Scriptura 77 (2001), pp. 303-324

THE CALL TO REWRITE THE BIBLE: SOME PERSPECTIVES[1]

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Abstract

In the recent past a number of calls, particularly in the African context, were issued for rewriting the Bible. Apart from attention to what such rewriting would entail, an investigation of the purported reasons for such calls is imperative. It is questionable whether the early hermeneutical practices of the Jewish "rewritten" Bible or inner-biblical exegesis can be claimed as legitimate precedent for constructing a new canon. Rewriting concerns relate as much to hermeneutical issues as it requires reflection on changed attitudes to and perceptions of the status and role of the Bible in Christianity. A number of rewriting strategies or perspectives are identified and examined against the background of biblical antecedents.

1. Introducing the issue

The anachronistic or rather post-modern attempt to rewrite history, is not only an attempt to redeem the past, but also to provide a new beginning for the present reader (Lategan 1994:134).

In the history of humankind, the Bible is probably the one book, or rather compendium[2] of books, which has experienced the largest number of revisions, and although the rewriting of history has therefore been around before the postmodern era its motivation is related to *past and present* as suggested by Lategan. Historically, even before it is possible to point to "the Bible" as canonical collection of documents - whether as "Old Testament" (Hebrew Bible) or "New Testament", or both - its precursor oral traditions were continuously in a state of flux, contextually adapted to address the concerns of the time anew. A rich and dynamic tradition of "inner-biblical" exegesis is not restricted to Second Temple Jewish groups, and even in the New Testament traces of revisionary exegesis go beyond the engagement of earlier (Hebrew Bible) literature. A good example is the reinterpretation of the Pauline message which also underwent some revision ostensibly because at times it was "difficult to understand" (1 Pt 3:16 *dusno,hta, tina*).

The rich tradition of formation and development of "the Bible" has, however, frequently been ignored or glossed over. During recent times however, and probably because of the increased recognition and acknowledgement of the co-optation of the Bible in defense and legitimation of various socio-cultural, political, economical and other strategies, ideologies

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1. This is an edited version of a paper read at the SBL International Meeting, 17-21 July 1999, in Helsinki and Lahti (Finland). Financial assistance from the National Research Fund (Social Sciences and Humanities) of South Africa for attending the conference is gratefully acknowledged; opinions expressed are those of the author.

2. The very 'collections' or canonical lists, which were agreed upon, also differed from one another during various phases of the development of the Christian tradition. Cf e.g. Anderson (1993:61-80); Sanders (1995:58). Reaching back to the inclusion of (some of) the Apocrypha in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions, there is today still difference of opinion regarding the canonical position of deutero-canonicals as is clear from their inclusion in the Jerusalem Bible.

and the like,[3] the layered, reworked and continually contextualised traditions found in the Bible have come up for scrutiny. In some theological and other circles, calls have been made, with and without reference to the *rewritten* nature of the Bible itself, for applying a "cut and paste" technique to the texts of the Bible in order to construct a new Bible. From one perspective this is an(other) indication that the question of canon has been reopened[4] (Davies 1986:62ff), but there are of course other issues to consider, as well.

Many reasons have been cited in support of the demand to rewrite the Bible, and are related to attempts to reclaim an *adjusted* Bible in almost all aspects of human existence: politics, gender and sexuality, economics, socio-cultural patterns, religious practice and spiritual experience, to name a few. An obvious but important point of departure for calls to rewrite the Bible is the conviction that it continues to be an important document for religious communities and people, their beliefs, values and commitments.[5] However, calls to rewrite the Bible more often than not – ironically – perpetuate the imperialist discourse such calls want to expose and eschew. As long as the Bible is deemed a powerful document, the temptation will exist amongst its users to subvert its texts for their own purposes, to claim ownership of the texts. Although this is understandable and often, at least initially, happens for understandable if not good reasons within a paradigm of inculturation, it can ultimately become counter-productive. Adapting the texts of the Bible will not result in its general acceptance, which of course is not the primary purpose, but will, on the contrary, have consequences dangerously similar to those the rewriters want to curtail.

At this point, and recognising that the location of the author is important in the study of meaning, but also in light of the discussion to follow, I put my cards on the table. The situatedness of this study is postcolonial Africa, and post-Apartheid South Africa in particular. The author is a white male, middle-class and perhaps not yet fully middle-aged, and indigenous to South Africa.[6] As a professional biblical scholar at a historical and still predominantly black institution of higher learning in South Africa and being involved in the ministry as well, I have a vested interest in the issue of rewriting the Bible as it is more than a passing concern in the narrow academic sense of the word.

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3. Cf e g Boone (1989) on Fundamentalism; Loubser (1987), Kinghorn (1986) and others on Apartheid; Segovia (1995a, 1995b) on Western ideology; Ruether, Schüssler Fiorenza (references below) and others on women's issues; Usry and Keener (1996) on slavery and racial discrimination; Kwok (1995, 1998) on 'religious exclusivism' and resultant demonisation of others; and so on.
4. And is accompanied by several issues, pertaining to the continuing value and indeed initial insistence of the church on a closed canon; abuse of the canon as legitimating agent for purposes not aligned with the gospel; a closed canon imposing limits on the power of God in the church; restricting the church to a collection of texts the disciples were obviously not limited by; the possible inclusion of text formerly left out for uninformed reasons; the contemporary limitation to writings dating back to a different historical era; and, implications of all of these for the ongoing work of the Spirit (cf Anderson 1993:66-67). Other issues have to be added, including questions on the ownership of the Bible; the quest to politically control if not to claim its texts; etc.
5. Contra the claims by some scholars of religion regarding 'decanonisation', the decreased influence of the Bible in (secular) human life.
6. One of those whites, or as Pobee would have it, 'Caucasian settlers' in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Zambia who 'knows no other home' (Pobee 1992:28,58,164 n13).

2. The rewritten Bible in the Old and New Testaments

The attempt to justify the rewriting of the Bible on the basis of a historical antecedent (Banana 1993:23-26) can easily falter, especially when it fails to recognise that the purpose of such "rewriting" was evidently never to delete from or favour in a final way sections of the canon to the whole.[7] Ancient rewriting intended rather to make relevant, explain and clarify the existing canon as such and the (interpretive) "tricky" parts, in particular.[8] The fluidity of the text during biblical times[9] has to be understood within that particular context and cannot readily be claimed as direct precedent for rewriting the Bible today as will be explained.

2.1 The rewritten Bible[10]

The Torah has seventy faces (Rabbinic saying, cf Uffenheimer 1988:161).

The scriptures of Israel (Old Testament) are ample illustration of a continuous process of rewriting, through a process called "inner-biblical exegesis" (Fishbane 1980; 1985). The "rewritten Bible" was a feature of the earliest phases of exegesis after the appearance of a "stabilized text": the interpretation was not so much intent on commenting on the text, as using the text to "rewrite the tradition" (Evans 1989:165). But the rewritten Bible of the Jews was not an isolated phase round about the turn of the first century CE Hayward contends that the Targumim can also be viewed as examples of the rewritten Bible to the extent that they "interweave with their rendering of the Biblical text into Aramaic explanatory comments and edifying homiletic material" (1990:595-598). And still later, "[i]n the late phase of the Midrash tradition (from about the eight century), the genre of the "rewritten Bible" is found yet again as the radical result of midrash. This genre was intent on providing "edification and entertainment" (Stemberger 1991:41).

The rewritten Bible therefore depended upon and was simultaneously the result of the well-known Jewish practice of inner-biblical exegesis,[11] which, again, depended on the notion

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7. With the later exceptions of those like Marcion who created a Bible consisting of two parts, the Gospel (a revised version of Luke's gospel) and the Apostle (10 Pauline letters)! Cf Lehmann-Habeck (1993:37).
8. It remains a further question in how far the pre-canonical handling of biblical texts should be seen to provide an analogy for current - that is, post-canonical - appropriation of these texts. Even granting the fact of 'authoritative traditions' which guided the appropriation of the canon, e g the Mishnah and Talmud in Judaism and the creeds in Christianity, these traditions were still 'at an authoritative level somewhat below that of the Bible' (Sanders, quoted in Myers 1991:53; cf Barr 1990:117,158).

   Fishbane (1989:18) argues that the 'entire corpus of Scripture' remained open and thus given to rewriting until its closure in the early rabbinic period - thereafter interpretive tradition carried on in the role of written or oral commentary. During both the pre-canonical formation period and thereafter the text itself was considered 'sacred' (cf West 1993:133).
9. At least until around 70 CE there was a plurality of Scripture texts. Müller (1996:35) refers for example to the absence of a standard text of the book of Isaiah during the first century.
10. The expression 'rewritten Bible' originates from Geza Vermes, attempting to describe the dynamic, centripetal - 'always revert[ing] to the historical sequence of events' - nature of this interpretation. Cf Müller (1993:203 n22).
11. Jewish inner-biblical exegesis is a term which is frequently used in association with the process of generating the scriptures of Israel: 'the re-use, re-interpretation and re-application of earlier scriptural material within the OT itself', which happened mostly in one of four ways, through glosses; different arrangements of material; direct quotations; or, re-use of earlier themes and traditions (Mason 1990:313; Fishbane 1980; 1985). Cf Marks (1984:77) who refers to the 'revisionary correspondences' present already in the prophets: Hosea interpreting Israel's sojourn in the wilderness foreshadowing God's union with Israel; Isaiah seeing in the exodus from Egypt, the Noachide covenant and the foundation of Zion 'as types of Israel's ultimate

about an inexhaustible range of meanings found in Scripture as recounted in the rabbinical saying above. Sarna (1987:11) describes this as

> a dynamic process whereby a text, once it is recognized as being Scripture, necessarily and spontaneously generates interpretation and adaptation so that often the original text is transformed into a new and expanded text. Thus is created inner-biblical exegesis.[12]

The continuing generation of interpretation was a consequence of the belief in the unity of Scripture (cf Mejia 1987:31). In rabbinical interpretation of the Torah, the emphasis is similarly on the text as *living* entity[13] and therefore always open to new or re-interpretation. "[T]he Torah is constituted as an open canon. To be sure, the letters of the original scriptures are fixed, but they are never dead" (Bruns 1990:201).

The concept of sacred text to which nothing should be added and nothing removed[14] should be balanced by the notion of contextualising this text. Although the text as text was respected very highly and held as inspired and sacred - the full revelation of God - it is nonetheless not the "final word". The texts that were transmitted were not considered in any way final or complete, on the contrary, only by contemporising the textual traditions could it become the word of God in a complete or comprehensive sense.[15] With Scripture, there was the abiding ambivalence of a sacred yet living text. As sacred text there were strictures against changing it, but as living text people were compelled to mould it according to the needs of the circumstances.[16]

Relying on early Jewish practices - and as continued in later rabbinical practices - of "rewriting" the text as antecedent (or perhaps precedent) for a purified and extended canon as proposed by Banana seems out of place since the historical practice referred to involved a different context, dynamic, and design (cf Punt 1997:134-135).

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redemption'. To this could be added, on a larger scale, the Chronistic revision of Israel's history. Cf Hayward (1990:595-598) on the notion of rewritten Bible as a description of post-biblical Jewish writings, e g Ecclesiaticus (Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sira), Jubilees, the Genesis Apocryphon, the Temple Scroll, and the Book of Biblical Antiquities. Cf Loewe (1990:349).

12. Contemporary appeals to the dynamic character of the Bible often relates to theological rather than historical or literary concerns: e g Kirchschläger (1987:39) who argues for 'the operating of the divine spirit' as the 'dynamic behind' Scripture and locates the concept of 'inspiration' in this operating of the Spirit.
13. For a fuller explanation of Scripture as living text in the early period of this era, and references in this regard, cf Punt (1996:384-385).
14. Perhaps echoed in the NT in texts like Mt 5:17-19 (espec 18) and Gal 3:15?
15. The bridge between the notions of sacred yet living text was the insistence upon an inspired interpreter. In early Judaism the notion existed that the exegete himself [sic] was 'inspired', which meant that the interpreter was capable of discerning layers of meaning in the text which were not previously revealed (Stemberger 1991:37). E g, Bruns (1990:212 n22) follows Hartman in locating midrash 'in the extraordinary intimacy that exists between God and exegete'. This led to a very high valuation of the Oral Torah, attributed the same 'divine authority' as that of the Torah proper (Murray 1990:343). Among early Christians this perception of the interpreter or reader of Scripture being able to establish the 'real' meaning beyond the literal was accompanied by the notion of 'the guidance of the Holy Spirit' and Scripture was read 'through a prophetic perspective' (Murray 1990:343-344).
16. Physical changes to the texts during these early years find an analogy in the text editions of today, as they are intended to reflect more accurately the textual sense of the original (cf Lambert 1993:192). Cf Grabbe (1994:543-544) for four characteristics of the use of Scripture by 1st century Jews: as information source; legitimation or justification agent; magical; and expanding the canon.

2.2 The church and the New Testament[17]

Respect, then, for the relative textual fluidity of the Hebrew Scriptures in the early Christian era can help us to understand the extent to which ... the church inherited an "interpreted Bible" (Dinter 1983:51).

The translators of the Septuagint (LXX), the "first Bible of the church" (Müller 1996), carried out their work in the early Jewish context, where the transmission process was exceedingly creative. This does not mean that the LXX should be seen as an altogether new interpretation of the Jewish traditions, a new rewritten Bible, but that "this translation is to be understood as part of the dynamic process of handing on traditions, in the course of which these traditions were given actuality"[18] (Müller 1993:202-204). The LXX was the first Bible of the church and its interpretation in subsequent writings which later became known as the "New Testament" illustrates many elements of the already noted concerns among Jewish interpreters for the sacred yet living text, as well as for the notion of inspired interpreters.

The use of the scriptures of Israel in the letters of Paul is a good example of the appropriation of older traditions for new circumstances within the early church. While Hays (1989:157) contends that from a certain perspective, Paul's hermeneutic is "flagrantly revisionary",[19] the apostle nonetheless recontextualised the texts within a hermeneutic of freedom, and still maintained continuity. An attempt to provide a coherent and holistic explanation of the relatively free approach exhibited by Paul and other ancient authors is made by Stanley (1997b:25-26). He maintains that unlike the modern "print-oriented" society[20] with its accompanying emphasis on literality, no identical manuscripts were found in the ancient world.[21] The important reason for the *free* use of texts was scribal activity. "[C]ontrolled freedom of textual variation" was "the result of a sincere attempt to understand the meaning of a particular passage within the context of the author's own culture and/or community" (Stanley 1997b:27). However, Stanley insists that as much as Paul apparently deliberately adapted certain texts, his use of (some) original form of the text still amounted to an "interpretive rendering" of the text. It is clear, therefore, that Paul's freedom in his use of Scripture neither amounted to a careless or incompetent use of Scripture nor to surreptitious manipulation of the original text(s). Paul's freedom with texts amounted to what would today be called the *contextualisation* of Scripture.

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17. Müller (1995:649-658) emphasises the 'unparalleled discovery' (Grundtvig) that 'the Church was there from the beginning with its creed and sacraments, and that the New Testament did not come into being until later'. Rather than seeing the pre-New Testament existence of the church as a debilitating factor for the position of Scripture, it needs to be noted that '[t]he constituent elements of the life of this Church therefore form the context in which these writings are to be understood'. The NT understood this way, demystifies Scripture and allows for a rereading, cognisant of the dominant socio-cultural patterns of the day.
18. Müller (1989:65) holds that the LXX translators felt no dissonance between the two interests of 'accentuation of the integrity of the text and the translation of it', and 'the recognition that the process ... of translation will involve an interpretation'. The paraphrastic nature of the LXX leads Evans (1989:166) to conclude that it is also 'in a sense ... a targum' - a loose remark which tends to obscure rather than clarify!
19. It is the eschatological that provides the 'hermeneutical warrant for major shifts and revisions in the reading of Scripture', according to Hays (1989:169).
20. As well as the influence of 'the written language bias of linguistics and philosophy' on the notion that quotations 'strive for verbatim reproduction' (Wade and Clark, quoted in Stanley 1997a:50 n20).
21. Although he refers to this, Stanley fails to take the presence and role of fluid, oral traditions as a serious factor in the fluidity of the text.

From a different, intertextual,[22] perspective on Paul's use of Scripture, Moyise (1994:138-141) and Hays (1989:178) for example refer to Greene's[23] four categories of describing the "relation between a poet's work and its predecessors", the imitation of the text. One of these categories is called "heuristic", that is "where a new work seeks to define itself through the rewriting or modernising of a past text" (Hays 1989:178). The new text does not imitate but succeeds the old text, by creating - simultaneously - a chasm between text and quotation and the bridge or *rite de passage* between past and present.[24] "Heuristic imitation" is found notably in "discursive passages where the author argues for a particular interpretation of Scripture". A good example is the use of Gen 15:6 and Ps 32:1-2 in Rom 4.[25] Hays (1989:176) disagrees with the idea that Paul's letters[26] should be read in this - traditional - way, as it would assume that Paul's reading supercedes Scripture, consigning it as an old relic to the past, based on the distance created in such an understanding. The "Old Testament" is not in an antithetical relationship to the "New Testament".

2.3 Freezing the text

And so the text is frozen by *tradition and it is frozen* against *tradition after it has been frozen against heresies* (Ricoeur 1979: 273; emphasis in the original).

The Christian canon can be described as a "hermeneutical process" (Ellis 1988:679). The process and developmental nature of the canon is reflected in the relatively long period it took for agreement on the biblical canon, with the Old Testament in its present form decided by the end of the 1st century CE and the New Testament of today only by the end of the 4th century CE.[27] However, the biblical canon was still not fixed in the way our understanding, moulded by a print culture, would have it. The canonical process was to carry on for many years still (e g Anderson 1993:61-65).

Eventually, however, the text of Scripture became fixed and its documents canonised. The fluid text of Scripture was cast in stone. The biblical texts were not only fixed but its character also changed from sacred and living texts to timeless truths. The biblical texts were transformed into theological symbols with fixed meanings (Villa-Vicencio 1981:17). At least three important historical situations led to the ever-firmer freezing of the text. Early in the development of Christianity the text was frozen because of the fight against heresies; in the Middle Ages an authoritarian interpretation was implanted on the text; and with the Protestant Reformation the literalist emphasis strove to excise all strains of the influence of tradition on the Bible (Ricoeur 1979:273).

Even if one could be able to claim the earlier history of Bible formation as precedent for

22. From the perspective of a writer-oriented notion of intertextuality; cf Van Zyl (1994:352-353).
23. As explained in Greene, TM. 1982. *The light in Troy: imitation and discovery in Renaissance poetry*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
24. Cf Keesmaat who argues in different terminology if with similar distinctions that Paul's rereading of the scriptures of Israel amounts to the 'transforming' of tradition, rather than an option towards 'alienation' or 'reversion' of tradition (1997:316ff).
25. Jas 2:23ff shows that another interpretation of Gen 15:6 is possible (Moyise 1994:140).
26. Except for Galatians, although Hays (1989:176) contends that Paul is even in that situation uncomfortable with this approach (3:21; 5:6; 6:15).
27. Some of the criteria for assembling the canon include the presumed antiquity of the texts; (their claim to) apostolic authorship; conformity to ecclesiastical teachings; their use within communities; and at times the belief in their divine inspiration (Anderson 1993:62).

its contemporary rewriting, and even if the intention is to undo the freezing of its eventual text – in its literary form as such – it is a question whether one should artificially initiate a programme to rewrite the Bible on the terms called for today. However, in order to address contemporary calls for rewriting, more than historical precedents deserve our attention.

3. The contemporary call for a rewritten Bible

Ironically, the causes of our present-day crises in the practices of text interpretation are in good measure those very theories of interpretation proposed for dealing with earlier crises (Wolterstorff 1997:28).

The contemporary call to rewrite the Bible issues forth from a wide variety of positions as different groups of people from various social locations have expressed their concern to rewrite the Bible, as suggested by Wolterstorff for example. However, one general characteristic which identifies all the groups intent on rewriting the Bible is that they perceive their own status to be those of decentered and marginalised groups in relation to the biblical texts, and canon in particular. To be sure, the biblical writings are believed to be implicated if not indicted in the marginalisation of such groups.

In the history of the church, Scripture has often been employed to fulfill the function of legitimating the views of those who use these texts.[28] As legitimating text the use of Scripture as ground or resource for Christian life and morality receded into the background, in favour of what is commonly referred to as *prooftexting*: an apparently direct or literal yet ethically irresponsible and arbitrary appropriation of texts in order to support positions and views, otherwise difficult to maintain. Many examples of the legitimating use of Scripture can be enumerated from the earliest church to the past (Apartheid-) and contemporary (New-) South African society.[29] Also in the wider African context, it was recently pointed out how a "the Bible says-theology" has been and is still practiced to justify patriarchy and the oppression of women in society (Oduyoye 1995:173-176;189-192; cf Smit 1994:275). "Ufortunately, biblical interpretation and Christian theology in Africa have had the effect of sacralizing the marginalization of women's experience, even in traditional African religions" (Oduyoye 1995:175; cf 1994:179).

It is to be expected that different notions will exist on how the rewriting of the Bible should happen and what the Bible as rewritten document should look like. In fact, the difference of opinion could be expected to correlate with the various profiles of the communities insisting on a rewritten Bible. Before addressing four such perspectives, it needs to be noted that the Bible is today in some communities not involuntarily seen as Scripture but is at times attributed a different status and/or role in communities.

3.1 The Bible and its traditions: Commodity, fetish and icon

The Bible has, with only a few exceptions along the way, in the history of Christianity

28. Cf also on the role of Christian discourse in relation to larger society, the contribution of Cameron (1991) on the ability of Christianity to build a 'rhetoric of empire', through - apart from political and economic reasons - the successful combination of word and text, oral speech and written documents into a 'totalising discourse' (Foucault), through the use of which Christianity had the superb ability to adapt itself, and its texts to the ever-changing landscape of human life and experience. For the appropriation of Cameron's insights cf e g Cochrane and West (1993:35-39) and Perkins (1996:309ff).

29. Archambault and Tinker (1995:300) put it boldly from an American Indian, or Native American perspective: 'the Bible, the Word of God, was used in the destruction of our cultures and identity'.

traditionally been viewed as "symbol of the Word of God" rather than the literal word of God itself (Schneiders 1991:27-43;40ff). Recently, however, the symbolic nature of the Bible has been expanded to include a variety of different understandings of it. Acknowledging the changes in people's perception of the nature and role of the Bible (and its status) for their lives, throws more light on the appeal for a rewritten Bible.

Plotting views on the Bible today, it has in the modern world so thoroughly soaked in global capitalism become another commodity, "a material-cultural object in the capitalist period of Western civilization, especially in relation to the commodity culture of the consumerist society in which we in the West all live now" (Carroll 1998:47). Add to this the professional study of the Bible, providing tenure to scholars of the Bible and having students pay fees for courses on it, and it is easy to show up the Bible as merchandise in the global capital market.

On the other side of the spectrum of appropriating the Bible, it becomes a fetish. A major complicatory factor for the adequate use of the Bible is the practice of venerating it, leading to either magical or idolatrous practices (Schneiders 1991:43). As a "great code" (Frye) which has become a fetish, the Bible needs to be recoded, as it indeed has already started to happen in various locations globally (Kwok 1998:186-187). The "manmade" [sic] quality of the Bible reappears when it is no longer treated as fetish (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993:4). Such is the nature of treating the Book as sacred object, however, that it is attributed magical qualities. In this context, Waliggo (1997:179) cautions against the use of statistics on Bibles sold, possessed, and so on, for determining its real value and role in Africa, because of the widespread "magical" use of the Bible. The mere possession or touching of the Book is considered beneficial.[30]

It is somewhere between these positions where the Bible assumes an iconic nature - when the sacred myth turns sacred image (Lee 1998:256) - where perhaps the biggest challenge is presented to biblical interpreters today.[31] The iconic nature of the Bible relates not only to that which it is believed to prescribe but also to proscribe. This of course presents a double jeopardy with inscribing the social marginalisation of groups such as women and the poor, as well as the construction of a powerful patriarchal and kyriarchal ideology.[32]

The different statuses and roles attributed to the Bible, especially concerning its desacralisation, can also be understood in light of recent theorising on the entanglement of textual traditions in the discourse of power. In this regard, Scott (1990) has shown upon the distinction between hidden and public transcripts.[33] This distinction recognises and

30. Instead, '[t]he quality of Christianity in Africa should be measured by the lives of people transformed' (Waliggo 1997:191); cf Ndungu (1997:62-63) regarding the 'magical use' of the Bible in healing practices.

31. For the danger of bible idolatry or bibliolatry, cf Lee (1998:259). Cf my earlier argument on the danger of 'bibliology' which easily turns into biliolatry (Punt 1998:269,272-274).

32. Lee wants to retain the notion of the Bible as icon, and describes this in fourfold way: the sacred text is a symbolic resemblance of divine presence; it offers a fundamental awareness of divine presence; it represents the non-dualistic nature of the sacred text as 'divine revelation in human forms, symbols, stories and images'; and, as icon it offers a two-way path: 'the reader of Scripture is an active participant in the dialogue, playing a vital role in the creating of meaning' (1996:260-261). She cautions against iconophobia, pleading for a healthy balance between iconoclasm and iconophilia in developing 'a feminist poetics of sacred reading', enabling 'women to touch the sacred text in a two-fold sense: on the one hand, to expose the ever-present danger of the idol (iconoclasm) and on the other hand, to open a pathway for veneration of the icon (iconophilia) (:263-264). For a different sense of the Bible as 'cultural icon' (in US politics) which approaches the notion of fetish, that is where authority transcends interpretation, cf Glancy (1998:461,476).

33. Public transcript is 'a shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who

emphasises the relationship between power relations and discourse. The relationship between power and discourse is in sharpest relief where divergence between public transcript and hidden transcripts is greatest. As much as the Bible, both in terms of texts selected as canon and the texts themselves is public transcript, a hermeneutic of suspicion seems in order. The biblical texts are the written records of society's powerful,[34] as evidenced in their literacy and control over the production and selection of its texts.[35]

It is not only the biblical texts, or its canonical format but also the accompanying interpretive traditions which come up for scrutiny.[36] In the area of biblical scholarship many examples of competing interpretive traditions are found. Horsley (1996:4-7) refers to the "great" and "little traditions"[37] regarding, on the one hand, the official Jerusalem tradition and the popular Galilean tradition during the time of Jesus, and on the other hand, contemporary scholarly and popular readings of the historical Jesus.[38] He explains how these two sets of reading strategies or performances are at odds with one another and often in conflict too.

In the modern world interpretive traditions are powerful tools for controlling the meaning of texts, especially by "professional middle-class culture and sensibilities" (Cormie 1991:190).[39] It has to be remembered that the available history of interpretation, especially in so far as this is available today in written form, represents the interests and thoughts of the powerful of church and society: "[T]hose who have won and not those who have lost in the course of history". This means that the history of the interpretation of the Bible can easily function as nothing but a legitimation of successful historical processes or, even more cynically, nothing but a secondary hermeneutical legitimation of secondary biblical legitimations, which have been used in the history of the church to justify the acts of the rulers of the church, or, sometimes, of the rulers of the world (Luz 1994:64).

Eventually it has to be asked whether the Bible is representative of the center or whether the voices on the margins can be heard in its texts? Hardly any serious scholar will today contend that the Bible as we know it is the result of an organic, neutral or even an essentially

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dominate' and 'where it is not positively misleading, is unlikely to tell the whole story about power relations'. Hidden transcript 'characterises discourse that takes place 'offstage', beyond direct observation by powerholders' (Scott 1990:2-3).

34. Thistlethwaite's (1985:100) insistence on the Bible being 'written from the perspective of the powerless' cannot be sustained in a general sense.

35. The debate on the reasons for an exclusivist canon continues: to achieve harmonisation of the texts, or unity in the early church, or secure theological authority, and so on. However, the canon was the not the product 'specific theological and religious reasons' only (Anderson 1993:63).

36. Some have been largely displaced, cf the Hamitic interpretation of the curse of Canaan (Gen 9). Cf e g Aaron (1995:721-759); Usry and Keener (1996:70ff).

37. For 'great and little traditions', cf Meeks (1986:7-9). In similar vein and as part of her argument on different opinions regarding slavery in the USA, Glancy (1998:460-477) refers to 'house' and 'field' readings.

38. Fasholé-Luke (1975:78) argues that, following upon the availability of Bible translation in the vernaculars, 'the vast majority of Africans' have an 'uncritical approach to Scripture'. The reading practices of ordinary readers should not, therefore, be romanticised. This kind of approach to Scripture often mitigates against the notion of 'popular readings' being, according to Draper (1996:2), necessarily innovative and liberatory, and challenging the 'great tradition' of the particular (oppressive) society. Often these popular readings rather achieve the opposite which is to affirm the oppressive status quo, not only – but at times especially – because of the influence of particular (established) traditions or histories of interpretation. It is a problem that describing 'great' and 'little' traditions, both earlier and contemporary, entails a vast amount of generalisation, that their construction is dependent upon scholars (involved in their own great(er?) tradition), and that they are often presented as relatively monolithic constructs.

39. Or as Horsley puts it: 'biblical scholarship only discerns the reality of the literate elite' (1996:5).

divinely inspired process. Clearly the whole of what is often rather blithely refered to as "the Bible" is - to generalise - the result of an intricate political process, from the oral traditions through the manuscripts, versions and selections through the construction of canon(s) through the development, maintenance and transformations of interpretive traditions to the comparatively elaborate modern interpretive venture imposed on the Bible. To maintain the innocence of the choices made throughout the historical development of the biblical canon and as continued in its interpretation today seems naïve *and* dangerous. The Bible is political, and reflects the sentiments of those in control in society.

A second range of questions is in order: How is the Bible interpreted today and which or whose political concerns and interests are reflected in biblical hermeneutics? Are the traditions of interpretation enveloping the Bible recognised and accounted for, and are they addressed? Realising the rather simplistic posing of these questions, they have to be postponed in order to delve somewhat deeper into the setting of the call for a rewritten Bible.

3.2 The option to rewrite: Naming four proponents

The option to rewrite the Bible, to construct a new and essentially different canon, can be investigated from a variety of perspectives, two of which are attempted here. In a first round, a condensed sampling will be provided as illustration of such calls for rewriting,[40] and this will be followed by an attempt to formulate a selection of strategies rewriters (wish to) employ.

3.2.1 African letters

I think it is time to create a Bible that reflects the realities and possibilities of today's world (Banana 1993:29).

In Africa the name of Canaan Banana is often the first to be linked to the call for a rewritten Bible,[41] promoting "The case for a new Bible" (1993:17-32). In short, Banana argues in this essay that the Bible has to be liberated from its culture-specific views, points to the use of the Bible as oppressive instrument,[42] and insists on the continuing revelation of God and that Christ supercedes the Bible. He claims that the purpose of the Bible was to unite Christians against forces that wanted to divide them and that we need to recreate the Bible into such a "unifying element" again. "This [rewriting the Bible] would include revision and editing to what is already there, but would also involve adding that which is not included (Banana 1993:30)." In short, what amounts to the modification of the existing historical texts is proposed. Although there is much to commend about his concerns about the Bible and its use today, Banana needs to be questioned on his insistence that "re-writing is a necessary component to liberating the Bible" (1993:17).[43]

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40. At least, more contemporary calls. For earlier attempts at contemporary relevant collections culled from the Bible and other Scriptures, cf Anderson's reference to Jefferson, Stanton, Ballou, Browne, Kerr (1993:68).
41. Cf Parratt (1995:148-153) for a short biographical sketch and brief introduction to his theological views. Cf the introduction of Mukonyora, Cox and Verstraelen (1993:x-xiii) for a historical account of Banana's call to rewrite the Bible, claiming that it became a 'catchword that inflamed an intense controversy'.
42. On the other hand, cf Pollard's three reasons for holding on to the Bible in its current form even though it was used in the past as instrument of oppression (1995:47-50). Cf also Punt (1998:279-280). In the US context, Cone argued that the notion of the Bible as 'Word of God' has at least limited Whites' use of the Bible in the oppression of Blacks (Mosala 1989:15).
43. Combrink (1996:286), for one, approves of Banana's suggestion by arguing that the rewriting of the Bible happened during the time of the New Testament already, offering Luke and Matthew's appropriation of Mark

Others support Banana's call for an adjusted canon in Africa. The complicity of the "ideologically motivated concept of the unity of the Bible *per se*" in the oppression of people leads Mofokeng to sanction an abbreviated or purged canon.

Those portions, texts and stories of the Bible which were seen to be clearly opposed to their communal concern for individual and communal survival were ignored or rejected outrightly. These Black Christians did this informal hermeneutical work without any feelings of guilt for allegedly dismembering the canon of Scripture (Mofokeng 1988:40).

Mofokeng also stops one step short of advocating a *new* Bible as he identifies the Bible as such as *the problem*, and not so much a "bad interpretation or use" of the Bible.[44]

For Mofokeng and various other African scholars the rewriting of the Bible would therefore imply culling from the Bible "liberation texts", or then at least texts with a liberatory potential. These texts are to be reestablished as *the* Bible, a contemporary canonisation. The belief is that this liberation of the Bible will result in revealing its liberatory deposits.[45]

3.2.2 *Feminist and Womanist concerns*[46]

The historical-critical challenge to the concept of holy scripture is no longer the primary one ... If "holy scripture" does not also offer the theological basis for resisting the law of the Father, then this concept should be rejected as an irredeemable ideological construct (Watson 1994:156).

In feminist circles, divergence of opinion regarding the status and appropriation of the biblical canon exists, while Banana based his call for rewriting in part on feminist concern for liberating the Bible (1993:31). Indeed, some feminist scholars have concluded that the Bible cannot be redeemed from its androcentric, hierarchical, patriarchal or kyriarchal and such like tendencies, while others have consistently found the Bible helpful in formulating an emancipatory vision for women, and the other marginalised in today's world.

Many attempts to categorise the different biblical and canonical approaches of feminist scholars are found. Osiek provides a five-part typology, ranging from a "rejectionist" position such as that of Stanton and Daly, to a "loyalist" position. Between these extremes, one finds "revisionist" (Trible), "sublimationist" and "liberationist" perspectives (Camp 1993:157).[47] Some feminist theologians nevertheless ply their trade within the confines of the traditional

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as example. However, Evans (1993:170ff) argues that the rewriting taking place in Luke's gospel, for example, was not so drastic as that proposed by Banana. Cf Luz (1994:80) for Matthew's reinterpretation of Mark.

44. For a similar approach, cf the comments by Myers (1991:53) on an 'African American de facto canon'. Myers is supportive of 'more than one final form' of the canon, as required and established within believing communities. Wimbush (1991:94) also refers to the alteration and/or rejection of the traditional canon within African American Christianity of the early twentieth century to the present.

45. For problems with the use of 'liberation' exclusively in a political sense, cf De Villiers (1993:18) who reasons that the effect might be to instill an absolutising perspective 'on the world and humanity which is radically political'. Cf Boff (1991:22-27,33).

46. Dealing with gender and therefore with human sexuality as well, issues in concerns about biblical texts pronouncing on homo-eroticism. Cf reference to Raiser (in *Ligdraer* 59/8:2) on the need to amend the texts of the sacred scriptures of some religions: 'These holy books are quite difficult because of the discrimination of homosexuals. It might be necessary to delete some sections because they are the products of their times'. Cf also a similar calls for deletion of such sections from the Bible by Comstock (Smith 1996:251).

47. Cf e g Sakenfeld (1985:55-64) for 3 options in addition to giving up on the Bible; Schüssler Fiorenza (1992:20-50; cf 144-150) for a 10-fold typology; Wicker (1993:373-374).

canon, whether Jewish or Christian whereas others lodge their objections against it in a variety of ways.[48] "Both Ruether and Schüssler Fiorenza argue persuasively that it is feminist romanticism to abandon the reformation of a tradition in favour of discovering or creating alternative traditions" (Cochrane and West 1993:29). Indeed, Schüssler Fiorenza finds it sad that feminist biblical studies are still largely devoted to the "apologetic debate" on whether the Bible, in whole or in part is liberating and therefore has authority or should be rejected as irredeemably oppressive (1993:5,11). The dualistic hermeneutic strategy seems set to persist, contributing to both women's religious power and their continuing suffering in this regard.

3.2.3 The "non-biblical" world

> *Indeed, I have begun to question whether the concept of canon is still useful. Claiming to safeguard the truth, on the one hand, canon can also lead to the repression of truth, on the other. A closed canon excludes the many voices of the* minjung *and freezes our imagination* (Kwok 1995:18).

Calls to reevaluate the biblical canon in light of the plurality, including religious plurality, of today (Kwok 1995:10), suggest the need for, at least, an expansion of the biblical canon.[49] Kwok (1995:18) describes her problems with the canon as twofold: while it claims to oversee and regulate truth, it tends to become absolute. The first claim, however, also leads to the repression of truth through the exclusion of other narratives and discourses of liberation. A different notion of the canon is advocated, which admits to the relational character of Scripture, deals with exposure to different Scriptures in a multiscriptural context, and accepts that the boundaries that delimit Scripture are not that rigid (1995:22).[50]

Arguing also from an Asian perspective, Samartha (1994:344) similarly sees the power of the biblical canon to reside eventually in the notion of "closedness":[51] limiting the books that were to be included in the canon, and exercising authority over the interpretation of texts. Although Samartha finds this "closure", or the restriction by selecting texts for inclusion in the canon, not only acceptable but also common practice for the sake of order in believing communities, he does plead for identifying resources with which to break out of the confines of canon for the sake of "the new". In this regard he refers to the Pauline distinction between "letter" and "spirit" (2 Cor 3) and the Johannine emphasis on the guidance of the Spirit (Joh 16:13) as contemporary pointers in this regard.

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48. f e g Sakenfeld (1985:55-64); Schüssler Fiorenza (1986:371-376,379 on Cady Stanton's *Woman's Bible*); Tamez (1991:65,69); and, Thistlethwaite (quoted in Cormie 1991:176, 340 n16). A good review article on feminist biblical criticism is found in Bach (1993:191-215), herself encouraging breaking through 'the borderlands of the Bible' (:206).
49. From a general science of religion approach, one can argue for a different hermeneutics, 'based not on exclusive principles but on a universal recognition of the sacred'. This allows for 'providing a framework for an inclusive understanding of the Bible without falling into his error of minimising the central importance of particular and concrete symbols for believers within all religious communities' (Cox 1993:121).
50. In addition to her call for reworking the canon, Kwok (1995:14) also mentions that '[t]he use of Asian resources has stimulated many exciting and creative ways of rereading the scriptures'.
51. Samartha argues that Semitic religions are more inclined to insist on the closure of the canon, unlike Eastern religions where the process of canon is 'more elastic and open', partly because 'the attitudes towards dissent are different' (1994:349). On the other hand, Cameron argues that - at least, early - Christian discourse was characterised by 'multiplicity' or 'elasticity'; she does emphasise that she considers 'mainly ... the Greek tradition'. Cf from a feminist perspective, May and Meyer (1993:151 n25) in debate with Wainwright, regarding the power-play surrounding the structuring of the earliest canon(s), and referring in particular to early church councils.

In a certain sense then, the Bible in a multiscriptural world is already rewritten, in the sense that it becomes one of many other Scriptures.

3.2.4 The literary turn

A reconsideration of the Bible can take place only along with, and as part of, a reconsideration of language, and of all structures, including the literary ones, that language produces (Frye 1982:227).

As a final instance of an example of contemporary rewriting, post-structuralist literary studies deserve some mention. Acknowledging not only the influence on but also involvement of the reader with regard to the meaning of texts, the reader is seen to be at the very least a co-creator if not sole creator of meaning. In concluding the meaning of the text for the particular reader(s), it implies that the results of the interpretive process cannot be offered as the product of the text alone. Reading becomes writing, reading is writing. By extension, all reading becomes rewriting by default and texts are always more than literary product allowing whether through the indeterminacy of meaning or through intertextuality or in other ways themselves to be involved in an ongoing process of textual production.

The emphasis in literary studies on the inevitable rewriting which takes place in the reading of texts is borne out in the case of religious scripture where canons are formed within and around groups, or interpretive communities. Such realignment of canon often amounts to no more than a pragmatic occurrence, and is community dependent and therefore multidimensional in as much as the rereading or rewriting serves different purposes. Biblical texts are generally good examples of the never-ending formation, reinterpretation and often reformulation of literary documents, even after their "final" forms have been fixed.

4. Strategies for rewriting the Bible

To conclude this discussion, a number of categories or perspectives governing the contemporary calls to redraft the biblical canon may be suggested. It is admittedly an all too brief effort at a thematic overview of rewriting positions or strategies and will need further attention in the future, but can be useful to distinguish between the various appeals for a rewritten Bible.

4.1 Historical-ideological perspective

From a historical perspective, the call for rewriting the Bible is often launched with reference to the historical precedent of the rewritten Bible in the earliest years, as discussed above. From another, if still historical point of view, it can be argued that the Bible has come into existence in its current form through a long process of oral reminiscence, textual inscription, reinterpretation and rewriting, canonising, text-critical endeavours and so forth. No single instance of this protracted process was neutral or objective.[52]

The biblical texts as well as the canon are the distillations of long processes of the interaction of communities with each other, their contexts and the transcendent. As such, the Bible is reflective of the norms, values, and *cultural* settings of these people and their communities. The initial inscription of the rich oral traditions was followed at a later stage by the whole process of canonisation. Still later, different text-critical attempts were made to put

52. This, of course, is true of all interpretive traditions, methodologies and stances. Non-neutrality hits both ways (Parratt 1995:190).

the "Humpty Dumpty" Bible back together again.

The historical element of the biblical texts is reason enough to accept that the notion of a single entity appropriated as the Bible is not untainted. Add to that the particular cultural and political format of the texts, competition and conflict regarding control of the composition of the canon, the imposition of interpretive traditions, and the need for rewriting is not too difficult to argue.

4.2 Functionalist-liberative perspective

Another especially liked argument for rewriting the Bible is the insistence that it is in use by many different communities today and therefore should be adapted to suit their profiles and fit their purposes. This argument flows from the former strategy by claiming that the particular form of the Bible and formats within it, were dictated by the perspectives, needs and larger setting of the communities involved with it. The emphasis of the claim is, however, not so much that historical precedent has been established, but rather that the *new Bible* should both contain elements of the community's liberative traditions as well as address the broader socio-political setting of the community.

The call for a rewritten Bible comes from representatives or indeed members of marginalised communities.[53] Ironically, many of these communities are marginalised, very often not in spite of but precisely because of the Bible. Such biblically legitimated marginalisation would concern gender, sexual orientation, racism, clerical and political oppression, anti-Judaism/Semitism, and various others. It is therefore felt that a strong need exists to put a new Bible in place. And, the only way to really accomplish such a new Bible, it is argued, is to physically rewrite or adjust it in one way or another.

4.3 Literary-aesthetic perspective

Rewriting is often assumed rather than argued from a literary perspective. Two instances will suffice for the argument here. The distanciation of texts is sometimes found adequate ground for introducing a new reading of the text. And indeed, through the establishment of such an interpretive tradition, the new reading paradigm virtually establishes a new text. Particularly in the case of the biblical texts, it is argued that they are removed from their authors, historical contexts, and so on. Schneiders draws on the work of Gadamer and Ricoeur - especially the latter - and emphasises the distanciation of the text from its originating circumstances, including (the intention of) the author. Advocating a "hermeneutics of transformation", the world created by the text and projected ahead of itself is appropriated by readers by means of "a kind of deconstituting of the self and reconstitution of the self according to the coordinates of the world of the text".[54]

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53. Whether these representatives are adequately articulating either the needs and marginalisation of a particular community, or the perceived ways of addressing such marginalisation, will not be dealt with here.

54. Sanders, although his work has arguably never received the same acclaim as that of Childs', has pointed out a number of important matters concerning the reception of the Bible. The notion of a 'canonical process' or 'progressive development' of the scriptures as developed by Sanders clearly illustrates how the early Christian communities accepted the Bible as normative authority. Through a long and not always conscious process of reevaluating and reappropriating biblical texts, and by means of a variety of hermeneutic procedures, 'often midrashic in nature', these texts were contextualised to address new circumstances within the communities. Such procedures enhanced interaction between the texts and the community, and introduced interpretations continuously trying to recontextualise the tradition (Pontefical Biblical Commission 1995:28). Canonical studies as Sanders goes about it, allows for the possibility to consider the history of the reception of the texts in the past as well as in the present as interactive events. This entails influences of the text on the reader, as

The distanciation of the biblical texts from their authors is clarified in the weak and strong arguments against aligning the meaning of the text with the intention of its author. In the first place, there is no guarantee that readers today can grasp the author's intention, or that it is still relevant. Secondly, "[a]uthors simply do not have the power to produce texts that will dictate their own interpretation" (Westphal 1997:62).

A second aspect of a literary-aesthetic rewriting, entails the recognition of social location as another "text", which at least implies the importance of reading a context. Not only is the particular social location from where textual interpretation takes place an interpretive construct, but acknowledgement of it also requires attention to the intertextual interplay between literary and social texts. In short, every reading of a text is a rewriting, often unconsciously, under pressure of the presuppositions of the reader (Eagleton, quoted in Tate 1991:166-167).

4.4 Universalist perspective

When rewriting in terms of a literary perspective becomes accepted as the general effect of all reading, one should perhaps refer to an universalist perspective or strategy of rewriting. All readings of the Bible constitute a rewriting of the Bible. Reception studies illustrate that a new text is called into creation, in the sense that the interpretive key as determined by the history of interpretation guides and effectively controls the understanding of the text. At best, interpretive traditions ensure that only a certain range of meanings remains possible.

More importantly, an universalist perspective on rewriting requires us to deal with the notion of textual indeterminacy. Positively, texts evidence a surplus of meaning which is capable of eluding "the grasp of social prejudices that produced it" (Brett 1995:74). The underdetermined nature of interpretation implies that it is "more like formulating an empirical hypothesis than like testing it by canons of inductive logic, and is importantly similar to generating a metaphor" (Westphal 1997:59ff).

4.5 Essentialist perspective

A strategy similar to that that would want to counter abusive readings of the Bible emerges also in attempts to legitimise the rewriting proposal. The reasoning behind this strategy can be summarised in the words of Bird (1994:333), namely the belief that there is in the Bible "a corrective core which a new hermeneutical lens is able to access", failing which, it has to be added. The emphasis is, however, not on the new hermeneutical lens but on the identified liberative sections or elements in the otherwise oppressive texts.

Once again, it might be a generalisation but such a strategy approaches the age-old attempt to identify a canon within the canon. Such a search for the corrective core of the Bible is bound to be augmented by a "totemised" (Sugirtharajah) selection of other texts and traditions[55] which are then to be added to the selected portions from the canon (Sugirtharajah 1991:443, cf Verstraelen 1993a:241; Verstraelen 1993b:281). The notions of a canon within the canon and a unifying theological center in the Bible is a "historical-theological construct

much as the reader or past readers (i e, the interpretive traditions) determine 'what' text is read, and 'how' it is read.

55. Anderson claims that Scripture is used to critique itself in feminist readings, due to reliance on a canon within the canon (1993:69). Similar to Banana's proposal from the African context that texts and traditions from other religions and liberatory movements should be added (1993:20-21), rewriters in other locations will be inclined to nominate still other texts.

which must be submitted to critical theological reflection and ethical assessment" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1989:14).

The above typology of rewriting strategies and proposals should certainly be augmented and refined. It is clear though that a number of different starting-points and positions exist on how to address the task of actually rewriting the Bible. This plurality is not the most serious problem with Bible rewriting, but certainly contributes to the difficulty of the venture.

5. A final word

> *Literally, the Bible is a gigantic myth, a narrative extending over the whole of time from creation to apocalypse, unified by a body of recurring imagery that "freezes" into a single metaphor cluster, the metaphors all being identified with the body of the Messiah, the man who is all men, the totality of* logoi *who is one Logos, the grain of sand that is the world ... This sequence is connected with one of the most striking features of the Bible: its* capacity for self re-creation (Frye 1982:224-225, emphasis added).

The impact if not the importance of the Bible has always, and will for the foreseeable future continue to elicit new and contemporising interpretations thereof in the more enclosed spiritual-religious realms as well as in popular culture. The influence on and even use of biblical themes and metaphors in contemporary pop-music, Hollywood films, advertising campaigns and so on, underwrites the continuing significance of the Bible in large parts of the world today. The Bible is as much part of the modern church as it is part of the modern world at large.

In this contribution, no direct evaluation regarding the calls for rewriting the Bible was made, since more needs to be said before such an assessment will be appropriate. It has become clear, however, that such an evaluation will have to reckon with the history of the formation and interpretation of the Bible, and its perceived nature today as much as it should avoid bland generalisations and even dismissals of calls to rewrite the Bible. The challenge surrounding the Bible is well-described by Frye and bears down on us today, in a real way, confronting us to unfreeze the frozen, inviting us to take up the challenge to investigate both our perceptions and beliefs around the Bible as such, and its interpretation.

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