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The Woman's Bible: Once Failed, Now Scripture

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THE WOMAN'S BIBLE:
ONCE FAILED, NOW SCRIPTURE

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Abstract: Published in two parts in 1895 and 1898, *The Woman's Bible* presented Elizabeth Cady Stanton's views on the biblical foundations of patriarchy and sexism. The text was reviled by prominent clergymen upon its publication, and women involved in the suffrage movement distanced themselves from it. Nevertheless, the *Bible* was revived in the 1970s by second-wave feminists. It is natural to view this text as paratextual to the Bible; this paper, however, reads it as its own scriptural text, just as the second-wave feminists did. The text served as scripture for feminism, particularly for those feminists who were also concerned with Christianity and the Bible. The *Bible* targeted an American Christian audience of both men and women, assuming a good knowledge of the Bible. Its invited uptake might have been for readers to reevaluate biblical "truths" regarding women. Regardless, it certainly was taken up this way: clergy at the time of publication strongly took issue with it, while feminists reacted differently decades later. The *Bible* has many paratexts, especially in light of the feminist literature that draws on it. This paper examines the dynamic history of *The Woman's Bible* through the lens of its scripturalization. Its maintenance was almost non-existent for decades, so it provides a unique insight into the impact of reviving a scriptural text after a period of little use.

Introduction

One hundred years after the first volume of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* was published in 1895, Anne Todd celebrated the book and its author in the *Daughters of Sarah* magazine, noting how "[Stanton] sought to reclaim the Scripture for Christian women," and that "*The Woman's Bible* must be seen as visionary."[2] Todd, a graduate student at the time, was not alone in this sentiment. In 1993, prominent feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza edited *Searching the Scriptures*, a collection of feminist Bible scholarship in two volumes, "in preparation for the 1995 centennial celebration of the publication of *The Woman's Bible*."[3] Along with other books and articles, these works represented thorough engagement with *The Woman's Bible* among feminist scholars

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[2] Anne Todd, "The Woman's Bible: 100 Years Ahead of Its Time?" *Daughters of Sarah* 21, no. 4 (Fall 1995): 51.

[3] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Searching the Scriptures* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), ix.

beginning in the 1970s. With just a glance at this history of the text and the scholarship surrounding it, one quickly notices the decades-long gap between its publication and its conspicuous revival.

When Stanton published the first volume of *The Woman's Bible* in 1895 (the second volume came in 1898), it was not met with reviews of its "visionary" quality. Rather, "[p]rominent clergy reviled it, Stanton's fellow suffrage leaders disassociated themselves from it," and it "f[ell] out of print and out of notice."[4] For more than a half century afterwards, no canon of feminist biblical scholarship and criticism developed, but in 1974, *The Woman's Bible* "saw its first significant reprinting, by the Seattle Coalition Task Force on Women and Religion."[5] Following this reprinting, Stanton's *Bible* encouraged eager feminist scholars to examine the book in a social setting completely different from that of the 1890s. One who notices the gap between the initial publication of *The Woman's Bible* and its revival might also take note of the dramatic level of attention the text received in the years after its reprinting.

The history of *The Woman's Bible* raises important questions about how it developed from a book forgotten and failed to a text that has served a leading role in feminist theology and biblical studies since the 1970s. Rejected by clergy and by Stanton's suffragist colleagues at the time of its inception, this paper argues that the rebirth of *The Woman's Bible* through second-wave feminist scholarship displays a remarkable history of scripturalization. Indeed, scholars began to use the *Bible* as their own scripture, and many maintain it as such today.

First, it is necessary to define some of the key terms used in this paper. My use of "scripturalization" is derived from Vincent L. Wimbush's 2012 book *White Men's Magic: Scripturalization as Slavery*. Therein, he defines this term as "a social-psychological-political structure establishing its own reality."[6] For the purposes of this paper, scripturalization encompasses the initial processes by which a text becomes a scripture, and

[4] Emily R. Mace, "Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past: A Historiography of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's The Woman's Bible," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 5, 6.
[5] Mace, "Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past," 2, 11.
[6] Vincent L. Wimbush, *White Men's Magic: Scripturalization as Slavery*, (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 19.

the ongoing processes by which its scriptural status is maintained and used.[7] My use of the term "failed scripture" is linked to scripturalization. Given that scripture might be framed as a relationship between a text (*The Woman's Bible* in this case) and its reader(s), a scripture fails when this positive relationship is not established and thus the intended reception is not realized.[8] In this paper, "second-wave feminism" refers to the feminists of the 1970s. While much (if not most) of the source material herein was published in the decades after the 1970s, the origins lie firmly within the second wave.

Genre of *The Woman's Bible*

The Woman's Bible, while not intended to replace the Christian Bible, possesses essential characteristics that facilitated its later development into a scripture for second-wave feminist scholars. Unlike other scriptural texts of the nineteenth century, such as the *Book of Mormon* and *Science and Health*, *The Woman's Bible* contains no claims of divine authorship or inspiration. A review of four generic qualities—imagined audience; establishment of credibility; assumed expectations, knowledge, and dispositions; and invited uptake—however, contributes to our understanding of how the text's structure facilitated its later development.

First, the imagined audience of *The Woman's Bible* (at the time of writing and publication, of course) was White American Protestants, especially women. In fact, Schüssler Fiorenza notes in her preface to *Searching the Scriptures* that "Cady Stanton's work … on the whole engaged mostly Protestant white women from the United States." This is not particularly surprising given Stanton's background.[9] Stanton was raised in the Calvinist tradition, but she had certainly rejected traditional Calvinist doctrine in favor of more liberal theological views before the 1890s. This position is visible in the makeup of the committee that Stanton assembled to produce *The Woman's Bible*.[10] The committee consisted of three ordained Universalist clergywomen and "[m]any members … interest[ed]

[7] This framework also comes from the work of American religious historian Seth Perry (Princeton University). See *Bible Culture and Authority in the Early United States*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).
[8] This framework of scriptural failure is derived from the current work and research of Professor Perry.
[9] Schüssler Fiorenza, ix.
[10] *The Woman's Bible* was technically written by a committee of women, of which Stanton was chair. The great majority of the text, however, expressed primarily her ideas and was written by her. Anne Todd notes that "the project was almost solely hers alone." See Anne Todd, "The Woman's Bible," 48.

in New Thought or Spiritualism."[11] The composition of the committee, coupled with Stanton's roots in Protestantism, showcases the audience likely imagined by Stanton: White American women with Protestant backgrounds.

Second, Stanton establishes her credibility in two ways: (1) by using the King James Bible (the Bible likely most well-known by her neighbors and imagined audience), and (2) by attempting to bolster the influence of her name (as a leader of the suffrage movement) with the committee that she convened. In other words, Stanton's status in the women's movement established an initial level of credibility expanded upon by a committee she formed to promote the idea that *The Woman's Bible* was not the intellectual offspring of just one critic. The use of the King James Bible is also important to note because it allowed Stanton to show how the words of the translation used by many Protestant denominations could be interpreted in a drastically different manner.[12] It is fair to suggest that readers might have less readily accepted her work if she had used another English translation with which they were less familiar. Stanton had achieved some credibility as a result of her decades of work in the suffrage movement, and her name would allow for the *Bible* to be published and disseminated without trouble. Her profile in the movement, however, did not guarantee that all of her work would be viewed by every reader as credible and worth reading. This potential shortcoming was mitigated by "those committee members she convinced to work on the project."[13] Notwithstanding the fact that Stanton wrote the vast majority of *The Woman's Bible* herself, the status of her committee as the "author" helped to legitimize the text as a valid criticism of the Bible's perceived sexism.

Third, the dispositions, expectations, and knowledge that Cady Stanton took for granted in her audience primarily included a Christian familiarity with and reverence for the entire Christian Bible. Without this familiarity, *The Woman's Bible* would have no ability to meaningfully reach readers. Stanton also expected some degree of support from the suffrage movement and, importantly, understood that *The Woman's Bible* would be a controversial publication. This paper has already discussed the significance of the King James Bible to the writing and reception of *The Woman's Bible*, but Stanton took for granted that her audience

[11] Mace, "Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past," 9, 10.
[12] Todd, "The Woman's Bible," 48.
[13] Mace, "Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past," 9.

would know not only the words of this Bible, but also its orthodox American Protestant interpretations. Stanton's views were certainly not orthodox, but the most effective method she could use to express them, at least to her thinking, was to "literally [cut] out relevant passages" of the King James Bible and provide her commentary underneath.[14] In doing so, Stanton assumed that her readers would know the Christian Bible well, and she also expected that they would find her commentary controversial. During the three years between publication of the first volume in 1895 and the second volume in 1898, there erupted "a storm of controversy that at once appalled and delighted Stanton," at least partly due to her excitement that the publicity would lead to increased readership.[15] Anne Todd notes that "[t]he opposition only fueled her efforts" in the years between the two volumes.[16] As these scholars point out, Stanton's work was controversial from the start; even if she was somewhat delighted by the publicity generated as a result of that controversy, the woman's suffrage movement was not. For *The Woman's Bible* to garner widespread and long-term legitimacy, it would have been necessary for the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and related groups to openly support it. However, NAWSA passed a resolution in 1896 declaring the lack of any "'official connection with the so-called "Woman's Bible,"'" in an attempt to retain those religiously conservative NAWSA members opposed to *The Woman's Bible*'s "religious radicalism."[17] Stanton took NAWSA's support for granted, but when intense controversy emerged, NAWSA had to prioritize its members. The other two expectations (familiarity with the Christian Bible and a controversial response from the public) that I have outlined, however, were indeed realized.

The invited uptake of *The Woman's Bible* is multifaceted, but it especially encouraged its readers to critically reconsider the biblical passages used to justify the oppression of women. This reconsideration was not intended to target solely sexist interpretations of certain parts of the Bible by American Protestant clergy, but rather the Bible itself. Historian and theologian Dorothy C. Bass writes insightfully about Stanton's goals for the uptake of *The Woman's Bible*. She notes:

[14] Mace, "Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past," 9.
[15] Mace, "Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past," 10.
[16] Todd, "The Woman's Bible," 48-49.
[17] Mace, "Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past," 10.

> Stanton, who was by this time in her eighties, had been arguing for half a century that the chief cause of woman's oppression was 'the perversion of her spiritual nature,' her enslavement to a misogynist religion. The keystone of this religion, and thus by extension the keystone of woman's oppression, was the Bible.[18]

Stanton intended for her *Bible* to be a critical commentary on the Bible from a feminist perspective, as Bass argues, and she invited readers to take it up as such. Nevertheless, even before the first volume was published, the American public was skeptical that Stanton was trying to effectively rewrite the Bible. For example, the *Springfield Daily Republican* reassured its readers that while "[o]rthodox Christians of various denominations seem quite shocked and worried about [*The Woman's Bible*]," it was "a commentary on the Bible" and not "'[a] New Bible for the New Woman' [or] a 'Woman's Version of the Bible.'"[19] Bass particularly elucidates the problems that Stanton saw with the Bible; Stanton wanted her readers to critically consider her thoughts on those problems and engage with them in the face of a sexist clergy and the Christian Bible that enabled it. Further discussion of both the invited and realized uptake of *The Woman's Bible* will follow, including an examination of the generic qualities of a scripturalized text in order to demonstrate the relevance of the author's intention.

Paratexts

The paratexts of *The Woman's Bible* inform a more complete understanding of the social and religious environment in which Stanton wrote, as well as the evolution of its place in that milieu over time. The second-wave literature that took up the *Bible* as its scripture is, of course, made up of individual epitexts that illuminate the *Bible's* ability to connect with feminist biblical interpreters and religious studies scholars in the 1970s (and later). Similarly, it could certainly be argued that the lack of attention given to *The Woman's Bible* for decades before its reprinting is paratextual. In order to emphasize its intense revival in the latter half of the twentieth century, I will focus my attention on peritexts and the paratexts that emerged immediately before and for some years after the publication of the first volume in 1895.

[18] Dorothy C. Bass, "Women's Studies and Biblical Studies, an Historical Perspective," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 7, no. 22 (February 1982): 11.
[19] "Mrs. Stanton's 'Woman's Bible.'" *Springfield Republican* (Springfield, Massachusetts), June 15, 1895: 6.

The *Springfield Daily Republican* and other publications attempted to defend Stanton's work, but much of the nationwide coverage was not so flattering. The *Charleston News and Courier*, published then as *The Sunday News*, informed its readers that *The Woman's Bible* "has failed to meet the approval of any theologians able to read the language in which the Bible was written," adding that Stanton had laughed when criticized for "her efforts to interpret the language of Moses through the modern speculation about women's rights."[20] While this detail was not particularly relevant considering that *The Woman's Bible* did not attempt to re-translate the King James Bible, this snub coupled with derogatory language did serve to discredit the text. The Cleveland *Plain Dealer* also noted local women's distaste for the title of *The Woman's Bible* on account of their personal disagreements with Stanton's commentary.[21] *The Sunday News* subtly reiterated this complaint, commenting that "[w]oman, in the person of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, has laid her hand upon the Bible."[22]

These epitexts demand review of a critical peritext: the title of Stanton's commentary itself. The existence of the revising committee assembled by Stanton, which I have already briefly discussed, did not give Stanton the authority to label the text as reflecting the beliefs of or belonging to 'women,' especially since she wrote the vast majority of it alone. In fact, her attempt to portray her ideas as belonging to all women not only ostracized those who disagreed, but also left out important voices. Christiana de Groot has more recently argued that the title is a result of Stanton's view that "all women are essentially the same," allowing her to "universalize[] her own experience … and claim[] to speak for all women." In doing so, de Groot also argues that Stanton had the "luxury of not noticing that other women's experience could be very different from her own."[23] As the aforementioned newspapers reported, Stanton's failure to grasp the reality of differences between women contributed greatly to the controversy that surrounded her *Bible* from the start.

Two additional peritexts that merit consideration are the list of committee members provided in the book and the typography of the pages (including Bible passages and

[20] *Charleston News and Courier* (Charleston, South Carolina), July 7, 1895: 4
[21] "Little Favor. The 'Woman's Bible' Causes Much Criticism in Cleveland. Opinions of Representative Women," *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, Ohio), December 5, 1895: 8.
[22] *Charleston News and Courier* (Charleston, South Carolina), May 26, 1895: 9
[23] Christiana De Groot, "Contextualizing the Woman's Bible," *Studies in Religion* 41, no. 4 (December 2012): 566.

commentary). The names of the members of the revising committee that worked with Stanton are published on the second page of the original 1895 edition.[24] This paratext immediately informs readers that this commentary was written by a committee of over twenty women. Those readers would, however, soon discover that Stanton's name is attached to most of the commentary. This is, again, the physical manifestation of Stanton's effort to establish superficial credibility through her committee. Moreover, while *The Woman's Bible* adheres to the common structure of a Bible passage followed by commentaries, Emily R. Mace has noted that, "contrary to usual practice, the text of the commentary used a larger typeface than the biblical passages."[25] This paratext signals that readers should focus on the commentaries and accordingly view the Bible passages as a mere prompt.

Initial Uptake

The uptake of *The Woman's Bible* began even before publication and continued in the years immediately after, only to be effectively paused for decades before second-wave feminists resurrected it in the 1970s. These two uptake periods were naturally characterized by very different trends and attitudes among the people interacting with the text. *The Woman's Bible* stirred great controversy in 1895; both theologians and the public contributed to an animated discourse surrounding the text. Writing in 1982, Dorothy Bass placed *The Woman's Bible* within "a history of estrangement between feminist perspectives and professional biblical scholarship." This view can easily be extended to an estrangement between "feminist perspectives" and mainstream Protestant clergy.[26] The *Bible* "inspired discussion in the ministerial profession," ranging "from outright ridicule," such as that observed in coverage by *The Sunday News*, to claims of demonic involvement in Stanton's writing process.[27] Newspapers around the country reflected the sentiment of many, particularly women, on the subject. The *Omaha World-Herald*, published then as the *Morning World-Herald*, included the following comments on *The Woman's Bible* in a column entitled "A Word with the Women":

[24] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible* (New York: European Publishing Co., 1895), 2.
[25] Mace, "Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past," 10.
[26] Bass, 12.
[27] Mace, 11.

> Mary Abbott, writing in the Times-Herald of Chicago, gives to…the 'Woman's Bible'…the most unqualified condemnation," adding that "[w]omen who have the advancement of their sex really at heart might" be frustrated with the "ignorant, egotistical and senile" *Woman's Bible*. "Mrs. Stanton…ought to let us remember her past and to sit for photographs of herself" instead of "exposing her ignorance" by writing this commentary.[28]

This pointed criticism directed at Stanton and her work apparently reflected the feelings of many women from Cleveland, Omaha, Chicago, and beyond. This rejection of Stanton's entreaty to reconsider the Bible's role in the oppression of women was hardly what she had envisioned. While the failure of women in general to accept *The Woman's Bible* prevented the beginning of its meaningful scripturalization, the suffrage movement's active disassociation from the text proved an even harsher blow.

The Woman's Bible and Scriptural Failure

The suffrage movement's renunciation of *The Woman's Bible* proved to be the nail in the coffin of its scripturalization in the years immediately following its publication. Individual women around the country, as evidenced in numerous examples of less-than-ideal newspaper coverage, held strong and controversial opinions on the *Bible*. The influential movement (in which Stanton had been highly regarded, almost revered) made these opinions official. In withholding support, the movement effectively undermined the potential scripturalization of *The Woman's Bible*. NAWSA did not merely refuse to provide the backing necessary to establish *The Woman's Bible* as scripture, but actively repudiated the text. As a result, *The Woman's Bible* became a failed scripture. As news coverage waned in the years after the publication of the second volume in 1898, the *Bible* experienced for many years an "erasure from history."[29] This scriptural failure fits well within the theoretical framework: the processes needed to establish a scriptural relationship between the text and its audience did not develop due to controversy and public resistance from the women's movement.[30]

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[28] "A Word with the Women," *Omaha World-Herald* (Omaha, Nebraska) XXXI, no. 67, December 6, 1895: 8.

[29] Mace, "Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past," 11.

[30] This framework of scriptural failure is derived from the current work and research of Professor Perry.

The Woman's Bible and its potential for scripturalization lay dormant for most of the twentieth century, until the Seattle Coalition Task Force on Women and Religion decided to reprint it in 1974. The reprinting ignited a flurry of scholarly engagement by the feminist religious studies and Bible scholars of that era. Indeed, "[w]omen scholars heeded the coalition's call with eagerness," and the *Bible* experienced a second uptake.[31] The American Academy of Religion and a host of feminists began earnestly discussing and studying *The Woman's Bible* in an environment devoid of the controversy previously surrounding the subject. In doing so, these scholars began performing a scriptural relationship with the text. Scholars "began to trace a line of tradition back to nineteenth-century forerunners," reviving Stanton's reputation.[32] They lauded Stanton as a pioneer, releasing multiple articles and books in the two decades or so after the reprinting, each of which contributed to the scripturalization process. The text quickly developed into a scripture following the relationship established and performed through the 1973 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion's Working Group on Women and Religion. The text's establishment as scripture was augmented by important scholars such as Mary Daly and Phyllis Trible, who incorporated *The Woman's Bible* into their own work.[33] In the decades to follow, this relationship was successfully performed as *The Woman's Bible* remained a popular subject for feminist study. Dorothy Bass called it "the foremost example of nineteenth-century feminist hermeneutics" in 1982 (less than a decade after the *Bible* was reprinted).[34] The 1990s brought Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's homage to *The Woman's Bible* in the form of *Searching the Scriptures*.[35] Other scholars like Anne Todd performed continued praise of the *Bible's* "visionary" appropriateness, emphasizing its success in transcending time periods.[36] The work of these feminist scholars demonstrates the maintenance and use of *The Woman's Bible* throughout the last few decades of the twentieth century, representing the remarkable scripturalization of Stanton's once-erased contribution to feminist biblical studies.

[31] Mace, "Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past," 11.
[32] Mace, "Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past," 11.
[33] Mace, "Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past," 12.
[34] Bass, "Women's Studies and Biblical Studies, an Historical Perspective," 10.
[35] Schüssler Fiorenza, *Searching the Scriptures*.
[36] Todd, "The Woman's Bible," 51.

The Woman's Bible and the Characteristics of Scripture

A brief examination of *The Woman's Bible* in the context of observed scriptural conventions and characteristics is worthwhile and further supports this analysis of the text's scripturalization. A presumption of consequence, one such scriptural characteristic, is straightforward at first glance: Stanton realistically would not have written and published unless she felt confident that her ideas were consequential. Although her reputation was damaged, she accurately judged the capability of *The Woman's Bible* to make a significant impact, mainly as seen in the 1970s. Stanton's unrealized goal of disrupting mainstream American Protestant interpretations of the Bible with her commentary might not necessarily reflect that impact, but as Emily Mace notes, Stanton's "prominent place as a historical predecessor" is undeniable.[37] The author's lofty expectations for her text coupled with the continued use of her *Bible* as a scripture by feminist scholars allow for modern observers to ascertain the scriptural convention of a presumption of consequence.

The scriptural characteristic of deeper truth, which holds that a scripture contains a degree of esotericism, is also seen in this case. Stanton offered her interpretation of the Bible's passages concerning women, but also questioned the status of the Bible itself by opining about the parts of the Bible she deemed sexist. The presence of these characteristics of scripture, certainly recognized by the second-wave feminists who took up this text, contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the scripturalization of *The Woman's Bible*.

Conclusion

Elizabeth Cady Stanton's commentary on the Bible has experienced a remarkable and complex history of scripturalization. Clergymen, theologians, and Christian women initially disagreed fiercely with her claims, as did her suffragist friends and fellow members of NAWSA. After being forgotten for decades, *The Woman's Bible* was "resurrected," re-emerging into a world that would have been alien to Stanton.[38] Feminist scholars of the Bible and religion eagerly studied, discussed, and wrote about it, quickly establishing its scriptural status and relationship. This dynamic relationship was continuously performed and developed, structured on the generic qualities of *The Woman's Bible* and informed by its

[37] Mace, "Feminist Forerunners and a Usable Past," 23.
[38] Todd, "The Woman's Bible," 49.

paratexts. The community of second-wave feminist scholars maintained their scriptural relationship with the *Bible* by using it in the publication of dozens of articles and books during the 1970s, ‘80s, and ‘90s, and this maintenance and use continues well into the twenty-first century.

Stanton did not set out to create a new religion or denomination, and her goal was not to destroy the Bible and Christianity. She expected that her commentary could be consequential in demonstrating deeper truths about sexism and the oppression of women. Her *Bible*’s scriptural status lies primarily within the second-wave feminist scholarly tradition and its successors, but its extraordinary scripturalization is worthy of attention, begging consideration of how particular scriptures develop their status as such, and perhaps whether more failed scriptures might experience their own future revival.

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