Feminist Hermeneutics of the Bible Section
(and African American Biblical Hermeneutics Section)

Theme: Inclusive Biblical Interpretation: Taking the Other Seriously
Panel Response to Cheryl Anderson, *Ancient Laws and Contemporary Controversies: The Need for Inclusive Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford University Press, 2009)
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I wanted to thank members of the Feminist Hermeneutics of the Bible Section, in particular Cheryl Anderson, for the invitation to present on this excellent panel. I also must pause to congratulate Cheryl on her new book, which is hot off the press from Oxford. Cheryl and I both took jobs in Evanston, IL, in the same year, in the same field, right across the street from each other. This is Cheryl's second book, which puts her…. ahead of me. And between projects she spent time in South Africa on a Fulbright, she is on just about every committee that SBL has, including the executive council, and she works hard for her denomination at the national and local level. My friends, I do believe that Cheryl Anderson is the hardest-working person in biblical studies.

Cheryl has asked this panel to engage her book, which is a fabulous example of the kind of work that we need to be doing in the guild. *Ancient Laws and Contemporary Controversies* seeks to bridge the gaps between religious communities and the academy, between the academy and our contemporary context in the U.S. I have heard a recurring theme among many of the leaders in our guild—that it is high time that we as biblical scholars take our work to the streets, to move our discussion from the convention centers and the classrooms into the public square. If there ever was a time that our world needed sane, public intellectual discourse on religion, that time is now. I applaud Cheryl for producing a book that seeks to take that first step—to jump off the proverbial academic ivory tower and dive into the deep and swirling contexts of "flesh and

blood" readers of the Bible, in order that the "others" in the text and in our societies might have *mishpat*, justice.

Cheryl has asked us to spend a brief amount of time engaging her work with broader academic and ecclesial communities in mind. There is also a pedagogical purpose in this panel, to see how one might begin to think about teaching a text like this in various contexts both within and outside of the academy. I have been asked to engage the last of Cheryl's chapters, "The Need for an Inclusive Approach Continues: the United States, the Founding Fathers, and the National Identity." It is a wonderful chapter that looks at the "rhetoric" of inclusion in the Constitution and other foundational documents in U.S. society (by rhetoric I mean the language that gestures toward inclusion even when it has no "real" intention of changing structural realities), [this rhetoric of inclusion], using a hermeneutics of suspicion and textual commitment. I found the illustration of Barbara Jordan, an African American former member of Congress, to be a great example for what Cheryl is after in this chapter. Jordan carried around a pocket-size version of the Constitution with her wherever she went, even as she resisted the ways that this same document had been historically and is still used to exclude those peoples who are not part of the dominant culture, whether that dominant culture emphasizes gender, race, class, or sexuality. So how does one find a liberating/justice-oriented word in a document that was originally intended to protect the privileges of white, heterosexual males? All I can say is, "Thank God that language is a slippery thing, and that a text always seems to outlive and even betray the intentions of its authors."

My thoughts will focus on two principles that emerge from my engagement of this chapter. In my discussion I will propose a couple of rough sketches that might point to teaching dynamics within different contexts. These contexts are the key, because I believe that this book

will work well in most classrooms, whether in the synagogue/church, community center, or graduate school; however, it will mean different things to different people, and thus, will require a different set of goals based on the groups that use it for their engagement with the Bible and with each other. It will challenge different people in different ways, and our jobs as teachers will be to maximize that challenge so that it has the greatest effect on its audience.

The two principles that I would like to ponder, that I believe will teach well from this chapter are: 1) the fostering of a different biblical culture; and 2) creating critically engaged interpreters of culture, society, and the world. The first, fostering a different biblical culture, is implicit in Anderson's chapter, and is illustrated well through the analogy of Congress woman Jordan above. It is clear that Anderson is arguing for a different form of engagement with the Bible. By different, I mean different from the literalistic, socially-conservative, simplistic form of biblical interpretation that persists in American culture and tends to rear its ugly head anytime social issues are contested. How else does the book of Leviticus suddenly move from being one of the most legalistic, culture-specific, and boring books of the Bible within church communities to become the #1 proof text of theological conservatives? [It's kind of ironic isn't it? That probably one of the most difficult texts to interpret literally from a 21st C. perspective is the one gets interpreted the most literally in the 21st C. God must laughing, because if she isn't she probably wouldn't stop crying]. The biblical culture that Anderson envisions, however, is one that embraces the text even as it contests it. It reads on behalf of the marginalized in the text and in society—women, victims of violence and abuse, children, slaves, people who are marginalized because of ethnicity, the *ger*, etc., etc. What I like about this principle is that it suggests to us that individuals and communities can be both committed to these important texts, what Christians and Jews alike call Scriptures, while 1) not checking your brain at the door, and 2) while being

suspicious of the ways in which these texts have been used to harm those communities that are "other"-ed in U.S. society. I have always taught my students that I don't know why progressive religious folk, like the mainline progressive Christian communities to which I belong, are so afraid of preaching the good word. Our gospel is a hell of a lot better news than what I hear in conservative circles. I think it might be high time to create such communities of biblical culture. We have many models. The liberation theologians and communities of liberation in the Global South that read with the poor through a hermeneutical lens of God's preferential option for the oppressed. OR how slaves in the South were able to take the religion of the oppressor and transform it into a gospel of liberation—where a way in the wilderness, became a literal map for human emancipation from slavery. These were biblical cultures through and through. And my sense is that we must begin by fostering a new generation of biblical liberating interpretation and praxis. Where the biblical idiom works not to harm the "other" but seeks justice and liberation for all creation.

The second principle is based in the underlying interpretative practice that I see at work in this chapter, that is, how to create critically engaged interpreters of culture, society, and the world. This is Anderson calls being "simultaneously committed to a text as written and dedicated to challenging conventional applications of the text" (157), whether that text is the Constitution of the United States, the Bible, or any other cultural text that requires some transgressive dismantling even as it is affirmed. Another skill that I look to foster in the classroom and in congregations is the ability to critically engage the world around them. That is, how can we as teachers, educators, and thinkers model and pass on to our communities a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion not just in the interpretation of texts, but in our reading of social issues, modern culture, and the world?

One of my strategies has been to use contemporary examples of "other"-ing in contemporary culture, i.e., through examples in popular music, film, television, and even YouTube. The idea behind this strategy is that people tend to be less critically engaged with themselves when they are consuming media, so I find it often provides occasions for those surprising ruptures in one's own or in a community's self-awareness. Of course there are easy targets in Hollywood [for example: How in *Philadelphia* the only way that a gay couple can be made human is through normalizing them through a white suburban nuclear family with aristocratic values; or in *Crash* how all most of the white characters somehow find a way to be redeemed from their racism, but a young black man still ends up getting shot by a white cop; and don't get me started with *The Blind Side* or *Gran Torino*]. Once a classroom or a congregation learns to spot the ways that people are "other"-ed in film, they will have a hard time enjoying movie night; but it is always rewarding when someone comes up to you, like one of my Korean American urban high-schoolers did after watching Dangerous Minds, saying, "Why is it that a white woman always ends up saving the hood?"

One final word… As we begin to think about how to live out this "Inclusive Approach," we must be aware of the multiple contexts in which we live and teach: 1) how to get privileged communities to get past liberal, white, male, heterosexual guilt and move into advocacy and empowerment of others; 2) how to move minoritized groups past the cult of victimhood and into places of empowerment and change; 3) how to transform the institutions in which we live, religious or academic, to change so that the other is not exploited but is heard.