

## ON 1 TIMOTHY 2: 9-15: WHY STILL INTERPRET 'IRREDEEMABLE' BIBLICAL TEXTS?

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### **Abstract**

*In this article attention is paid to 1 Timothy 2:9-15 within its historical-cultural context and to the history of interpretation of this passage. In this way the human contexts and reasons for the nature and immense influence of this passage are exposed. Apart from its patriarchal roots and of the patriarchal cultures in which this text was interpreted for the greatest part of its existence, its history of influence closely cohered with the view of the Bible as an authoritative book and answer book. It is argued that, in order to deal with issues pertaining to women and other contemporary matters in a more meaningful and humane way, a different view of the Bible and a different view of our relation to our Christian past is necessary.*

**Keywords:** *1 Timothy 2:9-15; patriarchal culture; history of interpretation*

### **1. Introduction**

Why still interpret “irredeemable” biblical texts? And, since we are here concerned with a biblical text with a long history of interpretation, why go back on the footsteps of this passage and its interpretations? Why again put in the spotlight what women would rather want to leave behind at this stage in the history of humanity and of Christianity: On the one hand male authoritative and denigrating talk about women, and on the other exposure to a history from which women were to a large extent excluded? Why remember when reminiscences in this case would imply opening of old wounds?

The question asked in the title of the paper is, of course, not at all obvious to all readers of the Bible, including some biblical scholars. Even in our time it will elicit different reactions. Focusing on “irredeemable” in the question, some would still want to ask whether it is not inapt to use a word like this with regard to a passage in the great Book of Redemption. Could there really be something like an irredeemable biblical text? Is such a label not merely an indication that the text is not yet fully, and correctly, understood? Or a sign of rebelliousness against God’s “creation order” on the part of half of humanity?

Recently the Synod of the Reformed Churches of South Africa decided that this passage, together with a few others, is clearly not clear (“duidelike onduidelikheid”) with regard to the admission of women to the ministry and needs further investigation (*Beeld*, 27 January 2003:1). Nearly two thousand years of interpretation, including more than two hundred years of intensive investigation within the discipline of biblical scholarship, apparently did not yet bring complete clarity with regard to this ostensibly complex passage. Viewed from another angle, one can say that it has not yet been decided what to do with what we have come to know during the centuries between the writing of this passage and the present. Perhaps nearer to the truth, it has not yet been decided what we are *willing to do* with this information. This includes insights about the (nature of the) then world, the relation between past and present, the perspectival nature of knowledge, the relation between language and reality, the contextual nature of truth, et cetera. In the meantime this text and its exclusivistic interpretations continue to influence the

lives of many people, particularly women. Since God's will for women is still closely related to male decisions, some women continue to hope that God will in his own time (that is, when males have changed their minds) grant them admission to all the churchly offices (*Beeld*, 27 January 2003:2).

In a recent so-called "fresh analysis" of this passage by a number of scholars in the Evangelical tradition (Köstenberger *et al* 1995) one realises how far from settled the interpretation of this passage still is, how far from departing aspects of their past some biblical scholars still are. And how far certain churches still are from accepting women as equal human beings. Having paid extensive attention to the text and its centuries-old interpretations, the so-called historic view, which continues the silencing of women in the churches, is merely retained. In the introduction of his article one of the contributors to this book refers to female theological students' misinterpretation of their calls. While they are, in his view, *entitled* to be called to a kind of ministry which *excludes* authoritative teaching, they mistakenly feel themselves called to be pastors, which *includes* the function of teaching (Schreiner 1995:105, footnote 1). Whereas in the case of women the danger of subjectivity with regard to their "calling" looms large, nothing of this danger is referred to with regard to males. In fact, it is questionable whether one could, according to the authors of this book, speak of such a thing as a calling in the case of women. In the conclusion of the book a clear distinction is made between the *gifts* of women and the *callings* of men (Dorani 1995:267). Admitting women to the role of teaching pastors is seen as succumbing to the pressure of the world and squeezing the church into its mould (Köstenberger *et al* 1995:210, 211). This view, in turn, results in hair-splitting questions such as the following: "If women cannot teach men in the church, is it permissible for them to teach children? If so, at what age do boys become men: High school, college, age twenty five" (1995:210)? Fortunately these questions, and more of the same kind, are only asked without an attempt, in the specific book, at answering them. It is difficult to predict whether the outcome would be tragic or comic.

Closer at home, even in a church like the Dutch Reformed Church, where women have already been admitted to the ministry, the view of the Bible as a timeless answer book still prevails. Commenting on the decisions of the Synod of the Reformed Churches, the editor of *Die Kerkbode* wrote that the Reformed Churches take Scripture very seriously and would rather be too cautious than doing something which they regard to be against Scripture. For this reason they avoided taking a political correct decision on women in the churchly offices (*Die Kerkbode*, 7 February 2003:6).

It is clear that, despite different decisions on the issue, little if anything has really changed. Whatever differences there may be, a specific view of the Bible, God and humanity mostly still underlies discourses about women and their position in the Christian churches. In the Christian churches the Bible is, despite its patriarchal context, still mostly regarded as an authoritative answer book for Christians of all times. It has merely to be correctly understood in order to provide valid answers for present day situations. The view of God as someone who long ago provided all the answers – or at least the most important ones, answers which contemporary Christians merely have to unravel – still exists. And within the Christian churches humanity is still divided into two distinct sections, male and female, the former being bestowed with authority, and with the power to decide, the latter regarded to be subjected to authority and those who have to be decided upon. Since the words of the male writers of the Bible and of its male interpreters are in the Christian tradition, including the Christian churches, still inextricably related to God's words, in the interpretation of biblical texts the focus is still mainly on the *what*, without reflecting consciously and seriously on the *who* and the *why* in and of biblical texts, and on the implications of these. It is precisely emphasis on the *who* and the

*why* which may open up new perspectives, and which may encourage us to take new and more liberating routes.

When an attempt is made here to answer the question “Why still interpret ‘irredeemable’ biblical texts?”, there is no pretension of asking from a “neutral” position. Apart from the “personal thing” (how can it for a twenty first century woman be a disinterested question?), it is nowadays commonly realised that such a position does not exist. The involvement of the person in interpretation, including the kind of questions asked and being answered, is, moreover, a specific insight of feminist scholarship. Who is asking and who is answering matters, makes a difference (Briggs 1997:169). Nor is there an attempt at a disinterested answer, although informedness on the cultural-historical context in which the Pastoral letters originated and first functioned is regarded to be essential for its understanding and interpretation (cf MacDonald 1999).

If one consents to there being something like an “irredeemable” biblical text, why would one still want to spill ink on it? Why not simply leave it behind as dated and focus attention on the more liberating texts in the Bible, especially since in some churches the restrictions of this text no longer apply? If this text formed part of another book, it would indeed long since have been left behind, housed somewhere in an archive and used merely as comparative material. As we today use the Babylonian creation story for understanding the Genesis narratives (Schwartz 1998:191). If it is true that the past has to a large extent made us what we are (Barzun 2001: back cover), we have to acknowledge that the Bible and its centuries-old interpretations have in many respects made Christians and even to some extent secular Westerners what they are. This impact, specifically with regard to women and their position in church and society, has to be taken very seriously.

The longer, less travelled road with regard to 1 Timothy is undertaken here to find out:

- *Why* are we, women and men, in church and society where we are? Since in this case the reason comes in the form of a road, we should add: *How, by which road*, did we get to where we are? Contrary to how the Christian churches have viewed the matter for most of the history of the interpretation of this text (and some others), this is a matter of exposing the human, especially the patriarchal roots of this text, a road full of male choices and male-centered interpretations.
- How should we go forward? Which road should at this stage be taken? Whereas until recently the road was paved and trodden almost exclusively by males of a patriarchal kind, on the road ahead the “second sex” will hopefully also have a say.

In order to answer these questions, attention must firstly be paid to this text within its historical-cultural context. And, of course, to its long, unpleasant but nevertheless highly influential history of interpretation.

## 2. 1 Timothy in Context

### 2.1 The Pastoral Letters and their Author

Whereas some scholars still ascribe the Pastoral letters (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) to Paul (e.g. Johnson 1996), many nowadays think that Paul was not the author of these letters, but that they were written by one of his students or disciples to keep his teaching alive in the generations that followed his death (MacDonald 1999: 236). Although these letters make use of Pauline traditions, they differ in various respects from the authentic letters of Paul. Commentators point out that, unlike Paul, the author of these letters does not argue with those with whom he disagrees; he even refuses to do so (2 Tm 2:14). The language, style and “theology” of the letters differ from Paul’s authentic letters, while the vocabulary shows clearer

resemblances to the philosophical writings of the time. With regard to the “theology” of the letters, concepts central to the Pauline letters such as an emphasis on the justice of God and the cross of Christ do not occur in these letters. More crucial still is that the circumstances of these letters clearly differ from that of the Pauline letters in that they refer to offices (bishops, elders, deacons) and instructions for these (1 Tm 3:1-12; 1 Tm 5:19-22), which do not occur in the Pauline letters. This points to a time when the church structures and organisation were already further developed than during Paul’s time. The letters are therefore nowadays regarded by many scholars to be pseudonymous, that is, written by someone in the name of Paul. Their inclusion in the canon was probably due to the fact that they at that time fulfilled an important role in the church (Bassler 1996:17-21).

Within the context of this article an even more crucial question than the one about authorship is the reason for so much attention to this matter. Why is it so important to know who the author of these letters is? Is the question of authorship (Pauline or not) really crucial to the interpretation of these letters, as some scholars still think (Bassler 1996:17)? Is not the underlying issue for interpreters, especially those in the more conservative traditions, perhaps that of authority: A more authoritative male, Paul, more inspired than the lesser ones, would give the prescriptions in the letters, including the prohibition on women in 1 Timothy, an even stronger stamp of authority. If today some might find it surprising, even strange, that Paul, a hellenised Jewish child of his time, could be expected to provide answers to all questions of sexuality, gender, and women’s leadership roles in Christian congregations for all times, for the greatest part of the common era this was mostly taken for granted in a church context.

## 2.2 The Nature and Context of the Letters

What kind of letters are the Pastoral letters? These letters are clearly concerned with “tending the existing flock” rather than the expansion of the mission. They are primarily interested in the management of the community and in the resolution of internal problems (MacDonald 1999:246). The required conduct of the community and its leaders is spelt out clearly: Those at the top of the hierarchy (elders, bishops, deacons) as well as those at the bottom (young men, women and slaves). According to the author the leaders of the congregation should be good citizens and the heads of households. The members, on the other hand, should be obedient, silent and submissive. The solution to the problems experienced in the concerned communities is clearly regarded to be that of subordination by some categories of people to others (Bassler 1996:23).

The nature of these letters, their prescriptions and restrictions, should be understood in relation to both their more specific and their broader context. With regard to the former, the letters probably responded to problems in the community: Women teaching in the church (1 Tm 2:11-15), the “misuse” of the office of widow (5:3-16), a problem with some elders (5:17-25) and disrespectful conduct of slaves (6:1, 2). Some of these problems were probably related to the presence of false teachers in the community, whose views and conduct were regarded by the author to be harmful. The broader, socio-historic context is clearly reflected in the letters as well. The problems in the community are namely dealt with in a way that resembles the values and norms of Greco-Roman society. Both the broader and the more specific context, and the way they possibly cohered in the communities which the author of these letters addressed, need our attention here.

## 2.3 Timothy 2:9-15 in Context

Concern with the conduct of women, as reflected in 1 Timothy 2:9-10, was not only a concern of the early Christian writers; it was typical of the then world, in both its Jewish and Hellenistic

parts. The idea that women should clothe themselves properly and that they should exhibit good deeds rather than luxurious clothes and decorations (1 Tm 2:9,10) is a common subject in the writings of both Greco-Roman and Jewish moralists (Bassler 1996:58). The Jewish rabbis regarded women as in some respects potential disturbers of the orderly world. It was, for example, thought that during menstruation women could defile everything and everyone which they came into contact with. Even excessive talking to a male could be dangerous, since it could deceive him into adultery (Ilan 1995:126). No wonder that women's behaviour had to be regulated by means of strict prescriptions and restrictions.

Reading 1 Timothy 2:11-12, which prohibits a woman to teach and relegates her to submission to man, one is struck by the author's authoritative style. It sounds as if the women who are prohibited to teach have no chance of appealing, as if the last word on this matter has already been spoken. No wonder that, in the hands of male interpreters and continued by means of and within male absolutist discourses, including that of the authority of Scripture, this text became decisive for what women were allowed to do in a church context during the past nineteen centuries.

With regard to "teaching" most commentators agree that public teaching is at stake here. Even if attempts to "soften" this passage's meaning, thus "saving" it for women, would be successful (e.g. Holmes 2000 and the early literature she cites), it would at this stage hardly be good news for them. If it would turn out that the traditional interpretations of this text, interpretations continued for nearly two thousand years, were mistaken, this could for women even be more demoralising than accepting them as defensible interpretations of this text. From a contemporary perspective the text *per se*, which fits perfectly into its ancient patriarchal context, is less problematic than the long-standing conviction that it can provide timeless and valid answers to and about women in totally different contexts. Wringing a more positive interpretation from a clearly patriarchal text may, moreover, continue the illusion that liberating answers on all contemporary issues are in the end available in the Bible if one just persists long enough.

The prohibition against teaching in public has to be understood in the context of the then world. The world in which the Pastoral letters were written and functioned, was the Greco-Roman world with its characteristic ideals, institutions and practices. It was a patriarchal, stratified society, in which difference of class and gender played an important role and in which the public and private sectors were clearly demarcated. In line with this, a sharp distinction was drawn between the roles, functions and expectations of males and females. The public sphere was regarded as male territory, while women were mainly restricted to the private or domestic sphere. In this context wives were expected to be submissive to their husbands, and to limit their speaking (Stratton 1996:263). These arrangements were often not only viewed as social in nature, but as ordained by God (Bassler 1996:24; Castelli 1999:229). The author's teaching prohibition on women has partly to be understood in this context. When reading the Pastoral letters, one should constantly keep in mind that they were written by a male, who wrote about women from a male perspective within the context of communities where authority belonged to men and where men's experiences and views were regarded to be the norm.

The more specific context of the Pastoral letters is more difficult to detect, since it has to be inferred indirectly from clues in the letters themselves. Apart from the fact that every text is written from a specific perspective, which means that it does not provide direct information about its context, in this case there are additional barriers. As has already been pointed out, the author does not argue with his opponents; he merely labels them as wrong and exhorts members to avoid them (1 Tm 1:3, 4: 4:1-3, 7; 6:20). The stereotypical expressions which he uses, and which were also found in other writings of the time, as in the attack of philosophers

on their opponents, do not necessarily provide reliable information about the author's opponents and the specific situation of the letters (Bassler 1996:24-25).

From 2 Timothy 2:18 commentators deduce that the opponents at stake here had a negative view of the body and of the material world. This is reflected in other sections of the letter as well. 1 Timothy 4:3 refers to persons who prohibit others to marry and order them to abstain from certain types of food, which may refer to a form of ascetism. This, together with a spiritualised view of the resurrection and the strong emphasis on knowledge (1 Tm 2:4; 6:20; 2 Tm 2:25; Tit 1:1), may point to a form of Gnosticism as part of the letters' context (Bassler 1996:27).

Although the author of the Pastoral letters describes the problems in the communities he addressed as a doctrinal one (1 Tm 1:3; 6:3; 2 Tm 2:18; 4:3), it clearly had social implications. Women in the communities were probably positively inclined towards the ascetic message, since it provided them with an alternative to a life of submission to males and the bearing of children. It is not impossible that they even acted as teachers of such a message, and that for this reason he spoke so vehemently against women as teachers. In reaction to this situation the author insists on a return to the traditional hierarchy in the family which prevailed in the society of the time. In this context the phrase "she will be saved by bearing children" has to be understood. According to the author a woman's well-being, and that of the community, entailed sticking to her traditional role – that of bearing and rearing children.

Taking into account that the Pauline tradition probably did not develop monolithically, some scholars think that the views of the opponents against which the author of the Pastoral letters warns, could in some way be related to Paul's. Although one has to be careful to infer "Paul's view" of marriage from a contingent and situational text (Castelli 1999:222), we know that in 1 Corinthians 7:25-35 Paul "propagated" celibacy. In his case it probably had to do with the expectation that the end was near. In the second-century extra-canonical Acts of Paul and Thecla, Paul is explicitly described as promulgating a message of celibacy. In response to his teaching Thecla, who is on the brink of marriage, decided, against the social conventions of her time, not to marry and have children, to lead an ascetic life of dedication to God and, like her male counterparts, travel from place to place, preaching and teaching. Although it is impossible to prove it could be that the opponents defended their views and actions by appealing to this "branch" of the Pauline tradition (MacDonald 1999:249). What constitutes the Acts of Paul and Thecla, namely celibacy and the resulting leading position for a woman are for the author of the Pastoral letters problems which need serious attention. If this position is taken it would imply that the author of the Pastoral letters countered supposed "legends" about Paul with letters purportedly from him (Bassler 1996:30).

If one takes the close relation between the Pastoral letters and their historical-cultural context seriously, it becomes problematic to assume that their author could have come up with a prohibition for Christian women of all times, as was maintained for nearly twenty centuries in the Christian churches. This direct application becomes even more problematic when attention is paid to the specific way the problems in the community are dealt with. The way he deals with these problems comes, namely, from the household codes of the then world, an ethics used by Hellenistic moralists to define apt conduct and relations between members of the household. Although the household codes enhanced positive values such as loyalty, hospitality and respect for age and experience, they implied clear lines of authority and the subordination of various groups to others: Wives to their husbands, slaves to their masters, and children to their parents (Balch 1987; MacDonald 1999:242). In 1 Timothy the author applies the rules of the private household to the church, which he understands metaphorically as the household of God. So strongly, in fact, does he identify the church as a household that the distinction between real

households and metaphorical household becomes blurred and the relations within the real household become definitive for roles within the church as the household of God (Bassler 1996:31). In doing so the author even applies the usual household restrictions more strictly. Whereas in the real household women were expected to be submissive to their own husbands, in the household of God the regulations apply to all women, not only married ones. Married and unmarried women's conduct in the church should reflect their submissive status. No woman may exercise authority over a man; therefore women are not allowed to teach (Bassler 1996:59, 60).

If the strict prohibition on teaching by women may be related to the teaching and actions of the opponents, the emphasis on submissiveness and silence for women, combined with an emphasis on adhering to traditional roles, clearly implies conforming to the conservative pre-cipations and values of the society of which the author and his readers formed part. Scholars point out that the correspondence between ethical exhortations with regard to household relations in the deuterio-Pauline writings and the ethics of Greco-Roman society was intended as an apologetic response to those who critiqued Christians for the effect they had on the household and the behaviour of women (MacDonald 1999:243). In this way the author probably wanted to show that Christians did not intend to undermine the existing values of their environment, specifically those pertaining to women, but respected and supported these values. In this vein young widows are instructed to give up their celibate life, to marry and bear children, in this way assuming the life of the traditional matron (1 Tm 5:14; MacDonald 1999:237).

#### 2.4 A Text within a Text: The Author's (and Other Interpreters')

##### Use of Genesis 2,3

If the traditional values of his context decisively shaped his solution to the problems encountered in the community, in his substantiation of his command, the author also turned to Scripture (Genesis 2-3), which he, once again, interpreted in line with the values and views of the time. He firstly refers to the sequence in which the creation of mankind took place according to Genesis 2,3, that of male before female. During biblical times the first-born was regarded to have higher status than the younger children. This implied that he was bestowed with authority over them. By referring to the sequence of creation the author implies that women who teach, thereby exercising authority over men, were undermining the social order established by God (Bassler 1996:60).

For the second part of his substantiation the author appeals to Genesis 3. Not only does he understand the text literally; by focusing on only one aspect of the story (Eve's deception, Genesis 3:13), in this way making Eve the only transgressor and sole scapegoat, he distorts it (Bassler 1996: 60).

In the then world deception was a standard charge by means of which philosophers silenced their opponents. By means of this term the author brings all the parties together: Eve, who according to the Garden Story was the first to be deceived, the women in the community who are also accused of deception, and the opponents who are regarded as the current deceivers. By going back to Eve, the author probably wants to say that women are especially prone to deception, which is why the opponents have success with them. Since women are defenceless against deception, as exemplified by the story of Eve, they are not allowed to teach, thereby propagating false teachings in the church (Bassler 1996: 60, 61).

Having listened to the author of 1 Timothy, having paid attention to his use of Genesis, one has to ask at this stage in the history of the Bible and its interpretations: What kind of text is Genesis 2, 3? How valid is his use of Genesis? Can so much be deduced from it? According to

Old Testament scholars the “events” described in Genesis 1-3 belong to two different narratives, which were later edited and combined into the form in which we now have them in the Bible. From the different names used for God in these narratives it is deduced that these come from different periods. Genesis 1-2:4a probably originated between 586-539, during the Babylonian exile, a period in which there was a great emphasis on monotheism. Genesis 2:4b-3:24 was probably written during 1000-900 BCE, although it could earlier have existed in oral form.

The Garden Story (Genesis 2:4b-3:24), in which we are interested here, can be typified as an aetiological saga (Norris 1999:16). Its aim was to *explain* certain “facts of life”: The fact that the earth has to be cultivated, often under difficult circumstances, that birthgiving is a painful process, that human beings are mortal. To treat this passage as a historical report of what happened in the beginning, as is still done in some churches, is to go against the grain of its genre.

If the author’s substantiation of his command to silence sounds strange, even rings false to someone informed about the genre of this passage and the modern view of creation, the influence of this passage and its interpretations, even in what we would in hindsight call its misinterpretation and misuse, should not be underestimated (cf Pagels 1988:ix, xx). During the course of the Christian era more and different interpretations of this narrative would appear on the scene. The most influential among them is that of Augustine, who regarded the meaning of this passage to be that of original sin. This doctrine implies that infants are from the moment of conception infected with the disease of sin (Pagels 1988:ix). In Augustine’s hands the Garden Story lost its status as a self-contained story and became an introduction to the history of salvation, the first Adam looking forward to the new Adam (Thompson 1999:392).

Interpretations do not have to be well-founded in order to flourish. What they really need are powerful proponents and a fertile breeding-ground. According to Pagels (1998:xxvi) Augustine’s theory of original sin proved politically expedient in his time since it persuaded many of his contemporaries that human beings need external government, both from the Christian state of which they at that stage formed part and from an imperial supported church. Augustine’s theory provided an analysis of human nature that became the heritage of subsequent generations of Christians and the major influence on their psychological and political thinking (Pagels 1998:xxvi). Mostly dealing with the Bible in a historical vacuum, and often uninformed about the origin of their beliefs, many Christians even today regard this fourth-century doctrine to be the original message of Genesis 2, 3.

Apart from the crucial role Genesis 2,3 came to play in the Christian religion, this passage and its long history of interpretation also had far-reaching implications for how women were viewed during the past centuries, for the position allocated to them by men (Milne 1999). If the non-historical nature and the patriarchal context of the Garden Story is ignored, as happens in 1 Timothy, it is inevitable that the woman becomes the scapegoat in the story.

If present day Christians are decisively influenced by Augustine’s interpretation of the Garden Story, the author of 1 Timothy also had some predecessors to lean on. It is striking that apart from the first few chapters of Genesis, the rest of the Old Testament has no traces of the Garden Story (Stratton 1996:261). Only during the intertestamental time (the second temple period), and afterwards, the narrative appears again in some of the literature of the time. When the author of 1 Timothy wrote his letters, a number of interpretations of this episode were already in circulation. Although this does not apply to all the relevant sources, there was during this time clearly a tendency to idealise Adam and blame Eve. In intertestamental wisdom literature women as a group are often the subject of misogyny, where they are described as easily deceived, or as weak in reasoning ability (cf Stratton 1996:262 for sources). In an

extremely derogatory section about women (Sirag 25:13, 15, 19, 24) Ben Sira, a Jewish wisdom teacher from the second century BCE, wrote that sin has its origin in a woman and that as a result of her conduct we all die. He even wrote that a man's wickedness is better than a woman's goodness. In the *Greek Life of Adam and Eve* this tendency comes clearly to the fore as well. This writing tells the story of humanity's first experiences of illness and death and places the responsibility for this squarely on Eve's shoulders. In fact, the male author of this writing puts his own words into Eve's mouth, letting *her* say that all sin in creation came about through her (Norris 1999:97). This kind of interpretation is continued by the author of 1 Timothy.

### 3. 1 Timothy 2:9-15 and its History of Interpretation

It was, of course, not the kind of interpretation which attempts to take the cultural-historical context of this passage seriously, which was so influential in determining the position of women in church and society for the greatest part of the past nineteen centuries. For the most influential interpretation we have to turn to the traditional one or ones, as reflected in its history of interpretation. This interpretation started shortly after the writing of these letters and continues, at least in some circles, to be influential up to the present.

Even if one would want to avoid citing the worst excesses of past interpretations of this passage, and try to give a fair and representative history of interpretation of it, there is, from a woman's viewpoint, almost nothing to rejoice about. For those who still question the validity and aim of feminist biblical scholarship, the history of interpretation of this passage may just be conversion material. If, of course, they are willing to renounce their privileged position and read with eyes wide open. This is one of the instances in the encounter with the Bible and its interpretations where one acutely realises that not critical scholarship, but uncritical acceptance of the Bible, can be dangerous and inhumane. Having read this, one even wonders whether it is in our time still justified to merely circulate the Bible as normative text(s) without providing any historical context whatsoever in which to read and interpret it.

1 Timothy was from the beginning, and until very recently, interpreted and applied in a (seemingly) "straightforward" manner, that is, literally and ahistorically. In this form it was so influential. No wonder that this passage, until very recently, functioned almost universally as substantiation and justification for women's position of subordination and her exclusion from the churchly offices. Not only did the traditional interpretation follow the contours of the passage very closely; it regarded this passage to be a true reflection of reality and of God's will with regard to women. With regard to Genesis, for example, it was merely accepted that this is how it happened long ago and far away. Because of God's "creation order", by which he gave male the authority over female, women could and can teach informally, but not publicly and with authority. Since God first created Adam, then Eve, males should be the spiritual heads of churches and homes. The other reason for woman's subordination was and is regarded to be Eve's deception. And of course, writing up the words of God, Paul did not only address women in a specific situation; he laid down regulations for women of all time (Doriani 1995: 223).

For someone living in a different time and after so much has already been done in the field of biblical scholarship, it is striking to realise how early on, already with the Church Fathers, the contexts of the biblical texts were merely ignored and their prescriptions were in contextless form made compulsory for Christian women. Like their Greek forefathers the Church fathers relegated women to the private sphere, especially with regard to teaching (Stratton 1999: 264). Since "what has been written" was regarded as a reflection of "how it is" and as a blueprint for "how God wants it to be" (e.g. Genesis 2, 3 and its use), 1 Timothy 2:1-14 was often merely quoted to substantiate the view that a woman ought to be silent in church, without further

investigation or explanation (Doriani 1995:221). If elaborations were added, this could even aggravate the matter. Tertullian, for example, wrote that, if women were not even allowed to *learn* with over boldness, how could they be given the power of teaching and baptizing (Doriani 1995: 222)? Elaborating on the position of woman, he called her “the devil’s gateway”, “the first deserter of divine law”, “who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack” (Doriani 1995: 222). On account of what she has done, even the Son of God had to die. According to Origen, even if women would say admirable things, this would be of little consequence, since these things came from the mouth of a woman. It seems as if restrictions on women became even stricter as time went by. In the Apostolic Institutions of the late fourth century women are asked to teach as little as possible, since defective explanations produce scorn of God. If Jesus had wanted women to teach, he would have appointed one of them (Doriani 1995:223, 224). In Origen we also read about the “order of creation” in connection with the creation story which would become such an influential weapon in restricting women to their own place. If a woman was allowed to teach, as Jerome allowed the widow Marcella, it was still under the authority of a man and then mostly privately (Doriani 1995: 225, 226).

Right through the Middle Ages and even during the Protestant Reformation one encounters these kind of interpretations like a monotonous refrain, with little variation on the theme. During the Middle Ages Thomas Aquinas gave two reasons why women should not be allowed to teach in public: Her subjection to man, and the accompanying prohibition to speak in public, is her penalty for her role in the fall into sin. But even before she sinned there was something suspect about her in comparison to man. She is not perfected in wisdom and lacks in firm rational judgement (Doriani 1995:251). Medieval women who did teach, like the mystics, circumvented the ordinary channels of power by appealing to God and Christ as the origin of their visions (Doriani 1995:234, 235).

If in the Christian churches much changed during the Protestant Reformation, the position of women in the church was not one of them. With regard to 1 Timothy, Martin Luther merely continued its depressing aspects. Commenting on this passage he wrote that the subjection of woman to man and man’s domination of woman is not taken away. Women will have to endure this. However, it should be for them a great comfort that they can be saved by bearing and rearing children (Fontaine 1997:89). When dealing with the woman issue, his *sola gratia* clearly lost something of its unconditionality. One hears an echo of this in the Afrikaans translation and paraphrase of the Bible, *Die Boodskap*, where it is said that women can compensate (“vergoed”) for what they have done by bearing and rearing children. Attempts to mine the writings of Calvin for possible more favourable statements and a problematisation of the status quo have turned out to be unsuccessful. According to Calvin God had set an order in which men should always lead, which may in no way be broken, and must continue even to the world’s end (Doriani 1995: 243). It is clear that the views of the Protestant Reformers on the position of women in the church basically entailed a confirmation and affirmation of that of their predecessors. It is, moreover, completely understandable that those for whom the Reformers are still the prime role models, regard themselves justified in excluding women from the positions regarded to be reserved for men.

Only with the start of historical-critical biblical scholarship did it become possible to understand a text like 1 Timothy 2:9-15 within its cultural-historical context. With the rise of feminist biblical scholarship the God-male-insider-contextless text-circle finally broke up. Women could now begin to interpret from a different position, from which the “truth” looks substantially different. Of course this did not bring to a sudden and automatic end the influence of many centuries of male-centered interpretations, which impacted on a much bigger scale on women’s lives than their position in the Christian churches – and which continue to be

influential. This is one of the reasons why this text should still be interpreted and problematised as a timeless prescription.

#### 4. Why Still Interpret these Texts? The Way Forward

“Don’t let the past dictate your future, but let it be part of what you will become”, the prospective Greek bride’s brother advises her shortly before her wedding with a non-Greek in the film *My big fat Greek wedding*. The context of this advice is one in which Greek identity is regarded to be of the utmost importance and in which the superiority of own culture and conventions are strongly emphasised. In the end, though, these are, at times quite humorously, and at times touchingly, relativised in service of the celebration of life and of living it to the full.

It could be quite satisfactory to stick to this imaginative and, in my view, meaningful solution to the problem of the relation between past and present – in our case specifically that between women’s past and their present. This would allow everyone to come up with an ending of her own, with her or his own conclusion. In this “truth from beneath” no validation “from above” is necessary.

However, since the question of the relation between past and present is in the case of women in a sense even more complex, since it is asked here within the discipline of biblical scholarship, and also because the Christian imagination was for such a long time dominated by males, this important issue cannot merely be left to everyone’s own imagination; it has to be rethought in a more reasoned and systematic way. This means that the longer route to a suggestion about this relation has to be taken. Since our interest is especially, though not exclusively, between Christian women and their authoritative past, the question will be addressed within the discipline of feminist biblical scholarship and theology.

The first reason for still interpreting “irredeemable” biblical texts, the one about uncovering the origins and the interpretive route which led to the traditional position of women in the Christian churches, and to a large extent in societies influenced by the Bible and its interpretations, has to a great extent already been elaborated on. Unlike the “shortcut from heaven” still commonly appealed to in the Christian churches when the Bible and biblical interpretation is at stake, the “earthly road” with which we have been concerned here, has turned out to be full of *human contexts, human interests, human choices* and *identifiable reasons*, nearly exclusively male ones. We have identified the role of patriarchal culture and interpretation. The role of ahistorical and literal interpretation, in which neither the genre nor the cultural-historical context of a writing has been taken seriously and the meaning of texts, also the prescriptions embedded in them, have merely been transferred to different times and places. By ascribing these kind of interpretations directly to God, God was for a very long time, as it were, quoted selectively and out of context. This is often still the case, with immense implications for those in the Christian churches and those influenced by the Christian tradition.

What kind of route should at this stage be taken, specifically with regard to women? How do we move forward? What could assist us in moving forward in a meaningful way?

Before an attempt is made to answer these questions, brief attention has to be paid to how the Bible is viewed by Christians, to the authoritative way in which it functioned for the past centuries and mostly still functions. Without this piece of the puzzle our non-religious and non-fundamentalist brothers and sisters would be unable to understand how and why a text such as 1 Timothy 2:9-15 could have had such a long and illustrious career, to the point of determining the face of the Christian churches. Why it is in some churches still regarded as the last word on women’s position in the Christian churches. The issue also relates to the concluding section of the article.

In debates about contemporary issues in which the Bible and biblical substantiations play a role, the differences between the different (sometimes opposing) parties are often ascribed to their different views of the Bible. Some, we are told, regard the Bible as the Word of God, while others do not subscribe to this view. For this reason not only their interpretations of biblical texts differ, but also their views about the normativity of a passage from the Bible for today.

But is it really as simple as that? Does this really solve the problem? Where do the differences really lie? However one might answer these questions, it is obvious that a statement which directly relates a human view to that of God disguises the human role in the origin as well the continued functioning of the Bible.

Although the Christian canon was already established during the fourth century of the common era, and from early on had a huge impact on the development of Christian piety and discourse, the doctrines concerning the authority of the Bible date from a later time, from the centuries after the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century (Tolbert 1998:170). After "sola" had been added to "Scriptura", the authority once attached to the broader Christian tradition became focused on (what was regarded as) a single book. Thus it became more crucial than in the past to demarcate it from other books. The view of the Bible as a single book with a single author is, of course, unthinkable without the invention of the printing press and hence the routinely bounding of the Jewish and early Christian writings into a single volume (Borg 2001:8).

Detailed attention about these doctrines is not the aim here. Within the context of this paper the question merely is: What happens to biblical texts when they are circumscribed by a discourse of authority (Tolbert 1998:169)? It can firstly be said that within an authoritative discourse biblical texts mostly function ahistorically. In the words of Tolbert (1998:176) the text "is raised to the level of transcendence of its Divine Author, omni-scient and omni-relevant". In this way culture-bound utterances become timeless statements, prescriptions and prohibitions. Secondly, the worldview of a certain historical period in antiquity, that is, a hierarchical and patriarchal one, is imported and idealised, which implies that the present actual situation has at best a secondary status (Tolbert 1998: 177, 178). Thirdly, this mostly leads to disregarding biblical passages or books in their entirety and in their contexts and therefore to a truncated form of reading the Bible. Small portions of texts are associated and combined with other small portions of Scripture taken from totally different locations, often to prove a point, without taking the contexts of these passages seriously. For if God is the Author of Scripture, different sections from the Bible will necessarily cohere in some way. Fourthly, as has already been pointed out, by linking one's own viewpoint to God, by appealing to God for the justification of a specific viewpoint, the role of the reader or the community of readers in reaching their viewpoint is disguised (Tolbert 1998:182).

All of these, in combination, apply to how 1 Timothy 2:8-15 has been interpreted and applied during most of the common era, especially in the churches, but in some branches of biblical scholarship as well. This text was for a very long time read ahistorically and regarded as "omni-relevant", relevant for women of all times. In this way the patriarchal and hierarchical worldview, in which this text was originally embedded, was continued instead of problematised. Even in societies which are no longer dominantly patriarchal in nature, some are still eager to continue these prohibitions on women. The welfare of the church is even regarded by some to be related to the continuation of this prohibition (Schreiner 1995:154). And, of course, since appeals are still commonly made to the "Word of God" to substantiate these views, it is almost impossible to detect the role and interests of the reader or reading community. Would it be female sinfulness or male fear? More precisely, male fear of female

sinfulness? Whatever the answer may be, it is clear that “under the ‘special hermeneutics’ of authority the Bible becomes a powerful weapon in the hands of some to force their will and beliefs on others” (Tolbert 1998:182).

How do feminist scholars deal with this situation? How do they relate with their past? How do they envisage women’s future, inside and outside the church? As one would expect, they respond to these questions in more ways than one. Some feminist biblical scholars try to retrieve the better part of women’s past within early Christianity by distinguishing a stage in the early Jesus movement when women indeed played a more prominent role (e.g. Schüssler Fiorenza 1983). Though this procedure assists in producing a more balanced picture of the position of women in early Christianity, and could serve as a basis on which to build, this should, and usually is, combined and supplemented with other approaches in order to address the present day realities of women’s lives (e.g. Schüssler Fiorenza 1992).

Since in the field of feminist scholarship history and theology are regarded by some scholars to be closely interrelated (Castelli 1999:223), I would like to make use of an approach in which both of these are taken seriously, in a specific and, to my mind, convincing way. This entails somewhat of a detour, though a meaningful one and one that is necessary in creating a context for reflecting about a possible way forward. This approach takes seriously the difference between the past of the biblical text and our present, the role of the interpreter or theologian in interpretation (theologising) and the shifts in intellectual disciplines of which feminist biblical scholarship and theology and their practitioners form part and by which they allow themselves to be influenced. If interpretation is in the end the interaction of a person and/or discipline with a text (Pagels 1988: xxvii, xxviii), developments within the discipline at stake need attention here. Use is mainly made of insights from Sheila Davaney’s article “Continuing the story, but departing the text” (1997).

In her article Davaney firstly pays brief attention to the initial stage of feminist biblical scholarship and theology. During this stage of her short existence feminist biblical scholarship/theology comprised, according to her, a number of clear-cut components which formed a more or less unified system. Although the concrete particularity of female lives was always acknowledged, it was nevertheless assumed that women’s experience had a common character, a universal and common essence (Davaney 1997:200). After such a long exclusion of women, women’s experience was now even regarded by feminist scholars as the normative site against which theological assertions had to be tested. Together with this went an essentialist notion of tradition. However different the essence of tradition was defined by feminist biblical scholars, it was regarded to have an emancipatory character and as corresponding with the purposes of divine reality (Davaney 1997: 201, 202). The result of this resonance of history, God and female experience, was that feminist theology could assert that its norms and constructive approaches were not merely contingent historical possibilities, but had an ontological grounding, or at least the backing of an authoritative tradition that supported feminist claims to validity (Davaney 1997:206).

Theoretical shifts in current intellectual disciplines, which have been accommodated by much of feminist scholarship, have led to a movement away from this initial essentialist position. These shifts are related to what Davaney calls the “turn to historicity”. This turn implies the historicizing of the female subject, and of religious traditions, and undermines the conviction that feminist norms and approaches have an ontological grounding or are backed by an authoritative tradition. Instead of these essentialist notions, the plurality of women’s experience, the plurality within religious traditions and the humanly constructed character of religious symbols are realised and taken seriously (Davaney 1997:207). Taking historicity seriously would lead, according to Davaney, to the acknowledgement that we are “historical

products, constituted in some real way by what we have inherited and by the limitations and resources of our given contexts” (Davaney 1997:210). This acknowledgement, however, does not have to render us powerless, since it is precisely as historical beings that we are also constructive historical agents. It is, according to her, “because we not only inherit plural histories but forge new identities out of them that we can speak both of responsibility and of hope” (Davaney 1997:210). Women are inextricably bound up with their past(s), immensely influenced by it, but not sold out to it.

Davaney sums up the relation between past and present, also with respect to our religious traditions, with the notion “Continuing the story but departing the text”. On this she elaborates as follows: “Knowing that we are continuing a story – really, many stories – will remind us that we are not isolated but historically connected with what went before. Departing the text will focus our attention on the call not merely to repeat or conform to the past ... but to self-consciously engage in constructing practices and interpretations that are viable for today” (Davaney 1997:212). Here what she calls “constructive pragmatism” comes into play. Taking our own context seriously, the crucial questions will, according to her, no longer be whether our visions cohere with a universal nature or are in continuity with an authoritative past. The really important question will be what difference these visions make to real lives in differing circumstances. What difference will it make if we live out of one set of values and one imaginative rendering of life rather than another? What difference will it make to our bodies, to our communities, to those affected by our lives, to the larger web of human life and nature (Davaney 1997:212)?

What does all of this have to do with 1 Timothy 2:9-15? In line with Davaney’s article 1 Timothy can shed some light on aspects of the origin of the Christian churches and Christian theology, on why, for example, their official face and their conceptual tools are so male. It cannot, however, give ready-made and authoritative answers for the present and future, also pertaining to women’s role and position in church and society. Not only is the past plural and complex, not only does it differ too much from the present to supply us with answers to all our present day questions. Our historical legacy is not undiluted goodness, but a mixture of good and evil. “No moment of history, including that which gave birth to Christianity, escapes such a mixed nature” (Davaney 1994:55). Moreover, an idea or vision which in one period provided liberation, may at another time offer destruction. This leaves us with the task and responsibility to evaluate and make judgements about our history’s utility for the present (Davaney 1994:55). Applied to 1 Timothy 2:9-15 this would imply that for us living in the twenty-first century, in which women are, outside the church, leaders in every sphere of life, the pressing question should no longer be whether the author of 1 Timothy, or even Paul, believed that women should be silent and submissive, but whether *we* believe or should believe it (Tolbert 1998:174). In the light of what we know about the biblical writings, their historical-cultural contexts as well as our own, the question with which to approach a text like 1 Timothy 2:8-15 should no longer be what God said, and says, about women as ministers. We should ask *why* the *human author* of 1 Timothy wrote what he wrote about women and their position in the church, how his views cohered with his own context, and what the justification would be for continuing this in a totally different context. These are human questions which call for human reflection and action. In the end they should inspire us to find solutions to our own problems at a time at which the mere subordination of some to others is no longer regarded as a fruitful and humane way of solving problems.

Why still interpret a biblical text which can, from a contemporary woman’s viewpoint, only be regarded as “irredeemable”? Why remember, when reminiscences are all but pleasant? To find out where we have come from, we have said. To identify the human, historical reasons

which brought us where we are. Confronting and struggling through our Christian past can for women often be demoralising. For it reveals the darker side of the Bible and its ongoing interpretations, for contemporary people, the side which was and is often still rendered invisible by the unholy piety which characterises so much of biblical interpretation, especially in a church context. At times this rouses acute anger. However, if the exposure of the “male-mad(e)ness” of this past could lead to arguing and disagreeing with our sources and their patriarchal authors, this confrontation can become a therapeutic exercise, a turning-point and thereby a starting-point for going ahead in a very different way. Together with those males who have also left the patriarchal dispensation behind or never really felt fully at home within it.

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