

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR CHERYL B. ANDERSON, *ANCIENT LAWS & CONTEMPORARY CONTROVERSIES*

Chapter 1: “The Need for Inclusive Biblical Interpretation”

1. How has biblical authority functioned within your faith tradition? What is your (inherited) understanding of the authority of the Bible?
2. Is a “neutral” reading of the Bible a possibility? Or does one’s race, sex, class, culture, religious background, etc., shape how one reads and understands the Bible and applies its teachings to life?
3. On page 28, the author states her hermeneutical principle that guides her interpretation of the Bible as “the divine commitment to justice.” What hermeneutical principle guides your interpretation, and how does it shape your reading of the biblical text? (Realize that our hermeneutical principles are often unstated and operate in an unconscious way.)
4. What difference would it make to hear the voices of the marginalized “Other” as a part of the process of understanding the meaning of biblical texts?

Chapter 2: “Problematic Biblical Laws”

1. What difference does it make if biblical laws treat rape as a violation of a man’s property rather than against a woman’s personhood? What does this say about the value of women in a society?
2. Contrast the bans ordering the annihilation of “the inhabitants of the land” in Exodus 23:31-33; Deuteronomy 7:1-2; 20:16-18 with the injunctions not to oppress or wrong but to “love...as yourself” resident aliens among the people in Exodus 22:21; 23:9; Leviticus 19:33-34; Deuteronomy 10:19. How can these conflicting parts of the same law codes be reconciled?
3. In what ways do the biblical laws discussed in this chapter reinforce patterns of domination and subordination?
4. What difference does it make whether the poor are regarded as recipients of charity and compassion or poverty is treated as a symptom of unjust social structures that must be changed?
5. The author quotes, on pages 56-57, a description by Terence Fretheim of how the law is not immutable but is revised and adapted to changing circumstances even in the Old Testament itself (to say nothing of Jesus’ radical revisions of the law in Matthew 5) and Fretheim’s hermeneutical principle that “we are called to study each and every law to discern whether it continues to serve the life and health of the community, indeed the larger created order, and see what might come out of that conversation.” How might this change the way you think about some of the biblical laws discussed in this chapter?

Chapter 3: “Ruth and Esther as Models for the Formation of God’s People”

1. Some of the themes of Ruth and Esther are loyalty and commitment—to self, to family, to national and ethnic ties and homeland, etc. But what happens when these loyalties and commitments come into conflict with each other? Which commitment prevails and why? How do the books of Ruth and Esther answer that question?
2. Ruth and Esther are also about the issues of identity and assimilation. In our pluralistic context, how do those who are not of the dominant culture balance maintaining their own identity and being true to who they are with the need to assimilate into the dominant culture in order to survive and thrive? How did Ruth and Esther address that question? Are their solutions satisfactory? Why or why not?
3. Are Ruth and/or Esther liberating or oppressive models for women and for ethnic “minorities,” or in some ways both?
4. Ruth and Esther each in some way used her sexuality as a coping strategy to survive in a potentially hostile environment, as well as to care for the needs and well-being of others (Naomi/ the whole Jewish people). Were they selling themselves out? Sacrificing themselves for others? Pragmatically doing what was necessary to survive?
5. What do the books of Ruth and Esther tell us about the polarities of inclusion and exclusion? About the cycle of violence and counter-violence in a context of unequal and unjust power dynamics?

Chapter 4: “Jesus, Paul, the Law, and Inclusive Biblical Interpretation”

1. How might Jesus’ more contextual and inclusive approach to the law relate to the question of unjust laws and civil disobedience today? The question of immigration laws and undocumented immigrants “breaking the law” by crossing the border without authorization?
2. Does respect for the law mean unqualified obedience to the law, even if laws are discriminatory and if obeying them leads to destructive consequences for some? (Think here about the Nazi regime in Germany and how resistance to Hitler was a violation of the law.)
3. To what extent was Paul, in his teachings about women, the family, slavery, and sexuality, a product of his own cultural context, and to what extent was he able to transcend the limits of his context?
4. How do you reconcile the restrictive comments attributed to Paul about women being silent in church with Paul’s affirmations of women in ministry in his letters (e.g., Romans 16:1-16)?
5. The author states on page 107 that both Jesus and Paul taught love of God and neighbor as the “absolute requirement of God” and that “the law of love overrides and transcends traditional boundaries and is the theological basis for their inclusive biblical understandings.” What happens when the law of love comes into conflict with human laws or even the laws of God?

Chapter 5: “The Protestant Reformers and Inclusive Biblical Interpretation”:

1. Do you believe the Bible is the “Word of God”? If so, what does that mean? How do you understand the Bible as the “Word of God”? If not, what do you understand to be the “Word of God” and why? How does the Bible relate to or connect with this understanding?
2. What is the role of the law in the life of the Christian? How does your understanding relate to the teachings of Luther, Calvin, and Wesley?
3. What kinds of problems arise from relying on one, or a few, selected Scripture texts to define a doctrinal or ethical/ moral position on such issues as slavery, the ordination of women, or the compatibility of homosexuality with Christian teaching? Does the Bible speak with one voice on these (and other controversial) issues? Are there other Scripture texts that might offer a different perspective?
4. How has social context shaped both the biblical tradition and the tradition of the Protestant Reformation? How might a different social context today lead to new ways of reading the Bible? How might gender, race, and sexual orientation make a difference in how one reads the Bible and hears the “Word of God” through it?

Chapter 6: “Biblical Authority and the Ethics of Biblical Interpretation”

1. Discuss the differences between an understanding of the authority of the Bible in terms of “authority as domination” versus “authority as partnership.” How might each of these perspectives influence a person’s or group’s reading of the Bible and its relation to key points of controversy in biblical interpretation?
2. Considering that the earliest written form of the Bible took shape during the period of the monarchy in Israel (specifically the reigns of David and Solomon) and reflected a perspective supportive of the monarchy, how might that origin have embedded a concept of “authority as domination” into the biblical texts themselves?
3. At the same time, it is important to recognize a diversity of perspectives in the Bible. In addition to authoritarian, monarchial, and hierarchical voices in the Bible, are there also anti-monarchial, anti-authoritarian, and egalitarian voices? Are there voices affirming political, social, and religious leadership and authority of women alongside those voices calling for women’s submission?
4. When we talk or read about a “feminist interpretation,” an “African-American interpretation,” a “Latin American interpretation,” or a “post-colonial interpretation” (i.e., an interpretation from a perspective other than the dominant Western/ European and American perspective), in many people’s minds these are contrasted with, and even subordinated to, a “regular,” “traditional,” or “universal” interpretation of the Bible and what is considered to be the Judeo-Christian faith. Is there a “regular” or “universal” interpretation untouched by a particular social location? Or is the so-called “regular” or “universal” interpretation actually only the particular perspective of the “mythical norm” (white, male, privileged, Western, heterosexual, etc.)? What are the consequences of one particular perspective passing itself off as representing the universal human perspective—and/or the divine perspective?

5. Discuss the two different statements about the Bible as “the Word of God” expressed on page 147. How does each of these statements fit the facts of the Bible’s actual contents? How does each of them impact the way the Bible is placed in conversation with the life of faith today?
6. Reflect on Jack Rogers’ comparison of interpretations that supported slavery and the subordination of women with those that support the condemnation of homosexuality on pages 151-152 and his conclusion about a common pattern in each case of reading of societal prejudice back into Scripture and then supporting that prejudice with select Scriptures taken out of context. What does this pattern suggest about the interconnection between the struggles of marginalized groups in relation to inclusive biblical interpretation? What does Rogers’ comparison reveal about ethical versus unethical modes of biblical interpretation? Can any principles of interpretation be extracted from this history of problematic interpretation?

Chapter 7: “The Need for an Inclusive Approach Continues”

1. On page 164, the author states Vanessa Beasley’s conclusion that “the American people have learned how to live comfortably with their contradictions.” How comfortable are you with the “contradiction between ‘American rhetoric’ and the ‘American reality’” (page 159)—with the fact that our nation’s founding documents used such inclusive phrases as “all men are created equal” and “We the People,” while offering the full rights and privileges of citizenship only to white, male property owners?
2. In current immigration debates, many who are opposed to a liberalization of our nation’s immigration policies or even favor more restrictions on immigration have expressed concerns over the dilution of our nation’s “cultural purity.” What is this “cultural purity” or “American identity”? How is it defined? Is it the same as Audre Lorde’s “mythical norm”? What similarities and/or differences would you find between “American identity” and the “mythical norm”?
3. Recognizing “the exclusionary intent of the founding fathers” and their assumptions about the alleged inferiority of “the African race” (page 156), what perspective does this bring to the debate over restricting interpretation of the U.S. Constitution to its purported “original intent” versus interpreting it as a “living document” to be adapted to changing circumstances?
4. Recognizing that both the Bible and the U.S. Constitution were written from, and have been predominantly interpreted from, the standpoint of privileged members of society, what would it mean to include in their interpretation the perspectives of the “Other”—of those whose voices have been marginalized?
5. How do American identity, Christian community, and the Kingdom of God look different when those who have long been excluded are included as full participants and equal partners in defining “our” identity?

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