What is a North American Old Testament scholar doing addressing a meeting of South African New Testament scholars, a meeting focused on the question of hermeneutics in the South African context? I pondered that question when the possibility was first raised for me, torn by desire to see this land of dreams and anguish and by a sense of fraudulent misrepresentation in even considering the invitation. If I have made peace with my conscience too easily, it is to honor your desire for conversation across national and disciplinary boundaries, and in the conviction that the question of context in biblical hermeneutics is best seen in the light of alternative or competing contexts. Your expectations in inviting me may not correspond to my expectations in accepting, but I hope that I may at least be able to perform the service of the outsider in addressing a common concern. I am in any case honoured by your invitation to address this gathering and grateful for the opportunity it has afforded me to get to know many of you personally, together with the contexts that shape your work as biblical scholars.

My first word then is a word of gratitude for hospitality, for widened horizons, and the chance to experience at first hand the pain and promise of this beautiful land as it experiences the birth pangs of a new society.

To speak, or interpret, contextually is to speak with attention to the particular

* This lecture was intended for oral communication (at the NTSSA Congress, Apr 1994) and bears the marks of that design in its diction and documentation (the latter sparse, the former loose—depending on pause and presence for articulation). In consenting for its publication I am well aware that its flaws will be magnified in print. I am nevertheless honored by the request, and hope that the printed form will extend the arena of conversation and enable those who originally heard to reflect critically on what they heard. I have made only minimal changes in the text (unsure at times of what I actually said) and have not attempted full documentation, which may be found in a number of my other publications (noted below).
context(s) that shape interpretation—and to do so with critical awareness. All biblical interpretation and theology is contextual, reflecting the context of the interpreter; but what is generally unnoticed and unnoted (therefore uncontrolled) in the dominant theologies is made the object of critical reflection and a tool of interpretation in contextual theologies and hermeneutics. The locus of the interpreter becomes the decisive factor in interpretation. Contextual hermeneutics have arisen as correctives and protest against hermeneutics whose unstated norms have excluded or depreciated alternative understandings and standpoints as illegitimate or inconsequential. Thus contextualization is orientated towards contexts of interpretation that have been marginalized or excluded. Contextual hermeneutics raises questions of legitimation, authority, and norms. By challenging the dominant or assumed norms they perform an invaluable service for all of us by requiring us to identify and reflect critically on our own presuppositions and norms.

There is another question raised by an emphasis on contextual hermeneutics that to my knowledge, at least, is rarely recognized or addressed. It is the question of multiple and overlapping contexts. None of us operate within a single context, at least none of us who live outside the world of small traditional societies—and even these are showing signs of strain under the impact of external worlds through media, travel etcetera. The multiplicity of reinforcing and competing contexts, is masked, however, by univocal or unilocal designations such as ‘liberal’, ‘evangelical’, ‘liberationist’, ‘feminist’, ‘Asian’, or ‘Latin American’ theology. I want to begin by examining the role of multiple identities or allegiances in defining contexts and then move to the question of authority and norms of interpretation that this reflection has raised for me. My own attempt to formulate a title for this lecture combining these two themes was ‘Whose Text? What Context? Competing Claims in Biblical Interpretation’. I shall engage these issues by focusing on my own context(s) of interpretation, inviting you to compare and contrast this with your own. I shall also draw upon the work of the ‘SBL Bible in Africa, Asia and Latin American Group’.

I speak as an Anglo-American woman of liberal Protestant upbringing, raised in a family in which religion played a central and pervasive role—expressed in economic decisions, lifestyle, and support of organizations and action for peace and justice. I also speak as first generation feminist, belonging to that first group of women who entered the previously all male (or almost all-male) world of biblical scholarship, seminary faculties, and clerical office as fully credentialed and formally recognised members—only to discover with a shocked sense of betrayal the depths of sexism in the institutions, ideas, and individuals that we had trusted and which had been fundamental for our own identity formation. In my life and work, feminism is the place where my various worlds converge or collide. It is the point from
which I examine the questions of authority and context in biblical interpretation.¹

1 FEMINISM AS CONTEXT

There are many feminisms, and the increasing tendency of feminists to identify their particular social location or perspective by distinguishing labels such as 'womanist' (the preferred designation of some African-American feminists), 'muje­rista' (Hispanic-American), Asian, ecofeminist, etcetera gives visibility to some of the determinatives of identity that are hidden by the blanket term 'feminist'. At the same time there are women who exhibit a feminist consciousness and endorse feminist aims but reject the feminist label, identifying it with its most radical representatives—especially where these are presented as anti-religious and anti-family. Feminism is also now increasingly a global phenomenon, in which the distinctive voices and concerns of Asian, African, and Latin American women are finding a place, without adopting either the nomenclature or the agenda of North American feminists. I lump all of these movements under the heading feminism, because they are all grounded in recognition of structural inequality and associated disadvantage for women as a class. In this recognition and in their determination to fight against the various structures of oppression, feminists experience 'sisterhood' which transcends but does not cancel the differences that separate them.

Feminists' identity transcends religious as well as national, class, and ethnic identity. As a consequence feminist theologians and exegesis approach the task of interpreting the tradition with a built-in suspicion of claims to absolute truth as well as reluctance to grant authority to a tradition that has neglected or misrepresented their experience as women. This hermeneutics of suspicion and this boundary position in which fundamental identity is shared with persons outside the Christian tradition is also characteristic to greater or lesser degree of other contextual theologies, especially those based on racial or cultural identity, such as Black theology (in the US, and in an even more complex way, world wide), Asian theology, and now even Latin American theology, where indigenous religious traditions are being invoked as roots of identity and sources of revelation rejected by an imperialist Euro-centric theology.

If feminist theology finds its base in experience that transcends the religious tradition in which it operates, it is nevertheless determined far more significantly than is commonly acknowledged by the particular theological and ecclesiological context of the theologian or exegete. I find many discussions on feminist herme-

¹ The question of biblical authority addressed in the context of feminist critique was the subject of the J.J. Thiessen Lectures given at Canadian Mennonite College in October 1993 under the title, 'Feminism and the Bible: A critical and constructive encounter' (publication by CMBC, forthcoming). Much of the following discussion is derived from those lectures, which offer a fuller analysis of feminism as a movement and of feminist hermeneutical positions.
neutics extremely frustrating because of failure to recognize and clarify the differing understandings of the nature and authority of the Bible with which different feminist exegetes assume their task. Evangelical, post-Christian, and Jewish feminists approach the text with different presuppositions and aims. They share a common text, but not a common Bible. Many of the differences in methodology and content of feminist interpretation are the direct consequence of fundamentally different views of scripture and how it functions to inform and authorize belief and action.

I take as primary examples two well-known feminist exegetes, Phyllis Trible and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Both point to the contemporary community of women in struggle against patriarchy as the community that provides their perspective on the text and as the primary community they wish to serve by their exegesis. Both have served to a degree unequalled by any other (feminist) biblical scholars to raise the consciousness of women, and men, to the androcentrism of the received tradition and yet invoke that tradition, or elements thereof, in the battle against patriarchy past and present. But they have done so in very different ways, and with incompatible theologies, as well as methodologies.

For Trible, who as far as I know never speaks of her own ecclesiastical underpinnings but reveals her Southern Baptist origins in numerous ways, the word she encounters in the text is its own interpreter. Traveling through time as a pilgrim, it engages readers directly, yielding many interpretations but reserving the final word of judgement on those interpretations to itself. There is no privileged community of interpretation, neither church, nor sect, nor the sisterhood on whose behalf Trible employs her exegetical skills. Rhetorical analysis is her chosen method, directed to a text abstracted from historical and social context. Texts from different literary and historical contexts are made to interact, and development of ideas is traced through topical rather than chronological arrangement of texts. ‘Original’ (authorial) intention is of no concern. Rather, the text is ‘freed’ by the interpreter to address contemporary concerns. (Or does it simply serve the interpreter’s purpose?) Here is a theology of the sovereign word, rooted in the radical Reformation and enormously appealing to feminists who want to hold on to the authority of scripture. But such a theology of the word has always had the problem of collapsing the distinction between the interpreter and the text. It is also misleading in its rejection of concern for historical context, since it uses the tools of historical analysis (lexicon and grammars of ancient Hebrew) and makes historical assumptions about the meaning of attributes and actions, motivation and circumstances within the narrative.

If Trible represents the evangelical Protestant interpreter, Schüssler Fiorenza is her Catholic counterpart, embodying the fundamental presuppositions of Roman Catholic exegesis. For her, Scripture is the product of the church, and the ekklesia is

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1 I limit myself to feminist biblical scholars, though feminist theologians such as Rosemary Ruether and Letty Russell may have contributed just as substantially to critical consciousness of the Bible’s oppressive, and liberating, legacy.
the privileged locus of interpretation. But the church that has silenced and oppressed women cannot function as authoritative interpreter. Rather, it is the *ekklesia* of women (women-church) that holds the key to right interpretation. Through the lens provided by this identification Schüssler Fiorenza critically attempts to probe behind and beneath the distortions of androcentric rhetoric and patriarchal canonical process to discern an originating revolutionary egalitarian message, finding it embodied in a Jesus movement characterised by affirmation of women. The revelatory and normative word is not to be found in the received text, which reflects the patriarchal distortions of the early church, but in the community of discipleship that engendered it. For Schüssler Fiorenza, historical-critical scholarship is essential for recovering this reality behind the text, but also for exposing the social and political processes at work in shaping the message and determining the selection of writings that would be regarded as authoritative. Authority can not therefore reside in the text itself.

I have treated Trible and Schüssler Fiorenza as examples drawn from a broader attempt to describe how the Bible functions in feminist theology and what presuppositions feminists bring to biblical interpretation. I have done so in order to set my own interpretation in relation to theirs and to explain why my primary research and writing has not eventuated in interpretations that are generally recognized as feminist, although I consider myself a feminist and a feminist exegete. It is because I view the task of feminist exegesis, or at least my contribution to it, differently, but more importantly, I view the Bible differently. I shall return to this question, but first I want to expand my consideration of contextual hermeneutics.

I began by identifying the determinative context for my own exegesis as feminism, a feminism qualified by my experience as a white American liberal Protestant, but a feminism that unites me with women of very different cultural and religious contexts, with whom I would otherwise have little in common. Naming the context from which I operate is a necessary effort to control the universalising assumptions into which theologians of the majority tradition or class tend to slip, but it is also an illusion, in that it isolates a single factor as determinative, obscuring the role of other operative contexts.

## 2 THIRD WORLD CONTEXTS

Before I move to consider the ways in which the question of biblical authority has arisen in feminist interpretation I want to broaden the question of context with a brief account of contexts of interpretation identified by interpreters of the

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Bible in the Third World, or the world outside the centres where modern biblical scholarship developed. I draw here on papers presented in the ‘SBL Bible in Africa, Asia, and Latin American Group’ over the four years of its life (1990–1993). The papers have ranged over a wide spectrum of topics and included many different perspectives; they reflect, and reflect on, differing social, academic and ecclesial contexts and exhibit a wide variety of interests. They have been for the most part the work of academically trained biblical scholars or teachers, some from the lands or cultures in which their interpretation is practiced, some North Americans reflecting on their experiences living and teaching in the three regions or reflecting on uses of the Bible by others in these areas. Sessions have focused at times on common texts or topics, at time on regions, with efforts to assure cross-cultural conversation in each session.

You will recognize the dangers and the limits of trying to link three continents of enormous internal diversity in a single group, but the conversations that have begun to develop across regions have made considerable contribution, I believe, to North American biblical scholars, who have benefitted from hearing the voices of colleagues working in other regions and discovered among themselves previously unknown interests and expertise beyond the North American context. It has also provided a forum for scholars who have worked in isolation from centres of ongoing biblical research, offering occasion and incentive to reflect deliberately on the context(s) of their work.

Because my initial attempt to summarise the major papers or issues addressed in the four sessions ran to 15 pages, I must try a different approach. I will begin simply by listing briefly and selectively titles and topics from the first three years, then focus in greater detail on last year’s session, and finally attempt some generalizations, with which I will interact critically as I return to my own context of feminist interpretation.

The first program consisted of a panel discussion on ‘Biblical interpretation and social context in light of the Road to Damascus document,’ a topic chosen at the previous year’s consultation in an effort to respond to a statement formulated in the Third World and overarching regions and Testaments. Respondents were Temba Mafico (Zimbabwe/USA), Fernando Segovia (Cuba/USA), Chan-Hie Kim (Korea/USA) and Herman Waetjen (USA/Africa).

In 1991 the topic of ‘Contextualizing the interpretation of the Biblical conquest traditions’ elicited papers from Latin America and South Africa which saw the Bible itself as an instrument of conquest with which indigenous readers or oppressed

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classes must wrestle before they can appropriate its contents. Insisting that the con­
text (of struggle for life in the context of dehumanizing forces) has priority over the

text, Leif Vaage (of Lima) likened the urban explosion in Peru to the biblical infil­

tration of the Canaanite city states by displaced persons on the fringe of an ancient

order, descending from the hills of Moab, infiltrating Canaanite culture and making

it their own. Itumeleng Mosala also insisted on the context of the interpreter as pri­

mary, using a class analysis as a lens that exposes the Bible in its origins, as well as

its use, as ‘a social class product...a terrain of social class struggles...and a weapon

of social class struggles’. A Chicano (Mexican-American) contribution, by Robert

Maldonado, viewed the biblical conquest traditions through the lens of mestizaje

identity, a ‘mixed’ identity representing the dual heritage of Indian and Spanish

ancestors that creates ambivalence toward the culture of the conqueror, now repre­

sented in two colonizations, Iberian and US. Two North Americans, Kathleen

O’Brien Wicker, a New Testament scholar, and Sue Houchins, a literary critic, ana­

lyzed biblical themes in the pre -independence novel, Waiting for the rain, by the

Zimbabwean author Charles Mungoshi. Their paper, entitled ‘The blessing of Ham: Re-sacralizing and re-contextualizing the narrative of nation’, illumined some of the

fundamental dynamics of ancient and modern stories of nation.

The 1992 session focused on Asia, with papers on ‘Mahatma Gandhi and his

“cultural exegesis” of Daniel 7’ (by Daniel Smith Christopher), ‘Reading Paul

through Filipino eyes’ (Barbara Bowe), and ‘A feminist interpretation of Mark 5:

25-34 in a Japanese context’, (Hisako Kinukawa). Kinukawa analyzed the story of

the haemorrhaging woman from the perspective of shame-and-honor culture com­

mon to Japanese society and the first-century Mediterranean world, and then

pointed to a parallel to the woman's response in the action of the socially and geo­

graphically segregated villages of the outcast (hisabeku-buraku) in Japan, whose

liberation movement challenged God and the churches. The session concluded with

a panel discussion on the book edited by R S Sugirtharajah, Voices from the mar­
gins: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World.

Last year's (1993) program took as its theme, ‘Popular and academic interpreta­
tions of the Bible: What meeting place and whose terms?’ A team presentation by

Jonathan Ukpong of Nigeria and John Riches of Glasgow reported on the Bible in

Africa Project, a research project involving the Catholic Institute of West Africa at

Port Harcourt, the University of Zimbabwe (Harare), and the University of Glas­
gow, with parallel field research on oral interpretation of the Bible in Glasgow to

serve as comparison. The ultimate aim of the project is to provide insight for de­
veloping methodologies of interpretation informed by the socio-cultural perspectives of

Africa and sensitive to the needs of ordinary Africans. Initial interviews of a broad

spectrum of the population (of Port Harcourt) yielded a picture of dogmatic and

literal understanding of the Bible as the word of God. Viewed as a source of super­
natural power, it was used as an object to ward off evil spirits and read for consola-
tion, instruction, and enlightenment. 83% preferred the NT, despite closer cultural affinities to the OT, explaining their preference with the view that the NT was 'more powerful', as demonstrated in the miracles of Jesus.

In assessing their findings Ukpong and Riches concluded that the people are fundamentalistic in their use of the Bible because in traditional African society authority is accepted without questioning. Africans have no problem accepting the supernatural in the Bible because African culture accepts the existence of spirits, good and evil. And because African traditional religion had to do with material as well as spiritual welfare, the Bible is used in seeking deliverance from disease, childlessness, poverty, etcetera.

Further perspectives from Africa included a case study by Gerald West, 'Reading the Bible with poor and oppressed communities in South Africa', which focused on the interface between trained and 'ordinary' readers, aiming to move beyond 'speaking for' or 'listening to' the poor and oppressed to speaking/reading with them. Paul Germond reported on his experiences leading Bible studies in an Anglican congregation of blacks and whites in Cape Town (published in his book Portraits of Jesus: Luke, 1988).

Two papers from central America both focused on the particular meaning of 'popular' in current Latin American theology and considered the implications for the structuring as well as the content of seminary curriculum, deployment of faculty and location of study when seminaries commit themselves to serve this population. In Spanish 'popular' means of the people/'Pueblo' and in Latin America refers generally to the poor masses. But the term has received a more restrictive meaning in relation to Bible study, designating those groups that approach the Bible with a certain amount of class consciousness, interacting with it on the basis of their socio-economic and political analysis of the structures of society that keep them poor. The term 'popular' in Latin America is not used for the fast growing fundamentalist groups that appeal to people of the same socio-economic level. Nor is it applied to their Bible study, which does not include a structural analysis of society as part of their framework for thinking about the Christian faith. Their approach to the Bible is characterized by an individualistic search for meaning on a personal level, accompanied by a denial of 'the world' that has used and abused them.

A plea to broaden the notion of 'popular' to include this latter group was made by Daniel Carroll of Guatemala, a country that now counts 20-30% of its population as belonging to pentecostal or neo-pentecostal denominations. The 'explosion' of conservative evangelical Protestantism on the Latin American continent represents another kind of 'eruption of the poor', he argued, concentrated especially in the urban areas. These churches offer a social and religious network to those caught up in the new mass migration to the cities, providing a place of mutual support amidst the violence and increasing secularization of Latin American life and creating alternative moral communities. Ecumenical relations are difficult with these groups, and
they remain largely outside and immune to the kind of biblical scholarship practised in the main evangelical and Catholic seminaries.

Two papers by Korean graduate students illustrated a quite different response to popular Bible study and a different relationship between seminary and church. Both aimed to correct popular views by historical-critical scholarship. One focused on the proclivity of reading Jesus into the OT. The other criticised popular uses of NT eschatological terms in an ‘imminent parousia theology’ cultivated and propagated through Bible studies and preaching. Both observed that in the theological controversies now wracking Korean churches, seminary teachers are a ‘miserable’ minority, oppressed by a powerful church. Academic interpretation in Korea does not have a privileged position, but represents a marginalized voice.

I have left myself too little space for the generalizations and critique I had planned. Consequently, a few observations and comments must suffice.

(1) Last year’s discussion reminds us that ‘popular’ can have a wide range of meanings and that popular readings can abuse the Bible. When such readings are combined with power they can also be dangerous, as we should know from racist, and sexist, popular interpretations.

(2) In all three regions the Bible is understood almost exclusively as a Christian book and is studied with religious aims. Academic study is generally meant to serve ecclesial purposes, but it may take place in a variety of centres with differing relationships to the church and to other centres of learning. Several consequences follow from this location and purpose: (a) Serving the missional and apologetic needs of the church is primary. (b) The kind of ecumenical study of the Bible, or neutrality in respect to faith claims, that prevails in North American Biblical scholarship is generally foreign to the Third World. (c) Scholarship that does not serve immediate needs (however conceived) or that undercuts popular or church beliefs is suspect and generally excluded, as expendable or dangerous.

(3) An important, but little addressed, question concerns who controls the centres of biblical study and access to them. Women, who often play a major role in leading lay Bible study, rarely have advanced training. None of the participants in the BAALA Group over the past four years have been women native to the three regions with academic doctorates.

(4) In all the regions the Bible, together with Christianity, is a cultural import, introduced in the context of a broader cultural and political invasion or penetration. The terms of contact and of continuing relationship with the indigenous culture differ enormously. In all contexts, however, three distinct cultural/religious systems are involved in biblical interpretation: that of the Bible itself, that of its western media-
tors, and that of its Third World readers. Which of these contexts should have priority?

(5) A final observation and query: It is widely assumed that the Bible should serve users' needs, however diverse the understandings of needs. Bible readers expect it to help them in some way, while Bible teachers/interpreters see it as an instrument of personal and or social transformation. Where is there place for hearing a story which may not be our own or which we cannot readily appropriate? Where do we hear the Bible as a word of judgment? Can biblical study that does not serve immediate needs—of the church, the 'people', or 'women'—be ethically justified? Is there an ethical obligation to the biblical writers to hear them as distinct voices, in their own contexts—to preserve the integrity of disparate and dissenting voices in the Scriptures? I suggest that feminist critique has an important contribution to make to all forms of contextual hermeneutics by not permitting any simple equation of Scripture with the word of God or any reading of Scripture without a sense of discomfort.

2 WHOSE TEXT?

I have reported on a variety of efforts to shift the locus of biblical interpretation and the claims of privileged perspective from traditional centres dominated by Western white male interpreters to positions on the margins—margins defined by geography, culture, race, status, and gender. I welcome these moves, to which I have also contributed, because I believe they enable us to see aspects of the text and its message(s) that we did not see before and because, whatever the merits of the new readings, they require us to examine our own assumptions about the biblical message, as we test the new readings. A shift in perspective does not automatically produce a superior reading, but it extends the sphere of debate and experience relative to that debate. The Bible belongs to the church—the whole church, which uses it in many ways—and also abuses it. Scholars must beware of assuming exclusive rights of interpretation, but knowledge of the biblical text and the biblical world must not be viewed as disqualifications for interpreting a document whose very language(s) signal unmistakably that it belongs to a different world than any of us inhabit today—though some Third World readers are able to grasp its meaning more readily than Euro-American interpreters.

Vernacular translations have helped to expand the circle of interpreters, but when they erase the cultural markers that identify the Bible as a foreign text, they mislead us into believing that the Bible's message can be imported directly into our own world, whatever that may be. I think that is a dangerous illusion, and I think that feminist critique has an indispensable contribution to make at this point.

Feminist theology parts company with other liberation and contextual theologies in its assessment of the Bible as a source for theology. Contextual hermeneutics
commonly assume that a shift in the perspective of the interpreter will enable the truth and power of the gospel to be seen and apprehended more fully. Although some find the seeds of oppressive political and ideological uses of the Bible in the Bible itself (e.g. as a class document, or as containing anti-Jewish sentiments), virtually all point to a corrective core which a new hermeneutical lens is able to access. Such an approach also characterizes some feminist hermeneutics, which seek texts or traditions untainted by patriarchy, or containing counter-cultural messages. But even this appeal recognizes the overwhelmingly patriarchal character of the biblical texts. In my own view, the Bible is a thoroughly patriarchal document, and no text is free from that distorting influence, even if it bears no visible imprint of patriarchy. The Bible is the product of patriarchal society, inscribing patriarchal models of faith and action in normative writings. It is also an androcentric document, viewing the world through male eyes and assuming men’s experience as the norm. Its portraits of women are men’s portraits, and it allows us no unmediated access to women’s words or to the world of women’s experience. Its view of human nature is consequently deficient, and distorted. Can its portrait of the divine be any more adequate?

4 WHAT AUTHORITY?

For feminists, the Bible is a source or instrument of women’s oppression and a false witness to their nature and character. To ascribe authority to such a document is, for many, intellectually and morally repugnant, and they renounce it, together with the church that underwrites it. Some reject the authority of the text, but find authority in a faith community behind the text. Others grant authority only to liberating texts. Still others reject the notion of authority itself, viewing it as a legacy of patriarchy which should be discarded along with other forms of hierarchy. And many, whose faith has been formed by the Scriptures, are torn by crises of identity as well as allegiance as they struggle to assert the integrity of their experience as women and still hold on to the Bible as an authority for faith.

I sympathize with those torn by conflicting allegiances, and I know the sense of betrayal that comes when a long-time friend or respected mentor appears in the ‘enemy’ camp. But I do not think that feminist commitment requires rejection of either the concept or the confession of biblical authority. It does mean, however, that we must reconceive it—and, more fundamentally, our understanding of the nature of Scripture itself. What kind of book is this, and how does it authorize belief and action? How does it become, or mediate, the word of God to us, and how does it stand in relation to other sources and norms of faith? One of the most important contributions of feminism, in my view, is its exposure of the inadequacy of commonly held views of Scripture and scriptural authority.

I cannot give adequate answer in these concluding words to the questions I have raised. I think, in fact, that recognition of the problem is more important than the
solutions we may propose, but I will briefly sketch my own answer to the two-fold question of the nature and authority of the Bible.\(^5\) I want to argue for a way of understanding biblical authority and the task of biblical interpretation that takes its clues from the *form* of the biblical witness, or is congruent with that form. The Bible differs from all other primary theological documents (creeds, confessions, etc) in being a collection of writings with no clearly discernible core. It does have a pattern, though the pattern differs for the OT in the Palestinian and Alexandrian canons. What holds it together is the community that generated it, selected its documents, and interprets it—a community that was at no time single, or of a common mind. It is a collection whose center and whose central message must be apprehended by searching the length and breadth of it. Its message cannot be reduced to individual passages that may be linked together to create a system of belief. Nor can it be found in individual books (such as John or Romans), in key ideas (such as covenant, love, or justice for the oppressed), or even in a liberating-prophetic tradition, though all of these are indispensable elements of that message. I reject a canon within the canon, as a formal principle, and likewise a canon behind the canon (such as Schubert Ogden’s earliest apostolic witness), though I have my own inner canon, as I think all interpreters do, and must. But it cannot be absolutized, and it must be continually regenerated and tested by interaction with other interpreters.

The form of the canon in its irreducibly multivocal and pluriform character invites interpretation that is communal and dynamic, listening to all of the voices and interacting with them, seeking to discern the direction in which they point. The Bible comes to us as the record of a community’s conversation about the source and purpose of its life—a highly selective record (as we know from the exclusion or subordination of women’s voices, as well as the voices of classes and parties deemed insignificant or heretical). It is the conversation of particular communities in time and space, ancient Israel and the early church, but it is set in a global context (by Genesis and Acts), requiring that questions of individual and communal identity and destiny be given a universal thrust. The conversation is particular and local, but it seeks from that limited vantage point to comprehend the universal and the eternal. The particularity of its speech must be respected in interpretation and viewed as a principle of revelation, not an unfortunate limit.

The clue in the content that matches the form of the Bible’s revelation is the incarnation, the word of God made flesh—in a first century Palestinian Jew, who represents our common humanity in his particularity. That revelation, limited in time and space, does not exhaust or terminate God’s self-manifestation in history but teaches us to discern God’s presence in new places and new images. The conversation begun in Israel continues in the early church, seeking to understanding the

\(^5\) A fuller treatment may be found in my article, ‘The authority of the Bible’ in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol 1, (ed Leander E Keck; Nashville: Abingdon, 1994, [pp not available at this time]).
meaning of the new revelation for its own life and for the world. It uses interpretive
models from the old conversation: messiah, Moses, eschatological prophet, suffering
servant, son-of-man, logos—each revealing different aspects of the divine hu-
man-manifestation but each insufficient, qualified and broken in application to
God's new word in Jesus. But the conversation does not stop with these models, or
with the closing of the canon. It presses beyond, because it is generated by relation-
ship to a living God, a God that can only be truly known in the present, under the
conditions of our own place, language and culture. God's continuing activity and
revelation in the world required in times of the Bible's formation ever new state-
ments and new terms, often qualifying, and sometime negating, earlier pronounce-
ments. But the divergent and conflicting views are allowed to stand side by side in
the biblical text, requiring us to enter into that ancient conversation and weigh the
options. We cannot remain disengaged observers to the debate that pulses through
the Bible's pages, and having entered into that conversation, we must extend it into
our own time.

The nature of the biblical witness as a pluriform and multivocalic text requires, I
believe, attention to its own context—as multiple contexts. The Bible's speech re-
quires contextualizing in its own world just as much as our hearing requires contex-
tualizing in our world. Contextualizing in the past invites contextualizing in the pre-
sent, and vice versa. For that reason I find socio-historical criticism an indispensable
hermeneutical tool. And although it requires specialized knowledge to achieve best
results, it is not in itself an elitist method. Ordinary readers constantly make histori-
ical inferences about the meanings and occasions of biblical events, actors, and say-
ings, usually using their own experience as guide, while recognizing some degree of
distance or otherness behind the equation. It is the inappropriate or unreflective
model that distinguishes lay interpretation from that of the trained interpreter, not
the fundamental approach to the text, which recognizes an ancient speaker.

But doesn't such a relativizing approach rob the Bible of its authority—at the
very time when people are seeking a source of enduring values and constant norms,
a word from the eternal in a world of change and tumult? I think not, but it does
require a different understanding of authority than that proclaimed by its would-be
defenders in the battles now raging in American churches. In these church-rending
debates, the Bible is typically invoked as authority by those who resist change,
while those who advocate new ways of belief and practice, often on deeply biblical
grounds, are commonly viewed as rejecting biblical authority—and may view them-
selves accordingly. It is a tragic debate based on misunderstanding of the nature of
authority, and of the authority appropriate to the Bible.

Authority is a relational concept. It requires acknowledgement to effect its claim
and cannot be effected by assertion alone. It is not a possession, nor can it be freely
created. It develops over time and requires an element of trust and trustworthiness.
Authority is exercised within a community and is always contextual. It is relative to
particular situations and relationships, and it must be appropriate to its subject. The Bible’s authority may be understood to derive from God, but the Bible itself has a particular and limited purpose in God’s relationship to the church and the world, and its authority must be understood in relation to that purpose and those relationships.

The authority of the Bible, as written word, is an authority of communication; it depends on understanding. The Bible may function for some as a holy object or source of power, but its authority derives from its ability to instruct, convict, and inspire. When its message is no longer comprehended, or when its word is heard as false or irrelevant, its authority is jeopardized, or annulled. That is the reason for the crisis of biblical authority that has characterized much of the modern period; a radically changed world and world view has rendered old ways of understanding the text unintelligible, unacceptable, or simply inconsequential for many. Continued affirmation of the Bible’s authority requires new ways of interpreting the text and appropriating its message. And they must be capable of recognizing the offense in the text while affirming its truth and power. Here feminist critique is indispensable in exposing the androcentric nature of the text and insisting that this represents a deficient and distorted witness to both human and divine nature. In refusing to recognize divine authority in the words of men that have misrepresented and silenced women, feminists point to the disjunction between divine author and human word. The result, I believe, is that we can no longer regard the Bible as a divine oracle speaking out of time and space. We have turned the confession that arises out of encountering the word of God in scripture into a literal identification that betrays the living word in its attempt to confine and control it.

I do not have time to elaborate a theory of biblical authority adequate to the Bible’s many uses and functions. I want only to insist that it be appropriate to the character of the Bible as human witness through time to the living Word that is never contained by the form in which it is apprehended. I do not think we can dispense with the notion of authority, as David Clines proposes. The Bible comes to us with credentials which we cannot ignore. Christian identity is bound up with this book through the community that lives in conversation with it, a community whose vocabulary of faith is stamped by it. The Bible’s authority is a communal authority—but it requires individual confirmation. Thus it is marked by inevitable tension—and is always in the process of being reconstituted and reconfirmed. Affirmation of biblical authority compels a hearing, with a disposition to hear a word from God—but it does not compel assent to any particular interpretation. The Bible means different things to different people in different times and circumstances, but Christians are not free to construct their own meanings apart from the community that created and transmits the Bible—however painful that relationship. Communal

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6 Clines mistakes authority for authoritarian or dogmatic claims, associating it with a patriarchal past that must now be abandoned. See David A J Clines, What does Eve do to help? and other readerly questions to the Old Testament, (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 47-48.
authority does not demand consensus, but it does demand engagement. The Bible exercises no authority for those who cease to listen or to struggle with it. When feminists, and other critics, abandon this struggle, they leave the church with a false sense of the adequacy of the tradition.

The Bible’s authority is an authority of memory and promise, linking the past and present activity of God. The Bible presents us with a common history as the people of God and a common language to speak of our unique experiences. The Bible’s authority is grounded in past experience, which is never wholly adequate for an everchanging present. The inadequacy of past formulators is seen with particular clarity and existential urgency by feminists in their recognition of the patriarchal stamp of all our inherited institutions and ideas. That recognition is an essential reminder that Scripture is a human product, culturally conditioned, and limited. It is also a reminder that the Bible is the record of a sinful people—fearful, shortsighted, rebellious, like ourselves—a record of betrayal as well as faithfulness to the revelation they had received. The authority of Scripture does not depend on infallible words or model behaviour, but in the ability of its words to confront readers with the story and the presence of a God who redeems sinners by assuming their weakness, and empowers the weak and the silent (or silenced) with visions and with speech.

The authority of the Bible does not rest in the infallibility of its statements, but in the truth of its witness to a creating and redeeming power, which can and must be known as a present reality. The manifestation of the Creator in creation as revealed in the Scriptures does not exhaust or circumscribe the divine presence and power, and the word by which that action is recalled and re-presented is only the servant of the living Word—which loses its authority when it fails to connect with that living source. The word of God cannot be contained in any document, nor can it be comprehended apart from the Word made flesh, which is both the center and norm of Scripture. But that Word can only be apprehended in its fullness when it meets us in our own place and language and need.

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