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Living Word or Dead(ly) Letter: The Encounter between the New Testament and Contemporary Experience

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LIVING WORD OR DEAD(LY) LETTER

The Encounter between the New Testament and Contemporary Experience

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background

In one sense the question about the relationship between Scripture and Christian experience is an ancient one, usually formulated as the question about the relationship between Scripture and tradition. The modern discussion of this relationship began in the sixteenth century when, for diametrically opposed reasons, both Protestants and Catholics escalated the distinction between Scripture and tradition into a virtual separation.

The Protestant agenda was the establishment of the unique and absolute role of Scripture as the norm of faith which entailed defining tradition as a purely human and subordinate development. The Catholic agenda was the establishment of the authority of the magisterium as the divinely sanctioned and ultimate interpreter of divine revelation. This required a definition of Scripture and tradition (understood at least for all practical purposes as the sum of magisterial teaching and magisterially sanctioned practice) as two separate and equally authoritative sources of revelation. In practice, Protestants utilized tradition without acknowledging its role in biblical interpretation and Catholics subordinated Scripture to tradition while insisting on their equality.

Since Vatican II the two branches of Christianity, with the exception of the biblical fundamentalists among Protestants and the magisterial fundamentalists among Catholics, have come to share a substantially common, even though not identical, view of biblical revelation which involves a theoretical and practical rejection of the separation between Scripture and tradition.¹ Both have reaffirmed that the single source of Christian revelation is Jesus Christ in his life, death, resurrection, and return to his own in the Spirit and that our normative access to that revelatory event is the apostolic witness of which Scripture is a privileged

¹John R. Donahue (Roman Catholic) and William L. Hendricks (Southern Baptist), *Review and Expositor* 79 (Spring 1982) 231-44 and 245-57 respectively, give an excellent exposition of both the convergence of Catholic and Protestant theories of Scripture since Vatican II and the remaining tensions.

moment but not the exclusive carrier. Tradition is the multiform mediation of that witness to successive generations and as such involves the ongoing but never completed interpretation of Scripture.

B. Current Developments in Understanding the Relationship

In this understanding of tradition as inclusive of Scripture, the relation of the biblical text to Christian experience could be described as follows: the experience of the apostolic community was selectively interpreted, appropriated, articulated, and transmitted as tradition including the written formulation which was canonized as Scripture; Scripture, as the fixed and canonized form of apostolic tradition, then functioned as the norm of the ongoing experience of the believing community as that experience continued to be selectively interpreted, appropriated, articulated and transmitted as tradition. Tradition is, of course, far too vast and multiform to be ever fully objectified, thematized, or codified, but when ecclesial attention is focused on a particular aspect of tradition, Scripture is recognized, at least in principle, as the ultimate norm of interpretation.

The unsettling novelty in our current experience is our realization that this process, which has been understood as an essentially one-directional dynamic from foundational ecclesial experience to the production of Scripture to biblical norming of subsequent ecclesial experience, is now perceived as involving a "cybernetic loop" in which contemporary experience turns back upon Scripture itself to call it into question. Scripture (and especially the New Testament), the *norma normans non normata*, is being interrogated and judged by what the community has come to believe about God and humanity, and our traditional theological understanding of the relationship between Scripture and tradition cannot easily handle this development.

Two forms of this new engagement between Christian experience and Scripture are particularly challenging. First, contemporary believers, both individually and communally, are facing an ever-growing number of problems arising in and from human experience with which Scripture not only does not deal explicitly but which are not even implicitly or in principle handled in the sacred text. Such questions are raised, for example, by developments in the fields of medicine and genetics, by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, by the emergence of a global economy, by the encounter between Christianity and the world religions, by the cosmological implications of the new physics. If Scripture does not deal with some of the most significant aspects of our human and religious experience, how can the sacred text continue to function as norm of Christian faith life?

Second, and perhaps even more unsettling, contemporary believers have become acutely aware of the role of Scripture itself in causing and/or legitimating some of the worst developments in human history. In our own time the South African government has appealed to the Tower of Babel story in Gen 11:1-9, among other Old Testament texts, to justify racial apartheid, and to Rom 13:1-7

on submission to civil authority to bolster the state theology that enforced apartheid.²

For nineteen centuries slavery was defended by appeal to such New Testament texts as Eph. 6:5-6 exhorting slaves to be submissive to their masters as to Christ.³ The anti-Judaism of the New Testament, e.g., Jn. 8, where Jesus calls his Jewish adversaries children of the devil, while historically understandable, has powerful anti-semitic potential⁴ which has been actualized in violence toward Jews throughout Christian history. Homophobia,⁵ the witch-hunts in Europe and America in which tens of thousands of women perished,⁶ as well as genocidal colonization of non-Christian lands and wars of extermination against the so-called infidel have all appealed to biblical texts which do, in fact, support at least the attitudes and often the practices which Christians now rightly abhor. We will return in Part III to the problem which, for many Catholics, has become

²For a good summary of the historical use of the Bible in support of South African apartheid and arguments by biblical scholars against such use, see John W. DeGruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio, eds., *Apartheid Is a Heresy* (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), esp. Willem Vorster, "The Bible and Apartheid 1," 94-111 and Douglas Bax, "The Bible and Apartheid 2," 112-43.

"The Kairos Document," ch. 2 (available in *The Kairos Covenant: Standing with South African Christians*, ed. Willis H. Logan [New York: Friendship Press, 1988] 1-43) takes up the question of the role of the Romans 13 text in "state theology" witnessing to the long-standing use of the text to support apartheid and arguing against that use.

³For a brief but chilling summary of the biblical teaching on slavery see Morton Smith, "On Slavery: Biblical Teaching v. Modern Morality," in R. Joseph Hoffmann and Gerald A. Larue, eds., *Biblical v. Secular Ethics: The Conflict* (Buffalo NY: Prometheus Books, 1988) 69-77.

⁴There is a vast literature on New Testament anti-Judaism (regarded by many as in fact anti-Semitic, i.e., at least practically ethnically motivated by the increasingly Gentile affiliation of the apostolic Church) and an increasing recognition that no amount of exegetical nuance can whitewash the fact of its presence in the text. For a basic treatment see John T. Townsend, "The New Testament, the Early Church, and Anti-Semitism," in Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs, Nahum M. Sarna, eds., *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Intellect in Quest of Understanding. Essays in Honor of Marvin Fox*, vol. 1 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 171-86. Rosemary Radford Ruether deals with the contemporary problem flowing from the New Testament material in "Christology and Jewish-Christian Relations," *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 31-43.

⁵For a thoughtful treatment of the biblical material on homosexuality, see John J. McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual* (New York: Simon and Schuster Pocket Books, 1978) 48-77.

⁶For a restrained but still terrifying account of the European witch-hunt see Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt* (New York: The New American Library, 1977) esp. 225-55. My thanks to my colleague Mary Ann Donovan and the research staff of the GTU library for help with this item.

the most neuralgic, namely, the biblical legitimation of patriarchy and sexism.⁷

While the first problem, namely, the increasing number of crucial contemporary issues on which the Bible is silent, raises the issue of the *relevance* of Scripture to contemporary Christian experience, the second, namely the role of Scripture in causing and perpetuating moral evil, raises the issue of biblical *authority and normativity*. Both questions are important but, for reasons of time and space, I will concentrate on the second.

II. THE ISSUE OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

While for centuries Protestants have been concerned with the issue of biblical authority and have proposed hermeneutical theories ranging from extreme liberalism to fundamentalism, Catholics have largely side-stepped the problem of biblical authority by reliance on the magisterium. The latter, for its part, has tended to function reactively. When a theological position or pastoral practice seemed to require authoritative clarification the magisterium issued a statement of the correct teaching on the matter and then supplied an assortment of proof texts to bolster the official position. That this procedure is still in operation is clear from recent documents on contraception,⁸ the ordination of women,⁹ and sexual morality.¹⁰

The Catholic biblical academy has sometimes proposed, rather timidly, that the use of Scripture in these documents is inadequate but has tended to take the position that the biblical evidence on a particular issue is not ultimately determinative of Church doctrine and therefore that biblical scholarship is a resource for Church teaching but not necessarily a controlling one.¹¹ There is

⁷The most thorough critique of New Testament patriarchy and sexism to date is Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983). Alice Laffey in *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) surveys the Old Testament displaying its pervasive androcentrism, patriarchy, and sexism.

⁸Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* ("On the Regulation of Birth") published in 1968 and available from Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle, New York.

⁹Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter Insigniores* ("Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood"), published in 1976, available in *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration*, ed. Leonard Swidler and Arlene Swidler (New York: Paulist, 1977) 37-49.

¹⁰Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics" (Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1976).

¹¹This is substantially the position taken by the Pontifical Biblical Commission on the question of the ordination of women. The PBC "report" was never officially published but it was leaked to the press in July 1976. The Commission voted 17-0 that the New Testament does not settle in a clear way the ordination question and 12-5 that scriptural grounds alone do not preclude the ordaining of women and that such ordination would

little doubt that fear of Vatican interference in or even repression of biblical scholarship, a fear that is not unfounded in relatively recent experience,¹² has led Catholic biblical scholars to avoid raising the theoretical issues about the appropriate role of Scripture in relation to Christian experience and Church teaching that such questionable official uses of Scripture suggest.

However, since the 1950s there has been growing, among ordinary Catholics, an interest in and enthusiasm for Scripture as "the pure and perennial source of the spiritual life" that Vatican II called it in *Dei Verbum* (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation) VI:21. Catholics, both laity and pastors, who were content in pre-conciliar days to rely virtually exclusively on magisterial formulations of faith and morality now tend to be skeptical of official teaching which is proposed as authoritative and binding but which is not clearly based in Scripture.¹³ The increasingly biblical tone of official ecclesiastical documents, even when the latter make dubious use of the biblical text, is at least a concession to this changed sensibility.¹⁴

not transgress the plan of Christ.

The Catholic Biblical Association of America's Task Force on the Role of Women in Early Christianity produced a stronger statement entitled, "Women and Priestly Ministry: The New Testament Evidence," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41 (October 1979) 608-13.

¹²For a listing and summary of recent Vatican interventions on biblical interpretation, e.g., the warning of the Holy Office on the historicity of Scripture (1961) and the address of Cardinal Ratzinger on historical criticism in 1988, see Raymond E. Brown and Thomas Aquinas Collins, "Church Pronouncements," in Brown, Fitzmyer, and Murphy, eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1990) esp. pars. 29-41.

¹³See, e.g., the article by Dan Grippio, "The Vatican Can Slight Scripture for Its Purpose," in Jeannine Gramick and Pat Furey, eds., *The Vatican and Homosexuality: Reactions to the "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons"* (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 33-39. The "Letter" was published Oct. 1, 1986.

¹⁴A major weakness of the U.S. Catholic Bishops Pastoral on peace and war, "The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response" [available in Philip J. Murnion, ed., *Catholics and Nuclear War* (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 245-338] was its inability to integrate Scripture into its arguments. Nevertheless, the first section of the Letter is devoted to an examination of Old and New Testament foundations for peace, an implicit acknowledgement that Scripture rather than philosophy at least ought to be the primary source of Christian morality.

A much better use is made of Scripture in "Economic Justice for All: Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy" [available in *Origins* 16 (Nov. 27, 1986) 409-55].

A fine explanation of the reason for the difficulty of using Scripture in Catholic moral theology is provided by Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Is Catholic Ethics Biblical? The Example of Sex and Gender," *Warren Lecture Series in Catholic Studies*, no. 20 (Tulsa: University of Tulsa, 1992).

Enthusiasm, however, cannot fill the theoretical vacuum created by centuries of substituting an appeal to authority for an adequate biblical hermeneutics. The disturbing questions about biblical authority raised by contemporary Christian experience, especially in regard to oppressive theory and practice in both Church and society, cannot be addressed on the basis of anything less than a theory of biblical interpretation that is both theologically and philosophically sophisticated and thoroughly conversant with developments in the field of biblical scholarship.

III. RESOURCES FOR DEALING WITH THE ISSUE

I do not pretend to have such a fully adequate hermeneutical theory to offer in response to the increasing tension between Christian experience and the New Testament.¹⁵ What I propose to do here is to draw upon the theory of effective history developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer, the theory of text and interpretation developed by Paul Ricoeur, and some insights of feminist biblical scholarship to suggest a possible framework within which to rethink the relationship of Scripture to experience. These theoretical resources, however, can only be exploited for the long overdue development of a contemporary biblical hermeneutics at the price of definitively abandoning both the positivistic notion of history and the static understanding of textual semantics that have dominated biblical scholarship since the Enlightenment as well as the patriarchal approach to authority that has characterized ecclesial practice since at least the second century.¹⁶

A. *Effective History and Scripture*

Certainly in this company I do not need to expatiate on the Gadamerian understanding of effective history. But I do need to delineate the aspects of the theory that I believe have relevance for the topic in hand. To obviate possible confusion, let me be clear that in speaking of history I do not mean the subject matter of historiography but rather real history, that is, the past as event. Obviously, historians can and do sort through the evidence of past events that is available in the present and attempt to reconstruct those events as accurately as possible in the writing of history. But the notion of effective history is concerned not primarily with history as written by historians but with the past itself, its mode of existence and our access to it.

¹⁵I have developed the ideas presented here at greater length, and attempted to integrate them into a more comprehensive hermeneutical theory, in *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

¹⁶An excellent analysis of the development and the impasse of post-Enlightenment biblical hermeneutics is Edgar V. McKnight's *Post-Modern Use of the Bible: The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988) esp. chaps. 1-3.

The concept of effective history (which is, in fact, the only kind of real history there is) stands in opposition to the positivistic nineteenth century understanding of history as an independent, free-standing, once-and-for-all-established collection of events presumed to have happened in an enclosed sphere called the past which can be cognitively accessed as it existed back then by the present-day historian. In reality, the past actually exists only as a dimension of the present, albeit that dimension which is the relation of the present to what preceded it. This means that the past actually exists only as it has been incorporated into the present, a process that really changes the past by placing it into an enlarged context and within an expanded horizon of interpretation. A past that is purely past would be, by definition, unknown. History, then, as it really exists, is always the past as integrated into and influencing what succeeded it, that is, as effective or productive.

Effective history is composed of events recognized to be not free-standing or fixed but generative of consequences which then enter constitutively into the reality of those events and help to determine their historical significance. By way of example, let us imagine a six year old child whose distant and financially irresponsible father dies. For the child and her mother the event is an unmitigated tragedy. They have lost the only support they know, however minimal it might have been. A couple years later the widow meets and marries a man who loves her and the child and fills their lives with an affection and material security they have never known. The death of the natural father which produced the possibility of this new set of relationships is no longer a tragedy in their lives but a liberating grace. The effective history generated by the originating event, namely the death of the natural father, makes the event itself of the death, now experienced as integral to a new life and interpreted within a new horizon, a genuinely different reality. In a very real sense the event, although unchanged in its material facticity (the father has died and is still dead), is completely different in significance, that is, in its historical reality and meaning because of its integration into the history that it effected.

What the term "effective history" emphasizes is that this is not a fiction, a "mere interpretation" which does not in fact change the historical reality. Had the mother and child died before the advent of the new father the event of the natural father's death would have retained its character as tragedy. It is the consequences, that is, the effective history generated by the event that really changed the character of the event itself from tragedy to liberation. History is effective both because of the consequences events generate and because of the repercussions of those consequences on the originating events. Effective history, then, refers to a double movement forward in time from an event and backward toward the originating event. The event generates a history which becomes part of the event by, as it were, flowing back into it and influencing its meaning and significance, that is, its present reality.

This process is verified in relation to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus experienced and transmitted by the apostolic witnesses as the Christ-event. The

event of Christ in Jesus of Nazareth has generated a history (i.e., Christianity) which is interpreted within an ever-expanding horizon (i.e., world history). Who Jesus is, namely, the source of ever-actual revelation, undergoes continual development as Christians live the paschal mystery within an ever-widening horizon of interpretation.

In this sense, the foundational revelation in Jesus is not static. It is not contained restrictively between his conception and Pentecost, established once and for all, and capable of being propositionally formulated for use in subsequent ages. Christian history, the totality of experience generated by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as it was experienced and witnessed to by the apostolic generation, not only exploits and unfolds the potentialities of the Christ-event in Jesus but also flows back into the Jesus-event developing and changing the historical event itself. It is not only subsequent history but also the historical reality of Jesus himself (as opposed to the material facticity of his life and death) that would be really different had the Jesus-movement been terminated in the middle of the first century. For example, Jesus would not be what he actually is, the founder of Christianity, for he was not a founder in his earthly life. He became a founder only as the experience of his followers led to their unification in a community which eventually became the Church.

The frequently repeated formula that "revelation ended with the death of the last apostle" (whoever that might have been or whenever it is presumed to have happened!) is based upon a positivistic conception of history and a corresponding propositional conception of revelation that is untenable in the context of an understanding of history as effective, that is, as generating consequences which flow back upon and alter the originating event. Revelation is continuous, not in the sense that new information is being communicated from on high (which is not what revelation means in any case) but in the sense that the divine self-communication is an ever-actual present experience of the Christ-event in Jesus and, as such, necessarily includes the effective history of the past event which generates it.

This conception of history as effective entails the possibility that what an originating event generates can not only enrich and enlarge the event but also undermine or subvert it. In fact, this seems to be exactly what has happened in regard to certain aspects of the apostolic witness. This witness has generated an effective history which has given rise to a community of faith that is calling into question some aspects of the witness itself. Slavery, racial and ethnic prejudice, sexism, anti-semitism, homophobia, and religious warfare which were originally seen as at least compatible with Christian faith and life, are increasingly seen, precisely because of the Gospel as the Church has lived it, to be anti-evangelical. Such realizations are becoming part of the effective historical consciousness of the Church, that is, of the progressive appropriation by Christians of the Christ-

event in Jesus.¹⁷

The developmental process of Christian revelation, that is, the effective history of the Christ-event, began virtually immediately as the first disciples placed the crucifixion of Jesus into the context of their resurrection experiences. The public execution of Jesus as a criminal was quickly transformed by its effective history into the victorious redemptive sacrifice of the messiah (see Acts 2:14-36). If Christianity had continued as a purely oral phenomenon many of the problems we face today would probably not exist because they would have been solved by the homiletic and pastoral practice of the Church actualizing the Gospel in the day to day life of the communities. But, in fact, before the disappearance of the first generation the community had begun to commit its experience to writing and by the fourth century had virtually canonized the New Testament while denying normative status to much of the collateral literature of the foundational period.¹⁸ In other words, the tradition was normatively textualized. The range of legitimate interpretation of the foundational revelation events was established in writing. This is precisely what has created the problem of biblical authority and normativity in relation to subsequent Christian history. Textualization seems to paralyze the process of effective history by rendering the original events, teachings, attitudes, and practices of the early Church impervious to subsequent development.

Texts appear to be semantically fixed. Their meaning seems to have been established by the intention of the author. And it is precisely this semantically unchangeable character of the biblical text which created the problems with which we are dealing today, namely, the fact that the texts which norm Christian experience say nothing about an increasing range of later experience and say the wrong things about many areas of contemporary concern. In other words, the effective history of the Christ-event seems to be limited to what is compatible with the written norm whose meaning does not change through time.

If in fact the meaning of texts is actually fixed, limited to what the author intended, then the dilemma is truly insoluble: either we live by a text which is increasingly irrelevant, dead, and in places immoral, i.e., deadly, or we abandon the text in favor of later insights and thereby slip our historical moorings in the apostolic tradition. Both choices have been made, the former by biblical literalists who finally sacrifice people to the text and the latter by post-Christians who finally sacrifice the text to the expanding freedom and dignity of people.

It is important to realize that this dilemma is the product of an attitude toward texts in general, and especially toward the biblical text, that is a strictly

¹⁷The term "effective historical consciousness" was coined by Hans-Georg Gadamer and developed in part II of *Truth and Method*, 2d rev. ed., trans. and rev. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad, 1989). In *The Revelatory Text*, 67-71, I make use of it to rethink the concept of tradition. The notion is integral to what I am proposing about effective history but space precludes developing the notion here.

¹⁸Lee Martin McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988).

modern development. The ancients and the medievals knew how to draw a normative text forward from its own past into a changing present. Their hermeneutical theory, which included such categories as typology, allegory, and the multiple senses of Scripture, supplied the basis for an interpretive strategy that was the analogue for texts of effective history for events.¹⁹

This approach to texts which respected their material identity through time while incorporating their meaning into expanding horizons of interpretation became increasingly questionable within the framework of post-Enlightenment scientific approaches to knowledge. Just as nature and history became, respectively, fixed objects of positivist scientific investigation and positivist historical criticism, texts began to be treated as fixed semantic containers. As nature was the expression of immutable laws which were to be established with mathematical certitude by the objective observer and history was a fixed past to be known "as it really happened" without interference from the historian's present, so texts were now seen as linguistic entities each of which contained established meaning which was to be deciphered by objective historical-critical methods. The meaning of a text was univocal, determined by the intention of the author.²⁰ Therefore interpretation consisted not in drawing the ancient text forward into the present by the use of fanciful (if not fantastic) "spiritual exegesis" that was minimally controlled by the literal sense, but in the exegetical extraction of its one correct meaning, namely, what it was intended by its author to mean to its original audience. This approach, the classical historical critical exegesis of the literal meaning, immured the biblical text in the first century. Thus the problem of a text which is increasingly irrelevant and sometimes immoral.

B. Text and Interpretation

Obviously, a return to pre-critical approaches to biblical interpretation is neither desirable nor possible. The critical mind cannot go home again. If the meaning of the biblical text is to be released from its historical prison it can only be by means of a post-critical theory of texts which can ground a post-critical actualizing theory of interpretation. Paul Ricoeur, in my opinion, offers the best framework for the development of such a theory.

Ricoeur, in his little masterwork *Interpretation Theory*,²¹ asks, "What happens to discourse when it is written down?" His answer is that the use of

¹⁹See David C. Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," *Theology Today* 37 (April 1980) 27-38.

²⁰John L. McKenzie wrote in "Problems of Hermeneutics in Roman Catholic Exegesis," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 77 (1958) 199, that "if all scholars were perfectly objective, entire unanimity should be theoretically possible in exegesis itself; for the meaning of the Bible has been determined by its authors, not by its interpreters."

²¹Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

language, that is, discourse, which occurs as transitory *event* now survives as re-identifiable ideal *meaning*. By ideal, of course, he does not mean "optimal" but rather virtual, that is, susceptible of actualization as real discourse in and by the process of reading. This ideal meaning, however, because it has been textualized, differs significantly from its oral analogue. In fact, written discourse, far from being simply oral discourse transcribed or "talk writ down" is a really different kind of discourse from speaking. Reading, consequently, is a really different kind of interpretation from hearing.²²

1. Semantic Autonomy. First, the act of writing distances the text from its author, not just physically in that the author can walk away from the text or even die while the ideal meaning incorporated in the text perdures, but semantically in that the author's intention ceases to govern the meaning of the text. Once written, the text means whatever it means, regardless of what the author intended it to mean. This is a matter of common experience for those of us who write and who know that we sometimes fail to incorporate our intended meaning into the text and (*mirabile dictu*) we sometimes write more than we knew. This semantic autonomy of the text is not absolute. The author does create a linguistic structure which exercises certain constraints on the reader. Ricoeur argues that structuralist analysis is an indispensable moment in the explanatory phase of textual interpretation precisely because it reveals these constraints,²³ but I would argue that there are other equally good analytic tools, such as surface structural and literary analysis, for this purpose. The point, however, is that texts do not mean whatever anyone wants them to mean. But the control is the linguistic structure of the text, not the intention of the author. The text is in fact independent of the author's intention and is a potential semantic partner in a theoretically unlimited number of valid and diverse events of interpretation. What this implies, as Ricoeur says, is that the matter of the text "may escape from the author's restricted intentional horizon, and that the world of the text may explode the world of its author."²⁴

2. Decontextualization. Second, the act of writing distances the text from its sociohistorical context and coordinates of production. This does not mean merely that what was once written by quill on parchment can now be copied by computer on microfiche. It means that the text's reference, that is, its truth claims about reality, is no longer limited absolutely by the world of meaning operative in its composition. In other words, the meaning of the text is not limited to what it meant or could mean to its writer or its original readers. The text can be decontextualized and recontextualized by its later readers and in the process

²²See Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutic Function of Distanciation," in John B. Thompson, ed. and trans., *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 131-44, for the basis of the following three sections.

²³See Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 81-87.

²⁴Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 91.

come to mean something very different in the new context.

A good intra-biblical example of this process of change of meaning through recontextualization is offered by the Song of Songs. There is relative scholarly consensus that this text was originally, that is, in its context of composition, a collection of love songs without overt or explicit religious reference.²⁵ Placed within the context of the Jewish Scriptures it became the love song of Yahweh and Israel. Later recontextualized by the inclusion of the Jewish Scriptures in the Christian Bible, it became the love poem of Christ and the Church. As the mystics of the Christian tradition have read the Song of Songs, recontextualizing it again within their personal experience of the divine indwelling, it has become the expression par excellence of the intimacy between the Word of God and the soul. Thus, emancipation of the text from the sociohistorical conditions of its composition and therefore from its original specific reference grounds the possibility not only of multiple interpretations but of the text really meaning something different within a new horizon of interpretation.

3. *Universalization of Audience.* Third, fixation of the meaning of discourse by inscription liberates the text from its limitation to ostensible reference. As long as discourse is oral, that is, as long as the dialogical situation obtains, the linguistic markers in the speech such as personal pronouns, verb tenses, the current meaning of words and so on are controlled by the shared world of speaker and hearer. The "I" is the concrete historical speaker and the "you" is the here and now hearer. The past is what preceded the current experience. Words mean what they mean at the time of speaking. The written text, however, breaks out of these constraints. The ostensible references, even if they can be established by exegesis, are no longer the textual reference. The shared interpersonal world of the speaker and hearer is exploded and the text creates for itself a potentially universal audience. The text now means all that it can mean to whoever can read it in any context of interpretation.

The distancing of the text from the intention of the author, the sociohistorical context of composition, and ostensible references available to the original audience creates the conditions of possibility for multiple valid interpretations of a text. In other words, the textual positivism of post-Enlightenment criticism according to which a text has one meaning only, namely that established by the author and understood by the original audience, involves a theory of the text which is actually not only naïve but erroneous. Texts are linguistic structures which constitute the objective pole of a never ending process of reinterpretation by which the meaning of the text emerges within the ever new horizons of an endless series of readers, both individual and corporate. Subsequent interpretations flow back into the text, changing its meaning, as the effective history of events flows

²⁵For a discussion of the provenance and history of interpretation of the Song of Songs see Roland Murphy, "Introduction," *The Song of Songs*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 3-105.

back into the originating, events changing their historical significance.

This process of ongoing multiple interpretation is not arbitrary. The biblical text is not a Rorschach inkblot susceptible of uncontrolled projection. Discerning and developing criteria of validity in interpretation is a major challenge not only for the biblical academy but also for the believing community.²⁶ The critical rejection of some patristic allegorical interpretations, of fundamentalist millenarian fantasies, of ecclesiastical prooftexting, and of homiletic moralizing of biblical material is as much a part of the ongoing effort to adjudicate, according to grounded and defensible criteria, among conflicting interpretations as is the never ending proposal of new interpretations by scholars. But however arduous this task may be it is no more difficult or fraught with uncertainty than the task of discerning the so-called univocal literal meaning of the text undertaken by positivist historical criticism.

C. Feminist Ideology Criticism

Let us now look very briefly at the implications of these theoretical reflections for what is perhaps the most disturbing problem raised by the encounter between contemporary experience and the biblical text, namely, the role of the Bible, particularly the New Testament, in legitimating the oppression of women in family, society, and Church.²⁷ I suggest that this is the most disturbing problem for at least two reasons. First, more than half of the Christian community is negatively affected by the anti-woman bias of the biblical text. Second, the androcentric and patriarchal bias of the New Testament is not limited to a few texts but pervades the text from one end to the other. It is not an occasional text which we need to banish from the lectionary or explain as culturally conditioned. The more carefully feminist scholars examine the New Testament the more pervasive and profound the problem appears. The question for increasing numbers of women is no longer how to handle particular oppressive texts but whether or not a self-respecting woman can continue to allow this text to norm her faith life. Many women have already decided that the answer to that question is no, and if the Church cannot or will not address the issue of biblically legitimated oppression of women I suspect their number will grow.

²⁶Ricoeur in *Interpretation Theory*, 78-79, discusses the logic and process of validation, in contrast to the logic and process of empirical verification. He describes it as a method of converging indices which is appropriate for the interpretation of "individuals" as opposed to instances of a general law. I take up the question in greater detail in *The Revelatory Text*, 164-67.

²⁷For a fuller treatment of this issue, see my article "Feminist Ideology Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 19 (January 1989) 3-10 and chapter two of my *Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist, 1991).

In my opinion, what we need is a thoroughgoing ideology-critical approach to the New Testament as a whole rather than simply a piecemeal attack on particular problematic passages, although such text-by-text work also needs to be done.²⁸ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza undertook such a full scale project from an historical critical perspective in her ground-breaking book, *In Memory of Her*. But given her objective, which was to find out what role women actually played in the Jesus movement of the first centuries and how the text mediates that involvement she had to conclude that much of the text either has to be mined for clues for reconstructing the history of women which the text actually denies or suppresses, or else be rejected as non-revelatory because of its incompatibility with the emancipatory experience of women.

In my view, this can be only a step in the process because the ultimately serious question is not what women did or did not do in the first century (although restoring their Christian history to women and women to Christian history is a very important project) but what it means to be a woman and a Christian in the present. As long as the positivist approach to the biblical text is in possession of the territory, historical research and reconstruction must result either in exclusive modelling of the experience of contemporary women on what the New Testament says about first century women's participation in the Christian mystery, or in denying revelatory status to those texts whose historical meaning limits the personhood of women. Schüssler Fiorenza refused the first alternative in favor of the second whereas many Christian women continue to restrict their own development as persons rather than surrender the revelatory status of any of the biblical text.

I am proposing an interpretation of the text in which historical criticism plays an ancillary rather than hegemonic role in a larger hermeneutical project. This would require that, within the theoretical framework outlined above, we definitively abandon the positivist understanding of history in favor of a theory of effective history and the static approach to textual semantics in favor of a theory of the text as interactive mediator of meaning through multiple interpretations. In other words, it would involve abandoning the theory of biblical interpretation as the ascertaining of the univocal literal meaning of the New Testament which then controls what may or may not happen in the contemporary experience of Christians. The Bible would no longer be naïvely imaged as a repository of definitively fixed propositional revelation or as a blueprint for contemporary Church life which confronts the believer with a "take it or leave it" alternative. In other words, we would stop asking such questions as "Whom did Jesus ordain?" or "Were there any women apostles?" or "Who presided at

²⁸Several collections of such studies have appeared in recent years, e.g., Mary Ann Tolbert, ed., *The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics*, Semeia 28 (Chico CA: Scholars Press, 1983); Letty M. Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985).

Eucharist in the early Church?" in order to decide how women can function in today's Church. However important such questions may be for historical knowledge of our origins their answers are not determinative of contemporary faith and life. This amounts to a redefinition of the normativity of Scripture in dynamic and interactive rather than static and propositional terms.

If, as I have tried to show, texts do not have a single, univocal meaning but can and do change and develop in meaning and play different roles as they are recontextualized within the ever-widening horizon of ongoing Christian experience, then in the case of patriarchal and sexist texts we are not necessarily dealing with immutable determinants of women's identity and destiny according to first century religious or cultural patterns or even first century theology. For example, a text which clearly establishes that Paul intended to limit the Christian participation of women (e.g., I Cor 14:34-36) could function today not as an eternally valid establishment of female subordination but as a witness to the real limitation of first century understanding of the equality in Christ of all the baptized. Placed in interaction with other texts in the Pauline corpus (e.g., I Cor 11:5; Gal 3:27-29) it may serve to show us, not what women today may or may not do, but how it was possible, even for Paul and therefore perhaps a fortiori for us, to have the principle right but its application wrong.

Perhaps what we need to see in oppressive texts is not their declarative content as a determinant of present possibilities but the dynamics of Christian engagement with contemporary societal constraints which they exemplify. Sometimes early Christian engagement with the surrounding society and culture was amazingly courageous (e.g., the refusal of Peter and John to obey the order to refrain from preaching the Gospel [Acts 4:19]) but sometimes it was pusillanimous and shortsighted (e.g., the willingness of some early communities to sacrifice the Christian liberty of women and slaves to the perceived need for social acceptability [cf. I Tim 2:9-15 and 6:1-2]). What Phyllis Trible has called biblical "texts of terror," like our personal sins, have redemptive capacity, not as paradigms for future behavior or justification of past evils but as salutary challenges to go and do differently.

In short, I am convinced that only a hermeneutical theory which can handle all of the biblical text as revelatory, all of it as inspired by God and written for our instruction (cf. II Tim 3:14-17; II Pet 1:19-21), can finally facilitate a life-giving interaction between Scripture and ongoing Christian experience. Unless the whole biblical text is Scripture for us, none of it really is. But how various parts of the text are revelatory depends on our understanding of what a text is and therefore how it is to be engaged. If the text is a fixed container of inarguable theological dicta and unquestionable paradigms of behavior then it will become, at best, progressively less pertinent to Christian experience as the first century recedes historically, taking with it into the dust of irrelevance a dead text. At worst the text must be abandoned as irredeemably immoral in regard to some of the most important issues of our day, a text that becomes ever more deadly in proportion to the affirmation of life of increasing numbers of

contemporary people.

But if the biblical text is a structured but virtual mediation of meaning which only becomes actual meaning in the interpretive engagement by the reader within the horizon of contemporary experience then we must wrestle incessantly with the text until it blesses us with liberating truth. The darkness in which we wrestle is the blinding residue of intellectual and moral ignorance which always partially obscures our vision and the history of oppression that limits our perception of God's all inclusive *shalom* of equality and justice. But we wrestle with the strength of all of the insight, compassion, and wisdom of the community's effective history up to and including our own time, an important part of which is precisely the ongoing interpretation of Scripture itself which flows back into our history changing the character and meaning of the founding events. The painful but not ultimately crippling limp which will always mark the Christian community's walk through history reminds us of our foolish arrogance, our sublime vocation, and the blessing we must earn by hanging on in the darkness.

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