

## BIBLICAL AUTHORITY AND THE AUTHORITY OF WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES: WHITHER WAY?

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### Abstract

*Certain women's liberation scholars attach value to the significance of the Bible as a resource for their own spiritual live. Many such scholars experience a contradiction mostly between the authority of the canon of the Bible vis-à-vis the authority of the canon of their own (different) experiences. The present article outlines the views of different scholars regarding the tension between these two forms of authority so that we may gain a greater appreciation of its magnitude.*

### 1. Introduction

The Bible continues to play an important role in the spiritual lives of many Christians today. This is so primarily because the Bible is regarded as the authoritative word of God that may, as such, not be questioned. One may not even question the interpreters, who are mostly viewed as God's spokespersons. For who dares question God? It has become a tendency to put the Bible on the same level as God.

In this paper, I would like to focus on the perceived tension between belief in the Bible as the authoritative Word of God and the authority of women's contexts and how women experience the Bible. This is prompted by my perception that for us, or for most of us, the Bible is not just mere literature. The words of Osiek (1985:83, Osiek's italics) are noteworthy in this regard:

... the very fact that we spend so much time and energy wrestling with biblical texts and traditions, the very fact that there is such a thing as 'biblical scholarship', means whether we care to acknowledge or not that the Bible is more for us than a curious piece of history. It is part of our *own* living history, a power to be reckoned with in our communities of faith to which we belong or from which our students and friends come.

I wish to highlight the tensions that arise when a woman reader, who is conscious of her unique experiences as a woman, interacts with the Bible. Such a woman often finds herself tossed between two forms of authority: the authority of the Bible and the authority of her own experiences. The resulting tension she experiences raises the following questions: Is it possible to advocate the rights of women and still be a faithful adherent of the Bible, or must one follow either of the two options? Must one be either a woman's liberation advocate or a Bible-believing Christian? As Pinnock has rightly argued (1986:59): 'If it is the Bible you want, feminism is in trouble; if it is feminism you desire, the Bible stands in the way.'

Is it possible to couple the two? Or, to put it in other words: How can the Bible be interpreted in a sensible way for women's liberation advocates? Or, to take the matter further, how can a woman's liberation reader read the Bible in a just way? The answer to all these questions revolves around hermeneutics - trying to make sense out of one's reading of the Bible (a reading which in one way or other is shaped by one's experiences).

How should women understand the biblical notion of womanhood, for example? How should they make sense of a woman's place, roles, and position in society as portrayed in the Bible? How may people, who have tenaciously clung to the Bible as the liberating, authoritative Word of God,

reconcile the apparently androcentrically-oriented Bible with its liberating traditions? Can the Bible still hold the same authority for these people? Does the Bible have a message that accords with their own experiences in their own different contexts?

I wish to present a brief summary of how various women's liberation scholars have reacted to the question of biblical authority vis-à-vis the authority of women's experiences. This will be followed by my own views regarding the issue at hand. Before embarking on this course, however, I will briefly elaborate on the concepts crucial to our discussion, namely, 'biblical authority' and 'women's experience.'

## 2. Clarifying the issues: 'Biblical authority' and 'women's experiences'

It is beyond the scope of this paper to outline how and why the Bible has come to be regarded as the infallible, inerrant, authoritative, Word of God. The concept of the Bible's absolute authority is, historically, a largely Protestant phenomenon. It is linked with the special place that the Reformers accorded the Bible in an effort to affirm its authority over the church. The *sola scriptura* ('by scripture alone') concept originated from this endeavour. Efforts were subsequently made to protect and defend it (the concept). Despite the emergence of the historical-critical methods of the Enlightenment Era, methods that came to challenge both Catholic and Protestant conceptions of the Bible, there are those who through the years have refused to be moved by any 'foreign' and unspiritual notions of the Word of God; those who still cling to the notion of the Bible as the inerrant, authoritative Word of God (Bird 1994a:3ff).

The emergence of the modern women's movement presented yet another challenge to the notion of the Bible as the authoritative word of God. It is not surprising that the feminist scholars who are hardest hit by this new challenge are those of Protestant persuasion. Why should this be the case? Even though they affirm the authority of scripture (whatever the notion of authority is in their case), they also attach a significant place to the role of experience in their lives as women. As Sakenfeld (1988:6-7) notes that the central issue around which feminist approaches to biblical authority revolve is the place of women's experience in appropriating for themselves the biblical witness. Nearly all feminists would agree that experience may not be ignored, because it inevitably affects every person's interpretation of scripture. As we shall observe, however, they differ with regard to how their experiences as women and the authority of the Bible should interact or should be prioritised vis-à-vis one another.

## 3. The authority of the Bible vis-à-vis the authority of women's experiences - different perspectives

One would argue that women liberation scholars' commitment to praxis is one of the reasons for their attributing a significant role to experience. For those women who regard the Bible as a resource, not only of their theological and biblical endeavours, but as a resource to shape their lives, the matter of experience becomes more pronounced and problematised. It becomes pronounced because, as Christians, they acknowledge the capacity and authority of the Bible to shape their lives. It is, however, problematised because the Bible does not always nurture their experiences: the Bible sometimes hurts them. These women find themselves on what Mary Ann Tolbert (1990:12) has called 'the horns of a dilemma'. She argues:

Jewish and Christian feminists, and especially Protestant feminists, whose religious formation has been so permeated by scripture, are thus faced with a difficult dilemma: honesty and survival as whole human beings requires that we point out and denounce the pervasive patriarchal hierarchies of oppression, both social and sexual, that populate the Bible, and yet at the same time we must acknowledge the degree to which we have been shaped and

continue to be nourished by these same writings. How are we, then, to understand the same Bible as enslaver and as liberator?

In the following lines we will examine the ways in which various women liberation scholars from various ethnic backgrounds, though mostly from a Protestant tradition, grapple with the question of the authority of the Bible vis-à-vis the authority of their experiences as women.

The point of departure here is that there is no universal women's experience. Although women experience patriarchy as a common problem, I would agree with Schussler Fiorenza (1992:114-115) that the definition of patriarchy differs from one woman's context to the next. In order to highlight this difference, I have chosen to present the opinions of women from differing contexts. I will thus focus on the views of the following biblical scholars: Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, Renita Weems, Teresa Okure and Kwok Pui Lan.

### 3.1 Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza

Schussler Fiorenza, a Catholic feminist scholar, has a unique way of addressing the question of biblical authority vis-à-vis the authority of women's experiences.

For Fiorenza, experience should be accorded a pivotal role in understanding what is authoritative in scripture (Fiorenza 1983:17). Feminist theology, according to this biblical scholar, should start with 'women's experience in their struggle for liberation, not with the Bible'. She argues that the locus of divine revelation and grace is not the Bible or the tradition of the patriarchal church, but the *ekklesia* of women and the lives of women who live the 'option for our women selves'. She further maintains: 'It is not simply the experience of women but the experience of women (and all those oppressed) struggling for liberation from patriarchal oppression' (Fiorenza 1985:128).

For Schussler Fiorenza, women's experience - and not the Bible - is of primary significance for women's liberation struggles. For, in her opinion, the Bible becomes a patriarchally oriented book. As a result of her views, some scholars have accused her of having denounced the Bible and created a 'women's Bible' by means of a feminist critical reconstruction (Pinnock 1986:54). To my mind, such a critique fails to appreciate the significance of critical readings of the Bible. One would argue that it was not Fiorenza's intention to create another Bible, but rather to afford us an opportunity to imagine and reconstruct what the Bible would look like if women's voices were allowed to be heard clearly in the (making of the) biblical text.

At the other extreme, there are those feminists who will not accept any position that puts the Bible in second place. We refer to the views of Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty in this regard.

### 3.2 Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty

These scholars define themselves as Evangelical in the sense that they have a commitment to the authority of Scripture and a belief in the significance of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. Such a stance is similar to that of many Pentecostal Bible interpreters in South Africa. Scanzoni and Hardesty suggest that the primary source of theology should be Scripture. However, for the interpretation of Scripture, three other parts of the Methodist quadrilateral (tradition, experience, and reason) always come into play. For them, experience is understood as a personal encounter with the Jesus Christ who is proclaimed in the Bible. These two scholars, like Fiorenza, acknowledge that there are people other than women who share their experiences. In their case, however, it is not a political experience<sup>1</sup>, but a spiritual experience, that

1. For Schussler Fiorenza, however, women's struggles for liberation, which is a political struggle, should be given priority over the Bible. For this feminist scholar, the Bible cannot be given first place as it remains a

of a close relationship with Jesus Christ. They define experience as 'own personal religious experiences and those of people we know'(1986:22). Like other feminist biblical scholars, Scanzoni and Hardesty emphasise the inevitability of the subjectivity of the interpreter (cf. Sakenfeld 1988:8).

Unlike Schussler Fiorenza, Scanzoni and Hardesty regard the Bible as the starting point for any theological endeavour. For them, the Bible, and not women's experience, should enjoy priority in people's lives.<sup>2</sup>

Having outlined the views of Fiorenza on the one hand, and Scanzoni and Hardesty on the other, we now proceed to outline the views of an African-American biblical Womanist scholar, Renita Weems, in this regard.

### 3.3 Renita J Weems

In her article entitled 'Reading her way through the struggle: African-American women and the Bible' Renita Weems (1993:42-50) seems to be concerned neither with the ancient text nor its modern readers *per se*. She is concerned rather with the authority of the interpreter. What is important is whose interpretation is deemed legitimate or normative/authoritative. She argues that African-American women in the West have been taught particular ways of reading. These ways of reading have been used against the marginalised to the benefit of the hegemony- the latter being basically White and male. Readers are taught to subjugate their own interpretations that have been informed by their own experiences and to take on the interpretations of those whose voice dominates the literary work in general. She maintains that the challenge for marginalised readers in general, and African-American women in particular, has been to use whatever means necessary to recover the voice of the oppressed within the biblical texts. They have had to rely upon their experience of oppression as a guide in this endeavour.

The Bible has been able to seize the imagination of African-American women in the past and continues to do so now because it speaks to the deepest aspirations of oppressed people for freedom, dignity, justice and vindication. There are substantial portions of the Bible which describe a world where the oppressed are liberated; the last become first; the humbled are uplifted; the despised are preferred; those who have been rejected are welcomed; the long-suffering are rewarded; the dispossessed are repossessed; and the arrogant are prostrated. Weems (1993:40) argues that 'these are passages, for oppressed readers, that stand at the center of the biblical message and, thereby, serve as the vital norm for biblical faith.'

For this Womanist scholar, the authoritative passages are therefore those that appeal to the lives of African-American women in a liberative way. These are the passages that identify with the experiences of the oppressed. It is the task of these oppressed women to read the Bible in such a way that they will discover their own voice in the text, i.e., the voice of the oppressed. Such passages become authoritative for the faith of these women readers.

What is significant to this scholar is having an appropriate way of approaching the Bible

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strange ( cf. its patriarchally-oriented nature) for women.

2. Letty Russell's views constitute what may be called a middle position between the two extremes as represented by the radical views of Fiorenza on the one hand and the conservative views of Hardesty and Scanzoni on the other. Although she acknowledges the authority of the Bible, she qualifies the latter as follows (Russell 1985:138): '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... Its authority in my life stems from its story of God's invitation to participation in the restoration of wholeness, peace, and justice in the world.' For this feminist theologian, unlike Scanzoni and Hardesty, biblical authority is not accepted at all costs; it is accepted only if it lines up with her experience, particularly her experience of the wholeness which God offers her through Jesus Christ.

guided by one's experiences as a woman. African-American women must therefore be wary of adopting reading strategies that have been deemed authoritative by the dominant hegemony. Their experiences of oppression should guide them in their search for authoritative passages in the Bible.

It may be argued that, for Weems, the experience of African-American women is paramount in their encounters with biblical texts. Guided by the oppressive context in which she lives, an African-American woman reader must learn to recognize the voice of the oppressed in the text and identify with it. In the same way, an African-American woman is affirmed by the liberative texts of the Bible.

How do women on the African continent respond to the question of the authority of the Bible vis-à-vis those of women's experiences? Although we present a general portrayal of how African feminist scholars address the question, we will focus specifically on the views of Teresa Okure.

### 3.4 Teresa Okure

For African feminist biblical scholars, the authority of the Bible is usually taken for granted. The word 'African' in this context will refer to the area covered by Central, East and West Africa. Scholars from these regions have made significant contributions in the field of the Bible, theology, and women. We must, however, acknowledge with Pala (1994:209-210) and Okure (1993:77) that due to African history - a history of poverty and ideological domination in both intra- and international spheres - Africans cannot as yet boast of many 'professionally' trained female biblical scholars.

Though African feminist biblical scholars acknowledge the androcentricity of the biblical text, they view the Bible as the container of God's will. Okure argues (1989:47):

The Bible as the embodiment of the revealed will of God thus plays a decisive role for Christians in their approach to the women issue today, including in the Third World, to seek to understand correctly what the Bible actually says concerning the divine will for women.

These women approach the Bible from the viewpoint of women's experiences. Though they acknowledge that the Bible has been used to subordinate women through inappropriate interpretations, their main perception is that the Bible, which they regard as normative, can liberate African women if read appropriately from their own perspective. For these feminist scholars, therefore, the authority of the Bible is weightier than the authority of women's own experiences.

Teresa Okure re-reads the biblical texts in a way that is liberative for women readers. The way that she re-reads the Adam and Eve story is a case in point. She shows how the traditional interpretation of Eve's story has been used to legitimate the subordination of women. She then proceeds to demonstrate how the whole movement of the fall narrative imputes greater blame on Adam, a term reserved here exclusively for the man, because he personally received God's prohibition against eating the forbidden fruit (Genesis 2:16-17). She further argues that, after the fall, Eve became the 'mother of all living' (Genesis 3:20) in a physical sense, thereby playing a role akin to God's, namely, that of being the source and giver of life.

In her article entitled, 'The will to arise: Reflections on Luke 8:40-56', Okure (1992:221-223) foregrounds Jesus as the provider of solutions to various problems with which the women of His time wrestled. In the same way, African women today still experience Jesus as an answer to the different questions they encounter. In this way, the Bible becomes the authoritative word of God as it is used in a liberative way to empower African women in their experiences as women.

In conclusion, we consider the views of the Asian feminist theologian, Kwok Pui Lan, on the subject under discussion.

### 3.5 Kwok Pui Lan

For most Chinese, the truth claim of the Bible cannot be based on its supposed status as the revealed Word of God because ninety-nine percent of the people do not believe in this statement. These people can only judge the meaningfulness of the biblical tradition by looking at how it is acted out in the Christian community (Pui Lan 1992:21). For Pui Lan, therefore, what is significant is not the abstract notion of the Bible as the authoritative Word of God, but the ability of the Bible to shape or influence the lives of its adherents, and the ability of the latter to allow themselves to be shaped by the Bible.

Such a view has obviously been shaped by this scholar's unique context - a non-Western context that is not concerned as much with well-defined epistemologies as with everyday practical realities. Pui Lan (1992:21) argues that, people in the Third World are not interested in whether or not the Bible contains some metaphysical or revelational truth. The authority of the Bible can no more hide behind the unchallenged belief that it is the Word of God, nor by an appeal to a church tradition which has been defined by white, male, clerical power. The poor women, and other marginalised people, are asking whether the Bible can be of help in the global struggle for liberation.

She points out the need for a 'dialogical imagination'. This term refers to the attempt to capture the complexities, the multi-dimensional linkages, and the different levels of meaning in the task of relating the Bible to an Asian context. The process is dialogical because it involves a constant conversation between different religious and cultural traditions. It is imaginative because it looks anew at both the Bible and the Asian reality, challenging the established 'order of things' (Pui Lan 1992:22).

Kwok Pui Lan states that, being a woman from a non-biblical culture, she has found the notion of canon<sup>3</sup> doubly problematic:

1. A canon that relegates the great Chinese cultural teachings and traditions to second place cannot be easily accepted.
2. She agrees with Carol Christ that women's experiences have not shaped the spoken language of cultural myths and sacred stories. Women must therefore seek, discover and create the symbols, metaphors and plots of their own experience (cf. Christ 1979:231). These scholars therefore highlight the importance of the canon of women's experiences as women interact with sacred stories (cf., for example, the canon of the Bible in the present text).

She doubts whether the concept of canon is still useful because that which claims to safeguard the truth on the one hand can also lead to the repression of truth on the other. A closed canon is not helpful because 'it excludes the many voices of the *minjung*<sup>4</sup> and freezes our imagination' (Pui Lan 1993:27). According to Pui Lan, the liberation stories of women from different cultural contexts should be regarded as being as sacred as the biblical stories. This is because '[t]here is always an element of holiness in the people's struggle for humanhood, and their stories are authenticated by their own lives and not the divine voice of God' (1992:27). She calls upon women to claim back the power to look at the Bible with our own eyes and to stress that divine immanence is within us, not in something sealed off and handed down from almost two thousand years ago.

The following points emerge from Kwok Pui Lan's perspective on the authority of the Bible:

3. The fact that Pui Lan does not define the 'canon' she discusses is revealing. It may be argued that for this scholar, like many others, the word 'canon' has always been used to designate the biblical canon, as though the latter, is the only canon available for everybody.
4. *Minjung* is a Korean word for the mass of the people or the mass that were subjected or were being ruled.

1. The authority of the Bible is valid only if it can shape Christians' lives.
2. In a non-biblical world, the voice in the Bible is not the only one; it is only one voice amongst the many found in other religious traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and so forth.
3. People's cultures should not be brushed aside or made secondary to the Bible; the two should be allowed to interact.
4. Women's stories and experiences should be regarded as being as 'sacred' as the Bible.

### 3.6 In summary: different perspectives revisited

The preceding sections (3.1. - 3.5) have hopefully afforded us a glimpse of the many different voices of women trying to locate themselves with regard to the position of the Bible vis-à-vis their experiences. A review of these voices can be summarised as follows:

The discussion brings to light the fact that we cannot speak about a universal women's experience. The words of Pui Lan (1993:105) are noteworthy in this regard:

Feminist theories have clearly demonstrated that women's experience is not determined by female biology alone but is largely shaped by powerful cultural and social forces. In other words, there is no such thing as 'universal' women's experience. Patriarchy is experienced in varied ways according to different social and political situations.

The women scholars whose views we have outlined above speak out of their own individual contexts. This is a step in the right direction because their own contexts give them legitimacy. Such an exercise makes their works relevant to their communities at large and their women communities in particular.

Their views regarding the authority of the Bible are also shaped by their various contexts, contexts that include geographical, ecclesiastical, socio-political history and academic experience and training.

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, with her Euro-American Roman Catholic background, does not hesitate to give the experience of women priority over the Bible. She even proposes that the silences of the Bible should guide us in our attempt to reconstruct women's history in early Christian origins (1995). For Schussler Fiorenza, women's political struggle should serve as a norm when we interact with the Bible.

On the other hand, scholars from the Protestant tradition still reserve a significant place for the Bible in their lives. This makes sense in the light of the '*sola scriptura*' principle that we previously noted. These scholars, however, differ with regard to the place of the Bible vis-à-vis that of their experiences as women, depending on their denominational and geographical background. Euro-American Evangelical scholars like Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty are very clear that the Bible should have a first place in their lives. Unfortunately, all other aspects of their lives receive secondary attention. An African-South African female reader may ask whether their position may be attributed to the privilege that they may enjoy by virtue of their race.

African feminist scholars seem to acknowledge the authority of the Bible in their lives. They nevertheless re-read the Bible in a liberative way, informed by their experiences as women who have been pushed aside by patriarchy - particularly as it manifests itself in the African religious-cultural heritage. Although Weems also acknowledges the significance of reading the Bible through one's varied experiences as a woman, she goes further. Informed by her African-American history and experiences, she goes on to question those in power, criticising particularly those reading methods that have been imposed on the powerless as normative. She therefore cautions oppressed women readers to be careful of such methods because the text will not make

sense to them as long as they employ those reading strategies.

These women's reading strategies are informed by their experiences as women. For them, the Bible is normative only as long as it is in a position to speak in a *meaningful* way to African-American women's lives.

For Kwok Pui Lan, a Protestant of Asian background, the Bible cannot enjoy the claim that it alone is normative for people's lives as there are other religions that have their own sacred scriptures. Adherents of the Bible should interact with people from other religions. One should also permit the Bible to interact with the Asian cultural heritage.

Having summarised the views of Fiorenza, Hardesty and Scanzoni, Weems, Okure and Pui Lan, we now turn to my own views concerning the issue at hand.

#### **4. My own response to the question at hand**

The Bible is God's revelation to the people of biblical times. The Israelites, for example, believed that they had to take the words (commandments) of Yahweh seriously, as they were revealed to Yahweh's servants. The words were therefore normative for their lives.

As an African Christian woman living in twentieth century, post-apartheid South Africa, I find the words of this book valuable for my life and the lives of many fellow African sisters. Its message about the God whose ways and thoughts are not similar to those of mortals, humbles and also challenges me, because I find such a message confirmed in our everyday lives. For example, the God proclaimed in the Bible identifies with those whom humanity despises - women, the physically challenged, Blacks and the poor (to name but a few categories of disenfranchised peoples). The Christ proclaimed in the Bible gives life. The latter is manifested in my experiences of the power that the resurrected Christ still gives believers to cast out demons, to heal the sick, and to preach the good news to the poor. Hence, I attach great value to the Bible and it is authoritative in my life in so far as it proclaims life, abundant life. This life includes, *inter alia*, righteousness, love, justice, peace and obedience (cf. Weem's exaltation of liberative passages in the Bible).

The rosy picture that I have presented of the Bible does not, however, imply that the Bible is an innocent book. It does contain elements (such as its androcentricity, its inclinations towards the ideologies of the elite) that alienate some people such as women, Africans, inhabitants of rural areas, and so forth. Such elements reveal the Bible's ideological nature; it too is a human book. It is therefore the interpreter's responsibility to spot such elements and reject them, for they will not be in line with the words of life that the Bible proclaims. The Bible is both oppressive and liberative. It would therefore be beneficial to seek appropriate ways in which to render the Bible's message relevant to its twentieth century readers in post-apartheid South Africa (cf. Weem's proposal of relevant reading strategies).

John Scott (quoted in Johnston 1986:41) argues that we have too often been 'better at defending biblical inspiration than at wrestling with biblical interpretation;' at trying to 'affirm the authority of the Bible than to demonstrate its relevance'. Scott affirms the significance of both biblical authority and the effort to make the Bible relevant to people's lives. Such relevant and empowering readings of the Bible will bring healing to the broken selves of those who have been relegated to the margins of society.

I align myself with the words of Bird (1994b:336):

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 and irrelevant, its authority is



jeopardized, or annulled... 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 offence in the text while affirming its truth and power.

In my thesis entitled, 'Proverbs 31:10-31 in a South African context: A *Bosadi* (Womanhood) Perspective' (1996), I have proposed a *Bosadi* (Womanhood) approach as one such appropriate way of approaching the Bible informed by one's experiences as an African-South African woman. Space does not allow me to present a detailed elaboration of this approach here. A few of its aspects are, however, listed below:

#### 4.1 The *Bosadi* (womanhood) approach

The *Bosadi* approach acknowledges the uniqueness of African-South African women's context. This is a context characterised by sexism in society - particularly in the African culture - post-apartheid racism, and classicism. Such a context will shape the way that African women interact with the Bible. As a *mosadi* reader reads the biblical text, she will not only spot the androcentric elements in the text, but also the class and race elements. These elements are critiqued in such a way that the Bible is re-read in a new and liberating way for those who have been marginalised by those oppressive texts. The *bosadi* approach, therefore, like many of those employed by the scholars in the preceding lines, affirms the role played by women's contexts/experiences in reading the Bible.

The *Bosadi* approach acknowledges the points common to both the Israelite and the African worldviews.

1. In its analysis of the reader's context, the *Bosadi* approach highlights the significance of the faith element in an African woman's life as she encounters the Bible. The foregrounding of faith in women's lives reminds one of Hardesty and Scanzoni's views that there is a need for a personal (faith) commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. The difference between the two approaches is, however, in the fact that the *bosadi* approach does not exalt the authority of the Bible *at all costs*. Though it acknowledges the authority that the Bible should enjoy in the lives of women and other people, it defines what authority is. The Bible can have authority in one's life as long as its authority is liberative and life giving.
2. Like many other women's liberation approaches, the *Bosadi* approach foregrounds the liberative elements of the Bible and challenges and resists those that are oppressive.
3. The *Bosadi* approach is not only critical of the biblical text; it also criticises the African culture. The oppressive elements of this culture are challenged and resisted whilst the positive elements are embraced (cf. also African women's critique of the African culture).
4. For the *mosadi* reader, both the contexts of the biblical text and that of the modern (woman) reader are significant. One should therefore strike a balance between historically oriented approaches on the one hand, and context-oriented ones on the other. An 'overdose' of one approach may cripple the end product. On the one hand, an overdose of a historical-critical study of the Bible leaves us with a text that is an ivory tower, isolated from the real lives of the people. On the other hand, an overdose of contextual approaches (cf. women's liberation approaches in the present context), leaves us with all manner of eisegesis, convenient interpretations which are in most cases miles away from the intention of the original authors. If we are comfortable with such biased interpretations, we may as well forget about scientific interpretations of the Bible. For, in attempting to make the Bible relevant to our lives by unmasking the biases it might have, we are also found guilty of bringing our own biases to the Bible. Therefore, there is no open dialogue between the two partners in conversation: the texts and their modern readers.

## **5. Conclusion**

In our conversation with biblical texts, we must be open and not allow our anger and frustrations to shape our way of reading them. This applies particularly to those of us who have been marginalised by these texts. Our openness may assist us to identify liberative aspects of the text because, as I have argued, the Bible has the capacity both to subordinate and to liberate women. Such liberative texts are empowering and life-giving for African women in South Africa.

Whatever our approach to the question of biblical authority may be, we cannot pretend to approach the Bible without any bias. The experiences of a Bible reader will always play a role in a reader's encounter with the Bible. The main problem is how to regulate our experiences in such a way that we can do justice to the biblical text. How do we monitor our biases so that we can defeat the temptation of merely reading that which we want to read into the text? If we purposefully read what we want to read in the text, why do we still read the text? Is this not an indication that we attach some value to the text? If that were the case, one would suggest that we try, as far as we can, not to manipulate the text even as we do not want the text to manipulate us.

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