

2004

# Scripture: Tool of Patriarchy or Resource for Transformation?

Sandra Marie Schneiders

*Jesuit School of Theology/Graduate Theological Union, [sschneiders@scu.edu](mailto:sschneiders@scu.edu)*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/jst>

 Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Schneiders, S. M. (2004). Scripture: Tool of Patriarchy or Resource for Transformation? In *Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church*. Revised edition. (pp. 37–71). Paulist Press.

Reprinted with permission.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Jesuit School of Theology by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [rscroggin@scu.edu](mailto:rscroggin@scu.edu).

## ***Scripture: Tool of Patriarchy or Resource for Transformation?***

### **I. Introduction**

If feminism is a major resource for the transformation of humanity and history in the direction of wholeness and hope, it is also a serious challenge to organized religion and especially to Christianity because it calls into question the traditional theology of God and of human beings. But beneath these theological questions lies an even more fundamental issue, namely the question of biblical revelation. The question, in its starkest terms, is whether or not the Bible teaches the maleness of God and the inferiority of women. In other words, is patriarchy divinely revealed and therefore divinely sanctioned? It would seem that, if it is, there is no future for self-affirming women in Christianity because the Bible is regarded by Christians as somehow a bearer of divine revelation.

The uniquely privileged place that the Bible holds in Christian faith is expressed in various ways in different Christian communions but, in effect, all agree that it is the touchstone of the faith. Vatican II in the dogmatic constitution on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum*, called scripture, which the

church venerates “as she venerate[s] the Body of the Lord” in the eucharist, “the pure and perennial source” of the spiritual life (VI, 21).<sup>1</sup> Authentic Christian faith cannot bypass scripture. But a God who reveals women’s intrinsic inferiority cannot function salvifically for women. Indeed, such a God cannot finally function salvifically for men either because this God would be the legitimator of men’s oppression of women and, in the last analysis, oppression is destructive of the oppressor as well as of the victim.

As feminist biblical scholarship has progressed during the past two decades it has become virtually impossible to pretend that the long established tradition of invoking biblical authority to justify the oppression of women in family, society, and church is based solely on a misreading of scripture. Without doubt there have been misogynist misinterpretations of scripture in the course of history, but it is no longer possible to deny that the text itself is not only androcentric, i.e. a male-centered account of male experience for male purposes with women relegated to the margins of salvation history, but also patriarchal in its assumptions and often in its explicit teaching, and at times deeply sexist, i.e. anti-woman. Its God-language and imagery are overwhelmingly male. When the official church invokes scripture to justify its discriminatory treatment of women it does not have to resort to fundamentalist proof-texting or to questionable exegetical methods. In other words, the problem is in the text.

Some women, of course, have accepted and interiorized what seems to be the biblical verdict on their status, namely that male headship in family and church is divinely mandated, that women’s subordination is of divine institution, and that God is ultimately, if not actually male, at least the warrant for regarding the male as the normative human being. In biblical fundamentalist communities there is vir-

tually no alternative to accepting these conclusions and their practical implications.

Other women, whose number is increasing, have examined the biblical material and, having found overwhelming evidence of its androcentric, patriarchal, and sexist character, have concluded that the biblical text is so totally and irredeemably oppressive of women, so destructive of female personhood, that it cannot possibly proclaim the true God or function as word of God for self-respecting women. Those with the courage of their convictions have severed their ties with institutional Christianity and taken their religious quest elsewhere. We will return to this subject in the next chapter.

Finally, there are some women who have neither agreed to a seemingly biblically mandated inferiority nor found a way to avoid the problematic conclusions of sound exegesis. And yet, leaving Christianity behind is not a viable option for them. These are women who recognize not only the damage that Christianity has inflicted on women but also its positive effects. Furthermore, they also realize that western culture is thoroughly imbued with biblical influence. One cannot simply walk away from Christianity because its values and presuppositions color all of our western institutions, social processes, and relational patterns. One does not have to be a registered Christian to feel the effects of biblical misogyny and leaving institutional Christianity will not protect one from them. But even more importantly these women have deep personal reasons for wanting to remain Christian. Their spirituality is profoundly christocentric and the roots of their identity and personal history are deep in the soil of Christianity. It is these women who have continued to struggle with the question, both theological and exegetical, of the Bible and its role in Christian faith.

If we agree that the question is simply "What does the

Bible say about women?" and that the sole method for answering that question is historical critical exegesis, our options are severely limited. I want to suggest that this formulation of the question does not go deep enough and that exegesis is an insufficient approach to the answer. The first question that must be asked is what we mean by the basic faith assertion that the Bible is the word of God. Then exegesis must be subsumed into a larger project of interpretation in order to discover not just "what the Bible says" but what the scriptures, as word of God, mean for the Christian community today.

In approaching these questions two extremes are to be disavowed at the outset. The first is extreme biblical liberalism according to which the Bible is merely a "book like any other book," one written in a time and culture whose presuppositions about such things as miracles, cosmology, or divine speech, and therefore perhaps also about the nature and status of women, are no longer credible and therefore do not have to be either accepted or refuted but merely exposed and explained. The extreme biblical liberal does not share the problem of the believing feminist for whom the Bible remains authoritative, because for the extreme liberal "word of God" is simply a reverential designation for a book which, however dear to Christians, is no more nor less authoritative than its content, judged by current norms of rationality, warrants.

The second extreme position is that of the biblical fundamentalist for whom the Bible is literally the word of God. Although fundamentalists cover a broad spectrum the position itself involves three presuppositions which, in my opinion, are false in themselves but which, more importantly for our purposes here, foreclose any attempt to deal with the morally problematic aspects of scripture in a liberating way.<sup>2</sup>

First, fundamentalism rests on the faulty theological pre-

supposition of verbal inspiration, a presupposition which founders on the results of modern biblical criticism such as multiple authorship of some books of the Bible, historical processes of composition which sometimes spanned centuries, and clear historical and scientific errors of fact in the text.

Second, it rests on the erroneous literary presupposition that there is such a thing as "face value" in literary texts; that one can read a text without interpreting it and that this is, indeed, the best and only honest way to read it. In fact, the only way we can understand texts is by interpreting them, and the richer, more complicated, and distant from us by language and culture the text is, the more necessary and complex will be the required process of interpretation. The question is not whether we will interpret the text, but how.<sup>3</sup> The refusal to interpret is a particular kind of interpretation and one which is not justified by our human experience with texts and reading.

Third, fundamentalism rests on a faulty spiritual presupposition which involves a quasi-magical view of the biblical text. Magic is the attempt to influence, even control, divine action by use of certain techniques. The fundamentalist approach to scripture attempts to make God respond to a disordered human need for absolute certitude. Christian faith affirms that, as Vatican II said, God comes to meet us in and through the scriptures,<sup>4</sup> but this divine encounter does not involve a divine promise to answer our felt needs for absolute authority in our lives which is really a deep desire to escape the human condition.

For reasons very different from those of the extreme liberal, the biblical fundamentalist is also unlikely to struggle with the question with which we are dealing. However, people who are not fundamentalists in the doctrinal or confessional sense are often naive literalists in their approach to

scripture. For a literalist the processes of exegesis are respected but, once the so-called "literal sense" of a text has been established, the interpretative enterprise is closed. Like the fundamentalist, the literalist stops with the answer to the question "What does the text say?" which is thought to be equivalent to what the author meant and/or how the text was understood in the historical setting to which it was first addressed. As we have already noted, the answer to that question often cannot be other than damaging for women.

## **II. Meaning of the Affirmation: Scripture Is the Word of God**

Christians of all varieties are united in affirming that, in some sense of the term, scripture is the word of God. This affirmation usually goes unexamined and, as has been said, can signify anything from religious reverence for the book itself to an extreme fundamentalistic belief that every word of scripture was literally dictated by God to a human scribe who wrote it down without error. Most Christians are somewhere between these two extremes but are hard put to say exactly what calling scripture the word of God signifies theologically. I propose to break the question down into two parts. First, what kind of linguistic entity is the term "word of God"? Second, to what does the term refer?

### *A. The Linguistic Expression: A Metaphor*

To inquire into the linguistic nature of the term "word of God" is to ask what kind of language we are using when we use this term. At the very least we must admit that the term cannot be a literal designation of the Bible. To call scripture the word of God is to attribute intelligible discourse to God. But God does not think discursively and does not speak in words.

Discursive thought is the sequential mental process of limited beings whose rationality does not and cannot involve immediate and complete spiritual coincidence with the known. Furthermore, words are physical sounds (or their visible representatives), produced by vocal cords, as expressions of human rational and affective processes of some kind. Such speech is both our most powerful method of self-expression and an ultimately limited and inadequate method. The limitations of speech itself are evident in the impossibility of perfectly translating speech from one language to another. Without words we can say nothing at all, but our words can never express perfectly the self we strive to bring to disclosure by speech. In short, speech is a radically human experience, rooted in our bodiliness and expressive of our sequential thought processes, and therefore essentially and not just accidentally finite. Nothing in this descriptive definition of speech can be literally predicated of God who is pure spirit and therefore literally neither thinks nor speaks.

To deny that scripture is literally the "word of God" because God does not literally speak is not necessarily to claim that the expression is ultimately meaningless or radically untrue. It is to realize that "word of God" is, strictly speaking, a metaphor. A metaphor is not simply an abbreviated simile whose tenor can be translated into literal language once its meaning is understood, or a mere rhetorical decoration that makes discourse more interesting or effective. Metaphor is our most effective access to meaning which cannot be expressed literally because it transcends in some way the ostensible reality of everyday experience.

A metaphor is recognizable by the fact that, at the literal level, it is absurd and yet it carries meaning. It is not false, as is, e.g. the erroneous statement, "Cats are canines." The metaphor conveys meaning but in such a way that the mind must reach beyond, without negating the relevance of, the

literal expression.<sup>5</sup> The metaphor suggests the direction of meaning but does not simply deliver it. It invites the whole psyche—intelligence, feeling, imagination—into play in search of meaning which is indicated but not delivered. “Hungrily his eyes searched hers” conveys meaning. But taken literally it would be absurd. Eyes cannot literally hunger or search, nor can they be searched.

A metaphor is a predication which involves an unresolved tension between an “is” and an “is not,” an affirmation and a negation, predicated of the same thing at the same time. At the literal level what is affirmed must be denied, i.e. it “is not.” But at some other level, some deeper and more important level, the affirmation is true. This is the “is.” To say that “Individualism is the cancer of our society” is to speak metaphorically. At the literal level individualism “is not” a physical disease which can be treated by surgery or chemotherapy. But the metaphorical statement evokes not just an intellectual grasp of the life-gone-wild character of rampant individualism but also the emotional response of fear, revulsion, hopelessness in the face of a silently spreading malignancy, and a desperate sense of urgency. It also evokes an organismic understanding of society with all the philosophical and sociological freight that this foundational metaphor carries. If we agree with the negative judgment on individualism carried by this metaphor it conveys more truth than a literal analysis of the phenomenon does. But whether or not we agree with it, the metaphor is more powerful in its appeal to the whole psyche than a non-metaphorical, i.e. a literal, description of individualism.

Because the metaphor lives in the tension between the “is not” of the literal level and the “is” at the evocative level, a metaphor is a very unstable linguistic entity. There is a constant and inveterate tendency of the mind to resolve the tension by choosing between the “is” and the “is not.” If one

suppresses the "is" one destroys the metaphor by simply denying its applicability to the subject matter. Thus, one says that society is not literally an organism and individualism is not literally a physical disease and consequently there is nothing to worry about.

If one suppresses the "is not" one literalizes the metaphor. A literalized metaphor has been killed, but not all dead metaphors are buried. Most metaphors eventually die and they are buried in the semantic field of the language. For example, "leg" was originally a metaphorical way of speaking of that which holds up a table. Now, one of the dictionary meanings of the word "leg" is "part of a piece of furniture." The metaphor has been literalized and interred in the language.

However, some metaphors refer to realities which are both unavailable to ordinary experience and tremendously significant for personal or social experience. Therefore, when such metaphors are literalized, it often is not noticed because there is nothing in our sensible experience against which to check the affirmation. These are the dead but unburied metaphors which pollute their imaginative environment distorting both cognition and affectivity. Such a dead metaphor, at least in the imagination of most Christians, is "God is our Father." For such believers God is, for all intents and purposes, literally a male being who rules over his patriarchal household, the human family, as earthly fathers rule over theirs. For such people, it is no more appropriate to call this heavenly father "mother" than to call our human fathers "mother." And all non-human metaphors for God are reduced to similes because their "is" cannot be taken seriously in regard to a God who is literally a male person, a father.

Finally, there are metaphors which never die, whose tensiveness is ultimately unresolvable because their tenor is so intrinsically irreducible to their vehicle that the mental equa-

tion necessary for their literalization cannot be carried out. For example, the metaphor of the church as body of Christ is difficult to literalize because the church is so evidently not a physical body that the “is not” cannot be suppressed. Such resistant metaphors have a pronounced capacity to function as “root metaphors,”<sup>6</sup> i.e. metaphors which draw semantic nourishment from a wide range of experience, while they generate, support, and organize a rich growth of imaginative fruit in the form of dependent and related metaphors. Sallie McFague has suggested that the root metaphor of Christianity is “reign of God,”<sup>7</sup> an eschatological reality which not only focuses hope but names whatever has been achieved which is recognizable as that hope in process of realization.

What kind of metaphor is the expression “word of God”? Although it is susceptible to both destruction and literalization, I would propose that it is best understood as a root metaphor because, as soon as one reflects deeply on the metaphor, its metaphorical quality “revives.” One can, of course, like the extreme liberal, deny the “is” and treat “word of God” as a reverential designation of a book which is not, in any real sense of the word, divine. And one can, like the fundamentalist, suppress the “is not” and treat the Bible as literally God’s speech. But the first position runs counter to the profound faith conviction of the Christian community that there is something special, unique, even divine about the Bible. The second position runs counter to the results of the best biblical scholarship and, increasingly, to the common sense of ordinary believers. Both faith and reason conspire to identify the proposition “The Bible is the word of God” as a metaphor. It evokes felt meaning but it does not deliver literal sense.

This metaphor is not, however, an ordinary one. It is a root metaphor because its nourishing ground is the entire tradition of biblical revelation and because its fruit is a rich

and diversified range of interaction between God and humans in the sphere of interpersonal self-communication.

*B. Referent of "Word of God": Symbolic Revelation*

If word of God is a metaphor, its function is to convey meaning which exceeds our capacities for literal expression, which is too rich to be captured by literal speech, but which is neither unintelligible nor unavailable. We must, then, inquire after its referent, that to which it points. I suggest that the referent of the metaphor word of God is symbolic divine revelation.

Revelation is not the imparting of secret information, even though it does have a noetic dimension. Revelation is, first and foremost, self-gift, the communication or sharing of one's subjectivity. One's self is the ultimately unavailable. Virtually any other kind of knowledge is, in principle, available to any qualified researcher. But the "knowing" involved in personal relationship is different precisely because we cannot come to know another unless the other invites us into that intimacy, makes it possible for us through the self-gift of revelation.

Language plays a singularly important role in the process of self-revelation. Far from being primarily a system of labels which we affix to discreet entities of experience, language is first of all the activity in and through which we bring our selves to disclosure, make ourselves intersubjectively available. Language is intrinsically symbolic because it is the extension of body which is the primary symbol in human experience. Unlike a sign which stands for something other than itself, as an exit sign stands for a doorway or a red light stands for the command to stop, a symbol is a way of being present to something which cannot be present in any other way. Our body, and its extensions in language, both spoken

and gestural, is our way of being present. It is the symbol of our person which cannot be present in intersubjective availability except through symbolic self-expression.

Symbolic expression is both the only way personal subjectivity can render itself present and always necessarily an inadequate and ambiguous rendering. The symbolic expression never exhausts the reality being expressed, thus necessitating endless reexpression as the speaker struggles to disclose the fullness of her or his thought or feeling. But no matter how adequate the expression it never coincides totally with what is being expressed, and thus it remains ambiguous, capable of being misunderstood. Consequently, symbolic expression only functions in interaction with interpretation, and no interpretation is fully adequate, complete, exhaustive. While this seems, at first sight, to be a tragedy rendering communication always imperfect and often false, it is also the source of the endless and ever new interaction which is the special delight of friends and lovers. The person who invites us into intimacy through symbolic self-revelation can never be definitively known but remains a reservoir of meaning drawing us ever onward and inward in the quest for personal communion in the mystery of being.

However divine revelation is understood, it is first and foremost not an extraterrestrial source of accurate information but God's self-gift to humans. Christians believe that God invites human beings to be "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4), to enter into the divine life of God which is opened to us through divine revelation. That revelation is necessarily symbolic, i.e. suited to our mode of intersubjective knowing. But because it is symbolic it is always limited, inadequate to its infinite subject, ambiguous and therefore in need of endless interpretation. The infinity of divine subjectivity requires but is never exhausted by symbolic revelation.

Divine self-revelation is actually coextensive with reality because whatever exists speaks of its creator, of the source of its being. However, Christian reflection has identified three primary spheres of revelation: nature, history, and humanity. The psalms especially speak of the glory of God revealed in the wonders of nature where day speaks to day of God's beauty and night pours out knowledge (cf. Ps 19:1-3), where the voice of God thunders in the cataracts (cf. Ps 42:7), and the power of God is unleashed in storm and earthquake (cf. Ps 18:7-15). The Hebrews were not the only peoples to discern the presence and action of God in the mighty displays of nature as well as in her beneficence to all living things. The special insight of the Hebrews was their realization that God also acted in history, revealing God's nature and designs for all people but especially for those whom God had chosen by bringing them out of captivity, establishing them in their own land, and giving them a law incorporating the divine Wisdom as no other law before had ever done (cf. Wis 10-11).

Ultimately, however, God resorted to human language, speaking through specially chosen messengers, the prophets of the Old Testament and eventually Jesus of Nazareth. Just as nature can be regarded as God's self-manifestation and history can be understood as the experience of God's interaction with the people, so the oracles of the prophets can be regarded as God's speech. But nature remains nature, history remains history, and humans remain humans even as they serve as symbolic material for divine self-communication. They do not cease to be limited, imperfect, ambiguous, in need of endless interpretation if they are to function as God's symbolic self-expression.

The real referent of the expression "word of God" is divine symbolic self-revelation. The choice of the term "word" is both appropriate and dangerous; appropriate because language is our most adequate mode of symbolic self-

revelation and dangerous because it is too easy for us to imagine God as a person in our image speaking as we speak. This danger is compounded when the term is applied not to nature or history or prophetic spokespersons but to the Bible which is indeed a verbal reality, a document written in words.

For Christians the ultimate divine self-revelation is not the Bible but Jesus, the word of God incarnate. But the temptation to see scripture, precisely because it is a linguistic reality, as the ultimate divine self-revelation is powerful. It is a temptation that must be resisted if a nuanced and theologically accurate understanding of scripture is to be developed. Such an understanding is the only basis for a theory of interpretation which can both take seriously the unique role of the Bible in Christian faith and respond to the challenge raised by the very real limitations of the biblical text. Symbolic revelation is the locus of encounter with God but it is, like all symbolic communication, only capable of mediating such an encounter through the never exhaustive process of human interpretation because all symbols are inherently and invincibly ambiguous, simultaneously revealing and concealing as they lead us into interpersonal intimacy.

### **III. Relation of the Bible to Divine Revelation**

If word of God is a metaphor for the full range of symbolic divine revelation in nature, history, prophecy, human beings and especially Jesus, we must raise the question of what role scripture plays in this multi-faceted interaction between God and humanity. In other words, we must ask "What is the relationship between scripture and revelation?"

First, it should be evident that scripture is not identical with revelation. Revelation cannot be reduced to the Bible for it is a much more inclusive term. Second, the Bible is not

the paradigmatic instance of revelation, a role that Christians assign only to Jesus. Third, the Bible does not contain revelation the way a dictionary contains definitions or a newspaper contains stock market information. Revelation is not primarily information and its primary form is not propositions. The linguistic text has some relationship to revelation but the nature of that relationship is more complex and subtle than the relationship of a container to its contents.

Perhaps the best category for understanding the relationship of text to revelation is witness. The Bible bears witness to that special revelation which Christians believe occurred in the history of Israel and the early church and especially in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Witness is always in some way a language event, a verbal or quasi-verbal testimony to one's experience and therefore to that which has been experienced. However, no matter how faithful the witness it never delivers the reality of the event as such. Witness is always at least two removes from the reality in question. The first remove is the interpreting experience of the person who is the witness. The second remove is the recounting of the interpreting experience in the giving of testimony.

Because testimony or witness always involves the interpretation of the event by the witness and then the verbal shaping of the event in the testimony itself, no witness is ever fully adequate to its subject matter. Furthermore, as human testimony it is virtually always biased in some way by its position within the horizon of a particular witness. At times testimony which is essentially true can even involve errors of fact or interpretation. For example, I can give true witness to the fact that car A ran a stop sign and collided with car B which was proceeding legally even though I may be in error about the color of the cars or the name of the street where they collided. Of course, the more errors of fact my testimony

involves, the less credibility is likely to be assigned to my witness. And some errors would render the witness useless.

Because of the necessarily limited, biased, and error-prone character of all human testimony precisely because it involves interpretation by the witness and because it must be set forth in the available linguistic genres, the receiving of witness is itself an essentially hermeneutical enterprise. All testimony must be interpreted. This involves not only ascertaining the competence and honesty of the witness but also interrogating the testimony given. Once we have identified scripture as a case of human verbal witness to divine revelation we must accept the consequences, namely, that we must not only ascertain the competence of the witnesses but also examine the testimony for the shortcomings and inadequacies that are part of all human witness and then interpret the testimony using all the skills available to us.

Word of God, then, is a metaphor for the totality of divine revelation, especially as it is expressed in Jesus. The Bible is a witness to the human experience of divine revelation. In other words, it is a limited, biased, human testimony to a limited experience of God's self-gift. The Bible is not divine revelation nor does it contain divine revelation. It contains the necessarily inadequate, sometimes even erroneous, verbal expression of the experience of divine revelation of those who were privileged subjects of that gift of God. In other words, it is not God who is limited but the modes through which we can experience God and the modes by which we can express that experience. The Bible is literally the word of human beings about their experience of God. Metaphorically it can be called the word of God because of the subject matter of that human discourse and the power of the experience which comes to expression in it. But it is not thereby made literally divine speech nor is it invested with the inerrancy of divinity.

The foregoing reflection brings us back to our original dilemma, the morally unacceptable content of scripture. Although our concern is with the biblical material which is harmful to the personhood of women, it must be recalled that the Bible also contains racist and anti-semitic material as well as morally objectionable attitudes toward war attributed directly to God. In other words, the problem raised by feminists is not limited to women. The large question is how a text which has been found morally wanting in some respects can function normatively for a community called to justice and liberation.

One approach to the objectionable material, and one which is generally regarded as unacceptable, is to excise the offending material if not physically at least by silencing it in the community. A second approach which is useful but, in my opinion, still not adequate is the purely exegetical. Feminist scholars have devoted considerable effort to the important task of exegeting from a feminist perspective the texts of Old and New Testament which deal directly with women in an effort to highlight the occasional positive presentations of women and their role in salvation history<sup>8</sup> as well as the liberating praxis of Jesus in regard to women.<sup>9</sup>

Other scholars have turned to the exegesis of blatantly sexist texts such as the "tales of terror" in the Old Testament,<sup>10</sup> or such New Testament texts as 1 Cor 11:3-16; 14:34-36; Col 3:18-19; Eph 5:22-33; 1 Tim 2:8-15; Tit 2:4-5; and 1 Pet 3:1-7,<sup>11</sup> in order to make visible what has been silenced in the history of God's people as well as to demonstrate the occasional character and culturally limited valence of such texts.

More ambitious projects of an historical nature have been undertaken by scholars such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in *In Memory of Her*. In this master work Fiorenza interrogates the entire New Testament in order to force it to

yield the suppressed history of women in early Christianity and, by restoring women to Christian history, restore their history to Christian women.

All of these efforts are necessary and helpful. But they do not address the fundamental question of how an intrinsically oppressive text, one which is actually morally offensive in some respects, can function normatively in and for the believing community. In what sense can one regard as word of God that which, in some respects at least, cannot possibly be attributed to God without rendering God the enemy and oppressor of some human beings?

#### **IV. Beyond Exegesis to Hermeneutics**

The approach I want to take to this question goes beyond exegesis into the realm of philosophy, a philosophy of written discourse and a philosophy of interpretation, in order to arrive finally at a theology of interpretation. At the outset I want to set aside definitively any appeal to the special religious character of scripture as a solution to the problem since that is precisely what is called into question by the morally objectionable material in the Bible. In other words, I do not want to claim that scripture must be finally and somehow salvific because it is divinely inspired. Whatever may be said about a "fuller sense" of scripture or the progressive nature of revelation in salvation history is outside the realm of the present inquiry precisely because both of these approaches involve claims that cannot be investigated without appeal to the faith which is threatened by the very text under scrutiny. It is the biblical basis itself of faith that requires investigation.

I propose to examine the nature of the biblical text *as text*, i.e. as a human literary construct purporting to bear witness to the experience of divine revelation, and interpreta-

tion *as a human enterprise*, i.e. as a work of human understanding. I am asking whether there is a way to understand text and interpretation which allows us to acknowledge honestly what we cannot deny, namely the moral problems inherent in the text, and to continue to claim this text as normative and liberating for the Christian community.

#### *A. The Nature of a Text*

Within the contemporary community of biblical scholars there are basically two understandings of texts. The first, which admits of much variety that runs the gamut from rank fundamentalism to very nuanced historical criticism, is an essentially positivist position. The text is regarded as a kind of semantic container, separate from and independent of the reader, and permanently circumscribed by the conditions and circumstances of its production. Its meaning, which was determined by its author, was put into the text by the act of writing, and it remains constant throughout the history of its interpretation even though readers may be able to understand that meaning more or less adequately at different times.

Exegesis is the process through which, by the correct application of appropriate methods, one extracts from the text the meaning intended and established by the author. In short, a text means what its author intended it to mean, and the task of the exegete is to discover what that meaning is. This semantic content of the text is known as its "literal sense." Once literal sense has been ascertained to the best of the ability of the exegete, it can be taken up by theologians and pastors who, by allowing it to interact with the tradition and experience of the believing community, apply it to contemporary situations in a theologically, religiously, or spiritually relevant way. The process of exegesis, however, is inde-

pendent of later applications. Not all applications are equally valid, and their degree of validity must be judged according to their fidelity to the literal sense.

In the course of church history the positivist approach to the text has supported three basic modes of handling the increasing historical gap between the literal sense and the contemporary context. The typically Protestant approach involves a more or less complete surrender to the text. The typically Catholic approach involves submitting the text to ecclesiastical authority which supplements (and sometimes supplants or suppresses) its meaning by recourse to "tradition." Finally, the biblical fideist manages to live relatively comfortably in two worlds, affirming intellectually the historical literal sense of the text while adhering in faith to what the church teaches and believes even if it is neither contained in nor supported by the text. In every case exegesis is the limit of the positivist approach to the text.

The second understanding of text, one which is gaining increasing acceptance among biblical scholars and which is the one upon which I will draw in what follows, is essentially linguistic and literary rather than purely historical. It regards the text not as a semantic container but as a structured mediation of meaning. Meaning is not contained in the text; it is an event of understanding which takes place in the encounter between text and reader. The text, then, is never fully independent of the reader except in the most banal and physicalist sense of the word.

Like a musical score, which is not really music but only the normative possibility of music awaiting actualization by the one who plays it, the text does not contain meaning but provides a normative possibility for making meaning which can be realized by a competent reader. Because every reader is different the interaction of text and reader will never be exactly the same twice. However, just as not all interpre-

tations of a musical score are equally good, not all interpretations of a text are equally good; indeed not all interpretations are valid. Thus, it is necessary to develop criteria of validity and to submit diverse interpretations to these criteria applied both by the community of scholars and by the community of believers.<sup>12</sup> The text norms the interpretation, but no interpretation is *the* one and only correct one, and the interpretative enterprise will never terminate in a final and uniquely valid interpretation. Such a final interpretation is not only not possible; it is not even desirable.

For those who regard a text this way, exegesis is a moment in a larger process of interpretation. The quest for meaning does not terminate in the intention of the author, and the distance between ancient text and contemporary interpreter must be bridged in and by the interpretation itself, not by means of a separate and subsequent process of theological or homiletic application. Interpretation terminates in the transformation of the reader whose horizon of self-understanding now coincides, at least to some degree, with the horizon of the world of the text. The reader begins to live "in a different world" which involves being somehow a different person. This transformation can be either positive or negative. Our question is whether a woman who enters into this process of interpretation must necessarily emerge into a world that constricts and debases her or whether the text can mediate a self-transcending transformation toward liberation.

### *B. The Process of Interpretation*

Hans-Georg Gadamer proposed the fruitful analogy of legal hermeneutics<sup>13</sup> which has been exploited by subsequent theorists to illuminate the question of how ancient classical texts can be made to function normatively in subse-

quent historical situations. The judge faces incessantly the problem of how to apply a law formulated in the past to a case in the present which is often radically different because of the changed historical situation.

Linnell Cady, in a recent article, proposed a typology of juridical approaches to this dilemma.<sup>14</sup> In the first approach the judge considers himself or herself absolutely constrained by precedent, i.e. by the way in which the law has been applied in the past. If precedent exists the judge has no choice but to follow it. Only in cases where there is no precedent can the judge improvise, thereby creating a precedent which will be binding for subsequent judgments. The problem with this approach is that, as social experience becomes more complex, the law appears more primitive and unadapted to the cases to which it is being applied until such time as it becomes completely useless and must be rescinded and/or replaced.

In the second approach, at the other extreme, the judge considers himself or herself completely unrestrained by precedent. Here the judge interprets the law according to current understandings of goodness and justice, without appeal to the mediation of precedent. The problem here is that there is no continuity between current jurisprudence and the community's historical experience. The community is adrift in the sea of contemporary wisdom guided only by maps which become ever more out of date as time passes because they have not been updated through a process of consistent interpretation.

The third approach is one in which the judge is constrained by precedent but not absolutely constrained. The judge does not ignore precedent but interprets precedent in the light of the community's ongoing experience, including its current understandings of justice. The question, of course, is how the judge arrives at that vision of the whole which

enables him or her to read the law, mediated by precedent, through the lens of current perceptions of justice and thus apply it to the case before the court. This is precisely the question faced by the biblical interpreter, the challenge of being simultaneously faithful on the one hand to the text and the tradition of interpretation and on the other to contemporary perceptions of justice and liberation so that the text can be allowed to function normatively but not oppressively in the faith community.

### 1. Conditions of Possibility for an Actualizing Hermeneutics

The work of the philosopher Paul Ricoeur on the nature of the written text is very useful for our purposes.<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur challenged the unreflective assumption that a text is simply “talk writ down,” i.e. that writing is just a fixed form of oral discourse. He pointed out several essential differences between oral and written discourse which bear directly on the process of interpreting texts.

First, what does *not* happen when a text is composed is that its meaning becomes fixed in such wise that the text means forever whatever the author meant when he or she wrote it. Furthermore, contrary to what Plato and his successors taught,<sup>16</sup> the writing of a text does not render the vivid meaning of the oral discourse fainter, necessitating an effort to “revive” the meaning whose faint traces are found in the text. Texts, said Ricoeur, are not oral discourse committed to paper but a different kind of discourse altogether.

When discourse is committed to writing, three effects occur. First, the meaning of the text is sheltered from destruction. It is no longer dependent upon the memory of those who heard it but can survive not only the disappearance of the author but even that of the original audience.

Second, inscription invests the text with what Ricoeur

calls “semantic autonomy.” The meaning of the text is cut loose from the author’s intention. As long as the speaker is speaking, the hearers can question what they do not understand and the speaker can correct the hearers’ interpretations. The discourse remains under the control of the speaker and it means really and only what the speaker intends, whether or not the hearers understand it. But once the discourse has been written down, “[w]hat the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author meant; henceforth, textual meaning and psychological meaning have different destinies.”<sup>17</sup> The text now means whatever it can mean and all that it can mean. Meaning is no longer limited to authorial intention but is mediated by the structures of the text. Students often learn this painfully when their grade reflects what their test paper actually says and not what they meant or intended to say. Thus, a text might mean much more (or much less!) than its author actually understood or intended. The “much more” is what has been called the “surplus of meaning” in so-called classical texts.<sup>18</sup> The semantic autonomy of a text is not absolute because meaning continues to be mediated by the structures of the text which remain constant through multiple and diverse interpretations. *Hamlet* can be played in innumerable different ways; but it cannot be played any way at all. The same is true of the biblical text.

The third effect of inscription on discourse is that the text now transcends the psycho-sociological conditions of its production. It can now be decontextualized and recontextualized by successive readings as long as there are readers competent to interpret it. These recontextualizations, like diverse settings for a jewel or different environments for a plant or interpretation of a musical score by a different instrument, will exploit the surplus of meaning which the text now has in virtue of its emancipation from authorial intention.

An excellent example of the effect of decontextualization and recontextualization is the ongoing interpretation of the American Declaration of Independence which was written in the patriarchal slave culture of eighteenth century America by adult, white, property-owning, free males. When they wrote that "all men are created equal," they certainly did not intend "men" to include women, blacks, slaves, children, or the poor. Had they been asked, they would have denied emphatically the possibility of equality in personhood and rights of these groups with free, white, adult, propertied males. The proof of this is that amendments to the Constitution were required to extend freedom to slaves and suffrage to women, and Americans have still not passed the Equal Rights Amendment which would extend full equality to women. However, as the founding documents of the republic have been recontextualized throughout the history of the nation, the surplus of meaning of "all men are created equal" has begun to be exploited. In later contexts the humanity of slaves, women, the poor, and children has been progressively acknowledged. In other words, the word "men" has achieved greater extension than the founding fathers could ever have imagined, and thus the predication of equality has extended to new groups of people.

The implications of this theory of text for the reference of a text are enormous. The text, especially a classical text which is so imbued with truth and beauty that it transcends its own era and remains meaningful for successive generations,<sup>19</sup> now refers not merely to the real world of the author, to that which the author intended to express. The text has the capacity to create a world which it projects "in front of itself." This is the possible world which Ricoeur calls "the world in front of the text"<sup>20</sup> as opposed to the world out of which the text came, or the "world behind the text." Although it was derived from the world of the author, the text is no longer

limited to reference to that world. Thus, it is not merely informative but has a capacity to function transformatively.

## 2. Interpreting the Emancipated Text: Transformational Hermeneutics

The text as written discourse looks, as it were, in two directions. It stands between a past world out of which it came and a possible world which it projects. The primary concern of the exegete is to use the text as a kind of "window" onto the past world giving access to the historical setting and experience of the author and his or her contemporaries. Thus, for example, exegesis can reveal the attitudes of first century Christians toward women, the roles women played in the first Christian communities, the theological concerns of the evangelists, and at least a certain amount of data about the historical Jesus. Through the window of the text we glimpse the world of Paul or of the Johannine church.

The primary concern of the hermeneut, however, is with the world in front of the text, the world of possibilities which the text projects before itself. What kind of world does the text create and invite the reader to inhabit? In the case of the New Testament the world the text projects is the world of Christian discipleship. Christian discipleship is community life structured by the paschal mystery of Jesus the Christ. It involves living in hope toward the boundless *shalom* of God according to the pattern of life from death that Jesus established by his cross and resurrection. In other words, the real referent of the New Testament text, what the text is primarily "about," is not the world of first century Christians which we are expected to reconstitute in the twentieth century but the experience of discipleship that is proposed to us and to each successive generation of readers as it was proposed by Jesus to the first generation. The relevant question is not about

what roles women played in the Pauline community but about what role women should play in a community of Christian disciples. When Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza coined the phrase "a discipleship of equals" to describe the community of Jesus, she was proposing not primarily a description of past Christian experience but the world projected by the New Testament text, the eschatological project which must be realized anew in every age and whose implications will be progressively revealed as the text is recontextualized in successive historical settings.

The competent reader of the classical or normative texts of any community is not first and foremost the individual community member but the community itself.<sup>21</sup> This brings us back to our question about how the judge charged with applying the law to a new case develops the vision necessary to be both faithful to the community's tradition and open to the newness of the contemporary situation. The judge does not function as an autonomous individual deciding what justice and goodness mean and require in each situation. The judge is formed by the community whose values he or she articulates in passing judgment. This does not, of course, mean that justice is determined by majority vote. In fact, part of the basis for the selection of judges is that they are not "reeds shaken in the wind" of popular opinion. But neither are they moral "lone rangers" or judicial monarchs. Judicial wisdom must be distilled from the ongoing experience of the community by the legal processes which utilize both the theoretical developments of jurisprudence and the "common sense," in the strong sense of that term, expressed through such institutions as the Grand Jury and a jury of peers.

In the believing community the interpretation of the biblical text requires a similar community reading which gradually brings to light the meaning of discipleship. One ingredient of this reading is the contribution of biblical

scholarship which offers the results of responsible exegesis. But the other ingredient is the experience of Christians, the heirs of two thousand years of lived discipleship. As this community has read and attempted to live the gospel through the centuries, it has become a certain kind of people. Gradually, like Americans seeing the implications for blacks of our foundational commitment to equality, Christians have come to repudiate the slavery which Paul accepted, the potential anti-semitism of Matthew and John, and increasingly the attitude toward war of the Old Testament. In our own day the repudiation of patriarchal oppression of women as it is taught and condoned in the New Testament is arising out of the Christian consciousness of what it means to be called to a discipleship of equals. In other words, the emancipated text is capable of "exploding" the world out of which it came.<sup>22</sup>

This process by which the text produces a people capable of criticizing the text is both a hermeneutical and a dialectical one. It involves not only coming to understand the meaning of discipleship to which we are invited by the text but also allowing this theoretical understanding to be criticized by ongoing praxis.<sup>23</sup> Unless the experience of diminishment and victimization of those for whom the current understanding of discipleship does not work is allowed to challenge that understanding, a closed theory can disguise the ideological distortions of the Christian message by the privileged element in the church structure. It is precisely the experience of women who are marginalized and oppressed in the contemporary church that is challenging the adequacy of our corporate understanding of discipleship. But part of the reason women can and do experience themselves as oppressed in the church is because their experience as disciples of Jesus makes them aware that what is being done to them in the name of God is contrary to the will of Christ for his followers.

## **V. Engaging the Text from Within**

The foregoing analysis of scripture as witness to rather than propositional embodiment of revelation, of text as mediation rather than semantic container of meaning, and of interpretation as transformational appropriation of the world of Christian discipleship rather than unearthing of historical information can, perhaps, open a way for the Christian who is a feminist to engage the biblical text with some hope of liberation. Meaning, according to the theory just proposed, is not equated with or reduced to information about Jesus or the first Christians although this can be useful in the interpretative process. Meaning is, rather, a world of possibility into which the text mediates our entrance. It may, in fact, turn out that the horizon which the text offers to Christian women is finally too constricting. But it is my opinion that the text has not yet been fully engaged from a contemporary hermeneutical and dialectical perspective and therefore that the answer to the question of whether the text is a tool of patriarchy or a resource for women's liberation is not yet available.

If we accept that the witness to God's revelation in Jesus of Nazareth offered to us in the New Testament is the limited, necessarily biased, and sometimes erroneous testimony of believers who, though enjoying a privileged role in the plan of God, were restricted by their personalities, their historical and cultural setting, and their language in both their experience of Jesus and their witness to that experience, then we cannot simply surrender to the text agreeing that what it actually says is precisely what God reveals. On the other hand, if we believe that the text is truly word of God in the sense explained above, then it does have a privileged role in our attempts to engage divine revelation, i.e. to enter into communion with the living God. We cannot, therefore, avoid the arduous task of wrestling with the text in order to engage

its meaning, and that wrestling begins necessarily with the exegetical task of grasping what the text actually says. It cannot, however, end there any more than the dialogue with a friend about matters of supreme importance, especially when we seem to disagree, can terminate with ascertaining the literal meaning of the friend's statements on the subject.

Without attempting to be exhaustive I would like to suggest some of the procedures which might be involved in struggling with the text, especially when we are dealing with texts whose content is actually oppressive. First, as Rosemary Ruether has suggested often, the text has to be approached as a whole in light of its own major preoccupations.<sup>24</sup> Liberation of an oppressed people for covenantal life with God is at the heart of the Bible's concerns, and where elements of scripture are incompatible with that concern they must be criticized and sometimes judged simply unfaithful to revelation. To judge that some portion of scripture is not worthy of the God of liberation is not a judgment passed on God but a recognition that our forebears in the faith, those upon whose testimony we depend, were no more infallible than we in understanding and responding to divine revelation. We need not, indeed must not, excise these texts from scripture because their ultimate revelatory purpose may be to alert us to the ways in which Christian experience can go wrong. But we also must not accept as purely and simply the word of God, much less institutionalize in the church, the mistakes of our forebears in the faith.

Second, we must recognize that analogous to the "hierarchy of truths" in systematic theology there is a hierarchy among texts in scripture. To hold that the scriptures as a whole are a foundational witness to divine revelation does not imply equating occasional injunctions or incidental disciplinary regulations or even early Christian teaching with

the paschal mystery. It may be that it really does not matter, for contemporary Christians, whether Paul thought that women should be silent in the church. Whatever the value of that injunction in Paul's time (and that needs to be questioned), it is now clear that he was wrong about the appropriateness of women Christians exercising their gifts in the liturgical assembly. This does not solve all problems because it can be excruciatingly difficult to judge particular early Christian practices and teachings in terms of their place within the revelatory framework of Christian life. However, our tradition suggests that nothing, no matter how seemingly sacrosanct, is beyond question. Certainly the decision that the Mosaic law need not be imposed on Gentile converts will never be surpassed in radicality. Ordaining women priests would be far less innovative.

Third, we must enter into the dynamics of the text, or, as Gadamer put it, engage in the question and answer type dialogue which the text initiates.<sup>25</sup> This involves, first of all, the effort to disengage the question to which the text is an answer. When Paul says "women must keep silence in the churches" it is not necessarily to be presumed that he is answering the question, "What is God's will concerning the behavior of women in the church?" Perhaps he is answering the question of disgruntled male Christians, "What are we to do with these obstreperous women who insist on doing things we men have always monopolized?" Or perhaps he is answering the question, "Should we, for the sake of not making ourselves conspicuous, insist that Christian women be bound by the same restrictions that are applied to women in our (i.e. pagan) society?" In each of these cases the meaning of the text as answer would be quite different.

Entering into the dynamics of the text also involves discerning the direction of the answers given, even when the

answers themselves fall short of liberating truth. Paul, in the letter to Philemon, actually implicitly legitimates slavery by sending Onesimus, the runaway slave, back to Philemon, his master. But Paul also expresses his dawning awareness that there is something wrong, not necessarily with his decision, but with the situation which necessitated his decision. So he challenges Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother, not because he must but because that is what Christian faith seems to offer as an ideal. By following the trajectory of Paul's answer we, today, can say firmly that Paul's decision, however prudent in the circumstances or even justified in terms of what was known at the time, must be judged inadequate. Not only can one Christian not hold another Christian a slave but the system of slavery is totally reprehensible not only among Christians but among humans.

Another way of entering into the dynamics of the text involves using the text, not as an apodictic answer to our questions, but as a pedagogical guide for working out our own answers. How did the early Christians struggle with such issues as Mosaic observance, relations with pagans, civil behavior, church order? Maybe what we need to learn from the text is not what we are to do but how we are to go about deciding what to do.

It is also important to try to discern the focus of revelation in problematic texts, i.e. what seems to be radically new and not explainable by the culture in which the text was produced. For example, when the author of Ephesians says that wives are to be subject to their husbands (cf. Eph 5:22) he is not creating Christian teaching, because women in the patriarchal society of that time were necessarily subject to their husbands. But "husbands, love your wives as your own bodies" (cf. Eph 5:28) was new teaching, based explicitly on the implications for Christian marriage relations of under-

standing the church as the body of Christ. It might be analogous to saying to Christians today, "Of course you should pay your taxes, but make sure you don't support foreign military aggression." The obligation to pay one's taxes is assumed, but something quite new would be injected into the approach to paying taxes if making sure one's taxes were not used for evil purposes were part of that Christian obligation. In fact, it might mean that in some cases one could not pay all of one's taxes. Perhaps, "husbands, love your wives" relativizes essentially "wives, be subject." Is Christian love perhaps as incompatible with unilateral subjection as paying some taxes is with non-cooperation with military aggression?

A fourth way in which we struggle with the text involves bringing to the text questions from our own historical experience which could not possibly have been explicit concerns of first century Christians. Just as the emancipation of slaves was not part of the agenda of the writers of the Declaration of Independence, the morality of nuclear deterrence was utterly beyond the cognitive ken of the New Testament authors. How, then, are we to bring the New Testament to bear upon this ultimately significant modern question? We can only do so by calling into explicit awareness our community grasp of the nature and content of Christian discipleship as it has unfolded over the two thousand years of our lived experience. We cannot find a textual answer to the question, "What does the New Testament say about nuclear arms?" We have to ask what it means to be a Christian and what that implies about nuclear weapons. In other words, we have to deal with modern problems the way the early Christians dealt with issues like the admission of the Gentiles to the church.

A final consideration might be that the history of biblical interpretation in the church suggests that texts can come to function differently from the way they were originally intend-

ed to function. The Canticle of Canticles was originally a collection of love songs, and it took centuries for the Jewish community to finally decide that it was to function as an allegory of the relation of God with Israel. Later, the Christian community modified the Jewish canonical decision and began to treat the Canticle of Canticles as an allegory of the relation between Christ and the church or the soul and the word of God.<sup>26</sup> Phyllis Tribble in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, returning to the original meaning of the text as songs celebrating the relationship of human lovers, has shown that the text can function as a corrective to the deformation of the male-female relationship in the course of biblical history.<sup>27</sup> What this suggests is that some texts in scripture might function today not as prescriptions for Christian attitudes or behaviors but as witness to the misunderstanding of the gospel by earlier (or later) Christians.

What all of these procedures for struggling with the biblical text presuppose is that, as readers of scripture from within the community of faith, we are not passive recipients of non-negotiable dicta to which we must submit under penalty of loss of Christian identity. The Christian community is the active subject, not the passive object, of revelation. The biblical text witnesses to revelation, and we engage that witness as criterion of our faith but also as challenge to our own witness. At times we must judge the witness of the scriptures as inadequate, biased, or even counter-evangelical. We do not rewrite the scriptures because no temporal judgment is irreformable and we cannot know what future generations will make of our judgments. Furthermore, even inadequate witness is part of our history and should not be suppressed lest we repeat our errors because we have forgotten them. But we also do not submit passively to the text on the assumption that it conveys without fault or remainder God's explicit intention for the church.

## VI. Conclusion

It would be premature to answer the question with which we are engaged, namely whether biblically based Christianity is a viable option for women who claim full and equal personhood within the human and the religious community. What I have tried to suggest is that the question cannot yet be answered definitively in the negative. If we really believe that the word of God is not bound (cf. 2 Tim 2:10) and that the God of universal liberation and *shalom* cannot endorse the oppression of any of God's creatures, then we must find a way to allow God's word to promote and enhance the full personhood of women. Given that the biblical text was written primarily if not exclusively by men in a patriarchal cultural context, this task will not be easy. However, if we as Christians are prepared to abandon both a doctrinal fundamentalism and a scholarly positivism, both of which immure the meaning of the biblical text in an ever more remote and irrelevant past, and undertake a hermeneutical and dialectical project of biblical interpretation which is capable of drawing the text forward out of its past into our present, it may be possible to discover a world of Christian discipleship that is a fit habitation for Christian women. Jesus did not counsel a passive submission to his word, much less to the biblical witness to that word, but an active and progressive engagement of it under the influence of the Spirit who will lead us into all truth (cf. Jn 16:14): "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:32).