonged to those who were to be driven out. The divine gift and promise were not good news for them.

The problem is not that we have good texts and bad texts, and that all we need to do is to distinguish between them. The problem runs deeper. Evil covers its interests and cloaks itself as revelation. If the interests of the interpreter coincide with the interests embedded in the text, the fiction of revelation, a kind of pseudorevelation, can persist for millennia. Christians did not admit the blatant economic interests at work in their biblically based justification of slavery for nineteen centuries after the time of Christ.

How are we to sort out the divine wheat from the mundane chaff planted and nurtured in the same soil? How can we understand the scriptural canon and its authoritative character in a way that meets our critical and moral insights yet nourishes an authentic Christian faith today?

CANON: COMMUNAL AFFIRMATIONS, THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

Canon refers to that set of ancient writings that, with small differences, Christians recognize and affirm as authoritative Scripture. The notion masks layers of concerns and questions, however, starting with its historical development. What was the process by which the Christian canon originated? Why did it develop? Treating these questions would take us into a historical study of the challenges that generated the development of a canon, the first of which is usually seen to be the figure of Marcion, who rejected the Hebrew Bible and accepted only Luke's Gospel and Paul's letters as historical. He perhaps was the first to argue for a "canon" of Scripture to support his own view of Christianity.[2]

Questions about the selection of canonical writings also probe contemporary noncanonical works. Why did 1 and 2 Peter make it into the canon, for example, while works that functioned in second-century churches as Scripture—such as the *Didache*, the *Shepherd of Hermas,* and *1 Clement*—did not make it into the final canon? There is little with which to answer these questions. If anything, the development of the canon and its contents remains a mystery—not in the sense of a sacred reality but in the sense of an all-too-human historical process too complex to trace fully.

I take the common designation of Athanasius's Easter letter in 367 C.E. as the source of a fixed Christian canon. In the modern period, more intense investigation of early noncanonical writings has yielded insight into Christian origins, practices, and beliefs as well as the realization and the acknowledgment that a fixed canon reflects social dynamics of power and exclusion. Puzzles remain to be solved with regard to the formation of the canon, the politics of inclusion, and the criteria of selection.

Like most Christians, I accept that inspiration was involved in both the writing and selection of biblical writings, but I suggest that determining what we mean by "inspiration" would be very difficult to define and even harder to substantiate. I agree with many who argue that grounding the writings in apostolic authority is difficult, if not impossible, but that it matters less today than it did for, say, the medievals. I affirm the diversity of canon, both in its variety of genres and theological perspectives as well as its rather uneven contents. In contrast to solutions such as Thomas Jefferson's thin New Testament, most Christians affirm not that the whole canon has some special meaning in itself, as Brevard Childs argued, but that the decision about its contents is a historical event and is permanent in that regard. The canon originated as separate texts and requires interpretation as individual and discrete texts even if accepted as a body. I agree with the common observation that we all observe some sort of "canon within a canon," not because we chose a smaller specific canon but because we have preferences—verses, stories, or texts that we prefer and others that we abhor. Our preferences reflect our values. Galatians 3:28

[2]See recently David L. Dungan, *Constantine's Bible: Politics and the Making of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).

is high on my list of preferences as a compact theology of sin and redemption, while Eph 5:22–24 and other household codes rise high on my abhorrence list.

For me, the function of the canon is incarnational. It unifies and holds permanently some of the early witnesses to Jesus, in whom, the first disciples and later creeds affirmed, God became fully present in human history. The Scriptures also mediate this historical reality and make possible its continued experience in the lives of believers.

So there is a range of historical and theological concerns about canon—including how it came about, what writings were unhelpfully included or excluded, how baldly political the process of canon selection was, and how to conceive of inspiration—that, though knotty, do not threaten the viability or authority of the Christian canon for me. I can accept it, and I believe that, despite such difficulties, Christians can justifiably affirm the biblical canon as one constitutive element in their Christian identity and the legacy they inherit and wrestle with.

But, while affirming that modern findings about canon may not pose a fatal problem, there remain other, further issues, already alluded to, that do render canon deeply problematic from a feminist point of view.[3] They are three: (1) that not all the accepted texts are morally acceptable; (2) that biblical texts reflect cultures and worldviews informed by unacceptable privilege, especially of gender and class; and (3) that Christian notions of sin are used ideologically within the Bible itself to reinforce those unacceptable oppressions. Thus, to say the canon is not a problem at one level is not to say that it is not problematic at another. As I accept the biblical canon, how can I as a feminist theologian understand and deal with the problematic character and unacceptable aspects of Scripture?

Accepted yet Unacceptable Texts

Descriptions of the Scriptures are usually very positive, perhaps more so than is warranted. One well-respected scholar, Luke T. Johnson, for example, writes that Christians "consider the New Testament to be indispensable and normative for theological understanding, moral discernment, and spiritual nourishment." He continues:

[3]I believe a "feminist point of view" means one informed by a commitment to identify injustices toward women, to trace their roots, and to promote the dignity of every person. The question of canon has been important in feminist theology and biblical interpretations. See, for example: Mary-Paula Walsh, *Feminism and Christian Tradition: An Annotated Bibliography and Critical Introduction to the Literature* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 1991) esp. 167–198; Carol L. Meyers, Toni Craven, Ross Shepard Kraemer, eds., *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000) esp. 1–3, 21; Stephen E. Fowl, ed., *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997) esp. Claudia V. Camp, "Feminist and Theological Hermeneutics: Canon and Christian Identity," 53–67; and Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005) 60–67. Several early works that remain important are: Letty M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1985) esp. contributions by Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Letty Russell: "Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation," 111–124; "The Will to Choose or Reject: Continuing our Critical Work," 125–136; and "Authority and the Challenge of Biblical Interpretation," 137–146, respectively. Also, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1984); and Carolyn Osiek, "The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. A. Y. Collins (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985).

> The New Testament's authority within the life of the Church is grounded in the conviction that its writings, composed by human authors of the ancient Mediterranean world, are also inspired by God's Holy Spirit, and are therefore a living word from God to humans in every place and time.[4]

Terms routinely used to describe the canon include: Indispensable, Normative, Authority, Inspired, Living Word. The writings shape our understanding, our moral awareness, and our religious lives. It sounds fine until we take into account the fact that the Bible is thoroughly patriarchal, androcentric, ethnocentric, and religiously exclusivist. We do not need to look far to find texts that call into question exactly how the Bible can shape us.

The story of Jephthah's daughter in Judg 11 is one such text. While I accept the canon, as I have noted, stories like this reinforce the fact that my relation to the world of Scripture is fundamentally different than a man's might be. It is a world in which I, as a woman, am invisible, vulnerable, and marginalized. In this story, the androcentrism of the narrator is evident in the narrator's lack of sympathy for the fate of the daughter whose life is sacrificed in celebration of her father's military success. She is not rescued from death by the substitute of a sacrificial animal, nor is she even named in the story. She is a striking contrast to the male heir of Abraham—Isaac—whom God commands to be sacrificed and for whom God provides a ram as a substitute at the last moment.

We are used to descriptions of the Scriptures as good. Yet, though all canonical texts be accepted, some of them are not good at all.

God makes no demands in this story. Jephthah already had the spirit of the Lord going into battle. He did not need to make a vow to God. His daughter pays for Jephthah's victory. Her lament of her childlessness is poignant—she will never be married nor bear children—but even her lament is a telling reflection of the patriarchal definition of women's function within creation: reproduction.

We place this text alongside Luke Timothy Johnson's positive description of Scripture to make the point that, in thinking about the canon, some—not necessarily Johnson himself—confuse the *acceptance* of the text as canonical with a judgment of value about the *goodness* or moral acceptability of the text. We are used to descriptions of the Scriptures as good. Yet, though all canonical texts be accepted, some of them are not good at all. The confusion of these two categories is actually a convenient forgetting, a skipping over, an ignoring of the uncomfortable. The more one heads toward fundamentalism, the more this is the case. Fundamentalists argue that Scripture is all true and all good (not to mention a reliable source for history and science). But if we turn this on its head and say that only what is non-

[4]Luke Timothy Johnson, "The New Testament," in *The Blackwell Companion to Catholicism*, ed. James J. Buckley et al. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000). Accessed online (4 May 2009) at http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405112246_chunk_g97814051122463.

sexist and nonpatriarchal in the Bible can be revelatory, we will be hard pressed to find much to affirm, since the Bible is patriarchal through and through.

Even the Gospel of Mark, which has little that is explicitly sexist, does not introduce women *disciples* until 15:40. Why wait to mention them until the story is about to end? It is because as a narrator Mark does not need them until then, just before the women become the first to receive the news that God had raised Jesus from the dead. In keeping the women disciples invisible, Mark is *androcentric,* even though he is not overtly sexist.

The patriarchal framework and androcentric character of biblical texts render them difficult to affirm as good, beneficial, or reflective of authentic values, even when we accept them as canonical. In what sense, then, can they be authoritative or normative for me?

Privilege and Sin

Another affront is from Scripture's confirmation of unconscionable privilege, and a third is the misuse of the notion of sin. We treat them together here. The canon is not an abstraction but a collection of real writings. Individual writings reflect their actual historical and social settings. Dominant views in Scripture often mirror the dominant views of the culture. We will note gender and class privilege in particular and the way in which the concept of sin is utilized to maintain this privilege. We will take several representative examples from each Testament. Acceptance of the canon must not entail acceptance of these dominant features of its worldview.

Gender Privilege. Among texts to examine are these from the Hebrew Bible:

> To the woman he said, "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." (Gen 3:16)

> This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised....[This] shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. (Gen 17:10–11)

> When a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged to be married, and lies with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife. But if her father refuses to give her to him, he shall pay an amount equal to the bride-price for virgins. (Exod 22:16–17)

And from the New Testament:

> Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. (Col 3:18)

> Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands. (Eph 5:22–24)

> Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach

> or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. (1 Tim 2:11–15)

These texts present male privilege as divinely willed. Male domination is blamed on woman herself as her divine punishment for sin. Men and women are separated into gender spheres of persons and property. Men are persons, full covenant members, owners of property, initiators of economic transactions, those to whom honor is to be restored by payment of a bride-price, those who teach, have authority, and will be saved through faith. As property, women are the subjects of economic transactions between men, married to the one who violates them sexually, made to be silent. The male voice of the text links women's salvation to reproduction.

Within the social reality constructed by these texts, *sin* becomes the violation of male property, resistance to subordination, rejection of unequal spheres, assumption of roles reserved to men, and refusal to be defined by reproduction. The patriarchal household then becomes the model for the household of God. Woman's subordinate place in the household also now defines her place in the church. The latter is justified on the basis of creation and sin—created second, woman sinned first.

In taking the Gen 2–3 and 1 Timothy texts as primary sources for reflection on sin and redemption, early Christian theologians transposed the cultural sexism of the ancient patriarchal world into a theological anthropology of gender inequality. Augustine, the fifth-century bishop of Hippo, even pushed female subordination back *prior* to the fall: "For we must believe that even before her sin woman *had been made* to be ruled by her husband and to be submissive and subject to him."[5] Hers becomes an ontological inferiority.

Class Privilege. Reflecting another set of privileges are these texts from the Hebrew Bible:

> When a slave-owner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished. But if the slave survives a day or two, there is no punishment; for the slave is the owner's property. (Exod 21:20–21)

> This is the account of forced labor that King Solomon conscripted to build the house of the LORD and his own house….All the people who were left of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, who were not of the people of Israel—their descendants who were still left in the land, whom the Israelites were unable to destroy completely—these Solomon conscripted for slave labor, and so they are to this day. (1 Kings 9:15, 20–21)

As well as the New Testament:

> Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of

[5]Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, vol. 2, trans. John Hammond Taylor, Ancient Christian Writers 42 (New York: Newman, 1982) 171 (emphasis added).

> heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. (Eph 6:5–6)
>
> Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. (Col 3:22–24)
>
> Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. (1 Pet 2:18)

These texts present class privilege as the order of creation. Real persons are male—the elite male, head of household, husband, slave-owner—whose economic interests are enforced. The social reality constructed by the text divides persons into separate and unequal spheres. As human property, slaves have no social, political, economic, or religious rights or prerogatives. The texts sanctify the radical evil of enslaved existence as God's will. No recognition is given to the dehumanization of slavery, the violence of masters, the terror or extreme suffering experienced by slaves, or the economic benefits of slavery to the slaveholder. The New Testament texts Christianize the oppressive relation of master to slave as well as the exploitive economics of slaveholding. The slave is pulled into the subversion of Jesus' preaching by being asked to identify the slave-owner, now Christian, with Christ.

Within the worldview of these texts, *sin* is stealing another male's property and disobedience or resistance to the absolute will of the master. The sins assumed by this worldview mask the real sin projected by texts—the violence of slavery itself. Augustine assumed Scripture as his ground when in the fifth century he proposed—the first in the Christian tradition to do so—that slavery is divinely ordained of God and that perpetual bondage has apostolic sanction. He writes that the cause of slavery is human sin and that God imposes it as punishment.[6]

These brief New Testament texts served as the scriptural warrant for slave-owning Christians until the end of the nineteenth century. Southern ministers in the United States were among the strongest defenders of slavery, not least because many preachers owned sizable plantations and large numbers of slaves.[7]

The influential eighteenth-century Boston preacher and theologian Cotton Mather advocated converting slaves and supported slavery, since he himself was a slaveholder. He advised Christian slave-owners that Christianized slaves would be more efficient and that Scripture included no law forbidding servitude. The slave-owners were duty bound, Mather said, to teach their slaves "that it is God who has caused them to be Servants, and that they serve Jesus Christ, while they are at Work for their Masters."[8]

[6]Peter Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 47–48.

[7]James Newton Poling, *Deliver Us from Evil: Resisting Racial and Gender Oppression* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

[8]Cited in ibid., 42.

The texts commanding subjugation are made all the more effective by their ideological use of sin. They make domination into a command of God and disobedience into sin. The victim is commanded to obey within unjust relations and to collaborate with structures that are sinful. It is this reality—that sin pervades even our cherished texts—that creates a fundamental distortion of meaning in Scripture. The rationalization of evil as good is one dimension of what Christians call the problem of original sin.

AUTHORITY AND AUTHENTICITY

Contemporary approaches to the Scriptures are first historical, even if many other hermeneutical questions arise. Historical consciousness expects that a literary text is understood only when put in relation to its social and cultural settings. In doing that, we become aware of the differences between our culture and those of the biblical world, including differences in horizons, interests, and values.

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In contrast to the tradition that made the Scriptures simply and straightforwardly equivalent to the divine word, modern interpreters, influenced by historical consciousness, have emphasized the mediation of the divine word through the human authors of the Scriptures. This stance implies that the Bible and all religious expressions bear the features of human meaning in general, notably the fact that meanings and values are always a mixture of insights and oversights, rationalizations and biases, good and evil. Because religious meaning, like all meaning, is dialectical, a dialectical approach to biblical interpretation would seem apt for evaluation of this biblical ambiguity and for determination of the authentic and inauthentic aspects of the biblical text and its legacy. That is, we must not only understand texts using literary and historical methods, we must also evaluate them, uncovering the interests that project evil as good (and rejecting them), while recovering genuine insights (and promoting them).[9]

In our encounters with Scripture, we not only meet the past but also persons—figures in the narrative, of course, but also authors and redactors of the texts. We discover the values they hold. We criticize or affirm them. We allow ourselves to be challenged by them, or we reject them as insufficient or even sinful. Religious development takes place in the context and practice of such evaluative interaction. Inasmuch as we reject values that are false, our own conversion to

[9] See Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972). I have drawn on Lonergan for the idea of dialectical meaning and interpretation. See especially the chapters on meaning (57–100), religion (101–124), and dialectic (235–266).

truth and value is deepened and our withdrawal from inauthenticity furthered. In uncovering gender and class privilege, for example, we reject the false values at work in such ideologies of superiority—rejecting, too, the use of the concept of sin to sustain them. The texts are not excised from the canon, but they are evaluated as part of an ongoing effort to articulate and live genuine values. Their misuse of sin is a form of inauthenticity from which we withdraw. We see what sin is through the ideological distortion of it. Bernard Lonergan defines sinfulness as "distinct from moral evil; it is the privation of total loving: it is a radical dimension of lovelessness."[10] What is more radical in lovelessness than slavery?

The historic failure to approach Scripture ready to evaluate the values we meet there is evident in the centuries-long defense of slavery. What should have been rejected as inauthentic in the text was instead taken as normative and revelatory. It is not because there was a failure to understand slavery and all it entailed. Rather there were two millennia of turning a blind eye to the disvalues or evils of slavery because the values of the text and the interests and values of the interpreters coincided. Christians through the ages could have acknowledged that slavery was a horrific system and that turning humans into property was beyond the pale. But their economic interests coincided with those of the biblical writers. Even if people in the ancient world took the social institution of slavery for granted, as many historians have argued, they still could have recognized the deep contradiction between the gospel and the violence that was required to keep people in slavery.

Rather than excising unconscionable texts or traditions or mandates from the scriptural canon, therefore, the heart of what I am calling a feminist response to the problematic elements in the canon consists in a dialectical hermeneutical encounter with biblical texts, persons, and values. The goal is to enable discernment of authentic Christian values in that legacy and for today.

In this theological exercise, we have argued that a feminist perspective does not entail rejection of the idea of a fixed canon, even if we now understand its development—both as individual writings and as a body—to have been influenced by less than divine motives. We accept the canon as one constitutive part of the Christian legacy. But the real contribution of a feminist theological perspective lies in identifying unacceptable values of patriarchal culture that inform the biblical text and in raising up a critical evaluative process that confronts and surmounts them. In the end, Scripture is normative and authoritative when it forces me, as a feminist Christian, to advert to and withdraw from inauthentic aspects of the biblical legacy, to affirm the authentic values revealed in that dialectical encounter, and, thereby, to draw ever closer to the truth proclaimed by and in Jesus of Nazareth.

TATHA WILEY teaches New Testament at the University of St. Thomas in Saint Paul, Minnesota. She is trained in systematic theology and has interests in both systematics and Scripture. Her most recent publication is Creationism and the Conflict over Evolution *(Wipf and Stock, 2008).*

[10]Ibid., 242–243.