

are to approach, read, and interpret the Bible. Over the last two centuries biblical scholarship has emphasized the need to read the text in light of the historical and cultural contexts in which it was written. Three questions can help guide the reading of the Bible: (1) What kind of book is this? (2) Why should anyone believe it? (3) What principles or interpretive strategies should be used?

What Kind of Book Is This? God's Word, Human Words

The Bible is a long book written over a span of about two thousand years and completed almost two thousand years ago. Several dozen authors from very different times and places contributed to the Bible. It deals with many different topics, cultural situations, and environments, from the height of Israel's power to Israel's exile in Babylon.

Many biblical scholars suggest that the Bible is not the Word of God in an absolute, literal sense. God did not dictate the Bible to a secretary or make an audiotape of the essential teachings, which a typist transcribed verbatim. There is enough ambiguity, repetition, and disagreement that it is difficult to see the Bible as God's crystal clear mandate to humanity. Rather, the Bible is composed of human words written in response to God's actions. Sandra Schneiders wrote: "The Bible is literally the word of human beings about their experience of God."⁷ Human beings encountered God and found the relationship so compelling and life changing that they continued to speak and write about it.

The Bible is the experience of God. This is theology.

This makes the Bible more of a storybook than a rule book. It is a narrative about God rather than a recording of God's actual words. Not every word reflects the will of God because the words have been filtered through human brains, lives, and pens and inevitably reflect the assumptions, attitudes, and behavior patterns of the culture. Human understanding is imperfect, as is the ability to articulate something so mysterious as the encounter with God. This implies that the biblical authors could not anticipate the historical circumstances of the twentieth century, and therefore their words are not always applicable now. It also implies that the biblical writings cannot be required to meet twentieth-century standards of justice, equity, and church life in order for them to say something valid and meaningful. The Bible simply does not answer many contemporary questions.

The word on the Bible is not God's word. The words have been editing many times.

If the Bible is a human book, subject to human frailty and cultural context, what distinguishes it from other books and accounts for its power and influence? The Bible continues to speak because it captures some of the timeless, recurring issues of humanity—pain, passion, power, greed, loss, despair, and disease. It describes a caring God who acted in the

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past and suggests that this God is present to contemporary readers as well. The experiences of people who encountered God in the past give insight to those who meet God now. The Bible also speaks the painful truth about the human condition—that we often damage each other and ourselves. That is not God's will, but the reason for redemption.

The Bible continues to speak, some scholars believe, because Scripture is more than a human book. It can transcend the limitations of its authors because God chose to use human words and experiences to communicate divine truth.⁸ God accommodated to human capacity and spoke, as it were, with a lisp or a stammer, so that God's Word in Scripture could be understood by human beings. When patriarchy and slavery appear in Scripture, they are part of God's accommodation to human capacity, not God's intentions for eternity.⁹ Letty Russell observed that it is dangerous to call the Bible the Word of God if by that one means that everything in it reflects God's intention or will for the world. "But divine inspiration means that God's Spirit has the power to make the story speak to us from faith to faith. The Bible is accepted as the Word of God when communities of faith understand God to be speaking to them in and through its message."¹⁰

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experience

The Bible will not always be easy to hear. It makes difficult demands. It asks readers to care for the poor, to put another's interests ahead of their own, to give up personal desires for the good of the community. It calls readers to new ways of living that are not always comfortable. Readers, like the biblical writers, are limited by their humanity and sinfulness and will not understand or like everything they read. Johanna Bos wrote: "If the Bible is the living Word of God, it might be as surprising and unmanageable as God."¹¹ The Bible cannot be domesticated. It has the power to both shock and transform all its readers, even feminists.

Why Believe It? The Authority of the Bible

The Bible often serves as the center of Christian worship and sermons. What gives it credibility and relevance? Why do people give it power to shape their lives? What is the nature of its authority?¹²

Some people grant the Bible authority because they see it as a divine rule book descended from heaven to tell people what to do. It is God's Word and must be obeyed without question. Any challenge to any part of the Bible threatens to undercut its credibility and influence. If the apostle Paul did not write the books of Ephesians or 1 Timothy, as the books say, the validity of the entire Bible is compromised. Recognizing the authority of the Bible means accepting every word as God's Word and will.

Feminist Perspectives on the Bible

Other people do not believe that the Bible has any claim on their lives. There are Christians who listen to the reading of Scripture on Sunday morning and do not reject it outright, but they know so little about its content that it has no real function in their lives. Some feminists insist that the Bible has no authority because it is an ancient book with many outdated and offensive ideas and therefore need not be granted any influence in their lives.

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It is also possible to understand Scripture as a document that says something true and meaningful about the human condition and therefore invites assent, as when Claudia Camp described authority as "a free surrendering to the jurisdiction of Scripture."¹³ In this understanding of authority, people try to live according to the Bible's principles, not because God coerces or threatens them, but because Scripture at its best gives meaning, purpose, and guidance. They choose to say yes to the Bible because they believe it has something valuable to say to them.

Feminist theologians speak in many ways about the importance of Scripture in their lives. Renita Weems wrote, "Where the Bible has been able to capture the imagination of African American women, it has been and continues to be able to do so because significant portions speak to the deepest aspirations of oppressed people for freedom, dignity, justice, and vindication."¹⁴ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz explained that for Hispanic women the Bible is meaningful, not because it is the Word of God, but because its stories provide insight and courage. "Bible stories become ours when we use them because we need them."¹⁵ Letty Russell described her encounter with Scripture:

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The Bible has authority in my life because it makes sense of my experience and speaks to me about the meaning and purpose of my humanity in Jesus Christ. In spite of its ancient and patriarchal worldviews, in spite of its inconsistencies and mixed messages, the story of God's love affair with the world leads me to a vision of New Creation that impels my life. . . . For me the Bible is "scripture," or sacred writing, because it functions as "script," or prompting for life.¹⁶

One text that provides such prompting for life is Mark 5, where two stories are woven together. Jairus came to Jesus seeking healing for his twelve-year-old daughter, and Jesus agreed to go to his home. On the way, Jesus encountered a woman who had suffered from a bleeding disease for twelve years, which made her ritually unclean and an outcast from synagogue and society. Jesus was surrounded by a crowd, so the woman was able to approach him without being noticed and touch his

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clothes. She was immediately healed, and Jesus felt power go out of him. When he asked who had touched him, the woman told him what had happened to her, and Jesus affirmed her deep faith and promised her healing and wholeness. A messenger came to tell Jairus that his daughter had died, but Jesus went on to the house and raised the girl from the dead. Women who read this story encounter Jesus, who values women even though they were not high priorities in his culture. Jesus was not bound by laws about ritual purity or social interaction with women. He affirmed the woman's faith and encouraged Jairus to have the same faith she did. Jesus gave freedom and dignity to the woman and new life to the child, and his treatment of women provides hope for contemporary readers who seek healing and dignity.

How to Read It? Principles of Interpretation

How do we read the Bible? If it is influenced by the culture, opinions, and experiences of the author, and if the authors sometimes contradict each other and themselves, is it possible to make any sense of it at all? How does the reader discern what the text meant when it was written and what it might mean now? This is particularly important when reading the texts that most restrict women.

The texts that have historically had the most power to portray women negatively or to restrict their roles are the stories of the creation and fall in Genesis 1-3 and Paul's instructions that women should submit to their husbands, be silent in the church, and refrain from teaching or exercising authority over men. Gerda Lerner observed, "These biblical core texts sat like huge boulders across the paths women had to travel in order to define themselves as equals of men."¹⁷ In other texts Paul was quite positive about women, assuming their presence, leadership, and gifts; but the references were more subtle. The negative passages, 1 Timothy 2, 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, and Ephesians 5, are very explicit and are often presented as the Pauline position without reference to the texts where he speaks of women as his coworkers or as church leaders. As readers try to understand what the text said and meant to its hearers in the first century, and what it means to contemporary readers, they might ask four questions.

What is the historical context?

The Bible arose out of a patriarchal culture in which men ruled and were the center of life. Its authors found nothing unusual in the role of women as nameless daughters and wives who belonged to their fathers

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and husbands. The fact that the Bible reflects those patriarchal assumptions does not mean that patriarchy is God's will, but rather that the authors could not escape their cultural contexts. In the story of Hagar, Sarah, and Abraham, for example, the use of a slave woman as a surrogate mother was not unusual in a culture that valued women for their ability to bear children. If a woman's entire identity depended on producing children, she would take desperate measures to ensure that she had them. God did not approve of the practice or suggest it should be valid for all time. On the contrary, the text illustrates the competition, jealousy, and destructiveness that resulted.

God never said women is lower, sometimes is because of the culture.

When the author of 1 Timothy told women that they could not teach or have authority, he did so out of a culture where women were seldom educated or respected as leaders. He may have known of women involved in forms of Christianity he considered heretical and therefore tried to protect the community from the influence of false teaching. Readers can sympathize with his intentions without agreeing that his advice is similarly valid for the twentieth century.

Understanding the historical context is particularly essential when Scripture offers a radical challenge to the surrounding culture. The book of Ruth is remarkable because a young woman chose to be linked, not to a man who could protect her, but to her mother-in-law, who had no money, position, or authority. This is a story about the loyalty of two women to each other and the initiative and effort they put into their survival. When the reader can see the odds against them, the story becomes an even more powerful example of women's strength and courage.

Ruth is a possible story that can encourage women

What is the literary context?

How does a particular text or set of verses fit into the larger document? How does the context help to explain the meaning of a specific text? The verses in which Paul commands women to keep silent in the church (1 Cor 14:34-35) are embedded in a lengthy passage about appropriate worship and use of spiritual gifts. Paul wanted worship to be carried out in a decent and orderly way. He did not want people showing off their spiritual gifts or speaking out of turn. Some commentators suggest that the women in Corinth were interrupting the services to ask questions and that this verse reflects Paul's desire for decorum. Feminist biblical scholars observe that, although this may have been a legitimate and appropriate request for first-century Corinth, it is not necessarily God's will for women in the twentieth century.

First century Corinth is difference from twentieth century. Event happen in the old days is not necessarily God's will for today's women.

Another difficult text is Ephesians 5:22-33, which begins, "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church." Ephesians 5:21

("Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ") is not always bundled with these verses, but it should be because it sets a context of mutual submission that shapes the interpretation of the following verses about marriage. It is also important to note that Ephesians 6:5-9 instructs slaves to obey their earthly masters. Even the most conservative biblical interpreters do not suggest that slavery is currently the will of God.

Literary context is also important for interpreting the story about the concubine in Judges 19. The story lacks a clear statement that God was displeased, as my student correctly noted; but the entire book of Judges is an indictment of the sins of the Israelites, who were completely out of control and lacking in basic human decency. The story of the concubine can be seen as a particularly gruesome illustration of the behavior that occurs when people lack a sense of God's presence in their lives. The book of Judges as a whole reports that God was deeply displeased with the way people treated one another.

What is the author's purpose or intention?

Why did the author write a particular book or text? The New Testament letters were written to specific congregations or groups of people and often addressed questions or issues that had occurred in that community. The psalms, on the other hand, are honest expressions of human doubt, conflict, and faith. They articulate the deepest emotions of people struggling to encounter God and make sense of the world. When the psalmist asks God to destroy the babies of his enemies, he expresses not the will of God, but rather, a common human desire for vengeance.

When reading the Bible, then, we need to ask whether the author is defining the essence of the gospel or responding to a specific issue in the experience of the readers. Is the author suggesting a solution to a particular problem or making an absolute rule? In 1 Corinthians, for example, Paul did not show a very high regard for marriage. He encouraged the Corinthian Christians to remain single if they could, although he conceded that marriage was permitted to those who lacked self-control. His purpose, however, was not to deny them the pleasures of the body. He believed that Jesus would return to earth in the next few years and that while they waited Christians should divert them from their work.

Authorial intention is also an important factor in the interpretation of the gospel. Spouses and families would spend all their energy proclaiming the purity laws embedded in the book of Leviticus. The book contains numerous laws about sacrifices, worship, social relationships, health, diet, and sexuality. These laws are not established simply for their own sake, but as a sign of holiness and purity. The Israelites were to be a dis-

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The law in the book is try to separate Israelites from other people.

inct people, clearly different and separate from the nations around them. The laws served as boundaries that helped to define the Israelites and distance them from their neighbors. The body of the individual seemed to serve as a symbol of the larger community. The deep concern about dirt and purity, about what entered and exited the individual body, seemed very much connected to the purity of the nation. This does not fully resolve the problem of the purity laws for women, but it does help to set them in a larger context of concern for everyone's purity.¹⁸

How does the text fit into the whole biblical story?

This question is particularly important when the Bible seems to contradict itself, as it does on the issues of slavery and women. The Israelites held slaves and were commanded only to treat them well, not to free them. Slavery was also common in the first century, and both slaves and owners joined the Christian community. As Christians began to understand the implications of the gospel, they realized that enslaving other humans was not compatible with the Christian faith. They also recognized that social institutions could not be transformed immediately. Paul believed that in Christ there is no distinction between slave and free (Gal 3:28), but he also told a slave to return to his master (Philemon) and urged slaves to obey their masters (Eph 6:5-9). Such ambiguity does not mean Paul suffered from multiple personality disorder, but that he was caught between his deep commitment to the gospel and the awareness that social structures change slowly. His tolerance of slavery did not mean that slavery was or is anything other than a sign of sinfulness, but fully living out the gospel is a process that takes time and is still not complete in the present.

Scripture demonstrates a similar ambiguity about the role of women. Paul wrote in Galatians 3:28 that in Christ there are no distinctions between male and female. He recognized the leadership of Prisca, Phoebe, Junia, Euodia, and Syntyche in the early church (Rom 16:1-7; Phil 4:2-3). Paul's letters report that women prophesied and evangelized, led house churches, and instructed both male and female Christians. Women in the early church found freedom to lead, to speak, and to use their spiritual gifts; but this freedom clashed with social realities because women who took public roles in religious ceremonies could be mistaken for temple prostitutes. The disregard for gender differences and social status in Christian congregations threatened the hierarchical Greco-Roman culture. Paul did not want the Christian faith to needlessly offend outsiders or to invite more persecution, so he advised particular congregations that women (and at times men) should be cautious with their new freedom. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argued that as the

churches developed they became even more cautious and conservative as their conflicts with surrounding cultures increased. The letter to Timothy may have been written more than fifty years after Paul's letter to the Galatians, which would account for some of the discrepancy.¹⁹

Rita Nakashima Brock wrote of this ambiguity in Paul, "Rather than trying to decide whether he was sexist or liberating in his attitudes toward women, it may be more honest to say he was both, as he was by turns egalitarian and authoritarian."²⁰ Paul believed that the gospel breaks down the barriers between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. He saw how effectively some women exercised leadership in the church, but his understanding of the gospel conflicted with his education and assumptions, which did not recognize women as capable of authority or learning. Like the rest of us, Paul was not always consistent. He was a human being, wrestling with issues and trying to make sense of the Christian faith for people of his time. One of the most crucial questions for twentieth-century readers is to discern how Scripture continues to speak to them in their own time and place.

How do we decide? ^{评价文本的标准} Criteria for evaluating texts

How do fallible people ^{不可靠的} presume to determine which parts of the Bible should shape their lives and which arose out of the cultural situation of their authors and were not meant to define contemporary life and behavior? Critics charge that this gives readers power to pick and choose what to believe, because anything offensive can be automatically labeled an ancient cultural issue and therefore considered irrelevant.

Evaluating texts does not mean determining their worth or truth. Exodus 35-40 contains elaborate details for sewing clothes for priests and constructing the tabernacle where the Israelites worshiped in the wilderness. The texts are true and valid in that they provided instructions for the orderly worship of God. Most contemporary Christians do not believe God requires them to worship in tabernacles or offer animal sacrifices, but they might still learn from the passage in Exodus that worship space is holy, that care ought to be exercised in creating it, and that God ought to be approached with a sense of awe.

Scripture itself suggests that some parts of the tradition are more definitive than others. Judaism emphasized obedience to the law as an important means of relating to God, but Jesus redefined both the obedience and the relationship. He appeared to make the law even more demanding when he said in the Sermon on the Mount, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:43-44). Similarly, he made the laws about anger, adultery, and

retaliation almost impossible to keep, but that was his point. The law is not the primary basis of a relationship with God. Paul wrote to the Galatians that although the law was essential for Judaism, Christians no longer live under its requirements. Jesus and Paul contradicted the Old Testament even though they valued it as God's word. They established a new set of criteria, which made faith and grace the center of Christianity.

law is not the only connection and relationship with God.

For Paul, the timeless or central truth of the gospel was justification by grace through faith. People are made right with God not because of what they do but because of what God has done for them. Scholars call this approach the "canon within the canon," which means that within the accepted canon, or list of writings finally gathered into the Bible, there is a subset of texts that serve as the central theme by which all others must be measured. Martin Luther agreed with Paul that the central theme of the gospel is justification by grace through faith, which led him to question the inclusion in the canon of the book of James. Luther called it an "epistle of straw" because it places so much emphasis on good works.

encounter & belonging

Discerning a central theme requires the reader to make judgments about which parts of the Bible constitute its essential message and which parts represent culturally conditioned advice. Scripture assists with this process by highlighting these central themes. Teresa Okure argued that the liberating elements of the Bible, such as the equality of men and women, the creation of women in God's image, and Jesus' affirmation of women, came from God and thus represent the timeless truths of salvation. The oppressive elements, such as the inferiority and sinfulness of women, the command of submission, and the rules about purity, arose out of a human and culturally conditioned perspective.²¹ Okure believed that Paul articulated the essence of the gospel in Galatians 3:28, but reflected the limits of his humanity and culture when he instructed wives and slaves to submit to their husbands and masters.

Defining a central theme enabled some feminist theologians to minimize the impact of the negative passages. Elsa Tamez criticized feminists who dismiss the Bible without understanding its central message.

The tendency of some First World radical feminists to reject the Bible, is, it seems to me, an exaggerated reaction. I think that by assigning too much importance to these peripheral texts [Gen. 3], many leave aside the central message, which is profoundly liberating. From my point of view, it is precisely the gospel's spirit of justice and freedom that neutralizes antifemale texts... A time has come to acknowledge that those biblical texts that reflect patriarchal culture and proclaim women's inferiority and their submission to men are not normative; neither are those texts that legitimize slavery normative.²²

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Rosemary Ruether suggested that a central theme in Scripture is the prophetic principle. The prophets and Jesus frequently criticized hierarchy, legalism, and the abuse of power and wealth and recognized that even the best religious impulses could be corrupted by greed, power, and privilege. When the Israelites achieved political power they failed to care for the poor and outcast; the prophets reminded the people of the need to do justice, but the prophets failed to recognize the deep-seated patriarchy in the tradition. The assumptions of their culture made them blind to their own failings. Feminist theology, Ruether argued, has continued the prophetic principle by applying it to the problem of sexism.²³

Another central theme often used to evaluate biblical texts is the character of God. Would a merciful and just God, who encourages people to treat each other well and care for the poor, encourage sexist or racist behavior? Sandra Schneiders asked bluntly, "In what sense can one regard as word of God that which, in some respects at least, cannot possibly be attributed to God without rendering God the enemy and the oppressor of some human beings?"²⁴ Elsa Tamez pointed out that even readers who are not biblical scholars automatically deal with the sexist texts by saying that "reality should be different today, that God is a God of life, and therefore he cannot favor discrimination against women."²⁵ Letty Russell wrote, "For my part, I cannot imagine a God who does not seek to be a partner with all humankind in the mending of creation."²⁶ Teresa Okure wrote, "In whatever way we look at it, no oppressive element in the Bible can be attributed to God's will. God is by nature the liberator of the oppressed; God cannot ipso facto be an oppressor in any form of the word."²⁷ Renita Weems noted that the biblical texts that speak of justice and liberation present "a portrait of a God that oppressed readers can believe in."²⁸

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There are other readers of the biblical text, however, who identify God's judgment as the central theme in Scripture. They argue that God sets rules and expects people to live by them. Obedience is more essential than justice for the oppressed. Maintaining the status quo is more biblical than turning social institutions upside down. Since people choose different central themes, obviously the canon within the canon approach does not guarantee that Scripture will be interpreted in a liberating way. Some feminist theologians argue that because Scripture fails to unequivocally support the equality of women, it cannot provide the norms or criteria for its own interpretation. The criterion for evaluating Scripture, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argued, is not the book itself, but the experience of women.²⁹ What in the Bible is good and helpful for women? Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz illustrated this approach when she wrote, "Hispanic women's experience and our struggle for survival, not the

Bible, are the source of our theology and the starting point for how we should interpret, appropriate, and use the Bible." The Bible is authoritative "only insofar as it contributes to Hispanic women's struggle for liberation."³⁰

Women's own sense of right and wrong helps them to make sense of Scripture. Renita Weems advised readers to "resist those things within the culture and the Bible that one finds obnoxious or antagonistic to one's innate sense of identity and to one's basic instincts for survival."³¹ Margaret Farley wrote that Scripture "cannot be believed unless it rings true to our deepest capacity for truth and goodness. If it contradicts this, it is not to be believed." Critics would ask if the Bible is "really required to answer the demands of reason and the cries of the human heart," but Farley replied that religious traditions have power only as they help to make sense of human life. Religious traditions do not have to be easy or completely rational, but they cannot do violence to our most basic convictions.³² Equality and mutuality are two such convictions, and whatever violates them cannot be seen as authoritative.

Suspicion and Trust

Kathleen Norris, describing the process by which she integrated feminism and the Christian faith, said that she read the Bible "with a certain suspicion, with a wary eye on who is doing the telling, and who is left out, marginalized, or demeaned." She found this a useful way of reading, but she added, "I soon realized that reading with suspicion worked best when I also read with trust, with belief enough to nourish my developing faith."³³

Interpreting the Bible is a complicated task that requires study, effort, humility, suspicion, and trust. There are many difficult passages in Scripture from which people claim divine justification for treating each other badly. There are ugly stories of human brokenness and failure. And yet there is also something liberating about Scripture, such as God's care for the poor, God's persistent love of resistant people, Jesus' relationships with women and other outcasts, and the counter cultural witness of the early church. God's passion and compassion shine through. God demonstrates deep care for the world and all its people, for women as well as men. God uses fallible human beings and their stammering voices to communicate profound truth about God's justice, care, and shalom. When all is said and done, God's good news has the last word. And it is good news for all.

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CHAPTER 3

Language About God

When you think about God, what picture or image comes into your mind?

When Michelangelo painted the Creation on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, he portrayed God as a bearded, kindly, mature man reaching out with his fingers to a younger version of himself. Celie, in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, also described God as a bearded white man with blue-gray eyes. In the movie *The Ten Commandments* God was not visible, but possessed a deep male voice. A popular religious song asserts, "He's got the whole world in his hands." Many Christians pray to "Our Father, who art in heaven." In colloquial terms, God is "the man upstairs."

Many people envision God as a kind, gentle, elderly man who may resemble a beloved grandfather. We may think of God as the grumpy, but soft-hearted, Mr. Wilson in the "Dennis the Menace" comic strips. We may envision God as an absent father who cares about us, but is so busy working that he is never around. Or perhaps our first image of God is that of a stern and unforgiving judge. Many, perhaps even most, of the assumptions and images we have of God are of a male figure.

If pressed, many of us would quickly insist that God is not really a male. God transcends sexuality. God is not defined by gender as humans are. He is a Spirit. But then, why do we so often call God (he?)? Some people appeal to Scripture and tradition to reply that "The Bible calls God *he*. Jesus refers to God as *he* and *Father*. These names and pronouns are always used in worship. This is what I have always been taught."

Some people appeal to the rules of language or grammar. "He

includes *he* and *she*. It is a generic term. When we use it, we don't really mean God is male; but we must have a personal pronoun to speak of God, and *he* is more inclusive than *she*."

Others defend the use of male language for God by citing the relative value of male and female in our culture. "Calling God *she* would insult him! God *certainly* isn't a WOMAN!"

Others dismiss the entire topic as completely irrelevant, unimportant, and uninteresting. "Why are we talking about this issue? It doesn't matter what we call God. Why do feminists want to change everything?"

The Problem of God Language

A little girl wrote a letter to God in which she asked, "Dear God, are boys better than girls? I know you are one, but try to be fair."¹ A four-year-old daughter of feminist parents is convinced that God is a boy, despite her mother's use of feminine pronouns.

Females want to be fair.

Feminist theologians believe that language about God matters a great deal because it reflects our deepest beliefs about God and ourselves. They want to change, or at least to expand, some of the language traditionally used for God because they believe it has contributed to an excessively narrow understanding of God.

A message board outside a church contained this quotation: "Those who are born of God are growing to resemble Him." Are women included in this? Can a woman resemble a man? Should she be asked to? "Well, of course," church members might reply, "women and men equally grow to resemble God in love, faith, hope, and justice." And yet the church belongs to a denomination that does not ordain women as ministers and elders. If God is a he, does men's greater resemblance to God give them the right of ordination?

A worship service in a Protestant or a Roman Catholic church illustrates the nature of the language commonly used for God. The opening hymn might be "Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven," or "This Is My Father's World." The minister may begin the service with the phrase, "In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit." The call to worship might include the phrase, "For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand" (Ps 95:7). The assurance of forgiveness may include the words, "I am He who blots out your transgressions" (Isa 43:25). The Apostles' Creed begins, "I believe in God the Father Almighty." The Lord's Prayer begins, "Our Father, who art in heaven." The closing hymn might be "All Creatures of Our God and King," which in some older versions contains more than a dozen male pronouns for God in seven verses.

These examples suggest that even if we are more sophisticated than the little girls who think God is a boy, religious language is permeated with male imagery and pronouns. God may not actually be a man, but when we talk about God in worship and elsewhere our language describes exactly that—a man.

Feminist theologians argue that traditional language about God takes one dimension of the divine—God as Father—and elevates it to an exclusive position, refusing to allow other images that express something equally biblical and true about God. The emphasis on God as King, Lord, and Master means that we think of God as a powerful, controlling ruler. This is a valid biblical image, but the Bible images God in other ways that are often neglected.

Male language for God also implies that men are more like God or closer to God's image. If we see God as a man or more like a man or more properly named in male language, we tend to think of men as more like God, and women as less like God. Mary Daly captured the essence of this problem with her pithy phrase, "If God is male, then the male is God."²

Predominantly male language for God can make it difficult for some people to relate to God in a positive way. Women and men who have been physically, sexually, or emotionally abused by their fathers find it difficult to think of God primarily as a father. Even if one's father has been absent rather than abusive, the sense that daddy was never there may make it difficult to experience God the Father as a comforting presence in one's life.³

Finally, feminist theologians challenge the easy acceptance of dominantly male language for God. Why does this language seem so obvious? Why is it so difficult to change? Why is it so difficult to think critically about it?

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The Persistence and Power of Masculine God Language

Feminist theologians have identified several reasons why the link between God and maleness persists despite the disclaimer that God is not "really" a man. The Bible, the history of Christianity, theological language, liturgy, education, and custom all contribute to the pervasiveness of male God language. The feminist critique attempts to describe the power of the tradition, the nature of its influence, and the difficulty of change.

① One of the most common reasons for using male language for God is that the Bible uses male pronouns and titles for God. "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and

female he created them" (Gen 1:27). A recurring theme in Israel's history contrasted the one God of the Israelites, who transcended sexuality but was still called he, and the multiple idols, fertility cults, and female deities of the surrounding nations. God is occasionally referred to as father to illustrate that the God of Abraham and Sarah, Rebekah and Isaac was powerfully and persistently related to the people. Jeremiah asserts that God is a father to Israel, a particularly hopeful and comforting image to people in exile who wondered if God had abandoned them (Jer 31:9).

In the Christian Scriptures Jesus often referred to God as his Father. Some Christians argue that if Jesus called God Father, they should also. Jesus brings us into a relationship with God, and his Father becomes our Father. If Jesus used it, it must be good, right, and appropriate. After all, Jesus never called God Mother!⁴

As the Christian tradition developed over the next twenty centuries, theologians continued to use male pronouns for God. The language of creed, liturgy, and hymns was similarly masculine. God was powerful, awesome, and totally in control, as the Westminster Confession affirms:

There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of his own immutable and most righteous will, for his own glory.

Daphne Hampson observed that descriptions such as these suggest that God is all-powerful, complete in himself, and self-sufficient. "Is He, one wonders, the reflection of what have been many a man's wildest dreams?"⁵ Such descriptions of God reflect the deep human desire for life to be orderly, sensible, and controlled. Only men have traditionally had this kind of power in the world.

Children are educated early into the tradition that describes God in male terms. In a church that prides itself on its inclusive language in worship, two-year-old children in Sunday school still learn from the teacher and the curriculum that God is he. After six years in a feminist household and a year of reading Bible stories aloud, my son asked why I always changed the he's to God, when after all, God is a he. My daughter, reared to pray "God is great, God is good, let us thank God for our food," suddenly began to hesitate when she prayed and soon was reluctant to pray at all. She had moved into a new room at her day care, and there the regular lunchtime prayer was phrased, "let us thank *Him* for our food. . . ."

When children who are educated this way become college students or adults, they cannot understand why anyone would question what is so incredibly obvious to them. Of course God is referred to with male pronouns. They have not been told of any alternatives and have rarely been asked to examine their assumptions.

A more subtle, but equally powerful, factor in our view of God is that many of us have been effectively socialized to believe that maleness and men are better or more important than femaleness and women. Men are stronger, wiser, smarter, and braver than women; and so God must be a man or at least more like a man or described in male language. Many people need to think of God in male terms because they do not think women or mothers are powerful enough to be in charge.

People's
option

Women have often been portrayed in the Christian tradition not only as weaker than men, but also as far more sexual. Several critics of feminist theology have claimed that speaking of God in female or maternal terms introduces sexuality into the nature of God. Feminine sexuality and childbirth are seen as particularly demeaning to God.

If God is addressed in female terms, however, his holy otherness is lost sight of. If God is called Mother, the metaphor system of birthing, suckling, carrying in the womb comes into play; and the divine Mother is then portrayed as giving birth to creation. . . . This is the ultimate idolatry, in which the Trinity is destroyed, the holy otherness of God from creation is lost, and human beings have usurped the place of their creator.⁶

The word *he* apparently transcends sexuality. At first this argument seems to transcend logic as well, but there are many English words in which the female version is inferior to the male or is sexualized in a particular way. A master is skillful or in charge; a mistress is an illicit sexual partner. A lord manages property; a lady has perfect manners and breeding, but does little more than drink tea. Sir is a term of respect; a madam runs a brothel. Christians throughout history have considered the female and the feminine at best subordinate, and at worst, dangerous. They did not think they honored God by calling God Mother or Midwife.

no honor
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by
calling
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mother
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Even the limitations of English grammar contribute to the problem of God language. The Christian tradition values a personal God, and "it" seems too impersonal. Since English has no personal, gender-neutral pronoun (as do other languages), we must choose between a male or female personal pronoun. For centuries "he" has been considered generic, or true of both sexes, so it has been the pronoun of choice for the

deity. This linguistic quirk enables people to repeatedly refer to God as he, even while claiming that God is not male or female.

Feminine language for God makes many people uncomfortable. References to God as she are disturbing because they are new and different, they feel unnatural, or they seem demeaning to God. In response to an article about God language in a denominational magazine, a man wrote a brief, but pointed, response: "If God the Father leaves my church, I'm going with him."

Given the powerful Christian tradition and the pointed feminist critique, it is not surprising that there are sharp conflicts over language about God. The publication of the *Inclusive Language Lectionary*, which substituted the "Reign of God" for the "Kingdom of God," "Sovereign" for "Lord," and added "[and Mother]" after the word Father, caused enormous controversy, including accusations that the authors were "castrating God."⁷ The Christian Reformed Church recently decided that it was acceptable to say God was something like a mother, but not to address God as Mother. Worship services have been arenas for conflict when some members insist on retaining Father language for God and others ask that it be eliminated. These discussions are heated and not entirely rational because they evoke strong feelings about the nature of God and humanity.

Feminist theologians have not simply criticized the tradition, but have thoughtfully and creatively begun to revision it. Their contributions include reflection on the mystery of God, the meaning of metaphors, the use of maternal and other feminine images for God, and the need for many names to describe God.⁸

The Mystery of God

The Christian tradition has always acknowledged the mystery of God and the limits of human knowledge about God, but feminist theologians maintain that the persistent and exclusive use of male God language demonstrates an insufficient awareness of the mystery of God. No one name or set of names is adequate to understand God. A variety of names and images for God is not only acceptable, but necessary to reflect the fullness of God's character and activity. Scripture and tradition are much more varied in their language about God than is usually recognized.

The Bible reveals some truth about God, but it does not claim to have complete knowledge and, in fact, leaves many questions unanswered. The book of Exodus contains a fascinating story of an encounter between God and Moses. Moses was tending his sheep and minding his

own business when God appeared in a burning bush and called Moses to liberate the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt. Moses replied that he would not be able to convince the Egyptian pharaoh to free his slaves. Moses could not simply arrive at the palace and announce that God wanted the people to be free. Pharaoh would want to know who this God was. Moses asked God for a definitive name to give to the skeptics and probably to himself.

God's answer did not provide the clarity Moses hoped for. It was vague, imprecise, indefinite. God said simply, "I am who I am." Another way to translate that is "I will be who I will be." God refused to be put in a box and precisely labeled with fancy terminology. "I am who I am" reminded Moses that God is mysterious, God cannot be fully known, God is always several steps ahead of human speculations. And yet this mysterious God chooses to help and be present with people. God cares for those God loves.

God is so mysterious and awesome that complete knowledge of God would overwhelm finite human beings. Late in his life Moses asked to see the glory of God. God replied that no one could see God's face and live; but after placing Moses in an opening in a rock wall, God covered Moses' face as God passed by, but permitted Moses a glimpse of God's back (Exod 33:18-23). Other biblical figures reported being overwhelmed or blinded when they encountered the presence of God (Isa 6:1-8). Such direct encounters seem relatively rare today. Human knowledge of God usually comes through Scripture, tradition, and experience, which means that knowledge is limited by human finitude and sin.

Theologians have tried to comprehend, speak, and write about this mystery, and at times their language multiplies words and concepts in dizzying ways. God is the "ground of all being," said Paul Tillich. Thomas Aquinas employed the term "unmoved mover." Hymn lyrics dating from the sixth century proclaim:

High in the heavenly Zion Thou reignest God adored;
And in the coming glory Thou shalt be Sovereign Lord.
Beyond our ken Thou shinest, The everlasting Light;
Ineffable in loving, Unthinkable in might.⁹

These words may offer a glimpse of God, but they too are incomplete because God is much more than words can express.

The theologians who speak and write at great length about God also recognize the limitations of their work. Augustine said, "If we have understood, then what we have understood is not God." And Thomas Aquinas wrote, "The supreme knowledge which we have of God is to

know that we do not know God, insofar as we know that what God is surpasses all that we can understand of him."¹⁰ A hymn writer addressed the mysterious God, "Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes." Theological and devotional language may hint at the reality of God, but can never capture the essence or the fullness of God. Language is limited, as are the users of language. If we claim that God is limitless and transcendent, then we must also recognize that human language will not do justice to such a God.

The general caution of the Christian tradition regarding language for God does not extend to the use of male language. Most authors would admit that God is not really a male and God is not really a father; and yet they believe that God is more appropriately named in male terms. It seems natural and obvious since the Bible speaks of God as Father and he and because men have always possessed more power, respect, and authority than women. For many people in the tradition, Father has become God's name.

Feminist theologians argue that the exclusive use of any human term or characteristic for God can be a form of idolatry, which reduces the distance between the divine and the human by assuming that the divine can be adequately named in human terms. The frequent and casual use of the phrase "Father God" implies that God has been domesticated or tamed. Certainly God is like a father in some ways; but God is far more than that, and language for God ought to reflect a sense of mystery and awe as well as of relationship. Human beings ultimately cannot name the God who is always several steps ahead of them and who refuses to be confined to the names they choose.

Neither will God be confined by the trivial uses human beings often want to make of God's power and presence. Carter Heyward observed that we sometimes think of God as a big aspirin about whom it can be said, "Take a little God, you'll feel better." This God fixes all our problems for us, finds us parking spaces in crowded malls, and bails us out of tight situations. God gives clear guidance about every possible decision. Heyward suggests that it is far more biblical to think of God as enigmatic or incomprehensible. God is not in our control or at our beck and call. God does not exist to do our bidding or to make our lives more convenient. Often God does not make everything all better. Illness, pain, and death are not always fixable; but God is present in the midst of them.¹¹

The assertion that language about God must be humble and cautious does not mean that knowledge of, or relationship with, God is impossible. Elizabeth Johnson concluded a discussion about the incomprehensibility of God by saying, "Ultimately, the highest human knowledge

about God is to know that we do not know." Johanna Bos concluded a book about language for God with the statement that "The only 'wrong' naming of God is that which is sure of having it 'right.'" Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza wrote a prayer that included this paragraph:

Our language is insufficient
Our intellect does not grasp you
Our imagination cannot get hold of you
Although we do not know what to call you
we are called by you.¹²

Recognizing human limits leads, not to despair, but to worship and awe.

Metaphor 神話

If God is completely mysterious and incomprehensible, is it possible to say anything true about God? If human knowledge, comprehension, and language are limited, even damaged, how can we speak of God?

When Scripture speaks of God it rarely attempts to prove the existence of a divine being, but simply assumes that God is. The opening phrase of the Bible is "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). Scripture does not speak of God in abstract philosophical language, but describes God's actions in relationship to God's people. The authors use ordinary human language to make extraordinary claims about God. God is our rock, they proclaim. God is the light of the world. God gives birth to creation. God loves the people of Israel as a father loves his children. Scripture uses metaphors such as these to attempt to say something true about God. In the Gospel of Luke some religious people complained that Jesus spent too much time with tax collectors and sinners. In response, Jesus told three stories. God is like a shepherd searching for a lost sheep. God is like a woman searching for a lost coin. God is like a father welcoming home a lost son.

Metaphors are figures of speech that use something we know to explain something we do not know. We say clouds look like marshmallows, for example, because both are white and fluffy looking. Clouds are not exactly like marshmallows, however, because clouds are not small, edible, and made of corn syrup. Effective metaphors aid our understanding, but they are not literally true. When we use human experience to describe God as something like a mother, a father, or a rock, we qualify these comparisons because we recognize that God cannot be fully described by these images. The psalmist calls God a rock, which means that God is lasting and dependable; but God is not the small, rounded

object I use to edge my garden. God is like a mother or a father in significant ways; but God is not harried, distracted, and short-tempered as human parents can be. Metaphors say something true about God, but they also remind us that divine reality far exceeds the metaphor.

Johanna Bos suggested the formula "yes, no, and more so" as a way to understand language for God. Many metaphors or names for God, such as Father, Mother, Rock, or Light, say something true about God—the "yes." Yet every metaphor falls short, and no title names God accurately or adequately—the "no." God always transcends human attempts to name and describe God—the "more so."¹³ God is love, we often say, and it is true. But human understanding of love is limited, and God may be quite different from some of our notions of love. And yet God is more like love than we will ever know. God is love in a way that far exceeds our present knowledge of either God or love.

Language about God should help us to understand and encounter God, but we should not confuse the reality of God with the limits of our language. When my son was about nine months old, he enjoyed a book about bunnies. One day on a walk I said, "Look, Mark, there's a bunny," and I pointed at a rabbit. He looked quite intently at my finger, but had no idea that he was supposed to look beyond it to something else. Language should be like a finger pointing to the moon, Phyllis Tribble wrote; but we often acknowledge the finger and not the moon, or we equate the two. We mistake our language about God for the reality of God, forgetting that language about God can never be more than an approximation.¹⁴

The most effective metaphors usually startle, shock, or surprise. When the Hebrew Scriptures occasionally referred to God as a father, or when Jesus prayed to God the Father, that was a fresh, surprising, even radical metaphor for God. Religious people usually thought of God as a distant being in the heavens. The biblical use of father imagery suggests a God who relates intimately with human beings, who is involved with them in a personal way, who is not isolated in heaven, but is connected with people as closely as a father to his children. Father language said something powerful and important about God, particularly where knowledge of biology was limited and people believed that the father was the primary source of life.

While it is completely understandable that a patriarchal society that did not value women very highly would think of God in male terms, it is not necessary for contemporary society to do so. Many feminist theologians argue that it is both unnecessary and idolatrous to use predominantly male language for God because it has lost much of its power to evoke meaning. Johanna Bos wrote, "If we conceive of the *father*