

## Using the Bible for Liberation and Justice

Down through the centuries of the Christian era the use of the Bible has been determined by a concomitant confessional affirmation of its divine origin as the Word of God. How much of it actually was appropriated and applied depended on the degree of identification between the biblical text and the Word of God that was acknowledged. From Marcion down to Rosemary Ruether different theological and hermeneutical criteria have been employed in order to identify divine revelation and consequently determine what is normative for life and faith. Although few Christians have been as radical as Marcion in substituting a new canon in place of a traditional body of scripture, many have acknowledged a canon within the canon while others have preferred to maintain an open-ended canon that included other writings considered equally authoritative for Christian faith and life. Both of these latter perspectives appear to be more widely represented among Christians today than ever before in the history of the Christian movement, and it is largely due to the growing awareness of the classism, sexism and racism which are encountered in the biblical texts.

It is ironic yet very natural that in the scientifically oriented historical-critical method of biblical interpretation, innovated and practiced by elite white males and supported by the economic surplus produced by the industrial exploitation of laborers, the elite males remained unconscious of these realities, either in their interpretation of the biblical text or in the biblical text itself, and therefore also contributed little to the identification and dislodgment of these realities in Western society. In his essay, "The Bible: Is an Interclass Reading Legitimate?" published in *The Bible and Liberation*, Sergio Rostagno charges:

The exegetical tradition of Protestantism, with its claims to being scientific, developed against the background of the great historiographical presuppositions of the bourgeoisie. . . . Exegesis has worked and still works in accordance with. . . generalized and contradictory principles that anything and everything can in fact be found in the text. To say that the biblical message is not timeless but historical (geschichtlich), not

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individualistic but community-oriented, not traditionalist but open to the future and so on, is meaningless unless completed by precise definitions. But the whole of exegesis was overshadowed by a universe of dogmatic discourse that should have been attentively analyzed — that the human being is continuously in need of salvation, that all his paths are ultimately false and that he could never free himself from his burden on his own. This line of thought placed the exploited and the exploiter, the revolutionary and the imperialist, who were all in need of pardon, under the same heading.<sup>1</sup>

Christian socialism, liberation theology, feminist hermeneutics and also to some extent the utilization of the social sciences in the interpretation of the Bible have exposed the bankruptcy of Western biblical scholarship, its ideological captivity and the unethical character of its neutrality. Moreover, as a result of their identification of the realities of classism, sexism and racism in the Bible itself, the problem of the relationship between the scriptures and the Word of God and, therefore, also the use of the Bible, becomes more critical than at any previous time in the history of Christianity. For the presence of these realities in the Bible is being recognized and acknowledged only for the very first time.

Yet many who are involved in the class struggle for justice and liberation appear to be unaware of the classism, sexism and racism in the Bible. The "campesinos" of Solentiname expound the biblical text in dialogue with each other on Sunday morning or in study over a communal lunch after mass. They concentrate on the gospels, and the integrity of what Paul Ricoeur has called "the first naivete," which is informed by their experience of injustice and dispossession, enables them to grasp the meaning of salvation as it is reflected in the liberation activity of Jesus' ministry on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. To what extent they are also conscious of the realities of sexism and racism in their society and among themselves and therefore can also identify them when they are encountered in the biblical text is not discernible. In South Africa, on the other hand, the bourgeois ideology of Western hermeneutics, which claims to be universal and therefore "contextualizable," continues to dominate the interpretation of the Bible. Sergio Rostagno's analysis of its aberrancy deserves wider recognition. The biblical hermeneutics of Western culture

. . . claims to consider humanity in certain typical existential situations which provide analogies for all human situations resulting from the human condition. It deals, therefore, with humanity rather than with the workers as they try to wrest from the

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<sup>1</sup> Sergio Rostagno, "The Bible: Is an Interclass Reading Legitimate?" in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: The Community for Religious Research and Education, 1976), 19.

dominant class its hold on the means of production and its hold over the vital spheres of human life. In this sense it could be said that exegesis was an interclass affair.<sup>2</sup>

Itumeleng Mosala, a young black South African Old Testament scholar, while acknowledging that Western biblical scholars have become aware of the disparate character of the biblical texts, criticizes them for failing to perceive "the ideological unity which pervades most of the Bible."<sup>3</sup> In the Old Testament that ideological unity is nothing less than the universalization of the upper class interests of the Israelite monarchy which is oriented towards world maintenance. Walter Brueggemann's elaboration provides the ground for this critical perspective:

The Davidic-Solomonic tradition with its roots in Abrahamic memory provides an important alternative theological trajectory. We may identify two theological elements which are surely linked to this movement and which are important to the subsequent faith and literature of the Bible. First, it is generally agreed that the emergence of creation faith in Israel has its setting in Jerusalem and its context in the royal consciousness. The shift of the social vision is accompanied with a shifted theological method which embraces more of the imperial myths of the ancient Near East and breaks with the scandalous particularity of the Moses tradition. The result is a universal and comprehensive world view which more and more is inclined toward social stability than toward social transformation and liberation.<sup>4</sup>

The Old Testament is a canon of sacred texts constituted by the elite of ancient Israel and expresses the ideology and political interests of the upper class. For Mosala and other liberation theologians in South Africa the Bible can only become the Word of God for black South Africans when it is used as a record of class struggle and concomitantly exegeted with a materialist hermeneutic that begins and ends with the black experience of injustice and oppression in South Africa.

Feminist theology has been struggling with the same problem of differentiating between the Bible and the Word of God. Letty Russell, like other feminist theologians, acknowledges that the Bible is a dangerous book, especially if it is identified literally as the Word of God.<sup>5</sup> Her interpretive key, which she arrived at through her own life story, is the witness of scripture to God's promise of actualizing the restoration of the creation and its beginnings of fulfillment in the Christ event. The Bible unfolds a horizon of expectation that offers women a basis for their own expectation of justice and liberation:

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>3</sup> Itumeleng Mosala, "The Use of the Bible in Black Theology," 14.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel," *The Bible and Liberation*, ed. Norman Gottwald (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1983), 308.

<sup>5</sup> Letty M. Russell, "Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 138.

In God's action of New Creation women and men are already set free to develop new ways of relating to one another, to the world, and to God. This freedom of living in the "already, but not yet" of the New Creation is key to those who are struggling with the structures of oppression and with biblical texts that are used to justify and even to bless these structures. . . .<sup>6</sup>

This eschatological reality conveys the authorization and empowerment to engage in the activity of overthrowing all forms of oppression and dehumanization. In spite of the patriarchy and androcentrism of the Bible, the prevailing constellation of values and beliefs against all forms of domination necessarily implies the freedom, self-determination and equality of women. In fact, the paradigm shift to which the Bible bears witness includes the liberation of the Bible and its interpretation from patriarchy and sexism.

Rosemary Ruether's hermeneutical key does not emerge from a biblical horizon of the expectation of justice and liberation. For her, "women's experience" of oppression, exploitation and dispossession is the hermeneutical "starting point and the ending point of the circle of interpretation."<sup>7</sup> Its validity is established by the interaction between human experience and theological tradition in the formulation of the Bible. Structures of domination negate this hermeneutical circle by imposing a self-serving unilateral understanding on the tradition and establishing it as the interpretive key to all human experience. Yet new revelatory experiences, such as the Exodus and the resurrection, "transform, revise and recombine the traditional touchstones of meaning."<sup>8</sup> Codified tradition becomes meaningless when its interpretation of experience is no longer meaningful and fosters inauthentic human existence. Because women's experience has been excluded from the interpretation of the "foundational revelatory experience," both within the scriptures and its subsequent interpretation in the history of the church, biblical revelation has become oppressive and invalid. "Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, to be appraised as not redemptive."<sup>9</sup> Conversely, ". . . what does promote the full humanity of women is of the Holy, does reflect true relation to the divine, is the true nature of things, is the authentic message of redemption, and the mission of the redemptive community."<sup>10</sup> For Ruether this is "the touchstone by which we test and criticize all that diminishes us."<sup>11</sup>

If the foundational tradition in scripture is androcentric and patriar-

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>7</sup> Rosemary R. Ruether, "Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation," *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 111.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 115.

chal, and its universal claims are therefore questionable, what validity does it have for women today? Can it be salvaged in any way? Ruether allows that "the Bible can be appropriated as a source of liberating paradigms only if it can be seen that there is a correlation between the feminist critical principle and that critical principle by which biblical thought critiques itself and renews its vision as the authentic Word of God over against corrupting and sinful deformations."<sup>12</sup> This critical principle is the perspective encountered in the prophetic-messianic tradition which places the canonical scriptures under its critical scrutiny and judgment.

Ruether's touchstone sanctions an open-ended canon of scripture for doing feminist theology. The existing base remains the Christian Bible in spite of its sacralization of patriarchy, but many other texts, ancient, medieval and modern may be appropriated in order to serve as "a springboard for constructing what must become a new expression of theology from the perspective of the full personhood of women."<sup>13</sup> Although her collection of *Womanguides Readings* is not offered as a substitute canon, she advocates the creation of a new textual base, a new canon, writings that reflect the larger story of women's experience.

Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, while also acknowledging the androcentric and patriarchal orientation of the two testaments, wants to reclaim from them the experience of liberation and empowerment which, in the beginnings of the Christian movement at least, belonged as much to women as to men. Recognizing the ironic ambiguity of the Bible, she states, ". . .the Bible is the source for women's religious power as well as for their religious oppression throughout the history of Christianity to the present."<sup>14</sup> As a woman and feminist theologian she warns that ". . .relinquishing our biblical heritage merely reinforces the androcentric reality of construction of Western culture according to which male existence and history are the paradigm of human history."<sup>15</sup> Moreover, she observes,

Androcentric texts and linguistic reality construction must not be mistaken as trustworthy evidence of human history, culture and religion. The text may be the message, but the message is not coterminous with human reality and history. A feminist critical hermeneutics must therefore move from androcentric texts to their socio-historical

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>13</sup> Rosemary R. Ruether, *Womanguides: Readings Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), ix.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 35.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 28. See also Schüssler-Fiorenza's essay, "The Will to Choose or to Reject: Continuing our Critical Work," *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 133-34.

contexts. . . Such a feminist reconstitution of the world requires a feminist hermeneutics that shares in the critical methods and impulses of historical scholarship on the one hand and in the theological goals of liberation theologies on the other hand.<sup>16</sup>

To undertake this task she appropriates a sociological-theological model of social interaction and religious transformation for the reconstruction of the early Christian movement in order "to break the silence of the text and to derive meaning from androcentric historiography and theology."<sup>17</sup>

The silence of the text must be broken! But the biblical text has been silent not only because of its androcentric historiography and theology but also because the male-dominated social construction of reality and the false consciousness that it fosters have continued to thwart a recognition or recovery of what the biblical writers were struggling to communicate. At the very least this may be true of some of the New Testament texts, specifically the four gospels and possibly also the genuine letters of Paul. The Old Testament in its entirety appears to be androcentric and patriarchal. There is only a glimpse of the early pre-textual or pre-literary age of the Judges when a peasant egalitarianism could give rise to the leadership of Deborah who could function in Israelite society as judge, prophet and military general. With the inauguration of the monarchy and the literary transmission of the tradition, masculine domination established and perpetuated itself right up to and, of course, beyond the time of Jesus. The socio-economic pyramid that was maintained included some women elites who identified with it, but the masses of peasants, artisans and ever-growing number of unskilled laborers who produced the wealth which the upper class expropriated and enjoyed, continued to be powerless and invisible. The royal ideology of the House of David seems to have seduced many, if not most, of the Old Testament prophets, and where it did not, a patriarchal mentality and outlook may nevertheless have prevailed. Prophets like Amos, Jeremiah and Third Isaiah remain ambiguous. Amos was a peasant, and Jeremiah belonged to a disenfranchised community of priests. Perhaps their own experience of oppression may have diminished their androcentrism as well as their attachment to royal ideology. Trito-Isaiah, as the spokesperson of Levites who were dispossessed by Zadokite priests returning from Babylonian exile, renamed the people of God by substituting the two feminine names, "Hephzibah" and "Beulah" in place of the masculine "Israel" which originally had been given to the patriarch Jacob.<sup>18</sup> Whether that, however, involved genuine egalitarianism is difficult to determine. Never-

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<sup>16</sup> Schüssler-Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 29.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>18</sup> Isaiah 62: 3-4.

theless, it was Third Isaiah who was the first in the long history of Israelite prophecy to proclaim the imminence of a new heaven and a new earth; and one can only hope that that vision of a new moral order included gender and race equality as well as a classless society.

Is the Old Testament the Word of God? Perhaps only in as far as it is subordinated to the critical principle of the prophetic tradition of justice and liberation, and human beings perceive their own participation in the oppression and exploitation of women and ethnic communities reflected in it. Certainly the Hebrew scriptures can become the Word of God in a recovery of the liberation theology of the Exodus event and its concomitant Moses and Miriam traditions.

On the other hand, the relationship between the Bible and the Word of God can be determined by what may be considered as the only valid criterion of judgment: the one that it bears witness to as the incarnation of the Word, namely Jesus of Nazareth, who in the Greek-speaking community of the Christian movement was identified with the epithet, "the Son of Man," or as it should be more correctly phrased, "the New Human Being." For the earliest Christian experience of the reality of Jesus' resurrection from the dead was interpreted to signify the divine affirmation that this manifestation of humanity corresponds to the will of God for the whole creation. Perhaps the only adequate measuring stick to determine whether or to what extent the writings of the New Testament are the Word of God, and therefore authoritative for life and faith, is the degree to which these texts conform to the reality of the Sophia/Logos which became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth and therefore present the Good News without classism, sexism and racism.

The gospels of the New Testament not only employ androcentric language. They appear to convey various hierarchical and patriarchal christologies when they identify Jesus with masculine messianic titles, such as: the Son of David, the Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Man. In some instances a patriarchal perspective may be the underlying factor. In others, however, perhaps even in the majority, it is the androcentric character of the language and the persistence of a hierarchically-oriented, male-dominated social construction of reality that conceals, at least for us today, the androgynous, egalitarian interpretation of Jesus which the gospels actually offer. The phrase, "the Son of Man," denotes the individual and corporate reality of Jesus and those who want to follow him into a reordering of power. The world of binary oppositions is to be terminated. Any and every pollution system which separates people, animals and things according to the categories of "clean" and "unclean" or "good" and "evil" must be cancelled. In the new order there will be no verticality, no hierarchical structures, no patriarchy, no racism, no classism, no sexism. The New Human Being, understood both individually and corporately, is "the Son of God." But the traditional phrase,

“the Son of God” — like “the Son of Man” — is no longer adequate or appropriate. A new language must be created to convey these identities. The New Humanity is God’s offspring, God’s beloved adult daughters and sons.

Moreover, the traditional christological ordering of Jesus’ identification as “the Son of God” and “the Son of Man,” must be reversed. A literary-structuralist reading of the New Testament gospels indicates that Jesus is understood by the evangelists to be first of all “the New Human Being”: in Mark’s gospel by a death and resurrection experience in baptism, in Matthew’s and Luke’s gospels as a result of his generation by the Holy Spirit, and in John’s gospel by means of the incarnation of the Sophia/Logos that occurred at baptism. Because Jesus is a New Human Being — and by his resurrection from the dead also the first New Human Being! — he is also God’s off-spring. The true arrangement of the two central titles, therefore, should be: “the Son of Man” and consequently “the Son of God.”

Each of the origins of Jesus as the New Human Being and therefore a “Chip off the Old Divine Block” has social and political implications for those who are being addressed by the individual evangelists. The gospels are oriented toward the realities of class! Matthew opens his literary composition with a genealogy that includes women as well as men because he is addressing the rich and the powerful urban elite of the city of Antioch. The genealogy is impressive not only because the men include the entire dynasty of David but especially because the women express divine discontinuity in Israelite history. Mary, of course, is the culmination because she gives birth to the New Human Being who makes a complete break with the past and its process of redemption by subverting the social construction of reality. Jesus is the Messiah, as a result of his adoption by Joseph, but when he is disenfranchised by the ruling class, he establishes his ministry among the masses of oppressed in the bottom half of the socio-economic pyramid and proceeds to dismantle the pollution system of the hierarchy.

The Fourth Gospel breaks radically with the tradition of antiquity and announces that the primordial activity of the Word, once its individuality and autonomy has been established, is reuniting all things with God. The Word, of course, is also engaged in differentiation in order to build a symbolic universe, a *cosmos*, but its foremost activity is feminine, that is, uniting with human beings in order to unite them with each other, with the creation, and ultimately with the Creator, not vertically but horizontally in a relationship of true justice and equality. No elitism or patriarchy are ever developed or fostered by the one in whom the Sophia/Logos becomes flesh. Jesus attributes the same transcendent origin to his disciples that he claims for himself: “I have given them your word, and



the world hated them, for they are not from (that is, they do not originate from) the world, even as I am not from the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you guard them from the Evil One; they are not from the world even as I am not from the world." (John 17:14-16) In fact, he declares that his disciples, who commit themselves to the New Humanity that he is establishing, will achieve greater things than he has: "The one who commits her/himself to me (as the embodiment of the New Humanity) will do the works that I do, and greater works than these s/he will do because I am going to the Father." (John 14:12)

Luke-Acts is a "history" of John the Baptizer, Jesus, and the beginnings of the Christian movement written from the perspective of the underside of society. Women express the divine reversals that inaugurate the transformation of history. Elizabeth, not Zechariah, believes the annunciation of the angel Gabriel in contrast to the Old Testament story of the grand patriarchs of Israel, Abraham and Sarah. Mary sings the great hymn of the Magnificat that provides the theme of the evangelist's two volume work: "God put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree. The hungry he filled with good things, and the rich he sent away empty." Mary speaks in the past tense as though it has already happened, but in actuality Caesar has not yet been dethroned by the one who was born in a stable. Nevertheless, Acts closes with the tantalizing arrival of Paul in the imperialistic city of Rome. Tradition claims that he fell victim to Caesar's ax, and the readers of Luke-Acts probably knew that. But volume two may deliberately have been left open-ended in order to intimate that the sisters and brothers of Jesus have at last reached Caesar's household, and they in collaboration with others and with God will subvert its foundations and effect its destruction forever.

The gospel according to Mark is for the so-called Third World. It is the story of Jesus told to peasants and artisans by a masterful but uneducated storyteller in order to provide them with a model for their own entry into a reordering of power. Jesus, a carpenter and a sinner, comes to John's baptism, and by a radical act of repentance renounces the total social construction of reality into which he was born and according to which he was raised. After being called into being as God's beloved offspring and surrogate, he proceeds to draw others into the New Humanity, which he is determined to embody, and to share his power and authority with them for mutual collaboration in the enterprise of building a new moral order, the Rule of God. As he moves about in the narrative world which the evangelist is building, Jesus is not a self-contained, complete human being. He is nationalistically and racially centered in his ministry until he encounters an extraordinary Greek woman who insists that her daughter should be included in the benefits he is dispensing. As

a result of her influence he moves farther into Gentile territory and begins to work among the Gentiles as well (Mark 7:31). Only then does his ministry become universal. It is not until he is on trial before the Sanhedrin that Jesus is willing to acknowledge that he is the Messiah. Earlier when Simon Peter had confessed him as Messiah, he had rejected the title, or at least its content, and substituted "the New Human Being who must suffer" (Mark 8:31). Now, however, he acknowledges this identity because, like an Old Testament king, he has been anointed, and by an unnamed woman who has intruded into a men's party. Assuming the role of an Old Testament prophet, she anoints him as the Messiah in death.<sup>19</sup> She alone understands that he is the king who dies in order to liberate his fellow human beings from his rule. He is not the Messiah who perpetuates himself, who enslaves others or fosters dependency. He embraces his death so that his fellow human beings may attain to their own sovereignty, freedom and self-determination. He dies so that others may succeed him in carrying on the work that he inaugurated. He dies as a male so that the male-dominated world may die with him. He dies so that others may succeed him in carrying on the work that he inaugurated, but with the same horizontal relationship with the Creator and the same self-understanding that it engenders.

That his followers are to succeed him as pioneers in their own right and therefore to blaze their own trails is intimated by the second voyage across the Sea of Galilee in Mark's gospel. On the first trip Jesus had been in the boat with the disciples — not just twelve males but the entire community! — and when the storm arose he awed them by muzzling the forces of chaos. Now, however, he insists that they "go before him." The time will come when they can no longer be dependent on him, and therefore they must learn to exercise their sovereignty and self-determination. For as the Wisdom Psalmist declared in reflection on the creation story in an effort to define authentic humanness created in the image and likeness of God: "What is the human being that you are mindful of her and the human being that you care for him? You have made them little less than God. You have crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them sovereignty over all things" (Psalm 8:4-6). Or in the words of Irenaeus, "The glory of God is the human being fully alive."

All the gospels of the New Testament, regardless of which class of society they address, bear witness to a paradigm shift in the fundamental structures of human existence. The new moral order of God's Rule has been inaugurated, and its goal is to draw all women and men into a horizontal relationship with the Creator. As Jesus said at his trial before the Sanhedrin, "You will see the New Humanity seated on the right

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<sup>19</sup> Mark 14: 3-9.

hand of power. . ." (Mark 14:62). Moreover, this horizontal relationship involves those who participate in it in a collaborative association of liberating the entire creation from its enslavement to futility, alienation, and dependency. While the Old Testament scriptures anticipate the actualization of this new being, the New Testament, particularly the gospels, announces its establishment and growth. The will of God has been manifested in flesh and blood disclosing the divine operation of terminating all forms and forces of classism, sexism, racism, and whatever else prevents human beings from recovering their likeness to God.

Although many of the biblical writings may misrepresent and even distort this divine operation, as a result of infection from the ideologies of classism, racism, and sexism, the central trajectory clearly emerges in both testaments. Other books may be added to the canon for greater elucidation, but no new revelation is necessary. Every use of the Bible, therefore, that can be considered legitimate will remain faithful to its axial witness; and every use of the Bible that remains faithful to its axial witness will express itself in direct involvement in the transformation of all social, economic and political structures that diminish and destroy authentic humanness. The true use of the Bible will always be associated with activities of justice and liberation.