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PERSPECTIVES ON FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS
AND BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

by

© Michael M. Ricketts

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of
Religious Studies in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
of Master of Arts at
the University of Windsor

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1988
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ABSTRACT

This study reviews and critiques the work of feminist biblical scholars and theologians in terms of the growing uneasiness among feminist reformists over the issue of biblical authority. First, the reformist dilemma is placed within the larger context of what has been considered by theologians to be a general crisis of biblical authority. Three heuristic categories are used to bring into focus the diverse positions on this issue: conservative, radical, and centrist positions.

Next, the work of seminal feminist reformist theologians and exegetes is held up against this framework. Those with conservative tendencies articulate the greatest concern over this issue, for their work reveals most clearly the incompatibility of feminist reformist hermeneutics and the patriarchal nature of the Bible.

Finally, the reformist dilemma with the issue of biblical authority is examined in light of recent applications of literary theory to biblical exegesis. This very recent work raises serious theoretical challenges to the reformist position, which reformists have yet to acknowledge. Some structuralist analyses of biblical texts suggest that if the authority of the Bible is to be respected, so must the authority of the androcentrism and patriarchy; some studies using speech act theory indicate
that feminist interpretations of biblical texts can be sustained only if significant meaning-generating elements of the text are ignored. Other studies using reader-oriented theory may legitimize feminist interpretations of biblical texts, but in order to do so they must also call into question the authoritative status of the Bible, the very status reformers seek to uphold.

The study concludes that the already tenuous position of the reformists will be pushed to a logical impasse by the new trends in literary approaches to the Bible.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

JAAR  Journal of the American Academy of Religion
JBL   Journal of Biblical Literature
JRSR  Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion
JSOT  Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................ iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ....................................................... vi
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS ............................................... vii
INTRODUCTION ............................................................... 1

Chapter

I. NOTIONS OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY
   A. Introduction .............................................................. 9
   B. Concepts of Authority ............................................... 13
   C. Authority and the Notion of Canon ............................. 14
   D. Notions of Biblical Authority in Normative (Patriarchal) Theologies .......................................................... 19
      1. Conservative Positions ........................................... 19
      2. Radical Positions .................................................. 21
      3. Centrist Positions .................................................. 23
   E. Notions of Biblical Authority for Major Feminist Theologians ................................................................. 28
      1. Rosemary Radford Ruether ...................................... 28
      2. Letty M. Russell ...................................................... 35
   F. Conclusion .................................................................... 40

II. FEMINIST EXEGESIS WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF AUTHORITY
   A. Introduction .............................................................. 43
   B. Conservative Positions ............................................ 47
      1. Phyllis Trible ......................................................... 47
2. J. Cheryl Exum ........................................... 50
3. Sandra Schneiders ..................................... 52
C. Radical Positions ....................................... 57
   1. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza ....................... 57
   2. T. Drowah Setel ..................................... 62
D. Centrist Positions ...................................... 65
   1. Mary Schertz ......................................... 66
   2. Dana Nolan Fewell .................................. 71
E. Conclusion ................................................ 75

III. CRITIQUE OF REFORMIST WORK WITH THE BIBLE

A. Introduction ............................................. 78
B. Rejectionist Theologians ............................... 81
C. New Theoretical Challenge of Literary Criticism to the Feminist Framework of Authority
   1. Structuralist Exegesis and Feminist Exegesis .... 91
      a) David Jobling ...................................... 91
      b) Pamela J. Milne .................................. 95
      c) Esther Fuchs ..................................... 97
   2. "Extra-Textual" Approaches .......................... 100
      a) Introduction ..................................... 100
      b) Reader-Oriented Theory .......................... 104
         Miöke Bal .......................................... 113
      c) Speech Act Theory ................................ 117
         Susan Lanser .................................... 125
D. Conclusion ............................................... 129
IV. MAJOR IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY

A. Introduction .............. 132

B. Implications of Structural Exegesis for Reformist Strategies .......... 134

C. Implications of Speech Act Theory for Reformist Strategies .......... 135

D. Implications of Reader-Oriented Theory for Reformist Strategies .......... 137

E. Implications of Reader-Oriented Theory for Conventional Notions of Biblical Authority .. 140

F. Conclusion .............. 142

BIBLIOGRAPHY .............. 147

VITA AUCTORIS .............. 157
INTRODUCTION

How can a thoroughly patriarchal document be authoritative for those who reject the patriarchal model of reality? This is a question that is confronting feminist biblical scholars and theologians with increasing persistence. Because this question is the topic of current debate, there has not yet been a comprehensive study of how feminist biblical scholarship is dealing with the issue of biblical authority. In order to fill this void, this study will attempt to bring into focus the various strategies which feminists within the Christian tradition are using to retain the Bible as an authoritative document of faith. Subsequently, it will examine some recent literary theory which seems to raise fundamental theoretical questions about the viability of efforts to maintain the Bible as an authoritative source for feminists. The implications of


2 Jewish feminists are facing a similar dilemma. Their situation, however, is not identical to that of Christian feminists, and therefore needs to be treated separately. The primary focus of this study is Christian feminists.

3 David M. Gunn, "New Directions in the Study of Biblical Narrative," *JSOT* 39 (1987): 65-75; Susan S. Lanier,
this recent literary work, however, have yet to be brought to bear on feminists' use of the Bible. This study, thus, will bring together three areas of discourse: biblical authority, feminism, and literary theory.

While the field of feminist biblical studies is characterized by a wide variety of exegetical methods and hermeneutical goals, two general camps can be identified on the basis of the scholars' positions on the question of biblical authority: rejectionists, who believe that, because of its patriarchal nature, the Bible cannot be authoritative for feminists, and who, therefore, find it necessary to analyze the Bible from outside of the community of faith; and reformists, who acknowledge the patriarchal nature of the Bible and yet accept the Bible as authoritative at some level and remain within a community of faith. As the field of feminist studies develops, the reformists are finding themselves in the increasingly paradoxical situation of identifying more and more oppressive aspects of a text that must be held as authoritative and as the ultimate source of truth. Feminist reformists have both an academic and a personal involvement with the biblical text. Feminist rejectionists, on the other hand, treat the Bible as simply an historic document or as a work of literature. For rejectionists biblical authority is no longer an issue.

Because the issue of biblical authority is a growing stumbling-block for Christian reformist feminists, methods are continually being developed and refined within this camp to bypass or redefine conventional understandings of biblical authority. Since most feminist biblical scholars and theologians belong to the reformist camp, biblical authority is fast becoming a central issue within feminist hermeneutics. It is the dilemma of the reformist camp that will be the primary focus of this study. By examining hermeneutical goals and exegetical strategies, it will attempt to draw into focus the means by which feminists within the Christian tradition are striving to overcome this dilemma and will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

This study will have three major component parts. Part I will examine the major feminist reformist approaches to the question of biblical authority in relation to current Catholic and Protestant approaches. In Part II the exegetical strategies of several reformist biblical scholars will be critically evaluated in terms of their position on biblical authority. In Part III the position of reformists will be evaluated in light of the work of two important theologians and the work of several feminist literary analysts which raise challenges to the idea that a feminist can accept the bible as authoritative without accepting the authority of patriarchy.

Milne, (forthcoming).
Part I sets out the main approaches to biblical authority in current "normative" (patriarchal) theology and compares the main feminist positions to them. The emphasis in this section is on the notion of biblical authority itself and on the reasons why this is becoming increasingly problematic for many Christians.\textsuperscript{5} Indeed, "normative" concepts of biblical authority can no longer be precisely defined, because "the automatic acceptance of the Bible as the basis and standard has in many places been severely shaken of late."\textsuperscript{6} Avery Dulles, however, suggests three general positions on biblical authority that will be useful to this study: 1) Conservative or fundamentalist positions consider the biblical—text to be literally the word of God, and thus attempt to find the locus of biblical authority exclusively within the biblical text. 2) Radical positions find the locus of biblical authority outside the text, for example, in experience or political action. 3) Centrist positions at present attempt to balance the two extreme positions and find locus of biblical authority not exclusively within the biblical text but also in the faith community. Methods of many feminist theologians are not different from those of "mainline" theologians holding


centrist positions on biblical authority. For example, Rosemary Radford Ruether's use of prophetic critique is much like the neo-orthodox model of "canon within the canon"; and Letty Russell finds the locus of biblical authority in the faith community in a way similar to that of theologians holding centrist positions on biblical authority. It is the dimension of women's experience which they bring to their work that causes their work to be considered radical by "mainline" theologians: Ruether's method correlates prophetic critique to feminist critique; Russell redefines authority, according to feminist principles, from power over community to power within community. Feminists who hold conservative positions on biblical authority, however, face the most serious dilemma. If the Bible is understood as being literally the Word of God, what is to be done with oppressive texts, and what is to be done with the masculine grammatical gender of the deity employed by the biblical text? 

The reformist exegetical strategies examined in Part II serve to liberate the Bible from patriarchy in a number of different ways and thereby to render it spiritually acceptable to feminists. Some strategies locate the problem of sexism and androcentrism at the level of interpretation rather than in the text itself. Others accept the idea that the text itself is patriarchal, androcentric, and sexist but

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argue that these characteristics are culturally conditioned and not binding for today. Others use the remnants of women's experience in the text to reconstruct their full roles in the early Christian community. These reconstructed roles and experiences are then used to interpret the nature of the Bible's authority for the feminist believer.

Part III sets forth the critiques, explicit and implicit, to the strategies proposed in Part II. Some, but not all, of the authors whose works are examined here have rejected biblical authority. Rejectionists clearly articulate their position that the core of Christianity is irreparably patriarchal. The focus of rejectionists is on Christian symbology. They argue that, not only the gender, but also the character and attributes of the Christian God are patriarchal. Thus, for them, revision of the Bible cannot rescue it from patriarchy. While the hermeneutical goals of the reformist and rejectionist camps are diametrically opposed, it is essential to bear in mind the position of rejectionists when looking at the work of Christian feminists, for the rejectionists present the problem so "clearly and unavoidably".  

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Recent developments in literary theory shed new light on the issue of biblical authority, and pose theoretical problems for feminist Christians who attempt to work within the framework of authority. "Criticism of biblical texts using reading methods of contemporary critics of other bodies of literature has, in a relatively short time, become entrenched among the disciplines of the professional guild of biblical critics" and has become the "new orthodoxy" of biblical studies. Modern literary theory can be categorized by three developmental stages: a preoccupation with the author (Romanticism and the nineteenth century); an exclusive concern with the text (New Criticism); and most recently a shift in focus to the role of the reader.

This most recent developmental stage of literary theory will be a primary focus of this study. Reader-oriented theory defines the meaning of a work of literature as the product of the interaction between the text and the reader. It rejects the autonomy of the text and instead emphasizes the dependence of the text on the reader's participation. The examination of a text for the sake of finding its meaning is replaced by a discussion of the process of reading that text. Since the reader has an active role in this process, the meaning of the text is relative to the

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10 Gunn, p. 65.
reader's horizon of expectation and perception of reality. Thus no interpretation of a text can be objective. All interpretations are shaped by the presuppositions of the reader.\textsuperscript{12}

Since reader-oriented theory legitimizes the relativity of different readings, it casts doubt on conventional understandings of biblical authority.\textsuperscript{13} It is this aspect of reader-oriented theory that is significant to feminist work with the Bible. Reader-oriented theory provides a way to bring new understanding to both the nature of the problem which biblical authority poses for Christian feminists and the means by which they are addressing it.

In sum, this study will make two significant contributions to feminist biblical hermeneutics. It will provide a much needed comprehensive survey and critical analysis of the state of the issue of biblical authority for feminist hermeneutics, and it will examine this issue under the new light of reader-oriented theory.


CHAPTER I
NOTIONS OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

A. INTRODUCTION

Feminists of the Christian faith are faced with a basic dilemma: since a considerable number of biblical texts conflict with principles of feminism, they seemingly must choose whether to be faithful to the teachings of the Bible or to be faithful to their own integrity as human beings. As doubts grow about the possibility of resolving this dilemma, the issue of authority is surfacing more and more persistently in the work of feminist theologians and biblical scholars. Even for those who choose not to discuss it, the issue of biblical authority, nevertheless, is brought to bear on their work because feminist interpretations and perspectives unavoidably challenge the dominant, traditional views of biblical authority.

This chapter will analyze the dilemma of biblical authority for Christian feminists and argue that this dilemma can be seen to be more political in nature than theological. It will first examine dominant views on the issue of biblical authority. This will involve a close look at definitions of authority and the meaning of canon. These traditional views of biblical authority, then, will be compared with those of two leading feminist theologians,
Rosemary Radford Ruether and Letty M. Russell. This comparison will highlight both the ways in which feminist positions on the issue of biblical authority fit into the larger scheme of the issue and the ways in which they do not. In doing so, Chapter 1 will set the stage for Chapter 2, which will present several feminist reformists' exegetical strategies for dealing with the problem of authority.

Biblical authority is not a new issue, nor is it one confronting only feminists. Wolfgang Pannenberg indicates that the development of critical analytical methods in the nineteenth century started the "demise" of biblical authority.\(^1\) Gordon Kaufman summarizes the problem succinctly. He writes that the Bible

\begin{quote}
the Bible is one of the great sources of the very form of our life, but its norms no longer bind us....For the most pious, all this is highly embarrassing: they would like to regard the Bible as still maintaining, at least for them, the authority it had had. But it does not: they cannot and do not actually order their lives by biblical norms....It is important that we recognize these facts' forthrightly and not attempt to regain artificially the stance and attitude toward the Bible which, however appropriate to an earlier age, are now gone.\(^2\)
\end{quote}

According to Phyllis Bird, the recent formation of new lectionaries, the development of new liturgies which emphasize the importance of the Bible, and especially the


growing emphasis on inerrancy in the fundamentalist camp, can all be seen as being reactions to the growing crisis in biblical authority.\(^3\)

In the past, familiar positions on the Bible and tradition could be identified with particular ecclesiastical bodies and their doctrinal structures. Today biblical scholars are less identified by confessional boundaries. Differences in biblical scholarship cut across confessional boundaries and imply concepts which were not considered in the old confessional tradition.\(^4\) Three general positions on the issue of biblical authority, however, can be identified.\(^5\) These positions also cut across denominational boundaries, and each position is distinguished from the others according to what it holds most authoritative—the Bible, tradition, or human experience.\(^6\) The conservative or fundamentalist position claims the Bible itself holds the highest authority. The radical position finds the highest


\(^6\) In this study, the term "experience" is used with the understanding that one's experience is the result of the dialectical relationship between one's historical and cultural context and his or her worldview. According to Kenneth Burke, "any given situation derives its character from the entire framework of interpretation by which we judge it." See his, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, 2nd. rev. ed. (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), p. 35.
authority in personal experience or the current situation, as opposed to the Bible or tradition. The centrist position claims the Bible is the highest authority, but not independent of community (experience) and tradition.7

Before the issue of biblical authority can be addressed adequately, it is necessary to discuss the terms, "authority" and "the biblical canon".8 Indeed, Stanley Hauerwas finds that despite the widespread belief that the Bible is the primary authority for the Church, the meaning of "authority" is seldom considered:

That this is the case is but an indication of how foreign the political nature of Scripture has become for us since the concept of authority is fundamentally a political notion.9

Hauerwas suggests that the failure to understand that "the biblical narratives have and continue to form a polity" has largely contributed to the present crisis. David Kelsey indicates that claims about the authority of the Bible are actually claims about the function of the Scriptures in the life of the church.10 Thus inherent to any notions of biblical authority or the biblical canon are social and political implications which must be taken into account.

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7 Intended here are not three clearly-defined, mutually exclusive positions, rather three general locations on a continuum which extends between two extreme points.
8 Since, as we shall see, just as there is a range of positions on biblical authority, so there is also a range of definitions of these terms. At this point we will put forth only general definitions, which will be qualified as we discuss each of the three positions.
B. CONCEPTS OF AUTHORITY

The word "authority" can no longer be easily defined. In the words of Hanna Arendt, "Since we can no longer fall back upon authentic and undisputable experiences common to all, the very term [authority] has become clouded by controversy and confusion."\(^{11}\) In order to attain an understanding of authority, Arendt suggests, it is necessary to first realize what authority is not.\(^{12}\) She defines authority in contradistinction to both persuasion through dialogue or arguments and coercion by force. Authority is not an egalitarian term, at least not as it is understood in a patriarchal environment. Rather it is always hierarchical and thus precludes persuasion among peers. Yet authority must not be mistaken for the sheer power of the strong over the weak. According to Arendt, when force is used, authority has failed. Authority, therefore, must be intrinsically worthy of obedience.

Max Weber considers authority to be one of the two possible types of domination, the other being domination by force. For him, authority "implies a minimum of voluntary compliance, that is, an interest (based on ulterior motives.

\(^{12}\) Arendt, pp. 92-93.
or genuine acceptance) in obedience." 13  

Normative endorsement of authority is also crucial to Weber's definition:

The merely external fact of the order being obeyed is not sufficient to signify domination in our sense; we cannot overlook the meaning of the fact that the command is accepted as a "valid" norm. 14

Authority cannot be maintained by coercion, rather any authority system must be accepted from below in order for it to survive. 15 For this reason, every system of authority attempts to establish and to cultivate belief in its legitimacy. 16

C. AUTHORITY AND THE NOTION OF CANON

Technically, the "biblical canon" is the list of books recognized by the church as sacred writings, and hence implies a closed collection of sacred writings. 17 The concept of canon, however, functions only within the context of a community of faith, and due to the close association between scripture and the rule of faith, a sense of authority has become associated with the word "canon" when it is used in reference to the books of the Bible. Thus in

14 Ibid., p. 946
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 213
common usage, "canon" does in fact mean "rule", "standard", or "norm."18

Gerd Theissen19 argues that since tenets of faith cannot be supported by facts, faith communities are necessarily dependent on a consensus of beliefs. He considers the canon to be one of the social controls that originated in the second century to establish and protect this necessary consensus. Although some biblical scholars might dispute the label "social control", most agree that the canon functions to provide a common set of interpretations of the community's history, and thereby provides a necessary basis for common beliefs and actions.20

This points to an important distinction between "scripture" and "canon" which must be considered. The scriptures existed among many other religious writings long before the canon or list of scriptures was drawn up.21 The

21 While there are problems with pegging a precise date for the "closing" of the canon, most scholars look to the work of Athanasius and the Synods of Hippo and Carthage in the late Fourth Century C.E. as instrumental in establishing the canon. As late as the Sixteenth Century C.E., however, Martin Luther saw fit to delete the Apocrypha from the canon, and in reaction to this the Council of Trent officially declared the entire Bible, including the Apocrypha, canonical. See Achtemeier, pp. 120-121; Coward, pp. 53-54.
process of selecting and assembling these particular religious writings, which culminated in the formation of the canon, was a gradual one—"a gradual transition from oral authorities to written authorities, and then from functionally authoritative writings to formally authoritative writings."\(^2^2\)

The consequences of the formation of the canon have been significant, and most likely unforeseen by the authors of the sacred texts.\(^2^3\) In Christianity, the scriptures were initially seen as authoritative because of their connection with the apostles' eyewitness to the revelation given in Jesus. Once these writings were canonized, however, their image changed from being testimonies to the revelation of Jesus to being revelation in and of themselves. The authority of scripture changed from being based on historical proximity to the apostles of Jesus to being in and of itself authoritative as the Word of God.\(^2^4\) A chronological diagram can clarify the chain of social interactions which resulted in the formation of the biblical canon:

[God] > people > tradition > sacred writings > canon.\(^2^5\)

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22 Coward, p. 54.
24 Coward, p. 54.
25 This diagram resembles one which James Barr used to illustrate the difference between the traditional concept of the canon and one which recognizes the social dimension of the canon. See *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 1980), p. 60. Here [God] is bracketed because the notion of a divine origin of biblical texts is precisely the issue being questioned by some feminist analyses.
Weberian theory can help focus our definition of canon. Weber identifies three general types of claims used to legitimate authority:^{28} 1) Legal-rational authority applies to a belief in the legality of established rules and to the right of those persons holding authority by virtue of those rules to exercise their authority. 2) Traditional authority appeals to the sanctity of custom and tradition, and evokes personal loyalty to the tradition. 3) Charismatic authority depends upon the personal magnetism or exceptional sanctity or heroism of an individual person and appeals to the normative patterns revealed by that person. Charismatic authority evokes personal trust in the hero and in the hero's revelation. In its pure form, charismatic authority has a character so out of the ordinary that it cannot survive without its leader or hero, and thus if the normative patterns established by the charismatic leader are to survive once the leader is no longer present, the charismatic authority must become radically changed by the community of disciples. In Weberian terms, charismatic authority becomes "routinized."^{28} It takes on the character of traditional or rational authority. From a Weberian perspective, the process of collection and canonization of scriptures thus represents the routinization of Jesus' charismatic authority.

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^{27} Weber, p. 245.
^{28} Weber, p. 246.
What must be emphasized, then, in our discussion of biblical authority is that biblical authority does not seem to be found in the Bible itself. Those who argue for biblical authority, in fact, cannot find significant support for their position in the Bible itself. It is external to the Bible, and is found in the communal decision to grant normative status to the contents of the Bible. Furthermore, as Delwin Brown argues, "a unitary, normative Bible does not exist, and a normative perspective within the Bible cannot be established; it can only be asserted." The normative status of the Bible is not inherent to the Bible, rather it resides essentially in the faith community, from whom the books come and for whom these books continue to be authoritative. Biblical authority thus resides in the Bible itself only derivatively, "as the voice which they [i.e., the community of faith] wanted to be heard as their voice." Biblical authority is, however, essential to the structure of Christian faith and Christian religion. Being Christian requires belief in the God of the Bible. In the words of James Barr,

Christian faith is not whatever a modern Christian may happen to believe, on any grounds at all, but faith

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30 Delwin Brown, p. 18. Brown demonstrates that biblical scholarship, hermeneutical studies, and theological uses of the Bible all raise problems for the attempt to consider the Bible’s authority as its normativeness (pp. 17-20). See also Crawford and Kinnamon, p. 98.
31 Barr, Scope and Authority, pp. 64, 51.
related to Jesus and the God of Israel. The centrality of the Bible is the recognition of the classic sources for the expression of Jesus and God.\textsuperscript{32}

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Up to this point we have attempted to define the concept and origins of biblical authority in a general way and in a way that conveys the multidimensionality of the concept. With this background it is now possible to return to a discussion of the three basic positions on biblical authority -- conservative, centrist, and radical -- that can be identified in contemporary normative patriarchal Christian theologies. Our goal will be to identify specific ways in which each position differs from the others on this concept.\textsuperscript{33}

D. NOTIONS OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY IN NORMATIVE (PATRIARCHAL) THEOLOGIES

1. CONSERVATIVE POSITIONS

The fundamentalist or conservative position would disagree with most of what has been said so far, for it holds the Bible in its entirety to be divinely inspired and therefore it does not consider important the social dimension of the Bible's origins. The dominant


\textsuperscript{33} Since on most continuums few representatives are found at either extreme and most are found at points in the middle, we will just briefly describe the fundamentalist and radical positions and instead focus on the centrist position.
fundamentalist assertion is that the Bible is divinely inspired and therefore it is authoritative and error-free.\textsuperscript{34} Fundamentalists hold the Bible as the highest norm of Christian faith, but in an uncritical and unqualified manner.\textsuperscript{35} Since finding the smallest error in the Bible would cast doubts on its authoritative status, the fundamentalist position demands that the Bible be interpreted in such a way that no error is ever found.\textsuperscript{36} Thus the fundamentalist interpreter must move back and forth between different methodologies to ensure an inerrant Bible.\textsuperscript{37}

Since the entire Bible is considered to have been inspired by God, everything is seen as equally important. In practice, however, certain books (e.g., Gospels) are given more attention than others (e.g., Esther or Ecclesiastes).

Although fundamentalists would deny this to be the case, the fundamentalist reading actually projects onto the text a conviction (that the Bible is authoritative and inerrant) which came about apart from the text. Fundamentalists also deny that their expectations of the text shape their interpretation.

\textsuperscript{35} Baum, p. 72.
\textsuperscript{36} Pinnock, pp. 69-79.
\textsuperscript{37} Barr, \textit{Fundamentalism} p. 40.
2. RADICAL POSITIONS

The radical position on the issue of biblical authority holds human experience as life's highest authority, and thus subordinates everything else, including the Bible, to this higher authority. This position has become unavoidable in the places where people were "forced out of their dogmatic sanctuaries," places where the oppressed experience biblical texts, no longer as the word of God, but as the ideology of the dominant culture striving to maintain the status quo.

Gregory Baum observes that at the core of any discussion of biblical authority is the crucial question of where do we find the ultimate truth upon which to base our lives. For Baum, "there is no access to truth except by being in touch with what really goes on in one's life," because if the norm of truth is an external source -- a document, an institution, another person -- we will be alienated from our own experience.

In a Roman Catholic context, Raymond E. Brown speaks disparagingly of the radical position on biblical authority, referring to its members as "a few left-wing theologians who regard the newspaper to be just as much revelation of God's dealing with human beings as the Bible...[and who] will never influence the hierarchy nor change the Church." Obviously, Brown does not consider himself to be among those

\[39\] Baum, p. 77.
\[40\] Raymond E. Brown, p. 3.
holding a radical position, yet many Catholics would consider as radical his exegetical work with texts dealing with controversial matters, e.g., the virgin birth, the resurrection. Thus for conservative Catholics, Brown's work is radical, but on the other hand, Brown considers exegetical work that questions other doctrines of the church, such as the doctrine of the Bible as the word of God, to be radical.

Brown sees the crisis in biblical authority as arising from the struggle between the centrists and the far-right, and as concerning the doctrine of the Bible as the word of God. In a Protestant context, James Barr sees the real struggle to be between the role of scripture and the role of contemporary philosophical and cultural trends, i.e., between centrist and radical positions. The comparison of the differing opinions of these two scholars highlights the relativity of these and of all positions. In other words, the perspective of the scholar is dependent upon where he/she sees his/her position on a hypothetical scale.

It is significant that the role of human experience (both personal and communal) in interpreting the Bible is perhaps the most decisive criterion for differentiating one position from another. Centrists accuse fundamentalists of naivete for not recognizing the presuppositions which are

41 Ibid., p. 93; and see his The Virginal Conception and the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus (New York: Paulist Press, 1973).
42 Raymond E. Brown, The Critical Meaning, p. 3.
43 Raymond E. Brown, p. 3, 5.
shaped by their church and personal experience and which influence their understanding of the Bible. On the other hand, centrists accuse radicals of putting too much emphasis on human experience.

3. CENTRIST POSITIONS

The centrist position on biblical authority, as the term "centrist" implies, is found between the two extreme positions: the fundamentalist position, which holds the Bible as the highest authority; and the radical position, which holds human experience as the highest authority. By recognizing that the Bible cannot function apart from the community of faith, the centrist position manifests the tensions between these two positions. But the centrist position is becoming increasingly more tenuous. Indeed, in 1971 the World Council of Churches considered the situation a crisis:

There appears to be a general crisis of authority at the present time, or at least the notion of authority...
is different. Authority is no longer conceded a priori, but is accepted only where it actually proves itself as such. Accordingly, it becomes increasingly difficult to assert biblical authority in a general way. We no longer suppose that the acceptance of biblical authority is a sure way to rightness in our exegesis, or even its acceptance is a necessary precondition of right interpretation.48

Recognizing the role of human experience in the process of interpretation, the World Council of Churches advised a move away from the legal concept of authority:

We are not to regard the Bible primarily as a standard to which we must conform. . . . The Bible is not a norm imposed on us from outside. On the contrary it is meant to be read and heard within the witnessing community, in the Church. Interpretation is also partly determined by the elements of any given situation.49

Yet in the same report, the World Council of Churches maintained the Bible as the highest authority, or the norm or standard to which Christian thought and action is to be subjected.

The indispensable confrontation with contemporary thought and the elements of our present situation must not betray us into surrendering the priority of the Bible for the Church's thought and action. The Bible is not a patrimony from which we are free to select at will, nor is it just one source of inspiration among many. To understand it in such a way would be to misunderstand it.50

The World Council of Churches thus presents a paradoxical position. On one hand, it acknowledges that the Bible cannot yield uniform interpretations which are acceptable to all. But on the other, it maintains the Bible as the highest authority.

50 Ibid. My emphasis.
As a solution to this paradoxical situation, the World Council of Churches attempts to redefine the concept of authority. It suggests that biblical authority is not to be misunderstood as demanding blind obedience and suppressing freedom. Rather it should be understood as a "relational concept, not as aggressive power but as a testimony which is to be accepted in freedom, not as overwhelming force."  

A more recent World Council of Churches meeting, which focused specifically on the issue of the authority of the Bible in light of women's experience, still maintains the Bible as the normative authority of the Church, and therefore the report locates even more problems and raises more serious questions. In a way similar to the earlier report, it suggests that the solution lies in broadening the concept of authority. This report, however, stretches the meaning of authority (which we discussed earlier in this chapter) beyond the limit of past definitions, when it says, "Genuine religious authority must not be confused with fidelity to hierarchicalism...Rather, it arises out of sharing and dialogue." The report also suggested that allowing women an active role in the interpretation of the Bible should alleviate the problem, or at least be a step toward its resolution. This is perhaps the only solution the World Council of Churches can attain because acceptance

52 See Parvey, and Crawford.
53 Crawford, p.97.
of biblical authority is a prerequisite for membership in the Council.54

James Barr, however, argues that any attempt to make authority more flexible and to increase the emphasis on free decision and acceptance, will create confusion and produce something "which the average person will not recognize as 'authority' at all."55 He finds the World Council of Churches is confused in its attempt to conceptualize authority more flexibly. Barr distinguishes between "hard" and "soft" concepts of authority. For Barr a "hard" concept considers the Bible authoritative in its entirety and prior to interpretation. The "soft" concept derives the authority of the Bible from its interpretation and application, and thus will not necessarily find all parts of the Bible authoritative.

Since the dominant concept of biblical authority, at least in the West, has been a legal one (corresponding to his "hard" concept), Barr argues that a shift from a hard view to a soft view will have the effect of abandoning the authority concept altogether. Furthermore, Barr argues that although the "soft" concept is stronger religiously, it will threaten the authoritative status of the Bible because this concept of authority is not supported by all texts of the Bible and because it can be found in many sources other than the Bible.

54 See n. 47 above.
55 Barr, Modern World, p. 27.
In differentiating its position from that of the fundamentalists, the World Council of Churches argues that while the fundamentalist position maintains an almost dogmatic assumption that the Bible is authoritative, it (the World Council of Churches) derives the authority of the Bible from the experience of the message of the Bible. There are serious problems with basing the authority of the Bible on the experience of its message. James Barr argues that particular passages might speak with authority to certain people (and from the experience of these passages, they expect the rest of the Bible to be just as meaningful to them, as well as to all people), but this cannot be generalized into a universal rule, for all parts of the Bible do not speak with equal authority for all people:

The experience based upon some passages can certainly not be extended to all others [hence the commonly recognized canon-within-the-canon approach]...and even passages which speak with authority to some may fail to do so to others.

Indeed, Douglas Hall argues that oppressed minorities point to the "questionable or ambiguous nature of much that has been passed onto them as if it were revealed truth." He indicates that the models of contextual theology provided by oppressed minorities within the larger Christian community can no longer be regarded as mere alternatives or exceptions to the norm. Hall recognizes feminist theology as one of the models of contextual theology which can no longer be

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57 Barr, Modern World, p. 29.
58 Hall, p. 7.
ignored. We will argue in Chapter 3 that, by calling into question the sexist nature of authoritative biblical texts, feminist hermeneutics is challenging the very notion of biblical authority.

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In comparing feminist positions to the currently normative and dominant positions on the concept of biblical authority, we will be examining closely the role given to experience in each position as well as the degree to which each position recognizes the role of experience in defining its position.59

E. NOTIONS OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY IN MAJOR FEMINIST THEOLOGIES

1. ROSEMARY RADFORD RUETHER

Although the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether clearly tends toward the radical side of our continuum, it still reflects the ambivalence of the centrist position on biblical authority. Ruether has not made a definitive statement on the status of the Bible for feminist theology. Rather she has put forth two mutually conflicting positions on the issue.

59 The meaning of the term "experience" in feminist theology is in accord with this study's definition of the term (see p. 11, n. 6). Carol P. Christ writes, "Feminist theologians use the word 'experience' inclusively to refer to feeling and perception, action and reflection, body and mind, individual and community; they do not use it in the technical sense of immediacy prior to reflection." On this see her article, "The New Feminist Theology: A Review of the Literature," Religious Studies Review 3 (1977): 204.
On one hand, she states:

feminist theology cannot be done from the existing base of the Christian Bible. The Old and New Testaments have been shaped in their formation, their transmission, and, finally, their canonization to sacralize patriarchy. 60

Indeed, she intends her recent book, Womanguides, to be a step toward the development of a canon for feminist theology, which of necessity must include more than the canonical writings and certainly not all of the canonical writings. 61 Here she states that when patriarchal texts are read in light of the larger reality which they attempt to hide, they lose their normative status. 62

On the other hand, Ruether indicates that scripture can be normative for feminist theology, and argues that feminists need not reject the Bible. While the feminist critical principle demands that feminists "stand outside and in judgment upon this patriarchal bias of the scriptures," it requires feminists to reject the Bible altogether as normative only if it were just "an authoritative source for the justification of patriarchy." 63 Although Ruether recognizes that the Bible is the product of patriarchy and manifests the bias of patriarchy, she nonetheless finds within it a perspective undercutting patriarchy and all

61 Ibid., pp. ix, xi-xii.
62 Womanguides, p. xi.
other worldly hierarchies. She proposes a theological method which focuses on this perspective.

The fact that both of the positions put forth by Ruether are found in works published during the same year indicates her ambivalence on the issue. The first position cited here is similar to the stance taken by Fiorenza, and will be discussed in Chapter 2. The second position puts forth a method by which, in Ruether's opinion, feminists can embrace the Bible as the word of God and thus is most relevant to this chapter.

Ruether's method correlates the feminist critical principle and the biblical critical principle. She defines the critical principle of feminist theology as being the affirmation and promotion of the full humanity of women:

whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer of a community of redemption. 64

This definition, she explains, reads as a negative principle because the full humanity of women is not fully known, nor has it existed in history. From this negative principle can be inferred the positive principle:

What does promote the full humanity of women is of the Holy, it does reflect true relation to the divine, it is the true nature of things, the authentic message of redemption and the mission of redemptive community. 65

65 Ibid. Ruether notes that the concept upon which this principle is based, is not new. The correlation of original, authentic human nature (imago dei/Christ) and diminished, fallen humanity provide the basic structure of
Ruether locates the biblical critical principle within the prophetic messianic tradition with which liberation theology identifies. Like liberation theologians, Ruether finds that the God-language of the prophetic tradition assumes the perspective of the oppressed and, therefore, is judgmental and destabilizing toward the existing social order and its hierarchies of power—religious, social, or economic. In accord with the perspective of liberation theology, Ruether argues that the biblical critical principle enables the Bible to critique and renew itself as the authentic Word of God over against corrupting and sinful deformations and limitations of past biblical traditions which function to sacralize the existing social order.

In Ruether's view, the correlation of these two principles is justified, even necessary, because the prophetic tradition can remain true to itself only by adapting itself to changing contexts and to changing issues of justice and injustice. She argues that, while the biblical critical principle is not specifically applied to women, it is the basic perspective of the Bible and thus women are entitled and required to appropriate it. The biblical writers:

have been responding to fears of death, estrangement and oppression and the hopes for life, reconciliation and liberation of humanity. They have been doing this on male terms. But women can discover this critical element and apply it to themselves. In so doing, they

classical Christian theology. That women name themselves as subjects of authentic and full humanity is new.

67 "Feminist Interpretation," p. 117.
will not leave it as it was, but transform it in profound ways. They will make it say things it never said before. 68

In her opinion, this method of correlation of biblical critical and feminist critical principles provides the only way in which the Bible can function as an authoritative spiritual source for feminists. 69

Ruether acknowledges that her method has been criticized because the prophetic messianic tradition does not clearly include sexism and patriarchy in its critique of social injustice, and that for this reason, her method correlates the biblical critical and feminist critical principles without biblical authority. In response to this criticism, Ruether calls upon the distinction between biblical faith and biblical religion and argues that continuity with the prophetic tradition is not simply the restatement of past texts but also the constant renewal of the meaning of the prophetic critique itself. It is renewed continuously by the new critical consciousness of current issues and of the limits and deformations of its own past. 70

Fiorenza criticizes Ruether's method for separating form and content. 71 To this Ruether begs the distinction between theological approaches and exegetical approaches:

69 "Feminist Interpretation," p. 117.
70 Ibid., pp. 118-119.
exegetical approaches examine specific texts, and theological approaches look for theological principles or central traditions. What is important for Ruether, therefore, is not the use of specific texts which either affirm or oppress women, but rather the overall liberating perspective of the Bible. Ruether, however, does not explain how specific texts which oppress give rise to an overall perspective of liberation. Furthermore, as we shall see in Chapter 3, structuralist studies of Genesis 2–3 have suggested that the Bible does in some texts deny the full humanity of women. This being the case, if Ruether's method is to be true to the feminist critical principle, it would have to reject the Bible.\textsuperscript{72}

Ruether articulates the sociological dimension of the origins and function of the Bible (which we discussed earlier in this chapter) in her definition of canon (and tradition) as "codified collective human experience."\textsuperscript{73} Revelatory experiences as found in the Bible have been interpreted by men, and canonization and the ongoing process of interpretation maintain that patriarchal bias. In this way, references to female experience have been removed or else interpreted with an androcentric bias. The Bible thus becomes an authoritative source for justifying patriarchy in the Jewish and Christian tradition. For this reason, Ruether argues, the Bible and tradition are not to be

\textsuperscript{72} The relationship between the conclusions reached by means of exegetical approaches and those reached by means of theological approaches will discussed in Chapter 4.
\textsuperscript{73} Sexism and God-Talk, pp. 12-16.
considered objective sources for theology, as opposed to the subjective, culture-bound criterion of experience, especially women's experience.

For Ruether, the use of experience as a source for theology, thus, is not what makes feminist theology unique, but rather the use of women's experience, which has been suppressed by theologies of the past. Since women have not been allowed to bring their experience into their community's formulation of the tradition, the tradition has been shaped and interpreted against them, and it also has been shaped to justify their exclusion. The use of women's experience in feminist theology, therefore, exposes the fact that classical theology and its use of Scripture and tradition (i.e., codified traditions) is based on male experience and not on universal human experience.

On one aspect of authority, however, Ruether's position is clear: "Existing institutions and churches do not have a monopoly on the words of truth or the power of salvation." 74 Since Christian feminists can wait no longer for necessary reforms, Ruether sees in the future of Christian feminists a move toward women-church, whose members are "religious feminists who seek to reclaim aspects of the biblical tradition...but who also recognize the need both to go back behind biblical religion and to transcend it." 75 From Ruether's position on women-church and from the fact that

75 Ibid., pp. 3-4.
her method correlates a biblical principle with a feminist principle, it would seem that Ruether considers as equal the authority of the Bible and the authority of women's experience.

In comparing Ruether's method to those of dominant theologies, hers is different only to the extent that it is based on women's experience, rather than men's experience. The implications of her method, however, raise even further doubts about the viability of using the Bible as an authoritative source for feminists. Although, as we saw above, her method functions outside the limits of biblical authority per se, it still does not convincingly demonstrate how the Bible can function as an authoritative source for feminists. The criticisms of her method and the findings of other feminist research indicate that, in fact, it cannot. The fact that Ruether contends her method is the only means by which feminists can hope to reclaim the Bible as an authoritative source, coupled with the fact that it is apparently unsuccessful in its attempt, suggest the seriousness of the dilemma faced by feminists.

2. LETTY M. RUSSELL

Letty Russell's position on the issue of biblical authority is considerably more optimistic than Ruether's. Russell asserts, "In spite of the patriarchal nature of the biblical texts, I myself have no intention of giving up the biblical basis of my theology.... The Bible has authority in
my life because it makes sense of my experience..."76 She unequivocally upholds the Bible as an authoritative spiritual source for feminists. She does not intend to "demolish the biblical and church tradition as a source of life" but instead to "build a new house of authority using the 'master's tools.'" For her, "the house of authority needs rebuilding on a firm evangelical foundation."77 Her method involves critical analysis as well as rediscovering and rebuilding feminist theology while continuing to live in "the old house."

Russell, like Ruether, argues that the Bible has a critical and liberating tradition contained in its prophetic-messianic message of continuing self-critique. The evidence for the biblical message of liberation for women and other oppressed groups is found not in particular stories about women but in the overall message of the Bible.78

Russell's interpretive key, or canon within the canon, is the witness of scripture to God's promise for the mending of creation, on its way to fulfillment. Those parts of the Bible which do not give witness to God's intention for the liberation of all creation are not authoritative. Thus Russell holds the Bible as a normative source, even though

78 Ibid., p. 71.
her interpretive key makes it necessary to reject many of
the Bible's teachings and its patriarchal context.\textsuperscript{79}

Although the evidence that God intends women to be
included in the mending of creation is seldom self-
evident in the patriarchal context of the biblical
texts, they nevertheless hold out a vision of
liberation that continues to have authority in my life
and faith.\textsuperscript{80}

Just how patriarchal texts, especially oppressive texts, can
do this is a problem for her method, and, as she admits,
her is a paradoxical position to hold.

Since Russell's method, like that of Ruether, claims an
overall liberating perspective despite an apparently sexist
text, it faces the same criticisms that Ruether's method
faces. Russell's approach, however, argues much more avidly
that the Bible is an authoritative source for feminists.
For this reason, it has been accused, as we shall see in
Chapter 3, of "bending the biblical witness" to serve her
purposes. Furthermore it is quite clear that Russell tends
toward fundamentalist strategies. Since some biblical texts
speak meaningfully to her, she generalizes and attempts to
attribute the divine origin and authoritative status of
these passages to the entire Bible. Russell, therefore,
manipulates the Bible and her methodology in such a way that
the authoritative status of the Bible can be retained,
although, as she admits, in a paradoxical way.

Whereas Ruether's approach examines closely the
formation of canon and the canon's experiential basis,

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., p. 60; "Authority and the Challenge," p. 140.
\textsuperscript{80} Household, p. 71.
Russell's approach deals primarily with the issue of authority. She envisions a new meaning of authority. For Russell, the prevailing paradigm of authority in Christian religion is one of domination, one not suitable to feminists. It reinforces the idea of authority over community and refuses to admit ideas and persons who do not fit into the established hierarchies of thought. Russell envisions an emerging paradigm of authority as one of authority in community or authority as partnership. In this paradigm differing ideas are valued and respected, and all persons are not forced to accept one priority system of theology. Her theology, thus, allows for multiple authorities to enrich rather than out-rank one another, and thereby suggests a definite shift away from normative, hierarchical concepts of authority.

The paradigm shift that is suggested by Russell provides a new way of approaching the issue of biblical authority. Authority as partnership places biblical interpretation in a context of communal search for meaning and sharing of ideas. In this way, it helps overcome the dispute over whether the interpretive key for the Bible should be found within the biblical canonical tradition or outside that tradition. Ultimately, Russell foresees a movement toward a "de-absolutized" canon which both allows for honouring biblical witness to the extent that it reveals basic truths of our faith and for honouring the authority of our own experience of God. Thus Russell's method will allow
for a "configuration" of sources of faith. In order to protect the Bible's authoritative status, it is necessary for her, in fact, to compromise its status to that of one of many authoritative sources. In this way Russell departs radically from the centrist position.

In comparing the approaches to biblical authority of these two feminist theologians, we see a difference in emphasis between them. They both share the same belief in an overall liberating perspective within the Bible, despite its patriarchal nature. Russell attempts to solve this paradoxical situation outside the Bible: she calls for a redefinition of authority. By allowing more flexibility in interpretation, the dilemma to choose or reject is avoided. This solution is much less confrontational than that of Ruether. Ruether's analysis stresses the sexist origins and political nature of the canon, and attempts more to provide a means for dealing with the sexist text. Russell calls for a "de-absolutized" canon; Ruether lays the ground work for a new canon. In sum, Russell calls for a redefinition of authority in order that the authoritative status of the Bible may be maintained. Ruether's method places the authority of the Bible more explicitly on an equal level with the authority of women's experience.

While Russell's approach to the issue of biblical authority seems, at first, to be more optimistic than Ruether's about reclaiming the Bible from patriarchy, it inadvertently suggests a more serious problem. The central
focus of her approach is not the Bible per se but rather the context in which it is read. By redefining the concept of biblical authority to allow the reader more freedom in interpreting the text, multiple readings of the same text are made acceptable, as are multiple sources of authoritative texts. But by such a move, is not Russell avoiding confrontation with the apparently sexist texts, and therefore actually conceding the point that the Bible is irreformably patriarchal?

F. CONCLUSION

Russell's reference to the changing paradigm of authority will lead us to the conclusion of this chapter. The concept of paradigm originated in a context of historical research on the practice of science, in the work of Thomas Kuhn. Sally McFague has assimilated Kuhn's concept of paradigm to theology. In theology, according to McFague, a paradigm is a set of assumptions or beliefs within which theologians conduct their work. What does

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83 Kuhn's later work distinguishes, within a paradigm, a "disciplinary matrix" and "shared exemplars." A disciplinary matrix is a set of fundamental assumptions or metatheory common to practitioners of a professional discipline. Shared exemplars define both the types of questions and the types of answers which the discipline finds acceptable. Thomas Kuhn, "Second Thoughts on Paradigms," in The Structure of Scientific Theories, 2nd. ed., ed. Frederick Suppe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 462-463.
not fit into the framework of the dominant paradigm is not "seen." Problems that cannot be solved within the paradigm are usually overlooked and not considered worth looking at.

When a sufficient number of unresolvable issues generated by the dominant paradigm accumulate, they start to exert pressure on the dominant paradigm. This growing pressure ultimately leads to a revolution. In Kuhnian terms, times of crisis are times when defenders of each paradigm compete for the allegiance of the community. Since proponents of rival paradigms hold radically different perspectives and their terms of reference are not at all commensurable, they are bound to talk past each other. For this reason a new paradigm cannot be built on the one it succeeds. It can only replace it.

In this chapter we have seen that the dominant religious paradigm (represented by the centrist position), which maintains the Bible as the highest Christian authority, is under pressure from the other two positions (fundamentalist and radical). The pressure it faces is exacerbated by the emerging feminist paradigm.

McFague argues that religious paradigms are more flexible and can more readily absorb change than scientific paradigms. The degree of change in a theological revolution is less drastic than in a scientific revolution. She supports her position by saying that the basic Christian paradigm, i.e., the paradigm identified with the "parables

84 Ibid., p. 82.
of Jesus and Jesus as parable of God," and its shared set of assumptions have resisted changed and have endured despite a history of crises.

In the same context, however, McFague acknowledges that feminism poses a challenge to the Christian paradigm that it has never before faced. Feminist Christians find their experience a critical anomaly which does not fit the Christian paradigm, and are moving toward a very serious question: Does the Christian tradition have resources and openness to adapt to this feminist anomaly or must feminists base themselves in, or create for themselves, another paradigm? We have seen the methodological difficulties in attempts by feminist theologians to adapt the Christian paradigm to the feminist paradigm. In Chapter 2 we will examine the work of reformist exegetes and argue that although they strive to find ways in which the Christian paradigm can be adapted to a feminist perspective, their work, like that of Ruether and Russell, inadvertently raises even more problems for the issue of biblical authority.

85 Ibid., pp. 82-83.
CHAPTER II

FEMINIST EXEGESIS WITHIN THE FRAMWORK OF AUTHORITY

A. INTRODUCTION

As we saw in Chapter 1, the multidimensional nature of the concept "authority" contributes to the complexity of the issue of biblical authority. Persons or groups holding various perspectives approach the issue on different levels. Some find the locus of biblical authority in the Bible itself (conservative position), or in doctrines, actual or assumed, which attribute authority to the Bible (conservative and centrist positions), while others locate authority in the faith community (centrist and radical positions), and still others subordinate biblical authority to the authority of human experience (radical positions). Just as there are a variety of perspectives on biblical authority found in the traditional positions, so the same holds true for feminist positions.

In this chapter we will examine some of the more prominent exegetical approaches of reformists. Most studies of feminist approaches focus primarily on exegetical methods or hermeneutical goals.¹ This study, however, will examine

feminist approaches only in terms of their position on biblical authority. First, we will examine the exegetical approaches which tend toward the conservative end of the spectrum of feminist methods, represented by the work of Phyllis Trible, J. Cheryl Exum, and Sandra Schneiders. For the purposes of this study, their work is considered conservative, for it attempts explicitly to maintain the Bible itself as the locus of authority. We will then examine exegetical approaches which tend toward the radical end of the spectrum. Here the work of Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and T. Doroah Setel will be considered. Their work explicitly subordinates the authority attributed to the Biblical text to the authority of feminist experience. Finally, we will examine two very new approaches developed by Mary Schertz and Dana Nolan Fewell specifically in response to the growing uneasiness among feminists with biblical authority. This work fits the description of the centrist position, for it holds in tension the authority of the Bible and the authority of feminist experience.

While feminist reformists approach the Bible from a position of faith, they do so from a position of radical suspicion. Feminists do not hold as normative all the


Since the purpose of this study is to examine the interaction of feminist approaches to the Bible with the issue of biblical authority, the intention here is not to provide a comprehensive description of each methodology. For this, the reader is advised to refer to the writings of each exegete.

Sakenfeld, p. 55.
values espoused by the Bible, and they recognize that women in biblical narratives can no longer serve unambiguously as role models for women, either as historical persons or as literary characters. Although reformists all acknowledge that the Bible came into existence in a strongly patriarchal environment and is a product of its time, they differ on the extent to which they find androcentrism in the Bible, on the means by which they choose to deal with its patriarchal nature, and on the extent to which they find the text reformable. Adela Y. Collins describes well the work of reformists which we shall examine in this chapter:

In circles where proof-texting is regarded as a naive use of the Bible but where biblical authority plays a predominant role, further work has been done in articulating critical hermeneutical principles based on the Bible itself. By implementing such hermeneutical principles, however, feminists intentionally or unintentionally, actually shift the locus of authority from the Bible itself to the authority of feminist experience. We must bear in mind that the work of feminist reformists necessarily challenges the premise of biblical authority. All feminist approaches involve a divergence from traditional, dominant concepts of biblical authority insofar as they cannot avoid calling into question, intentionally or inadvertently, the authoritative status of biblical texts which are sexist and androcentric. At the same time, as we shall also see in this chapter,


Ibid., p.4.
reformist approaches to the Bible cannot fully overcome methodological inconsistencies when they seek to operate within the parameters of biblical authority.

All the exegetes to be discussed are considered "reformers" because they argue that biblical texts should be retained. We shall see, however, that there is a variety of purposes for which they argue the text should be retained.

B. CONSERVATIVE POSITIONS

1. PHYLLIS TRIBLE

For Phyllis Trible, liberating the Bible from patriarchy is the first consideration of reformers. She sees her work and the work of all reformers within the long history of the biblical tradition:

"History shows theological warrant for changing texts within believing communities....The discipline of tradition history demonstrates this procedure in the Bible itself. Theologians of ancient Israel and the early church reinterpreted texts in light of subsequent events. Such activity freed the scriptures to give and take new meanings."  

Although she grants the believing community the authority to interpret, even to change the meaning of, biblical texts, she nonetheless considers the entire Bible to be the "voice of God." Her work, therefore, reflects a tension between sources of authority—between the Bible itself and the believing community, but her belief in the Bible as the work

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of God predominates in her work. Accordingly, her methodology resembles that of fundamentalists, discussed in Chapter 1, insofar as she has developed three feminist approaches to biblical texts and moves back and forth among these approaches. She must do this in order to ensure the authoritative status of the Bible despite her feminist perspective, which defines feminism as a critique of culture in light of misogyny.

Tribe's first approach exposes the subordination and abuse of women in biblical texts. Since this approach can lead to outright rejection of biblical texts, Tribe does not dwell on this approach but rather focuses on her two other approaches which attempt to overcome the patriarchal character of biblical texts discerned by the first approach. The second approach highlights neglected texts and reinterprets familiar ones. Tribe admits that the "treasures" uncovered by this approach are small but "nonetheless valuable in a tradition that is often compelled to live by the remnant." This approach functions as a critique of patriarchy, Tribe argues, and it neither eliminates the male bias of scripture nor disavows evidence


In Chapter 3, we will see serious doubts, both practical and theoretical, cast on Tribe's conclusions.
of the first approach. Trible's third approach retells sympathetically, not judgmentally, stories of terror against women.

Trible makes use of rhetorical criticism, which concentrates on the text itself, and not on extrinsic factors. In rhetorical criticism, form and content are inseparable, and together they yield the meaning of the text. For Trible, "how a text speaks and what it says belong together in the discovery of what it is."

Trible's hermeneutical goal, therefore, is not to find a "usable past" for feminist Christians; rather it is to translate biblical faith without sexism. Trible acknowledges that biblical texts come from a male dominated society and that biblical religion, therefore, is necessarily patriarchal. She distinguishes between biblical faith and biblical religion, however, and argues that biblical faith, unlike biblical religion, serves to function as salvific for both women and men and not as a perpetrator of patriarchy.

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12 "Feminist Hermeneutics," p. 118. For an extensive application of this approach, see her *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*.
13 For an extensive application of this approach see her *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).
16 "Depatriarchalizing," p. 31.
17 Ibid.
Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza finds significant methodological weakness in Trible's approach. First Fiorenza argues that Trible's methodology and perspective are incompatible. Rhetorical criticism focuses on the movement of the text, and not on extrinsic factors, to ascertain the theological meaning of the text; but Trible defines feminism as a "critique of culture". Fiorenza argues that patriarchal culture and patriarchal religion cannot be addressed by rhetorical criticism for they are extrinsic to the text. Trible, therefore, never questions whether feminist imagery and traditions about women are feminist "countervoices" or whether they are only remnants of patriarchal repressions of Goddess religion, and never mentions the political implications of biblical interpretation.

Fiorenza notes another inconsistency in Trible's approach. Although rhetorical criticism maintains that form and content are inseparable in determining the meaning of a text, Trible claims that the masculine pronouns for the deity "decide neither sexuality nor theology." Trible does concede, however, that masculine pronouns do reinforce a male image of God and that their effect is "detrimental for faith." Trible also admits that she is unable to resolve "the dilemma posed by grammatical gender for deity in the scriptures themselves, since translation must answer to both grammatical accuracy and interpretive validity."\(^{19}\)


\(^{19}\) *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 23.
In sum, Trible acknowledges that "considerable evidence indicts the Bible as document of male supremacy"\(^{20}\) and concedes:

Clearly the patriarchal stamp of scripture is permanent... [Her method] did not... eliminate the male-dominated character of scripture; such a task would have been both impossible and dishonest.\(^{21}\)

Trible's method, therefore, is unable to prove that the "voice of God" is not patriarchal, and it indicates that the means to do so are not found within the limits of rhetorical criticism. While this method can counter patriarchal interpretations of the text, it finds, in many cases, patriarchal bias inseparable from the text.

2. J. Cheryl Exum

The work of J. Cheryl Exum is quite similar to Trible's second approach and is representative of the work of many other reformists who use literary methods. Exum suggests that her approach to biblical texts is "bifocal", i.e., it recognizes the contribution of women recorded in the Bible but is also critical of the Bible's androcentric perspective.

Exum does not wish to defend the Bible or deny its patriarchal bias. She finds both the Bible and the history of exegesis in need of feminist criticism. Her goal is not historical reconstruction, but rather a reassessment of traditional assumptions about women's roles in biblical

\(^{20}\) "Depatriarchalizing,\" p. 30.
narratives. Within the Bible, Exum finds models of biblical women who undermine patriarchal assumptions of the text. She, therefore, uses an approach which pays close attention to the portrayal of women in selected texts. Through this method of "close reading," she finds strong "countercurrents of affirmation of women" which, she argues, undermine patriarchal assumptions, temper patriarchal biases, and challenge patriarchal structures.\(^2^3\)

Perhaps the most significant weakness of her method is found in the paradoxical position in which she locates female characters. Exum is not critical enough of the Bible's androcentric perspective, and therefore her method only serves to make more explicit the ambiguous position of female characters in biblical texts. She finds that although they are frequently ignored in the larger story, female characters are often essential to the plot. But Exum does not take into account the patriarchal nature of the plot of biblical narratives. For example, her exegesis of the Abraham-Sarah narrative (Gen 12-23) reveals that, although Sarah's role is clearly subordinate to that of Abraham and the other male characters, Sarah nevertheless acts at strategic points that advance the plot, and thus the promise, towards its fulfillment. Bearing in mind that the promise is the promise of the male deity made to males, we


see that, according to Exum's analysis, Sarah only acts to further the cause of patriarchy. Looking at other works of Exum we see that this is always the case: women play active roles only when their part can serve the purposes of patriarchy.

Although not her intention, Exum's method makes clear that the real paradox is not that women's roles in biblical narratives are underdeveloped or have been misinterpreted, but rather that women are depicted favourably only when they are actually acting against their own best interests. For this reason, Exum's bifocal approach fails to take into account the full impact of the Bible's androcentric perspective, and the "countercurrents of affirmations of women" elicited by her method are unable to undermine patriarchal perspectives within the text.

3. SANDRA SCHNEIDERS

Schneiders finds sexism and androcentrism in the prevailing interpretations of the text and not in the text itself. For her,

the New Testament message is not essentially patriarchal, despite the fact that an unreflective patriarchal ideology pervades it. What is patriarchal

24 In "Mother in Israel", Exum demonstrates how mothers in biblical texts are valued only to the extent that they serve the purposes of their progeny, specifically powerful sons. Nathalia Brenner finds women's roles are always type-cast. See her Israelite Women: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985).

25 Esther Fuchs, whose work will be discussed in Chapter 3, identifies this as a literary strategy to advance patriarchal ideology.
is the history of exegesis and appropriation [of the text].

Crucial to her position, however, is the tenuous distinction between human words and the Word of God: "...Scripture is the Word of God in human words....The human words may be time-bound but the Word of God is not." For Schneiders, the theological exegete treats Scripture as the Word of God in human words, and the role of the exegete is both to explain what the original author meant to say to his original audience and to explain in contemporary terms what the Word of God means today.

Schneiders’ primary concern is the status of women in the Church (the Roman Catholic Church). She demonstrates that there is no scriptural warrant for the repressive treatment of women in the Church: the biblical message (i.e., the Word of God as opposed to the words of human authors) says nothing about the role of women. Specifically, Jesus said nothing about the nature and role of women. She therefore contends that the repression of women is a result of hundreds of years of proofexting by the church. Furthermore, Schneiders contends that it should not be necessary for those who oppose discrimination against women

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28 Schneiders makes a distinction between exegesis and theological exegesis. Theological exegesis is done from a position of faith. We will return to this distinction in Chapter 4.
29 "Women in the Fourth Gospel," p. 35.
to prove that such discrimination is unjustified. Rather
the onus of proof lies with the prevailing powers within the
Church to prove, on biblical grounds, that women are to be
restricted within the Church.

This is the point from which Schneiders' work can
proceed no farther. Her method attempts to reclaim the
biblical message from patriarchal interpretations, yet in
her own writings she gives concrete examples of how the
church continues to prooftext to justify its position.30
The appropriate questions and the correct answers are
determined by those in power. The (patriarchal) powers
within the Church have established and maintained their
position by prooftexting. Thus the problem is power. The
presuppositions brought to the text determine the
interpretation, and the presuppositions of those in power
prevail.

Schneiders' contribution is significant, but not
necessarily for reasons she intends. It makes clear the
futility of feminist-reformist attempts within the Roman
Catholic Church. No matter how strong the evidence in
favour of the feminist position, the traditional patriarchal
position holds fast. Although Schneiders indicates she
finds no difficulty with her method, its futility is quite

30 E.g., She argues that The Declaration on the Question
of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood of
the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrines of Faith makes use
of "inapplicable theory and indefensible fact" but still it
prevails. On this see her article "Did Jesus Exclude Women
from the Priesthood?" in Women' Priests: A Catholic
Commentary on the Vatican Declaration, ed., L. Swindler and
obvious. Whether or not the Bible can be salvaged from patriarchy is not the pressing issue; rather it is that the power to dictate what is or is not a sound reading of Scripture resides in patriarchal faith communities.

Although Schneiders is working within a Roman Catholic context, her findings can be applied generally to all feminist work within faith communities. As we saw in Chapter 1, the Bible is authoritative only within a faith community. Thus—no matter how successful a feminist method might be in reclaiming the Bible from patriarchy (as indeed Schneiders considers her method is), a feminist reading will not be recognized by a patriarchal faith community. As Schneiders admits, the Bible is a most pliable resource: it is not an univocal source. For this reason it can be cited to justify almost any position or belief. 31

Furthermore, as Fiorenza observes, 32 Schneiders’ first priority is faithfulness to the text. Thus she explains away whatever is found to be oppressive to women in the New Testament as being time-bound to the culture of the first century, and consequently, her method recognizes neither the historical nor current political role of the biblical canon.

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31 As an example, Schneiders refers to the ways in which the Bible was used to justify slavery in the past.
The three exegetes considered thus far find the locus of authority within the Bible itself. Running through their work is the belief that the Bible is the word of God. As well as various methodological weaknesses, two serious problems for reformist strategies are apparent in their work.

Trible regards the Bible as literally the word of God, yet she admits that the "patriarchal stamp" of the scriptures is indelible. That she acknowledges that her method is unable to liberate the word of God from patriarchy is significant. She, like Mary Ann Tolbert, represents those reformists who are articulating serious doubts about the compatibility of the Bible and feminist hermeneutics.

Schneiders, on the other hand, allows feminist reformists more room to manoeuvre, insofar as she considers the Bible to be the word of God in human words. Her work, however, points to another problem facing all feminist exegesis: regardless of how successful feminists find their interpretive strategies, the power to determine what is a sound reading, and what is not, still lies with interpretive communities which are patriarchal.

C. RADICAL POSITIONS

1. ELIZABETH SCHUSSLER FIORENZA

The radical approaches which we shall consider do not share the two basic problems faced by conservative approaches, for they intentionally subordinate the Bible to the authority of feminist experience. As we shall see, however, the radical approaches are not without their own problems.

1) ELISABETH SCHUSSLER FIORENZA

Fiorenza's approach differs considerably from work of other reformers. Recognizing the thoroughly androcentric character of the biblical texts and yet not wanting to reject biblical texts, Fiorenza moves the locus of revelation from the text to the Christian experience and community behind the text. For example, she considers as revelatory not the text of the New Testament, but the life of Jesus and the movement that surrounded him, of which the text is an "inadequate reflection."

The hermeneutical goal of her method is to show that the actual situations of early Christianity allowed women a larger role than the canonical writings suggest. It thereby attempts to reconstruct biblical history. This approach involves looking for clues about the role of women in

35 Ibid., p. 41.
canonical writings and then studying the evidence found in "heretical" writings. Combining these two sources in light of current sociological theory indicates, for Fiorenza, that the earliest Christian movements were egalitarian.

Fiorenza's method is not restricted to the limits imposed by the present canon and prevailing notion of biblical authority. Instead it takes as most authoritative, not the biblical text, but the experience of women, specifically, "the solidarity with women past and present whose lives and struggles are touched by the biblical trajectory in Western culture." Her method subjects the Bible to the theological authority of the church of women.

Fiorenza's method, like most reformist methods, is based on the assumption that canonical writings have not only been subjected to patriarchal interpretation but are themselves products of patriarchal hermeneutics. Whatever the historical reality, biblical authors were influenced by political and cultural tendencies and, as a result, they composed thoroughly patriarchal documents. Unlike Russell and Schneider, however, Fiorenza finds the canon, having been established by a male-dominated church, as not a good source for studying history of women in Christianity. See Memory p. 41. On this see also Bernadette J. Brooten, "Early Christian Women and Their Cultural Context: Issues of Method in Historical Reconstruction," in Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship ed., Adela Yarbrough Collins (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985), esp., pp. 71-72.


Women-Church is the movement of self-identified women or women-identified men in biblical religion. For a full description, see Memory, pp. 343-351; and Ruether's Women-Church: Theology and Practice. Fiorenza uses it as "political-oppositional term to patriarchy" and as political as well as theological basis for feminist theology. See Bread, pp. xiv-xvii. Women-church is, obviously, the faith community in which feminist readings are acceptable, and
and seeks to assess the oppressive or liberating dynamics of all biblical texts and their function in the contemporary feminist struggle for liberation. For Fiorenza, a critical feminist hermeneutics must:

- do justice to women's experiences of the Bible as a thoroughly patriarchal book written in androcentric language as well as to women's experience of the Bible as a source of empowerment and vision in our struggles for liberation.

Where the Bible can be a viable spiritual source for feminists, it is accepted as such:

- only the nonexistent and nonandrocentric traditions of the Bible and the nonoppressive traditions of biblical interpretation have the theological authority of revelation.

The parts of the Bible that are found to be oppressive are not discarded, however, as in the approaches of Ruether and Russell, rather they are retained as clues to the reality of women's place in early Christianity. Fiorenza thereby attempts to reclaim from the New Testament a part of the history of women as "victims and subjects participating in patriarchal culture."

The ultimate goal of Fiorenza's method, therefore, is not to reclaim the Bible for feminists but rather to restore...
women to their rightful place in Christianity by means of a "feminist reconstruction of Christian origins." The Bible is important only to the extent that it can benefit that goal. Furthermore, she argues that:

it seems...methodologically necessary...to bracket the issue of theological legitimization until women can come into focus as historical agents and victims and until biblical history can be restored to women.  

Fiorenza does not seek to identify certain biblical texts and traditions as timeless truths (like Ruether and Russell), but instead seeks solidarity with women in biblical religion in order to create "visions for the future out of the interconnection between women's historical and contemporary struggles for liberation and biblical religion." New Testament texts are not abstract and timeless theological ideas or norms, rather they represent faith responses to concrete historical situations.

For this reason Fiorenza does not consider the Bible as an archetype but as as an historical prototype -- a formative root-model of biblical faith and life. The Bible as prototype enables feminists to make choices between oppressive and liberating traditions in the Bible without having to accept or reject it as a whole. The Bible functions no longer as authoritative source but as a "multifaceted" resource for women's struggle for liberation.

Mary Ann Tolbert's response to Fiorenza's approach reflects that of many reformists: Fiorenza's radical

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43 *Bread*, p. 9.
44 "Emerging Issues," p. 46
evaluation of the biblical text would seem to push one out of the Christian tradition.\textsuperscript{45} They question whether an historical reconstruction can form the basis of Christian faith and practice. Even though the goal of this method is to retrieve the earliest Christian tradition, the Jesus movement, Tolbert's criticism is well-founded, for, as we saw in Chapter 1, the authoritative status of the biblical canon is an integral part of Christian faith and religion. Fiorenza's method overturns the authoritative status of the Christian Bible. Indeed, it seeks to reconstruct the origins of Christianity \textit{in spite} of the Bible.\textsuperscript{46} Fiorenza goes even further and indicates that a feminist hermeneutics calls for not only a new use of Scripture, but also for a "new naming of God."\textsuperscript{47}

Even if Fiorenza's approach is not understood as pushing one out of the Christian tradition, Fiorenza's optimism that the earliest Christian tradition was egalitarian may be unfounded. Although here Fiorenza represents a "minority consensus," Mary Rose D'Angelo argues that Fiorenza's attempts to reconstruct the early Christian

\textsuperscript{45} Mary Ann Tolbert, "Defining the Problem: The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics," \textit{Semeia} 28 (1983): 123.
\textsuperscript{46} For this reason, as we shall see in Chapter 3, Goldenberg argues that reformers such as Fiorenza have already broken from the Christian tradition. Furthermore, Fiorenza's work is predicated upon the assumption that Christianity, in its purest form, can be appropriated by feminists, that it can be a basis for feminist theology. As we shall also see in Chapter 3, rejectionists raise serious doubts about this assumption.
\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Bread}, p. xiii.
movement will not be unproblematic.\textsuperscript{48} Elaine Pagels considers as futile such attempts to find the "golden age" of Christianity. Pagels' research indicates that, from a strictly historical point of view, there never was a such a time.\textsuperscript{49}

2. T. DRORAH SETEL

For T. Drorah Setel,\textsuperscript{50} the central issue for contemporary religious feminists is the extent to which the use of biblical writings continues to define women in Western society. She sees the significance of feminist biblical scholarship not only in its recovery of women's history, as suggested by Fiorenza's approach, but also in its potential to produce an "increasingly sophisticated analysis of the development of Western patriarchy."\textsuperscript{51} For this reason, Setel finds the Bible too important and influential a document to be ignored.

Setel confronts the patriarchal dualistic modes of thought found in the Bible and in methods of interpretation. In place of the dualistic philosophical framework of traditional methods, her method is based upon a theoretical


\textsuperscript{50} Although Setel is a Jewish feminist, her comments and method are applicable in many ways to the work of Christian feminists.

framework which sees significance in connection and relationship, specifically, in the interactions of the text with its historical context and with feminist theory. For Setel, relation, as an interpretive principle, finds connections between historical and theological issues. Rather than insisting on the distinction between the liberating themes and oppressive laws or imagery, upon which the methods of Ruether and Russell are based, Setel's method takes into account:

the fact that the very prophets who articulated such powerful visions of social justice and redemption also contributed some of the most vividly misogynistic material in the Hebrew Bible.

Moreover, Setel criticizes methods which use historical perspective as an excuse for continuing to separate form and content of biblical material. Concern with the nature and implications of these and other relationships allows the development of a feminist perspective which does not "cut and paste" the biblical text to validate its significance. Setel need not resort to such methods because, for her, the significance of the Bible lies not in its authoritative status, but in its potential for revealing the historical development of patriarchy.

54 Ibid.
Setel's method also applies relational considerations to biblical theology, and acknowledges the relationship of human experience to biblical authority. Relationship is a process and not a rigid establishment of authority. From this perspective, authority should not be an external entity from which we are separate. Setel, however, does not specifically address the issue of having to choose whether to accept or reject the Bible as authoritative for feminists. While she acknowledges that, for some feminists, understanding historical contexts may provide a perspective of "moral realism" which allows these texts to be read as sacred writings and that, for others, the offensive contents demand that they not be declared "the word of God" in public settings, she argues that only through the interaction of these two camps will feminists be able to redefine their relationship to the biblical text and also to their own history and community in ways which fully acknowledge female experience. In this way she avoids confronting the issue of biblical authority. For her own work, however, the Bible is important only to the extent that it is an historic resource.

Setel's position appears to be quite similar to Fiorenza's: both argue that the Bible in its entirety should be retained as an historical resource for feminists.

Whereas Fiorenza uses the biblical text as a vehicle for reconstructing a feminist history of Christianity and for locating divine revelation behind the text, Setel uses the text for reconstructing women's history and also for analyzing the development of patriarchy. Setel, like Fiorenza, argues that "dismissal of all biblical texts as completely devoid of that experience [female experience] is an implicit acceptance of women's historical non-existence." She argues that feminist biblical scholarship, at least on an historical level, attempts to affirm the significance of female experience throughout human history and that more work needs to be done in examining the Bible in terms of the relationship between women's experience and the social and political structures of patriarchy. Setel, however, makes no definitive statements about the authoritative status of the Bible as a spiritual source for feminists.

D. CENTRIST POSITIONS

The following two approaches are considered here to be centrist, for they explicitly attempt to balance the authority of the Bible and the authority of feminist experience. That they have been developed specifically for this purpose is indicative of the growing uneasiness within

55 "Feminist Insights," p. 39
57 Ibid.
the reformist camp over the compatibility of the Bible and feminist hermeneutics.

1. MARY SCHERTZ

Mary Schertz\(^58\) proposes a "tensive literary model" for feminist hermeneutics, a model indicative of the reformists' growing concern over the issue of biblical authority. This model specifically focuses on the inescapable tension between the authority of biblical texts and the authority of women's experience and attempts to transform it into a constructive tension.

Schertz argues that most feminist interpretations of ancient texts rely on a method which she labels "historical allegory,"\(^59\) i.e., feminist exegetes assume that the female characters of the texts "stand for" what happened to women in history and male characters "stand for" what men did to women in history. Schertz sees this assumption as being actually an external interpretive framework imposed on the text. As examples, she cites the work of Ruether, Fiorenza, and Daly and observes that although each scholar has her own interests and position, each interprets texts by means of this historical construct. Although the work of these scholars has made clear the dynamics of women's oppression in patriarchal culture, Schertz argues it can do no more than this because it does not grasp fully the power and


\(^{59}\) Ibid., pp.29-30.
authority of texts. In her opinion, this limited concept of the authority of texts confuses the goals of feminist interpretations and thereby has created the dilemma faced by reformists.

The text's ability to represent history, Schertz contends, is just one basis for textual authority. She demonstrates another basis of textual authority: the text's power to communicate a message. Here Schertz draws on Susan Lanser's work with speech act theory:

The term 'author' designates not only the producer(s) of a message, but a special kind of formalized power—authority—which the sender has (presumably) received from the relevant social community...The verbal act, in other words, implies not only a sender, receiver, and message, but some potential for successful speech activity which depends for its realization on the sender's authority and the receiver's validation of this authority.

Schertz's interpretive model draws together the work of three theorists: Wayne C. Booth, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Wolfgang Iser. According to the theory of Booth, the reception of the text's message requires a certain intellectual predisposition on the part of the reader, or a willingness to be influenced by the text. Since feminists cannot and should not submit to the values

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60 Speech act theory and Lanser's use of it will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3. What is important at this point of our discussion is not speech act theory in itself, but rather Schertz's use of it as a reformist strategy.


of texts that are patriarchal and misogynist, Fiorenza warns against the possibility of relinquishing one's "theoretical presuppositions and political allegiances" in the act of interpretation, and instead advocates a "hermeneutics of suspicion." 63

Here the presuppositions and values of Booth's sympathetic reader clash with those of Fiorenza's suspicious reader. It is at this point that most feminists find it necessary to choose between the authority of the text, as it has been traditionally interpreted, and the authority of their own experience. Schertz uses the work of Wolfgang Iser, not to resolve this tension, but to "transform it from a dysfunctional to a functional tension." 64

The act of interpretation, according to Iser, takes place in the interaction between the text and the reader. There is an inherent tension between the text and the reader, which Iser places on two opposing poles. The emphasis in textual analysis is thereby shifted from the text to the interaction between the text and the reader. Schertz places the authority of the text on one pole and the authority of women's experience on the other. In this light, the text need not have "authority over" the reader in order for its message to be understood. Suspension of one's values in the act of interpretation is precluded by this model, Schertz argues, for both poles are equally important.

63 In Memory of Her, p. xvii, cited in "Modern Women", p. 35.
and necessary to maintain, in the words of Iser, "the tension which is a precondition for the processing and comprehension that follows it."\(^{65}\)

Schertz points to the work of Janice Capel Anderson\(^{66}\) as an example of using the tension between the authority of the text and the authority of women's experience to interpret the meaning of a text. At this point, however, the apologetic tendencies of Schertz's method begin to surface. Anderson's hermeneutical goal is to discern the ways in which "it has been or could be possible for women positively to appropriate androcentric texts as authoritative texts for their religious experience."\(^{67}\) In this way she, in fact, is giving precedence at the outset to the text pole of Schertz's model.

Although Schertz acknowledges the patriarchal nature of biblical texts, she seems to be saying that the problem lies not at the level of the text but at the level of interpretation. In other words, the androcentric text presents a problem only if it is interpreted as an androcentric text. Schertz states that interpretations of a text must be accountable to the illocutionary aspect of a text (how the message is delivered). In order for her method to be successful, i.e., to interpret a patriarchal text as anything other than a patriarchal text, the reader

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\(^{67}\) "Matthew: Gender and Reading," p. 5.
must focus, however, on the perlocutionary aspect of the text (the content of the message).

This circuitry is witnessed in Anderson’s analysis, which focuses on a tension within New Testament texts between patriarchal and non-patriarchal values. Anderson argues that if the reader uncritically adopts the patriarchal worldview represented by the narrator and by Jesus, the reading experience is destructive. To counteract the patriarchal values depicted in New Testament texts, she uses, for example, those instances when Jesus spoke out against oppressive norms. Thus Anderson focuses more on the content of the message than on the way in which it is delivered. By this method, Anderson and, by association, Schertz contend that feminists can identify with New Testament texts without betraying feminist principles.

Although her criticism of the limitations of historical critical methods for feminist analysis is well-founded and her use of speech act theory to enlarge the concept of

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68 Ibid., pp. 22-26.
69 In this way, however, Schertz’s method separates the content of the message from the way in which it is delivered. As we shall see in Chapter 3, speech act theorists consider the way in which a message is conveyed as an important factor in determining the meaning of that message. Thus unlike the methods of Ruether and Fiorenza, Schertz’s method makes it possible for feminists to retain all biblical texts as authoritative, but does so on weak methodological grounds.
biblical authority appears promising, Schertz is unable to demonstrate how these insights can redeem the Bible from patriarchy. Rather, her approach to the Bible is apologetic, and she seems to be using her method merely to legitimate feminist analysis of the Bible.

2. Danna Nolan Fewell

Danna Nolan Fewell\textsuperscript{71} approaches the Bible in a way similar to that of Schertz insofar as her focus is the tension found in feminist readings of the Bible. Rather than finding the locus of tension between the authority of the text and the authority of feminists' experience, however, she finds it between the reader's values and the values espoused by the text. Fewell attempts to resolve the reformist feminist dilemma with the issue of biblical authority by arguing, like Wolfgang Iser,\textsuperscript{72} that the tension between reader and text is an essential component of any reading process.

Fewell's method is based on reader-oriented theory: it focuses on the reader's role in determining the meaning of a text.\textsuperscript{73} According to her understanding of reader-oriented theory, the value system of the text limits the "responsible" reader's interpretive alternatives. The


\textsuperscript{72} See n. 64 above.

\textsuperscript{73} In Chapter 3, we will discuss reader-oriented theory in detail. Here our primary focus is Fewell's use of it.
reader, in her opinion, is not free to find just any meaning for the text. Rather, in order to "actualize a literary work, the (responsible) reader must enter into the value system of the work." Fewell suggests four types of interactions between the reader and the text. In the first type of interaction, the reader can easily and completely adopt the value system of the work and, consequently, the text brings about no change in the reader. The second type represents a reading experience opposite to the first: the content of the text is so foreign to the reader's experience that he or she cannot relate to it or enter at all into the value system of the work. This type of reading also has no effect, for the reader experiences no change or broadening of perspective. These two types of interactions are dismissed by Fewell as insignificant because the reading process "results in no result at all." The next two interactions do produce results, one a positive result and the other negative.

In the third type of interaction suggested by Fewell, the reader can relate to some, but not all, of the values espoused by the text. The reader is able to "enter into" the value system of the text to the extent that he or she finds his or her beliefs or experiences somewhat similar to those depicted by the literary work. Here the reader is challenged by the text to consider a different perspective.

74. "Feminist Reading," p. 77. Fewell finds a distinction between entering into and adopting the value system of a text.
75. Ibid., p. 78.
and to rethink his or her own values. The result of this reading experience is positive. The reader is somewhat changed.

In Fewell's fourth category, those aspects of the text with which the reader can identify are given low priority in the value system of the literary work. Consequently, the reader's ideology takes precedence over the ideology of the text, and the result of the reading is negative. It is in this category that Fewell locates feminist biblical critics.

Since negative readings of the Bible threaten its authority, Fewell proposes deconstruction of not only those texts which are conducive to negative feminist readings but also of the negative readings themselves. This is where Fewell's apologetic tendency emerges: working within the limits of biblical authority is the central focus of her method, and not women's experience.

Because the Bible presents so many different points of view, Fewell argues, "it actually invites us to see not only patriarchy in the text but also how patriarchy breaks down."76 Like Ruether, Russell, and Tribe, Fewell argues that some readings inevitably undermine others, and that the Bible would have lost relevance if it could not critique itself.77 For her, any reading that produces a text with complete thematic unity is a misreading.78 She, therefore,
argues that feminists can neither accept positive feminist readings of biblical texts as unmediated words of liberation nor reject patriarchal texts as unredeemable words of oppression. She observes that all interpretations either ignore or suppress elements of a literary work that run counter to their understanding of it. For example, in Fewell's opinion, Trible's positive, or "text-affirming" reading stresses positive aspects at expense of the negative; Fuchs' negative or "text-resistant" reading (which will be examined in Chapter 3) stresses the negative at expense of the positive. Each passes over any evidence in the text that may be contrary to her own reading of the text. Fewell indicates that this is the case because "we read texts to find meaning, not just any meaning, but meaning we can appropriate in our own engagement with our world."

That Fewell places feminists in her fourth category of interpretive alternatives and does not consider the possibility that some feminists might be located more appropriately in her second category clearly indicates that she assumes that all readers should relate positively to, or enter into, at least some aspects of the biblical texts. She is clearly giving precedence to the text pole of her analytical model. For this reason, her method is more

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79 Ibid., p. 82.
80 Ibid., pp. 79-82.
81 Ibid., p. 77.
82 As we shall see from the work of Daly and Goldenberg this is an unfounded assumption.
apologetic for the Bible than beneficial for feminist analysis of the Bible.

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Although the work of Schertz and Fewell, at least theoretically, attempts to balance the authority of the Bible with the authority of feminist experience, in actuality it fails to do so. Giving priority to the authority of the Bible, both use their approaches instead to justify feminist interpretations. For this reason, their work might more appropriately fit the conservative position set out by this study. Whether or not their methods can be applied in different ways to achieve the goal they seek, remains to be seen. The work of Trible casts doubt on the viability of such a goal, however, and the work of Schneider indicates its futility.

E. CONCLUSION

In sum, we have located a variety of problems with reformers' exegetical strategies. Those approaches which tend toward the conservative end of the spectrum illustrate the basic problems faced by reformist attempts, viz., the lack of recognition given feminist interpretations by dominant interpretive communities and the apparent incompatibility between feminist perspectives and biblical narratives. The radical approaches seem to function more effectively, at least for the exegesis making use of them,
than the more conservative approaches, for they bypass the basic problems faced by the conservative approaches. But even the radical approaches are not without their own methodological weaknesses. The two approaches we considered as centrist attempt to make dynamic the tension between the authority of the Bible and the authority of feminist experience, but they in no way resolve the paradoxical position of the reformists.

Because feminists find the Bible is corrupted by androcentrism and patriarchy and because they use feminist critical principles for the evaluation of biblical texts, it is not surprising that the reformist position on biblical authority is ambiguous. In the methods which seek to maintain as normative both biblical as well as feminist principles, however, either one norm or the other implicitly takes precedence over the other. The work of Trible indicates the incompatibility of biblical and feminist norms, and the growing awareness of this incompatibility has led some reformists reluctantly to suggest that ultimately a choice between the two is necessary. The reformists who attempt to work within the limits of biblical authority fail to acknowledge that feminist norms for evaluating the Bible are not unequivocally found within the Bible. Therefore in their work, the Bible does not function authoritatively, despite what is claimed. In the radical reformist approaches, on the other hand, it is openly acknowledged

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that the Bible must never be appealed to as a norm and must always be subjected to the criticism of women's experience. Yet here the interpretation given to that experience, especially in the work of Fiorenza, sounds quite similar to biblical material or themes derived from the Bible. Although the authority of the Bible is openly denied, the Bible seems to function nonetheless as a hidden or anonymous authority.\(^4\)

Despite the ambiguous role of biblical authority in reformist approaches, it is clear that, in all the methods discussed, the basis for determining what is the Word of God and what is not has shifted from the givenness of the canon to the subjectivity of each reader or each group of like-minded readers. Insofar as these scholars admit their own bias as well as locate patriarchal bias both within the text itself and in its history of interpretation, their work, if nothing else, makes clear that the meaning of biblical texts is standpoint dependent. Therefore how can the Bible in its own right be authoritative or normative? As we saw in Chapter 1, even in the dominant, patriarchal camp (centrist position) the issue of biblical authority has reached the crisis stage. Feminist reformist approaches, intentionally or inadvertently, are pushing the crisis to its brink.

CHAPTER III
CRITIQUE OF REFORMIST WORK WITH THE BIBLE

A. INTRODUCTION

Thus far we have seen the work of reformists—those feminists who attempt to reclaim the Bible for feminists and who, to varying degrees, maintain that the Bible can be a viable, authoritative spiritual source for feminists. In examining the work of each scholar, we have located some of the more obvious problems with their approaches. In Chapter 3 we will elicit some problems in their arguments that are not immediately apparent. We will begin our discussion by looking at the work of two theologians, whose work challenges the basic assumptions upon which reformist theologians and exegetes base their work. While the hermeneutical goals of reformists and rejectionists are diametrically opposed, most reformists value the contribution of rejectionists to the extent that rejectionists force a reassessment of the patriarchal model of reality.¹

Next we will examine recent work with structuralist approaches to biblical texts. This work poses a challenge most explicitly to the work of Phyllis Trible and, in a general way, to all literary methods which seek to remain within the framework of biblical authority. Structuralist approaches reveal that the deep structures of biblical texts are androcentric and patriarchal, and thereby present theoretical problems for those approaches which seek to reclaim the Bible for feminists by means of reinterpreting surface features of such texts.

Finally we will attempt to turn the discussion of the problem of biblical authority in a significantly different direction. To do this we will discuss what is known as reader-oriented theory, an emerging theory whose potential to deal with the phenomenon of subjectivity in ways previously unavailable in either literary-critical or historical-critical methods is just beginning to be realized by the exegetical community. An important reason for turning to reader-oriented theory at this point is that, as we have seen in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, the meaning, and ultimately the authority, of biblical texts is standpoint dependent. Applications of reader-oriented theory to biblical exegesis draw into focus the inherent subjectivity of all interpretations. We will argue, however, that, despite its potential to revolutionize biblical exegesis, this theory, no matter how it is approached, offers little

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promise of resolving the reformists' dilemma with the issue of biblical authority. Instead it only serves to accentuate the basic problems faced by reformists.

Two general approaches to this theory will be identified. One gives autonomy to the reader over the text. Although this approach might appear to justify feminist interpretations of biblical texts alongside, or in place of, traditional androcentric readings, by doing so it also relativizes the authoritative status of any and all interpretations, and thereby undermines theoretically the whole premise of biblical authority. This approach, however, also recognizes the role of the interpretive community, which establishes the parameters for acceptable interpretations, as a justification for the literary (or biblical) canon. Insofar as any interpretation requires the validation of the interpretive community in order for it to be regarded as acceptable or authoritative, this approach only serves to highlight the dilemma already faced by those reformists who argue that the locus of biblical authority is in the faith community.

The other approach to reader-oriented theory, although cognizant of the role of the reader in the process of interpretation, nevertheless contends that a range of acceptable interpretations is set implicitly by the text itself. Here we will expand our discussion to include speech act theory, which maintains that acceptable interpretations must be in accord with the implications and
intentionality of a text. Since all feminists agree biblical texts are patriarchal and androcentric, speech act theory casts serious doubts on reformist methods which ignore the inherent androcentric implications of the texts in order to impose a feminist perspective on biblical texts.

In sum, this chapter will examine both philosophical and theoretical challenges to reformist methods, which cast doubt not only on the viability of the Bible as a spiritual source for feminists, but ultimately on the entire notion of biblical authority.

B. REJECTIONIST THEALOGIANS

All feminists challenge, to varying degrees, the core symbols of Christianity. Reformists, in their efforts to rehabilitate the tradition, attempt to change the understanding of these core symbols, or even the symbols themselves. Rejectionists, however, believe the core symbols of Christianity are not in any way reformable. They see Christianity as being dependent on a symbol system which personifies the deity as male, Father, Son, Lord, and King, and which therefore establishes and maintains the belief that all significant power belongs to men, not to women. Sonia Johnson, formerly a Mormon, clearly depicts the significance of a male deity:

In our patriarchal world, we are all taught—whether we like to think we are or not—that God, being male, values maleness much more than he values femaleness. God, will stand behind the men; he will uphold them in all they do because he and they—being men... know what
they know, a large part of which is that women must be made to understand that females are forever outside their charmed circle, forever consigned to the fringes of opportunity and power. I had been taught as we all have, not in so many words but nonetheless forcefully, that in order to propitiate God, women just propitiate men. After all, God won't like us if we don't please those nearest his heart, if we don't treat his cronies well.

And I also read the scriptures, and knew that people who did not respect God got zapped. There is a lot of zapping in the Old Testament...

The rejectionist position builds upon the work of the anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, who defines religion as "a system of symbols which acts to produce powerful, persuasive, and long lasting moods and motivations" in groups of people. From this perspective, religious symbols serve not only as models of divine existence, but also as models for human behaviour. Thus for Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, the Judeo/Christian "God in 'his' heaven is both a model of divine existence and a model for women's subordination to men."

Likewise, Mary Daly argues that:


5 Ibid., p. 3
the symbol of the Father God, spawned in the human imagination and sustained as plausible by patriarchy, has in turn rendered service to this type of society by making its mechanisms for the oppression of women appear right and fitting. The images and values of a given society have been projected into the realm of dogmas and "Articles of Faith," and those in turn justify the social structures which have given rise to them and which sustain their plausibility. The belief system becomes hardened and objectified, seeming to have an unchangeable independent existence and validity of its own.\(^6\)

Although Daly is not speaking here directly to the issue of biblical authority, but to patriarchal religion in general, her argument is quite similar to the arguments of two theologians cited in Chapter 1: Hauerwas, on the political nature of the biblical canon, and Hall, on the "questionable" nature of much of what has been upheld within the canon as "revealed truth."

Daly finds that "the efforts of biblical scholars to reinterpret texts, even though they may be correct within a certain restricted perspective, cannot change the overwhelmingly patriarchal character of the biblical tradition."\(^7\) For her, "the medium is the message." Theological qualifications cannot erase the clear message which is printed on the Christian mind and unconscious by its core symbols: "if God is male, then the male is God."\(^8\)

Reformers, however, base their work on the premise that Christianity can be reformed, i.e., from their own positive


\(^8\) *Beyond God the Father*, p. 19.
experience of selected biblical texts, they assume in advance that the true message of the Bible supports women's liberation. Rejectionists argue this premise is unfounded. Since a religion and its symbol system are inextricably bound together, the true content of the Christian faith cannot be obtained by bypassing its core symbols. Thus the patriarchal symbol system of biblical religion precludes the possibility of that religion supporting feminism.

For this reason, Naomi Goldenberg finds that reformist efforts are "characterized by a searching quality—by an effort to address current uneasiness by saying 'misogyny is not what real Christianity or Judaism is about.'" In other words, reformists are finding that the very premise which guides their work is contradicted by their research findings, but they nonetheless attempt to hold on to it.

In light of the challenge that feminist questioning of symbology presents to biblical religion, Goldenberg contends that all reformist strategies actually "constitute a serious break with Jewish and Christian traditions," although reformists do not yet realize the implications of their strategies:

[Feminists] who are reforming their traditions do not see such reforms as challenging the basic nature of Christianity and Judaism....The psychology of Jewish and Christian religions depends on the masculine image that these religions have of their God. Feminists change the major psychological impact of Judaism and

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10 Ibid.
Christianity when they recognize women as religious leaders and as images of divinity.

A society that accepts large numbers of women as religious leaders would be too different from the biblical world to find the book relevant, let alone look to it for inspiration. 11

Thus Goldenberg sees the hermeneutical goal of reformers as ultimately pulling them out of the biblical tradition. This is precisely the fear which is articulated by Phyllis Trible and other conservative reformers who strive to function within the limits of biblical authority, and which is thereby leading their use of feminist critical methods to a logical impasse. To support her position, Goldenberg provides arguments which apply to reformers who attempt to operate within the bounds of biblical authority as well as to those who seemingly have bypassed the issue of biblical authority.

As we noted in chapter 2, reformist scholars see their work as recovering and building upon repressed strands of the tradition which seem to treat women favourably. They justify their work by saying it is in accord with the true or original message of their religion. Such scholars locate a bit of the tradition that feminists can respect, and then expand on it and attempt to add this to mainstream Christianity. In reformist biblical scholarship the original tradition or the true message of the Bible is always interpreted as being egalitarian, as treating men and women equally.

Goldenberg faults historical-critical and theological methods which attempt to find and to return to the message of primitive Christianity. Assuming that this message was in fact egalitarian,\(^\text{12}\) to return Christianity to this state would require unraveling 2000 years of the Christian tradition. This, to Goldenberg, would alter Christianity, as we know it, to such an extent that it could no longer rightly be considered Christianity. In other words, any attempt to highlight strains of the biblical tradition that are overridden by that tradition, in essence, constitutes a departure from the biblical tradition.

From Goldenberg's perspective, attempts to change the gender of the deity through retranslation would also result ultimately in a religion that could not be called "Christian" for, as a consequence of that retranslation, the core symbolism of that religion would be changed. Regarding the many feminists who still claim the Bible as a whole is God-given but who recommend ignoring parts of the Bible or question just how much of it can be ignored, Goldenberg writes, "It is hard to deny that an eventual consequence of criticizing the correctness of any sacred text or tradition is to question why that text or tradition should be considered a divine authority at all."\(^\text{13}\)

Goldenberg also faults the canon-within-the-canonical approach. She specifically criticizes Russell's use of this

\(^{12}\) As indicated in Chapter 2, Pagels' recent research indicates the contrary.

\(^{13}\) *Changing of the Gods*, p. 13
approach, for it "retranslates, skips over or reinterprets parts of the Bible that do not support human liberation," and thereby overlooks the predominant (patriarchal) thrust of the Bible in order to highlight those themes that are acceptable to feminists. In other words, although Russell claims to hold faith in biblical witness, in order to do so she must "bend 'biblical witness' whenever the necessity of 'liberation' seems to demand it." Thus Goldenberg observes the paradoxical nature of Russell's position: she consciously uses experience as the yardstick that measures biblical truth, yet she attempts to justify this use of experience on the basis of the Bible itself.

[Russell] appears to be 'playing at the threshold of ecclesiastical authority when she states that "each person is free to choose the particular style that develops out of tradition, education and life experience". But she still says that the Bible and Christian tradition, must be used to endorse that freedom.

Goldenberg concludes that this paradoxical stance is required if a feminist wants to hold on to the Christian symbol system.

14 As we saw in Chapter 1, Russell uses the theme of human liberation as the standard by which she evaluates biblical texts, i.e., by which she determines her canon-within-the-canon.
15 Changing of the Gods, p. 21. This criticism echoes Fiorenza's criticism of canon within the canon—that it separates form and content. See In Memory of Her, pp. 15.
Goldenberg, therefore, sees attempts to minimize or overcome sexism in the Bible by any means to be a "self-deceptive" enterprise:

A culture that maintains a masculine image for its highest divinity cannot allow its women to experience themselves as the equals of its men....Women have to stop denying the sexism that lies at the root of the Jewish and Christian religions.\(^{18}\)

The assumption behind attempts to minimize or overcome sexism in the Bible is that editing the sexism out of the Bible "is not changing the meaning of the words...but instead is amplifying the meaning of the original words."\(^{19}\) Goldenberg notes that concern for preserving the "eternal validity" is basic to any reform that "purports" to be operating from within the Bible of the Church. Those who support such reforms, unlike Russell, refuse to acknowledge that they are, in fact elevating the authority of personal experience to the level of the authority of the text: "What they do not want to see is that when the imagined change is incorporated into official text it is treated as equal to the text."\(^{20}\) Goldenberg notes that such reformers are uncomfortable with what they are doing and stop short of achieving their goal in fear of moving "beyond the thresholds of authority of the Church and the Bible."

Goldenberg believes that most reformists unconsciously realize the threat their proposed reforms pose to Christianity—"that feminism [ultimately] implies the

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\(^{18}\) Ibid.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., p. 20, n. 16.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 20.
outright rejection or at least the relativization of all
to progress toward religions in which new images of modeled sacred by biblical tradition." Although the
Bible is seen by feminists as patriarchal and androcentric,
many find that renouncing the patriarchal tradition is too
frightening a declaration to make:

To progress toward religions in which new images of
women live and thrive we have to make a philosophical
leap entirely out of patriarchal structures. One of the
ways reformers avoid this rather frightening leap
is by retranslating the Bible.22

She finds that Trible explicitly acknowledges this anxiety:

If these [rejectionist] views are all which can be said
or, primarily what must be said, than I am of all women
most miserable. I face a terrible dilemma: Choose ye
this day whom you will serve: the God of the fathers or
the God of sisterhood. If the God of the fathers, then
the Bible supplies models for your slavery. If the God
of sisterhood, then you must reject patriarchal
religion and go forth without models to claim your
freedom.23

Goldenberg notes that Trible is wrong in saying feminist
work furnishes no models. The fact is that "sisterhood"
offers models, but these models are not considered
authoritative by the Christian tradition.

In sum, because rejectionist theologians find that the
core symbols of the biblical tradition are patriarchal, and
because they argue the inherent incompatibility of the Bible
and feminist hermeneutics, they pose a direct challenge to
all reformist endeavors. Goldenberg goes further to say
that, because Christianity and its symbol system are

21 The End of God, p. 77.
23 Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation" JAAR 41 (1972): 31, quoted in The End of
God, p. 77.
inextricably bound together, any attempt to reform Christianity, i.e., to change its symbol system, is in itself a movement away from Christianity. Thus rejectionists directly confront the problem in a way that causes apprehension for some reformists, e.g., Trible and Tolbert. Here an important distinction can be noted among reformist scholars, a distinction which corroborates the distinction indicated in Chapter 2. Reformists such as Trible and Tolbert are reaching the conclusion that they are stuck with the dilemma of biblical authority, that their methodology can take them no farther; others, such as Russell, Ruether and Fiorenza, still believe they have room to maneuver. Despite the criticisms from the rejectionists, the second group sees no problem with their approaches and methodologies. Whereas Russell admits and accepts the paradoxical nature of her approach, Ruether and Fiorenza do not think their attempts to recover or reform the biblical tradition have led them to a logical impasse. None of the scholars in the second group, however, see their work as leading them away from the Christian tradition. The work of Goldenberg highlights the irony of the position taken by this group: they have overtly subordinated the authority of the Bible to the authority of feminist experience, and this in itself constitutes a break from the tradition.

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The theological and philosophical challenges raised by Daly and Goldenberg are not the only ones to face those
feminists who wish to maintain the Bible as an authoritative tradition. The next section of this chapter will examine recent work with structuralist approaches that challenge the reformist literary approaches discussed in Chapter 2. Structuralist approaches suggest that the deep structures of biblical narratives are patriarchal and androcentric, and thereby raise serious doubts about the credibility of reformist literary approaches, which examine only the surface level of biblical texts.

C. NEW THEORETICAL CHALLENGE OF LITERARY CRITICISM TO THE FEMINIST FRAMEWORK OF AUTHORITY

1. STRUCTURALIST APPROACHES AND FEMINIST EXEGESIS

a) DAVID JOBLING

In light of the "present crisis of self-evident authority" of biblical texts Jobling questions whether it is proper or even possible for the reader to relate to the system of values of biblical texts and specifically asks, "Can a feminist do so with the Bible?" He suggests not:

...there are those who find it [reading the Bible] neither pleasurable nor approachable, who rather feel "stuck with it". I have the sense that structuralism's "hermeneutics of suspicion" holds peculiar potential for them.

25 Ibid.
Jobling finds a "profound connection" between structural methods and feminist hermeneutics, for both are based on a "hermeneutics of suspicion." He observes that one goal of the feminist movement is:

to show that how things now appear does not correspond to the nature of things— that the surface structures of the world are out of alignment with the deep structures.²⁶

On structuralism, Jobling writes that while it has not always avoided the dangers of reductionism and positivism, its intellectual foundation is found in the thought of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, which also established a critique of culture through "a hermeneutics of suspicion." These three "masters of suspicion" demonstrated the deceptiveness of human systems:

Such systems normally become elaborated by "natural," genetic, unconscious processes, to cover contradictions, logical flaws, inequities, etc., which it would be dangerous for the society or individual to confront directly. The "masters of suspicion" deconstruct [Jobling's emphasis] these systems from within.²⁷

Jobling, therefore, argues that structural analysis "necessarily and persistently" tends toward deconstruction.²⁸ For this reason, structuralism, according to Jobling, is a useful tool for feminist exegesis, and it should serve well the hermeneutical goals of feminist analysis.

²⁷ "Structuralism, Hermeneutics, and Exegesis," p. 142.
Jobling's analysis of Genesis 2-3 and other structural analyses of this text⁰⁹ indicate that the problem lies in the deep structures of the text, which cannot be altered by "rereading" surface details. Contrary to Trible's rhetorical exegesis of Genesis 2-3, Jobling's structural exegesis finds the text as wholly patriarchal. His deconstruction of the text, however, reveals that the text is totally unsuccessful in its attempt to make sense of patriarchy. Through deconstruction, he finds in the text:

a patriarchal mindset - tying itself in knots trying to account for woman and femaleness in a way that both makes sense and supports patriarchal assumptions.³⁰

For him, the text attempts to account for human experience by establishing "human as male," but the text fails to do so, for "humanity as male and female" inevitably asserts itself.³¹

While Jobling acknowledges his sympathy for Trible's goals, he explicitly challenges her approach to Genesis 2-3.³² His structural exegesis contradicts Trible's rhetorical exegesis on many significant details,³³ but the most serious challenge he raises is a practical one. He questions who, in a patriarchal culture, composed this

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³⁰ The Sense of Biblical Narrative, p. 43.
³¹ Ibid.
³² E.g., he challenges her interpretation of ha'adam as an undifferentiated "earth-creature" and her insistence on the equality of the woman's and man's offenses in eating the forbidden fruit. Ibid., p. 41.
³³ Ibid., pp. 41-42.
"feminist" story which Trible considers the text to be? He further questions whether it is realistic for Trible to argue that a feminist story serves as the basic myth of origins of a patriarchal culture.\textsuperscript{34} Jobling also challenges the inconsistency of Trible's approach. If in her readings of other biblical narratives, e.g., the Book of Ruth, she admits that it is a "man's world" which tells stories about women in the Bible,\textsuperscript{35} he asks, why is it not the same "man's world" which depicts the creation narrative?

In sum, Jobling argues that "positive" aspects of a biblical text, i.e., those aspects which appear to present an equal relationship between man and woman, cannot be found on the surface level, rather only through deconstruction of the deep levels of these texts. For this reason he argues that, although structuralist methods have not been used for feminist exegesis, these methods not only offer great potential for feminist analysis of biblical texts, but they also can resolve the dilemma facing feminist reformist scholars:

...feminist theology is not forced to choose between rejection of the Bible as wholly patriarchal and denial that the Bible is wholly patriarchal. The third option is to accept the Bible as everywhere patriarchal, but as everywhere expressive, for that very reason, of the bad conscience that goes along with trying to make sense of patriarchalism; and conceptually vulnerable, therefore, to the kind of deconstructive literary approach which I have adopted here.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p. 42.
\textsuperscript{35} Rhetoric, p. 166.
\textsuperscript{36} The Sense of Biblical Narrative, p. 43. Jobling's emphasis.
b) PAMELA J. MILNE

The work of Pamela J. Milne challenges the hope that Jobling's work raises for reformists. She argues that Jobling's conclusion — that Genesis 2-3 is male mythology and that the Bible is everywhere patriarchal — poses a direct challenge to reformist strategies. Not only does his feminist structuralist analysis of Genesis 2-3 confirm that methods which "reread" surface details cannot overcome the patriarchal and androcentric nature of the Bible, Milne also argues that the deconstructionist feminist analysis proposed by Jobling will not aid the reformist position and that it in fact supports the position which maintains the Bible cannot be rehabilitated as a spiritual source for feminists.

On the one hand, the goal of feminist poststructuralist approaches is change:

Feminist poststructuralism, then, is a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change.38

On the other hand, however, biblical texts cannot be changed because they are protected by a closed canon. Thus feminist poststructuralist approaches, when applied to the Bible, cannot achieve their goal since they cannot alter the canonical collection in any way. They can reveal the patriarchal nature of the Bible, but can do nothing to

change it. For this reason, Milne finds Jobling's proposal offers no solution for the dilemma faced by feminists in biblical religions. Since the biblical canon cannot be changed, the dilemma to choose or reject the Bible cannot be overcome by structuralism or by poststructuralism. Milne indicates that a feminist poststructuralist approach can change the way feminists relate to and understand the Bible, but it cannot change the Bible's patriarchal nature.

Milne further demonstrates that if, by his proposal, Jobling is suggesting that feminists accept a patriarchal Bible as a spiritual source, he exposes his analysis to serious hermeneutical problems. His deconstruction of patriarchal structures exposes their illogic and reveals that they in fact fail in their attempt to make sense of patriarchy, but it nonetheless clearly demonstrates that the traditional patriarchal interpretations are warranted by the text itself and cannot be attributed exclusively to the bias of the interpreters over the centuries. Milne questions how patriarchy exposed as illogical and in sensible can be any more acceptable than patriarchy unexposed. On this she concludes:

If anything, Jobling's work has made it even more difficult, if not impossible, to reclaim this biblical tradition as a positive spiritual resource for women.

Milne locates Jobling's approach among the growing number of feminist approaches which indicate that the

40 Ibid.
biblical text itself is patriarchal but which cannot fully overcome the Bible's patriarchal nature. She concludes that since no feminist approach has yet provided an adequate solution to the dilemma faced by feminists in biblical religion, it is time to look more closely at the issue of biblical authority, "to look more honestly and directly at what it means to call apparently non-reformable patriarchal texts like the story of Adam and Eve 'sacred.'" 41

c) ESTHER FUCHS

The work of Esther Fuchs exemplifies the kind of literary deconstruction advocated by Jobling, but also demonstrates the limitations of the application of this approach to the Bible indicated by Milne. Fuchs uncovers the patriarchal bias of biblical texts but makes no attempt to rehabilitate the text. 42 The influence of the Bible on the present state of sexual politics being universally recognized by feminist critics, her method seeks to analyze "biblical sexual politics." 43 Her method focuses on the

41 Ibid.
42 In her work, Fuchs makes no reference to the issue of biblical authority. Rather she refers to the Bible as an influential document for Western culture.
43 Fuchs' definition of sexual politics, "the power-structured relations between men and women and more specifically to the economic, social, and ideological arrangements whereby males have traditionally controlled females," is based on Kate Millet, Sexual Politics (New York: Ballantine, 1969), pp. 31-81. "Biblical sexual politics is defined as the ways in which the Bible promotes the idea of woman's subordination to man. Esther Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible," in Feminist Perspectives on
literary strategies used by biblical narratives in order to foster and perpetuate its patriarchal bias. These literary strategies can be seen as manifestations of the patriarchal deep structures found in Jobling's analysis.

Fuchs' method finds that female characters are for the most part type-cast. They are important only to the extent that they serve the patriarchal ideology. They are ideologically contrived to advance the patriarchal plot and are confined to stereotyped roles which are always subordinate to the male protagonist. Granted, all literary characters are ideologically contrived, male role models nevertheless are judged always in terms of their relations with Yahweh and female role models are usually judged in terms of their relations with men. Thus female characters of biblical narrative reflect literary flatness; they are depicted in such a way that they reveal only what their male creators want them to reveal and not women's authentic lives. For example, Fuchs finds that in biblical narratives the role of mother is the most valued role a woman can hold. She also finds that deceptiveness is a common attribute of female characters, no matter what role they play in biblical narratives. But when the fact is uncovered that patriarchal society debars women from direct action,


46 Ibid.
this depiction of women can be seen as an ideological tool which conveys suspicion and distrust of women and which validates women's subordination through discriminatory literary techniques. Awareness of this double standard indicates a gynophobic patriarchal attitude and not a moral deficiency in women.  

Fuchs observes that although few feminists would argue that biblical narratives are not inspired by patriarchal ideology, feminist scholarship has not yet analyzed the literary manifestations of patriarchal ideology. The work of Daly and Goldenberg, as we saw above, has exposed the inherent patriarchal nature (and its implications) of the Judeo-Christian tradition, from a philosophical and theological perspective. From a literary perspective, Fuchs demonstrates that all biblical texts, even those which appear to treat women favourably, are in fact elements in a network of social control which reinforces the values of the patriarchal system. Implicit in Fuchs' work is the contention that, in their search for a positive feminist evaluation of the biblical text, reformers tend to ignore the manifestations and implications of the patriarchal nature of the Bible.

49 Ibid.
Up to this point we have examined literary theories which focus on the text and have seen the problems which they raise specifically for reformist literary methods, and in a general way for all reformist methods. Now we will shift to theories which focus on the role of reader in the interpretive process. Due to the growing awareness of the standpoint dependent nature of the meaning and authority of biblical texts, it is important to consider theories which focus on the role of the reader in establishing the meaning of biblical texts. These theories, however, not only raise additional problems for reformist methods, which seek to function within the limits of biblical authority, but they also call into question the entire concept of biblical authority.

2. "EXTRA-TEXTUAL" APPROACHES

a) INTRODUCTION

Recent trends in literary theory and linguistic theory shed new light on the issue of biblical authority and pose new problems for reformist approaches. Both literary and linguistic theorists are calling into question the standard communication model upon which traditional methods are based: Sender, Message, Addressee—in which the message is decoded on the basis of a code shared by both sender and
addressee. These new theories find the standard model too simplistic to describe the actual functioning of communicative intercourse. Umberto Eco proposes a model\footnote{Umberto Eco, \textit{The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), p. 6.} which takes into account the complexities of communication. (See an adaptation of this model on the following page.) This model is significant, for it demonstrates the subjectivity inherent to all discourse, and as Eco notes, casts doubts on the notion of an "objective," implicit reading of any text.\footnote{Ibid., p. 5.}

We will examine two approaches which are concerned specifically with the unavoidable subjectivity of all written discourse. Reader-oriented theory focuses on the relationship between the reader and the text and thereby reflects a movement in literary theory from intrinsic criticism to reader-oriented criticism. (Reader-oriented theory concentrates on the operations depicted on the right side of Eco's model.) Speech act theory focuses on the relationship between author and text and thus reflects a shift in linguistic theory from syntax-based, context independent concept of language to one that is semantic-based and context dependent. (Speech act theory is concerned primarily with the operations depicted on the left side of Eco's model.)
AN ADAPTATION OF ECO'S MODEL OF THE SEMANTICO-PRACTICAL PROCESS
By definition, reader-oriented theory considers the text to be the result of an interaction between writer and reader. Speech act theory tends to consider literature to be an observable and classifiable object of knowledge. While the primary areas of focus of these two emerging theories are different, both theories seek the meaning of a text in "extra-textual" areas: both reader-oriented theory and speech act theory support a view of literature as a linguistic activity which cannot be understood apart from its context and the context of the persons participating in it. As we shall see, these theories also support the notion of interpretive communities. This common ground between these two theories is most significant to the issue of biblical authority and, therefore, will be the area of concentration for the remainder of this chapter.

53 Some speech act critics, such as Susan Lanser, argue that unspoken conventions and implications are as intrinsic to the text as are the denotations of the words or the rules of formal grammar, and that the distinction between a formal theory of language and a theory of language use does not imply a distinction between text and extra-text. On this, see Susan Lanser, "(Feminist) Criticism in the Garden: Inferring Genesis 2–3, " Semeia 41 (1988): 71. For the purposes of this study, however, "extra-textual" will apply to all aspects of the text which cannot be found within the words on the page or in the deep structures of the text.
b) **READER-ORIENTED THEORY**

Reader-oriented theory applies to an aggregate of literary approaches that focus on the reading process.\(^5\) These approaches can be categorized as "reader-oriented" because they all hold the phenomenological assumption that it is impossible to separate the perceiver from the perceived,\(^6\) an assumption which is also basic to feminist critical theory.\(^7\)

Reader-oriented theory defines the meaning of a work of literature as the product of the interaction between the text and the reader. This theory thereby rejects the autonomy of the text and instead emphasizes, to varying degrees, the dependence of the text on the reader's participation. Reader-oriented theory thus replaces the examination of a text for the sake of finding its meaning with a discussion of the actual process of reading that text.\(^8\)

Terry Eagleton notes that, according to reader-oriented theory, the text is seen as merely a "series of cues to the reader, invitations to construct a piece of language into

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\(^{55}\) Stephen Mailloux, "Reader-Response Criticism?" *Genre* 10 (1977): 413.


\(^{57}\) E.g., see Setel, pp. 38-39.

meaning," and that the reader is necessary to "concretize" the literary work, "which is in itself no more than a chain of organized black marks on a page."\textsuperscript{59} In concretizing a work, the reader-oriented theory critic focuses on gaps or indeterminacies in the text, i.e., elements whose meaning depends on the reader's interpretation. The text calls for effort on the reader's part to "normalize" the indeterminacies or to give them stable meaning.

Eagleton, however, also observes that indeterminacies can be interpreted in a number of different, often mutually conflicting ways. The extent to which the text itself determines a stable meaning is a topic of ongoing debate among reader-oriented theory critics.\textsuperscript{60} Some contend meaning is found within the text, and others contend that, since there is no text in the first place without the reader's participation, the meaning of the text is ultimately found within the reader. Robert Fowler clearly states the issue facing reader-oriented theory critics: "does the text control the reader, or does the reader control the text?"\textsuperscript{61}

Thus two general positions can be identified on this issue. One position sees the reader as "servant" of the text, and the other sees the reader as "master" of the

\textsuperscript{59} Eagleton, p. 76.
\textsuperscript{60} That there are factions emerging in reader-oriented criticism, for Stanley Fish, "is sure sign of its having achieved the status of an orthodoxy." See his \textit{Is There a Text in This Class?} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 344.
Roman Ingarden and Wolfgang Iser represent the position which sees the reader as servant of the text. Ingarden considers literary works as organic wholes, containing indeterminacies, and expects the reader to fill in these indeterminacies in such a way as to maintain the organic unity of the text. For Ingarden, the role of the reader is to concretize the text "correctly." This position clearly maintains the idea of a monolithic reading of a text.

Wolfgang Iser represents a somewhat more liberal position and stresses the interaction between text and reader. He grants the reader a greater degree of co-partnership with the text and allows different readers the freedom to concretize the work in different ways. Thus, for Iser, there is no single correct interpretation which will exhaust the semantic potential of a text, yet he maintains that the reader must construct the text so as to render it internally consistent. In other words, the parts must be made to adapt coherently to the whole. In the process of interpretation, the "openness" of the work is gradually eliminated, as the reader comes to construct a working hypothesis which can account for and render mutually coherent the greatest number of the work's elements.

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62 The terms "servant" and "master" are used to clarify the distinction between the two contrasting roles the reader is seen as playing by recent literary theories. On this see Fowler, Ibid., p. 6.
63 Eagleton, pp. 80-81.
64 "Text and reader converge by way of a situation which depends on both for its realization." But "if the literary communication is to be successful, it must bring with it all
literary scholars, however, criticize Iser's position for it presupposes both the willingness and the ability of a reader to assume the role of the "ideal" reader for whom a given text was intended.

From Ingarden and Iser we can see that, although to varying degrees, the primary focus of critics in this camp is more the text than the reader. They ascribe to the text greater power in determining meaning than to the reader. Since they analyze the mechanisms or codes within the text which manipulate the response of the reader, their approach is reminiscent of formalism, and thereby gives added support to Milne's development of Jobling's insights, and also lays the groundwork for speech act theory.

The other approach to reader-oriented theory focuses more on the reader and less on the text, and sees the reader as master of the text. Since the reader has an active role in the process of "creating" the text, the meaning of the text is relative to the reader's horizon of expectation and perception of reality. Thus, for this approach, no interpretation of a text can be objective. All interpretations are shaped by the presuppositions of the reader. This camp of reader-oriented critics elicits and


Eagleton, pp. 84-86; Iser, p. x; Mailloux, "Reader-Response Criticism?" pp. 413-416.
examines those presuppositions, and also examines the criteria that explicitly and implicitly determine whether or not an interpretation is "acceptable."

Since for this camp the reader in essence creates the literary work, no reading, no matter how outlandish, is inherently incorrect. Consequently, this approach to reader-oriented theory has been criticized for granting too much authority to the reader, for opening the door to literary anarchy. Some interpretations are inevitably given precedence over others, however; some interpretations are considered more acceptable or authoritative than others. Here we might ask what is the definition of acceptable and who establishes this definition. According to Stanley Fish, the reader must follow the current rules of the literary institution in order to render an acceptable reading. Similarly, Stephen Mailloux maintains that the reader follows interpretive conventions which, he admits, are ultimately established by the interpretive community. Thus even in this camp, there are some limits to the reader’s freedom to interpret the text.

Fish and Mailloux have developed social models within reader-oriented theory that demonstrate that, while the reader controls the text, the interpretive community controls the reader. Fish finds that there are mechanisms

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67 Fowler, p. 14; Eagleton, pp. 82-85.
68 Mailloux, *Interpretive Conventions*, p. 147.
69 Fish, p. 347.
70 Mailloux, *Interpretive Conventions*, pp. 147, 149.
for rejecting "unacceptable" interpretations. These mechanisms cannot be found within the text because, according to reader-oriented theory, the text is actually a consequence of the interpretation.\textsuperscript{71} Rather they are found in the currently recognized interpretive strategies for producing texts.\textsuperscript{72} Mailloux calls these mechanisms interpretive conventions: shared ways of making sense of reality. They are "group-licensing strategies" for providing "acceptable and approximating translations in the interpretive process."\textsuperscript{73} Fish goes so far as to say that agreement on particular interpretations is testimony to the power of the interpretive community to "constitute objects upon which its members can agree."\textsuperscript{74} Clearly the work of Fish and Mailloux demonstrates that the criteria for producing a "normative" interpretation or an "acceptable" range of interpretations are established, not by the text, but by the interpretive community.

\textsuperscript{71} Fish, p. 340. This point certainly should cause many exegesists to reconsider the distinction between eisegesis and exegesis which, to date, has been crucial to biblical scholarship. On this see pp. 353-354.

\textsuperscript{72} Fish, p. 347.

\textsuperscript{73} "An acceptable and approximating translation" is Mailloux's definition of interpretation. Mailloux, \textit{Interpretive Conventions}, p. 149. In light of the political nature and constitutive basis of hermeneutics, he qualifies his definition: "(1) every translation is actually a construction producing what it claims to approximate; (2) the position from which any translation is judged to be a close or remote approximation depends entirely on the interpretive conventions constituting that position; and (3) the acceptability of any translation is determined by the interpretive conventions with authority in a historical community." p. 201, n. 13.

\textsuperscript{74} Fish, p. 338.
Fish and Mailloux have thereby enlarged the scope of the issue faced by critics who espouse reader oriented theory, from the two-sided relationship between text and reader to a three-sided relationship of text, reader, and the context of the interpretive community. Here we are approaching the point where reader-oriented theory can inform our inquiry into the issue of biblical authority. The social models devised by Fish and Mailloux take into account three considerations crucial to the present study: the criteria that define, implicitly and explicitly, acceptable interpretations; who establishes the criteria; and the effects of these criteria on the process of reading.\textsuperscript{75} The dynamics of the interpretive models developed by Fish and Mailloux are strongly suggestive of the dynamics of the circular way in which the biblical canon functions. The interpretive community defines what the text is and prescribes how the reader should read it; the text (as defined by the community) shapes the reader and "constrains the critical gaze of the community"; the reader (as instructed by the community) construes the text and contributes to the evolution of the interpretive community.\textsuperscript{76}

Although Mailloux argues for a reader-oriented approach to literary criticism based on a social model of intention

\textsuperscript{75} Since we have established, in Chapter 1, that the Bible apparently does not hold authority on its own accord, rather it is granted authority by the community of believers, the social model of reader-oriented theory is most relevant to this study.

\textsuperscript{76} Fowler, p. 14.
and convention, he acknowledges that "all we have are interpretive grounds for our proposals, and their acceptability must be according to beliefs already in place." Thus Mailloux's reader-oriented criticism tends toward metacriticism. He is actually arguing for the relativity of all interpretations, and is quick to admit that his and all interpretations are always based on interpretive assumptions and strategies and not on some "bedrock of uninterpreted reality." Thus his reader-oriented analysis and theory, as well as all practical and theoretical discourse, are not objective statements but persuasive interpretations. He concludes that the textual elements and reader activities upon which he focuses "are not discovered but constituted by [his own] interpretive conventions":

If I had not proceeded with the conventions of this type of reader-response criticism, I would have proceeded with other interpretive conventions based on different assumptions about readers... and about texts.... This is simply to say that there are no basic facts of reading available independent of interpretation.

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In sum, we have seen two general trends of thought within reader-oriented theory. One considers the reader as

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77 Mailloux, *Interpretive Conventions*, p. 206.
78 Ibid., p. 13.
79 Fish posits a similar argument. *Is There a Text in This Class?* pp. 340-342.
80 Mailloux, *Interpretive Conventions*, p. 206. Fish, p. 167, reaches a similar conclusion: "What is really there" is always a product of the procedures used to describe it.
servant of the text and focuses on the strategies or codes within the text which manipulate the response of the reader. While this approach takes into account the role of the reader in the interpretive process, it nevertheless considers meaning to be inherent to the text. Thus the text itself sets the limits for what is an acceptable interpretation and what is not. Later in this chapter we will examine speech act theory, which builds on the foundation set by this approach to reader-oriented theory.

The other approach to reader-oriented theory sees the reader more as master of the text and focuses on the presuppositions of the reader and on interpretive conventions. Since this approach considers the meaning of a text to be dependent on the reader, it might be seen as giving support to the position of those reformists who argue that the patriarchal nature of the Bible is largely the result of its history of biased interpretations. This approach does so, theoretically, but in practice, interpretive communities (described in the work of Fish and Mailloux) establish the limits of what is an acceptable reading, and what is not. Insofar as this concept points to the social or political determinants of the process of interpretation, it relates, at least in a general way, to the problem facing all feminist biblical interpretations: since the predominant interpretive communities of biblical texts are patriarchal, feminist interpretations are not considered acceptable.
The concept of interpretive communities also provides another perspective on the argument of those who find the locus of biblical authority in the faith community. This concept, however, in its recognition of the arbitrariness of all interpretations and of the power of social or political influences to determine what is, or is not, an acceptable interpretation, not only corroborates our discussion in Chapter 4 of the political nature of the biblical canon, but also poses a further challenge to the entire notion of biblical authority. This challenge will be taken up in Chapter 4.

Before moving on to speech act theory, which grows out of the reader-as-servant-of-the-text approach to reader-oriented theory, let us examine the work of Mieke Bal, which will serve as an example of the reader-as-master approach.

**MIEKE BAL**

In her study of biblical love stories, Mieke Bal argues for the arbitrariness of all readings. The gaps, or indeterminacies, of biblical texts, for her, do not allow for the consistently patriarchal and androcentric interpretations given these texts throughout history. She demonstrates that these gaps have given rise to a variety of interpretations of biblical texts in Christian, Western

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culture, but this variety is marked by a "monolithically misogynist line of interpretations" of biblical stories and a denial of the importance of women.

Her method, therefore, is "confrontational": it plays the ambiguities the text allows against the "disambiguated" readings readers are prone to produce. Her method ultimately finds that patriarchy is not within the text itself, rather that it is in the text's history of biased interpretations.

She has two basic hermeneutical goals: to break open the "too-monolithic readings projected on the Hebrew love stories" in order to demonstrate that life, love, and women are what one wants them to be, they are not defined by the text; and to show that the tools of literary theory can be used to point out the political underpinnings of seemingly "neutral" readings.82

She demonstrates that patriarchal and androcentric readings of biblical texts are not unproblematically established and that the text allows for alternate readings. She argues that there is no overall ideology within the Bible:

What went wrong in the history of the reception of these stories is precisely the repression...of the heterogeneous ideology of the text, which had to be turned into a monolithic one. Textual subjectivity had to be replace with the subject of the text.83

She examines the relationship between ideological dominance and its manifestation in biblical interpretations:

82 Ibid., p. 132.
83 Ibid., p. 131.
Texts trigger readings; that is what they are: the occasion of a reaction. The feeling that there is a text in support of one's view makes texts such efficient ideological weapons. Every reading is different from, and in contact with, the text.84

On these same grounds, however, Bal finds that Trimage, in her reading of Genesis 2–3, is "taken in by her religious feelings."85 Despite Trimage's feminist and literary intentions, Bal argues that Trimage tends toward theological solutions to the text's indeterminacies and also overrates the role of Yahweh at the expense of Yahweh's status as a literary character in the narrative.

Bal is forthright about the presuppositions and intentions which guide her work: First, she is not interested in the issue of biblical authority, for only when the Bible is seen as authoritative can it also be seen as a "feminist resource" or as a "sexist manifesto". Instead, she is interested in the Bible as "a strong representative instance of what language and literature can do to culture, specifically to its articulation of gender."86 Secondly, Bal does not intend to restore the "original" meaning to the texts she analyzes, nor does she seek to establish a "privileged" meaning. She admits that:

there can be no doubt that my interpretations are thoroughly anachronistic if one wishes to find the "original meaning" of the stories.... My readings present an alternative to other readings, not a "correct," let alone the "only possible" interpretation of what the texts "really say."87

84 Ibid., p. 132.
85 Ibid., p. 124.
86 Ibid., p. 1.
87 Ibid., p. 132.
Thirdly, she does not seek to establish narrative theory as the authority that fixes meaning as opposed to the "divine voice." Rather her method intends to establish dialogue between the two and disturb the presuppositions of both.

Although Bal states she is not interested in the issue of biblical authority, her method can be used to support the position of reformists insofar as it does not locate androcentrism in the biblical text itself but rather in the text's history of biased interpretations. By the same token, however, insofar as her method or any reader-oriented theory method locates the source of meaning of texts within the reader, it dislodges the notion of authority residing in the text itself and thereby challenges the entire concept of biblical authority.

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In Bal's work we have seen an application of reader-oriented theory which views the reader as master of the text. Next we will turn to speech act theory, which sees the reader as servant of the text.
c) SPEECH ACT THEORY

Speech act theory is a philosophical theory of language use, originated by John Austin and John Searle. This theory is based upon the premise that all utterances are produced by an illocutionary act, which is "the performance of an act in saying something as opposed to the performance of an act of saying something." The meaning of an utterance is not so much dependent upon its contents as upon the presence of certain conditions in its social context, or the intentions of its speaker. Stanley Cavell describes the nature of language from a speech act perspective:

Saying something is never merely saying something, but is saying something with a certain tune and at a proper cue while executing the appropriate business, the sound uttered is only a salience of what is going on when we talk.

Speech act theory understands language to be not the symbol, word, or sentence but rather an ingredient of a larger social context: "the production or issuance of the symbol or word or sentence in the performance of the speech act." In other words, meaning is a function of the

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89 Like reader-oriented theory, speech act theory is not a single unified theory, but a diverse array of approaches, all of which have grown out of Austin’s concept of the "illocutionary act." Differences among speech act theory approaches stem from, and reflect differences in emphasis regarding the status of conditions, conventions, and rules that constitute the context of the speech act. On this, see Hugh C. White, "Introduction: Speech Act Theory and Literary Criticism," Semeia 41 (1988): 41.
context in which linguistic communication is performed. Under certain conditions a particular utterance has a particular meaning. This understanding of language thus implies that meaning is created not only by decoding signs but by drawing on contextual assumptions in order to make inferences.  

A classic example of the importance of inference in determining meaning is found in the following exchange:

A: I have a headache.
B: I have an aspirin.  

If language is treated as a formal code, B's statement is taken to be merely an indication that B possesses an aspirin. According to the rules of inference within speech act theory, however, B is not only indicating that he or she possesses an aspirin, but B is also indicating a willingness to make that aspirin available to A. In the context of A's statement, B's statement constitutes an offer. Thus the meaning of B's statement is dependent on the context created by A's statement.

Hugh C. White explains that literary critics are attracted to speech act theory for two basic reasons. First, speech act theory makes possible a functional approach to literature and replaces ontological arguments with functional arguments. Secondly, speech act theory

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Lanser, p. 70.

See Pratt, pp. 153-155; Lanser, p. 71.

White, p. 2.

The importance of functional analysis over ontological analysis is also advocated by anthropologist Clifford
reconnects a literary work with its concrete context and moves it away from formalist approaches that detach it from its history and social matrix. It reintegrates literature "into the broader scheme of our verbal and social activities." Here we can see that speech act theory provides an approach to biblical exegesis whose starting point is at the level of practical considerations, such as Jobling’s criticism of Trible’s analysis of Genesis 2–3: who in a patriarchal culture would compose the "feminist" story that she takes it to be?

Speech act theory thus expands the notion of text from the formalist concept of words-on-the-page to the speech act concept of verbal performance, whose potential for meaning is determined by co-texts and contexts. The meaning of a text, therefore, is communicated, not simply through the reproduction of sounds and words, but through "a many-faceted act of reconstruction involving many sets of conventions unspoken but assumed." By nature language leaves unsaid much of what is needed for understanding. It gives rise to indeterminacies that need to be resolved.

Geertz, who writes: "The thing to ask about...[types of human behaviour] is not what their ontological status is....The thing to ask is what their import is: what it is, ridicule or challenge, irony or anger, snobbery or pride, that, in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said." The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 10.


Ibid.
Thus speech act theory, like reader-oriented theory considers indeterminacies, or gaps, to be a basic constituent of communication.99 Speech act theory, however, provides tools not only for recognizing and analyzing the gaps in discourse, but also for ascribing meaning to these gaps. Wolfgang Iser finds the foundation for these rules lies in contextual assumptions:

1) The implications of the utterance are the productive prerequisite for its comprehension....2) The very fact that a speech act automatically carries implications with it means that the fulfillment of the underlying intention of that speech act cannot be guaranteed by language alone.100

Contextual assumptions, however, comprise a problematic area for speech act theorists when their theory is applied to written texts. According to speech act theory, meaning is dependent on contextual knowledge, which includes:

- social custom (including what John Searle calls "institutional facts": the legal system, the monetary system), standard locutions, grammatical principles, cultural attitudes, common experience...and the immediate situation in which the language is used.101

Susan Lanser asks, whose social custom, grammatical principles, cultural attitudes and common experience one is reading from?102 This question points to two apparent weaknesses in speech act theory approaches to literature that have not escaped the attention of its critics:103 the need to establish the intention of the text (intentional

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99 Iser, p. 59.
100 Ibid.
103 E.g., Eagleton, p. 119; Culler, p. 128; Fish, p. 342.
fallacy); and the need to establish the original context, which is lacking in written discourse.

It is precisely from these two areas of apparent weakness, however, that Daniel Patte foresees, in "speech act exegesis" of biblical texts, a potential for dealing with the phenomenon of subjectivity in a way previously unavailable in literary-critical and historical-critical methods. Speech act exegesis promises to take into account dimensions of the meaning of biblical texts which have been neglected by traditional methods.\(^{104}\)

As long as we refuse to make the study of the subjectivity and the intentionality of the author a legitimate part of our critical investigation, we simply pretend that we can spontaneously apprehend them correctly! Actually, we occult this important dimension of meaning. A critical study of the intentionality of a text will allow us to recover it. For this purpose, unlike the spontaneous filling in of the ellipsis of live communication, we need to make a self-conscious use of the rules which govern intentionality.\(^{105}\)

Thus for speech act theorists, subjectivity is a process which can be studied.\(^{106}\)

Mailloux argues that intention in literary acts can be recovered only through communicative conventions. Only to the extent that intention is expressed or manifested conventionally can it be recovered.\(^{107}\) But he notes the dialectical relationship between intention and convention:

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\(^{105}\) Patte, p. 98.

\(^{106}\) Patte, p. 97.

\(^{107}\) Mailloux, *Interpretive Conventions*, pp. 152, 93-125.
in order to recognize authorial intention, the reader must share the author's communicative conventions, and to know the specific conventions being involved, the reader must recognize the author's intention.

Both Mailloux and Patte argue that speech act conventions and literary reading conventions continually interact at all levels to constitute the reader's interpretation of a literary text. They are the best evidence upon which to base an inference about authorial intention. Here we are back to the conclusion reached by Fish and Mailloux: socially determined conventions. Reading conventions, as shared hermeneutic strategies, we have examined in our discussion of reader-oriented theory; let us now turn to the ways in which speech act conventions point to authorial intention.

Jonathan Culler finds that shared conventions of literary communication determine the range of intended reader response to a text: "To intend a meaning is to postulate reactions of an imagined reader who has assimilated the relevant conventions." This, of course,

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108 Ibid., p. 102; Patte 91.
109 Mailloux, p. 102.
110 Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 30, quoted in Mailloux, p. 103. On this Umberto Eco writes: "To make his [sic] text communicative, the author has to assume that the ensemble of codes he [sic] relies upon is the same as that shared by his [sic] possible reader. The author has thus to foresee a model of the possible reader...supposedly able to deal interpretively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them." *The Role of the Reader: Exploration in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 7.
requires communicative conventions common to, and accepted by, both speaker and recipient, and a willingness of both to participate in the speech act. But since the speech act is divorced from its original context in literary texts, how can communicative conventions be common to speaker and recipient? Clearly a literary work cannot control and delimit its meaning to the extent that speakers can in face-to-face conversation.

While there are indeed differences in the sender-text-audience relationships between the written and oral modes, for speech act literary critics, the importance of the communicators does not diminish in the shift from speech to writing. For them, the text itself encodes a communicating voice. Examining a text in terms of language use both gives the reader insight into the perspective suggested by the text and enables the reader "to create a profile of the speaker's voice in relationship to the discourse act, its propositional content, and its audience." Since the reader receives a message divorced from its originator, however, speech act theorists acknowledge that the reader must make an extremely complex set of inferences about the narrator on the basis of the message itself, as determined by the reader's construal of contextual implications. In essence:

the reader builds on his [sic] tacit knowledge of the conventions--past and present, actual and possible--for.

111 Iser, p. 69.
112 Eagleton, p. 119.
illocutionary acts, and what he [sic] builds is an image of the world implied by the acts that constitute the work.\textsuperscript{114}

This is clearly the case with biblical scholarship. All scholars agree that the original context and linguistic code of biblical texts will never be fully known.\textsuperscript{115} As the scholar attempts to reconstruct the context in which a biblical text was produced, he or she implicitly constitutes what seems to be its probable context. In traditional methods, literary-critical or historical-critical, however, the context in which the text is read is seldom considered to be a factor in establishing the intentions of the text.\textsuperscript{116}

Here reader-oriented theory informs speech act theory. Reader-oriented theory makes explicit the reader's input in constituting (i.e., speculating on) the text's original context or intentions. The reader's context in which the text is reproduced is instrumental in assaying the context in which the text was originally produced.\textsuperscript{117} Assumptions of readers serve as filters that obscure certain observations and foreground others. Thus every reading both creates and is created by its context -- no uncontextual


\textsuperscript{116} E.g., see Sternberg, p. 10.

\textsuperscript{117} Lanser, "(Feminist) Criticism in the Garden," p. 76.
reading is possible. A piece of discourse with an apparently stable meaning can be uprooted by supplying a new interpretive context, as witnessed in the work of Trible and Bal. Differences in interpretations, therefore, can be attributed both to the degree to which context is brought to bear on the reading and to the kind of context the reading creates.\footnote{118}

Like all verbal discourses, then, literature reflects a relationship between sender(s) and receiver(s) interacting with a "message" or text.\footnote{119} Speech act theory provides analytical tools for interpreting biblical texts which take into account the subjectivity of both the sender and receiver.

SUSAN LANSER

The work of Susan Lanser reveals the theoretical problems speech act theory raises for reformist methods. Her method is critical not only of the context implied by the text, but also of the subjectivity of the exegete in determining that context. Her application of speech act

\footnote{118} Ibid., p. 77.
\footnote{119} Lanser, The Narrative Act, p. 54. In our discussion of reader-oriented theory, we found a tripartite relationship: text, reader, (meeting in) the interpretive community. In speech act theory, we see a different tripartite relationship: sender, receiver, (converging over), a text/message. Thus reader-oriented theory focuses on the context brought to the text, and speech act theory focuses on both the context within the text and the context brought to the text.
theory to Genesis 2-3\(^{120}\) uncovers serious considerations overlooked by reformists in their feminist-positive interpretations of this text.

Lanser specifically criticizes the work of Trible and Bal, for it is based on the assumption that language is a formal code in which meaning is determined only by syntax and the grammatical properties of words. She argues that, in order to attain a feminist-positive reading of Genesis 2-3, they both press a formal theory of language beyond its limits. Lanser instead draws on a theory of language use in which meaning always depends on specific contexts and in which the process of inference plays a powerful role. She argues the role of inference as a corrective to the notion, held by reformists such as Trible and Bal, that literary discourse is "privileged beyond the conditions in which communication ordinarily takes place."\(^{121}\) For her, a theory of language use, which takes into account the role of inference in the construction of meaning, could not render a reading of Genesis 2-3 as a non-sexist text.

An example of the challenge speech act theory poses for Trible and Bal is seen in Lanser’s interpretation of *ha'adam*. Even though the grammatical gender of *ha'adam* is masculine, Trible and Bal argue that *ha'adam*, the primordial human, represents an "earth creature" without gender. They contend that gender comes into being only with the


\(^{121}\) Ibid., p. 78.
subsequent creation of woman, and *ha'adam*, then, is initially masculine in gender only, not in sexual identity. Bal explains that traditional interpretations, which take the primordial human to be male, are based on unfounded assumptions: "what makes readers assume this creature is male?... Unable to read an unfulfilled character, they supply the missing features."  

According to speech act theory, Lanser argues, the reader infers the creature is male precisely because this is implied by the text. When a being assumed to be a human is introduced into a narrative, that being is assumed to have both grammatical and sexual gender. By implication, then, the masculine form, *ha'adam*, and its associated masculine pronouns define *ha'adam* as male. The standard implication is that a living creature named with masculine pronouns will be male, and furthermore, since the creature being created as helper is woman, the creature for and from whom she has been created is already man.  

Thus, in terms of a theory of language as a code or system of signs independent of the persons using this code, Lanser finds their interpretation correct. But in terms of a theory of language use, the conclusions of Tribe and Bal are inadequate. On these same grounds, Lanser challenges several other aspects of their interpretations which

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123 Ibid., pp. 70, 72.
ultimately make unviable Trible's conclusion that Genesis 2-3 is a feminist story and Bal's conclusion that androcentric interpretations of Genesis 2-3 are the result of interpreter's biases and not of the text itself.

In sum, Lanser argues that since what is meant can never be totally translated into what is said, any utterance -- oral or written -- is bound to contain implications. In contexts as diverse as daily conversation and formal texts, the meaning of an utterance is a function not simply of what is said, but of what is said and of what is implicated. It is these implications which necessitate interpretation. The Bible, then, requires attention not only to its formal structures but also to the acts of reading that "its performance ordinarily entails." Thus Lanser concludes that the esoteric readings of Genesis 2-3, such as those of Trible and Bal, detach the text from its place in the cultural intertext of human history.

In Genesis 2-3, Lanser does recognize a tension between the formal codes and their structures of inference, however, and suggests this tension might represent an ambivalence on the part of the writer of the text and his society about the place of women. Like Jobling, she finds in Genesis 2-3 indications of a patriarchal society beginning to be uncomfortable with itself. For this reason, she points to

125 Lanser, "(Feminist) Criticism in the Garden," p. 78.
126 Ibid., p. 79.
127 Ibid.
the need to develop a feminist approach for examining the uneasy relation between context and code. Her method, nevertheless, casts doubts on the methods used by Truille and Bal to achieve feminist-positive readings of this text.

D. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have seen serious challenges raised, implicitly and explicitly, for the reformists' efforts to salvage the Bible from patriarchy as an authoritative spiritual source for feminists. The work examined in this chapter further indicates the incompatibility of the Bible and feminist reformist hermeneutics.

The rejectionist theologians argue that, since the biblical tradition is dependent on an androcentric symbol system, not only will reformists ultimately fail in their attempts to reclaim the Bible from patriarchy, but also any attempt to find a feminist perspective within the Bible, even if it is claimed to be operating within the parameters of biblical authority, comprises an implicit rejection of biblical authority.

Findings of structuralist analyses of biblical texts confirm the rejectionist position that the Bible is thoroughly patriarchal and androcentric and, thereby, cast doubt on the credibility of reformist attempts to re-interpret biblical texts. Even if poststructuralist
methodology reveals that the Bible fails in its attempt to justify androcentrism and patriarchy, it still cannot resolve the reformists' dilemma over the issue of biblical authority, for the biblical canon precludes any changes to biblical texts. This approach, therefore, only serves to raise even more doubts about the viability of the Bible to serve as a spiritual source for those who reject patriarchy.

The recent applications of reader-oriented theories to biblical texts raise even more challenges to reformist methods. Speech act theory questions the theoretical foundation of methods which yield feminist interpretations of the biblical texts. In order to yield positive interpretations, such methods disregard what is implied by the text and instead approach the text as if it were a formal code divorced from its cultural context in human history.

Even when it grants the reader autonomy over the text, reader-oriented theory finds that the reader's freedom to interpret the text is held in check by the interpretive community. Since the dynamics of the interpretive community are closely akin to the dynamics of the faith community in which some reformists find the locus of biblical authority, this approach to reader-oriented theory offers no solution to the reformist's dilemma over the issue of biblical authority. In a general way, it also corroborates the rejectionist argument that all feminist approaches to the Bible represent an implicit break from the biblical
tradition. To the extent that feminist readings break from the traditional interpretations of the regnant interpretive communities, such readings already are operating outside the realm of biblical authority.

In Chapter 4, we will explore the implications of the theoretical problems posed by these new trends in literary criticism for the reformists' attempts to work within the framework of biblical authority, as well as the implications of the challenge raised by reader-oriented theory for the entire concept of biblical authority. At this point, however, having examined the seemingly endless list of problems, both implicit and explicit, faced by reformist approaches, we can only ask again the question which prompted this study, but this time with more scepticism. How can a thoroughly patriarchal document be an authoritative spiritual source for those who reject the patriarchal model of reality?
CHAPTER IV

MAJOR IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY

A. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we will discuss the implications of this study for reformist attempts to reclaim the Bible as an authoritative spiritual source for feminists. First, the implications of the recent literary theories which focus primarily on the text (structuralism) will be examined, and then the implications of extra-textual theories (speech act theory and reader-oriented theory). Finally we will return to the starting point of this study -- the concept of biblical authority -- and see that reader-oriented theory casts doubt on conventional understandings of biblical authority.

At the outset of this discussion, two possible methodological objections must be addressed. Objections may be raised against viewing theological approaches in the light of conclusions reached by means of literary-critical approaches, for the latter approaches may be considered as secular and therefore alien to the canon of revelation, i.e., as taking "the sacred deposit out of the hands of its recognized authorities." But the human dimension of the

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1 Amos N. Wilder, "Forward," in Orientation by Disorientation: Studies in Literary Criticism and Biblical
Bible cannot be discounted; even by fundamentalists, at least insofar as the Bible is recognized as divine revelation to *humans*. For this reason, the meaning of the Bible, then, "will only be fully disclosed in interaction with all our [human] categories, structures, scenarios and the imagination of our hearts." ² Thus theological approaches to the Bible cannot afford to ignore the findings of biblical scholarship, and indeed since the development of biblical-critical analytical methods in the nineteenth century, biblical theology has been influenced by biblical scholarship.

Objections may also be raised against using findings of literary-critical approaches to criticize conclusions of historical-critical approaches. These objections grow out of the ongoing debate, between literary-critical and historical-critical exegetes, over the priority of one method over the other. There is a growing awareness among biblical scholars that since historical-critical methods are not capable of achieving their intended results, literary-critical methods are necessary "to complete the historical task." ³ Thus, both methods can be seen as "truly


complementary: each must eventually take the other's conclusions into account."

Thus our analysis is based on the increasingly prevalent tenet that no single methodology can provide all the answers and that all approaches then must take into account, at least to some extent, the conclusions of other approaches. This tenet is in keeping with feminist principles which emphasize the importance of relationship. None of the reformers whose work has been discussed in this study, however, has yet responded to the implicit (or even the explicit) challenges to their work raised by the new literary theories examined in Chapter 3. For this reason it is important to examine the implications of the new trends in biblical scholarship for reformist work with the Bible.

B. IMPLICATIONS OF STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS FOR REFORMIST STRATEGIES

Structuralist exegesis indicates that biblical texts are indeed patriarchal and androcentric, and therefore it provides little hope for feminist attempts to reform either the Bible or its androcentric interpretations. This perhaps explains why, as Jobling observes, feminists have shown little interest in structural analysis of biblical texts.8

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6 The Sense of Biblical Narrative, p. 43.
This is the first feminist structural exegesis of Genesis 2-3, and as we have seen in the work of Milne, his conclusions offer no help for the reformist endeavor.

Furthermore Milne argues that even if structuralist analyses of biblical texts are wrong, i.e., even if the deep structures are not patriarchal and androcentric, these structures have been and still are perceived to be that way. Indeed, that Jobling is the first to contend that the Bible fails in its attempt to justify its androcentric and patriarchal perspective, Milne argues, is a clear indication that the Bible has "succeeded extremely well for centuries in fogging the illogic of patriarchy."  

Structuralist exegesis, therefore, provides substantial evidence that biblical texts and feminist reformist hermeneutics are not compatible. Feminist readings are inconsistent with the patriarchal and androcentric deep structures of biblical texts. Reformists have yet to respond to this indictment of their work.

C. IMPLICATIONS OF SPEECH ACT THEORY FOR REFORMIST STRATEGIES

The new insights into the meaning of texts provided by speech act theory also raise an apparently insurmountable challenge for reformist methodologies, for feminist readings of biblical texts are inconsistent with the implications of these texts. As speech act theory demonstrates, the

7 "The Patriarchal Stamp of Scripture," (forthcoming).
implications of a text shape its meaning just as much as the actual words on the page. Feminist rereadings are based only upon the words on the page, and have not taken into account the androcentricism implied by biblical texts.

The shift in conceptual framework suggested by speech act theory (i.e., linguistic sequences not only express actions but are in and of themselves actions) offers the potential to bridge many of the gaps between literary-critical and historical-critical approaches. Speech act theory, thereby, provides insights into the meaning of biblical texts, which are not attainable through traditional methods. Speech act theorists argue that both reader-oriented theory and speech act theory provide a necessary corrective for traditional text-centered methods, for traditional approaches are unable to account for the intentionality of a text. Maintaining that the intentionality of a text is expressed implicitly by that text, speech act theory provides ways of discerning that which is not explicitly stated by the text, yet which is nonetheless essential to the communication of the meaning of the text.

In this way, speech act theory goes beyond the basic principles of traditional literary approaches which demand that the meaning of a text be determined exclusively by what is in the text. For the purposes of this study, it is most significant that both speech act theory (extra-textual)
approaches and structuralist (intrinsic) approaches reveal the inherently patriarchal nature of biblical texts.

D. IMPLICATIONS OF READER-ORIENTED THEORY FOR REFORMIST STRATEGIES

Reader-oriented theory, no matter how it is approached, only raises more challenges for reformists. If it is seen as granting each and every reader autonomy over the text, it justifies feminist interpretations, but by the same token, it does not refute androcentric interpretations. It, in fact, relativizes the authoritative status of any interpretation as well as the authoritative status of any text. For this reason, this approach to reader-oriented theory actually challenges the entire notion of biblical authority. In this light, feminist interpretations can be seen as valid, but only at the expense of the concept of biblical authority, a concept reformists do not want to relinquish.

As we have seen, reader-oriented theory indicates that everyone brings cultural and personal contexts to the act of reading which serve "as a grid that obscures certain meanings and brings others to the foreground."9 Thus the reader’s attitudes toward the text and his or her expectations of the text greatly shape the meaning which each reader assigns to the text. In this light, readers who

approach texts which are essential to their religious faith will then be constrained by their expectations of the text. They take on what Robert Detweiler calls "a willing suspension of disbelief," a position which predisposes readers toward believing in the message of a text despite evidence against it in the reader's world.\footnote{Ibid., p. 224.}

The faithful reader approaches the text aggressively, determined to believe it, and hence she "fills in" the indeterminacies in an attitude of acceptance, adopting a position she would not take with any other kind of text.... The gaps she needs to fill, then, have to do with the space between what is conventionally credible to her... and what is not.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 224-225.}

Detweiler, like Lanser, argues that Trible's interpretation of Genesis 2-3 is dependent on her belief in the text's sacred status. He asks, "if Trible did not believe in some sort of authority inherent in the Genesis text, why would she bother to argue against its real or attributed sexism?"\footnote{Robert Detweiler, "Speaking of Believing in Genesis 2-3," \\emph{Semeia} 41 (1988): 136.} This same question can also be applied to the work of Exum and Schneiders. Detweiler then turns to a discussion of genre, and observes that Trible presupposes the sacred nature of the text, and yet her rhetorical analysis of the text demands that the text be recognized as narrative fiction (insofar as all traditional literary approaches analyze the fictive world created by the text, its setting, plot, characterization, dialogue, point of view, etc.). Detweiler therefore finds Trible's interpretations of Genesis 2-3 breaks down because she fails...
to explain why narrative fiction has been taken so seriously for purposes of religious faith and cultural values. Her method does not take into account the authoritative status attributed to the text; rather Trible presupposes this status before applying her method.

Detweiler explains that biblical interpretations from a position of faith are all fraught with difficulties, for a reader who approaches a sacred text from a position of faith, consciously or unconsciously, allows the text to delimit his or her freedom of interpretation. Such a reader submits to the authority of the text with varying degrees of compliance, and does so, "because she has been persuaded, pre- and extra-textually, by her community that this text is sacred and hence demands this response."  

The concept of interpretive communities, proposed by Fish and Mailloux, suggests the social and political constraints on the process of interpretation. These constraints corroborate the political nature of the biblical canon and of the entire concept of biblical authority. The work of Fish and Mailloux provides insight into the nature of the problem faced by reformists, but offers no help for the reformer's cause. In this light, the concept of Womanchurch, proposed by Fiorenza and Ruether, may be considered as an alternative to the dominant interpretive community, but then the issue shifts from authority of the

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13 Ibid., p. 137.
14 Ibid., p. 223.
15 Ibid., pp. 224-225
biblical text to the authority of competing interpretive communities. Thus the issue is more of a political nature than a theological nature.

E. IMPLICATIONS OF READER-ORIENTED THEORY FOR CONVENTIONAL NOTIONS OF BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

An adequate discussion of the implications of reader-oriented theory for conventional notions of biblical authority far exceeds the scope of this study. Here we will only make brief reference to the work of two scholars who have begun to consider these implications.

David M. Gunn sees the inevitable threat reader-oriented theory poses to the notion of biblical authority:

Troubling times lie ahead as the reader theory of the secular critics begins to corrode the edges of normative exegesis and doctrines of biblical authority which insist on viewing the Bible as divine prescription. The problem of the gap between "original setting and intention" and "contemporary interpretation" will merely have given place to the gap between reader and reader.\(^{16}\)

Reader-oriented theory exposes the arbitrariness of any and all interpretations, and thereby precludes the possibility of a normative meaning of a text, upon which the entire notion of biblical authority is based.

Robert Detweiler analyzes what constitutes a sacred text in terms of reader involvement and within the framework of contemporary philosophical-literary criticism.\(^{17}\) He sees


that emerging literary theories are pointing to a different concept of texthood. Thus the question, What is a sacred text? is part of the larger question posed by literary theory. What is a text? Reader-oriented theory thus makes it difficult to determine where the text leaves off and where the reader begins, i.e., to distinguish what is text and what is interpretation, and thereby casts serious doubt on the possibility of a normative reading of biblical texts, a possibility upon which the entire concept of biblical authority is dependent.

Detweiler turns to a discussion of the origins of sacred texts which points to the role of the interpretive community in order to explain how fictive or mythic texts took on, and continue to maintain, sacred status. His discussion, not unlike our discussion of biblical authority and the biblical canon in terms of Weber and Kuhn in Chapter 1, argues the political nature of biblical canon:

Canonization, the promotion and acceptance of a text as sacred and hence binding, is thus...mainly a matter of power. A text becomes sacred when a segment of the community is able to establish it as such in order to gain control and set order over the whole community. His analysis indicates not only that the contemporary interpretive community dictates what is or is not an authoritative interpretation of a sacred text, but also that it was an interpretive community which initially established the canon of sacred texts. In doing so, he demystifies the belief in inherently sacred or authoritative biblical texts:

18 Ibid., p. 226.
19 Ibid., p. 217.
The emergence of a sacred text, then, occurs not as some natural (or supernatural) process but from an interplay of tradition and religious-political design. Not only is the canonization process an operation of arbitrary decision-making, but all along the way the texts have been manipulated in a similar arbitrary fashion. Paradoxically, a sacred text emerges through particular authoritative figures in a community of believers who work to lend a given text divine endorsement and thus render it sacred. Here again one sees a circularity in action. Texts become sacred because someone (or ones) manages to imbue them with an aura of divine authority, but conversely, their divine authority is accepted by the community because they have been persuaded that the text is "sacred".

F. CONCLUSION

This study does not depict an optimistic scenario for the reformist position. Not only does each reformist position manifest inherent methodological weaknesses, but recent literary theories -- both intrinsic and extra-textual theories -- also cast serious doubts on the reformist endeavor to reclaim the Bible as an authoritative spiritual source for feminists.

On one hand, structuralist exegesis indicates the Bible is wholly patriarchal and androcentric. From this perspective, if the biblical text is accepted as authoritative, so must patriarchy and androcentrism. On the other hand, speech act theory indicates that the implications and intentions of the biblical texts, upon which meaning is contingent, are patriarchal and androcentric. In this light, feminist interpretations are

\[\text{Ibid., p. 215}\]
possible only if significant meaning-generating dimensions of the text are ignored.

Findings of both speech act theory and structural analysis, then, suggest that reformists are in fact disregarding, or changing the meaning of, the message of the biblical text in order to find a feminist perspective in the text. By doing so, however, they are acting against the textual authority of the Bible. This bears out Goldenberg's argument that reformists' attempts to confirm their belief that the Bible offers a feminist perspective, in and of themselves, constitute a break with the authority of the biblical tradition and that reformists' ultimate goals will eventually pull them out of the biblical tradition. This suggests that the incompatibility between feminist hermeneutics and the biblical tradition is more than just apparent.

The dynamics of interpretive communities, suggested by reader-oriented theory, corroborate the reformists problem of not having their interpretations validated by the faith community, and indicate, moreover, that as long as faith communities are predominantly patriarchal, feminist interpretations will not be considered authoritative. Reader-oriented theory also indicates that if the role of interpretive communities is not recognized, then meaning is entirely dependent on the reader. In this light, at least theoretically, any and all feminist interpretations are legitimate. In the same light, however, the biblical text
loses its authoritative status, the very status reformists seek to uphold.

Thus reformists are in a catch-22 situation with the issue of biblical authority, and recent trends in biblical scholarship seem to offer no solution, but instead they suggest that the situation will only become more severe. It is becoming more apparent that feminists ultimately must chose to recognize either the authority of the Bible or the authority of their own experience as human beings. A choice appears more and more inevitable as emerging literary theories expose even more theoretical weaknesses in the reformists' already precarious attempt to reconcile two apparently incompatible norms.

Reformers who tend toward the conservative end of the spectrum of feminist biblical approaches are starting to acknowledge this possibility, as they find it increasingly more difficult to justify, on an intellectual level, their tenuous position. Here it might be argued that only by faith can a feminist accept the authority of the Bible. While the relationship between reason and faith is beyond the scope of this study, the new trends in biblical scholarship indicate the unlikelihood of the reformist hope of reclaiming the Bible from patriarchy.

Reformists who tend toward the radical end of the spectrum have already overstepped the bounds of biblical authority, insofar as they have explicitly subordinated the biblical text to the authority of feminist experience. For
example, Fiorenza finds the text to be an "inadequate reflection" of the events it depicts. Thus for her, the Bible holds no authority in the traditional sense, rather it is an authoritative resource only to the extent that it can lead to a feminist reconstruction of Christian origins. But clearly from all perspectives -- rejectionist, reformist, and traditional positions -- her work does not fit within the parameters of biblical authority.

The apparently unresolvable nature of the reformists dilemma with the issue of biblical authority not only reflects the general crisis facing biblical authority, but also significantly contributes to this crisis. The findings of this study suggest that perhaps the predominant paradigm of biblical religion is not capable of withstanding the challenge posed, implicitly and explicitly, by the reformist endeavor. Structuralist exegesis and speech act exegesis add further credence to the argument of rejectionist theologians: since sexism is an integral part of the biblical tradition, the Bible cannot be the divinely inspired document which its adherents claim it to be. If the Bible is not to be considered authoritative in and of itself, then reader-oriented theory provides another source of biblical authority: the interpretive community, or in this case, the faith community. But if authority of the text is overtly replaced by the authority of the interpretive or faith community, then, at least in theory, each person's or each community's reading of that text is
equally valid. When the Bible's claim to a "privileged" or authoritative meaning is abandoned, the entire notion of biblical authority loses its basis of legitimacy.

In sum this study has shown that reformist approaches to the Bible manifest serious methodological and theoretical weaknesses; that new developments in biblical scholarship appear to be of no support for the reformist position, and instead further cast doubts on the theoretical foundation of reformist approaches; and that all discussions of the issue of biblical authority, implicitly or explicitly, suggest the political nature of this issue.
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