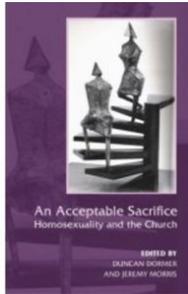


Whose Text is it Anyway? Limit and Freedom in Interpretation - An essay by Maggi Dawn.

Reviewed by Paul Fromont



Maggi Dawn, Chaplain to Robinson College, Cambridge University is included within a mix of nine writers seeking to “explore a position [regarding “homosexuality and the Church”] that is attentive to the authority of scripture, alert to the unity of the Church, and sensitive to the integrity and experience of practicing gay Christians.” They write, as Emeritus Archbishop Desmond Tutu notes in his foreword, for those who want to “... ‘think things through’...” He continues, “Its authors sincerely believe that that a more accepting approach to gay Christians is compatible with the heart of the Christian faith.” “Yet,” he adds, “they are scrupulous in their attempt to promote a deeper and

more open conversation about the issue with those who disagree.” “Such a conversation,” Tutu suggests, “is long overdue” within Anglicanism, whose “very future depends upon it taking place.”

The essay I set out to review is *Whose Text is it Anyway? Limit and Freedom in Interpretation* by Maggi Dawn. It can be found in the book: *An Acceptable Sacrifice: Homosexuality and the Church*. Edited by Duncan Dormor and Jeremy Morris, and published in 2007 by SPCK, London.

Dawn’s essay opens the collection and is one of three essays in Part 1, which set out to engage with “the use of scripture.” And, as in an earlier essay¹, she “opens up the basic question of interpretation,” by reminding us, as the editors themselves write, that a fruitful use of scripture “challenges us to overcome the temptation to launch unreflectively into the business of swapping texts.” In other words it challenges us; please excuse my crudeness, to stop using scripture as a series of ‘proof’-texts, that much like ‘hand grenades’ we lob from our own polarized lines and trenches into those of the ‘enemy.’

“All sides of the current debate concerning homosexuality and the Church appeal to scripture” starts Dawn. And, as a consequence of the inevitable conflict and disagreement that results, “the scriptures” face the increasing likelihood that instead of being “employed...as a source of life and liberty” they end up as a “battering ram with which to overcome the opposing arguments.”

Dawn, in her essay rightly “suggest[s] that scripture is multi-layered, complex and full of stories and insights that sometimes sit uneasily with each other.” She and her fellow contributors to Section 1 caution us that the ‘plain sense’ of scripture is not always as “plain” as we might think or like. The two essays that follow Dawn’s make this abundantly clear: in particular, *Threat and Promise: the Old Testament on Sexuality* by Andrew Mein, but also in Arnold Browne’s *The Call of Christ: reading the New Testament*.

Dawn’s essay is divided into seven parts. In the first, effectively an introduction, we are reminded that prior to the interpretative challenges of reading scripture we are called by Christ to love one another (Jn 13:35), for “... ‘by this will the world know’ – know that your love for one another exceeds the pressure [to factionalise], keeps you together under duress, [and] makes keeping faith with fellow believers the highest priority.” Further, Dawn reminds us that, “the call to place loving one another higher on the agenda than agreeing with one another is simply an imperative of scripture – we are nowhere called to agree with each other; but we are everywhere called to treat one another with the love, care and respect due to a fellow human being.”

¹ Maggi Dawn, ‘I Am the Truth’: Text, Hermeneutics and the Person of Christ in Anglicanism: *The Answer to Modernity* edited by Duncan Dormor, Jack McDonald and Jeremy Caddick. London: Continuum, 2003, pp.61-81.

Dawn goes on to helpfully offer that “for the present debate [homosexuality and the Church] to make any kind of constructive progress, it is probably essential to recognise that it’s unlikely that we will reach a point anytime soon where everyone agrees.”

Therefore, “instead of employing the scriptures to enforce one side of the argument over another, *it would do us more credit, and be more faithful to the Spirit of God, if we could recognise that a diversity of interpretation within Christianity is normal, and has a long history* [emphasis, mine].

Historical Shifts in Interpretation

In the second part, under the above heading, Dawn reminds us that “we [as interpreters of scripture] are historically placed and culturally conditioned.” “It’s easy,” she says, to look back at historical interpretations and their implications (e.g. slavery, corporal and capital punishment) and “to recognise that they are out of date and mistaken; yet it is equally easy to forget that at the time such views were viewed as emerging from, or reinforced by, Holy Writ.” She concludes, I think wisely, that “without prejudicing the outcome, we should at least bear in mind that our current situation of conflict will, one day, be a curiosity of history.” Therefore, “in the meantime... we need to avoid falling into the trap of viewing scripture as a means of resolving arguments to which we have set the agenda.”

“If we are to make any progress,” she continues, “with the issue at hand, and to do so while also observing the overriding call of Christ to love one another, it is essential that we not only read the scriptures, but allow the scriptures to ‘read us.’”

Dawn then offers us three lenses that she hopes will help us “to focus our view and expectation of the Bible:”

The First Lens: Word and words

This first lens has to do with “the idea of ‘the Word’ [as being] associated primarily not with the Bible, but with Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate.” Tom Wright’s ironic little observation came to mind for me at this point, “The word became flesh, said St John, and the Church has turned the flesh back into words...”²

Dawn reminds us that the heart of what “what God communicates is not ideas or instructions, but himself.” She continues, “‘the Word’, then, for Christians, indicates that there is a self-communication from God, not merely an exchange of information, and for this reason words alone are inadequate, and flesh-and-blood became the means through which God made himself known to us.”

“So”, she writes, “while we owe it to ourselves and our tradition to guard and treasure a high view of the Bible... in order to avoid...scripture...displac[ing] Christ the Word” we need to recognise in the “silences the capacity of Christ the Word to speak through the words on the page.” Scriptures”, Dawn suggests, are a “valuable but complex part of our conversation with God and with God’s people.” They are “a secondary revelation of God.”

“Scriptures” while “serving as our guide in matters of faith and conduct” are more than that. “They are part of the means through which we discern and understand God’s revelation of” God’s self, “precisely because they are a witness to Christ – the true Word of God.”

² Tom Wright, *The Crown and the Fire: Meditations on the Cross and the Life of the Spirit*, London: SPCK, 1992, p. 51.

“The revelatory capacity of the scriptures is always in the service of, and dependent upon, the revelation of God in Christ himself.” Or, as Rowan Williams and David Moxon, one of our Archbishops, are fond of saying in relation to debates over the interpretation of scripture, “Christ is in the room.” Christ is in the scriptures. “You meet and you recognise, the living Christ in the middle of everything. [Christ] is the centre.”³

Therefore, “in reading the scriptures...we are engaging with a means of listening to God whose ultimate self-revelation is not through words, but through the Word – the incarnate Christ.” It might have been useful at this point, if in referring to the scriptures as “a” means of listening to God, Dawn had linked scripture, even if only briefly, given her focus, with the other two ‘members’ of the Anglican theological triad: “the tradition of the Church”, and “reason.” All three will be required if Anglicanism is to negotiate a path through the mire it presently finds itself in. That said; the essays of this collection are in fact grouped around all three.

The Second Lens: A Transparent Text

In this section Dawn reflects on “what happens to texts when they are written, translated, read and reread over hundreds or even thousands of years?”

She says that “the nuances of this discussion are sometimes surrounded with an anxiety that admitting to any fluidity and shift in the meaning of texts might lead to a loss of respect for the Bible as authoritative and holy.” Sadly this anxiety often leads readers to a view of the Bible in which the scriptures are “transparent and unambiguous in their meaning”; the meaning is certain and unchanging. There is no room for “opacity.”

Dawn contends that “the idea that the words of scripture can be made simple and unambiguous, or that the words of Jesus are straightforward, are claims that the texts themselves do not ... support.” She notes “that there are numerous instances in which the original texts could legitimately be translated in different ways, and other instances where no clear meaning is accessible at all, and the best a translator can do is to offer a ‘best guess’ as to the meaning.”

She offers that “rather than treating [meaning making] as a dilemma that must be solved, it is [instead] worth recognizing that it is precisely the impossibility of nailing down once and for all a single and inflexible meaning that gives the Bible its capacity to be the means through which a living God can speak.” “Only a multi-layered text”, Dawn believes, “could give any kind of access to the God behind the words.” Recognising this offers a “caution” against moving “too swiftly to a limited range of meaning.”

“It is in the relation of the words of the text to the Word of God that... revelation is located... its authority and capacity for revelation flows from the witness it bears to Christ.”

The Third Lens: What are we doing when we Read?

In this section Dawn develops the belief that just as “writing is not as simple and direct as it may seem, [so] neither is reading.” She rightfully argues that “the Christian faith is living and present”, living and present in our everyday life and in our present contexts – as diverse as they are.

She notes, “... The objective in reading and interpretation is usually not to render a meaning that departs from the integrity of the text.” Rather, “it is to render a reading that says more clearly, more accurately in our current context, what this text was intended to mean *and* in the context of a succession of cultural [and/or] geographical changes, to

³ David Moxon, *Anglican Taonga*, Spring 2006, p. 12.

allow its particular interpretation to shift in order to maintain its faithfulness to the spirit of its meaning.”

I suspect this latter point will be much debated by those whose central argument is that *the* meaning and the way we are to read and hear the biblical text does *not* change. For them, faithfulness and thus meaning, is *always* continuous (rather than discontinuous) with the received interpretative tradition.

Read the text? Or be read by it?

“Our Bible then,” Maggi reminds us, “is a collection of books, written, edited, copied and translated by human beings to record the story of salvation and to bear witness to Christ.” Importantly, “it [remains] a text through which the living God continues to speak to us”. God speaks *into* “the reader’s historical and cultural context.” This is not a ‘dead’ text, mute in the face of a world that has changed much from that out of which the original texts emerged.

Therefore, Dawn explains, “we would be foolish to pretend to ourselves that it is likely or even desirable that we will read the scriptures with precisely the same meaning they had when they were written, or,” and this is important, “at any subsequent stage in the history of the Church.”

She continues, “Acknowledging that there is *at one and the same time* (emphasis, mine) a core of tradition – a recognizable thread of continuity – and a margin of flexibility in application from one generation to the next, one culture to the next, is to say that we see in our faith both the stability of truth and the flexibility of a living faith. The two correct each other: the flexibility saves the tradition from becoming rigid, a museum piece with a history but no current life; the tradition maintains a corrective to the variable margins, saving the living faith from rambling anywhere without boundaries or connection to the centre.”

Given the current interpretative challenges facing the Anglican Communion, Dawn offers that “nowhere in Anglican history has there ever been a requirement to reach identical answers in every corner of the Church in order to have unity.” She helpfully insists, “that it is possible to have diverging views, to disagree and still to walk together.” “But”, she writes, “[T]his uncomfortable unity is possible only by allowing the scriptures to be not an infallible and inerrant rule book, but a *living, breathing body of literature through which we engage with God, and which is as likely to ‘read us’ as to be read by us.*”

It requires “that we allow ourselves a hermeneutic of difference – one prepared to admit that we see only in part; and [one] which remains willing to respect the view – and the motives – of others, even when we find their view unpalatable.”

Dawn reminds us that “humility” requires of us that we “admit that our own reading of scripture, however valid and convincing, is still incomplete, contingent and therefore provisional.”

While appreciating the constraints of the essay genre, my only disappointment with this section was around my hope that Dawn would have unpacked in more detail what I considered a somewhat provocative section heading, particularly the latter part – “Read the text? *Or be read by it?*” Specifically I wondered, “What might it mean for the Biblical text to ‘read us’?” And, “what might this reading expose with respect to our current ways of both being church and of reading the biblical text, particularly around the question of homosexuality?”

Whose text is it anyway?

This is the final section of Dawn's essay and she begins it by stating that "there is no interpretative method, nor combination of methods, that will unerringly elicit 'right answers' from the scriptures. Not because there is no truth, but because Christianity itself is not a matter of ascertaining a pure and certain set of beliefs, but of engaging with a God."

So, "whose text is it...? Not yours. Not mine. Or, if you like, [it's] as much yours as mine." "It is not", she writes, "the book of the Conservatives or of the Liberals, nor the book of the Gays, nor even the book of the Church, but the book of witness to the Word of God himself – Jesus Christ."

She concludes by setting out the challenge that lies before us: "holding different interpretations in tension, living with ambiguity of meaning, and searching for the right balance between continuity and discontinuity."

Dawn also suggests that, "rather than searching painstakingly for verses and passages to back up our own opinion," we should start by listening, that we should "listen first and last for God's voice." In the end, she rightly asserts, "If God is God, there is only one Church", one body; that of Jesus Christ. Therefore, if the Anglican Church "does separate and go in different directions, it will not be at the call of scripture, but through the misuse of methods of interpretation to endorse one voice over another."

Finally, she notes that "if we walk rightly, our methods of interpretation will be undergirded by compassion, by a determination to listen carefully to others, and by the conviction that *above all things we are called to love one another.*"

Dawn's is a broadly accessible essay, one that I've chosen to review because Dawn is concerned with what I believe is one of the central challenges we face – *how* to interpret Scripture in ways that take us from what Walter Brueggemann describes as "faithful reading to faithful living." It is an essay that is concerned with pointing us towards interpretative practices that allow the Bible to nourish an ethic and way of being in the world that both embodies and cruciformly extends love to all, particularly to those who disagree with us, and maybe even hate us.

In her all-to-brief essay, Dawn lifts our eyes, broadens our vision, and in doing so offers us hope.

She and her fellow essayists are to be commended for an accessible and stimulating (though not in all cases) collection of essays. We would do well to read them and engage with them in our own church communities, particularly if they are Anglican expressions of the one body of Christ.

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March 2007