Review of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999.

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It is a great pleasure to discuss your work, Professor Schüssler Fiorenza, in this special session of the Rhetorical Criticism in the New Testament Section. Your work has become increasingly influential for more than three decades, during which you became the first wo/man president of the Society of Biblical Literature, and you have served as a dynamic and productive leader in many different contexts during your career thus far. Your book *Rhetoric and Ethic* draws together in an especially dynamic way the focus, program, and achievement of much of your work. With such a synthetic book, it is natural that many important issues will not be addressed that certainly should be addressed here today. It is my hope, on the one hand, to address topics of special interest to people who, for one reason or another, have their eye on rhetorical interpretation. In addition, it is my hope to exhibit some of the remarkably creative, substantive, and important dimensions of your work that should be applied to our own work.

As an overall topic for my statements, I want to address the question: "Is your program of interpretation truly rhetorical criticism?" I want to answer the question, "Yes," and explain some of the features that make it a rhetorical program of interpretation. As the discussion proceeds, I will raise some questions about unfinished tasks in a rhetorical-critical program of interpretation of early Christian literature. The title of your book juxtaposes the topic of rhetoric with the topic of ethics. Then, the subtitle introduces the topic of "politics." In the context of a discussion of the nature of your rich rhetorical-critical program of interpretation, I will turn to the issue of the ethics of a politics of the marginalized. This is, perhaps, an especially appropriate topic two weeks after a national election.

I. A Rhetorical-Critical Program of Interpretation and Exegesis

First let us ask the question: "Is your program of interpretation truly a rhetorical-critical program?" In footnote 10 on page 3 of your book you observe that none of your feminist works on rhetoric were listed in two extensive review articles on rhetorical criticism that appeared in 1995: one on rhetorical criticism of Pauline epistles since 1975, and one on argumentation in New Testament rhetorical criticism. As you say: "To place 'women' or 'feminist' in the title of an article or book ensures that the work will be relegated to the 'women's section' of reviewers and libraries as of interest only to wo/men" (p. 3). Later in the book, you state that "the malestream of academic discourses" marginalizes feminist work as ideological, if they mention it at all (pp. 6, 91).

One of the great strengths of your book is its recognition that all of these issues are highly complex, and this one is no exception. Rhetorical interpretation itself is a highly multiple phenomenon, as perusal of *The Rhetorical Tradition*, edited by Patricia

Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg,[1] readily shows. The great legacy of literary-historical criticism is exegetical commentary, a program that has manifested itself in verse-by-verse interpretation of every book in the Bible, including the apocrypha, and it is currently being extended beyond these boundaries. Given the way a new paradigm emerges in a field with a long tradition in the human sciences,[2] it is no accident that the environment of "verse-by-verse" exegesis has been the major site of competition for rhetorical interpretation since its re-emergence in the late 1960s. Hans Dieter Betz and some of his students including Margaret Mitchell, and scholars like Duane F. Watson, following guidelines introduced by George A. Kennedy, have produced verse-by-verse rhetorical-exegetical commentary on books in the New Testament. One of the strengths of your approach is its exegetical strength. You have produced rhetorical-exegetical commentary on portions of the Gospels, Acts, epistles, and the Revelation to John that are influencing interpreters today; and you display some of this exegesis in this book. On p. 142 you use the phrase "exegetical discourses" to describe traditional commentary in a negative way.

Questions:

(A) Do you see the possibility in the future for your rhetorical-critical program to be applied to every portion of every writing in the Christian Testament?

(B) Will it always be necessary to select only certain portions throughout Christian Testament writings for commentary, since the interpretation must be able to construct liberationist histories in order to exhibit marginalized voices (Chapter 6)?

(C) Do you understand your rhetorical-critical program to present a reconstruction of dominant voices as well as marginalized voices? When you describe the goal of interpretation in terms of "conceptualizing the struggles" (e.g., p. 191), are you presupposing that an interpreter will describe the interaction of dominant and marginalized discourses throughout the entire corpus, or is the task to exhibit only marginalized voices that attained a certain identifiable social or theological form in earliest Christianity?

II. Rhetorical-Critical Interpretation and Theological Science

It is obvious that you have not limited your rhetorical program of interpretation to rhetorical-exegetical commentary. What makes your approach "truly rhetorical" is that you have developed "analytical categories" for organizing, guiding, and exercising critical judgment in the context of interpretation. One of the weaknesses of "malestream" rhetorical interpretation, in my view, is that it has not successfully developed a system of analytical categories that emerge intrinsically out of both our present context of interpretation and the literature of the new Christian paideia that emerged during the first century CE. Rather, under the influence of both historical and literary criticism, malestream rhetorical criticism has used analytical categories either that Hellenistic-Roman rhetoricians formulated during preceding and succeeding

[1] Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (eds.), *The Rhetorical tradition : readings from classical times to the present* (Boston : Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1990).
[2] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

centuries or that twentieth century theorists like Chaim Perelman, Kenneth Burke, Stephen Toulmin, or others have formulated. In other words, most malestream rhetorical criticism has not accepted the task that the ancient rhetoricians accepted, namely to develop analytical categories dialogically out of the literature and the social, cultural, and ideological context in which they were interpreting

One of your important analytical categories is related to the legacy of exegetical commentary. To counter exegesis that appears to be value-neutral and objective, and therefore appear to be scientifically true, you use the adjectival term "*scientistic*" to describe "the positivistic ideological framework of much that passes for 'science'" (p. ix). It is important to notice that this category, in the tradition of rhetorical criticism, contains dynamics of both judicial and epideictic rhetoric. In the tradition of judicial rhetoric, your book judges much past and present exegesis to be guilty of simply looking like science. In the tradition of epideictic rhetoric, the book blames interpreters who present traditional exegesis for having the wrong values. One notices, then, that the term *scientistic* embodies the negative dynamics of discourse both in the courtroom and in the civil ceremony. An important dynamic of your book is to articulate a public inictment of malestream exegesis, and to use judicial-epideictic terminology to indict it. This should be no surprise. The subtitle of your book is: "The Politics of Biblical Studies." The program cannot be full-bodied, however, unless it also contains "deliberative rhetoric," the rhetoric of critical decision in the context of the political assembly. You turn to deliberative rhetoric explicitly at the end of your book when you discuss biblical theology. In your words:

> If scholars would understand biblical theology as public deliberative discourse of the *ekklesia*, then they could re-vision it as both a critical reflection on the religious-communal and social-political practices encoded in Scripture and as a critical rhetoric of inquiry that is able to explore the rhetorical function of biblical texts and contemporary interpretations (p. 191).

It is noticeable that you use the phrase "biblical theology" to describe the "deliberative" part of your interpretation. I will return to this in the final section of my review.

Questions:

(A) Is it correct to understand your rhetorical-critical program as a primarily theological rather than primarily exegetical program of interpretation? In other words, should the focus on theology in this quotation help us to understand your assertion that "a feminist ethics of justice … is not less but more objective"? Do you have in mind the objectivity of *Theologiewissenschaft*, versus *Wissenschaft* in the mode of philological analysis, textual analysis, social scientific analysis, and historical analysis?

(B) Do you envision the emergence of "a new science" through the theory and practices you are recommending? In other words, if I understand correctly, you do not think your rhetorical-critical program is anti-scientific (as some rhetorical programs are) but actually more scientific than conventional malestream standards of "scientific exegesis." Is it correct that you envision a kind of "theological science" that corrects conventional "historical science," "literary science," and "social science"?

(C) Do you envision that your approach might exhibit the suppression of theological articulation by certain men in earliest Christianity as well as by certain women? In other words, did the better male theological reflections and articulations rightly win out over the lesser male theological reflections? Do you think that since men were "the public humans," the male theological articulations that were suppressed did not win out because they simply were not good theological articulations of Christian belief?

III. Language as a Social Tool

On p. 140, and in some other places, you emphasize the importance of understanding language as "a social convention and communication tool." In accordance with this, in this book you adapt Paul Hernadi's rhetorical and mimetic "Literary Compass" on pages 123-128 in a manner related to my adaptation of it in 1995-96.[3]

One of the results of this emphasis is an assertion, with which I agree, that "it is no longer possible … to maintain that texts have a definite single meaning." Rather, texts exhibit "struggles for equality and equity" (p. 168).

Another result is that "the 'feminist we', which seeks to effect change must be articulated in critical interaction with wo/men's struggles for equality and equity, particularly with the struggle of those suffering from multiple oppressions and working to survive and change kyriarchal relations of domination" (pp. 168-9).

Questions:

(A) Have you analyzed and interpreted places in the Christian Testament where you see struggles for the equality and equity of males whose voices and actions were suppressed by the dominant male discourse the reader encounters in the Christian Testament?

(B) Do you think that personal experiences of struggles for equality and equity equip a person in a special way to identify struggles in earliest Christianity that are somehow similar? For example, if a person was born and raised in a family where one's mother physically and mentally abused one's father, could this aid a person in identifying contexts where some women in earliest Christianity were successful in the suppression of certain men's theological articulations, perhaps with the aid of alliances with certain strong men?

IV. A Rhetorical-Critical Program of Interpretation and Politics

[3] Vernon K. Robbins, "Social-Scientific Criticism and Literary Studies: Prospects for Cooperation in Biblical Interpretation," in Philip F. Esler (ed.), *Modelling Early Christianity: Social-Scientific Studies of the New Testament in its Context* (London: Routledge, 1995) 274-89; *idem*., *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1996) 27-40.

In your list of special analytical categories in the preface you include *ekklesia*,[4] which you describe as:

> originally a Greek political term denoting the democratic assembly or congress of full citizens. In the Christian Testament, *ekklesia* is the name for church. With *ekklesia* I intend to signify the radical equality that characterizes the 'already and not yet' of religious community and democratic society" (p. ix).

Here we see a fully rhetorical act of interpretation in the tradition of Hellenistic-Roman rhetoric down through the centuries. Your focus on a particular social location, the *ekklesia*, and your ability to elaborate the nature of early Christian literature as "*ekklesial*" discourse exhibits a fully rhetorical approach to the task of interpretation of early Christian discourse. The analogy is the political assembly in the Greek city-state and the analytical category "deliberative" to describe the topography of argumentation[5] of this kind of city-state discourse. You have also developed the analytical category of "*kyriarchal/kyriocentric*" to describe the "more comprehensive, interlocking, hierarchically ordered structures of domination, evident in a variety of oppressions, such as racism, poverty, heterosexism, and colonialism" (p. ix). These are very helpful rhetorical acts of interpretation, fully in the tradition of the heritage of Western rhetorical criticism through the centuries.[6]

One of the questions that can be raised is whether the single topographical term *ekklesial*, with the multiplicity of religious community and democratic society included within it, is broad enough to cover the spectrum of early Christian discourse the interpreter encounters in Christian Testament literature. One notices that there is no attempt to use the categories of the courtroom (judicial) and civil ceremony (epideictic or demonstrative) in a similar positive manner, or to develop some other categories beyond the "political" one. In contrast, Professor Karen Jo Torjesen displays five analytical categories and community settings to analyze the topography of second and third century Christian discourse: (1) divine wisdom discourse exhibiting the context of worship; (2) victory discourse exhibiting the context of martyrdom; (3) divine teaching discourse exhibiting the contexts of catechetical instruction and Christian schools; (4) cosmic reason discourse exhibiting the context of the Christian scholar's study; and (5) world ruler discourse exhibiting the context of the basilica.[7]

Analysis that focuses on the political structure of early Christian communities and the political nature of their discourse is a very important contribution. The challenge for rhetorical interpreters surely must be to develop a rhetorical program of interpretation that can analyze and describe the invention of multiple kinds of early Christian discourses, both dominant and marginalized, out of Hebrew Bible, Jewish, and broader Mediterranean discourse. Some of these may have been "therapeutic" or "paideutic," rather than political. These multiple discourses, which played different roles in different settings in earliest Christianity, functioned as resources for the

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[4] In addition to *scientistic* and *ekklesia*, the list includes *Christian testament, G*d, kyriarchal/kryiocentric, wo/man* and *wo/men.*

[5] A phrase generated by James D. Hester in *Persuasive Artistry*.

[6] Bizzell and Hertzberg, *The Rhetorical Tradition*.

[7] E.g., Karen Jo Torjesen, "You Are the Christ": Five Portraits of Jesus from the Early Church," in Marcus J. Borg (ed.), Jesus at 2000 (Westview Press, 1997) 73-88.

multiple discourses that emerged during the second and third centuries CE, which Professor Torjesen has described.

Questions:

(A) Would you invite additional vocabulary alongside *ekklesia* for analysis and interpretation of dominant and marginalized discourses in Christian Testament literature? You have analyzed Sophia discourse that Pauline discourse marginalizes with its prophetic and apocalyptic suffering-death discourse. As I understand it, your program of interpretation is designed to give the sapiential discourse of the wo/men's movement in Corinth a full-bodied judicial, deliberative, and epideictic form. What about other discourses in earliest Christianity? It would appear that certain Christian groups that used miracle discourse, for example, were also marginalized, perhaps both by some wo/men's groups as well as by Paul. Should rhetorical-critical interpreters try to exhibit those discourses also?

(B) If you consider *ekklesial* to be sufficient terminology, could you describe the difference between the rhetorical nature of Christian Testament literature and the rhetorical nature of Christian literature during the second and third centuries that could evoke the multiplicity described by Prof. Torjesen?

(C) If you would invite more multiplicity in interpretation of the writings in the Christian Testament, could you indicate in what realms it might be appropriate to pursue additional multiplicity?

V. Ethical Responsibilities of a Politics of the Marginalized

A very important moment arose for me when you discussed Karl Barth versus Rudolph Bultmann on pp. 185-6. In your discussion, you state that:

> … Bultmann himself does not go far enough in his radical *Sachkritik* insofar as he also begs the question by maintaining that *Sachkritik* is able to identify Jesus Christ, the Word of G*d himself, as the central subject matter of the *kerygma*, the only important matter in life and death, and the ultimate criterion of all human existence. Barth's response to Bultmann that the Word of G*d must be discerned in, through, and against "the voices of those other spirits" in turn begs the question how this can be done (p. 186).

This discussion suggests that your own work emulates Bultmann's work "in certain ways" and Barth's work "in certain ways." Bultmann limited his *Theology of the New Testament* to interpretation of Pauline and Johannine writings. In this way, he "embedded" his own theology in the theological discourse of two strong malestream traditions in the Christian Testament: Paul and John.

Questions:

(A) Is it correct to say that your rhetorical-critical program pursues "the voices of the spirits" to which Barth refers in the mode of an extension of Bultmann's radical *Sachkritik*?

(B) Do you understand your own program as an articulation of a "Theology of the Christian Testament" that has the strengths of Pauline, Johannine, and, perhaps, Lukan theology? In other words, are you consciously reconfiguring the strong malestream historical and theological literature in the Christian Testament in a manner that, like Bultmann's approach, bypasses "less theological" and "less historical" Christian Testament literature?

(C) Is one of the ethical responsibilities of a rhetorical-critical program that is grounded in the politics of the marginalized to interpret all the writings in the Christian Testament to get as full a picture as possible of the dominant and marginalized voices in early Christianity? Or is this not necessary, since a rhetorical-critical program of interpretation must be guided by "theology" rather than social analysis, cultural analysis, historical analysis, or textual analysis that might consider it necessary to interpret every verse in the corpus?

Again, it is a great honor to have this discussion with you. I am looking forward to the opportunity to gain a fuller understanding of your rhetorical-critical approach and the ways you think it may be extended further in the future.