

**CONTROVERSY AND CANON**  
**IN THE UNDERGRADUATE HUMANITIES CURRICULUM:**  
**THE EXAMPLE OF BIBLICAL STUDIES**

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***ABSTRACT***

*The question of canon, of whether undergraduates should read an authoritative list of books, raises substantial epistemological and pedagogical issues which may be obscured if the question is framed merely as a struggle between the left and the right for control of educational policy. These issues can be highlighted if the question is framed in the concept of reading canonically, that is, reading so as to nourish vision and action. The article summarizes ways Biblical scholars have developed the concept of reading canonically over the past ten years and explores how reading canonically may be of use to teachers who find themselves in a daily struggle with narrow and narrowing notions of consumerism and careerism which severely limit human potential.*

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Teachers of the humanities are being pushed, and prodded, and poked, and bullied to consider issues raised by a series of national reports. One of these, raised in a provocative and blustery way by William Bennett's NEH report "To Reclaim a Legacy," is the issue of canon, the question of whether undergraduates should read an authoritative list of books in order to be considered educated. Bennett makes the recommendation that, although institutions should be free to construct their own lists of approved books, undergraduate education should be formed about reading "the best that has been thought" so that "the best" then

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becomes a measuring stick (*canon*) by which to judge thought and action and around which to build cultural cohesion. (1984:9-11) A good deal of ferment has followed on this recommendation.

The richness of the resultant brew will be lost to the classroom, however, if the controversy remains merely polemical, merely a set of ritualistic exchanges in a struggle between the left and the right over public policy for education. Granted that questions of canon always proceed in the context of controversy, one vision of who we are and who we will become affirmed over and against another. Israel affirms the one God in the context of her polytheistic neighbors or Alice Walker searches for her mothers' gardens in the context of white and patriarchal culture. To frame the question fundamentally in ideological and polemical terms, however, allows me to escape pressing pedagogical tensions, tensions I experience daily in the classroom.

On a daily basis, the controversy I find myself in (and I think I have many companions from the left and right) is a controversy with consumerism and careerism, attitudes of mind and heart which affirm that what you do for a living and what you can buy determine who you are. I am engaged in conflict with the ways these attitudes mold students into passive learners and indenture them to the notion that the central goal of education is getting a good job. Ninety percent of the students studied by the Carnegie report, for example, list getting a good job as their primary motive for going to college. (Boyer, 1986:7) I struggle against habits of language which deform my own talk about education in the direction of mechanistic and marketplace images. I want to resist pressures which encourage teachers of the humanities to become narrow specialists (and workaholics) in order to advance "up the career ladder" when many of us would rather become generalists with lives considerably larger than our professions. I want to learn to transcend social arrangements making the act of ordering at McDonald's a rite of passage into adulthood.

Neither side of the polemic seems comfortable with the almost canonical status of commercialism and consumerism in college culture. Listen to Adrienne Rich urging us to reject "the culture of manipulated passivity, nourishing violence at its core, [which] has every stake in opposing women actively laying claims to our own lives." (1979:18) On the conservative side, it is not only the relativism of the curriculum that concerns Bennett; it is the way colleges display their offerings, like shoddy goods for consumption in a cheap bazaar. (1984:20) And Harry Levin passionately pleads that we not blur the distinction between "a well-tested canon and a well-advertised package." (1981:562)

What I propose is that, when I hear Levin say students should read "the best that has been known and said" because this is our "patrimony," our collective

memory, our "recallable past" (1981:562), I interrupt my polemical raging over the "erasure of women's political and historical past" (Rich, 1979:11) just long enough – that I stifle my cries of "your PATRIMONY, white man" just long enough – to say, O.K., yes, people need a recallable past on which to build a future. So what? If the controversy is just careerism and consumerism, then the question I pose to myself is what kind of reading will I do with the students I encounter in order to articulate another vision of who we are and what we will become.

Framed this way, the question of canon reminds us that we are all like Telemachos waking up one day on the brink of adulthood in the middle of our father's house (according to a patriarchal view of things), but in desperate need of stories about Odysseus and the times which laid down the outlines of the present. Without the stories, Telemachos is not able to enter the controversy with the suitors who are wasting his patrimony. Without the stories, he cannot affirm his identity as a member of a community defined over and against the usurpers and he cannot project a future in which to reclaim the legacy which is rightfully his.

Like Telemachos, we are all born into the middle of things needing to project some sense of identity and community, of heritage and vision of the future, in order to know how to live. We are all like the Israelites affirming in the book of Exodus that the God who brought our people out of Egypt is also present in our lives today. Canon gives us a sense of identity and corporate vision. We use its songs, metaphors, images and rhythms to give shape to our lives and ways. Canon gives us voice.

Over the past ten years, Biblical scholars have struggled anew with the question of how a community constructs and hears the canonical voice(s) which give it shape and direction. This struggle has been less with the question of which voices should be considered canonical than with the question of how specific communities are to read canonically, to read in such a way as to nourish vision and action. I would like to suggest that teachers of the humanities may find the concept of 'reading canonically' a fruitful framework for the question of canon. Under the influence of this concept the canonical issue has become for me, not so much what should we read, but what should we do when we read together, students and teachers, in order to engage the narrow and narrowing influence of commercial culture on our lives.

Canon and reading canonically are substantial issues in undergraduate education because, in addition to the polemical discussion, they also raise questions which are epistemological and pedagogical.

At the 1986 Convention for the Association for General and Liberal Studies, for example, a great upswelling of talk followed the opening panel on the

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Bennett report. Teachers sighed with relief and said it was more than time to replace the patchwork curriculum of the sixties with substance again, objected that the mainline canon excluded the very people they were trying to teach, affirmed that they had spent ten years opening the canon and were not about to close it, complained about pressures from fundamentalist Christians to limit the canon even more narrowly than Bennett proposed, wondered how a department back home so polarized by the issue was going to function at all.

These local political questions have arisen in the context of the national debate between the left and the right. On the one hand Robert von Hallbert in the introduction to a collection of essays, many originally printed in the left-leaning journal *Critical Inquiry*, writes that "a canon is commonly seen as what other people, once powerful, have made and what should now be opened up, demystified, or eliminated altogether." (1984:1) Putting the case more passionately, Adrienne Rich writes, "we need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us." (1979:35) On the conservative side, Bennett draws a picture of canon arriving just in time to save the academy from "a collective loss of nerve and faith on the part of both faculty and academic administrators" as a result of which the academy was left feeling "that we did not need to worry about what was worth knowing, worth defending, worth believing." (1984:19-20) Canon can reverse a trend of the past twenty years in which "intellectual authority came to be replaced by intellectual relativism as a guiding principle of the curriculum." (1984:6)

Connected with this struggle for a public policy in education are resonances which are epistemological, which raise issues about how we know what we know. The authority Bennett claims for texts arises out of a paradigm which, in Biblical Studies, would be called a *doctrinal paradigm* for interpretation. In this paradigm the authority and truth claims of texts are formulated in ahistorical and dogmatic terms. A text like the Bible is not seen as a record of revelation, but as revelation of eternal truths and timeless principles which can justify contemporary moral or institutional interests. (Schussler Fiorenza, 1984:26) It is from inside this paradigm that Bennett can urge us to acquaint ourselves with "the best that has been known and said in the world," to expose our students to those texts which – taken together – "virtually define the Western mind." (1984:10) Those seeking to open and demystify canon, on the other hand, often do so out of paradigms taken from critical social science or postmodern literary criticism. In these paradigms, texts and readings are arbitrary and constructed. For Paul deMan, for example, language is fictive and arbitrary. Even literary language, which at least implicitly acknowledges its own artificial character, still suspends readers between 'literal' and figurative meanings in such a way that readers are unable to decide 'true' meanings and texts become, finally, 'unreadable.' (Eagleton, 1983:147)

Canon also resonates in pedagogical circles. The dogmatic paradigm of interpretation is frequently criticized as supporting a banking model of pedagogy in which passive students are invested with already-understood knowledge. (Freire, 1985:100) Pedagogy coming out of the relativistic model is critiqued, even sometimes by its proponents, as contributing to a sense of listlessness and powerlessness in the academy. To quote von Hallberg again, "rarely does one hear a critic, especially a professor, confess to dreams of potency, perhaps because now that canons are recognized as the expression of social and political power, intellectuals are, by virtue of a consensus as to their adversarial role, almost required to view these aspirations [implicit in the canon] skeptically." (1984:1) In pedagogical circles at least, humankind cannot live by skepticism alone. We need substantial bread with which to nourish ourselves and our students, it is for the sake of nourishment that I wish to move away from framing the question of canon solely as an ideological question.

In order to bring a sense of closure to the discussion of Bennett at the Association for General and Liberal Studies, somebody, perhaps the chair of the panel, proposed a straw vote of participants. When the hands were counted the group was evenly divided: one-third, for; one-third, agin'; one-third, unable to decide at this time. Unless posed as a question of substance, I am afraid the canon controversy remains merely polemical and we will return from conferences, faculty meetings, departmental discussions with the feeling that all the fermentuous talk yields up nothing but a tired ideological debate.

I wish -- at least in my own teaching -- to re-energize the question by reframing it to ask how we should read canonically.

Recently, Biblical scholars have been drawing out some of what it means to read texts canonically, that is, as guides for living. Like most modern academic disciplines, Biblical Studies is a child of the Enlightenment. Using modern historical and critical methodology, Biblical scholars, particularly in the liberal Protestant tradition, built up a picture of the Bible which, if it shook pious and popular faith, defined study of the Bible as an enterprise well within the Enlightenment's concern for reason over faith and its impulse to verify all referential statements. Scholars using philological, historical, and literary critical methods, as well as archaeological finds, demonstrated conclusively that, far from being composed by single authors like Moses or St. Matthew, the scripture inherited by synagogue and church had a long and complex history. The Bible is a collection of genres, strains, and traditions, which had arisen, evolved, been written down, collected, edited and re-edited, all in different contexts for different functions, until the texts emerged as we have them today. In addition, the doctrinal paradigm for interpreting the Bible as an authoritative and ahistorical record gave way to an understanding of the Bible as a record of the religious history of Israel. (Childs, 1979:34-39)

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All of this activity was carried out with a sense of excitement and some trepidation. Paul Tillich tells of how fearful he was as a student during the early years of the new Biblical scholarship. Every morning he hesitated before he dared open the Dresden paper for fear he would have to read about some new discovery which would challenge his faith. (Sanders, 1984:47)

As the new scholarship became institutionalized in universities and seminaries, preachers began to carry its picture of the Bible into religious congregations. Some very good preaching and education resulted. People began to see Biblical figures – not as exemplary characters – but as people very much like themselves struggling to live faithful lives. Biblical imagery about journey, pilgrimage, exodus entered into people's self understanding and fed their visions. But the new picture of the Bible also made reading the Bible an interdisciplinary, highly expert, affair in which one broke apart the units of the final received text, tried to trace them to their earliest sources, and then to understand what function the sources may have served in their original settings. Scripture was rather like archaeological tell which only experts could dig. (Sanders, 1984:5) Treating the text as an empirically verifiable historical record also created difficulties for congregations and preachers seeking to nourish their faith. To catch the flavor of this situation imagine yourself in a congregation listening to a preacher adumbrate the significance of Israel's march out of Egypt by explaining that the manna referred to in Exodus 16 was probably "the excretion of two scale-insects which fed on the twigs of the tamarisk tree" (Oxford Annotated Bible) – not very nourishing fare.

For the past ten years, therefore, Biblical scholars have been reconsidering their scholarship in light of the fact that many of their students live in, or come from, belief communities which use scripture and a significant number of these students will go on to work in such communities. It is this location of the scholar/teacher between a discipline rooted in the Enlightenment, on the one hand, and believing communities facing the future, on the other, which interests me as a teacher of the humanities.

In recent years, Biblical scholars such as Brevard Childs, James Sanders, Phyllis Trible, and Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenze have been working at ways of reading the Bible which set scripture in the context of the way it is used by believing communities. The focus of their inquiry has shifted from a referential paradigm (to what does the text refer) for Biblical studies to a rhetorical one (how has the text formed the people and the people the text). This shift in paradigm has taken place in the context of a liberal/conservative controversy over Biblical authority, but it has consistently focused on the relationship between the Bible and its significance for the life of the community.

Brevard Childs reframes the text, not so much as a composite which has evolved throughout time, but as a text shaped and reshaped to its final form by a religious impulse. Thus he proposes a way of reading which, while it makes full and consistent use of critical tools, also takes as its central question the dynamic relationships between the text and the believing communities which shaped and continue to receive it. In this sense to read canonically is to appropriate a tradition, to enter into a relationship between it and your community. It is to discover the power of a "recallable past," but not as an end in itself. It is not the tradition itself or the history out of which it arose which makes texts canonical; rather it is what the community makes of them and the texts of the community as people search for wisdom about how to live. (1979:40-41)

The writings of James Sanders and Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza indicate some of the directions such reading might take. According to Sanders, at the heart of the canonical reading is the fact that the Biblical texts bring the reader to a theocentric monotheistic view of the situation as opposed to an androcentric and/or polytheistic view. Within this broad monotheistic perspective, however, there is a consistent tension between the view of God as the God of Israel and the view of God as the God of all. (1984:51) This axiom suggests some fruitful questions for humanities pedagogy. Once a canonical list has been drawn, what view does it place in center? What is this view over and against? Granted the center, what tensions recur?

Sanders' second axiom is that there are at least two possible lines of interpretation in the Biblical canon: the constitutive and the prophetic. The first line sees the text as constitutive of the community; identity with the tradition creates membership in the on-going community. Thus Exodus directly connects the passage of the people out of Egypt to all future enactments of this tradition. Although the prophetic hermeneutic makes use of the same tradition as the constitutive, it does so for the sake of challenging the people instead of building them up. The prophet Amos, for example, uses a traditional understanding of the Day of the Lord as a day when all will be set right, particularly in Israel's favor, to confront Israel with its own injustice. According to Sanders, there is a time to be confirmed or constituted and a time to be confronted and, since both lines of interpretation are frequently available in the same text, the choice of an interpretative principle depends on local needs. Canonical reading, not canon, is normative.

What this choice of lines for interpretation could suggest for humanities pedagogy is that the question of what one is to read is only the beginning of the canonical question. The lines along which one reads are equally important and these, almost no matter what the text, may well depend on the local needs. While, for humanities teachers, many elements would contribute to the choice of lines of

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interpretation, Sanders offers one rule of thumb I think very challenging; a bruised reed he would not bend and a smoldering wick he would not put out. (1984:53) Such an orientation toward students would require extraordinary empathy for what is life-giving and life-sustaining in student experience and personalities.

Students and teachers engaged in the kind of reading Sanders describes would develop at least three kinds of reading skills: the ability to read for the interplay between time-conditioned and transcendent qualities of texts, the ability to read in a flexible way, the ability to ask "so what?" The picture of the world drawn by Biblical texts is a circumstantial, untidy, ambiguous affair which does not easily yield to generalization and abstraction. The critical tools of Biblical scholarship, moreover, insist on the text being read in the context of its origin and development. Thus one cannot simply lay the Bible in a dogmatic and ahistorical way across modern life. Students, then, learn to read Biblical texts in all their historical, time-conditioned particularity, but they also read so as to enter the dynamic relationship between the time-conditioned text and the affairs of their own day. In the polarity between the historical and the present, between the actual circumstances and the transcendent meaning, there is the energy of a canonical dynamic. (Childs, 1979:41)

In the tensions between the time-conditioned and the transcendent there is room for teachers of the humanities to lose the naive notion that ancient texts confirm our own world. Chaucer and Shakespeare are no more warrant for present social and economic arrangements than Alice Walker and Adrienne Rich. In fact, far from conforming late capitalistic economic arrangements, Chaucer's theocentric world view might well challenge them.

Sanders also encourages reading which is flexible, especially in terms of who and where the reader identifies with the text. Most readers (and Sanders is thinking mostly of North American Liberal Protestant congregations) will find their reading of the New Testament, for example, most dynamic if they identify with the civic and religious leaders in the story (the Romans and the Pharisees) rather than with Jesus. The poor, on the other hand, will have a more dynamic experience if they identify with the poor of the gospel. (*The Gospel of Solentaname* and other material from Christian communities based in Central and Latin America has certainly shown this to be the case.) Sanders also suggests that readers learn to move in the text from one site of identification to another. In fact, parables often encourage this kind of shift. The Prodigal Son, for example, invites the reader first to identify with the younger son then with the older.

This kind of flexible reading is also a counter to the consumer notion that a text is to be immediately accepted or rejected according to whether or not the

reader (usually a student) can identify with it and, if accepted, can only be read (consumed) once: But I read Chaucer in high school!

Since Biblical texts are theocentric and since they are canonical, the central dynamic of canonical reading is the encounter between the believing community and the God in whom they believe. In this sense, a central ability in reading canonically is the ability to ask "so what" of a text. Given this interpretation of a text, so what? Given this interpretation of a text, how do I live? Given this interpretation of a text, what do I do to gain eternal life. In this sense canonical reading is *midrash*, the search for a word which will give life in this particular situation. (Sanders, 1984:26) Such a search differs from Bennett's dogmatic view of a text as an ahistorical source of transcendent excellence and from von Hallberg's skeptical and oppositional view that texts are to be demystified. Canonical reading in Sanders' sense sets students in lively, life-giving, and critical dialogue with texts for the sake of discovering how to live in the present and into the future.

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza focuses her paradigm for interpreting the Bible on the experience of women, in the context of our struggle for self-identity, survival, and liberation in a patriarchal society. While recognizing that Biblical texts were formed in ancient patriarchal societies and have been used to cement the patriarchal social and economic arrangements of our own time, Schussler Fiorenza feels women need to reclaim Biblical texts because "our heritage is our power." For Schussler Fiorenza, however, the canonical quality of canonical reading (its power as a criterion for revelation) is derived, not from Biblical tradition, but from contemporary experience of God's grace in the middle of a struggle for freedom and wholeness. As a consequence, women are called to read canonically, not in a way which will reproduce biblical structures and traditions, but so as "to remember and transform our biblical heritage." (1984:14)

To this end, Schussler Fiorenza has described a model for interpreting the Bible which is formed around a four-fold hermeneutic: (1) Interpretation begins with a *hermeneutic of suspicion* which is based on her understanding that Biblical texts are formed in man-centered language and reflect patriarchal social structures and, therefore, require critique from the perspective of women on the journey toward liberation. (2) Rather than a referential reading concerned with the truth claims of the text (a reading of factualness, Schussler Fiorenza would say), she next urges a *hermeneutic of proclamation*, a reading which uses the critical tools of Biblical studies to expose texts to careful theological evaluation of their potential for oppressive or liberatory impact in specific cultural situations. (3) The third interpretative move is a *hermeneutic of remembrance* which reconstructs the past by putting the struggle of women at its center, thereby creating for contemporary women a sense of tradition for the hopes and despair they experience in their own struggle. In this way interpretation moves beyond critique of patriarchy to discover

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cultural, and political influences that shape the world and self understanding of the community." (1984:35-36)

The work of these Biblical scholars can challenge teachers of the humanities to reframe the canonical question, to redraw notions of a text, and to understand more fully some of the things we need to know in order to read canonically with students. As I break away from an enervating polemic with colleagues and students on the right, I am learning to ask – not what shall we read in the sense of whose world view shall we hold up for confirmation and admiration – but what shall we read and how shall we read in order to nourish our ongoing struggle with the careerism and consumerism which would reduce us to what we can earn and buy.

I am slowly building up a notion of a text which challenges my disciplinary formation and, consequently, much of my pedagogical practice. In spite of a great deal of re-training, my daily work in the classroom often relies on New Criticism's notion that a text is an object, a structure, to be analyzed as in itself it really is. Slowly, I am more able to treat a text in its historical and rhetorical dimensions and, even more slowly, as a prompt, structure, tradition for creative recreation. I am also beginning my own education over again in order to learn some of the things I need to know in order to read canonically. From the beginning of my teaching I have been motivated to understand, as Schussler Fiorenza suggests I should, "the social, psychological, cultural, and political influences that shape the world and self understanding" of the students with whom I work. I have not been always so quick to make common cause with them, to see their careerism as a reflex or underside of the dominant concerns in my own college (we are encouraged to package our curriculum for the market) and profession (where I am encouraged to think about a career and making national contributions instead of having work to do on the local level) and wider life (where concerns about income and security also play themselves out). Students have been teaching me how to understand their experience (their location in families, ethnic communities, gender roles, economic circumstances) from the inside and to search out – with them – texts and ways of reading which will give us courage, vision, and hope to enter a controversy with these pressures deforming the human potential of our lives.

I find that I bring to this work much that I already know – about student cognitive and moral development, about community building, about a kind of political and economic analysis which is also personal and passionate, about texts, how they work, and how we use them. I find, to my delight, that there are new things to be learned: humble learning about students from the inside (as an us, not a they), a more flexible and imaginative kind of reading for the nourishing possibilities of texts, a new reliance on colleagues to make up what I lack in

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imaginative, dramatic, and artistic abilities, a new confidence that the hermeneutics of critique is not enough.

I find myself very much in the situation of the lawyer in the gospel who had hoped to draw Jesus into a polemic (which the lawyer, of course, would win) about how to interpret the law. Jesus instead tells the story of the good Samaritan and invites the lawyer to identify (and identify with) the neighbor in the parable. My job these days seems to be to get to know students in this neighborly way, learning from and with them how to read our texts and our lives canonically, to read in order to have life and that more abundantly.

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