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Joint Session: Feminist Hermeneutics of the Bible Section and African American Biblical
Hermeneutics Section

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Session 23-316
Napoleon D1 - SH

Theme: Inclusive Biblical Interpretation: Taking the Other Seriously

Review of
Chapter 4
Jesus, Paul, the Law, and Inclusive Biblical Interpretation

Introduction

Good afternoon!

Chapter four of Dr. Anderson's book focuses on Jesus, Paul, and the law. As a Hebrew Bible scholar, I know a great deal about one of those three topics, but I will do my best here this afternoon.

The central question in chapter four asks: Didn't the New Testament get rid of the Old Testament law? In the two major sections in this chapter, Anderson focuses first on Jesus and second on Paul.

Focusing on Jesus

In "Focusing on Jesus," she counters the popular Christian notion that Jesus was "against the Law." While some Christians believe that Jesus rejected Judaism and its laws, Anderson demonstrates that the New Testament gospels present an image of Jesus as an observant Jew. Furthermore, as explained in Matthew 10:17-20, Jesus asserts that he has not come to "abolish the law or the prophets" but "to fulfill" them.

Anderson links common misconceptions regarding Jesus' views on the law to New Testament disputes between Jesus and the Jews as well as the Pharisees. According to the gospels, Jesus engaged in debate with the Pharisees, a group of Jewish teachers and experts in the law who insisted on strict observance of the written law of Moses as well as the oral law, which became the Mishnah. Anderson notes that Christians today often make the mistake of equating the "Jews" mentioned in the New Testament with contemporary Jews and Judaism. However, Anderson argues the roots of Judaism as it is practiced today did not begin until at least the 4th century CE.

Anderson further links the disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees in Mark 7:1-23 to the difference between the Great Tradition and the Little Tradition. The Great Tradition involved the scrupulous keeping of purity laws by elites, including the Pharisees. The Little Tradition involved accommodation to the purity laws for rural peasants who would have been unable to follow the strict requirements of the law. In Mark 7:18, Jesus asks, “Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile...?” According to Anderson, Jesus does not reject purity laws. Instead, he redefines purity laws by expanding them to include modifications for non-elites.

Anderson contends that Jesus’ emphasis on expanding the law in Mark 7 provides the elements of what she calls “inclusive biblical interpretation.” Anderson highlights four key elements that make up inclusive biblical interpretation. First, Jesus considered the impact of an interpretation on the marginalized. Second, he grounds his understanding of the law in the biblical tradition. Third, he identifies the absolute requirement of God by highlighting the two greatest commandments. Fourth, he includes the excluded.

Anderson concludes this section of the chapter by asking three questions of any particular biblical interpretation (93):

- 1) Whose interest is served by the traditional interpretation of that text?
- 2) What is the impact of that interpretation on all segments of the community? And
- 3) Does that interpretation help to create a more inclusive table fellowship in today’s world?

Focusing on Paul

In the second major segment in chapter four, Anderson focuses on Paul, but before discussing Paul and inclusive biblical interpretation, she contends that it is first necessary for her to “liberate” Paul from dominant readings that have characterized Paul as “anti women, anti gay,

and pro-slavery” (94). Anderson explains that not all of the New Testament epistles were written by Paul. Also, while some passages in the epistles have been interpreted as supporting women’s subordination, in general, Paul’s writings seem to support breaking down traditional barriers, including gender. In addition, in examining the Household Codes which have been used to support slavery, Anderson notes that alternative translations and interpretations are possible. Finally, in looking at Paul’s views of sexuality, she argues that Paul has negative views of both homosexuality and heterosexuality.

Having laid a foundation regarding traditional views on Paul, Anderson discusses the ways in which Paul may be useful in developing inclusive biblical interpretation. Anderson argues that like Jesus, Paul includes the excluded. He includes the Gentiles who were excluded. Also, he bases his inclusion on biblical tradition by including Gentiles in God’s covenantal promise to Abraham and his descendents.

Anderson observes that Paul considers the impact of an interpretation or policy on the marginalized. For example, in 1 Corinthians 8, Paul advises against eating meat that had been offered to idols. Paul advises not eating the meat due to what David Horrell calls an “other-regard.” Those who see a Christian eating such meat may do it themselves while thinking that other gods exist. Also, like Jesus, Paul identifies the absolute requirement of God by focusing on love as a central theme in his writings. Thus, loving one’s neighbor is a fulfillment of the law.

Evaluation

Anderson’s work provides a helpful treatment of the continuing importance and reinterpretation of the law by both Jesus and by Paul. She explains the historical context surrounding major controversies such as dietary laws. Without a lot of jargon or intimidating

transliteration, Anderson succinctly discusses common Christian misperceptions of the law and argues for the continued relevance of the law for Christians today.

I have three main concerns that I would like to mention regarding chapter four: audience, structure, and analogies.

First, I am unsure of Dr. Anderson's intended audience. I would expect most of the material that is covered in this chapter to be addressed in an Introduction to New Testament survey course, but an introductory text would require much more detailed explanations. For example, Anderson defines Corban and explains Jesus' objections, but students or laypersons who are new to the material would need much more thorough discussions. Also, upper division graduate courses would be expected to engage these issues in greater depth than Anderson provides.

Second, Anderson structures this chapter with a focus on Jesus and a focus on Paul. If Anderson seeks to reach persons who are concerned with the contemporary controversies that she mentions, it might have been more effective to discuss these controversies by issue. For example, Anderson could have identified major issues such as women's church leadership or ordination. While she offers her own "liberation" of Paul and mentions issues of the disputed Pauline corpus, most laypersons would need much more hand-holding with a discussion of relevant texts and then a movement to a discussion of approaching these texts through an inclusive lens.

Third, specifically on page 84 Anderson writes, "The traditional leaders of the church—a relatively small group of white, heterosexual, Western, and privileged males—are our own Pharisees." Also on page 84 Anderson draws a parallel between Jesus and the Pharisees and contemporary progressives and conservatives. Some readers may find this type of description to

be inflammatory. To be clear, Anderson's point is that Jesus and the Pharisees are both part of the same faith community, but she falls into the same "Jesus vs. Pharisees" dichotomy that she seeks to reject. Just as Anderson argues against the simplistic comparison of Jewish Pharisees as bad and Jesus as good, greater nuance is required, especially in our current political climate when bipartisan cooperation is so greatly needed.

Conclusion

Dr Anderson's helpful discussion and clear examples illustrate the importance and ongoing relevance of biblical law as a part of Christian tradition. I appreciate the opportunity to review this chapter, and I look forward to the conversation with the panelists and with Dr. Anderson.