



The place of women and the perils of biblical interpretation¹

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Christians have found three kinds of difficulties with giving women prominence in worship and church life. They have pointed to longstanding Christian tradition, to social difficulties, and most of all to explicit biblical teaching. I am not persuaded by any of these. Christian tradition is not to be despised, but it should not be allowed to stop us reassessing our calling as Christians and the way we should deal with each other in the circumstances in which we now find ourselves. Social difficulties are best treated as challenges to our discipleship, rather than as serious objections. The scriptural objections are much less solid than they appear: they rest on a very partial and distorted approach to the Scriptures themselves. In this approach, Scripture is treated primarily as a source of legislation, ignoring the many and obvious inconsistencies to be found among the scriptural texts, ignoring the wide variations to be found in their style, explicit attitude, teaching, and literary form. My approach to these questions is shaped by a lifetime of concern with issues of authority in Christian life, and my training in intellectual history. Perhaps I should explain briefly what this means: I look for the particularities of texts, how they differ from each other, and I look for the agenda, or overall message of the writer; that is, before I rely on any statement in a text, I consider why the author is telling me that.

The objections come mainly from the writings attributed to St Paul. In 1 Tim 2:10: ‘A woman must be a learner, listening quietly and with due submission. I do not permit a woman to be a teacher [...]’. In 1 Cor 14:34–35 Paul writes: ‘[...] in all congregations of God’s people, women should not address the meeting. They have no licence to speak, but should keep their place as the Law directs. If there is something they want to know, they should ask their husbands at home.

It is a shocking thing that a woman should address the congregation.’ [Both NEB] The second quotation seems to run somewhat counter to 1 Cor 11, which implies that women were permitted at least to pray in public. In modern times many Christians have come increasingly to reject the restrictive teaching of such texts. I believe that a more careful consideration of Scripture gives them the freedom they need on this issue.

You might well wonder whether there is anything in the Gospels on the matter, remembering that the Gospel writers did not share Paul’s concern with the ordering of church communities. There is no specific teaching, only stories like that of Martha and Mary, in which Jesus seems to adopt a very different approach to women, and to be much more open and accepting with them. Why, then, are Paul’s explicit teachings not checked out against the Gospel stories? Could it be that Christians have searched the Scriptures for dogmatic certainties, when that is not what they offer? After all, there are other ways of approaching the sacred writings of a religion. It is possible to use them to illuminate our thinking, as the starting point of debates, or even of disagreements. In the rabbinic tradition this seems to be a commonplace, with debates often left unresolved. Some years ago at a conference in Canada, I heard a fascinating account (by Noah Efron) of such a debate among seventeenth-century Jewish scholars concerning Copernicus and the motion of the earth. Unlike their Christian contemporaries, these Jews did not feel any need to decide on the truth of Copernican astronomy. In the same way, we can honour our parents, while profoundly disagreeing with them. But why then, have Christians refused that option, and insisted on searching all of Scripture for explicit teaching? Disagreeing while maintaining mutual respect is something Christians don’t, on the whole, seem to have found very easy. The way Christians have used Scripture in debates on the status of women is typical of the way they have used Scripture generally.

Christians seem to want to nail things down, making sure of their ground, and that tends to mean looking for legislation in the Bible. Protestants are accustomed to refer to Scripture as the Word of God. I don’t want here to debate whether this kind of language is appropriate, but I do want to ask what, precisely, it means. Some

Protestants, rather unwisely, have taken it to mean that it contains God's words, like the way, I suppose, Muslims understand the Koran. More commonly, Protestants have assumed that its main function is to provide instructions for life. Does that mean that the Bible is our book of law, to be treated in just the way Psalm 119 encourages the Jews to treat the Torah? In 2 Tim 3:16 the writer seems to think like this when he says 'Every inspired Scripture has its use for teaching the truth and refuting error, or for reformation of manners and discipline in right living [...]'. If that is the way of it, it seems to follow that the interpretation of the Bible is all about assembling so-called 'scriptural proofs' on questions at issue. Many of us will be familiar with that practice. However, though parts of the Bible certainly contain a good deal of explicit legislation, Christians who think this way need to reconcile the widely divergent teachings to be found in different parts of the Old and New Testaments. Many Christians have a way of dealing with this problem: they take as binding any Old Testament legislation not explicitly countermanded by New Testament teaching.

It is hard to fault the logic of this conclusion. That is just how you would expect lawyers to deal with the conflicts and inconsistencies in a body of legislation. The problem is the principle underlying it: that the prime function of the Bible, as far as we are concerned, is to provide rules, or laws, to regulate our lives. If this assumption is faulty, applying this principle is likely to lead to serious distortions and wrong-headed conclusions. It is likely in particular to lead upholders of this principle into the trap of concentrating on those parts of the Bible that fit their approach, such as the letters of Paul. It may also lead them into discounting those parts that do not fit it so well, such as the Gospel parables. I am not suggesting that conservative Christians ignore the Gospel parables. I *am* suggesting that they may be applying to them a scheme of interpretation determined by their reading of other parts of the New Testament, and therefore running the risk of missing their point. They may be reading a Pauline account of the role of women in the church into the story of Martha and Mary, and so missing its point. Learning from material that is not explicit teaching requires very different skills from those required for reading explicit dogmatic teaching. It often requires an act of historical imagination.

We are all, I am sure, familiar with well-meaning Christians

who worry themselves about the literal truth of the Book of Jonah. They worry about the whale (I'm not sure why the talk is always of whales when the text says 'fish'), and think the integrity of the Bible is threatened when the Assyrian records contain no mention of Jonah's doings. To me it seems obvious that it is a fable, a fable of the same kind as those due to the Greek Aesop, a piece of pure fiction, contrived for the express purpose of carrying an argument, possibly about the universal love and mercy of Israel's God. Certainly it is Scripture, certainly to be respected, but not Scripture of a kind that easily adapts to the mindset of those who look for laws to be carefully compared and reconciled with each other. The Book of Jonah is not the only case of a work where the literal truth is irrelevant to the message. It would be ludicrous to demand that Job and his comforters were historical figures before we took the Book of Job seriously: we have many examples from more recent times of philosophical and theological dialogues in which invented characters are set up to explore issues important to the authors. Leibniz and Hume come to mind here.

The Book of Ruth is a more difficult case. I would not like to say whether it is historically accurate, but for those of us concerned to learn from Scripture, I doubt if its historicity matters much if at all. It tells the beautiful story of the widowed Moabitess Ruth. Instead of remaining with her own people in Moab, Ruth chose to go back to Israel with her widowed mother-in-law Naomi. Via some rather arcane legislation she ends up married to a relative of her late husband, and has children by him. At the end of the book we are told that one of her descendants is David, the great king of Israel. True or not, this claim is likely to be the reason why the story was remembered and included in the canon of the Old Testament, and may point us to the reason for writing the book, the essential lesson the writer wished to teach his readers. This is Scripture containing no explicit teaching, and no legislation, but nonetheless there to make a point. Without entering into the diverse literature on the book, I suggest we allow ourselves a little historical speculation. Who might have been surprised or shocked by the news that the great hero David was descended from a Moabitess? Could it be the prophet Ezra and anyone who took his reforms seriously? Scholars seem to think it derives from the same period in Israelite history.

You probably all know that in principle a Jew is anyone born of a Jewish mother. That criterion may go back to the events described in Ezra chapters 9 and 10, when the assembled crowd wept for their sins and resolved to put away the non-Jewish wives that many of them appear to have acquired. If the Book of Ruth is correct, David was descended from a foreigner. On the face of it, that fact, if it is a fact, must cause discomfort to any who took seriously the teaching of Ezra and his policy of salvation by purification, separating the Israelites, the children of the promise, as far as possible from all contact with non-Jews, the policy that became decisive in the later history of Jewry. The writer does not attempt to argue directly with Ezra's interpretation of the Law: that would get him nowhere against an opponent well skilled in interpreting the Law. Instead he unsettles him by taking him on to unfamiliar ground, telling the reader a story that may lead him to wonder whether there is something wrong with a policy that risked turning David into a foreigner. The writers of the Old Testament were not all agreed. Sometimes they chose to argue; sometimes they preferred to tell stories.

The New Testament also contains a lot of argument and explicit teaching, both in the Letters and in the Gospels. However, the Gospel writers note that telling stories was Jesus' principal method of teaching. It would have been much easier for many Christians, ancient and modern, if that had not been his way: explicit teaching is so much easier to cope with if you are looking for sure guidance. By using stories instead Jesus left his followers the difficult job of working out what the precise target of all these stories was, and trying to reconstruct the first-century debates that gave them meaning and point. People must have wondered why Jesus chose to teach this way, and no doubt there are many suggestions in the literature. Whatever, he must have had good reason for it, though without hard information the best we can do is look for an intelligent guess. Most of us will have had the experience of being faced with the possessors of fully worked out systems of belief, when we deeply disagree with their conclusions. There is little point in arguing with such people even when their positions are patently absurd and we suspect hypocrisy: they have answers to everything. Perhaps Jesus found himself in a like position in dealing with scribes and Pharisees. The successors of Ezra, their

goal was to ensure that never again would the children of Israel render themselves culpable through disobedience to the Law. If only, some of them may have told themselves, one Jew kept the Law in its entirety for one day long, the Messiah would come. The observing Jew had to obey it all, every jot and tittle, for who was to say what was important and what was not. It was not for him to decide on reasonable cases for a let out. To the Jew with that mindset, ritual purity came to have as much importance as the command to love your neighbour: it was no business of his to second-guess the mind of God. He avoided contact with Samaritans, of course, with tax gatherers, and with prostitutes, but also with those afflicted with leprosy, and so as a matter of course the Levite in Jesus' story did not help the victim of robbery, in case he thereby became ritually impure and could not perform his religious duties. Jesus did not try to argue, but told naughty stories that made the whole programme look ridiculous. It is hardly surprising that he was not short of enemies: the scribes and Pharisees had invested too much in this supposed route to holiness.

The point of a parable may not be obvious. There are things that teachers do need to spell out – and other things so trivial as not to be worth mentioning. Things not worth mentioning in one generation may be completely obscure to readers in another. In ignorance of the context of a story, later readers may miss its point entirely. Luckily for us, modern biblical scholarship helps us a lot by supplying much of the missing Jewish background. Not a parable, but as likely as not a true story, the story of Martha and Mary is as good an example as any: Mary is listening to Jesus teaching while Martha is being a good housewife in the kitchen. Martha complains, and gets a put down for her pains. How unfair! But perhaps we should be on the lookout for the nuances of the story and be alert to the possibility of a hidden agenda. I am told that according to the custom of the time (and you can be sure there were scribes to give the custom the backing of law), women were not supposed to hear the Law in public. But Martha cannot say that directly, for that would be to question the authority of the beloved Rabbi who was also their friend. So she tries diplomacy, and appeals for help in the kitchen. Jesus knows perfectly well what she is on about, and deals with the matter directly. It's OK for Mary to hear him discuss the Law, and she doesn't need to ask her husband

or father. She is allowed to ask him directly and discuss with him. Nowhere in the account does anyone say that the old ban on women taking part in religious discussions is thereby set aside, but that is what has happened.

I cannot of course offer a rigorous proof of this interpretation. But suppose I am right, we can put Paul in some kind of context. Taught by people who had been close to Jesus, the early church gave women a freedom unusual then, and since. Paul, on the other hand, had the job of organizing churches, and protecting them from unnecessary scandal. He chose to put bounds to that freedom. In that he was the precursor of a concerted move in the succeeding centuries to put women back in their place. We can sympathize with Paul and respect his motives, but that is no reason to follow him in attitudes which belong in their time and place, but have led to much evil and pain. Respect for the authority of Scripture does not require us, to use the phrase of W. S. Gilbert, 'to leave our minds outside'.



A coda

Lying behind the crude and one-sided interpretations of Bible I have criticized above, there may lie a further issue: the attempt to derive all of Christian belief and behaviour from the Bible. It can be confidently said that this is utopian, and in practice will always lead to external assumptions and attitudes being smuggled in. Theologians should learn from scientists who have largely abandoned the misguided attempt to derive their science from experience alone. They have learned instead to use experience as a check on their theories, not as their source. In the same way, theologians need to use Scripture as a treasure trove of material to check their theologies, rather than as the all-sufficient source they never will or can be. We learn from the world where the eternal Word already is.

Note

- 1 First drafted for the biennial joint conference of the Presbytery of Edinburgh/Dekanat of Munich Partnership, Dunblane, September 2002. This paper has obvious implications for the status of ecclesiastical authority, for which see e.g. my “The Trouble With Authority: The Galileo Affair and One of Its Historians”, *Modern Theology* 7 (1991):269–80.