The Bible on Steroids

The Effect of Androcentrism on the Lectionary

Susanne Sartor Ferris

For many Catholics the most common encounter with the biblical witness is through the Lectionary. Questions arise about the method by which biblical passages are selected, the message conveyed by the content of the Lectionary readings, and the impact of the Lectionary on our appreciation of the role of women in salvation history.

When I began to study the Bible as an undergraduate theology student, I was surprised to discover women in the Pauline texts who were leaders of house churches, missionaries, prophets, catechists, and deacons; women who were Paul's coworkers, not his subordinates. However, my genuine delight at this discovery was eclipsed by a deeper question: why had I not heard of these women before? After some reflection, I came to the realization that I had spent too much time with my missalette and not enough time with my Bible.

What I had experienced, and what all Catholics experience if they do not have significant extra-liturgical biblical encounters, was a scripturally mediated indoctrination into the Church's anthropology of women. This anthropology says that women were created to be the helpers of men, especially in procreation, and that they are characterized by certain qualities that pertain to this role, such as passivity, receptivity, selflessness, and sensitivity to the needs of people (John Paul II, n. 18). Every woman, regardless of her actual life situation, is defined by the “two particular dimensions of the fulfillment of the female personality,” (John Paul II, n. 17), virginity and motherhood. While the Lectionary's delivery of

Susanne Sartor Ferris is program administrator of the Ministry Institute at Notre Dame College in Manchester, N.H.
this anthropology is certainly less organized than that expressed through the patristic writings or papal documents, rendering it a little more difficult to detect, it is no less effective. In fact, the Lectionary has proved to be quite a powerful vehicle for the message, as my own experience has shown.

This essay is an exploration of the Lectionary’s role in presenting the Church’s anthropology of women and the implications of that presentation. Because extensive analyses of the contents and arrangement of the Lectionary have been done by many able scholars, this paper will merely summarize that research by offering a few representative samples of the various findings on the subject. My primary focus is framed by two questions: what is the relationship between the faithful and the Lectionary, and what are the pastoral implications of an androcentric “canon within the canon” for women, for men, and for the Church.

The Faithful and the Word of God

The encounter with a biblical text is always dialectical. A relationship is activated between the text and the reader in which the life and faith experiences of the authors and redactors of the text interact with those of the reader or listener to become part of the process of God’s self-revelation (Schneiders, 157). The liturgical use of Scripture brings an added dimension to the dynamic. The Bible is the Church’s book, the Lectionary even more so, since it was formed by the selection and arrangement of biblical texts by the hierarchy of the Church (Schneiders, 64). The hierarchy’s role as God’s agent legitimizes the Lectionary selections as the most important parts of Scripture. Also note that since this hierarchy is exclusively male, the decisions about what parts of the Bible best address the spiritual needs of the faithful were made by an androcentric body.

Two factors that impact the active listening process are the understanding of what is meant by the “word of God,” and the tendency to equate the Lectionary with the Bible. Many Catholics think of the phrase “word of God” in a literal sense, as the “words of God,” rather than as a metaphor for the totality of God’s self-revelation, giving little or no thought to the limitations of human language (Schneiders, 28). Thus, when the actual words that appear in the Bible are considered “God’s words,” the listener might overlook the human limitations and purposes of those who wrote and constructed the text.

This effect is intensified by the tendency to equate the Lectionary with the Bible. The compilers of the Lectionary have created a hierarchy of texts by selecting those passages that are deemed most appropriate to convey God’s message (Boisclair, 109). For the majority of Catholics, the Lectionary represents the totality of the biblical witness, not only because the liturgy may be their only exposure to Scripture, but also because the Lectionary is utilized for much of parish Bible
study and catechesis (Boisclair, 115). The literal understanding of “word of God” together with a lack of extra-liturgical biblical exposure creates a synergy in which, for the average Catholic, the Lectionary equals the Bible equals the word of God equals the “words” of God, thereby assigning tremendous power to the selection, presentation, and interpretation of biblical texts at liturgy.

Criteria for Inclusion and Arrangement of the Texts

The Lectionary was specifically created for use at worship and the texts were chosen and arranged to correspond to the liturgical year (International Commission on English in the Liturgy, hereafter ICEL, 1852). Vatican II ordered a revision of the Roman Missal, so that Scripture would play a more prominent role in worship and in the lives of Catholics. According to the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, “The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly so that a richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God’s word. In this way a more representative part of the sacred Scriptures will be read to the people in the course of a prescribed number of years” (Vatican II, n. 51). Four basic criteria were used in choosing and arranging the texts: paschal mystery as the primary focus, liturgical year as the primary organizer, a combination of lectio continua and lectio electa as the method of presentation, and length, difficulty, and pastoral value as determinants of suitability (ICEL, 1849). It is the criterion of suitability that is most relevant to the purposes of this discussion.

Through its compilation *Documents on the Liturgy*, the International Commission on English in the Liturgy provides guidelines for determining suitability, projecting concern about passages that would present “complex literary, critical, or exegetical problems” (ICEL, 1849). The rationale for omitting some passages because of the pastoral problems they might create is also explained: many liturgies, including the Roman liturgy, have traditionally omitted certain verses from biblical readings. This, it must be admitted, is not something to be done lightly, lest the meaning of the text or the intent and, so to speak, style of the Scriptures be distorted. But, for pastoral reasons, it seemed best to continue this tradition, taking care that the essential meaning of the text remain unchanged. Otherwise some texts would be too lengthy or readings of greater spiritual value to the people would have to be entirely omitted because of the one or two verses unsuitable pastorally or involving truly difficult questions (ICEL, 1849).
The criteria of suitability reminds us that the creation of the Lectionary involved deliberate value judgments about what was most important to include, and what was appropriate to exclude; what was considered essential to express about the paschal mystery, and what was insignificant, or even pastorally inappropriate. It is now time to turn to a brief analysis of the contents of the Lectionary to view the end product of those deliberate decisions and to assess their impact on the worshipping People of God.

Women and Anthropology in the Lectionary

Marjorie Procter-Smith has done extensive quantitative and qualitative studies of the portrayal of women in the revised Lectionary. When measuring frequency, Procter-Smith counts all occurrences of femaleness, including women, named and unnamed, female names, pronouns, or images of God, and feminine metaphors or characterizations of objects. The study found that women or femaleness appear in the Lectionary in 34 percent of the readings from the Old Testament, 6.4 percent of the Epistles, 9 percent of Acts, and 23.2 percent of the Gospels. The total references to women comprise 20.9 percent of the Lectionary (Procter-Smith, 1985, 56). Although this small percentage might seem to be representational of the androcentric biblical canon, the aim of the Lectionary is not to be merely representative, but pastoral in its selection of texts. The resulting compilation betrays the bias of its creators: instead of making optimum use of the available texts about women, they made decisions that, instead, fortified the androcentrism of the biblical witness. Even if the Lectionary were representative of the composition of the Bible, it is certainly not representative of the composition of the People of God.

Perhaps more significant than the frequency with which women are mentioned is the quality of those occurrences. Procter-Smith characterized the references as “significant” or “peripheral,” and then as positive, negative, or neutral. According to Procter-Smith’s analysis, most women appear in the Lectionary as minor players in stories about men, by giving birth to or enabling the mission of a significant male character, e.g., Rebekah giving birth to Jacob and Esau, or Miriam delivering Moses to safety (Procter-Smith, 1985, 56).

Through the analysis, the compilers’ definition of suitability becomes clear. Two major criteria seem to apply to the decision to include material about women: their position as helpers to central male characters and their adherence to social roles proper for women. Procter-Smith explains the first criterion with regard to the Old Testament: “Thus, one guiding principle of inclusion, at least for the Hebrew narrative material, seems to have been to regard certain male characters—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Elijah, and Elisha—as central actors...
in the drama of salvation history. Women are included as they relate to these male characters, but are not regarded as actors in their own right" (1985, 57).

The portrayal of Sarah illustrates the auxiliary status of women in the Lectionary. Although she is a pivotal figure in the Genesis narrative, appearing in over ninety verses, Sarah is mentioned in the Lectionary only once, in Genesis 18:1-10a, where she serves Abraham's visitors at Mamre, and the visitors predict her pregnancy. "The lection ends before Sarah becomes a subject who overhears the prediction of her pregnancy, reflects on sexual pleasure, laughs, and denies that she did so. It eliminates the fact that Sarah spoke to God and that God responded to Sarah" (Boisclair, 117). The omission of texts about Sarah exacerbates the problem inherent in an androcentric Bible by further silencing even those few women who are present in the biblical text. Sarah's encounter with God was an example of a woman's experience of the sacred, an experience that would not be relevant in an androcentric world because a man is not the central character. Evidently this renders the passage to be of lesser "spiritual value" to the worshipping community, making it an acceptable omission from the Lectionary.

Note that the existence of a criterion to include implies that the absence of the criterion permits exclusion. One of the ways in which women are silenced by the Lectionary is by giving the presider the option to proclaim a shorter form of the reading. In many cases, the optional verses are the part of the pericope that includes the witness of women. The guidelines provided by Church officials say that the omission of verses within a passage is "not something to be done lightly," and only in cases where the omission does not compromise the "essential meaning of the text," or the "pastoral value" (ICEL, 1849). Does this mean the exclusion of women in these passages affects no pastoral value? Examples of "optional women" include Mary of Bethany in the raising of Lazarus, the woman with the hemorrhage, and the women at the crucifixion in Matthew and Mark. Perhaps the most telling example of this type of silencing is the story of the anonymous woman who anoints Jesus at Bethany (Mark 14:3-9). This account is part of the passion narrative in Year B, but it is also part of the text that is omitted for the shorter form of the reading. The irony is in the contrast between this option to omit and the words of Jesus in response to the woman's prophetic act. "Although Jesus pronounces in Mark: 'And truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her' (14:9), the woman's
prophetic sign-action did not become a part of the gospel knowledge of Christians. Even her name is lost to us” (Schussler Fiorenza, 1994, xliii). And there is the further risk in the case of Sunday worship, that a presider can choose to “lose” her altogether.

The second criterion of inclusion is illustrated by the way in which Genesis 2:18-24, the story of the creation of the first woman, is paired with Mark 10:2-16 (the teaching on divorce) and Psalm 128: “Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house.” This grouping of pericopes emphasizes the purpose and role of women. In Genesis the first woman is created for marriage and procreation, in Mark's Gospel divorce is prohibited, and in the Psalm women are valued for their ability to reproduce. Thus, women are defined by their biological function in relation to men and are shown what their proper role is in the world (Procter-Smith, 1985, 57).

Exclusion is another way to emphasize the “proper role” of women by avoidance of exposure to the “improper” role of women. One of the most striking exclusions in the Lectionary is that of the women of Acts and the Pauline epistles. No women are included in the Lectionary selections from Acts and so the disciple Tabitha (9:36-43), Lydia, the first benefactor of the church at Philippi (16:14-15, 40), Priscilla, prominent missionary and head of a house church (18:2-3, 18-20, 26-27), Mary, the prayer-leader and mother of John Mark (12:12), and the four prophet daughters of Philip (21:9) are omitted. The omission of the women from the Pauline letters creates the impression that there was no female leadership in the early Church. While Chloe (1 Cor 1:11), Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2-3), Lois and Eunice (2 Tim 1:5), and Apphia (Phlm 2) are included, many more are missing. Neither Priscilla, who “risked her neck” for Paul (Rom 16:3) and was a catechist, missionary, and leader of a house church, nor Phoebe, diakonos and prostatis (“minister” and “superintendent”) (Rom 16), who was one of the most prominent women in the early Church and held authority in her community (Schussler Fiorenza, 1987, 45), are mentioned. Many others who appear on Paul's lists of ministers, catechists, prophets, and co-workers are never brought to the faithful in Sunday liturgy, are never studied in Lectionary-based Bible study, are never mentioned in Lectionary-based catechesis for children. I think that because they exemplify Christian leadership, these women do not meet the criterion for inclusion: they do not conform to the androcentric ideal of women as auxiliary to men.
The Example of Ephesians 5:21-33

Indeed, Lectionary epistle references to women usually describe the correct behavior for women. Of note is the inclusion of both sets of household codes, that from Colossians (3:18-19) and its later and more elaborate parallel in Ephesians (5:21-33). The Lectionary’s treatment of the Ephesians household codes illustrates well the Church’s attempt to ameliorate a pastoral problem created by an androcentric biblical text. The decision to eliminate the verses that pertain to the subordination of children to fathers and slaves to masters (Eph 6:1-9) shows the Church’s awareness of the culturally bound quality of parts of Scripture. The Church also gives presiders the option to omit vv. 22-24—“Wives be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord . . .”—citing the “difficulty inherent in these verses” (Myers, 238). Finally, preachers often deal with this passage by framing their remarks with the “mutual subjection” mentioned in v. 21 to show that these codes apply equally to both husbands and wives.

While this approach evidences the Church’s attempt at pastoral sensitivity, it also illustrates the failure of each of these strategies in creating a canon of Scripture that is liturgically appropriate. The decision to eliminate the slavery code while maintaining the marriage code actually increases the weight of the exhortation for women to be subject to their husbands, because the Church, in effect, is saying, “We could have taken it out, but it was so important for the faithful to hear this as the word of God, that we left it in.”

The option to omit vv. 22-24 skews the meaning of the passage because while the instruction is directed to both wives and husbands, without vv. 22-24 the passage becomes an instruction just for men. The omission also allows the reader to forget that the passage is really about the appropriate roles for women and men within marriage and that the author does not mean to imply that those roles are the same or even equivalent. The exhortation to husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the Church must be preceded by the exhortation to wives to be subject to their husbands in all things “as you are to the Lord” or the reader will miss the writer’s analogy and intended meaning.

The importance of this point is evident in the employment of “mutual subjection” as the focus for homilies. Mutual subjection is a pastorally sound theme only if the roles can be reversed and the analogy will still hold. In order to render this passage pastorally appropriate, homilists have to pretend that the author of Ephesians is not really saying what he is saying. He is not saying that husbands should be submissive to their wives and he is not saying that wives should love their husbands as Christ loved the Church. He is certainly not suggesting that there is any circumstance under which wives would be considered the head of their husbands. He is saying that there are two forms of “subjection to each other in reverence for Christ,” one form appropriate for wives and another for husbands. Wives show reverence for Christ by being subordinate to their husbands in all
things. Husbands show reverence for Christ by loving their wives as their own bodies, by being the head of their wives as Christ is the head of the Church. The suggestion that these two approaches to “subjection” are equivalent is absurd.

The Church’s decision to employ this reading liturgically can lead the listener to the conclusion that women have a role in marriage that is distinct from that of their husbands, and that role is decidedly subordinate, just as the Church, although loved by Christ, is under his headship. Thus, the problem with the passage is not in one or two “difficult verses” but in the entire husband/wife, head/body, Christ/Church analogy for marriage. Here, it seems, the principle of omitting texts of a pastorally problematic nature should have been exercised for this entire pericope, but it was not.

**The Power of the Lectionary:**

*Lex orandi, lex credendi*

The authority of the Lectionary is drawn from its compilers, the leaders of the Church, and from the origin of its content, sacred Scripture and word of God. However, its power emanates from another source, as well: its inclusion in the liturgy, itself. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* states, “For it is the liturgy through which . . . the work of our redemption is accomplished, and it is through the liturgy, especially, that the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ . . . the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows” (Vatican II, nn. 2, 10). The liturgy is powerful because it remains our most deliberate encounter with the divine, the crystallized expression of what we believe about God and about ourselves. There is a dialectical relationship between creed and cultus, to be sure, but it is through liturgy that the People of God purposefully seek out an encounter with their God in a way that goes beyond a recitation of what they believe. It is an encounter so deep that it requires symbol in order to express the meaning of the experience, the meaning of the living relationship between and among people and their God.

Through the symbol of words, the proclamation of Scripture reveals God to the assembled faithful, and the faithful to God and each other. Like liturgical language, biblical proclamation tells us whom we believe God is, and who we think we are. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. What is proclaimed at prayer, that is, at liturgy, tells what we believe. What happens when our liturgical biblical witness as proclaimed through the Lectionary tells us that men and male experience are normative and women and female experience are derivative? What happens when our biblical proclamation tells us that men are more like God than women are? What happens when our biblical proclamation says that men are God’s preferred
agents of God's activity in the world, and that women are at best passive recipients of the ministrations of the authentic (male) disciples of Jesus Christ?

When the biblical witness is skewed, then the self-revelation of God is also skewed. As humans—female and male humans—were made in the image and likeness of God, they must be represented as such in the story of God's interaction with humanity. This can only take place if women, as well as men, are remembered as participants in salvation history. Procter-Smith says: “Because to remember one's past is to have a future, Christian liturgy which recalls past constitutive events inevitably is oriented toward an eschatological future. The Christian eschatological hope is firmly grounded in the memory and the faithfulness of God, and thus in the conviction that God will not forget us” (1987, 409).

The elimination of women from the liturgical memory tells women that they have been eliminated from God's memory. They are not permitted to see themselves as participants in the story of salvation, as active agents of God's grace, as members of the People of God. This makes women vulnerable to all manner of abuse, neglect, and self-hatred. If God has forgotten, why should anyone else remember? They become less able to see themselves as God sees them, through the eyes of love, and so they are less able to recognize God's love in the world. When women are marginalized, men continue to see themselves as the primary arbiters of God's activity in Church and world, and maleness becomes an idol to worship in place of the one living God. When men lose the opportunity to experience the true partnership of women, instead finding divine justification for the objectification of half of the human race, their own humanity is compromised. If the Church is the People of God, and these are the people who make up the Church, the consequences of maintaining the status quo are serious, indeed. How does a Church that does not recognize the full humanity of all of its members hold the world to the standard of human dignity?

Some Remedies

If these are the consequences of the Lectionary's biblical witness, what are the remedies? There is much that can be done to mitigate, if not rectify, the problems created by an excessively androcentric Lectionary. Some of the solutions can take place within the system as it exists. Others require more radical change.

Within the existing system, providing the faithful with mature and scholarly Bible exposure and education would be a good first step. Scripture study and catechesis should not be confined to Lectionary-based programs. The faithful must be encouraged to take responsibility for their own continuing education, and the Church should find creative ways to make this education more relevant and accessible to its members.
Better preparation of preachers could alleviate many of the problems inherent in the current version of the Lectionary. However, even with good preparation not everyone has the gift of preaching. Preaching responsibilities should be shared by all those, lay and ordained, female and male, who are best prepared and most gifted for this ministry. An educated and well-prepared preacher can present even the most patriarchal texts as an encounter with God's revelation, even if only to say that God is revealing that the passage is so hopelessly bound in patriarchy that it has no place in the liturgy!

An attempt to create an inclusive language Lectionary received mixed reviews. However, controversy over word choices and translations do not negate the fact that the attempt was prompted by the authentic pastoral problems inherent in a Lectionary that employs male language for humanity most of the time and for God almost exclusively. Regardless of the language, the problem of content remains. The biblical witness of women in salvation history is still missing because the women, themselves, are missing. A true revision of the Lectionary would seriously strive for a more balanced selection of biblical texts. If women are present in the text as it is proclaimed, there is less need to alter the language to include them. This is not to suggest that the language need not be addressed, just that the more pivotal issue is the absence of the women themselves.

Finally, and most radically, if the Church's anthropology of women were revised, all of the above suggestions would naturally follow. If women were viewed as equal partners with men in the story of salvation, the current Lectionary would not represent the Church's view of humanity's relationship with God and would, therefore, be unacceptable. Interpretation would be altered because the hermeneutic would be altered. Preaching duties would be shared because a Church that does not need to hold the line against women's full membership is by its very nature inclusive of the gifts of all.

The Lectionary, the de facto “Catholic bible,” as the Word of God is an experience of males selecting, proclaiming, and interpreting “God's words.”
females from this domain implies that only males are fit to convey God’s revelation and maleness becomes, if not synonymous with, than certainly closer to the divine than femaleness is.

The Lectionary as it currently exists presents an enormous pastoral problem. If Christians are to believe that both women and men are made in the image and likeness of God, then both women and men must be able to see themselves as such in the scriptural portrait provided by the Church. If both women and men are to believe that they are called to be disciples of Jesus, both women and men must be able to hear that call through the word of God as proclaimed by the Church at liturgy. Humans are not God, but they are made in God’s image and likeness and it is the purpose of human existence to strive to resemble the One in whose image we are created. It is the purpose of faith communities to do the same.

References


