
CHAPTER 2

Feminist Perspectives on the Bible

Imagine a conversation between three students that occurs the first day of a course in Christian Feminism. Susan says she attends a Bible-believing church. "I've been taught that the Bible is God's word and everything in it is true. The man was created first and the woman sinned first, so it is clear that men are meant to lead and women are meant to be submissive wives and mothers. The Bible does not allow women to be leaders of the church."

Barbara introduces herself as a women's studies major and says, "I think that the Bible has caused most of the problems women have in our society. It blames women for causing sin in the world. It treats women like property, not persons. It does not allow women positions of power and influence. The Bible was obviously written by men, about men, to promote a male agenda. It is not a good book for women."

Jenny says, "I grew up in the Presbyterian Church, and I've always considered myself both a Christian and a feminist. I am beginning to wonder if that is possible. If it is, what do Christian feminists do with the Bible?"

How can the same book provoke such different interpretations? Some readers think that the Bible imprisons women and restricts the options they have for their lives. Others conclude that the Bible empowers women to resist oppression and ultimately sets them free. The Bible is a symbol and a source of oppression for some women and a positive resource for others. This chapter will explore the underlying assumptions of these interpretations of the Bible and describe some of the ways that Christian feminists understand the Bible.

The Bible Is the Word of God

Some Christians believe that the Bible is literally a collection of God's words. A painting by Caravaggio shows Matthew sitting at a desk writing the Gospel that bears his name. A dove sits on Matthew's shoulder and whispers into his ear, an image implying that God dictated the words Matthew put to paper. The painting represents a perspective that considers the Bible inerrant or infallible, without error or fault. God's words are expressed clearly and truthfully in Scripture because although God used human stenographers, God did not permit human error or opinion to creep into the Bible.

If the Bible is God's Word, some Christians conclude, then it clearly expresses God's intentions for human beings. This belief is summarized by a bumper sticker I saw recently that proclaimed: "The Word of God Is the Will of God." The Bible provides true, trustworthy, and absolute answers to contemporary questions. It tells Christians what to believe and how to act. If the Bible says that wives should submit to their husbands and slaves to their masters, Christians should accept this as God's will for human relationships in the twentieth century as well as in the first. If the author of 1 Timothy will not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority, he is expressing God's intent for the contemporary church as well as for his own. The Bible is God's rule book for all times and places.

Many Christians believe that if the Bible is the Word and will of God, they must obey the whole Bible, even if it is difficult to understand or seems to contradict common sense. The Bible is part of God's mysterious plan for human lives, and humans have only a limited understanding of it. If the Bible challenges women to live out roles they do not like, such as submission to men, the problem is their lack of obedience, not the Bible's error or sexism. The Bible was not designed to make people feel good or to affirm their desire for power, equality, and justice. The Bible values self-sacrifice, not self-actualization. The Bible must be obeyed without question or debate because it is God's book and these are God's rules. Any ambiguity or softening of the rules implies a lack of respect for God's Word and God's will. The Bible is something like the instruction book for a chemistry lab. Students must follow the directions to the letter or risk blowing up the room.

A Christian who believes that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God might interpret its teachings about women as follows:

The creation story in Genesis 2-3 says that man was created first to be the leader and woman was created second to be his helpmate. Eve brought sin into the world because she spoke with the serpent, ate the

forbidden fruit, and gave some to Adam. God punished Eve by giving men perpetual dominance over women and by giving women pain in childbirth. In the Old Testament the role of women was generally confined to being a wife and mother. A few exceptional women held leadership positions, but women were not permitted to serve in the priesthood.

In the New Testament Jesus did not include women among the twelve disciples, and he never ordained women to ministry. He treated women well, but did not challenge their subordinate social roles. When the church began to take shape, women did not serve as apostles, as did Paul and Peter. In fact, women were explicitly told to keep silent in the church (1 Cor 14:34) and were not permitted to teach or to have authority because Adam was formed first and Eve sinned first (1 Tim 2:12-14). Married women were told to submit to their husbands, just as slaves did to their masters and children to their parents (Eph 5:22-33).

People follow Bible, so they think women should not have special.

Christians who believe that the Bible is the Word of God insist that these roles and instructions for women are still binding today. They might permit women to work outside the home and recognize the authority of women in business and government, but they do not accept women's leadership in the church.

Christians who think this way are deeply committed to Scripture and to the search for God's will. They do not shy away from the difficult or the uncomfortable, but are willing to be challenged by Scripture. They recognize the mystery of God and the limits of human understanding.

The literal approach to Scripture has its weaknesses, however. If everything in Scripture is absolutely true, then the Bible contains some inconsistencies. The apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 14 that women should keep silent in the church; but a few pages earlier, in 1 Corinthians 11, he said that when women prophesied in the church they should cover their heads. When he wrote to the Galatians, Paul insisted that there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female because all are one in Christ. Which of these words is truly the will of God?

Bible's world against its own word.

If everything in the Bible is God's Word, readers might wonder about God's character. In Psalm 137 a frustrated author prayed for God to send an avenger who would take the children of his nation's enemies and dash their heads against a rock. When the Israelites became a nation, God frequently commanded them to destroy or enslave their political and religious enemies. If the Word of God is the will of God, do these social practices still reflect God's intentions for the world?

why God is mean to other nation

Even Christians who affirm the Bible as the Word of God do not consider every verse of the Bible equally applicable to their lives. They do

not see every word as God's will for today. They claim they are not required to obey the dietary and sacrificial laws in Leviticus because Jesus abrogated them. They also recognize that some first-century cultural patterns are reflected in the Bible. The author of 1 Timothy, for example, instructed women to dress modestly and to avoid the gold and pearls that wealthy women wore. Men were told to raise their hands when they prayed. Many "Bible-believing" Christians do not enforce these rules, yet they insist that the verse that follows (forbidding women to teach or to have authority) is completely valid and is not a cultural issue (1 Tim 2:9-15). The criteria for making such a determination are somewhat unclear.

The Bible Is NOT the Word of God

Bible told women should stay a home.

Male try to use bible to control women.

Many feminists find such an interpretation of the Bible extremely disturbing. Read in this way, the Bible seems to be the source of women's contemporary troubles. It is no surprise that women are seen as sexual objects unfit for the workplace and leadership when the Bible considers them the source of evil and tells them they belong at home. Why should women believe in or obey a book that has so little regard for them? The Bible is an ancient book with no more authority than any other old book. It might offer some insight, but it is not a source of rules for contemporary living. The Bible is not the Word of God, but human words or, more precisely, male words. It was written in a patriarchal culture by men, for men, to men, and it is not good news for women. It is a dangerous book; it treats women badly; and it is not trustworthy, relevant, or authoritative for the present. Feminists think Bible is not a good book for women.

A feminist interpretation of biblical texts about women concludes that there is little in the Bible that is positive for women, and much that has been destructive. Women were regarded as little more than property. The tenth commandment told men not to covet a neighbor's wife, as if she were a possession like a servant, a house, or a donkey. Women rarely led independent lives, but were identified by their relationships, first as a daughter to a father, then as a wife to a husband. If a woman was raped, the violation was not against her, but against the man to whom she belonged, because rape diminished the value of a man's property. Women's primary purpose in life was to produce and rear children, so women's names, rights, and wishes were not considered very important.

When women do appear in nonmaternal roles, they are rarely praised or affirmed. Jezebel possessed some power and authority, but was portrayed as a wicked queen who threatened the religious life of the

Israelites (1 Kings 18; 19; 20). Gomer was the unfaithful wife of the prophet Hosea, and her actions provided a metaphor for the failures of the nation of Israel (Hosea 1). A woman appeared in the book of Proverbs, but she was a dangerous temptress who must be avoided (Proverbs 7). Michal criticized her husband David's outrageous behavior and was punished with childlessness (2 Sam 6:12-23). Rahab was a courageous foreign woman who protected two Israelite spies; but when the author of the book of Hebrews praised her faith, he also felt compelled to remind readers that she was a prostitute (Joshua 2; Heb 11:31).

Even women done sth special, they do not get reward because they are not in their maternal role.

(Feminists have noted the recurring issue for women in the Bible of their ritual uncleanness during the time of their menstrual periods and for seven days afterward (Lev 15:19-30). Touching an unclean woman or sitting in her chair rendered a man ritually unclean and temporarily unable to participate in religious ceremonies. Because of their uncleanness, women could not serve as priests in the temple or fully participate in worship and rituals. Feminists wonder why women are labeled unclean and denied access to religious life for something that is a natural part of life.

The Bible also records a number of incidents of violence against women. Hagar, the Egyptian maid, was forced to bear a child for her master Abraham and was then forced out into the wilderness when his wife, Sarah, became jealous of her (Gen 16:21). Tamar was raped by her half-brother (2 Sam 13:1-22). A woman was thrown outside to a group of men who raped her all night and left her dead, and her husband cared more about the violation of his property than about her death (Judges 19). Particularly troubling is the fact that this violence seems to be taken in stride. No one, especially God, seems to be very upset by these stories, which Phyllis Trible calls *Texts of Terror*. One of my students wrote after reading Judges 19, "I didn't even know what to think after it. To me it seemed like there should have been a big 'And the Lord was displeased' on the end of that story."

God did not do any thing about woman who had horrible experience.

The New Testament demonstrates a kinder and gentler attitude toward women, but they still functioned in supporting roles. When they did something important, such as witness the resurrection, nobody believed them (Luke 24:1-11). When they demonstrated profound spiritual insight, it was forgotten (Mark 14:3-9). The Bible frequently commands women to be silent and submissive, reinforcing their secondary status. The Bible never challenges the persistent patriarchy and sexism reflected in it, but seems content with the status quo for women.

Bible never want to change the patriarchy and sexism reflected, they like the status quo for women.

This feminist approach to the Bible takes seriously the patriarchy and sexism present there. The images of women as nameless, unclean baby machines are not the only images of women in Scripture, but they are

very common, and readers need to think critically about their implications. Every year when I assign these texts to my students, several of them are shocked that such stories appear in the Bible. Sunday school lessons never mentioned rape and murder. These stories about women challenge their view of the Bible as a good book of moral lessons. Only when they look honestly at Scripture can they begin to consider what sort of book it is. Feminists ask appropriately whether women can give the Bible authority in their lives when its portrayal of women is so limited and destructive.

This critical approach to Scripture also recognizes its power to shape culture. Patriarchy may not have originated in the Bible, but it is certainly present there. Many people who do not read the Bible still believe that women are the source of evil, unclean, and subordinate to men. The assumptions in Scripture have influenced the beliefs of people who do not consider themselves Christian.

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The feminist perspective on the Bible has its limitations. At times feminists seem to ask that the Bible meet twentieth-century Western standards of equality and justice without fully exploring the ways in which Scripture interacted with its ancient Near Eastern culture. Feminists have focused on the most violent and oppressive stories in the Bible, but pay less attention to the stories that challenged cultural norms in profoundly liberating ways. The feminist critique has also alienated some people because it has dismissed the Bible as an ancient patriarchal text without considering the reasons for its persistent influence. If the Bible is simply a collection of men's words, why didn't it lose its influence long ago? Many Christians believe Scripture speaks meaningfully because it is God's way of communicating, and they find it difficult to hear the critique of feminists who have no patience with the Bible.

Feminists
opinions on
the Bible
has its
limitations.

The Christian Feminist Dilemma 困境

The preceding discussion indicates that conservative Christians and secular feminists both conclude that the Bible advocates narrow and restrictive roles for women. The most conservative Christians then tell women to obey the Bible, while secular feminists advise women to reject it. It seems that women must accept and obey the whole Bible, like the bumper sticker that says, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it," or women must reject Scripture as hopelessly patriarchal.

Many Christian feminists believe that they are not limited to these two options, but can value both the Bible and feminism. A group of women from the Third World claimed that the Bible was a catalyst in their quest for human rights. "The Bible plays a vital role in the lives of women and

in our struggle for liberation, because the Bible itself is a book about life and liberation. . . . The Gospels restore to women our human dignity as persons loved and cherished by God."¹ Rigoberta Menchu, a Guatemalan Indian who won the Nobel Peace Prize, wrote of the struggle for economic equity, "For us the Bible is our main weapon. It has shown us the way. . . . When we started using the Bible, when we began studying it in terms of our reality, it was because we found in it a document to guide us." Menchu had been taught that the Bible told the poor to accept their poverty, but when she read it she found that the Bible encouraged the struggle against injustice.² Chung Hyun Kyung described the experience of a Filipino woman who read the Bible and discovered that marriage was about equality, not obedience. "This we have learned from Bible study—freedom and equal rights."³ Cheryl Sanders wrote, "The Bible has been a significant source of spiritual, ethical, and political empowerment for black women. . . . It has supplied the chief rationale for their resistance to human suffering and oppression, mandated their moral teachings and practice, and resourced their affirmations of racial, cultural, and sexual identity."⁴ Renita Weems wrote, "African American women have continued to read the Bible in most instances because of its vision and promise of a world where the humanity of everyone will be fully valued."⁵

Bible has strong impact to African American women.

The Bible provides a rationale for resistance? The Bible restores dignity to women? The Bible teaches freedom and equal rights? Are these Christian feminists reading the same Bible discussed above? Perhaps reading the Bible is more complex than bumper sticker proclamations suggest.

Why the Bible that we read are so different.

If feminist theologians can find encouragement and positive role models in the Bible, perhaps they are reading it differently than either secular feminists or conservative Christians. Both of these groups tend to read it literally, rather than critically. They neglect many of the positive passages about women and fail to consider the cultural and literary contexts of the negative passages.

Feminist biblical scholars have found and brought to life many hidden or neglected stories of women in the Bible. There were women who took courageous and wise action, challenged the status quo, and were not primarily defined by their children. Miriam watched over her infant brother Moses when he was floating in the Nile and later led the Israelites through the wilderness along with Moses and Aaron (Exodus 2; Numbers 12). Vashti was a queen who refused to degrade herself by displaying her beauty before the king's friends (Esther 1). Jael offered hospitality to, then killed the leader of an enemy army (Judges 4). Priscilla was a leader and a teacher in the early church (Rom 16:2-4).

Bible records some positive story of women.

Maybe there are positive women story that Bible does not mention.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argued that the women who are mentioned in the Bible represent only the tip of the iceberg. Using her knowledge of biblical and extrabiblical evidence about the role of women in the first century, she approached Scripture with the assumption that if Paul spoke to a group of people about spiritual gifts, he meant both men and women. If the biblical texts identified a few women as leaders of house churches, there were probably others as well. If the first-century writers made a point of prohibiting women from preaching and leadership, they were most likely already active in these roles. Schüssler Fiorenza believes that readers need to look beneath the surface of the Bible. 在... 下

Other feminist biblical scholars explore the stories of women in a variety of ways. *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction* includes a number of essays in which scholars describe the principles they or others use to interpret Scripture. The *Women's Bible Commentary* contains analyses of the books of the Bible with an emphasis on the role and treatment of women. Many other recent books examine neglected stories of women in the Bible. A particularly imaginative approach can be found in Miriam Therese Winter's books, *The Gospel According to Mary*, and *The Chronicles of Noah and Her Sisters*. Winter wondered how it might be different if women were telling the story of Jesus or the early days of the Israelites and then rewrote these stories through the eyes of women.

Some feminists consider it pointless to describe a few token women in the midst of overwhelming masculinity and patriarchy. Such activity seems to play games with an androcentric text. If the stories of women must be teased out like a diamond from the rough, or if the role of women has to be imagined, the Bible appears to be hopeless. In 1973 Phyllis Trible proposed that the Bible could be depatriarchalized if readers were able to discard the patriarchal lenses that shaped their reading. If readers simply saw Scripture on its own terms without assuming, for example, that women were the source of evil, they would find that the Bible did not support male domination as much as men claimed. In response, Mary Daly wondered about the length of such a depatriarchalized Bible. Perhaps, she suggested, there would be enough for an interesting pamphlet.⁶

○ The strategy of accentuating positive texts and de-emphasizing negative ones can lead to a kind of scoreboard contest over which side accumulates more evidence. If feminists can find enough positive stories about women to outweigh the negative, does that mean the Bible can still be believed? How should readers weigh the Bible's frequent silence about women? This raises the broader and essential question of how we

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." 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

Have own
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.

Reason why some people do not believe every word in Bible.

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:

Bible's word speak out the thought in their heart.

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 cries 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

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.

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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

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 women 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.

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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 positive 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.

sometimes in the Bible, many are human will, no God.

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 insist that marriage and sexuality were bad for Christians, nor 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 spend all their energy proclaiming the gospel. Spouses and families would divert them from their work.

HaHaHa...

Authorial intention is also an important factor in the interpretation of 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-

Feminist Perspectives on the Bible

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

tinct 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 ^{不可靠的} fallible people 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.

PRC 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