

THE NEW TESTAMENT— THE CHURCH'S BOOK??!

The question of the relationship of Bible, Church and academy is of key importance for a conversation about the academic and ecclesial settings of theology. Biblical studies with its increasing dependence upon allied fields of Ancient Near Eastern studies, Classics and Ancient History, Archaeology and the various studies of anthropology, ethnology, botany, geology and the like that are required, linguistics, and literary criticism, to name but a few, can hardly be responsibly pursued outside the context of a major university.¹ The result of this academic setting has been to render philosophical, theological or ecclesial questions marginal in the professional lives of Biblical scholars. (Those of us who persist in taking an interest in such matters are largely perceived to do so on the basis of private, personal commitment rather than public, social or professional responsibility.)²

Biblical studies are further isolated from the theological enterprise because the questions it finds emerging from historical, linguistic, literary and "social sciences" approaches to its material are not those of traditional theology.³ It often seems preferable to build bridges toward colleagues and disciplines more closely connected to the ongoing work of Biblical research than to attempt to "wrestle" Biblical insights into an often uncomprehending and even hostile theological and ecclesial environment.

A common response to this dilemma, especially from Biblical scholars allied with ecclesial education, has been to insist on the obvious connection between

¹See my discussion of these issues in P. Perkins, "The Relationship between the Bible, Oriental Studies and Archaeology from the Perspective of a Biblical Scholar," L. Geraty, ed., *A Symposium on the Relationship between the Bible, Oriental Studies and Archaeology* (Occasional Papers of the Horn Archaeological Museum No. 3; Barrien Springs MI: Andrews University, 1984), pp. 1-10.

²This response may be viewed as a reflection of the general "dis-ease" with religious and ethical discourse in our society, which has resulted in what Richard Neuhaus aptly titles "the naked public square" (R. J. Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square. Religion and Democracy in America*. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984]). Neuhaus traces the privatization of religion in the decisions of the Supreme Court to the point at which "religion" is a synonym for "conscience." "Conscience" is not a public reality or a matter of communal values (p. 80). Influential currents of religious liberalism are caught in the double bind of supporting a view of pluralism in which religion can impinge on but never really belong in the public arena and yet demanding that they have political influence (pp. 129-55).

³See the discussion of the intellectual horizons of modern Biblical research in James Barr, *Holy Scripture. Canon, Authority, Criticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), pp. 105-21.

"Bible" and the community of believers, "the Church." Without such a community, there would be no canonical collection of writings that could be described as "Bible." It is this presupposition which commends itself to our attention this morning. We shall first consider arguments in favor of the contention that the "Bible" is the Church's book. Then, I would like to explore some serious challenges to maintaining that assumption in our present intellectual and religious climate. Not least among them are serious historical and philosophical questions about the "canon" on which such a view rests. Finally, we may reassess our original arguments in light of such challenges.

THE BIBLE AS THE CHURCH'S BOOK

The inseparable relationship between transmitted tradition, transformation of that tradition and community is fundamental to Biblical criticism, itself. The methods of both "form criticism" and "tradition criticism" demand explanations that go beyond formal, literary and comparative analyses of Biblical texts. They require formulation of hypotheses about the setting of such material in human communities of faith. Anthropology, sociology, comparative religion and the like are all critical in formulating such typologies. This concern with community memory and the ongoing process of interpreting the religious tradition indicates that Biblical criticism is not primarily aimed at getting the historical nuggets out of the Bible (according to some positivist view of what counts as historical data) and leaving the rest aside to be picked over by the poor.⁴

Emphasis on the transmission and modification of tradition within the community of faith also moderates the extent to which the Bible may be treated as "literature," simply. Whatever the considerable artistic and literary merits of parts of the Bible, it cannot be said to have emerged from the impulse to create an aesthetic object for its own sake.⁵ In order to understand what is "going on" in the tradition history of the Biblical materials, one must ask how the community draws on its tradition at varying stages in its development.⁶ Leander Keck has argued that despite its frequently announced demise, "historical-critical" (including more recent use of social sciences) study of the Bible and the survival of the Bible as "canon" of the Christian community go hand in hand. Historical criticism is not

⁴See W. E. Rast, *Tradition History and the Old Testament*. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), pp. 30f. Barr (*Holy Scripture*, p. 105f.) rightly insists that historical criticism is too narrow a term for what Biblical scholars are about. Many of the judgments of form and tradition criticism cannot be spoken of as historical. They are grounded in linguistic and literary analysis.

⁵See K. Stendahl, "The Bible as Classic and the Bible as Holy Scripture," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (1984), 6f. Stendahl wonders whether some of the intense interest in applying new literary techniques to the Bible does not mask a sophisticated apologetics for religion in the academy.

⁶The meaning of the tradition for the community may be quite different at different points in its experience. But the "canonical" function of that tradition lies in the conviction that the tradition serves to illuminate the changing conditions of its experience (see J. A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984], pp. 26-28).

a tyranny of historicism over Christian faith but a disciplined approach to the Bible which seeks to preserve its independence from our contemporary "fads" and "passions" in a way that either the fundamentalism of the right or the purely literary approaches of the left do not.⁷

One may also approach the issue of canon and community from the perspective of anthropology. Jonathan Smith has argued, for example, that in any religious group closure of a "canonical" text or list or established religious formulae is fundamental to the bounded sense of the sacred. Along with that sense of "canon" the community develops "rule governed" interpretation and interpreters. In that way, the "canon" remains unchanged while it is seen to embrace the totality of life.⁸

The necessity for "canonical" tradition may be reflected in tendencies toward codification of the tradition found within the New Testament. One must, of course, observe that it represents an anthropological dimension of religious experience which does not necessarily imply an "outcome" in what we now think of as Bible. Robert Funk has argued that although New Testament tradition has its roots in what is handed on orally, one does find the tendency to collect and fix traditions in written form. Biblical traditions had already moved toward embodiment in writing. That transition had important consequences for the way in which we think about the tradition. Instead of perceiving it as "word from God," the focus of revelation becomes "word about God."⁹

While the foregoing considerations are grounded in "historical-critical" study, Krister Stendahl's analysis of the canonical position of the Bible proceeds from a critique of the "Bible as classic" turn in contemporary theology and literary criticism. Though the Bible's claim to being a "classic" is often defended in terms of its "excess of meaning," all classics must function as such with respect to an established community.¹⁰ The authority which the Bible enjoys in Western culture is grounded in an awareness that it functions as "Holy Scriptures" in our churches and synagogues.¹¹ A normative claim—humans "must" shape their lives in accord with the reality disclosed in the Bible—attaches to the Bible which is not par-

⁷L. E. Keck, "Will the Historical Critical Method Survive? Some Observations," in Richard A. Spencer, ed., *Orientation by Disorientation: Studies in Literary Criticism Presented in honor of William A. Beardslee* (Pittsburg Theological Monograph Series 35; Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1980), pp. 117-24.

⁸J. Z. Smith, "Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon," *Imagining Religion. From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), pp. 43-48.

⁹R. W. Funk, *Parables and Presence. Forms of the New Testament Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), pp. 155-59.

¹⁰Stendahl, "Bible as Classic," p. 4f. This criticism can be addressed to the "disclosure of reality (Truth)" model implied in Tracy's definition of the classic (e.g., D. Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, p. 108).

¹¹Stendahl, "Bible as Classic," p. 5f.

alleled in the same way in literary or philosophical classics.¹² Stendahl comments:

The more intensive the expectation of normative guidance and the more exacting the claims for the holiness of Scripture, the more obvious should be the need for full attention to what it meant in the time of its conception and what the intention of the authors might have been.¹³

The normative position of the Bible as "canon" gives it an evaluative and "critical" role within the Christian churches. This "critical" function is not independent of the strategies of interpretation that are employed in understanding the intent of the Biblical material.¹⁴ Protestant orthodoxy associated canon and inspiration in such a way that Scripture could be said to be antecedent to the Church; that faith is response to the message of that Scripture, and that the life of the Church moved forward under the scrutiny of the divine Word in Scripture. Doctrine was said to be grounded in the material content of Scripture.¹⁵ Since the Bible, even as "closed canon," does not generate a univocal, normative doctrinal synthesis, the struggle for "historical-critical" understanding of the Bible can also be seen as allied with the struggles for political and theological freedom. The reformation principle of "justification by faith alone" (often described as a "canon within the canon") seeks to ensure that the free Christian conscience does not fill itself with its own content.¹⁶

The struggle for a historical-critical understanding of the Bible can be argued to be the basis for its continued critical function over against the community. Without such a hermeneutical discipline the Bible's canonical authority would all too easily be co-opted by the status quo or the latest intellectual and political fads. As we learn to perceive the particularity of the Biblical communities and their struggle toward faith, we also learn that the "canon" does not present us with some timeless ideal over against which all else is measured. Instead, it calls for the discernment of analogies by which the tradition illuminates a changing present. Historical criticism is not aimed simply at the Biblical text but also at the use and misuse of such texts in the life of the community. The required "distancing" of itself from the immediate present may also imply rejecting some elements of the Christian past (and even its exegesis) like anti-Semitism.¹⁷

¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 7-9. Another element in the normative claims made for the Bible as "canon" of a believing community is to be found in the necessary concern for the "intentions" of its authors. When the Bible is treated as aesthetic or even philosophical classic, the demand for normativeness is relaxed. However, the result is that we may find the Bible simply a base for our own thoughts and actions (p. 10).

¹³*Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁴For example, Tracy has rightly observed (*Analogical Imagination*, p. 289, n. 21), that Schillebeeckx's use of "Q" material (itself a scholarly reconstruction) to delineate the "dangerous memory" of the historical Jesus, owes as much to Schillebeeckx's theological use of socio-critical and praxis criteria as to reconstruction of the historical Jesus.

¹⁵See Barr, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 1-3; 23-31.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 33-35.

¹⁷See Keck, "Historical-Critical Method," p. 124.

Robert Funk has argued that, however arbitrary the historical process by which the Christian communities established their canon, that canon is vital to the ongoing life of the churches. It sets tradition over against the "self" as particular and pluralistic but bounded. The Bible was not narrowed down to a single tradition that could generate a logically coherent interpretation. Indeed, the very particularity of the Biblical traditions was felt to require multiple witnesses. On the other hand, the limitations placed on the canon show a refusal to expand the tradition indefinitely without reference to what is felt to be the ground of the tradition. Particularity and, hence, the appropriateness of pluralism in interpretation is protected by the canon at the same time as boundaries to the indefinite expansion of the tradition are established.¹⁸

If the Bible is clearly and unequivocally established as a "canonical text," then it cannot be divorced from its setting within the religious community. It may be true that the religious community should ground its interpretations of its Scripture (and its own history) firmly in insights derived from "the academy," but the Bible as such belongs irrevocably in an ecclesial context.

DOES THE CANON/CHURCH SOLUTION TELL THE WHOLE STORY?

It should be evident from the previous section that a serious case can be made for the claim that the Bible is in essence the "Church's book." Within that context ecclesial, theological concerns would appear to hold the "pride of place" in Biblical interpretation. But, as I indicated at the outset, we are beginning to experience the flaws in that solution to the question.

Within the liberal republican traditions of our Western democracies, political and religious freedom required the "privatization" of religious and ethical questions. There is a sense in which all religious bodies are now "sectarian." And, as was true in first-century Judaism, sectarian boundaries are maintained through practices of interpretation of canonical texts that are not shared with those outside the group. The disastrous consequences of sectarian, privatized religion are evident enough on both the national and global scale.

If human survival into the next millennium demands the emergence of global forms of religious symbolization and participation (as an alternative to Marxist ideology), then religious classics must have a place to empower human life and vision outside their sectarian ghettos. For Christians, that means that the Bible and other significant theological affirmations of our tradition must "leave the churches" and enter into significant, constructive dialogues with the global human community and the social and natural sciences which shape us and our world.

CRACKS IN THE "CANONICAL EGG"

The new "public discourse" about humanity and its foundational religious symbols has been seeking to carve out a "space" in the academy, which provides something of a "neutral ground" between the vested interests of Church and state.

¹⁸Funk, *Parables and Presence*, pp. 173-78.

Within this conversation, we find serious challenges to the paradigm of Bible as canon so fundamental to ecclesial theology. We shall consider five of them here: (1) Dissolution of the limits of canon in historical-critical study; (2) Dissolution of the boundaries of interpretation in literary criticism and "de-constructionist" theology; (3) Dissolution of the hegemony of metaphysical (theological) categories as the vehicle to insight by human and natural sciences; (4) Dissolution of the authority of Scripture as "archetype" in feminist theology, and (5) Dissolution of the bond between proclamation and text in the study of oral tradition.

(1) *Beyond the Canon*

Any historical study of the process by which the writings we now call "canonical" came to be vested with that authority will show that the process was neither uniform nor based upon theological principles that were uniformly applied.¹⁹ The beginning of the impulse to establish a "canon" beyond the "Scripture," that is, the Septuagint, does not even begin until the middle of the second century A.D. Although for much of the Church, the canonical list of books might look much like that in our Bibles by the end of the fourth century, the issues were not even settled then. Because the Church had considered the Septuagint "Scripture," Augustine disputed Jerome's selection of the Hebrew text as the basis for his Latin translation. The influential Syrian Church treated Tatian's Diatesseron (an amalgamation of the four gospels) as its gospel canon until the beginning of the fifth century. The East Syrian, Nestorian Church, which represented Christianity in all of Asia from Persia to China, never accepted Jude or Revelation as canonical. No modern "Old Testament" canon corresponds to the Hebrew Bible. The Roman Catholic Church decreed the Apocrypha to be canonical at Trent. The Reformed Churches rejected them. The Anglican and Lutheran Churches held that they were useful to piety to read but not obligatory. Differences in "canon" can also be found between the Russian and Greek Orthodox Churches.²⁰

The boundaries set by the canon lead to the creation of a false "genealogy" of relationships between texts within the canon. Such relationships do not reflect the way in which the early communities of Israel or of Christians drew upon and appropriated their traditions. Kurt Aland has observed that one can read much second-century Christian literature without any sense that the authors felt the need for

¹⁹The major study of this process for the first three centuries (H. von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible*, trans. J. A. Baker [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972]) observes that "Scripture" does not mean the same thing, even when used of the writings in the Hebrew Bible, for Christians as for Jews. For Christians, everything had to be referred to the Lordship of Jesus (p. 1).

²⁰See the discussion of the history of the canon in K. Aland, *A History of Christianity, Vol. 1: From the Beginnings to the Threshold of the Reformation*, trans. J. L. Schaef (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), pp. 93-114. Aland concludes with an affirmation of "ecclesial theology" by affirming that in the providence of God this chaotic process all worked out for the best. None of the more recently discovered early Christian writings could claim canonical status. He comments, "Even in their weakest sections, these writings [= canonical ones] possess the witness of the Spirit and power in a completely different fashion from all other early Christian literature" (p. 114).

a canon.²¹ What would later become "canon" would have been experienced by them as part of a much larger whole that included both apocryphal Jewish writings and apocryphal Christian ones. A variety of "gospels" and "Acts of apostles" circulated in second- and third-century Christianity, which would, superficially, at least, appear to be parallel to those transmitted by the Church in the "four-gospel" canon.²²

New discoveries of such material as the collection of gnostic writings from Nag Hammadi as well as new translations of the Jewish pseudepigrapha are bringing it off the scholarly bookshelf and into general libraries.²³ The simple availability of so much related material from the Jewish and Christian communities between 400 B.C.E. and 200 C.E. cannot but raise the question of the appropriateness of canonical boundaries to understanding earliest Christianity and its tradition.

George Nickelsburg's introductory textbook to the Jewish writings of this period describes them as the "seedbed of both early Christianity and early rabbinic Judaism."²⁴ Yet one could argue that the earliest Christian writings, stemming from an off-shoot of Judaism, actually belong in the context that he has described in his title as "Jewish literature between the Bible and the Mishnah." Nickelsburg situates his discussion of the various writings historically. The New Testament writings fall within the context of the final three chapters: "The Romans and the House of Herod"; "The Exposition of Israel's Scriptures"; and "Revolt—Destruction—Reconstruction." Since the Gospel of Matthew so evidently involves a Jewish Christian community working through the questions of reconstruction in response to the Jewish consolidation of the period after 70 C.E., Nickelsburg concludes that chapter with a brief discussion of the division between Christianity and its Jewish origins that is evident there.²⁵ It is these writings, not redaction-critical reconstructions of Old Testament traditions, that provide us with a window into how the Jewish communities out of which Christianity comes lived with, reinterpreted, expanded on their tradition. And, after rabbinic reconstruction took much of the Jewish community in a different direction, much of this Jewish heritage would have been lost if it had not been preserved in Christian circles.

The false genealogies created by the canon have not only cut off much of the early Christian Jewish heritage from view, they have also shut out Christian apocrypha, both those preserved and written in Gnostic circles and those of non-gnos-

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 114.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 95.

²³For the gnostic material see J. M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977). For the Jewish pseudepigrapha see J. H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. 1, *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983). (Vol. 2, *Expansions of the "Old Testament" and Other Legends, Wisdom and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms, and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works*, is due to be published in 1985).

²⁴G. W. E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 303-305.

tic origin. From the perspective of a closed and established canon, it may appear that we have little to gain from traditions preserved in writings of the second and third centuries C.E.

Once again this presupposition is challenged by scholars who suggest that the boundaries of the canon are no more reliable a guide to the origins and development of the Jesus traditions than they are to the Jewish origins of Christianity. The gnosticized collection of Jesus' sayings known as the *Gospel of Thomas* has affinities with traditions in the canonical gospels in which Jesus speaks as divine Wisdom (e.g., Luke 10:21f./Matt. 11:25f.). Other sayings in the collection reflect wisdom sayings that were circulating in Judaism of the first century C.E. Therefore, *Gos. Thom.* provides a critical resource in any study of the tradition history of Jesus' sayings and parables.²⁶

Helmut Koester has used sayings materials found in other gnostic "gospels" to establish a "trajectory" of sayings material that might have developed into the peculiar form of revelatory speech by Jesus that we find in the Fourth Gospel.²⁷ Though many scholars are not persuaded by the chronological priority that Koester attributes to much of the gnostic sayings tradition, no one can claim to interpret the tradition history of the Fourth Gospel today without careful analysis of the traditions preserved in the gnostic writings of the second century.²⁸

John Dominic Crossan mines *Gos. Thom.* and other apocryphal writings to demonstrate their importance as sources of independent lines of development in the Jesus tradition. Our investigation should not be limited to sayings traditions, in which one more naturally expects variants of a tradition to remain in circulation, but also to elements in the passion and resurrection narratives. After using apocryphal material in establishing the tradition history of the parables of the Great Supper and Wicked Tenants as well as the Healing of the Leper and the Question about Tribute Money, Crossan argues that other independent Jesus traditions are to be found among the New Testament apocrypha.²⁹ He even argues for a number of independent elements preserved in the passion and resurrection stories of the second century C.E. *Gospel of Peter*.³⁰ These preliminary investigations show that there is no segment of the gospel tradition which is isolated from the context of apocryphal gospel traditions.

²⁶See S. L. Davies, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom* (New York: Seabury, 1983), pp. 36-116. However, Davies presses these links to a nongnostic, first-century origin for the Thomas tradition generally, which does not seem warranted by the evidence.

²⁷For example, H. Koester, "Gnostic Sayings as Witnesses for the Development of the Sayings Tradition," *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, Vol. 1: *The School of Valentinus*, ed. B. Layton (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980), pp. 238-61; *idem*, "Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels," *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (1980), 105-30.

²⁸This detailed attention to gnostic traditions characterizes posthumously published commentary by E. Haenchen, *John 1. A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapter 1-6*, trans. & ed. R. W. Funk with U. Busse (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); *John 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of John Chapters 7-21* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

²⁹J. D. Crossan, *Four Other Gospels: Shadows on the Contours of the Canon* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985) pp. 7-87.

³⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 125-81.

(2) *Beyond Exegesis*

Studies of the traditions of the New Testament in the context of apocryphal Jewish and early Christian writings remain within the methodological boundaries established by historical-critical exegesis. Within the larger context of "the academy," exegesis cannot claim to be the sole mode of entry into an understanding of the Biblical text. Biblical exegetes do, in fact, attend to the questions of literary analysis in so far as these questions and methods seek to illuminate the structure, dynamics and meaning of the text within its own world and textual environment. Nickelsburg's introduction to the Jewish writings of this period sets out to be a "literary" study of these writings rather than some general exposition of their "ideas" or "theological content."³¹ However, he warns the reader that we cannot understand them without an attempt to appreciate the milieu in which they originated. Our appreciation of modern literature with its complex, sophisticated structures may make it difficult for us to appreciate the mythic symbolism and simpler forms of expression characteristic of these writings.³²

Aesthetic categories may also provide the exegete with appreciation for the "poetics" of the stories and symbols encountered in the Bible.³³ It may even be the case, as Amos Wilder suggests, that the Bible's aesthetic vision has something to teach modernity. Unlike modern apocalyptic visions, he argues, the Bible preserves a wholeness and integrity that is fundamental to preserving the communal rootedness of humanity and engaging the human will in responsibility.³⁴

The real challenge to the theological and exegetical enterprise comes from the emergence on the literary-critical scene of modes of analysis which Jonathan Culler has characterized as "theory." They seek to situate criticism beyond the traditional approaches of humanistic interpretation and its commitment to analysis of content. They draw insights, images, terminology and fragments of method from diverse fields or seminal thinkers without any concern for the "exegesis" of such sources within the fields in question: German philosophy; Marxism; empirical sociology; Freudian psychoanalysis and the like are all grist for the mill.³⁵

The simplistic image of the text as a vehicle of communication between author and reader has all but vanished from the scene. The text may be a disguise. Intentions attributable to an actual author disappear behind the "fictive author" and "reader" created in the narrative process. Many theories describe the process of reading as one in which the reader creates the meaning of the text in the process of resolving its ambiguities, difficulties and filling in what is necessarily "unspoken" in any telling. Such theories, much like the theory of the "classic" espoused

³¹Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature*, p. 3.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 4f.

³³As is so gracefully done by Amos Wilder. See, for example, his *Jesus' Parables and the War of Myths; Essays on Imagination in the Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

³⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 166-68.

³⁵J. Culler, *On Deconstruction; Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1982), p. 8f.; 20.

by Tracy, presume that overarching "meanings" or moments of insight are somehow funded by the text.³⁶

Others may even take on the apologetic task of eliciting the revelatory (even saving?) power of the Biblical text. Northrop Frye proposes a reading of the "literal Bible of myth and metaphor" which is to make the Bible truly available to the reader, who constructs its "antitype" in the dialectical process of reading. This construction is to replace the largely meaningless systems of belief. He writes:

We said earlier that the great doctrinal structures of the past, . . . have always tended to make themselves the antitypes of Biblical narrative and imagery. They are designed to establish the claim: this is what our central revelation really means, and this is how you have to understand it. Such systems of faith, however impressive and useful still, can hardly be definitive for us now, because they are so heavily conditioned by the phases of language ascendant in their time, whether metonymic or descriptive.³⁷

Further, he claims that such new literary reading may serve to establish a broader human community of unity and freedom precisely because the Bible and its vision can become dialectical partners in the world of human knowledge.³⁸ This new community must be established in "charity" beyond the divisions created by faith, that is the level of professed beliefs which divide humanity into religious groups and ideologies, which are inherently aggressive precisely because they cannot tolerate the ambiguity of doubt (or of the Biblical God, for that matter), and which thrive on the human propensity to build "anxiety-structures" around social and religious institutions.³⁹

This sweeping call for charity, human community and liberty does in the end reflect "theological conviction" about the grounding of the Biblical text in enduring structures of reality. Such convictions are difficult to dislodge. Though structuralists analyses have completely displaced the "creative subject," their elaborate analyses of the underlying and interlocking codes that make up cultural discourse, presume a stable source of enduring meanings.⁴⁰

It is precisely the availability of such funded meanings, in whatever form they are proposed, that "deconstructive readings" of philosophical and literary texts undermine. The texts reverse their own metaphysical presuppositions and inherited dualisms in a way that makes it impossible to establish any theory of language or reading.⁴¹ Mark Taylor has attempted to spell out the possibilities of "a/the-

³⁶See the discussion of these theories of reading in Culler, *On Deconstruction*, pp. 64-81.

³⁷N. Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), p. 226f.

³⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 227-33.

³⁹Since humans naturally desire forms of "slavery" and not freedom, they require the Biblical vision of "liberty" to keep the true form of revolution alive (*Ibid.*, p. 232; drawing on Milton's vision of the connection between the Biblical story and liberty).

⁴⁰See Culler, *On Deconstruction*, pp. 32-40; *idem*, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1981), pp. 25-41; and M. C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology*. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984), p. 86.

⁴¹See Culler, *On Deconstruction*, pp. 110-225.

ology" in the deconstructionist mode. Any doctrine of a "classic" or "masterpiece" is caught up in the presumptions of "canon" and the nexus of relationships, God—self—history—Book, that have formed the backbone of Western culture.⁴² Deconstruction resists the totalizing (and totalitarian) tendencies toward mastery which are embedded in the "logocentrism" of Western culture and its interpretive projects.⁴³

The rejection of tradition, canon and a pre-existing system of signification that would be required to make the established projects of interpretation (and theology) viable is not simply willful self-assertion. Rather, Taylor argues, it represents the necessary recognition that in the postmodern, technological state the "God" who served as divine Author of the Book (and hence guarantor of meanings) is indeed dead. Theology and philosophy may devise clever strategies to recapture what is lost, but they will not buy time for themselves or others in so doing.⁴⁴

Most of the proposals for recovery of Biblical meaning are based on the false assumption that the texts which guided and grounded previous generations are adequate to the postmodern world. However, human lives no longer follow patterns which can be said to express a single story, or plot. Instead, they are inscribed in multiple, even contradictory, texts. What appears meaningful in one context is senseless in another.⁴⁵ Stendahl suggests that the theological turn toward narrative reflects disillusionment with "history" as the locus of meaning and salvation.⁴⁶ But deconstructionist reading points out that even the creation of identity through narration, through autobiography and self-representation is full of ambiguity. In the very process, I am made remote to myself, alienated and dispossessed.⁴⁷

The Bible as foundation for a theological tradition or for a unified story of humans and God is lost. There is no "text-in-itself" or hidden meaning accessible to specialized interpreters. But it is not lost to the "free play" of interpretation. The text will not dictate the structures of world, law, or society. It will not endorse them as hypostases of God. Consequently the "opening of the text" has cultural, social and political implications.⁴⁸

What began as a seemingly harmless venture into literary analysis proves to be an even more radical challenge to the association between Bible and Church than any posed by historical-critical scholarship. From some quarters we hear nothing less than the call to free the Bible from imprisonment in both "Church" and "metaphysics (theology)" so that it can be part of the pressing human project of liberation and unity.

⁴²Taylor, *Erring*, pp. 7; 14; 89f.

⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 4-6.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴⁶Stendahl, "Bible as Classic," p. 4.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 45-50.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 177-79.

(3) *Beyond Metaphysics*

Literary criticism is not the only area of the "academy" in which the call to reshape our ways of thinking about the Bible is evident. It happens to be the more extensively developed due to the appropriation of some of its methods within the agenda of historical-critical scholarship. But the social and even the natural sciences may yet become partners in the dialogue. Stephen Toulmin has argued that postmodern science has an urgent mission to integrate our understanding of humanity and nature with a view to the critical issues of "practice," such as just supply and relations between human persons.⁴⁹

If the Bible is to have a place in such an emerging vision of humanity and its world, then its interpretation cannot remain locked into the categories of textual analysis, tradition history or philosophical theology. The insights and categories of human sciences such as sociology, anthropology and psychology must be brought to the task of interpretation in an integral way. New Testament scholars have been making serious efforts to describe the "social world" of the New Testament using anthropological and sociological models,⁵⁰ though we can hardly claim to have sufficient consensus over approaches that we could then dialogue with those sciences about their own models and results.

Gerd Theissen has recently taken major steps to advance the dialogue on two more fronts. He has produced a major study of Pauline theology, which combines traditional textual exegesis with psychological analyses drawing on learning theory, psychodynamics and cognitive psychology.⁵¹ And he has issued a challenge to Biblical scholars to rethink the Biblical story in light of the categories of human cultural evolution.⁵²

While the work on an evolutionary perspective is more schematic than that on psychology, it inserts the Biblical evidence directly into the heated disputes in the areas of ethology and behavioral biology. Scientists in these fields are proclaiming an end to the Enlightenment and its prejudices about human behavior with as much vigor as deconstructionist critics.⁵³

Theissen proposes that religious "mutations" play a critical role in human adaptation and survival. Religious symbolism has the power to establish an alternative to the evolutionary pressures of natural selection, aggression, survival of

⁴⁹S. Toulmin, *The Return to Cosmology* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982), p. 257.

⁵⁰See, for example, W. A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians. The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale, 1983).

⁵¹G. Theissen, *Psychologische Aspekte paulinischer Theologie* (FRLANT 131; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983).

⁵²G. Theissen, *Biblical Faith. An Evolutionary Approach*, trans. J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

⁵³See the sober and extensively documented account of this field by P. C. Reynolds, *On the Evolution of Human Behavior; The Argument from Animals to Man* (Berkeley: University of California, 1981).

the fittest and death.⁵⁴ The emphasis on "mutation" in evolutionary theory reminds the interpreter that evolution does not necessarily posit a continuous relationship of gradual improvement. Rather, one must seek out those points of radical discontinuity.⁵⁵ In order to make the case for religious symbolism as part of essential human adaptation, one must, Theissen admits, posit "God" as a central reality of life to which humankind must adapt.⁵⁶

The monotheistic revolution in Israel established significant "anti-evolutionary" principles. Out of the catastrophe of the exile, Israel learned that there is one God, who rules even the victors. Adaptation to that reality requires repentance and increased responsibility for all life (not just that of oneself and one's kin), even that of the weak and the rival.⁵⁷ At the same time, a question is posed which remains open to this day: when/how is a universal human community to come into being which is adequate to this vision of God?

When one takes an "evolutionary" approach to evaluating the New Testament traditions about Jesus, it is possible to situate him firmly within the traditions of Israel. Jesus embodies the change for which the prophets called. His preaching, and the early Christian claims about the Spirit, insist that the "new world" is an open possibility. Persons can begin to live on the basis of that reality here and now. In order to do so, they must make the radical break with the social pressures toward propagation, solidarity with family and hostility toward outsiders, preference for the strong and successful over the weak, and the like, which simply reflect the values of survival in the evolutionary scheme of things.⁵⁸

Theissen does not use this analysis as an apologetic argument for the superiority of "Biblical religion," since it is possible that similar religious experiences and symbolism can be found elsewhere.⁵⁹ But there is a presumption that the persistence of particular religious expression does reflect successful patterns of adaptation. The hermeneutical insights supplied by a serious dialogue with evolutionary biology presume that the various traditions which make up the Bible need to be evaluated individually. Some may represent the major breakthroughs in religious understanding. Others merely embody the types of sociocultural arrangement that humans make in response to the biological characteristics required for evolutionary success.

While the dialogue between religion and evolutionary biology has important implications for our understanding of human persons, the concerns evidenced by confrontation with the Biblical tradition are not merely speculative. As Theissen has observed, the root message of the story is that aggression is dysfunctional. When people are persuaded of that message, then it is possible to envisage a sol-

⁵⁴Theissen, *Biblical Faith*, pp. 49; 105; 111-14; 142f. Many evolutionary biologists would consider the claim that culture plays a role in human evolution a holdover from the outmoded thought patterns of the enlightenment (so Reynolds, *Human Behavior*, 63).

⁵⁵Theissen, *Biblical Faith*, p. xii.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 29-49.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 64-81.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 91-119.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 49.

idity which can even include the outsider and the enemy.⁶⁰ No community, church or society has yet been able to embody this vision as its own, though the first steps are taken whenever individuals or select groups succeed in doing so. They are the pioneers for the "next step" in human evolution.⁶¹

(4) *Beyond Patriarchy*

In both the cases of literary criticism and the dialogue with the emerging human sciences through evolutionary biology, the Biblical tradition brings a fullness of signification, meaning or "evidence" of human possibilities to the discussion. Consequently, it is a valuable, even necessary, partner in the quest for human freedom and fulfillment. However, the situation is much more complex when one considers the criticism raised by feminist scholars. It should be clear from the outset that the issues raised by feminism are not mere diversions of a disgruntled minority. They are as radically concerned with the structures of humanity and viable society for an increasingly vulnerable future as any of the other forms of "criticism" that we have examined. In one way or another, the hierarchical patterns of domination on which Western thought and society rest have come into question. Taylor notes that in the modern period an alliance between humanism and utilitarianism has perpetuated a political and sexual economy of domination and hence patriarchy.⁶²

Feminist critics of Freudian psychology have sought to unravel the presuppositions of an account of the development of female sexuality, which clearly renders the female "deficient" over against the male and handicapped as a possible participant in the larger human projects of civilization.⁶³ Deconstructionist analysis provides an opening for the feminist critique of the "male perspective" that dominates the critical enterprise (and hence Western "culture making").⁶⁴ But if patriarchal "culture making" depends upon the invisible subjection of women, then they can hardly expect to find much that is life-affirming in the "classics" of that tradition.⁶⁵ As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza points out, hermeneuticalologies have taught us to presume that our "classics" are adequate to our needs. Judged from the perspective of women's struggle for freedom and full humanity,

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁶²Taylor, *Erring*, pp. 26-30.

⁶³See the detailed analysis of Freud's treatment of women and the development of feminine sexuality by J. Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: Freud, Reich, Laing and Women* (New York: Vintage, 1974), pp. 5-119; a deconstructionist reading of Freud would argue that the very premises on which Freud bases his theory are opposed to the theory. Woman and her "incomplete sexuality" is not marginal but at the very center of the whole project (see Culler, *On Deconstruction*, pp. 167-75).

⁶⁴Culler, *On Deconstruction*, pp. 43-64.

⁶⁵Rosemary Ruether's *Womanguides* (Boston: Beacon, 1985) is an attempt to begin reflection on religious texts and images that might serve as the basis for a genuinely feminist spirituality. Biblical stories are juxtaposed with the stories and myths of surrounding religious traditions in a way that makes the cries of pain and glimmerings of liberation all the more striking.

that presupposition cannot be accepted. The dialogical model of hermeneutics presumes that the "androcentric" Biblical text has certain "rights." But a genuinely feminist hermeneutic cannot demand that women appropriate the horizon of such texts.⁶⁶

If the Bible is understood as a "canonical text" which sets forth permanent "archetypes" over against which humans and their societies are measured, then it will serve to perpetuate patriarchy. For some feminists this sense of "betrayal" is so strong that they no longer find any spiritual significance in "Biblical religions." Schüssler Fiorenza has attempted to work out a hermeneutical alternative to the dichotomy of either "submit to the tradition" or "abandon it." She proposes that the normative element in interpretation be the "woman-church," the community of women (and women-identified men) working toward a feminist transformation of the Christian tradition.⁶⁷

The feminist critique of the androcentric perspective that has generated Western culture intensifies a problematic that is already inherent in the Biblical material but that has been glossed over by dialogic hermeneutic strategies. The Bible reflects a pluralistic life and faith of concrete communities in specific historical circumstances. Its "messages" are even contradictory, as James Barr has observed in sketching the conflict between the "familial ethos" of the Old Testament and the rejection of domination by natural family ties in the teaching of Jesus.⁶⁸ The Bible contains texts and symbols which have been widely acknowledged to be oppressive as in the case of its acceptance of slavery as a "fact of life." Clearly, such texts cannot claim the authority of revelation. Schüssler Fiorenza observes that the "neo-orthodox" solution to this dilemma has been the creation of an operative "canon within the canon" whether that be some historical-critical reconstruction of "authentic Jesus tradition," a dogmatic principle of "righteousness through faith" or a philosophical statement of the revelatory essence of Scripture that can be separated from its embodiment in the historical accidents of language.⁶⁹

Historical-critical scholarship makes it evident that there is not one formulation of the Christian proclamation. Restricting and narrowing the Bible as "canon" according to some dogmatic synthesis so that it becomes a negative judgment against all other early Christian writings and expressions of faith is a dubious enterprise. Instead, Schüssler Fiorenza suggests that we understand the role of the Bible within the emerging community of woman-church as paradigm. A para-

⁶⁶E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1984), pp. 140-44.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 1-22.

⁶⁸See Barr, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 17-20. Barr argues on the basis of this comparison that even the New Testament does not presume that the "Scripture" is to be used to sort out truth and falsehood. He notes the low-keyed affirmation of Scriptural authority in 2 Tim. 3:16, Scripture is useful or profitable, not inerrant (p. 20).

⁶⁹Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread*, pp. 12-13. She also observes that even texts which express needed opposition to patriarchal values of power and domination become oppressive when used by a culture to socialize women to values of self-sacrifice, love and service that are perceived as "second class" (p. 18).

digim is open to elaboration, to change, to the multiplicity of Christian life.⁷⁰ We cannot predict in advance the shapes that the emerging Church of "coequal" disciples will take as the controlling structures and images of patriarchy are unmasked and the religious symbolism of Christian women and men is transformed. Revelation, finally, is not "in the text" to be extracted as some eternal pattern but is discovered by Biblical people in their concrete circumstances and struggles to become a "faith-ful" community, especially in the communities of the poor and women suffering and seeking a way toward human dignity.⁷¹

(5) *Beyond the Written Word*

Historical-critical scholarship takes us beyond the Bible as "text" into the multifaceted world of early Christian communities, into their diverse forms of tradition and expressions of faith. Literary criticism may also move us "beneath the text" into the structures of speech and narrative expression or beyond its control into the free play that its seeming fixity masks until uncovered by deconstructionist criticism. Confrontation with the governing categories of intellectual insights of the human and natural sciences requires that one come to perceive expressions of human life and culture that are not at the surface the subject of the text. Finally, feminist criticism calls for a "deconstruction" of the "androcentric" text in the experience of a new community of faith.

In each of these instances, we find that Bible as closed, fixed within the confines of the written word is not the locus of faith, salvation or insight. Although these pressures to move beyond the written word may seem threatening, even a final expression of modern nihilism, they may also remind us of the fact that "the book" is a relative latecomer to the religious life of Israel and of Christianity. Barr has rightly insisted that the believers of Israel related to God more through holy persons, institutions, and direct verbal communication than through the written traditions which came to be canonized in the Hebrew Bible.⁷² The New Testament is equally indebted to the oral world of proclamation and persons. Robert Funk has proposed that both the Pauline letters (our earliest NT writings) and the Johannine letters (among our latest) are taken up with the problem of "apostolic presence." This presence is not limited to the "text" of the letter but is embodied in the emissaries and messengers who have carried it to the community and the promises of future presence that the letters hold.⁷³

We bring to our experience of the textuality of the Bible experiences with writing and its associated psychodynamics that are quite unlike those of any Christians in the first centuries where writing more directly serves to recall speech.⁷⁴ Indeed, all of the forms of reflection and analysis that shape our interaction with the Bible whether within or outside the boundaries of religious communities are indebted to

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 36-40.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁷²Barr, *Holy Scripture*, pp. 1-9.

⁷³Funk, *Parables and Presence*, pp. 81-110.

⁷⁴See W. J. Ong, *Interfaces of the Word. Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1977), pp. 1-48; 230-71.

immense revolution brought about by the common mastery of the "written word." And the history of the "text" of the Bible, especially as a founding text for much of Western culture, is at the heart of this transformation.⁷⁵

But if the "textuality" of the Bible has played a central role in what deconstructionists refer to as the "logocentricity" of Western culture, then the Bible is not "church property." The question about the living Word, the speaking of salvation so that it can become present, and the written word, apparently handed on with the certainty of a "fixed shape," is really a question about our human consciousness. It is also a question about the technological culture that has been made possible by our typographic and electronic mastery over the word. Walter Ong has hinted at the deep-rooted connection between textual embodiment, "pastness" and death. Neither author nor audience need be alive once the word has become text.⁷⁶ Yet, writing perhaps more than signing, "speech" or "concept forming" may mark the transition from skills gradually encoded by evolution into the world of human culture.

WRITING THE NEW RIDDLE

By questioning the simple identification of the Bible with the "Church's book," we have come to raise the most fundamental issues of authority, textuality, human community and self that are faced by our society. Perhaps in the interest of a tradition of "comfortable words" we would prefer to pack the Bible (and its interpreters) off to churches where they will be safely kept around for the private enjoyment of any who feel so inclined. And, the churches may be all too happy to agree with this arrangement. It permits them not only the necessary space for pluralism and "freedom of religion," but also the leisure of privatized ways of speaking and living together that do not have to assume responsibility for the larger world of human life, reflection and society. Those concerns can be left to the academic or political realm.

The result of this neat division is something like the corporation in which no one is responsible. "E. F. Hutton" or "Bank of Boston" may "commit crimes" but no one is guilty. The shunting aside of the most serious questions of our time takes place all the more easily when both Church and academy conspire to avoid dialogue and so hide from view the cracks in the foundations of our culture. Northrop Frye concludes his book on the Bible and literature with an Old English riddle (to which the answer is the Book [= a Biblical codex]).

An enemy deprived me of life, took away my strength, then soaked me in water,
then took me out again and put me in the sun where I soon lost all my hair.⁷⁷

⁷⁵Ong (*Interfaces*, pp. 266f.) points out that had the "Word of God" come to a purely oral culture, the words and life of Jesus would simply have become part of a communal memory which would have had to rely only on itself for support. But embodiment in written text as well as the orally retrievable communal memory gave the Word an established place in the life and evolution of human consciousness.

⁷⁶Ong, *Interfaces*, pp. 232-40.

⁷⁷Frye, *Great Code*, p. 233.

What riddle shall we tell? Is Jesus' parable of the "hid treasure" still true? Or are we like those who buried the treasure for "safe keeping" and then forgot all about it. And a bulldozer came to make a new shopping mall . . . and the treasure was lost forever.

PHEME PERKINS
Boston College