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J.J. THIESSEN
LECTURES

Feminism and the Bible

A Critical and Constructive Encounter

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PHYLLIS A. BIRD

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The J.J. Thiessen Lectures

The J.J. Thiessen Lectures have become an important institution at Canadian Mennonite Bible College (CMBC) in Winnipeg. Named in honour of a founder of the College and long-time chairperson of the Board, the J.J. Thiessen Lectures seek to bring to the CMBC community some of his vision for the church.

Each fall an outstanding scholar or church leader is invited to CMBC to supplement the College's regular program. The lectures address issues which are important for the curriculum of the College and the life of the church.

The publication of these lectures, begun with the 1990 series, makes their content more accessible to the larger community.

1978 Marlin Miller, Professor of Theology at Goshen (Indiana) Biblical Seminary. *Mennonites and Contemporary Theology.*

1979 *Lectures cancelled.*

1980 J. Gerald Janzen, Professor of Old Testament at Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana. *The Terrors of History and the Fear of the Lord.*

1981 Frank H. Epp, Professor of History at Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario. *Mennonites with the Millennium on Their Mind.*

1982 Jürgen Moltmann, Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Tübingen, Germany. *Responsibility for the World and Christian Discipleship.*

1983 Cornelius J. Dyck, Professor of Anabaptist and Sixteenth Century Studies at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, Elkhart, Indiana. *Rethinking the Anabaptist Vision.*

1984 Kenneth Bailey, Professor of New Testament at the Near East School of Theology, Beirut, Lebanon. *Jesus Interprets His Own Cross: A Middle Eastern Cultural Approach.*

1985 Orlando Costas, Professor of Missiology at Andover Newton Theological School, Cambridge, Massachusetts. *The Crisis of Mission in the West and the Challenge of World Mission.*

1986 Susan Muto, Director of the Institute of Formative Spirituality at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. *Christian Spirituality and Everyday Living: A Practical Approach to Faith Formation.*

1987 Walter Klaassen, Research Professor of Religious Studies and History at Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario. *The Emancipated Laity: Anabaptism in Its Time.*

1988 W. Sibley Towner, Professor of Old Testament at Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia. *The Bible and Our Human Nature.*

1989 Stanley Hauerwas, Professor of Theology and Ethics at the Divinity School, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. *Resident Aliens: The Church and Its Ministry.*

1990 Werner O. Packull, Professor of History at Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ontario. *Rereading Anabaptist Beginnings* (first published lectures in this series).

1991 Howard I. Marshall, Professor of New Testament at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. *The Theological Message of the Letter to the Philippians.*

1992 George Lindbeck, Professor at Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut. *The Church as Hermeneutical Community: Jews, Christians and the Bible.*

1993 Phyllis A. Bird, Associate Professor of Old Testament Interpretation at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois. *Feminism and the Bible.*

Phyllis A. Bird, associate professor of Old Testament Interpretation at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Chicago since 1985, received her A.B. degree from the University of California at Berkeley, the B.D. from Union Theological Seminary in New York and the Th.D. from Harvard Divinity School. She taught for 13 years at Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, Texas. Dr. Bird is an ordained member of the United Methodist Church and the author of *The Bible as the Church's Book.*

Preface and Acknowledgements

When I was asked in the summer of 1992 to deliver the 1993 J. J. Thiessen Lectures on a theme related to feminist approaches to Scripture, I welcomed the invitation for a number of reasons.

I was working at the time on an article on "The Authority of the Bible" for the first volume of *The New Interpreter's Bible*, and I had attempted in the previous year to relate the question of biblical authority to feminist critique of the Bible in a series of lectures given at Bangor Theological Seminary. An invitation to address the Triennial Translators Workshop of the United Bible Societies on the subject of "Feminist Theology and the Bible" had provided an opportunity to explore more deeply the roots and branches of the modern feminist movement and to situate feminist theology and biblical studies within that broader movement. I looked forward then to probing the intersection and trajectories of these two subjects, biblical authority and feminism, which appeared to many to stand in irreconcilable tension.

It was a challenge for which Canadian Mennonite Bible College provided a conducive context—though somewhat intimidating for one who is neither Canadian nor Mennonite. Here, I was informed, was a college that made "a serious effort to be faithful to the Scriptures as interpreted in . . . [the denominational] tradition, and to be open at the same time to new insights and responsibilities." These word of institutional description mirrored the personal qualities I had come to respect in their speaker, my former classmate Waldemar Janzen. Love and respect for the Bible as the primary source of a faith community, commitment to the highest standards of scholarship, and personal integrity in relating intellectual and faith commitments: these qualities exhibited in a respected friend and colleague served to commend the institution and support the venture of exploring the implications of new insights and responsibilities arising from the feminist movement.

If the promise in the challege was not fully recognized either in

the lectures as delivered or as finally reproduced in print, I am grateful nevertheless for the hearing they received last fall and the earnest and animated discussion that followed. I trespassed often, I am sure, on sacred precincts of Mennonite faith, but I was received graciously despite my blunders.

The lectures, in both oral and written form, fall short of what I intended. More unforeseen obstacles strewed the path to delivery and publication than I could have imageined. Unanticipated surgery in the summer of 1993 and the loss of a planned fall sabbatical (the precondition of my agreeing to these lectures, as well as two other major writing projects) left me with too little time to prepare a finished manuscript. The backload of work that extended into the winter and spring were further affected by commitments to lecture and teach in South Africa for three weeks in March and in Switzerland (Basel) for three weeks in early June. Family matters, personnel crises in the seminary, and my own woeful computer skills further impeded work on the manuscript. With time, the text itself became problematic. Yet, I believe, it still conveys the essential arguments and information I intended to communicate.

The lectures as they appear in this version are essentially the same as delivered last October, with the addition of footnotes. I made minor corrections and "improvements," but have resisited the impulse to revise them more thoroughly. There are things I would now say differently, and in a single volume I would organize the material differently. Repetitions that originally served to carry a train of thought over several lectures stand out in the written text as impeding the flow. Other failings of style or precision may be attributed to hasty composition. Despite the defects that are now too obvious to me, I offer this long delayed transcript in the hope that it will serve to undergird the conversations begun last October and further the creative hermeneutical efforts that must take place within the context of Mennonite theology and biblical scholarship.

I conclude with thanks to the entire community of students, faculty, and church members that received me so warmly at CMBC and deepened my knowledge of Mennonite faith and life.

Phyllis A. Bird
Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary
Evanston, Illinois
July 22, 1994

Introduction

In these lectures I want to engage two arenas of discourse and commitment that are commonly viewed, from without and within, as mutually antagonistic—arenas of discourse and commitment that are fundamental to my own identity and vocation as a Christian. As a biblical scholar, I have followed a call awakened by love of the Bible as the church's richest treasure, witness of the historic faith and source of continuing inspiration and guidance. As a feminist, I have pursued a vision of wholeness and a demand for justice rooted in biblical faith. But the church from which I received the impulse for both of these pursuits often looks at these commitments with suspicion and censure. And it is the Bible itself that appears as the source of condemnation. In the eyes of many believers, modern critical scholarship and feminist critique are enemies of faith, attacking or undermining biblical authority.

I have come to believe that the key issue in many (perhaps most) modern debates over biblical interpretation and use is the question of biblical authority, more specifically, unexamined assumptions and inadequate conceptions of biblical authority.[1] In these lectures I want to focus on the question of biblical authority as the point at

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[1]For a fuller treatment of this question, see my article, "The Authority of the Bible," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994-) vol. 1 [publication scheduled for September]. Much of the thought presented in these lectures is drawn from that article or the work that preceded it, including a series of lectures on "Feminist Theology and the Bible" presented at the Triennial Translators Workshop of the United Bible Societies, Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, May 15-20, 1991, and the Francis B. Denio Lectures on the Bible, "Biblical Authority in Crisis," delivered at Bangor Theological Seminary, January 20-21, 1992.

which biblical faith[2] and feminist critique intersect. Both appear to hold a common view of the Bible and its authority, but to draw different conclusions about the proper response. Defenders of biblical authority typically see it as ordained by God, deriving from the nature of the Scriptures as God's own word, inviolable and unchanging source of divine truth, and the only sure ground of Christian faith. Feminists, observing the patriarchal pronouncements and assumptions of the text (as well as its interpreters) and alert to its harmful consequences for women, commonly view those claims of divine authority as demonic, giving supernatural sanction to oppressive social forms and presenting a false understanding of human nature. In the eyes of many feminists, the Bible is an enemy of women, which must be denied authority.

I will not elaborate further at this point on the consequences of these opposing judgments for persons caught between their conflicting claims, but move directly to consider the current state of the question of biblical authority within the church. In my second lecture I will shift my focus to the arena of feminist critique of the Bible, with an attempt to locate that critique within the women's movement as it developed first in the nineteenth century and as it was reborn in the 1970s. My third lecture will consider the work of several modern feminist theologians and biblical scholars, with particular attention to their differing understandings of biblical authority, which underly their differing strategies of interpretation. In my final lecture I will return to a focus on biblical authority and attempt a reformulation of the traditional doctrine in the light of feminist critique. I shall argue that feminist criticism exposes problems in recent understandings of the Bible and biblical authority that need to be corrected, and that it must be a companion and aid, as well as a critic, in this enterprise.

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[2]I use the expression here to describe Christian faith as grounded in the Bible.

Lecture One
Broken Cisterns
Biblical Authority in Crisis

I have introduced the subject of biblical authority in the context of conflict associated with feminist criticism, but this is only one element in a much broader assault on traditional understandings of the Bible. A consequence of this broad-based assault is a situation that may properly be called a crisis of biblical authority. The very question of authority, as a topic of definition and defense, is a sign of a problem. Authority becomes an issue only when it is contested or can no longer be assumed. I will describe shortly why I believe there is a crisis and why I believe that many efforts to reassert a lost or endangered authority will fail. The problem is deeper, I think, than is generally recognized, and I believe that feminist criticism can help us to see that. Of all the forms of modern disaffection with the Scriptures, feminist criticism is the most profound. It goes to the root. It permits no easy salvage. And precisely because of that it helps us to see what is at stake and what is essential to the church's affirmation of biblical authority. I also believe that it points to a way of reformulating and reappropriating that traditional affirmation.

The current crisis is broader than the debate that has been rending American churches with tragic consequences, and it has a history that is essential to understanding the current debate. Its origins lie in the emergence of a new world and a new worldview which we know as the Enlightenment. And it is largely a Western and Protestant phenomenon, linked to the special place given to the Bible by the Reformers, who made Scripture the final norm of faith and practice, signalled by the watchword of *sola scriptura,* "by Scripture alone." Prior to the Reformation the question of the Bible's authority had not been raised in a manner that required definition or defense. In the Reformers' attack on the abuses of the

church in the sixteenth century, however, the Bible's authority came to be affirmed over against the authority of the church, and it is in that context that the *sola scriptura* dictum was formulated. The following century saw the new Protestantism adopting the scholastic tools of its opponents to define more precisely the nature, origin and consequences of the Bible's authority vis-à-vis the authority of the church.[3]

With the Enlightenment, however, a new form of attack appeared, which ultimately impacted Catholic as well as Protestant understandings of Scripture, but had a far deeper and more devastating effect on Protestant belief and church life. It also had a much broader impact on the general culture of predominantly Protestant countries, because the Reformers had not only elevated the authority of Scripture as a source of doctrine, they had made it the center of their worship and the foundation of civil law. They had also given it into the hands of the people, so that for the first time in the history of the church the Bible became the people's book, not just the church's book. For the first time it was mass produced and translated into the vernacular. God's word was available now for direct consultation by ordinary believers. Thus when modern views of the Bible's origins and content began to emerge, which placed it alongside other ancient historical documents and exposed its contradictions, discrepancies, factual errors and moral "lapses," the effect was deeply and broadly disturbing. Problems in the text that had long been recognized, but had been explained by various forms of typological, allegorical, or other spiritual readings, now appeared to be the result of human error or fallibility. The Reformers' emphasis on the "plain" or "literal" meaning of the text exposed its failings. How could such a document still be understood as the word of God?

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[3]The traditional distinction betweeen Protestant and Catholic views of Scripture in relation to the church have been modified significantly in post-Vatican II ecumenical discusion, so that it is now possible to speak of a convergence of opinion (see Bird, "Authority," 84-85 [MS]). Nevertheless, the Bible continues to play a quite different role in Protestant and Catholic spirituality or devotion, which is reflected in differing approaches of Protestant and Catholic feminist hermeneutics. See below, p. 68.

The response to that dilemma took several forms, and we are still living with the consequences of those choices. Some, finding the claims of human and divine origin incompatible, chose to deny the notion of divine revelation. Since this position was readily embraced by individuals and groups, like the French Deists, who were intent on curbing the church's power or rejecting its teachings on a variety of matters, the new critical approach to the Bible was seen by many as antireligious. The great majority, for whom faith had first priority, struggled in various ways to silence or repress the new criticism[4] and its alarming results. Theologians attempted to defend traditional understandings of the Bible by elaborating theories of inspiration and by insisting, against claims of fallibility and error, that divine inspiration rendered the Scriptures infallible and inerrant in all their statements. Some extended the notion of inspiration to the words themselves as preserved in the original Greek and Hebrew—even including the Hebrew vowel points![5]

These theories of inspiration and inerrancy, developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century struggle of faith with the new humanistic and scientific learning, have continued to shape debate about the nature of Scripture and scriptural authority, with various modifications and accommodations to contemporary understandings of ancient Mediterranean society, literary production, the canonical process, and human psychology. Although a wide spectrum of views is now articulated under the affirmation of infallibility (from a minimalist position that claims infallibility only for spiritual and moral teachings to a maximalist position that includes every

[4]A technical term for critical study, originally associated with historical-critical method, or "historical criticism," but also used in connection other methods or approaches, such as "form criticism" and "rhetorical criticism."

[5]So, e.g., the Reformed theologian, Francis Turretin (1632-1687). Cited in Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979). Cf. Bird, "Authority," 64-65 [MS].

statement of every kind[6]), most discussion of biblical authority remains locked in the terms of debate born in the post-Enlightenment period and fixed in the nineteenth-century disputes. The language in which the debate is cast may derive from an earlier period (especially the language of inspiration and inerrancy), but it is being used in a distinctly new way. Claims to represent the traditional belief of the church unaltered fail to recognize or comprehend the gulf that separates modern Western thought from its premodern antecedents.

I shall return to this point again, but here I will simply affirm that something new has come into being in the experience of the West (ultimately impacting the entire globe), a new way of viewing the world and God, which can no longer be contained within the world presented by the Bible, but which *can* be illumined by the word from the Bible. Something new has indeed happened in the world—in fact, many new things, including the modern women's movement—and the Bible teaches us to expect it and to look for God's word in it. But I have gotten ahead of my story.

There were other responses to the intellectual revolution known as the Enlightenment which I have not mentioned. While most believers resisted the new learning, some welcomed it, seeing the possibility of liberating the Bible from the shackles of ecclesiastical interpretation that had bent the divine word to dogmatic interests or smothered the plain meaning in fanciful interpretations. The new historical approach opened the possibility of recovering the original meaning of the ancient authors, allowing the Bible to speak in its own voice, or better, voices. Now one could know, or hope to know, the historical Jesus behind the dogmatic portrait.

After initial resistence, the new biblical scholarship made rapid progress in the universities, especially in Germany. It was in Germany too that general ecclesiastical opposition was first broken. There the universities were relatively free from church restraint and thus provided an environment in which the new exploration could take place. They were also the primary centers of theological debate

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[6]"Inerrancy" emphasizes the necessary relationship between the accuracy of the words and the authority of the message.

and training of pastors, so the new study had a significant impact on the church. Germany pioneered historical-critical study of the Bible—as an expression of faith, rather than doubt. And when the new study finally reached America in the late nineteenth century, it came from Germany.[7]

England lagged behind the Continent in accepting a critical approach to the Bible. Ecclesiastical control of the universities and the early Deist controversy gave a different cast to the discussion. So too did the Evangelical Revival, which largely ignored questions raised by rationalist critique. In Germany, discussion had focused on the problem of relating historical fact to religious truth, or dogma, and had given rise to a science of interpretation (hermeneutics) that enabled movement from historical exegesis to contemporary faith within the framework of the church's traditional confession. In contrast, the English debate focused on the problem of science and faith, and more specifically on the conflict of reason and revelation as defined by early eighteenth-century Deism.

The Deists denied special divine action or communication in history and insisted on a universe ruled by divinely-instituted laws of nature as revealed by modern science. This left no room for revelation (identified with miracles) or prophecy, and cast doubt on

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[7]This brief account of the rise of historical criticism and the varied response of the church rests on my summary in *The Bible as the Church's Book* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982) 48-57, and my more recent treatment in "Authority," 65-80 [MS]. Major sources included the following: S. L. Greenslade, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Bible,* vol. 3, *The West from the Reformation to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963); H. Shelton Smith, Robert T. Handy, and Lefferts A. Loetscher, *American Christianity: An Historical Interpretation with Representative Documents,* 2 vols. (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1960, 1963); Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972); J. K. S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture: A Study of Reformation and Post-Reformation Understanding of the Bible* (London: Methuen, 1957); Jerry Wayne Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America 1800-1870: The New England Scholars* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 1969); Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); and Rogers and McKim, *Authority and Interpretation.*

the credibility of the biblical "reports" and hence on the authority of the Bible. An overconfident young science, embraced by critical religious thinkers, forced the argument onto its ground. Defenders of Scripture were pressed into an uncritical stance and responded by asserting the infallibility and the scientific credibility of the Bible in all its statements. Biblical apologists attempted to give scientific proofs for the Genesis account of creation, find evidence of the deluge and Noah's ark, and defend the Bible's chronology, as well as its miracles. In this defense, however, the problems of literalism became ever more evident and the arguments more strained.

The height of the debate and the turning point came in 1859 with the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species,* which directly challenged the literalists' attempt to defend biblical cosmology with a six-day creation in 4004 B.C. Scientists and religious sceptics acclaimed the new theory. So too did numerous theologians influenced by the new studies of the Pentateuch, which recognized a development of ideas exhibited in successive "documents" within the Pentateuch—a kind of religious "evolution." But for those who linked the authority of the Bible to literal infallibility, it was a call to arms. In 1864 some 11,000 clergy signed the Oxford Declaration aimed at countering the new "heresy." In their view, Genesis said all there was to be known about origins; any other view was blasphemy.[8]

It was a short-lived victory; within three decades the battle was over in England. Biblical faith had made peace with natural science through the mediating efforts of devout but critical biblical scholars, influenced by German criticism, who insisted that the Bible should be treated on its own terms, not forced to fit the categories of modern science. The Bible was a book of religious testimony, they insisted, not a manual of science. But the battle terminated in England was replayed a half-century later in America, culminating in the Scopes Trial of 1925, after which it disappeared from the public scene, only to reemerge in the final quarter of this century. Within the past year a California school district has attempted to

[8]W. Neil, "The Criticism and Theological Use of the Bible, 1700-1950," in Greenslade, *The Cambridge History of the Bible,* vol. 3, 257-263.

mandate the teaching of "creationism" in the public schools, to "enhance" the science curriculum.[9]

I have rehearsed these historical antecedents, though much too briefly, because they have played a decisive role in shaping American Protestant views of biblical authority and preoccupation with inerrancy as the criterion of truth and trustworthiness—a concept of truth defined by modern notions of facticity and historicity. Most recent literature on the authority of Scripture has grown out of a quite particular, and distinctively Anglo-American, debate which has determined both the centrality of the issue and the terms in which it is considered. As I shall shortly argue, I believe this orientation and this fixation is unfortunate, but because it has dominated contemporary discussion far beyond the circles in which it originated, it requires some deliberate attention.

The debate in America centered in the Presbyterian church, which combined the heritage of the English and Scottish Reformation with the post-Reformation scholastic theology of Geneva. The theoretical underpinnings of the debate over inerrancy, which occupied center stage for much of the past century in the U.S., were articulated in the "Princeton Theology" of A. A. Hodge and Benjamin Warfield. In this view, Scripture was understood as divine speech in universally valid and universally intelligible form, in which historical and cultural context played an insignificant role. When the Old Testament scholar Charles Briggs challenged this view at his inauguration in 1881 to the chair of biblical theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York, he was charged with heresy by the Presbyterian Church, which had adopted the Hodge-Warfield statement on inerrancy as its official position. Briggs was suspended from the Presbyterian ministry, but retained his chair when the seminary severed its ties with the Presbyterian church.[10]

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[9]*Los Angeles Times,* May 20, 1993, Sec. A, 1, 23.

[10]Bird, "Authority," 75-78; cf., *The Bible as the Church's Book,* 63-65. In the same year, the Scottisch Old Testament scholar, William Robertson Smith, was deposed from his chair in Aberdeen. He had managed to clear himself of heresy charges brought by the Free Church Presbytery of Aberdeen in 1876 for

The heresy trial of Briggs made front-page news; it was a controversy of national interest and it had national consequences. It split the Presbyterian church, and its widening ripples eventually effected virtually every other American denomination. We are still living in the wake of a battle between conservatives and liberals, or traditionalists and modernists, that centered on the question of biblical authority defined in terms of inerrancy—even though the terms of debate varied from time to time and in different ecclesial traditions and even as they are undergoing significant modification today.

The last major battle of national consequence was the Scopes trial of 1925 (the so-called "Monkey Trial"), in which a Tennessee biology teacher, John Scopes, was charged with violating a state law against the teaching of evolution. This was a key battle for fundamentalism, which had made inerrancy its touchstone and sought a national forum for its cause. Fundamentalism had arisen in the early decades of this century out of the old revivalist evangelicalism that had been the Protestant establishment in nineteenth-century America, but found itself increasingly challenged or eclipsed by the rise of new philosophies of life and new religious perspectives. It was especially distrustful of the new liberal theology (later called "Modernism") which attempted to reformulate Christian doctrine in the light of the findings of science, biblical criticism, and historical studies. Traditional Protestants emphasized a simple Bible-centered theology over against the perplexing array of new alternatives in an increasingly complex and fractured world.

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his espousal of "higher criticism." Lingering suspicion of the new scholarship, however, led the Free Church General Assembly to deprive him of his teaching position. The trial, in which Smith was charged with denying "the immediate inspiration, infallible truth, and divine authority of the Holy Scriptures," served to inform the general public about the new scholarship, and Smith's arguments that these qualities of Scripture were not inconsistent with higher criticism managed to rob the "German poison" of much of its dread. Neil, "Criticism and Theological Use of the Bible," 287-288.

Between 1920 and 1925 the movement gave particular attention to the teaching of evolution in the public schools.[11]

The fundamentalists had obtained the services of the great populist orator and social reformer William Jennings Bryan as prosecuting attorney. Bryan, who was also a lay preacher, had become obsessed with the question of evolution because of the social Darwinism he identified with it. The counsel for the defense was the renowned ACLU lawyer Clarence Darrow, who had been brought in with the intention of making the trial a national media event. Darrow's aim was to discredit the fundamentalists and the "state of civilization" of the state of Tennessee. He accomplished both, though he lost the case on a technicality (which was later reversed). By forcing Bryan into an untenable defense of the Bible's science, Darrow discredited him in the eyes of the educated public, which was enamoured with science. Public ridicule dealt a debilitating blow to the fundamentalist position; after 1925 most moderate Protestant conservatives quietly withdrew from the movement.

But fundamentalism did not die; it continued in marginal and sectarian churches, composed largely, but by no means exclusively, of the less educated and characterized by rejection of all modern views. Moreover, victories for historical-critical approaches to the Bible in leading seminaries (but by no means all) and among the leadership of major denominations did not succeed in carrying a large segment of the general church membership and believing public. In the past two decades resentment from the "grass roots" by people who have suffered the "rule" of progressive elites—like myself (seminary professors and denominational leaders)—has surfaced across the church in every "mainline" denomination. It finds expression in conservative caucuses, which usually identify themselves by means of biblical associations, such as the "Good News" caucus of the United Methodist Church and the "Biblical Witness Fellowship" of the United Church of Christ, in splinter

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[11]On the Scopes Trial, see Bird, "Authority," 78-81; and Garry Wills, *Under God: Religion and American Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990) 97-124.

churches within the Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Episcopal communions, and in takeovers of denominational offices and institutions in the Southern Baptist Church. The churches that embraced a liberal or modernist expression of faith are losing members, while conservative churches are growing.

Is this good news or bad news? I view this movement with both hope and apprehension, noting as a sign of hope the rise of a New Evangelicalism, which began to emerge from the fundamentalist remnant in the 1940s. These "New Evangelicals" reject the literalism and the privatism of their fundamentalist origins, joining forces with conservatives in many "main-line" churches and traditional believers in a number of other denominations whose distinct national or ethnic origins kept them apart from the major liberal and fundamentalist streams. I will not attempt now to analyze this mediating movement, which represents a modified inerrantist position with a wide range of variations.[12] Instead I want to focus my concluding remarks on the conservative upsurge.

The conservative move in the churches today involves much more than a matter of biblical authority identifed with biblical literalism and fundamentalism. But it does make heavy symbolic use of the Bible, appealing to Scripture as a norm that has been lost or threatened by alternative norms. The appeal to biblical mandates and biblical truth are fueled today not by arguments concerning the nature of revelation or truth, but by the widespread perception that fundamental values, foundations of morality and belief, are crumbling or under attack—values identified with biblical teaching. Whether the forces of dissolution are identifed with Satanism, secular humanism, narcisism, drugs, or the culture of violence that surrounds us and invades our homes through the media, many today

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[12]See Bird, "Authority," 81-83 [MS]. For more detailed discussion, see George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); Donald K. McKim, *What Christians Believe About the Bible* (Nashville/Camden/New York: Thomas Nelson, 1985) 49-69, 82-94; Mark A. Noll, "A Brief History of Inerrancy, Mostly in America," in *The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy, 1987* (Nashville; Broadman, 1987) 9-25; and Gerald T. Sheppard, "Biblical Hermeneutics: The Academic Language of Evangelical Identity," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 32 (1977) 81-94.

feel that the world in which we live is in a state of collapse. I need not detail the signs—the daily newspaper is full of them. But let me name a few areas of concern.

1. Families are in serious trouble, and troubled families produce troubled individuals. The personal and social consequences of divorce, single parenting, domestic violence, and impaired communication and trust are long-term and costly.

2. Social bonds are broken or strained at every level. We experience loss of a sense of community and community responsibility, marked or occasioned by anonymity, high mobility, and changing economic and demographic patterns, often with increased ethnic diversity or changed ethnic composition. Old, often ethnically and religiously homogeneous, communities and neighborhoods are fractured; new lifestyles prevail.

3. Drugs, violence, and crime rule some neighborhoods and threaten others. Some areas of our inner cities are war zones.

4. The sexual revolution has established an ethos of promiscuity in sexual relations that shows little sign of significant modification despite the devastating AIDS epidemic. "Free sex," sex for gratification, sex removed from the constraints of marriage—or even love—sex for hire and sex for humiliation: all these seem to be commonplaces of the new age.

5. Graft is rampant in public office; lying has become a way of life in public and personal relations.

Something is wrong here, and those who insist that this is so are right to protest. But the critical question concerns the source of the problem. Proper analysis is essential to any solution. For Christians whose childhood world or family life has been shattered, as well as for those who have never known the security of commonly accepted beliefs and practices, who long for assurances and for stability, the fundamental problem of the contemporary world is commonly attributed to the abandonment of moral standards that have proven themselves in the past—standards that embody and ensure truth, standards that are trustworthy because they have been given by God himself, standards enshrined in the Bible—as timeless norms. Cultural fashions and beliefs come and go, and differ from place to place; but Christians, it is argued, need not be bewildered or misled

by these new and competing claims, because they have a reliable guide. The biblical way is God's own revealed way, unchanging and unconditioned.[13]

It is an appealing analysis and program, and it has had a transformative effect on the lives of many people who have accepted it. It works, and I know persons who are living testimony to it—and I give thanks for that. But there is a problem with this analysis; it is not true, or it is only partially true—despite its effectiveness (yes, myths *are* effective). It is not true in its social and historical analysis, nor in its view of the Bible. It absolutizes a particular ideal of family and community life that does in fact derive from an earlier period of American life, but it is neither universal in Christendom, nor biblical. It is, moreover, a nostalgic, idealized version of that prototype, cast as archetype. It is a myth, and while myths are useful—and I would even say, necessary—they are also dangerous.

The myth of the "traditional" family (really the nineteenth-century bourgeois family), construed as "the Christian family," and of the lost community is a myth that has supported the violence to women and their exclusion from education, professions, political office, and even the vote until less than a century ago—patterns of violence and exclusion that continue in multiple ways today, both blatant and subtle—patterns of relationships condoned or advocated by explicit appeals to Scripture. It is a myth that ignores the racism of that idealized past, allowing it to persist unchecked, to be marshalled by unscrupulous agents such as David Duke (the ex-Ku Klux Klansman in Louisiana), who wrap it in the flag and baptize it with pious rhetoric. And it ignores the larger economic, technological, and demographic changes and the global

[13]This view of unconditioned norms provided by the Bible (and equated with church teaching) is well illustrated by recent Vatican pronouncements on morals ("The Splendor of Truth: Encyclical Letter addressed by Pope John Paul III to all the bishops of the Catholic Church regarding certain fundamental questions of the Church's moral teaching" [Oct. 5, 1993]) and by the new English-language catechism, which reiterates the church's traditional opposition to artificial forms of birth control and to ordination of women as priests, with appeals to Scripture.

interdependence that exert irreversible and deeply penetrating influence on every part of social life.

If appeal to biblical norms occasioned by moral confusion and social decay rests on false or inadequate social analysis and distorted memory, it also commonly involves a false portrait of the Bible's role in historic Christian argument and a highly selective view of the Bible's content. Here too the appeal is to a myth. What are presented as traditional understandings of the Bible, with the assertion or assumption that they have been transmitted unaltered from the earliest church, or from Jesus himself, are often distinctly modern readings. There is little recognition in most biblicist arguments of the great variety of interpretations of Scripture through the ages, both in the treatment of individual passages and in hermeneutical approaches. Appeal to scriptural norms also typically involves highly selective reading and differential weighting of sources. Authority is accorded to some passages and some interpretations and denied to others.

In practice the Bible as a whole has never carried the kind of authority invoked by advocates of a "return" to biblical norms, nor does it do so in the actual arguments and practices of contemporary biblicists. It is an argument of rhetoric more than practice, but a highly effective rhetoric when directed at liberals, who are typically hesitant to invoke biblical authority. In their critique of authoritarianism and abuses of authority and in their recognition of the complexity of the Bible's witness, liberals reject absolute claims for biblical positions, and often the claim of biblical authority itself.

In an earlier form of this lecture (which became too long) I analyzed current debate in my own church (United Methodist) concerning the nature of homosexuality and the place of homosexuals in the church—a debate occurring in most main-line US denominations.[14] I chose this example, because I think it illustrates well the differing views of the Bible and biblical authority in the church today. The Study Committee report, in which all members

[14]Including, to my knowledge, the Presbyterian Church USA, Episcopal Church, Disciples of Christ, American Baptist Church, United Church of Christ, and Evangelical Lutheran Church.

concurred, listed the Bible first among the authorities that provide knowledge and insight, but also recognized other sources, including "secular" sciences.[15] And both authors of interpretive articles defending the two alternative recommendations submitted to the church's General Conference made explicit appeal to the Bible as the primary authority for theological and ethical reflection. But they understood the biblical witness in fundamentally different ways.

For David Seamonds, professor of pastoral ministries at Asbury Seminary, who argued for continuation of the present and historic position of the church in condemning all homosexual practice, the Bible was a code or set of directives and models for Christian life.[16] For Victor Furnish, professor of New Testament at Perkins School of Theology, who argued that our present state of knowledge and insight does not provide a satisfactory basis for the church's condemnation of all homosexual practice, the Bible was essentially a story, of God's redeeming and transforming love as apprehended by ancient Israel and the early church. For Furnish, that central and underlying message determines how individual passages are to be read and appropriated.[17]

The disagreement concerned the question of meaning, not what the texts said; it also concerned the appropriate texts and contexts of reading. Ultimately it concerned the *nature* of the Bible itself and hence the *nature* of the Bible's authority for Christians. This, I think, is the critical question. It is complicated, however, by the fact that the Bible has been understood and used historically in a variety of ways, and with changing meanings. The Bible has been able to withstand these changes and clashes of understandings because it carried a kind of generalized authority as the word of God, whose meaning lay beyond human understanding and could

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[15]A description of the Committee's work with a summary of its conclusions and recommendations was published in the *Circuit Rider* (the magazine for United Methodist clergy) of December 1991/ January 1992, 4-8.

[16]David A. Seamonds, "A Common Thread of Opposition to Homosexuality Runs Through the Bible," *Circuit Rider* December 1991/January 1992, 8-9.

[17]Victor Paul Furnish, "Understanding Homosexuality in the Bible's Cultural Particularity," *Circuit Rider* December 1991-January 1992, 10-11.

not be fixed or limited. Thus the Bible has been an immensely rich and flexible source of messages for the church, which devised a variety of methods for discerning and extracting its truth—often with considerable violence to the plain meaning of the text.

But the tension between a literal reading and the meaning desired from the text has never been completely eliminated, and it has become more critical as the biblical world is distanced from the world of its readers. The crisis of meaning precipitated by the Enlightenment and erupting in the modernist debate has not disappeared in a postmodern age. It is deepened by the new yearning for a word from God to guide us in a land of broken and missing signposts, an authoritative word for a normless age.

Today both liberals and conservatives see in the problems and pain of contemporary society evidence of the violation or neglect of divine will, but they read the signs and sources differently. Those who would maintain traditional attitudes and behaviors typically appeal to the Bible as authority for their position, finding direct correspondences born of the Bible's long (and selective) use as a source of moral, and often civil, law in the Christian culture of the West.[18] Conservatives argue that the Bible has spoken and what it says is plain—and they commonly infer that it is God who has spoken, in just these terms. In the Bible, they insist, God has given us God's own clear word as guidance for our lives, but we have rejected this source of revelation, preferring instead rules and theories of our own devising. By conditional interpretation and appeal to modern social and scientific norms we have made this vessel of divine wisdom and instruction into a broken and empty cistern.

The metaphor is apt, though I think the application is flawed. It does indeed describe the Bible in the eyes of many people today, especially those who reject the simple systems purveyed by fundamentalists. The Bible in modern liberal and academic interpretation appears to be a collection of disparate fragments,

[18]That the Bible supports the *status quo* is an axiom of feminist critique that has led many feminists to reject the Bible's authority altogether.

whose individual messages are uncertain, contradictory, and limited, and whose relevance for contemporary life is unclear. The pieces do not hold together, say such liberal critics as Walter Wink, and they do not hold water, at least not water that we want to drink.[19] The authority of Scripture is shattered with its shattered message. We search for water of life, but find only a broken cistern.

Can it be repaired—or should it be? I will address that question in my final lecture, but I will focus first on feminist critique as a factor contributing to the current crisis of biblical authority—and pointing to a solution, or at least a path to living waters.

[19]Wink opened his book, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), with the declaration that "Historical biblical criticism is bankrupt" (1). "Establishment" biblical interpretation was incapable, he said, of achieving "what most of its practitioners considered its purpose to be: so to interpret the Scriptures that the past becomes alive and illumines our present with new possibilities for personal and social transformation" (2). In the past two decades major changes have taken place in the biblical "establishment," but few of these have been concerned primarily with personal and social transformation. I use the example of Wink to show that dissatisfaction with the dominant academic forms of interpretation is not confined to conservatives.

Lecture Two
Root Damage
Feminist Critique

In my first lecture I argued that the crisis of meaning precipitated by the Enlightenment is still with us, despite various resolutions of the past, none of which were able to claim general acceptance. The crisis of meaning occasioned a crisis of authority, as traditional affirmations concerning the divine origins, inspiration, and infallibility of the Bible were undermined by recognition of the human origins and historical conditioning of the sacred writings. Theories of inspiration and doctrines of authority were elaborated in an attempt to maintain the Bible's traditional authority in the face of perceived challenges to biblical claims, especially of a scientific and historical nature. Other sources of knowledge about the world and its inhabitants claimed the assent of believers, leaving the Bible with a diminished sphere of authority or creating confusion and conflict over the nature of its authority. While the majority of believers came to affirm that the Bible was a religious document, not a manual of science, and that its authority was of a moral and spiritual nature, there was no consensus on how the spiritual message was to be extracted from the cultural matrix in which it was embedded. Some rejected the apparently arbitrary picking and choosing of biblical texts to suit modern consciousness which appeared to characterize modernist approaches. Such selective acceptance made human wisdom the judge of divine revelation, they argued, and must be rejected as illegitimate subjectivity in apprehending the word of God.

Despite the appeal of arguments for unqualified acceptance of the Bible as the infallible word of God in all matters which it addressed and as a sufficient source of divine guidance for all situations of life, Americans in increasing numbers in the twentieth century came to accept a more limited view of the Bible's authority and embrace an understanding of the Scriptures that saw divine revelation working through human agency and conditioned by the

circumstances under which it was given. Revelation took specific and changing form to address specific and changing needs. Ancient situations had to be matched with modern situations of comparable character to determine the message for modern readers.

This matching of contexts is in fact the way that the Bible has always been approached, as readers in every age have sought a message for their day; only the way of determining appropriate correspondence has changed. But the confidence that the Bible really does have a word for our day has been severely eroded, as perception of the disparity between the biblical world and the world in which we live has grown. It is harder and harder to make the connection—a fact that is evidenced in the increasing biblical illiteracy in the general population of those who claim some church affiliation, including first-year seminary students.[1] At the same time, however, the dissolution of the world in which the Bible was still the norm has created a new hunger for an authoritative word and new efforts to reclaim the Bible as a source of direction.

There are signs in the church today of a building consensus on the need to combine recognition of the Bible's particular, culturally determined words with the affirmation of divine inspiration. There are also signs of ecumenical consensus on methods of Bible interpretation and the relationship of biblical to ecclesial authority—a matter that has been at the heart of Protestant-Catholic theological conflict. But a dissonant note has been sounded in this time of emergent consensus and increased demand for an authoritative word. Within the past two decades feminism has found a voice within the church, and its voice is almost unanimous in locating the source of women's oppression, or at least a major contributor to that oppression, in the Bible and its interpreters. Appeals to biblical authority carry a message of bondage for many feminists within the church as well as without. The search for the ancient paths (Jer 6:16) leads, in their view, to darkness not light.

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[1]I speak here from the experience of teaching in a United Methodist seminary, where many students in an introductory course to the OT are unable to name the books of the OT in order (based on standard English versions) or identify major figures and "events." Weekly content quizzes have been added in recent years to combat this illiteracy.

For them, the old-time religion is not good enough.

In this lecture I want to consider feminist critique of the Bible in the context of the women's movement as it developed in nineteenth-century North America. And I shall speak again quite specifically of the movement in the U.S., because that is the context in which most feminist theologians and biblical scholars in the English-speaking world have been formed and have formulated their positions. Although feminism can no longer be described as a Western phenomenon, North American feminists have had a significant impact on the women's movements emerging in various parts of the world today and searching for their own voice, vision, and program in the light of their particular conditions of oppression and their particular cultural resources.[2] Recognizing the necessity, but also the limits, of this starting point, I urge you to compare the distinctive features of your own national, ethnic, and ecclesial heritage to the features of the U.S.-based movement I shall describe.

I begin with the wider women's movement, because religious feminism has either grown out of it or had to define itself in relation to it, and because the Bible was very much a part of the cultural milieu and political discourse of nineteenth-century

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[2]The UN Decade of Women (1975-1985) is one indication of the worldwide consciousness of women's distinctive needs and perspectives—even though males constituted a majority of the official delegates at its inaugurating conference in Mexico City (Hanna Papanek, "The Work of Women: Postscript from Mexico city," *Signs* 1 [1975] 219). For examples of Christian femininsm in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, see Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, eds., *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992); *In God's Image* (a journal of Asian women doing theology, published by the Asian Women's Resource Center for Culture and Theology, Hong Kong); Denise Ackermann, Jonathan A. Draper, and Emma Mashinini, eds., *Women Hold Up Half the Sky: Women in the Church in Southern Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1991); Elza Tamez, ed., *Through Her Eyes: Women's Theology from Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989); and Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Yolanda Tarango, *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992). See also, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed. *Searching the Scritpures: A Feminist Introduction,* vol. 1 (New York: Crossroad, 1993) chs. 4-6.

America, in which the women's movement was born. Attitudes toward the Bible on the part of early feminists have deeply impacted contemporary feminist—and antifeminist—sentiments.

Feminist awakening is commonly associated with the consciousness-raising groups of the late sixties and early seventies, which adopted the language of liberation to describe their aims (whence the popular label "women's lib"). But this new wave of feminism had a history, which had been largely forgotten, because the success of the first wave of feminism had obscured the continuing, but less blatant, sexism in society.[3] Equality in the voting booth and in access to education (goals of the earlier women's movement) did not translate into equality of opportunity or advancement in professions, and it did not erase the sexist attitudes that continued to constrain women's lives. In fact, it was the disparity between the egalitarian ideals and pervasive male dominance that accounted for the depth of anger in the new wave of feminism and led to more radical analysis of the problem. The sense of betrayal and delusion after earlier victories added an element of bitterness and suspicion.[4]

The first phase of women's struggle for equal rights was in the area of education, where only two centuries ago prevailing opinion held that education was either harmful to women's constitution or detrimental to their domestic responsibilities—arguments that may still be heard today in much of the non-Western world. Two lines of argument were used to gain equal education for women, one emphasizing equality of "souls," of natural endowments and destiny, the other the needs of republican government—not that the ladies themselves should share the responsibilities of citizenship, but that they might "instruct their sons in the principles of liberty and

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[3]Josephine Donovan notes sadly that much of what was said by the "radical" feminists of the late 1960s and early 1970s had been said, repeatedly, over a century before *(Feminist Theory: The Intellectual Traditions of American Feminism* [New York: Continuum, 1991] xii). Her analysis of the intellectual traditions of modern feminism is the primary source of my account.

[4]Carol Hymowitz and Michaele Weissman, *A History of Women in America* (New York: Bantam, 1978) ch. 19 "The New Feminism," esp. 341-355.

government."[5]

A major impetus to change in women's legal position came from a change in the economic sphere. The development of the textile industry in the first decades of the nineteenth century brought women into the textile mills to work fourteen hours a day, just like men, and necessitated reconsideration of many traditional taboos surrounding women's nature and women's place.[6] But a movement for women's rights did not develop until the involvement of women in the abolitionist movement. Its philosophical foundations were laid some decades earlier by a British woman, Mary Wollstonecraft. Her 1792 essay entitled *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* was known throughout the 1800s as the "feminist Bible." In it she asserted that God had given "natural rights" to both sexes. Hymowitz and Weissman summarize her argument as follows:

> Just as it was not God's intention for men to be enslaved by tyrants, so too, she claimed, it was not God's intention for women to be enslaved by men. . . . Just as French and American men were justified in rising up against unjust monarchs, so women were justified in revolting against the tyranny of husbands, fathers, and brothers.[7]

Wollstonecraft linked the political and the domestic in her critique. She criticized the institution of marriage as it existed in her day, characterizing it as a form of legalized prostitution, in which women traded their bodies for economic security. "True marriages" based on friendship, respect, and love that went deeper than infatuation, she argued, could only be entered into by women capable of supporting themselves, who would have no need to entrap men. Equality of the sexes must replace dependency in marriage, as elsewhere in the society.[8]

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[5]Eleanor Flexnor, *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States,* rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA/London: Belknap, 1975) 17, citing. Dr. Benjamin Rush; see also 15, 23-40.

[6]Ibid., 17.

[7]Hymowitz and Weissman, *History,* 76.

[8]Ibid., 77.

Wollstonecraft's manifesto was widely read by the American women who helped spearhead the antislavery movement and the women's rights movement that grew out of it, allowing them to legitimate women's demands by linking them to the fundamental principles of American democracy. It drew upon the same ideas of natural rights invoked by the Founding Fathers to justify the American Revolution.[9]

It was the antislavery movement that brought women for the first time into organized political activity in America. The abolitionist movement was originally based on the "natural rights" thesis that asserted the incompatibility of human bondage and democracy. By 1830, however, abolitionists were claiming a religious ground for their demands. If liberty was man's God-given right, they argued, then those who interfered with this liberty were guilty of defying God's law. Slave owners and all who profited from an economy based on slavery were sinners.[10]

The meshing of politics and religion, which characterized nearly all of the reform movements of the nineteenth century, had profound affects on women's public and political activity. "So long as the abolition of slavery . . . was a question for the political arena, women were entirely excluded from the debate . . . no American woman with any pretensions to respectability dared to speak out on political issues." Religion, however, was a different matter. It was considered part of woman's proper sphere (a matter of the heart not the head). "When the antislavery dialogue moved from Congress to the pulpit, women were drawn into the debate."[11] The effect of that involvement was to prove revolutionary. Women were radicalized by their abolitionist experience, and prepared to fight for their own rights. The rigid separation of the masculine and feminine "spheres" had begun to be breached.[12]

Women's involvement began with the organization of female

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[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid., 78.

[11]Ibid., 78-79.

[12]Ibid., 79.

antislavery societies, but they were excluded from the hub of activity throughout the twenties and thirties. Despite the enormous influence exerted by some women, such as Lucretia Mott, they had no formal power in the movement and could not vote at its conventions. In 1838 two Quaker sisters from an aristocratic South Carolina family thrust women's role in the movement onto center stage, forcing unwilling men and women to recognize the parallel between the oppression of slaves and of the oppression of women.[13]

Sarah and Angelina Grimke had not intended to thrust the "woman question" into their antislavery tour of northern cities, but when men arrived to hear these eloquent speakers, their "parlor talks" became too large to meet in private homes, and they did not demur from public speaking.[14] Rebuked for speaking in public and forsaking "woman's sphere," Angelina insisted on "a woman's right to have a voice in all the laws and regulations by which she is governed, whether in Church or State."[15] Her logic extended to the highest office:

> If Ecclesiastical and Civil governments are ordained by God, then . . . woman has just as much right to sit in solemn counsel in conventions, conferences . . . and general assemblies, as man—just as much right to sit on the throne of England or in the Presidential Chair of the United States.[16]

The New England press reacted to the sisters' tour with scathing denunciation, focusing on their unwed state and speculating that failure to find white husbands had led them to seek Negro mates. But the churches outdid the press in their condemnation, depicting the sisters' public lobbying as an un-Christian assault on the social

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[13]Ibid., 80.

[14]Ibid., 82; cf. Flexnor, *Century of Struggle,* 45-46.

[15]Hymowitz and Weissman, *History,* 82.

[16]Ibid.; citation from Gerda Lerner, *The Grimké Sisters from South Carolina* (New York: Schocken, 1971) 123-124. Although Grimké refers to ecclesiasticl as well as civil government, she does not offer examples of clerical office—a reflection of her Quaker view of ecclesiastical order?

order and the sanctity of home and family. In the summer of 1837 the Congregationalist churches of Massachusetts issued a pastoral letter condemning their behavior and threatening women who followed their example with loss of the ability to have children and with an end in shame and dishonor, degeneracy and ruin.[17]

Sarah responded in a series of *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes* (1938), in which she laid out an argument for her right to speak in public, and to interpret Scripture, that offers a good example of liberal hermeneutics and exegesis of the day. Her defense involved close textual analysis of major biblical passages used to justify woman's position of subordination. Convinced that "an erroneous view of Scripture had evolved through 'perverted interpretation of Holy Writ,'" she rejected the need for clerical intermediaries (which also meant *male* intermediaries) in the reception of spiritual truth, drawing on Enlightenment ideas and the radical Protestant tradition that emphasized direct communication with divine Wisdom.[18]

> I . . . claim to judge for myself what is the meaning of the inspired writers, because I believe it to be the solemn duty of every individual to search the Scriptures for themselves, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, and not be governed by the views of any man, or set of men.
> . . . False construction [of Scripture] has no weight with me: they are the opinions of interested judges, and I have no particular reverence for them, merely because they have been regarded with veneration from generation to generation. So far from this being the case, I examine any opinion of centuries' standing . . . as if they were of yesterday.[19]

Her exegesis of the Genesis creation accounts gave priority to Genesis 1, in which she saw God's true intention reflected in the creation of man and woman as equals—in God's image—a view

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[17]Hymowitz and Weissman, *History*, 83-84.

[18]Donovan, *Feminist Theory*, 13-14; Hymowitz and Weissman, *History*, 84. Cf. Flexnor, *Century of Struggle*, 47.

[19]Cited by Donovan, *Feminist Theory*, 14.

later espoused by Elizabeth Cady Stanton in *The Woman's Bible.* Insofar as other passages of Scripture expressed notions of women's subordination and inferiority, she viewed them as reflecting the prejudices of men in biblical times, not the will of God. Thus she recognized a double source of women's oppression in biblical interpretation: the text itself, which at times reflected the perversions of human authors and transmitters; and later interpreters, who had distorted the divine message by giving false priority to oppressive passages. For this nineteenth-century Quaker, the intention of God was still discernible in Scripture and was to be sought there. Although she was the first American to apply natural rights principles to women, it was the Bible, she insisted, that declared men and women to be created equal.[20]

The next stage of the movement for women's rights fell to others, but was also linked to the abolitionist movement. In 1840 the World Anti-Slavery Convention, meeting in London, voted to exclude women from participating in its proceedings. Among the many female antislavery leaders from America forced to sit in a segregated gallery were Lucretia Mott and the new bride of abolitionist Henry Stanton, Elizabeth Cady Stanton.[21] The two discovered mutual interests in politics, religion, and reform, and soon resolved to hold a convention when they returned home and form a society "to advance the rights of women."[22]

Eight years later, on July 19-20, 1848, a Woman's Rights Convention was hold in Seneca Falls, NY and a Declaration of Rights and Sentiments, modeled on the Declaration of Indepen-

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[20]Donovan, *Feminist Theory,* 14. Cf. Flexnor, *Century of Struggle,* 47; and Nancy A. Hardesty, *Women Called to Witness: Evangelical Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984) 77-78.

[21]They were joined there by William Lloyd Garrison, who refused to participate in a convention that denied women a voice in its deliberations. Hymowitz and Weissman, *History,* 86.

[22]Ibid., 86-87.

dence, was issued.[23] The history of the movement inaugurated at that convention is too complex to relate. Its leaders were many, but three stand out: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the primary theorist and founder of the movement; Lucy Stone, the "star" speaker during the early years; and Susan B. Anthony, the organizational genius, who was called "the Napoleon of the movement."[24] The movement had various branches, and different leaders emphasized different reforms. Stanton, whom I will consider shortly in more detail, argued for women's rights within marriage and for easy divorce (which scandalized many orthodox religious women), while Lucretia Mott employed scriptural arguments to denounce clergymen who preached that God had made woman inferior to man. Ernestine Rose spoke for legal rights, and Harriet Hunt, one of the first nineteenth-century women to practice medicine, denounced doctors who proclaimed the physical inferiority of women.[25]

The Bible and theology played an important role in public debate as well as private life in nineteenth-century America, and among the leaders of the women's movement, Sarah Grimke, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone, and Antoinette Brown deserve to be remembered as theologians as well as political activists.[26] Though for the most part without formal theological education, some did acquire special training in order to be able to read and interpret the

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[23]Its 100 signatories included 68 women and 32 men, a third of those attending the convention. The only resolution that did not pass unanimously was resolution 9, demanding the vote (Lucretia Mott felt this went too far, and Mr. Stanton left town in protest). Elisabeth Cady Stanton, who did the final drafting, stuck to her daring proposal, assured by the black abolitionist leader, Frederick Douglas, that he would be present and take the floor in her support. Flexnor, *Century of Struggle,* 75-76; Donovan, *Feminist Theory,* 7.

[24]Hymowitz and Weissman, *History,* 112; Donovan, *Feminist Theory,* 19.

[25]Hymowitz and Weissman, *History,* 100.

[26]Biblical arguments played an especially prominent role in debates concerning women's rights and nature. In addition to the better known writings of Sarah Grimké and Antoinette Brown, Elizabeth Wilson's 200-page book, *A Scriptural View of Woman's Rights and Duties* (1849) deserves mention. Hardesty, *Women Called,* 75.

biblical text in its original languages. Elizabeth Cady was tutored in Greek, and when her pastor died he willed her his Greek lexicon, Testament, and grammer, and four volumes of Scott's commentaries.[27] Lucy Stone related that on discovering as a child that Gen. 3:16 decreed that men should rule over women, she first contemplated suicide and then determined to go to cllege, study Greek and Hebrew, and see for herself if in translation "men had falsified the text."[28] Antoinette Brown, the first ordained woman in Congregationalism, studied theology at Oberlin and looked at the Pauline epistles with feminist questions.[29]

Of these, Stanton had a direct and enduring impact on feminist biblical criticism. She was a complex figure, whose basic theoretical position, which led her into leadership of the suffragist movement, was rooted in the natural rights tradition. But the right to vote was never the end for her, but only a means for women to transform an oppressive legal and social system. In her later years she turned her political and intellectual energies to the critique of patriarchal culture and search for an alternative cultural tradition that reveres rather than denigrates women—a tradition she found in the notion of matriarchy, which she developed from the theories of Bachofen and others.[30] Stanton's critique of patriarchy targeted especially the institution of marriage, whose restrictive laws and customs she viewed in her early years as the major cause of women's oppression. Reform of the (patriarchal) family was the first program of this mother of seven, who was left to manage the household while her abolitionist husband was out on the lecture circuit. Writing to Stanton, who was pregnant at the time with her sixth child, Susan

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[27]Ibid., 70-71. No college in the U.S. admitted women at the time (Hymowitz and Weissman, *History*, 90).

[28]Hardesty, *Women Called*, 71.

[29]McKim, *What Christians Believe*, 141. Her article on 1 Cor 14:34-35 and 1 Tim 2:11-12 was published in the *Oberlin Review* of July 1849. Hardesty, *Women Called*, 74, 81-82; on nineteenth-century biblical arguments for women's rights—as well as rejection of the Bible in favor of appeal to universal human experience—see 70-85.

[30]Donovan, *Feminist Theory*, 17-19, 36-39. Cf., Hymowitz and Weissman, *History*, 117-121, 160-162.

B. Anthony complained,

> Those of you who have the talent to do honor to poor womanhood have all given yourself [sic] over to baby-making and left poor brainless me to do battle alone. Such a body as I might be spared to rock cradles. But it is a crime for you and Lucy Stone and Antoinette Brown to be doing it.[31]

Stanton gradually became convinced, however, that patriarchal religion was most responsible for women's inequality and redirected her energies to countering its influence. Resigning the presidency of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in 1892, with the major battles for the vote won, she set out to expose the role of religion, and more particularly the Bible, in fostering and maintaining the oppression of women. The central force in perpetuating an ideology of women's subordination, she believed, was "mindless reliance on the Bible and its supposed doctrine of women's inferiority."[32] Her critique of the Bible was grounded in natural rights arguments: "We cannot accept any code or creed," she insisted, "that uniformly defrauds woman of all her natural rights."[33] It also drew on the new critical scholarship of the day, which recognized the Bible as the product of human authors, specifically men, who incorporated their own ideas and prejudices in their work.

Because the Bible played such an important role in the religion and politics of the day, it could not simply be dismissed. It provided the ammunition for antifeminist arguments, and exercised its power over women as well as men, who accepted its words as the word of God. To counter and correct this prevalent view she conceived the *Woman's Bible* project, assembling a committee of twenty women to produce a commentary on all of the major passages of scripture relating to women. Her strategy in this undertaking, which was published in two volumes, in 1895 and

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[31]Hymowitz and Weissman, *History,* 119.

[32]Donovan, *Feminist Theory,* 37; cf. Hymowitz and Weissman, *History,* 266-267.

[33]Donovan, *Feminist Theory,* 36.

1898, was (1) to discredit the authority of the Bible where it presented negative ideas about women (by arguing that these simply represented men's prejudices), (2) to laud its positive images (and thereby draw the support of its traditional authority to the feminist cause), and (3) to develop alternative religious traditions more congenial to women.[34]

Stanton followed Sarah Grimké in appealing to the first creation account over the second, which she dismissed as an expression of male supremicist ideology. She emphasized the creation of man and woman as equals in God's image and elaborated her idea of the godhead as androgynous (initially articulated in her 1891 article "The Matriarchate").[35] She had little regard for the Old Testament in general, which, she wrote, "makes woman a mere afterthought in creation; the author of all evil; cursed in her maternity; a subject in marriage; and all female life, animal and human, unclean." One of the few accounts she admired was the story of Ruth, "who believed in the dignity of labor and self-support."[36]

The *Woman's Bible* project failed in its objectives, not because of clerical (male) opposition, which Stanton had anticipated, but because her own comrades in the suffragist movement were not willing to accept such an attack on the authority of the Bible, the anchor of religion. In a storm of protest the 1896 NAWSA convention officially dissociated itself from the "so-called *Woman's Bible* or any other theological publication."[37] For Stanton, the Bible was man-made. The problem with Scripture was not, as some feminists argued, in the male ideology of its interpreters (though this was acknowledged too), but rather of its authors. Men had put

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[34]Ibid., 37.

[35]Ibid., 37-38.

[36]Hymowitz and Weissman, *History*, 267. Stanton along with Anthony and other nineteenth-century feminists turned their criticism of women's oppression on women themselves, whom they saw as cooperating in their own enslavement by their cultivation of dependence and desire for fine clothes. Cf. Donovan, *Feminist Theory*, 18.

[37]Susan B. Anthony, who had become president in 1892, was almost alone in opposing the censure—although she herself characterized the work as "flippant and superficial." Hymowitz and Weissman, *History*, 267.

their stamp on biblical revelation in the Bible itself—and for Stanton that excluded the notion of divine origin or authority.

The dominant form of nineteenth-century feminism was the movement for women's rights, focused on the right of suffrage, which was seen as the key to righting a host of other legal and social issues. As an outgrowth of the antislavery movement, which was heavily undergirded by religious arguments and organization, it focused support in liberal religious circles that saw the Bible as undergirding the notion of equality. Alongside this dominant rights-oriented movement, which emphasized the same rights and duties for men and women, was another stream of feminism, which emphasized the unique nature and experience of women as the basis for demanding a greater role for women in society. This stream, which Donovan has termed "cultural feminism," was sharply bifurcated, with differing analyses of women's distinctive contributions and needs and correspondingly different plans of action.[38]

One stream saw women's contribution as arising from and shaped by the domestic sphere: women could save the world from many ills by being mothers to the world. From the temperance movement to the settlement house and the women's peace movement, these women brought religious values, which they derived from the Bible, to bear on social institutions. They combined traditional views of women's distinct nature and vocation as mothers with biblical affirmations of women's worth, deemphasizing the themes of subordination in the Bible and reinterpreting the notion of woman's "place." Thus they were able to claim a divine mandate for their mission—and oppose women who "wanted to be like men."[39] Women's movements within the church represented this ameliorating strain, finding expression in women's missionary societies and a variety of benevolent

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[38]Donovan, *Feminist Theory,* ch. 2 (31-63). On the continuation of this stream in contemporary feminism, see ch. 9 "The New Feminist Moral Vision" (171-186).

[39]Ibid., 31-32, 39, 54-50; Hymowitz and Weissman, *History,* 218-233; Flexnor, *Century of Struggle,* 182-196. The major theorists of the pacifist-social reform wing of feminsim were Jane Addams and Crystal Eastman.

organizations.

The other stream of "cultural feminism" also emphasized women's distinctive nature, but felt that society must be radically reorganized to allow women's contributions. Institutions such as patriarchal marriage—or marriage at all—were means of bondage for women that must be destroyed.[40] This stream had no place for the Bible, which was viewed as simply the tool of oppressive patriarchy—and its most effective and therefore most dangerous weapon, since it made Christian women assent to their own slavery. Stanton's *Woman's Bible* project was in large part motivated by her recognition of the strong hold of biblical faith among women. She hoped by reasoned argument to dissuade them from this false belief.

She failed in this because most women were unable to accept such a cavalier treatment of Holy Writ (—and unwilling on the basis of rational argument alone to abandon the security of home and faith, however abusive). Whatever its defects, the Bible remained a source of revelation and truth; for religious feminists that meant that the *true* meaning of the Bible *must* be equality of persons and dignity for women. The response in the church to radical feminist attacks on the Bible was twofold. On the one hand, an attempt was made to reinterpret the Bible as "feminist," and thus ally the Bible's traditional authority to the women's cause by seeking out texts that undergirded women's equality and by reinterpreting others; on the other hand, feminism as a political and social movement was identified with radical critique or rejection of religion, and more specifically rejection of biblical norms. The result has been a persisting legacy of hostility and mistrust between women who identify themselves as feminists and women who identify themselves as believers. And although that gap is being bridged today by women of faith who claim feminist identity, the feminist label still connotes to many a secular, and often specifically antireligious, movement. A view of the Bible as irredeemably sexist and a source and sanction of patriarchy persists today among feminists within the church as well as without.

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[40]Donovan, *Feminist Theory*, 39-54. Some of the names associated with this stream were Margaret Fuller, Matilda Joslyn Gage, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Victoria Woodhull, and Emma Goldman.

Feminism has never been a single movement, politically or philosophically, although at times a common interest, such as the right to vote, was able to unite a broad spectrum of women committed to the full realization of women's potential and the removal of laws and customs that limited women's rights and freedom. Feminist goals and strategies differed, as did their philosophical and theological underpinnings—and this is true today, where feminism has become a much broader and more complex movement, in which various streams of the earlier movement have merged and new ones formed.

The early suffragist movement had split into moderate and radical wings in 1869 after black men had been given the vote, but not women. All feminists felt betrayed, but the moderates would not desert their abolitionist allies. Stanton and Anthony, who were unwilling to wait, formed the National Women's Suffrage Association (NWSA), based in New York, while Lucy Stone, as leader of the moderates, founded the Boston-based American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA).[41] The latter group made winning the vote their sole cause, accusing the radical wing of jeopardizing the cause of women's enfranchisement by "dragging in their peculiar views of theology, temperance, marriage, race, dress, finances, labour and capital." Their primary target was Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who "more than any other nineteenth-century feminist leader . . . sought to understand the roots of women's oppression." As noted above, the vote, for her, was only a tool to gain other rights.[42]

The suffragist and rights wings rejoined in 1890 as the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), with Stanton as head, but by then the major battles had been won and Stanton had shifted her interest from the patriarchal family to the role of religion in fostering and maintaining the oppression of women. When she stepped down two years later to devote her full energies to the attack on religion, she was succeeded by Susan B. Anthony, who was a far more acceptable leader but was unable to rally a

[41]Hymowitz and Weissman, *History*, 160.

[42]Ibid. Cf., p. 27 above.

majority around her strategy of amending the federal constitution. After 1894 the suffrage movement was decentralized and efforts were devoted to winning state referendums.[43] When the vote was finally won in 1920 (with the ratification of an amendment introduced in 1918 by the newly elected first woman representative in Congress, Jeannette Rankin of Montana), it was due in large measure to changed political and social conditions and a changed national ethos.[44]

It was also due to a shift in attitudes and arguments within the suffrage movement. Second generation suffragists generally embraced reformist arguments of "cultural feminism," emphasizing the moral strengths and peaceful instincts of women, whose vote was needed to combat the increasing corruption of government by big business and political machines—and by lawless elements in the West. They no longer argued that women were like men and hence entitled to the vote, but rather that "women differed from men and therefore deserved the vote."[45] This change in argument gained broader support (from male voters) and speeded their victory, but it undermined the political strength of the woman's movement. At a time when large numbers of women were working in factories and growing numbers were attending college and establishing careers, suffragists were emphasizing women's special place in the home as support for their claim to the vote. Their embrace of high Victorian social attitudes and beliefs also involved racist and anti-immigrant biases that further limited the main stream of the movement to middle-class WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) women.[46]

The movement did not end with the achievement of suffrage

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[43]Ibid., 266-268.

[44]Ibid., 283-284. Among the contributing factors was pressure from the new western states, where women had been given suffrage as early as 1869 in the Wyoming Territory in an effort to strengthen law-and-order elements. Growing industrialization and urbanization were also factors, along with a changing population augmented by new waves of immigrants (ibid., 184-185, 192-217).

[45]Ibid., 273.

[46]Ibid., 272-274.

(after a seventy-two-year struggle), but continued along the earlier lines of cleavage. Having gained the vote, but not equality, the suffragists (NAWSA) continued as the League of Women Voters, while the equal rights advocates eventually found a home in the National Organization of Women (NOW). The latter incorporated elements of the earlier Woman's Party, formed by the radical suffragist Alice Paul (who was expelled from NAWSA in 1915). The sole platform of the Woman's Party had been the demand for an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution that would guarantee the full equality of women before the law—a goal still unrealized more than seventy years later.[47]

Between 1920 and the emergence of the second wave of feminism in 1970 a series of quiet changes brought radical changes in women's lives and in American society. Some of these changes had been underway well before the vote was won. By 1920 many women were actively engaged in public life. Some had devoted themselves to suffrage, social work, and reform; others had made their way into male professions. Many had chosen to remain single. But younger women in the 20's rebelled against the high price of public life, which required the sacrifice of marriage and a family.[48]

The sexual revolution of the twenties attacked the repressive and hypocritical attitudes of the nineteenth century toward sexuality and brought sex into the arena of public debate. Although its goals were not realized and the double standard remained, it resulted in new recognition of women's sexuality and sexual needs. The most important change of the twenties for women, however, was an outgrowth of that revolution. Emma Goldman, who had championed the right of women to sexual freedom and gratification, recognized that without effective birth control there could be no true sexual freedom for women.[49] Her campaign to introduce contraceptives to the public was taken up by Margaret Sanger, who organized the American birth control movement and "transformed public attitudes

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[47]Ibid., 278-284.

[48]Ibid., 285.

[49]Ibid., 285-293.

toward contraception from a gutter topic . . . to recognition of birth control as a major public health issue with profound political and economic significance."[50]

Changes in the work force also played an important role in emergence of the new feminist movement. Nineteenth-century patterns of discrimination against women in the work force continued into the twentieth century, with women workers poorly paid, segregated in "female" jobs, and treated as temporary workers. Between 1920 and 1940 the percentage of women who worked outside the home remained relatively stable, and most with paying jobs were young and single. But a shift from domestic and factory work to office work was underway—without significant changes in pay. Women's work did not afford a living wage, and the Great Depression compounded the problems of working women. Married women joined the work force when their husbands were laid off, but were accused of stealing jobs from men. Women in the thirties and forties were discouraged from entering professions (American medical schools placed a five percent quota on female admission between 1925 and 1945). The New Deal improved opportunities and working conditions, but women retained their second-class economic status.[51]

The great change came with the Second World War, when six million women took paying jobs at the urging of the government. Although two million were fired from heavy industry at the end of the war, not all returned home. By 1960 women comprised thirty-eight percent of all workers, and the typical worker was no longer young and single. But seventy-five percent of women workers were in "female only" jobs. In 1950, women's average earnings were sixty-five percent of men's, and by 1960 this had fallen to forty percent. In 1961 one-third of 1,900 office managers polled admitted that they routinely paid men higher salaries than women in equivalent positions.[52]

"Many women internalized the very sexual biases that kept them

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[50]Ibid., 294.

[51]Ibid., 303-309.

[52]Ibid., 312-316.

underpaid workers outside the home and unpaid workers in it."[53] Single women saw marriage as an answer to all their problems in the workplace, and few planned careers outside the home. "The postwar consumer economy had come to rely on a workforce of women who did not think of themselves as workers and were not taken seriously by their employers."[54] A return to domesticity and to nineteenth-century views of immutable feminine traits was reinforced by psychologists, sociologists, and writers, who emphasized biology as destiny and attributed a variety of social problems to women's failure to "adjust" to their sexual roles.[55]

When a suburban housewife in 1963 addressed the "strange discrepancy" between the "reality" of women's lives and the "image" to which they were trying to conform, her book, *The Feminine Mystique,* sold more than 300,000 copies. Betty Friedan highlighted the contradictions in the lives of twentieth-century American women that made the reemergence of feminism almost inevitable. Her analysis can be faulted for ignoring the real satisfactions women derived from homemaking and motherhood, and it was directed at highly educated middle-class women—setting the stage for later dismissal of the women's movement as a Western, elitist, white women's movement. But it succeeded in directing the energies of women once again to analysis and action relating to deeply ingrained patterns of gender inequality in American society, and ultimately to a recognition of similar patterns in other countries and cultures.[56]

In the mid-sixties women had educational opportunities, but were not expected to use them. Their sexuality was recognized, but defined by male standards. Forty percent had full-time jobs outside the home, yet they were defined as wives and mothers. A ninety-seven percent effective birth control pill enabled the average American woman to give birth to her last child by age 28, but she was expected for the remainder of her life to derive her primary

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[53]Ibid., 321.

[54]Ibid., 322.

[55]Ibid., 329-330.

[56]Ibid., 341-342.

identity and satisfaction from her biological role.[57] In 1966 NOW was established with the goal of bringing women into "full participation in the mainstream of American Society *now*, exercising all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men."[58] A new theme emerged in this feminism, although Stanton had made the same arguments almost a century earlier: for women to share men's sphere, men would have to start sharing women's sphere. The new feminism also attacked laws and practices that fostered self-denigration, dependence, and evasion of responsibility by women.[59]

The sixties also saw the reemergence of a more radical feminism alongside the reformist NOW. "Women's liberation" and "consciousness-raising" were the key terms for a decentralized movement that grew out of the student protest movements of the sixties, where women activists found themselves once again relegated to the kitchen and the bedroom. When feminists met in small groups to talk about their backgrounds and experiences, they quickly discovered that the "problems" that each thought was uniquely hers were common to others in the group—and to women in general. Consciousness-raising became a means of generating a common critique and energy for change and resulted in a sense of solidarity, described as "sisterhood." It also produced anger and shock, which was directed at men, and inward toward the self.[60]

By the seventies the new feminism had established itself as a broad-based movement, and by the mid-eighties it had penetrated every sphere of social and political life, though not in equal degree and not into all levels of organization.[61] Today's talk of the "glass

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[57]Ibid., 341-342.

[58]Ibid., 344.

[59]Ibid., 346.

[60]Ibid., 347-355. See further Donovan, *Feminist Theory*, ch. 6 "Radical Feminism" (141-169).

[61]Feminist contributions are also found in every sphere of academic and intellectual life, including theology. See Lecture III.

ceiling" and this year's launching of the Women's Health Initiative[62]—the first major study of women's health needs by a medical establishment that has continued to take men as the norm—are signs of persisting limits. But the revolution is in full steam and it will not be turned back. It can no longer be identified with a particular organization, or class. It has found its own, distinctive voice among African-American women, Asian women, and Latinas, working-class women, lesbians, Roman Catholics, and Evangelicals, to name some of its particular manifestations.[63] And it is a worldwide movement.

The revolution is in full steam, but with the enormous changes of the past two decades, we are beginning to see how far we have to go and how deep (and pervasive) are the structures of patriarchy that continue to control the marketplace and the minds of women as well as men.

How does the Bible relate to this revolution? As religion has come to play less of a role in the lives of North Americans today, so too the Bible. For most, it is simply irrelevant. For feminists, however, it is a sign of patriarchal bondage, identified with a past to which we cannot and will not return. The continuing hold of the Bible on the hearts and minds of a minority Christian population today is seen as a threat by many feminists, because it marks the line of most agressive resistance to feminist goals and invokes divine sanction for its program. Feminists rightly see a convergence or conflation of cultural and religious norms in the Bible, which sanctions the subordination of women by prescription and example.

In the view of most feminists, a Bible that preaches or condones the oppression of women cannot have authority for women—or it makes any claims to authority highly problematic. And oppression of women continues to be a fact of life today. We witness it in the rape of Bosnian Muslim women, and in the emergency rooms of

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[62]A major research study of post-menopausal women and their health sponsored by the (U.S.) National Institutes of Health.

[63]The importance of recognizing distinct feminist perspectives is that issues and emphases differ with social location, culture and religion—from sexual freedom to civil rights, from economic to reproductive issues. Strategies of action differ accordingly.

Chicago hospitals, which reported last year that one in three women admitted for treatment was suffering from injuries inflicted by a husband or boyfriend.[64] In the latter case, the problem of women's consent in abusive relationships can be laid directly to internalized understandings of social roles, self-worth, and economic dependence in traditional, religiously sanctioned patriarchal family patterns.[65] Elizabeth Cady Stanton saw well when she targeted the family and religion as the primary sources of women's oppression.[66]

Feminist critique of the Bible and biblical authority strikes at the root. If the authority of the Bible is in danger today because of disuse and a changed worldview that make it difficult to make the connections with contemporary life, it is threatened more fundamentally by feminists who insist on severing the remaining ties. In my next lecture I shall consider how the feminist movement has impacted theology and the academic study of the Bible and how feminist theologians and biblical scholars understand the question of biblical authority.

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[64]I have been unable to locate the *Chicago Tribune* article that originally caught my attention. The problem of battered women continues, however, with a recent article in *Newsweek*, "Patterns of Abuse" (July 4, 1994; 26-33), reporting that "about 1,400 women are killed by their husbands, ex-husbands and boyfriends each year and about 2 million are beaten—on average, one every 16 seconds" (26). The same article contains an account by a wife-abuser, who reports how he began his physical and verbal intimidation as a student pastor: "I was following what I thought the Bible said about what a family should be, that the man should be the head of the house and be in control" (ibid., 30).

[65]See Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "Every Two Minutes: Battered Women and Feminist Interpretation," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Letty M. Russell; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 96-107.

[66]Feminist biblical scholars have honored the one hundredth anniversary of Stanton's *Woman's Bible* project with two publication projects of their own: *The Women's Bible Commentary* (eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; London: SPCK/Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), consisting of contributions by 42 women biblical scholars; and a two-part work, *Searching the Scriptures* (ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza), whose first volume, *A Feminist Introduction,* p 21. n.2 above) contains the contributions of 25 women from a wide variety of cultural perspectives.

Lecture Three
The Lord's Planting
Feminist Hermeneutics

In this lecture I will consider the response by women in the church to the new wave of feminism which surged onto the scene in the seventies, and I will focus in particular on feminist theologians and biblical scholars, who have attempted in various ways to unite affirmations of faith and feminism. I use the term "feminist theologian" broadly to designate all who are engaged in relating faith to feminism, whether lay theologians or academically trained, and including biblical scholars as well as theologians more narrowly defined.

Feminist theologians represent a broad and diverse spectrum of responses to the perceived sexism in religion and society. Their individual stances reflect differing denominational and confessional contexts, fields of specialization and methodological interests, and relationship to secular feminism or the broader women's movement.[1] Feminist theology, like all modern feminist scholarship, is a response to the women's movement as it moved into the academy in the early 1970s. In its academic form, it coincides with the entry of women into professions formerly closed, or virtually closed, to them and with the introduction of women's studies—and feminist perspectives—into the curriculum in most of

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[1]It is becoming increasingly difficult to survey this field because of the volume of literature and variety of positions. An index of the exploding corpus of writings may be seen in Shelley Finson's bibliography, *Women and Religion: A Bibliographic Guide to Christian Feminist Liberation Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), which runs to 181 pages without the indexes, and scarcely touches feminist biblical scholarship.

the academic disciplines.[2]

But feminist theology was not born in the seventies, nor is it confined to the academy or the academically trained. As I tried to show in my last lecture, it has forerunners in the nineteenth century women's movement, some of whose arguments still carry substantial weight today—for better or worse. Some of its most powerful speakers and influential thinkers have been women without specialized theological training. Their theology was developed within the church, especially in women's groups. That locus for the nurture and propagation of feminist theology continues to be of importance today, especially among Evangelical and African-American feminists (or "womanists") and women from religious traditions in which academic study of theology has not been the norm—though that situation is changing today.

What was new in the seventies was that now there were a few women with higher degrees in theological disciplines and with all of the training and resources of their male colleagues, who could draw upon and contribute to the scholarship within their academic fields, and bring that to bear on the discussion in the church and the wider society.[3] More importantly, however, there was now a popular demand for feminist theology within the church and at its margins. Women theologians were part of a larger movement, whether they choose to identify themselves with it or not. Some stayed clear of the feminist agenda, like the few theologically trained women in Stanton's day, who were unwilling to associate themselves with the *Woman's Bible* project for fear of jeopardizing

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[2]Useful introductions to feminism in the academy are: Elizabeth Langland and Walter Grove, eds., *A Feminist Perspective in the Academy: The Difference It Makes* (Chicago: University of Chicao Press, 1983); and Ellen Carol DuBois and others, *Feminist Scholarship: Kindling in the Groves of Academe* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

[3] Although women had been admitted to Oberlin as early as the 1840s and to Methodist theological schools in the 1870s and although a few liberal denominations had a few women pastors in the early decades of this century, it was not until the 1970s that women were admitted to Roman Catholic and Jewish seminaries and began to form a "critical mass" in Protestant seminaries. On women preachers in Methodist revivalism and the Holiness movement, see Hardesty, *Women Called,* 86-103; on women at Oberlin, 46-48.

their careers (a very reasonable fear).[4] But most contributed to the movement which had opened the way for them, and in some cases impelled them into their scholarship.

My own experience may serve here as an example. Twenty-two years ago I was asked to contribute an article on women in the Old Testament to a volume that would provide an overview of women in the Jewish and Christian traditions. It was designed to meet the needs of women's studies courses and women's groups hungry for a reliable introduction to a hidden past. My dissertation adviser warned me not to get distracted by such a request. When I agreed to the project, which was my first writing after completing my dissertation, I did so out of curiosity born of total ignorance of the subject, and because I believed that such a popularly oriented work directed to a feminist audience would never undergo the scrutiny of my male mentors and colleagues (such was my state of confidence at the time!).[5] That response to the movement (then identified as "women's lib") is typical, I believe, of women theologians, whose work is defined by their position within intersecting spheres of academic disciplines and feminist circles.[6] That first tentative

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[4]In her Introduction to Part 1, Stanton commented:

> Those who have undertaken the labor are desirous to have some Hebrew and Greek scholars, versed in Biblical criticism, to gild our pages of learning. Several distinguished women have been urged to do so, but they are afraid that their high reputation and scholarly attainments might be compromised by taking part in an enterprize that for a time may prove very unpopular. Hence we may not be able to get help from that class (Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible*, Part 1 [n.p., 1885, repr. Salem, NH: Ayer, 1986], 9).

[5]I was wrong about its reception. The article, "Images of Women in the Old Testament" (in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974, 41-88), did in fact attract the attention of my colleagues, prompted by student demand and new scholarly interest in a hitherto neglected subject.

[6]Also typical of many first generation feminist theologians and biblical scholars is the pattern of academic traimg antedating feminist consciousness—often with failure to connect the new openness to women in higher education and church leadership with the women's movement, and belief that the path chosen was determined by purely individual and personal reasons.

treatment of women in the Old Testament set a still unfinished agenda of research and writing aimed at amplifying and correcting scholarly literature on ancient Israel marked by an absence of attention to women and gender. It was also the first treatment of such a topic, I believe, by an academically trained woman. Twenty years later, the *Women's Bible Commentary*[7] contained essays by forty-two different female biblical scholars, all with doctoral degrees or engaged in doctoral studies—and representing a broad range of perspectives and interests—a consequence of a movement that is transforming the face of the discipline.

Feminist theology is positioned within a three-way conversation between the academy, the church, and a women's movement that has impacted both but remains largely outside of both. That position is a source of creativity and tension for every feminist theologian and is handled in different ways by different individuals. Because feminist theologians are always in dialogue—and solidarity—with women who stand outside the church or balanced precariously on the boundary, I want to include in my consideration some women who have stepped outside the boundary of the church in order to show more accurately the range of criticism and the continuities across the spectrum.

The mother of modern feminist theology and one of its most brilliant and ascerbic thinkers had already moved by the early seventies to a position outside the church. Mary Daly's first book, *The Church and the Second Sex,*[8] documented and indicted male bias in the church as she had experienced it. After seven years in the virtually all-male environment of priests and male seminarians at the Dominican-run University of Fribourg and with two doctorates (in theology and philosophy), she found herself rejected and excluded from the positions for which her training had prepared her, viz. priest and doctor of the church.[9]

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[7]See above, p. 41, n. 66.

[8]Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper, 1968).

[9]Her later characterization of the Fribourg experience describes it as "a lengthy spiritual-intellectual chess game, interrupted by a side trip to the great carnival in Rome [Vatican II]." Ibid., 9 (from the preface to the 2nd edition).

Daly's second book, *Beyond God the Father,*[10] was a work of critical and constructive theology that drew upon the existentialist tradition, especially as articulated by the "death-of-God" theologians.[11] Following those theologians, who rejected objectified, reified forms of relationships and abstract hypostasized images of the deity, Daly rejected the notion of God as an hypostasized transcendence imaged as a Supreme Male Being. In place of "God the noun," she proposed "God the verb," in which we participate.[12] The God she rejects is the primary authorizing symbol of a patriarchal conceptual system that has robbed women of the power to name themselves, the world, and God.[13] Reclaiming the right to name is a key item of the feminist theological agenda.

Daly describes the women's revolution as "an ontological, spiritual revolution, pointing beyond the idolatries of sexist society and sparking creative action in and toward transcendence." "It has everything to do," she says, "with the search for ultimate meaning and reality, which some would call God."[14] Discovering/uncovering of God is realized through a dialectical process that begins with destruction of the idols, the reified oppressive forms, of patriarchal society,[15] and moves to new

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[10]Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973).

[11]Donovan, *Feminist Theory,* 126-127. Donovan notes the influence in particular of Paul Tillich and Martin Buber on Daly's work, especially the latter's *I and Thou.*

[12]Daly, *Beyond God the Father,* 33-34; Donovan, *Feminist Theory,* 127.

[13]Daly, *Beyond God the Father,* 8.

[14]Ibid., 6.

[15]This involves both the cutting off ("castration") of "phallocentric" imagery and conceptual systems that objectify God and legitimate the oppressive status quo (ibid., 19) and the exorcising of the internalized images of male superiority (20) and sense of Otherness, resulting in a new consciousness (40). The new consciousness is characterized by refusal to objectify. "Our liberation consists in refusing to be 'the other,'" she says, "and asserting instead 'I am'—without making another 'the other'" (34). See further Donovan, *Feminist Theory,* 126-130.

symbolizing and new naming. Daly's emphasis is not on the new language, but on the new consciousness this produces. She envisions a new becoming of women in sisterhood that is redemptive both for women and society.[16] Daly draws heavily in this book on traditional theological language and images, giving them new meanings. She speaks of exorcising evil from Eve, resulting in a "Fall into Freedom," which is redemptive and healing. The new community of sisterhood will unfold in an experience of new time and new space that is described in terms of exodus and wilderness.

In her third book, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism,*[17] she had moved completely outside the orbit of God the Father, constructing her work on the myth of the Amazon voyager. In it she attempts a radical "deconstruction" of language and construction of a gyn/ecological vision on metaphors taken from women's traditional cultural activities, such as spinning. Emloying a post-modernist style, she attempts to shock the reader into new awareness by means of puns, neologisms, and inversions of traditional definitions, especially of negative terms for women, such as hag, crone, spinster, lesbian, harpie, and fury.[18]

I will not try to characterize Daly's fourth book, *Pure Lust,*[19]

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[16]Although the new sisterhood is "anti-church" and "anti-Christ," it moves dialectically beyond this rejection toward a discovery of new modes of being and becoming via "sisterhood as cosmic covenant" (Donovan, *Feminist Theory,* 128-129). Through refusal of the falsities of patriarchy, it will occasion a "Second Coming," not of Christ, but of a female presence . . . enchained since the dawn of patriarchy" (Daly, *Beyond God the Father,* 96; cited by Donovan, *Feminist Theory,* 129).

[17]Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon, 1978). Cf. Ti-Grace Atkinson, *Amazon Odyssey* (New York: Links, 1974); and Donovan, *Feminist Theory,* 150-151.

[18]Donovan, *Feminist Theory,* 153-154.

[19]Mary Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon, 1984). Daly's output continues in *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* (Boston: Beacon, 1987); and *Outercourse: The Bedazzling Voyage: Containing Recollections from my Logbook of a Radical Feminist Philosopher* (Be-ing an Account of my Time/Space Travels and Ideas—Then, Again, Now, and How) (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992).

since she has removed herself sufficiently far from contemporary feminist discourse within the church to discourage dialogue, and her trajectory is clear from her earlier works.

I have cited her work at length, although she is neither a biblical scholar nor a Christian theologian, because her critique of Bible and theology is the most radical, and original, of contemporary feminists, and because I believe it contains a great deal of truth. I also cite her because for many feminists alienated from the church she is *the* feminist theologian—and because she illustrates so well the dilemma of many women confronted by a church that is unwilling to hear them or make a place for them. And finally I cite her as an example of a feminist approach to the Bible and biblical authority that is typically "Catholic," and more specifically characteristic of pre-Vatican II approaches to the Bible.

For Daly, the Bible's message was what the church taught. And what the church taught was that women were inferior to men by nature and ordained by God to roles defined by that nature. Since appeal to the Bible played a critical role in the church's arguments about women's nature, the Bible was seen as the church's ultimate weapon in its war against women. Daly's rejection of church authority carried with it a rejection of biblical authority. She had no reason to adopt the Protestant strategy of searching Scripture for an alternative message, which she viewed as a game of delusion. Yet her constructive counter-theology in its early phases drew heavily—and effectively—on biblical images, metaphors and themes, showing the continuing power of the Bible in theological discourse, even when it is denied formal authority.[20] Her recognition of that continuing power led her ultimately to abandon it, lest it subvert the new vision with old meanings.

Daly's initial effort to move beyond God the Father shows striking similarities to the way in which the Bible itself was formed, with earlier traditions being reemployed and reinterpreted to carry new messages that were often radically different from the earlier

[20]The fact that Daly's use of biblical language and imagery did not come directly from the Bible, but was derived from intermediate sources, does not invalidate the notion of authority exercised by means of commonly accepted symbols and stories.

ones. Although this is most obvious in New Testament uses of Old Testament texts and traditions, it can be illustrated within the Old Testament itself. Daly makes us ask the difficult question about the norms for discerning God's new action in our time, which may call for the rejection or reinterpretation of earlier witnesses. She also makes us reflect on the boundary where the new can no longer be contained by the old. Just how far can we press a separation of patriarchal form from anti-patriarchal content? Daly has seen more clearly than most the revolutionary meaning of feminism and the need to pass from critique of patriarchy to new alternatives. She has also shown us the need for new language and new symbols, lest old forms impose old content. All feminist theologians are indebted to her even if they cannot follow her.[21]

Before I move to consider other representative figures, I want to note a number of ways in which Daly's thought anticipates or reflects themes found in other feminist theologians. First, the progression illustrated in the three books I discussed reflects a progression in the feminist movement in general and in many individual feminists. It begins with protest against women's exclusion from activities, institutions, and positions—understood as unjust; it leads to recognition of patterns of female restriction and subordination and seeks liberation from enslaving systems of social organization and thought. It thereby calls into question the authority and legitimacy of the institutions and arguments that supported or justified the subordination, in this case the church and its theology. And finally it questions the nature or existence of the assumed authorizing power. If the system that has perpetuated women's alienation is understood as incapable of change, whether by habit or constitution, then it is deemed necessary to destroy it and seek alternative institutions and belief systems.

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[21]In fact, a considerable number of early feminist theologians have moved to positions outside the patriarchal religious traditions in which they were trained, to embrace "post-Christian" and "post-Jewish" positions and to seek alternative symbols of authority drawn from women's experience/sphere, or from traditions assumed to derive from women. These include Naomi Goldenberg, Judith Plaskow, Starhawk (Miriam Simos), Carol Christ, and Penelope Washburn.

Christian feminists and those outside the church are more unified in their fundamental critique than is often supposed. They differ primarily in their assessment of the ultimate source of the problem and of its depth and intractability. They also differ in their strategies for overcoming it. Here particular religious traditions, ecclesiologies, and individual experience play a decisive role. It is not surprising, I think, that the most radical forms of feminist theology today come from women of Roman Catholic identity or background.[22] Their experience of the church has been of a hierarchically ordered institution, whose teaching and governing offices are exclusively male, an institution that has declared women ontologically unfit for priestly leadership. Although the Roman Catholic church has shown broad toleration of limited dissent and alternative forms of lay leadership and orders, the experience of women who challenge the male order has been and continues to be overwhelmingly an experience of denial and censure. When Daly sees no hope for reforming this institution, she has simply extrapolated from her own experience.

The key question for feminists within the church is whether it can be reformed, and at what cost—to the individual, and the institution. Should one stay and fight, or leave? And what are the alternatives inside and outside that patriarchal order and belief system, which is the only order we have ever known? The enormous pressures of an order that promises salvation only to those within its fold weighs on every critic, threatening excommunication, eternal damnation, and loss of fellowship. And the latter may be the more serious threat, along with the loss of identity caused by severing ties with the faith tradition that has shaped the concept of self, of aims, and of duty. Feminists on either side of the boundaries drawn by patriarchal religious order find support in sisterhood as they seek to redefine faith and personhood in non-androcentric terms.

Feminist theologians within the church are not necessarily less radical than their counterparts outside. They do believe, however,

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[22]Generalizations are dangerous; one could argue that a fundamentalist Protestant background might produce equally radical responses.

that the institution is capable of reform—or that it is not monolithic. They may refuse to concede authority to the dominant stream and identify themselves with a counter institution or movement within the church, as a present or historic entity or as an eschatological reality. For them, the true church is the church to be, which may require the dismantling of the present structures and ideology (theology). Feminist theology is for the most part the work of women who remain within the church,[23] however alienated, and find resources for reform and reconstruction within the tradition—sometimes by recovering hidden, lost, or neglected tradition, sometimes by emphasizing minor or secondary themes, and sometimes by transvaluing central themes and affirmations that were not originally identified with the question of gender (e.g., as Enlightenment liberal feminists applied the natural rights argument to women's rights).

A fundamental insight of feminist criticism is the recognition that the oppression of patriarchal society (and religion) is not limited to restriction of action, occupation, or political and legal rights, but is also an oppression of the mind and psyche. Language, in particular, is seen as a primary instrument of that oppression. In patriarchal society, language belongs to men; with it they construct the world—and women. Women are consequently forced to see themselves and to interpret their experience in alien terms. Androcentric views of women, from Freudian psychology to advertising art, shape women's views of self, and these are reinforced by religiously sanctioned androcentric anthropology.[24] Daly's insistence on the importance of naming represents a central feminist affirmation.

Fundamental to most feminist critique is the concept of

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[23]I would also apply the term, feminist theologian, to theorists who are attempting to construct alternative belief systems outside of the church. These often place a female image (goddess or witch) in place of the traditional patriarchal deity of Judaism and Christianity, although some prefer an androgynous deity or reject anthropomorphic models (Buddhism has held attraction for some feminists).

[24]See, e.g., Margaret R. Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon, 1989).

"patriarchy," derived from nineteenth-century anthropology and applied to contemporary and historical forms of Western society. In feminist usage it describes a hierarchical ordering of society and social relationships in which men hold the dominant positions. It is typically identified with Judeo-Christian religion, with the Bible seen as its ultimate source and/or sanction. Sometimes the critique of patriarchy and patriarchal religion is accompanied by a view of an original matriarchy, characterized by goddess religion as well as female rule, an original order suppressed by biblical religion. The birth of Israelite Yahwism meant the death or defeat of matriarchy and the goddess, in this view.[25] I believe that this feminist construction of patriarchy is as much a myth as the matriarchy it views behind it, though it has proved to be a highly illuminating myth even with its distortions.[26] What I would emphasize at the moment, however, is that its roots are in nineteenth-century speculation, rather than contemporary anthropology, whose more complex and nuanced analysis of gender relations in differing socio-cultural contexts can contribute significantly to current feminist thought.[27]

What is new or emphasized in second-wave feminist understanding of patriarchy is recognition of the subtlety, depth, and

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[25]Goddess murder as the primordial event in establishing and perpetuating patriarchy plays an important role in contemporary feminist theory, despite the fact that few historians of religion find evidence for it. See Donovan, *Feminist Theory*, 155.

[26]For anthropological critique of the concept of "matriarchy," see Joan Bamberger, "The Myth of Matriarchy: Why Men Rule in Primitive Society," in *Women, Culture and Society* (eds. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974) 263-280. Some feminist theologians, whose earlier writings assumed an original matriarchy, have come to see it as a projection of patriarchal society, rather than a stage of historical development. See, e.g., Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992) 145-146.

[27]See Carol Meyers' critique of feminist views of patriarchy in *Discovering Eve* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 24-37, and my own demurrer in "Images of Women," 77, n. 1. Cf., Henrietta Moore, *Feminism and Anthropology* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988) 12-41.

pervasiveness of its effects. In modern feminist analysis, "patriarchy" has become a far more comprehensive and penetrating concept. It describes a rule of the mind (e.g., in preference for instrumental "male-type" thinking[28]) and the psyche, the organization of work and leisure around men's, rather than women's, needs, etc. Women's successes or failures in a male-dominated society are now seen to be not merely a matter of rules, rights, or even opportunities (formally conceived), but of self-image, style of behavior, and ways of thinking and acting. If this is so, then the claims of patriarchal religion to normativity become far more problematic. If the Bible and traditional theology are the products of male minds, reflective of male experience and male modes of cognition, then their truth claims are called into question, first for women, and then for all believers, insofar as they assert universal applicability.

Other themes in Daly's work that are prominent in feminist critique are the linking of patriarchal culture with war, rape, violence and death, including violence to nature—theme that finds contemporary expression in the ecofeminism of Rosemary Ruether[29] and Elizabeth Dodson Gray, but was already represented

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[28]The categorizing of "male" and "female" ways of thinking, approaches to problem solving, etc. is highly controversial because of the implied biological base in most constructions—although some feminists find the source of gender distinctions in socialization. It has become one of the primary interests (perhaps *the* primary interest) of contemporary feminists. See, e.g., Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); and Mary Field Belenky, *Women's Ways of Knowing* (New York: Basic Books, 1986). Cf. James B. Ashbrook, "Different Voices, Different Genes: 'Male and Female Created God *Them*,'" *Journal of Pastoral Care* 46 (1992) 174-183; and idem, "Ways of Knowing God: Gender and the Brain," *Christian Century* January 4-11, 1989, 14-15. See further Donovan, *Feminist Theory*, 171-186, who notes that earlier feminists such as Wollstonecraft and Margaret Fuller had also noticed a difference in men's and women's perception (176). The emphasis in contemporary feminist theory is on the differences, whatever their origins.

[29]Most recently in *Gaia and God*, but already a prominent theme in *New Woman/New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (New York: Seabury, 1975).

in nineteenth-century feminist thought.[30] The search for the source of an alternative theology and world view in women's own experience is also a dominant and recurring theme. It typically has a collective dimension; since patriarchal structures tend to isolate women as well as rob them of language to express their own experience, it is only through collective processes that women can come to true self-understanding. Along with the emphasis on women's experience, feminist theology is also characterized by use of symbols and metaphors drawn from women's traditional sphere (weaving, spinning, quilt making, food preparation) to image transcendant realities,[31] and by an emphasis on process and on wholistic and consensual approaches, with rejection of dualisms and hierarchies, including body-mind split. Perhaps the best known feminist theologian today is Rosemary Radford Ruether, like Daly a Roman Catholic, but a post-Vatican II Catholic educated at Scripps College (with an original interest in art) and Claremont School of Theology. Schooled in process theology and liberal Protestant thought, her first teaching position was at Howard School of Theology (a traditionally African-American school) from which she moved to Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary (a United Methodist institution). Her critique of patriarchy and a patriarchal church is not significantly different from Daly's, but her ecclesiology is marked by a fundamental pluralism that enables her to describe the pope as a "sect" and see the "true" church represented in feminist base communities, as well as other communities of liberation.[32]

Ruether's theology represents a form of liberation theology, an approach shared by the Protestant feminist theologian Letty Russell.

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[30]E.g., Margaret Fuller, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, as well as Elizabeth Cady Stanton. See Donovan, *Feminist Theory*, 32-50.

[31]See, e.g., the new ventures in liturgy and hymnody represented by Ruth Duck, Brian Wren, and Marjorie Procter-Smith.

[32]See, e.g., Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983) ch. 8 "Ministry and Community for a People Liberated from Sexism" (193-213). The characterization of the pope is from a lecture delivered at Temple Emmanuel, Dallas, in the 1970s.

Both link women's oppression to other forms of oppression and view women's liberation in a broader context of overcoming alienating systems.[33] Thus Ruether's prolific writings range over such issues as racism, antisemitism, Palestinian rights, and the environmental crisis, while Russell links sexism with racism, classism, and other forms of hierarchical value systems. Such linkage, however, does not intend to obscure the distinct historical and cultural forms of oppression; liberation theologies are by nature specific. For feminists, women's experience becomes the lens through which alienating structures are seen. But women's experience is not unitary. Women of color and women of oppressed social classes stand in different relationships to structures of power and require different means and symbols of liberation rooted in their own group identity and experience.[34]

In order to focus on representative biblical scholars, I will not attempt to summarize the theology of either Ruether or Russell, but focus only on the role that the Bible plays in each.[35] Ruether's theology may appear very "Protestant," but she remains a Catholic theologian in her preoccupation with ecclesiastical authority and traditional church teaching. For Catholic women, the church's use of Scripture in the oppression of women must be exposed and countered. Ruether recognizes the androcentric shaping as well as transmission and interpretation of the texts, reflecting patriarchal structures and values and a male hierocratic viewpoint; the Bible fosters views of male superiority and the denigration or subjugation

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[33]Compare Ruether's *New Heaven/New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* and her earlier *Liberation Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1973) with Russell's *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective—A Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974). Cf. Pauli Murray, "Black Theology and Feminist Theology: A Comparative View," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History* (ed. Gayraud S. Willmore and James H. Cone; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979) 304-322.

[34]See p. 21, n. 2 above. See also Donovan, *Feminist Theory*, 131-132; 156-161.

[35]For summary treatments of their theology, see Donovan, *Feminist Theory*, 130-132 (Russell) and 132-136 (Ruether).

of women, earth, and female attributes.[36] Along with other liberation theologians, however, she also finds a prophetic-liberating tradition within the Scriptures, which finds expression in the exodus traditions, prophetic critique, and eschatological vision of new/restored creation. For Ruether, this prophetic-liberating tradition is consistent with the "feminist critical principle of the full humanity of women" derived from women's experience of oppression, and is consequently accorded authority.

Thus while liberation feminist theology repudiates the patriarchy of biblical religion, it nevertheless claims the underlying prophetic base of biblical religion. This tradition of critical judgment and transformation has fundamentally shaped liberation feminist thought, Ruether argues, and cannot be excised or repudiated.[37] It is not located, however, in a set of texts or in a "canon within the canon." It is rather "a critical perspective and process through which the biblical tradition constantly reevaluates, in new contexts, what is truly the liberating Word of God, over against both the sinful deformations of contemporary society and also the limitations of past biblical traditions, which saw "in part and understood in part."[38]

Letty Russell's understanding of biblical authority is much more Protestant and Reformed and her theology more exegetically grounded and pastorally oriented, reflecting her training and experience as a Presbyterian minister (in an ecumenical innercity parish), a pastor who created the parish lectionary and wrote the commentary used in weekly Bible study and preaching, directed a large released-time program of basic Christian education, and engaged in regular exegetical preaching. Russell works with the Bible on more intimate terms, reaching into it for many of her primary themes and metaphors. Its authority for her does not reside

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[36]Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation," in Russell, *Feminist Interpretation,* 116. Cf. McKim, *What Christians Believe,* 147-148.

[37]This argument is directed against feminist theologians who would reject the Bible altogether as a norm for theology.

[38]Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation," 117.

in the individual texts on which she draws, but in the whole, which functions, in her words, as "script," or "prompting for life." "Scripture's authority stems," she says, "from its story of God's invitation to participation in the restoration of wholeness, peace, and justice in the world. Responding to this invitation has made it my own story, or script, through the power of the Spirit at work in communities of struggle and faith."[39]

For both Ruether and Russell, the patriarchal form of the Bible has not fatally obscured its fundamental message of God's redemptive and liberating activity. Both share the conviction that God's word may be heard in and through the Bible's culturally limited words. Their search for a "usable tradition"[40] within the patriarchal text is criticized on two fronts. Evangelical feminists and others who attack Ruether's existentialist stance argue that she subordinates the authority of Scripture to that of women's experience, making the "full humanity of women" in effect the critical principle.[41] Others find the dual appeal to Scripture and experience inconsistent.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that the Bible may not be invoked as a norm, but must always be subjected to the criticism of women's experience. She insists that Ruether's method of correlation and Russell's attempt to maintain a distinction between a patriarchal Bible and the Bible's authoritative witness to God's liberating activity preserve a "neo-orthodox" interpretation of the Bible that makes an untenable linguistic-philosophical division between form and content, linguistic expression and revelatory truth.[42] Fiorenza believes these "neo-orthodox" forms of feminist

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[39]Letty M. Russell, "Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation," in eadem, *Feminist Interpretation,* 138.

[40]The expression is Ruether's. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology,* 23.

[41]George W. Stroup, "Between Echo and Narcissus: The Role of the Bible in Feminist Theology," *Int* 42 (1988) 28. Cf. Elizabeth Achtemeier, "The Impossible Possibility: Evaluating the Feminist Approach to Bible and Theology," *Int* 42 (1988) 49-50.

[42]Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone* (Boston: Beacon, 1984) 13.

theology also idealize the biblical material to which they appeal and consequently tend to minimize the androcentric elements present in them. She insists that a consistent feminist theology must deny authority to androcentric literature. Feminist theology must begin with "women's experience in their struggle for liberation, not with the Bible."[43] It does not seek identification with particular biblical texts and traditions, but rather solidarity with women in biblical religion.[44]

In these debates we are confronted with the age-old question about the locus of authority for Christian theology. And despite claims to the contrary, it is apparent that the effective norm determining organization, selection and weighting of the evidence is always in some degree outside of Scripture. What is new in feminist theology is the explicit appeal to *women's* experience—which is seen as standing in fundamental tension with key aspects of the biblical witness and tradition.

Fiorenza's explicit attention to hermeneutics and authority for feminist interpretation sets her apart from most American feminist biblical scholars, who typically ignore or dismiss the question of authority in their work. Their interpretation gives clues, however, to their views of the Bible as a source for theology, and these have been analyzed in two helpful articles, by Katharine Sakenfeld[45] and

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[43]Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 17.

[44]Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone,* 14. Russell has responded by arguing that Fiorenza's appeal to "women-church" is dependent on a reconstruction of history based upon New Testament texts, and that the content of her vision is far more dependent on the biblical witness than she is willing to admit. Letty M. Russell, *Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 69.

[45]Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "Feminist Perspectives on Bible and Theology: An Introduction to Selected Issues and Literature," *Int* 42 (1988) 5-18. See also eadem, "Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials," in Russell, *Feminist Interpretation,* 55-64.

Carolyn Osiek.[46] I will return to this analysis later in summarizing feminist uses of the Bible, but first I want to give a more detailed (though very limited) account of the work of two of the best known feminist biblical scholars, Phyllis Trible and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.

In 1973 Trible published an article entitled "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," which was later incorporated into chapters 4 and 5 of her book, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality.*[47] Her aim in that article was to free the Bible from a history of patriarchal interpretation by rereading key texts dealing with women in the light of feminist critique. In so doing she hoped to reclaim the past for women—a project she understands as necessary for women, and hence for the church. In the book she comments on the genesis of the article and the book, which she traces to the year 1963, a year she identifies by reference to the publication of J. A. T. Robinson's *Honest to God,* the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the death of four little girls in the bombing of a black church in Birmingham, the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminist Mystique,* and the publication in the same year of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar,* followed closely by her suicide. "Clearly life was turning upside down in 1963," she wrote.[48] It was also the year she completed her doctoral studies at Union Theological Seminary in New York City (where I was a second-year B.D. student at the time) and began teaching at Wake Forest University,

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[46]Carolyn Osiek, "The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives," in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (ed. Adela Yarbro Collins; Chico: Scholars Press, 1985) 93-106.

[47]Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978). The article, a pioneering work of feminist biblical interpretation, was originally published in the journal of the American Academy of Religion, *JAAR* (41 [1973] 30-48), not in *JBL,* the journal of the Society of Biblical Literature. The latter society has been much slower than its sister organization to incorporate the presence and perspectives of women, as well as racial/ethnic minorities, into its activities and publications. Not until 1987 did it elect its first woman president, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Trible herself will be the second, in 1995.

[48]Trible, *God and Rhetoric,* xv.

the first of a new wave of women biblical scholars.[49]

She soon found the theology that had informed her life inadequate for addressing the concerns of her students and not wholly satisfying for herself. "The mighty acts of God in history proved wanting," she writes, "and the ensuing years . . . heightened that deficiency." Focusing on texts in the Hebrew Scriptures, she "sought a theological vision for new occasions."[50] For her, the Bible, despite androcentric distortions, was still the place where God spoke, and continued to speak.

Trible does not propose a comprehensive program for doing biblical theology, nor does she claim that the perspectives she has identified dominate the Scriptures. Instead she has chosen to accent neglected themes and counterliterature, describing her work as an exercise in "remnant thoelogy."[51] In her first book she traced a "counter theme," "the image of God male and female," through the Old Testament, providing a biblically grounded, textually oriented alternative vision shaped by feminist critique of culture. From this positive core of feminist readings she moved in her second book to highlight "irredeemable" texts, "texts of terror," in which women appear as victims of patriarchal society, victims whom she memorializes by retelling their stories "in memoriam."[52]

Trible defines her method as "rhetorical analysis," described as

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[49]There were predecessors, including Dorothea Ward Harvey (Ph.D. in Old Testament from UTS/Columbia[?], who wrote a number of entries in the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*), and the New Testament scholar, M. Lucetta Mowry, Professor of Biblical History at Wellesley and the sole female member of the original RSV Translation Committee. Mowry's publications included *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Early Church* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) and contributions to the IDB. There were earlier forerunners as well, whom David Scholer has brought to light in an unpublished paper delivered at a recent meeting of the Chicago Society of Biblical Research. All of these, however, antedated the second wave of feminism, to which Trible belongs.

[50]Trible, *God and Rhetoric*, xvi.

[51]Ibid.

[52]Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

a form of literary criticism which focuses on the text as an interlocking structure of words and motifs. She is not interested in such "extrinsic" factors as historical background, compositional history, authorial intention, sociological setting, or theological motivation and result.[53] Her approach stresses the unity and uniqueness of each text, and is more art than science. It is subject to the guiding interests of individual users and may result in multiple interpretations. Yet she asserts that not all interpretations are equal. "The text, as form and content, limits construction of itself and . . . stand[s] as potential witness against all readings."[54]

Here, I believe, we see a feminist version of a "Barthian," or radical Protestant, view of Scripture as the Word of God, revealed in time, but speaking from beyond it, moving through history as a pilgrim (Trible's metaphor), but not limited by the constructions of any particular age. It engages readers directly, and its message is grasped in the immediacy of encounter with the word. Although it is not limited by its historical origins or setting, it is laden with cultural betrayals, which must be exposed. The exegete's responsibility is to set it free. Trible does not reveal her own ecclesial identification, if any, in the writing with which I am familiar, but she appears to speak out of a tradition I surmise to be Southern Baptist. Her view of biblical authority appeals readily to Evangelicals in the role she assigns to the Bible for faith and in her emphasis on the Bible's transhistorical character and the experience of the reader/believer. But she parts company decisively with literalist interpretation, while retaining an emphasis on the letter of the text. Her freedom to reinterpret the text to yield feminist messages enlarges her audience to include feminists outside the circle of Evangelicals—and even outside the circle of faith.

In her concluding postscript to the collection of essays edited by Letty Russell in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,* Trible describes the authors as feminists who combine suspicion with commitment in a journey to discover "a biblical faith that yields

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[53]Trible, *God and Rhetoric,* 8.

[54]Ibid., 11.

wholeness and wellbeing."[55] Their efforts to liberate the Bible from patriarchy, she says, involves the application of a time-honored principle to a contemporary issue. "From the ancient world to the present, lovers of Scripture have released it from the prison of the past to speak to the living" through a process of reinterpretation that produces new meanings—a process demonstrated in the Bible itself and continued by later translators and interpreters. "A fixed, unchangeable text is neither possible nor desirable," she argues in response to those who insist that Scripture is fixed and may not be altered.[56] Trible rejects traditional notions of a canon within the canon as an authoritative core to which the rest is subordinate, because it "minimizes richness and diversity, and . . . absolutizes certain texts at the expense of others."[57] But she endorses a "pluralized and flexible form of canon within the canon, by which, in a variety of ways, scripture is made to interpret, and to judge, other scripture." The Bible through feminist critique critiques itself, she concludes, and it also "provides feminism with a needed critique of itself."[58]

I turn for my last example of feminist biblical scholarship to a European Catholic New Testament scholar, transplanted to the United States. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza was educated in German Catholic institutions, and her scholarship and commitments are shaped by post-Vatican II Catholic theological debate and European biblical scholarship. Her choice, and defense, of historical-critical methodology and her effort to reconstruct the history of the early church to include a central role for women are dictated in large measure, I think, by the way in which arguments for excluding women from ecclesial leadership have been made in the Roman Catholic church. In contrast to Trible's radical Protestant approach, which locates interpretive authority in the individual reader while retaining final authority in the text itself, Fiorenza, in a typically

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[55]Phyllis Trible, "Postscript: Jottings on the Journey," in Russell, *Feminist Interpretation,* 147.

[56]Ibid., 148.

[57]Ibid., 148-149.

[58]Ibid., 149.

Catholic manner, focuses on the church behind the text and the church that accompanies it as an interpreter—redefining both as an *ekklēsia* of women.

Both Trible and Fiorenza take their bearings from contemporary women's experience, conscienticized through critical communal reflection. Fiorenza seeks to ground the contemporary struggle against patriarchal oppression in historical and biblical witness. Her methodology is described and exemplified in the ground-breaking book, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (1983), while her hermeneutic is elaborated in a series of essays collected in *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (1985). In these two works she argues against postbiblical feminists who would reject the Bible as only a tool of patriarchal oppression of women, insisting that "the Bible contains the root historical prototype of liberation which must be claimed by women today in their struggle for redemption."[59]

Fiorenza claims historical-critical method in order to reveal biblical communities of faith beneath scriptural texts.[60] Her reconstruction depicts women of the early Christian movement as both oppressed and yet struggling for liberation.[61] Contemporary feminists reclaim this subversive memory of their foremothers in faith through their hermeneutical work and place themselves in continuity with these foremothers in their ongoing criticism of oppression. The Catholic theme of ecclesial continuity is sounded here, only it is an alternative ecclesiology. The function of the Scriptures is to put us in touch with the originating salvific facts, which in Catholic thought include the establishment of the church.

I cannot lay out the details of Fiorenza's hermeneutical and exegetical method, but I will comment briefly on selective features of her major theoretical and constructive work, *In Memory of Her,*

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[59]Rosemary Radford Ruether, from a review of Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone,* in a private communication, 1985. Cf., Fiorenza, *In Memory,* 33-35.

[60]Fiorenza, *In Memory,* xviii-xxi.

[61]Ibid., 84.

with particular reference to the question of authority.[62] Fiorenza begins by analyzing the hermeneutical significance of the androcentric nature of the biblical texts—a feature which characterizes the texts as a whole and is not limited to easily recognized instances of patriarchal oppression or bias. As androcentric texts, they both suppress and distort the history of women. As sacred texts, they not only rob women of their history, but also oppress and alienate women by claiming divine authority for androcentric vision/opinion.

For Fiorenza, the Bible as an androcentric text cannot provide the "revelatory canon for theological evaluation."[63] Instead, the locus of revelation is to be found "in the life and ministry of Jesus as well as in the discipleship community of equals called forth by him."[64] The goal of Fiorenza's work is "to recover the nonpatriarchal early Christian ethos as a basis for Christian theology."[65] Her historical reconstruction aims to reclaim early Christian history as the history of women and men—by viewing it as women's history.[66]

A guiding methodological principle of her reconstructive work is the axiom that New Testament androcentric language must be understood "on the whole as inclusive of women until proven otherwise."[67] Based on recognition of the common generic usage of androcentric language, this axiom makes the whole of the New Testament a potential witness to the activity of women, and not just the few texts that make explicit reference to women. A corollary of this principle of androcentric language is the recognition that where women are explicitly mentioned, they must have had special significance in the history behind the texts. Their significance is

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[62]I am indebted in the following overview to Joanna Dewey's review of the book at the Southwest Regional Meeting of the SBL-AAR, March, 1984.

[63]Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 32.

[64]Ibid., 34.

[65]Sakenfeld, "Feminist Perspectives," 7.

[66]Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 4.

[67]Ibid, 45.

further heightened, Fiorenza argues, by the fact that the New Testament texts appear to have been written and given canonical status during a period when the role of women in the church was already being restricted and in which debate over women's leadership was a significant issue in the controversies that eventually led to the exclusion of some groups as heretical. The canon is the record of the winners in the struggle to exclude women's leadership.[68]

Fiorenza finds in the Jesus Movement in Palestine, seen as a renewal movement within Judaism, and in the pre-Pauline missionary movement, a tradition of discipleship of equals that stands in contrast to—and in tension with—the patriarchal family model of organization and authority.[69] Paul's relationship to this tradition, in Fiorenza's view, is double-edged; he acknowledges it, but also undermines it.[70] In the period after 70 C.E., the patriarchal order of the Roman-Hellenistic household became the model of the Christian family or household and finally of the church and its ministry.[71] In Fiorenza's view, however, this patriarchalizing trend is countered by the Gospels of Mark and John (composed in roughly the same period), which present women as paradigms of true discipleship.[72]

The book concludes with an Epilogue, "Toward a Feminist Biblical Spirituality: The *Ekklēsia* of Women," which links the church of women discerned behind the biblical text (women who appropriated the hopes of salvation as women) with contemporary feminist communities of faith, or "women-church." It is this women-identified *ekklēsia* that provides the critical exegetical base for the "right interpretation of scripture."

I must forego critique of Fiorenza and Trible at this point, but will return to them in my final lecture, where I will expand the

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[68]Ibid., 52-56.

[69]Ibid., chs. 4-5.

[70]Ibid., ch. 6.

[71]Ibid., chs. 7-8.

[72]Ibid., 315-333.

picture of feminist biblical interpretation and place myself within the spectrum as I attempt to reformulate the claims and the limits of biblical authority. But a preliminary conclusion is in order. All of the feminist theologians I have considered find in the Bible a means of contact with a saving power and a liberating tradition recognizable in some form in history, despite its cultural perversions, and corresponding in some measure to the experience of contemporary women struggling for wholeness. While they exhibit radically different views concerning the nature and locus of that power and the means of identifying and appropriating it, all recognize the need for selective reading and refuse to accord blanket authority to the received text in its entirety—or they define authority in a way that includes negative and positive messages.

Feminist critique allows no easy appeal to the Bible as authority for contemporary faith and practice. For feminists, the Bible cannot provide models or norms that can be appropriated without critical hermeneutical work to free them from their patriarchal matrix. And it is not only the word that is perverted by patriarchy, but the root experience. The Bible's androcentrism is deeper and more pervasive than most of us have imagined. From what we now know about the role of gender in ancient and modern society, it is clear that men's and women's religious activities *and* experiences were significantly different in the biblical world. And if my colleague Jim Ashbrook is right in arguing that men's and women's brains are different, that they process stimuli differently, then the implications of our recognition that the Bible is fundamentally a male book are enormous.[73] It is a male book insofar as it is written by men, about persons, events and situations of importance to men, viewed from men's perspectives, and expressive of men's needs.[74] It excludes not

[73]Ashbrook, "Different Voices, Different Genes" (p. 53, n. 28 above).

[74]A number of biblical scholars, as well as popular authors, have suggested that portions of the Hebrew Bible may have been authored by women, at least at an oral or precanonical stage. See, e.g., Edward F. Campbell, *Ruth,* Anchor Bible 7 (New York: Doubleday, 1975); S. D. Goitein, "Women as Creators of Biblical Genres," *Prooftexts* 8 (1988) 1-33; and Harold Bloom, *The Book of J* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990). While women appear to have been the creators of certain types of songs, proverbs, and stories, the Bible, as a

simply women, but women's experience, or it reports these only through male eyes.[75] Can men's religious insights really describe women's faith, and meet women's needs? Can men speak for women with authority?

I have given one answer in the title of this lecture; I will expand on that in my final answer as I attempt a constructive response. I believe that the feminist movement is God's work and that feminist hermeneutics is the Lord's planting, a new vine in the Lord's vineyard, or a new graft into ancient stock that will enable it to bear much fruit—of richer flavor and hardier strain, renewing a spent vine. But it will not come easy, this union of new and old, and that is signalled by my retention of the familiar title ("Lord") for God that represents the patriarchal past, a title offensive to most feminists as a sign of a culture and a pattern of social relationships that have no place in the New Creation. Will the new wine burst the old wine skins, or will the old growth choke out the new? This question too I will leave to my final lecture.

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literary production, must be understood, I believe, as a male creation, dominated by male interests and perspectives, even in the incorporation of traditions originating in female circles. On the question of "voice," in contrast to authorship, see Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1993) 1-13.

[75]For implications with respect to women's religious lives, see my article, "The Place of Women in the Israelite Cultus," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (eds. Patrick D. Miller, Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 397-419. See further "Israelite Religion and the Faith of Israel's Daughters: Reflections of Gender and Religious Definition," in *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis* (eds. David Jobling, Peggy L. Day, and Gerald T. Sheppard; Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1991) 97-108, 951-957; and "'Bone of My Bone and Flesh of My Flesh': Old Testament Perspectives on the Nature of Human Being," *Theology Today* 50 (1994) 521-534.

Lecture Four
Living Waters
Biblical Authority Reappraised

In my first lecture I argued that society today is facing a crisis of morals and meaning and that the church in attempting to respond to this crisis is experiencing its own crisis. At a time when many both inside and outside the church look to it for a clear word of guidance, it seems to have lost its direction and its voice. It is rent by internal controversies, many involving protest over the erosion or abandonment of traditional beliefs and practices. For many, the crisis in the church is a crisis of authority, for others a crisis of identity. I believe that it is both, and that they are related. For Protestants, authority for belief and action has been vested traditionally in the Bible and appeals to Scripture. Today both the rhetoric of biblical authority and the content of biblical faith are under attack or have fallen into disuse.

In my second and third lectures I looked at feminist attitudes toward the Bible, beginning with the nineteenth century, in which the Bible played a prominent role in American culture and in public debate. The women's movement from its inception was forced to define itself in relation to a book that was widely recognized as supporting the subordination, and oppression, of women. Feminists could not remain neutral to claims of biblical authority and truth, and the test of truth was their own experience—which gave them mixed messages, for compelling moral judgments and spiritual insights were combined in the Bible with narrow vision and hurtful restrictions. A persisting tension is evident within the women's movement between the belief that the Bible as the word of God *must* support the equality of male and female, and insistence that the Bible as a primary source and sanction of women's oppression (perhaps *the* primary source) cannot be accorded the status of divine revelation—or reveals a God who is not worthy of reverence.

Contemporary feminism has largely relegated that problem to the church. In a religiously plural culture in which religion has become

primarily a private affair and in which the Bible, as a sectarian document, has undergone a general crisis of authority and use, feminists outside the church have little reason to struggle with biblical patriarchy and androcentrism. The Bible stands confirmed in their view as a document of female oppression. Thus the dilemma for feminists within the church is intensified.

Feminist theologians and biblical scholars have not for the most part softened the nineteenth-century critique of biblical patriarchy; rather they have shown the Bible's patriarchal bias to be deeper and more pervasive than earlier thought. Androcentrism characterizes every stage of the composition, canonization and interpretation of Scripture, and it cannot be removed by excising particular passages. As Rosemary Ruether summarizes it,

> The Bible was shaped by males in a patriarchal culture, so many of its revelatory experiences were interpreted by men from a patriarchal perspective. The ongoing interpretation of these revelatory experiences and their canonization further this patriarchal bias by eliminating traces of female experience or interpretating them in an androcentric way. The Bible, in turn, becomes the authoritative source for the justification of patriarchy in Jewish and Christian society.[1]

How can such a work claim divine sanction, and how can women find an authoritative word in a book that systematically distorts the truth of women's nature and experience, making it conform to men's or setting it apart as "other," alien, unclean? Katharine Sakenfeld opened her 1985 survey of feminist uses of the Bible with the question, "How can feminists use the Bible, if at all?"[2] The answer she gave on the part of religious feminists, was, for the most part: painfully and selectively.[3]

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[1]Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation," 116.

[2]Sakenfeld, "Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials," 55.

[3]Her conclusion is worth citing, since it identifies the question of authority as the critical underlying issue: "Thus no feminist use of biblical material is finally immune to the risk of finding the Bible hurtful, unhelpful, not revealing of God, and not worth the effort to come to grips with it. Regardless of approach, feminists may find that the Bible seems to drive them away from itself

Why then do women seek to hold on to a book that has historically enslaved them? There is no single answer to this question, but two essential components of an answer include the following. First, the Bible, especially in Protestantism, is essential to articulation of Christian faith and thus essential to Christian identity. That is why the modern loss of familiarity with Bible content is so serious for the church; it represents a dangerous amnesia that threatens loss of identity. For Protestants, however, the Bible is not only an historical source; it is a means of communication with God, a mediator of the divine word to contemporary believers, a source of present contact with the living Word—available to all believers.[4] Christian faith without the Bible is unthinkable. Where personal identity has been shaped as Christian identity, any threat to a primary source and sustainer of that identity may be too great to bear without fundamental and wrenching revision of the image of self. In assessing the threatened loss, the emotional as well as the cognitive aspects of traditional faith must be considered.

Loss of community is also critical for women who reject a patriarchal Bible and the religious community that bears it. That is why alternative communities, and alternative symbols and sources of revelation, are so important for feminist critics of patriarchal religion, whether "women-church" or Wicca, or other forms of Goddess/female-centered religion. That is why "sisterhood" is essential, first for women—and then for men, who must learn as outsiders to find themselves named and claimed by circles centered in women's experience.

But there is another reason for feminists to maintain the painful tie to a patriarchal text beyond the threat of lost community and the threat to identity, and that is that this source of bondage is at the same time a source of liberation, and, in my view, the primary

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(and sometimes from God), rather than drawing them closer. *At the heart of the problem* lies the issue of biblical authority" [emphasis added] (ibid., 64).

[4]On this aspect of biblical use and the particular dilemma this creates for Protestant feminists, see Mary Ann Tolbert, "Protestant Feminists and the Bible: On the Horns of a Dilemma," in *The Pleasure of Her Text: Feminist Readings of the Biblical and Historical Texts* (ed. Alice Bach; Philadelphia: Trinity International, 1990) 5-23.

source of feminist critique of patriarchal oppression. I am a feminist because I am a Christian, and I am not alone. For the critique of oppressive systems (economic, political, and ideological) and of idols, and the demand for justice are fundamental to the biblical message. When feminists turn that critique and that demand on systems of patriarchal power and ideology, they are simply actualizing in our day an old message, whose radical implications had not fully been realized. Ruether and Russell are right, I believe, when they identify the fundamental message of the Christian Bible, and Christian faith, as a message of liberation, wholeness and healing, governed by principles of love and justice.

Different generations, groups and individuals will hear that message in different texts and in different terms, and they will translate it in terms appropriate to their own contexts and experiences—as a word of release from bondage for African-American slaves in nineteenth-century America, as a critique of oppressive political systems in Latin America, as a rejection of racist social policies in South Africa and twentieth century America, and as judgment on women's oppression in patriarchal societies around the globe. But the critique of patriarchy is far more difficult to carry through on biblical grounds, for the very texts that carry the liberating message are often cast in exclusively male terms: "brotherhood" symbolizing the egalitarian ideal and a community of equals whose rights and duties are mutually binding—but only on other men (more specifically, free men, natives, and property owners). The feminist critique turns back on the very texts that have sparked and preserved the message of justice and the vision of wholeness. Do the terms of debate, identity of the speakers, or limits of the vision invalidate the message? When does the weight of patriarchal culture become too much for the word to bear; when does it crush those who attempt to wield it for new battles?

Different feminists assess the tension between patriarchal word and liberating message in different ways and use different means to locate and retrieve a feminist message. I will sketch some of those responses shortly, but first I want to return to the fundamental question of allegiance to the book and to the community that has transmitted and interpreted it. I spoke of the Bible as shaping and sustaining Christian identity and community. These are in fact

primary ways in which the Bible exercises authority. But biblical authority is more commonly identified with assent to propositions concerning the Bible's reception as the word of God: verbal assent to propositions concerning the Bible's divine origins, rather than life conformed to its teaching. And it is this claim of divine origin and order that is at the center of feminist critique. For a great many feminists today, perhaps the majority, recognition of the Bible's complicity in patriarchal oppression (in its origins as well as its use) requires rejection of the Bible as a source of revelation or norm for belief and action, and more specifically, as "word of God." Patriarchal texts must be divested of idolatrous claims to divine authority, they argue. The words of men must be unmasked in their attempts to represent themselves as the words of God.

Such an attack on the Bible as a human creation and a tool of patriarchy appears blasphemous to believers who reverence the Bible as the word of God. Many women, torn by this attack on a book by which they have lived, choose to trust its words as they have received them and submit to its authority as interpreted by the church, reasoning that it is better to serve God than "man" (more specifically, other women)—to follow God even against their own experience and will. I repeatedly encounter women struggling with new options for their lives, who believe that they must submit to male authority (even abusive authority) because it is God's way, revealed in Scripture. People who work with battered women report this as a common argument.[5] To forsake, or even question, a way that has been identified as God's way is too great a risk. For many both inside the church and out, the view of the alternatives is the same: accept the Bible as the word of God and submit to it, or reject it as the word of men.

It is a tragic dilemma, with tragic results for those who elect either option, because it rests on a false understanding of Scripture and scriptural authority. False beliefs hurt, and false or inadequate understandings of the nature of biblical authority are hurting the church today. I understand the appeal—especially in uncertain and tumultuous times—of a system that offers security, even if it

[5]See Thistlethwaite, "Every Two Minutes" (p. 41, n. 65 above).

pinches at places. And I am not ready to reject altogether the notion of submission of the will, or the metaphor of struggle, or even hierarchical models of authority, all of which have biblical sanctions and all of which have come under feminist attack. But I do reject idolatrous identification of human systems of order with divine plan or will. It is here, I believe, that feminism has an indispensible contribution to make. What is widely perceived as a threat to faith (namely, feminist critique of patriarchy) is, I believe, God's gift in our time—to the church and to the world—to save us from the false idols to which we cling and to lead us forward to the wholeness envisioned in creation, or revisioned as new creation.

Feminists insist that the Bible is the words of men—and further, of men who have misconstrued the nature of our sexually bifurcated (dimorphous) humanity, creating systems of oppression for women, which operate at both the political and ideological level. Feminist critique of the Bible is the most penetrating and comprehensive of all modern critiques of the Bible's culturally determined limits and perversions, because it leaves no place of safe retreat. In my own view, which corresponds at this point to the most radical critique, there is no pure remnant, no untainted core, no tradition, or set of texts, or sayings behind the text, that has escaped the imprint of patriarchal culture—which is to say that the Bible is a human book, and it partakes of the limits, and the sinful distortions, of human existence.

But that is no reason whatever to deny authority to this book, authority even as the word of God; for we have heard God speaking here, God's words in human speech and thought. In fact we do not hear that word in any other way. The heart of the Gospel message by which we live, and to which this book testifies, is that God has chosen to dwell among us, as one of us, and that we know God because we have seen God in our own likeness. And if God is not bound to that appearance and time, if I can see God in the prophet of Montgomery and Memphis, Martin Luther King, or in the compassionate friend of the dying, Mother Theresa, it is because I have learned to see Her in a Jewish teacher of first-century Palestine, a male leader in the tradition of his ancestors, who assembled an inner circle of men to further his mission, a teacher rejected by those to whom he came, but whose death gave life to a

new community that would encircle the globe, embracing and challenging all of the kingdoms and cultures of this world.

Word of God in human words: that is the mystery and power of our affirmation about the Bible, and that is the source of its authority for us. But how does it operate? How do we identify the divine within the human, distinguish eternal truth from transient and fallible human claims? How do we apprehend the Spirit in a work of ink and paper, papyrus and parchment? That is the problem of every generation and of every reader, and every solution is partial and fleeting. Every effort to separate Spirit from flesh, the timeless from the time-bound, falls short and cannot escape the trap of its own time, absolutizing the forms of a particular age and culture or abstracting a Spirit that cannot be recognized or apprehended under the actual conditions of life.

It is here that feminism helps us so profoundly, by showing us how deeply imbedded our cultural constructs, and our gender determined consciousness and needs, are in our sacred writings—and in the revelatory experiences and religious practice out of which they grew. Feminists insist that this partial view cannot stand for the whole; it requires a constructive effort to bring the feminine into view and into the shaping and substance of future discourse about the divine. Feminists are divided, however, on whether the androcentric tradition preserved within the Bible can give access to a source of truth capable of comprehending and addressing female experience and female ways of knowing, or whether it is bound to its male origins in a manner that excludes incorporation of female experience and representation of the divine.[6]

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[6]I have argued elsewhere (Bird, "Authority," 86-87 [MS]) that contemporary feminist critique is similar in many ways to the Marcionite critique in the early church, with similar consequences. As early Christians found much within the Jewish Scriptures morally and intellectually incompatible with their faith in Christ, so feminists today find much within the two-part canon morally offensive and incompatible with the message of the gospel as they have come to understand it. And as early Christians took different paths in responding to the perceived defect of the Scriptures, so too do feminists today. Those in the early church whose position ultimately received the stamp of orthodoxy insisted that the witness to God's activity in the ages prior to Christ was essential to Christian understanding. In order to

Feminists who continue to hold on to the Scriptures of Judaism and the early church find a significant measure of continuity between the faith articulated in those writings and the faith expressed in feminist dreams and hopes. They find the link in different ways and in different places, as I noted in my treatment of Ruether, Russell, Trible, and Fiorenza, and with different understandings of the nature of biblical authority.

Before I attempt concluding generalizations on feminist hermeneutics and biblical authority, I want briefly to expand my sketch of the options pursued by various feminist biblical scholars, drawing on Sakenfeld's 1988 survey.[7] Sakenfeld presents a typology of feminist positions on biblical authority, focusing on the role of women's experience (and definition of experience) in appropriating the biblical witness. Nearly all would agree, she says, that experience cannot be ignored in interpreting Scripture, but from that point of agreement three lines of thought diverge. At one extreme is Fiorenza, who makes experience, and more particularly "the personally and politically reflected experience of oppression and liberation" the criterion of appropriateness for biblical interpretation and evaluation of biblical authority claims.[8]

At the other extreme Sakenfeld places the literature of the Evangelical wing of American Protestantism, illustrated by essays from the Evangelical Colloquium on Women and the Bible held in 1984.[9] While she notes diversity of opinion within that collection

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retain that witness thay developed various means of interpretation that subordinated, reinterpreted, or dismissed as no longer relevant passages that appeared incompatible with later belief. A similar approach is taken by those feminists today who believe that the Bible, despite its defects, contains a message of liberation and critique that is essential to the feminist agenda. They are struggling in various ways to free that message from the constricting matrix in which it has been transmitted.

[7]Sakenfeld, "Feminist Perspectives" (p. 58, n. 45 above).

[8]Fiorenza, *In Memory,* 32; Sakenfeld, "Feminist Perspectives," 7.

[9]Sakenfeld cites a number of different works as representing this position, including the essays from the Colloquium, edited by Alvera Mickelson, *Women, Authority & the Bible* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1986); Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Nancy A. Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be: Biblical*

and cautions against generalizing, she finds that most of the authors seek a canonical check on "destructive subjectivism," while struggling with the question of "how Scripture itself can adjudicate debates between competing interpreters."[10] For example, Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty appeal to the Wesleyan "quadrilateral" (Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason) in asserting that while Scripture must be the first source of theology, the three other sources always come into play. They recognize the unavoidable subjectivity of the interpreter, but formally subordinate experience to Scripture. They also define experience differently from Fiorenza, identifying it as "our own personal religious experiences and those of people we know,"[11] in contrast to Fiorenza's specific focus on the struggle for liberation. For Scanzoni and Hardesty as well as Fiorenza, however, it is women's experience that is decisive.[12]

Sakenfeld finds a middle ground, or another angle of vision, in Letty Russell's understanding of authority and experience. Russell insists that authority, as "legitimized power," "accomplishes its ends by evoking the assent of the respondent."[13] Speaking in personal terms, she says:

> The Bible has authority in my life because it makes sense of my experience and speaks to me about the meaning and purpose of my humanity in Jesus Christ. . . . Its authority in my life stems from its story of God's invitation to participation in the restoration of wholeness, peace, and justice in the world.[14]

"Somehow," Sakenfeld comments, "the Bible for Russell evokes

Feminism for Today, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986); and Reta H. Finger, "The Bible and Christian Feminism," *Daughters of Sarah* 13 (1987) 5-12.

[10]Sakenfeld, "Feminist Perspectives," 7-8.

[11]Scanzoni and Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be,* 31; cited by Sakenfeld, "Feminist Perspectives," 8.

[12]Sakenfeld, "Feminist Perspectives," 8, n. 8.

[13]Russell, *Household of Freedom,* 21; Sakenfeld, "Feminist Perspectives," 8.

[14]Russell, "Authority and Challenge," 138.

consent through the power of God's Spirit despite its many sexist, racist and triumphalist texts whose viewpoint must be rejected."[15] Mary Ann Tolbert describes the paradox as a tension between "God as enemy and God as helper."[16] Both Tolbert and Russell propose new paradigms of authority, with Tolbert emphasizing partnership in place of domination, and Russell speaking of "the authority of the future," described as God's intention for a mended creation."[17]

Sakenfeld goes on to discuss the variety of ways in which the Bible functions as a resource for constructing feminist theologies, identifying three principle options. The first focuses on reinterpretation of texts traditionally read as requiring women's subordination within a patriarchal system and the highlighting of hitherto ignored texts that present women in more "positive" light. This approach, which attempts to show that the texts either meant something else[18] or refer to special circumstances of the time, seems to be especially important to Evangelical feminists, Sakenfeld notes.[19] The second option involves recognition of general themes in the Bible that offer the possibility of a theological critique of patriarchy and is exemplified by Ruether's appeal to "prophetic principles" and Russell's appeal to the biblical vision of a "mended creation" or "household of freedom." The third involves "approaching texts about women to learn from the intersection of experience of ancient and modern women living in patriarchal cultures," an approach represented by Trible and Fiorenza.[20]

Before I return to the question of authority in Christian faith, I want to elaborate briefly on an earlier emphasis in my treatment of feminist theology, namely, its links to a broader movement. That

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[15]Sakenfeld, "Feminist Perspectives," 9.

[16]Mary Ann Tolbert, "Defining the Problem," in *The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics*, ed. Tolbert, *Semeia* 28 (Chico: Scholars Press, 1983) 120.

[17]Russell, *Household*, 18; Sakenfeld, "Feminist Perspectives," 9.

[18]E.g., mutual submission instead of simply women's submission in Eph 5: 21-33.

[19]Sakenfeld, "Feminist Perspectives," 10.

[20]Ibid., 11.

movement has affected biblical studies in the academy as well as the church, and it has impacted Jewish as well as Chrisitian interpretations of Scripture. While a survey of this broader arena lies outside the scope of these lecturees, some account of these new interpretive efforts is necessary to illustrate the scope of the movement and the issues it has identified. Its most important contribution to academic inquiry, I noted earlier, has been its identification of gender as a critical variable in every field of study involving human subjects.

Attention to gender need not involve a specifically feminist perspective, although it is a consequence of feminist interests. Gender study has now become a recognized subdiscipline of anthropology, and gender analysis belongs to the core of current anthropological theory.[21] In biblical studies, an important contribution has been made to the discipline by a collection of essays edited by Peggy Day under the title, *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel.*[22] The volume exhibits a variety of approaches by female scholars to gender-nuanced interpretion of Hebrew Bible texts and related ancient Near Eastern literatures—some with sociological or historical interest, others with primarily literary interests. Many of these essays employ social science methods and data to interpret gender roles and relationships in the biblical texts. Day's introduction to the volume provides a helpful discussion of the role of female experience in feminist historical interpretation.[23]

More recently we have begun to see sociologically oriented studies of women and gender roles in the Bible, such as Naomi Steinberg's work on the patriarchal narratives and their genealogical frame.[24] Steinberg focuses on the role of inheritance and kinship in the accounts, interpreting women's roles and strategies in terms of these dual concerns. Literary representations of gender are the

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[21]Moore, *Feminism and Anthropology,* vii.

[22]Peggy L. Day, ed., *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

[23]Ibid., 1-11.

[24]Naomi Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Pespective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

focus of Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes' volume, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible.*[25]

Two recent works by Jewish feminist scholars make important contributions to current debate concerning the nature and extent of patriarchy in the Hebrew Bible—and in the social order and religious conceptions behind the text. Carol Meyers, in *Discovering Eve,* criticizes the concept of patriarchy as employed in contemporary feminist analysis and especially its use in analyzing ancient Israelite society. It fails, in her view, to recognize the complex dynamics of male-female relations, especially in situations where women exercise significant power, but have no formal authority; and it makes inappropriate equations between ancient Israelite and modern Western society.[26]

Meyers' critique of feminist theologians has an unspoken target in the tendency of Christian feminists to identify patriarchal oppression with ancient Israel and the Jewish Scriptures, either by characterizing Christianity as a liberating alternative for women or by criticizing the failure of New Testament Christianity to repudiate this oppressive legacy. Meyers acknowledges an oppressive misogynist stream within Judaism, observable in the latest stages of composition and redaction of the Hebrew Scriptures, but she attributes this primarily to Hellenistic influences (i.e., late, pagan/non-Jewish influence) and to fundamental social changes occasioned by the institution of the monarchy. Premonarchic Israel was an egalitarian society, she insists, in which women had equal status with men, and it is this period that is normative for her.[27] In her command of current anthropological literature and her use of

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[25]Page 66-67, n. 74 above.

[26]Meyers, *Discovering Eve,* 24-45.

[27]Ibid., 40-45, 165-196. Meyers uses the expression "functional nonhierarchy" (43 and *passim*) to describe the relationship between the sexes in ancient Israel. And although she acknowleges that "functional nonhierarchy of at least some peasant societies is not synonymous with equality" (43), she concludes that "male dominance did not exist in the formative stages of Israel" (187). Thus her argument parallels Fiorenza's in ascribing a gender-egalitarian impulse to the origins (=normative period) of the community/faith.

this to illuminate the life of village Israel as the ethos in which Israelite theology was born, Meyers is without peer and has contributed significantly to an understanding of gender relations in the context of family life and economic relations in ancient Israel—even if her interpretation and dating of key texts must be rejected, as I believe they must.

Tikvah Frymer-Kensky's book, *In the Wake of the Goddesses,*[28] targets the divine realm as the source for ancient Israelite views of gender roles and relationships. In contrast to the surrounding nations, whose gods reflected and at the same time legitimated the gender roles of the society, Israel's sole, sexless God provided no gender models for its citizens, but encouraged an anthropology that deemphasized sex and gender and prescribed behavior without acknowledgment of gender. Frymer-Knesky recognizes a gender-specific, and misogynist, strain in the textual tradition, but argues that the great majority of texts address readers without attention to gender, and hence equally.[29] Although I think this argument involves a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of androcentric generic representation, it brings renewed attention to the discrepancy between ideal constructions (formulated or construed as inclusive) and practice. Frymer-Kensky also draws attention to the problems of a sole deity and of gender representation in conceptions of the divine.[30] Her treatment of goddesses in ancient Mesopotamian religion and culture is a major

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[28]Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York et al: Free Press, 1992).

[29]Ibid., 118-143.

[30]It is worth noting that the question of biblical monotheism has received scant attention in the hermeneutical discussion of American feminist exegetes, in contrast to their European counterparts. See the pointed observation by Marie-Theres Wacker, "Feministisch-theologische Blicke auf die neuere Monotheismus-Discussion: Anstösse und Fragen," in *Der Eine Gott und die Göttin: Gottesvorstellungen des biblischen Israel im Horizont feministischer Theologie* (eds. Marie-Theres Wacker and Erich Zenger; Freiburg: Herder, 1991) 32 n. 36.

contribution—and the only reliable popular introduction.[31]

Both Meyers and Frymer-Kensky aim through historical argument to support traditional affirmations of the Bible's authority, although neither identify this aim, and both seek to accomplish this by minimizing female oppression. They may both be right in attributing a greater degree of gender equality, or indifference, to ancient Israel, but I do not think that historical argument of egalitarian intent is sufficient to ground a feminist affirmation of the authority of the Bible. Patriarchal bias and androcentrism remain in the text—as distortions, intended or unintended, of the image of God and of humankind.

I return now to the general question of biblical authority, taking Letty Russell's statement as an example of a contemporary formulation. In the fuller form of the statement cited above Russell says:

> The Bible has authority in my life because it makes sense of my experience and speaks to me about the meaning and purpose of my humanity in Jesus Christ. In spite of its ancient and patriarchal worldviews, in spite of its inconsistencies and mixed messages, the story of God's love affair with the world leads me to a vision of a New Creation that impels my life.[32]

I note the following points:

(1) The statement does not appeal to particular texts, but to the Bible as a whole. The Bible carries authority as a single, complex composition.

(2) The claim is personal, anchored in individual experience. Here Russell speaks only for herself. This characteristic feature of feminist theology, which rests final authority in personal experience, has been heavily criticized by those who are wary of subjectivism, and I shall return to this point.

(3) The source of the authority is a message. The authority is

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[31]As far as I know, this is the only overview of the subject available to a general audience that is written by a scholar familiar with the original texts in their original languages and ancient cultural context.

[32]Russell, "Authority and Challenge," 138.

not merely formal, but rests on content. Meaning and authority are intimately linked.

(4) Although the content of the message, as Russell identifies it, is formulated in distinctively modern terms, it is recognizable as the recapitulation of an old story, a story told and retold by the church. It points to a history of interpretation, and a locus for that interpretation (the church), even as it reaches behind this tradition to the Bible itself for a fresh reading—a reading in conversation with the concerns of a new day.

(5) The message is centered in Jesus Christ, who is seen as revealing God's intention for the world and God's means of relating to the world. This message contains as essential components a word about God, myself, Jesus, and the world. The authority of Scripture is exhibited and tested in what is primary and central to its message, rather than what is secondary or peripheral. Discerning the center is therefore essential.

(6) The authority is future-oriented, even as it is anchored in the past. It offers a vision that proclaims that God's business with the world is not yet finished. What has been is meant to prepare us for what will be, to chart the direction and invite us to participate in this project.

(7) The Bible energizes those who hear its message. Its vision impels. It brings readers and hearers into contact with the source of its power.

Russell's statement does not meet the usual tests for affirming the authority of Scripture that have been devised by those most concerned to safeguard it, but it touches virtually all of the essential points of the doctrine. Russell's choice of contemporary idiom is no more culture-bound than "traditional" or "orthodox" formulations, which have frozen the language of an earlier age, employing it, however, to clothe distinctively nineteenth-century ideas. As critics of fundamentalism have noted, this defense of a threatened tradition is a modern phenomenon shaped in response to a modern crisis. The crisis remains, and it remains unsolved by new assertions of authority. It remains because it is ultimately a crisis of meaning.

I have considerable sympathy for the argument of David Clines

when he proposes to discard the notion of authority altogether.[33] I agree with his complaint that the concept of an authoritative text has frustrated our ability truly to hear what the text has to say, and that it has constrained and misdirected biblical interpretation. I spend too much energy trying to get students past the preconceptions they bring to the text and their anxieties over the "right" interpretation, so they can encounter the text afresh, on its own terms. But I do not think we can read the Bible as Christians without raising the question of its authority for us, and I think Clines misunderstands the meaning of authority.

His argument surfaces in a critique of Phyllis Trible's reading of Genesis 2-3, a text which he views as "persist[ing] in its androcentric orientation, from which it cannot be redeemed despite the constructive programme of second-generation feminists among Biblical scholars."[34] The text (as irredeemably androcentric) is in conflict, he asserts, with a principle (viz. the equality of the sexes) which he cannot give up without a loss of personal integrity.[35] Posing the dilemma as a reader's choice between faithfulness to the teachings of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures or faithfulness to her/his own integrity as a whole human being,[36] Clines rejects the option of ascribing the sexism of the text to the primitive world of the Old Testament and denying its authority, as well as the option of "accept[ing] the authority of the Bible in matters to which the heart and mind can clearly consent" while rejecting it when it conflicts with our deeply held convictions.[37]

For Clines, the notion of authority points interpreters in the wrong direction, focusing on the nature of the text, rather than its function. He does not want to maintain that the Bible is "right" (or

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[33]David A. J. Clines, "What Does Eve Do To Help? and Other Irredeemably Androcentric Orientations in Genesis 1-3," in idem, *What Does Eve Do to Help? and Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990) 47-48.

[34]Ibid., 37.

[35]Ibid., 45-46.

[36]Russell's formulation of the dilemma, in "Authority and Challenge," 137.

[37]Ibid., 46-47.

even wrong), "but that it impacts for good upon people." Identifying authority with dogma and the plundering of the Bible for prooftexts for theological warfare, he chides feminists for failing to see that "'authority' is a concept from the male world of power relations" and that a more inclusive language of influence, encouragement and inspiration would be more acceptable.[38]

Clines misunderstands the nature of authority, I believe, although he does describe a popular use of the term (which William Countryman defines as "tyranny"[39]). And he rightly sees that the question of authority directs attention away from the living word to its credentials, away from encounter with the text to external tests of its truth or trustworthiness. Those who press the question of authority think to assure the purity of the Bible's precious contents, but they have constructed humanly-devised cisterns that cannot hold living water. What we need now is not more cement to plaster the cracks of our broken cisterns, but a way to drink—a path to the living waters that spring up from the depths in an everflowing stream.

The path to the waters of life has been strewn with obstacles—obstacles that define the object of our search in misleading terms and narrow the path we must walk by setting up preconditions on what we must believe and how we must read. Our fundamental problem with the Bible today, I believe, is a problem of understanding—and authority rests ultimately on understanding. Old understandings have been challenged by modern conceptions and experience. But we are reluctant to set aside past formulations so that the words can speak afresh to us. Changing times require changing concepts and changing assessments—not simply new translations. Our conversation with the ancient texts must reflect the changing circumstances of our world, but it must also honor the integrity of the ancient speakers.

I do not think there is *one* right way of using or understanding the Bible. That is what most doctrines of authority attempt to

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[38]Ibid., 47-48.

[39]William Countryman, *Biblical Authority or Biblical Tyranny? Scripture and the Christian Pilgrimage* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).

assure. The result is a straitjacket on the reader/believer—and on the Spirit, which usually manages to escape anyway and manifest itself in strange places, like the feminist movement. I do want to plead, however, for an approach to understanding the Bible and to understanding its authority that is consonant with the character and content of the Bible itself and with the diverse needs and abilities of its users. We speak different languages of faith, that are both genetically and culturally conditioned. I do not think these differences can be dismissed as "merely" semantic. But however real our differences and however deeply rooted in our individual and collective psycho-social histories, we belong to the same household of faith, united in allegiance to Christ, and confession of that allegiance requires us to engage in conversation.

The primer for that conversation is the Bible, providing us with a vocabulary of faith, and a pattern for our discourse. And it is a pattern of dialogue. What is most striking about the Bible as a written document is its pluriform and multivocal character. A collection of writings of different genres, ages, subject matter, and theologies, the Bible spans more than a millenium of time in its own internal witness and represents hundreds of voices. It presents us with the conversation of a community over time, a conversation about the source and meaning of its life, its destiny, and its vocation. It is a conversation that adopts new language for new occasions, a conversation that is filled with conflict and passionate argument as different voices present their visions and their claims to truth.[40] It requires us to enter into that conversation and to test those claims. We cannot stand by as onlookers, nor can we respond only through aesthetic appreciation. These voices claim to speak the truth about the nature of our existence, our destiny, our world. Conservatives rightly stress that the Bible makes ultimate claims.

To respond appropriately is to test those claims—not simply accept them. For the Bible is the first word in the Christian's journey, not the last, the primer for our theological reflection, not a ready-made theology for our day. If we have rightly understood

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[40]See further, Phyllis A. Bird, *The Bible as the Church's Book* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982).

the conversation within the canon of Scripture, we must continue it. For it is a conversation about a God who is alive and not dead, and about a world that is God's creation and the place of God's encounter with humankind. And it is a world of change—for good and for bad. We cannot return to the biblical world, nor can we make it speak our language or endorse our concerns. It has no feminist message, in my view, but it does have a message about the nature of our humanity and the requirements of justice that in our day must be translated into terms of full equality of women in order that the image of God may be fully revealed.

I return to the question of authority. I reject notions of biblical authority that link it to a particular theory of divine agency or impute a special supernatural character that removes its writings from the constraints of human nature, history and culture. I reject identification of its authority with particular theological formulations—or with a particular trajectory or core within the writings. Although I agree essentially with Letty Russell and Rosemary Ruether and other liberation theologians in recognizing a prophetic/visionary stream of tradition within the Scriptures that describes their central message, and message for me, I am uneasy about resting a notion of the Bible's claim on me on such a selective principle. I reject the notion of a canon within the canon, or a canon behind the canon (whether Fiorenza's *ekklēsia* of women or Schubert Ogden's "earliest apostolic witness"), even as I acknowledge the functional necessity of such a concept. I want to insist that the notion of biblical authority be distinguished from meaning-for-me, and at the same time insist that when the Bible ceases in significant measure to have meaning for me, its authority is dubious or null. I reject the criterion of meaning-for-me, or even meaning-for-my-group, because the Bible, in contrast to other books, is a communal document—created and transmitted through communal processes. Because the Bible is the church's book, that is where I must work out my understanding of it and its meaning for my life, in conversation with others there—even as I draw upon and contribute insights into its meanings derived from other sources, including academic study in the company of men and women of other faiths and of no religious faith. But where I give account of my understanding is in the church.

When I speak of a concept of biblical authority that does not rest (exclusively) on my consent, it is because as a Christian I come to the Bible with a presumption of what I shall find there that is shaped by my experience in the church. In the church, I live in a Bible-shaped world of liturgy and prayer, of song and story and sermon topics, of admonitions and exhortations. The Bible comes to me through family use and church school with credentials that I will only later test. In short, by the church's testimony of use and honor, the Bible comes to me as having authority. But it can retain that authority only as it is confirmed in my own experience—which may require discarding arguments on which it originally rested. Ultimately the Bible's authority rests on its ability to reveal its Author in a way that enables us to recognize Her in our own day. Only as it directs our attention away from itself to the living God may we proclaim it as the "word of God."

The authority of the Bible does not rest in the infallibility of its statements, but in the truth of its witness to a creating and redeeming power, which can and must be known as a present reality. The Bible as the word of God in human words exhibits the cultural limits and sinful distortions of humanity in every age, witnessing thereby to the central affirmation of Christian faith that God is most fully and truly revealed in assuming this same human nature. The Bible shares the incarnational character of the One to whom it bears witness. It proclaims by its composition as well as its declarations that the Creator has chosen to be revealed in creation, even coming among us as one of us. But that manifestation does not exhaust or circumscribe the divine presence or power, and the word by which that action is recalled and represented is only the servant of the living Word. The words of God spoken to prophets and poets are essential to Christian faith and carry the authority of their Speaker, but the word of God cannot be contained in any document; nor can it be comprehended apart from the Word made flesh, which is both the center and the norm of Scripture.