



Hermeneutics and the Authority of Scripture

Edited by Alan H Cadwallader

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Preface

The question of hermeneutics has increasingly come to dominate all disciplines of human knowledge. It has moved appreciably from a concentration on how to apply the results of research knowledge to considerations of the frameworks by which we conduct research as a meaningful exercise. In this sense contemporary epistemologies and ethical concerns are increasingly seen as critically entwined with the industry of knowledge. The pursuit of meaning has come to be recognised as guiding the very mechanisms that are deployed in the conduct of research. The hermeneutical enterprise therefore is part and parcel of the entry into and the perseverance in research.

Critical analysis of the Bible is no different, even when there is a predisposition or confessional commitment to treat the bible as sacred scripture. Biblical research is inextricably affected by those epistemologies and ethical sensitivities that inform understanding and the search for meaning in our contemporary world.

The essays in this collection amply testify to the breadth of epistemologies and the development of ethical awareness in relation to a range of concerns impacting our world. The reader will find engagements with the Bible informed by developments in science, law, ecology, feminism and linguistics. Key ethical issues about violence, fundamentalism, anti-semitism and patriarchy are variously recognised as inextricably involved in the interpretation of the Bible if the Bible is to be handled with responsibility and accountability in today's world. What is clear from these essays is that if the interpreters take hold of the freedom to interpret the Bible in engagement with and critique of structures of knowledge in the contemporary world, then two results follow. Firstly, the Bible re-gains a vibrancy by its re-engagement with human pursuits and, especially, with the human pursuit of knowledge. Indeed, human pursuits and the pursuit

of knowledge are themselves invigorated in that re-engagement. Secondly, the Bible is both challenged by and issues a challenge to those very human pursuits, including the pursuit of knowledge. Indeed, as some of these essays argue, the Bible itself demands and reveals in its own fabric such a rigour of hermeneutical engagement.

This collection of essays have been selected primarily from papers that were presented at the *Hermeneutics and the Authority of Scripture* conference held in Canberra in 2007. The Australasian Theological Forum, the organisers of the conference, provided the necessary resources for the keynote speakers at that conference, Terence Fretheim, William Loader and Frances Watson and for the publication of this collection. A number of unforeseen factors stalled the publication of these essays but the resultant collection still speaks powerfully of the radical importance and value of hermeneutics as the guiding dynamism in the continuing authority of the Bible both within confessional communities and in wider cultural interactions. I am grateful to each of the authors in this collection for the wells of patience that they have displayed in awaiting publication. Frances Watson's paper, regrettably, was unable to be included, having already been published elsewhere.

All the essays in this collection, whether drawn from presentations at the conference or received afterwards, were anonymously peer reviewed. I wish to thank those scholars who volunteered their time to select those papers that were suitable for inclusion and who made suggestions for their refinement. Finally, a sincere word of thanks to Hilary Regan and all the support staff at ATF Press who have determinedly pursued a commitment to the publication of fine theological and biblical scholarship in the Australian and New Zealand contexts.

Canberra, 2011

Alan H Cadwallader

Chapter One

Women, Authority and the Bible: Ecological Feminist Considerations

Anne Elvey

When I consider the nexus of women, authority and the Bible from an ecological feminist perspective, I am perplexed. In similar but different ways, feminist, ecojustice and ecocritical approaches to the Bible raise questions about what this text (this book of books) is, why I still engage with it, what it means to me as a member of a Christian community, and how it addresses me in a variety of contexts—as biblical interpreter, as lector, as congregation member, as a woman in a tradition where it remains difficult for women’s gifts to be called forth and deepened as ‘ordained’ for community and world, and, most particularly, as member of a wider, more than human, Earth community.¹

While the question of women, authority and the Bible is already well-travelled ground, difficulties identified by feminist biblical scholars, such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Letty Russell, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Phyllis Tribble, Kwok Pui lan and others over at least twenty-five years have not been addressed adequately in many churches.² Meanwhile, feminism

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1. I use the term ‘more than human’ coined by David Abram, to describe an Earth community that includes but is much more than the human. For Abram, humans inhabit this ‘world’ with many Earth others, with whom they are interconnected and toward whom they can be open through human sensuous embodiment. David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).
 2. See especially Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s innovative and highly influential book: *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM, 1983). See also, Kwok Pui-lan, ‘Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World’, in *Semeia* 47 (1989): 25–42; Rosemary Radford Ruether, ‘Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation’, in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Letty M Russell (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 111–24; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1986); Letty M Russell, ‘Authority and the Challenge of Feminist Interpretation of the Bible’, in *Feminist In-*

itself has changed. Earlier feminisms, founded in a Western liberal democratic framework and appealing to an ideal of equality, have shifted as feminist scholarship has opened itself to a multiplicity of voices, contexts, and approaches.³

A prior wave of feminism in the late nineteenth century speaks to this change. Having been active in the abolitionist movement, Elizabeth Cady Stanton became an early advocate for women's suffrage. In her later years, connecting the liberation of women with freedom from biblical gender paradigms, she coordinated and published *The Woman's Bible* in which she described the Bible as the 'words of men' rather than the 'word of God'.⁴ While sympathetic to her unease with biblical authority, I want to take from Stanton a different caution: because of her experience of androcentrism within the abolitionist movement and perhaps also her own inherited preference for whiteness, she gave women's liberation higher weight than the emancipation of slaves.⁵ Understanding that environmental destruction and oppressions on the basis of race, class or gender are interconnected, can I continue to privilege the category 'woman' or allow 'whiteness' and, in a more than human context, 'humanness', to pass as normative?⁶ For those of us who are well fed, sheltered and use more than

terpretation of the Bible, edited by Letty M Russell (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 137–46.

3. In feminist biblical studies from the local Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand region, see for example, Judith E McKinlay, *Reframing Her: Biblical Women in Postcolonial Focus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2004); Elaine Wainwright, *Shall We Look for Another? A Feminist Rereading of the Matthean Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998); Elaine Wainwright, *Women Healing/Healing Women: The Genderisation of Healing in Early Christianity* (London: Equinox, 2006). Also note the shift signalled in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Ekklesia—Logy (Ecclesiology) of Liberation* (London: SCM Press, 1993) which is extended in the multiple approaches of the essays collected in her honour: Fernando F Segovia (editor), *Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003).
4. Elizabeth Cady Stanton (editor), *The Woman's Bible*, 2 vols (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993 [1895–1898]) with a foreword by Maureen Fitzgerald, II.8. See also, Lisa S Strange, 'Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *Woman's Bible* and the Roots of Feminist Theology', in *Gender Issues* 17/4 (1999): 15–36.
5. See Jean Fagan Yellin, "'Race" and Nineteenth-Century American Womanhood', in *Legacy* 15/1 (1998): 53–8.
6. On whiteness, see Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin' up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2000); Suzanne Schech and Jane Haggis, 'Migrancy, Whiteness and the Settler Self in Contemporary Australia', in *Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand*, edited by John Docker and Gerhard Fischer (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2000), 231–9.

our share of Earth everyday, perhaps we are past speaking about ‘women’, authority, and the Bible.

Nevertheless, there is a danger in passing over this topic uncritically. As Barbara Reid writes:

Any way of telling the story that does not take us more deeply into the freeing and empowering love of God and impel us to radiate that to others is not an adequate version of the story. Nor is it an adequate version if it ignores, trivialises, or increases the sufferings of real women and men, particularly those who suffer most in our world. It is particularly incumbent on preachers, teachers and ministers to tell the story well and to help deconstruct and replace versions that are especially abusive toward women.⁷

Ecofeminist theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, and feminist ecophilosophers such as Val Plumwood, identify a patriarchal—or to take Schüssler Fiorenza’s term, ‘kyriarchal’—system of hierarchical dualism implicated in oppression of women and destruction of Earth. ‘Hierarchical dualism’, ‘kyriarchy’, ‘a logic of domination’, and ‘a logic of colonisation’ in practice refer to the same paradigm, where patriarchy is understood as a ‘pyramid of multiplicative oppressions’, which have feminist, ecological and colonialist effects.⁸ For Plumwood, this logic (which is euro-, andro-, and anthropo- centric) is supported by systemic practices of backgrounding (or denial); radical exclusion (or construction as ‘other’); incorporation (or assimilation); instrumentalisation; and homogenisation leading to stereotyping and demonisation, particularly in relation to indigenous populations, women, and the wider Earth community construed as ‘nature’.⁹ In this ecological feminist framework, one might add to Reid’s comment, the

7. Barbara E Reid, *Taking up the Cross: New Testament Interpretations through Latina and Feminist Eyes* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 182–3.

8. See Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 41–68; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), 173–201; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 114–20.

9. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 47–55; Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2002), 100–9.

need to be alert to stories that are ‘especially abusive in other than human contexts as well as human ones’.

Writing in the first volume of the Earth Bible series, Heather Eaton claims:

For ecofeminists, the choices are explicit: to accept the patriarchal Bible as sacred and authoritative and be content to expose its patriarchy, or expose its patriarchy and reject it as sacred and authoritative (Milne 1993: 167). From an ecofeminist perspective, the Bible can be accepted only as contingent and provisional (adapted from West 1993:89).¹⁰

It is difficult to argue with this view, and many feminist readings, uncovering the patriarchal effects of biblical texts, challenge an uncritical acceptance of the authority of the Bible.¹¹ Among the hermeneutics they employ, a hermeneutics of suspicion emerges that, if seldom sufficient, is always necessary.

Embedding suspicion within a wider hermeneutic circle (or spiral) that moves toward and through creative empowerment, Schüssler Fiorenza recalls:

On the one hand, the Bible is written in androcentric language, has its origin in the patriarchal cultures of antiquity, and throughout its history has inculcated androcentric and patriarchal values. On the other hand, the Bible has also served to inspire and authorise women and other non-persons in their struggles against patriarchal oppression.¹²

10. Heather Eaton, ‘Ecofeminist Contributions to an Ecojustice Hermeneutics’, in *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, edited by Norman C Habel, *Earth Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 54–71 at 59. The cross-references are to Patricia Milne, ‘The Patriarchal Stamp of Scripture: The Implications of Structural Analyses for Feminist Hermeneutics’ in Athalya Brenner (editor), *A Feminist Companion to Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 146–72 and Cornell West, *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (new York: Routledge, 1993).

11. In recent scholarship, see, for example, Elizabeth V Dowling, *Taking Away the Pound: Women, Theology and the Parable of the Pounds in the Gospel of Luke* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 214–5.

12. Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 21.

Here, Schüssler Fiorenza appeals to two kinds of biblical authority which while in tension may also be interconnected: firstly, a type of normative authority, which as Sandra Schneiders argues can be either 'unilateral and absolute' or 'dialogic and relative' in character, and secondly, an authority to liberate, or authorise those who are oppressed.¹³

From an ecological feminist perspective, I want to suggest a third type of authority that emerges in relation to the embeddedness of the biblical text not only in human community, but also in a wider Earth community: an eco-poetic feminist understanding of biblical authority. Responding to the work of Schüssler Fiorenza, Dorothy Lee writes:

. . . without denying the importance of political readings, biblical hermeneutics also requires its own poetics, including an understanding of how the text correlates with the modern reader at the narrative, mythic and poetic levels. Here overly-literal notions of how the text impacts on the reader—whether in terms of authorial intention, gender identification or power relations—give way before the unpredictable coalescence between personal experience and poetic/narrative text. Interpretation is ultimately numinous, touching the reader's spiritual and psychological depths.¹⁴

Lee offers the image of devotion to icons within Eastern Christianity as '[o]ne model that might be helpful in developing a gender-conscious hermeneutical poetics'.¹⁵ Considering 'the ambiguity between image as creative symbol and image as propaganda', she suggests that in a concern to eschew idolatrous patriarchal imagery certain feminist approaches to the Bible have been iconoclastic.¹⁶ Beside this iconoclasm, Lee invites an understanding in which '[s]cripture and icon—sacred myth and sacred image—belong together as 'texts': parallel constructions that unfold a symbolic universe'.¹⁷ A focus for devotion, mediating 'a personal relation-

13. Sandra M Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2nd edition, 1999), 55–9.

14. Dorothy A Lee, 'Touching the Sacred Text: The Bible as Icon in Feminist Reading', in *Pacifica* 11/3 (1998): 249–64 at 250.

15. *Ibid*, 251.

16. *Ibid*, 255–9.

17. *Ibid*, 256.

ship between the viewer and the divine realm', the icon becomes for Lee a metaphor for the Bible.¹⁸

Lee identifies four points of similarity between the Bible and the icon:

1. the icon is not identical to the sacred reality it portrays or conveys;
2. the sense of presence the icon communicates exceeds rational deliberation on its meaning or construction;
3. the icon is non-dualistic but represents a union of matter and spirit, divine and human, body and soul;
4. there is a mutuality between subject and subject: the icon as subject of devotion or contemplation and the viewer as subject under the gaze of the icon.¹⁹

To open up an eco-poetic feminist reflection on authority and the Bible, I will focus very briefly on two aspects of the icon:

1. the relationship between the icon and the matter from which it is formed; and
2. the effect of the icon on the subjectivity of the viewer.

Concerning the world of the icon, John Chryssavgis writes that in the icon 'there is no sharp line of demarcation between "material" and "spiritual". The icon constitutes the epiphany of God in the world and the existence of the world in the presence of God.'²⁰ Recently, in a time of transition, I undertook a short course on icon painting, where we learnt that the painting of an icon is a movement from darkness to light. The darker undercolours of flesh, garments, hair, and background are painted in on the smoothed gesso surface *first*. Then the first layer of light and shadow is added. Finally, the highlights and gold leaf are applied. The paints are mixed from natural pigments: ochres and semi precious metals. The light in the icon emerges from the application of these material elements, these bits of Earth. In part at least, it is this inner light of matter (rather than a reflected light) that engages the viewer in a dynamic interplay between the

18. *Ibid*, 251.

19. *Ibid*, 256–61.

20. John Chryssavgis, 'The World of the Icon and Creation: An Orthodox Perspective on Ecology and Pneumatology', in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, edited by Dieter T Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000), 83–96 at 84. See also, Gerald L Sittser, 'Protestant Missionary Biography as Written Icon', in the *Christian Scholar's Review* 36/3 (2007): 303–21.

prototype (the one represented in the icon), the particular icon itself and the person revering it.²¹

With the Bible we are dealing less directly with material elements, but they are there. Papyrus, parchment, paper, ink, even the light and shade on a computer screen when we read the text from a CD-rom or from an internet site, are grounded in matter: papyrus plants, animal skins, trees, minerals, fossils.²² The writers of the text themselves were nourished by and within an Earth community; the language emerged in human bodies and interrelationships, in the embodied breath and mind.²³ So, the text is not a creation *ex nihilo*, but a materially grounded thing. From this perspective, biblical authority—subtended by matter, where matter is taken in the widest sense as all that makes up the organic and inorganic physicality of Earth and cosmos²⁴—is relational and incarnational. While Chrysavgis writes that '[t]he icon presupposes and even proposes another means of communication, beyond the conceptual, written, or spoken word,' I want to affirm that, in their communication through the human mediation of matter, both icon and Bible, are 'sacramental'.²⁵

In this respect, Chrysavgis describes the icon as 'transfigurative' rather than 'figurative' or 'nonfigurative'.²⁶ The biblical paradigm for iconography (icon writing), then, is the story of the transfiguration (Matt 17:1–9, Mk 9:2–10, Lk 9:28–36). In different ways, each of the synoptic accounts has the disciples unsettled by the encounter in which Jesus is revealed as the icon of God dwelling within the materiality of the cosmos.²⁷ With Jesus' passion and death in view (especially Lk 9:31), the transfiguration accounts call forth the divine image restored in a humanity embedded

21. Anna Kartsonis, 'The Responding Icon', in *Heaven on Earth: Art and the Church in Byzantium*, edited by Linda Safran (University Park, Penn: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 58–80 at 60.

22. Anne F Elvey, *An Ecological Feminist Reading of the Gospel of Luke: A Gestational Paradigm* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), 25.

23. Compare Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 73–92.

24. This view parallels Catherine Keller's perspective on creation, when she re-reads Genesis 1:2 against a tradition of creation *ex nihilo*, to affirm an unsettling interagency between creator and the stuff/matter of creation. See Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003) especially at 238.

25. Chrysavgis, 'The World of the Icon', 87.

26. *Ibid.*

27. John Gatta, 'The Transfiguration of Christ and Cosmos: A Focal Point of Literary Imagination', in the *Sewanee Theological Review* 49/4 (2006): 484–506 especially at 490, 498.

within a more than human Earth community (compare Gen 1:26–28).²⁸ Even if the disciples do not in the narrative context immediately experience a lasting shift of worldview on the mountain, the accounts stand as windows into and calls to such a shift. For Chryssavgis, the icon can occasion in the viewer a similar shift of worldview or perspective.²⁹

For Julia Kristeva, the Bible, too, has the capacity to unsettle our subjectivities.³⁰ In reading the Bible, one is engaged with an otherness both inscribed in, and exceeding, not only the text but also the patriarchal imaginaries of authority brought into play in association with it and with certain influential traditions of biblical reception and interpretation.³¹ This shifting or unsettling of worldview is not (or need not be) simply a momentary discomfort, but rather opens the possibility for transformation that, like the biblical transfiguration accounts, does not turn away from the death of that worldview, a turning that would threaten to close off possibility.

Referring to Adrienne Rich's poem 'Power', Schüssler Fiorenza describes 'women's biblical heritage as one and the same source for women's religious power and suffering'.³² In addressing the biblical text in our contemporary situation of ecological trauma, can we turn this around to say that *our power/authority comes from the same source as our wounds*—with 'our' read broadly as referring to our being constituted within a more than human Earth community, and the biblical heritage understood to be but one source of our wounding, both that wounding we suffer and that which we occasion? Then the encounter between text and reader can offer the possibility of transformation oriented toward healing: personal, social and cultural.

Through openness to the otherness of text and context, this transformative encounter receives structure through the discipline of critical reading practices. In her recent work on women and healing in the synoptic gospels, Elaine Wainwright, for example, develops a transformative hermeneutics using feminist, postcolonial and ecological lenses along with the tools of socio-rhetorical criticism, in a process of theological meaning-

28. *Ibid.*

29. Chryssavgis, 'The World of the Icon', 83–4.

30. Julia Kristeva, 'Reading the Bible', in *New Maladies of the Soul* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 115–26.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 21; see Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language* (New York: Norton, 1993), 3.

making that is itself directed toward healing.³³ Affirming this orientation toward transformation, can we consider an authority *in* (rather than *of*) the biblical text, where the text is a place of vibrant interrelationship between material elements, human languages, writers and readers? In this dynamic mediated materiality, an inner light or voice can emerge in our contemplative critical engagement with the text, when we are both open and opened to a multitude of others: human and other than human, past, present and future, especially as we think of ourselves as ancestors of those who will inhabit Earth after us.

33. Wainwright, *Women Healing/Healing Women*.