

Group Members' Names
SCTR 165R
Seminar Leadership Presentation #1
February 5, 2008

The Myth of Textual Agency

Summary of Readings

Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006) 1-35.

Martin introduces his thesis: that the Bible doesn't speak unless we give it voice through our interpretations. We "make meaning" when reading the Bible; we don't receive it passively. This has ethical implications: it means that we must take responsibility for our views. He demonstrates the instability of the text in his second chapter by showing how various historical critics come to different interpretations of the supposedly stable text.

- Textual agency vs interpretive agency: two competing views of how texts mean; textual agency presumes the text has inherent meanings that we can uncover; interpretive agency recognizes the role of the interpreter in creating meaning.
- Textual foundationalism: The belief that the text of the Bible is a stable and reliable source (though not necessarily inerrant) for knowledge (e.g., doctrine, ethics, history, authorial intent).
- Textual fundamentalism: Presumes biblical inerrancy in matters of doctrine, ethics, history, nature, science
- The Rhetoric of Biblical Scholarship: Various Historical-Critical Readings of Romans 1:18-27
 - the possible positions
 - specific examples
 - Conclusion: The variety of results by people who claim to be appealing to a stable constraint on interpretation (text, authorial intent) show that the text isn't as stable as they might wish.

Mary Ann Tolbert, "Gender," in *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation* (ed. A. K. M. Adam; St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000) 99-105.

Here you would provide a similar brief abstract of Tolbert's thesis and argument, and then list the main points of her argument below.

Laurel C. Schneider, "Queer Theory," in *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation*, 206-212.

Here you would provide a similar brief abstract of Tolbert's thesis and argument, and then list the main points of her argument below.

Discussion Questions

1. If texts don't have inherent meanings and meanings are made by interpreters, how do we judge which interpretations are legitimate and which are illegitimate? Does historical criticism offer any controls on unethical interpretation?
2. If historical-critical readings are constructions rather than recoveries, can the text exert any control or limit on interpretations of it? If the text can't, who can? Is it even desirable to have such an arbiter?
3. What do you think of Martin's conclusion:
We must admit that we are without secure foundations for knowledge. In the end, there are no guarantees that we or anyone else will not use the text unethically. There are no reliable foundations. The answer to that problem is not just to keep insisting that there are but to learn to live faithful and ethical lives without secure foundations.
4. If methods of interpretation, like historical criticism, cannot guarantee that readings are ethical or unethical, why should we accept Martin's conclusion that foundationalism is always ethically dangerous?
5. Tolbert question #1
6. Tolbert question #2
7. Schneider question #1
8. Schneider question #2