

**How the Bible's Meaning Changes: Argument and Controversy in the Christian Church**

*Proposal for the NEH Summer Stipend*

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## **How the Bible's Meaning Changes: Argument and Controversy in the Christian Church**

In 1545, Protestant Reformer John Calvin declared that usury, charging interest on loans, was not a mortal sin but a morally acceptable practice. This declaration was remarkable because it represented a reversal of centuries of Christian thought. Not only did Calvin's position become the predominant Christian view of usury, thus securing religious sanction for a key component of modern capitalism then on the rise, but it also in effect changed the interpreted meaning of several biblical passages. This kind of interpretive about-face is not unique, but has occurred periodically throughout the Christian church's history. Since the sixteenth century, various segments of the Christian church have completely changed their official stances on a number of issues, including, in addition to usury, heliocentricity, racial equality, women's preaching, and homosexuality, with the Bible in each case interpreted as supporting one position and then the opposite one.

Although scholars have examined the social, cultural, political, theological, and economic motivations for these interpretive reversals (Cadge 2002; Chaves 1999; Jones 2004; Noll 2010; Olechnowicz 2011), less well understood or appreciated is *how* these changes in biblical meaning were accomplished through argument. While several scholars have detailed the biblical support for differing positions in these debates (Howell 2002; Dupont 2013; Olson and Cadge 2002; Wykes 2003; Zimmerelli 2015), their accounts generally present inaccurately static snapshots of clashing interpretations, failing to explain the interpretive evolution that eventually led to a change in the official position. What is missing from these histories is an attention to the dynamic and rhetorical nature of these disputes: how Christian interlocutors composed arguments both in response to and in anticipation of arguments from the other side, how these arguments persuaded those on the other side to modify their interpretations, and how these modifications shifted the grounds of debate inch-by-inch ultimately leading to a reversal in a denomination's position.

*How the Bible's Meaning Changes: Argument and Controversy in the Christian Church* thus examines the dynamic, dialogic, rhetorical nature of the aforementioned ecclesiastic debates and charts the argumentative steps that over time led to changes in official church positions. This project represents a

follow up to my first book, *Arguing over Texts: The Rhetoric of Interpretation*, under review at Oxford University Press, the first of its kind to present a theoretically grounded, systematic rhetorical method for analyzing controversies over the meaning of texts. This method consists of the *interpretive stases*, originally devised by ancient rhetoricians in Greece and Rome to generate courtroom arguments over the meaning of wills, laws, and contracts. The interpretive stases classify six types of disputes that can arise over the meaning of a text, stemming from issues concerning ambiguous words and phrases, definitions of terms, clashes between the letter and the spirit of the text, internal contradictions, applications of the text to novel cases, and the authority of the interpreter or the text itself. The interpretive stases also catalogue the available lines of reasoning that arguers can use to support competing interpretations, including appeals to the text surrounding the passage in question, the author's biography, and the sociocultural context. I apply this method in my 2015 article "The Interpretive Stasis of Assimilation: Evangelical Arguments against the 'Magical' Use of The Prayer of Jabez" published by *Rhetoric Review*, a top journal in rhetorical studies. In this article, I examine the evangelical debate over the appropriate use of an obscure biblical prayer that one best-selling book claimed could reap guaranteed blessings from God if prayed verbatim repeatedly. While this article offers insight into the types of strategies available in biblical disputes, *How the Bible's Meaning Changes* extends and deepens these insights by examining the use and function of such strategies over time.

Thus, following largely unheeded scholarly calls for histories of how argument has shaped the contested and accepted interpretations of various texts (Leff 1993; Mailloux 1998), I will map the argumentative steps that various actors took to alter the meaning of the Bible in the aforementioned historical debates. The analysis of these cases will yield patterns in how the church's biblically grounded positions have changed through argument, and these patterns will help scholars better understand the nature and outcomes of other past and contemporary biblical disputes. For example, the controversy over heliocentricity in the Catholic Church, examined in Chapter 3 of my book, may shed light on the current Christian debate over the congruity between evolutionary theory and the Genesis creation narrative. Or, as another example, the dispute over the practice of usury among the Reformers, analyzed in Chapter 2, may

offer insight into the split between conservative and progressive Christians over biblically warranted economic policies. The book will also serve as a model for scholars interested in studying the evolution of meaning of other sacred texts, such as the Jewish Torah, the Muslim Koran, and the Confucian Analects, and even non-religious texts, such as literature and law. The book is aimed at an interdisciplinary academic audience including scholars in rhetoric and composition, religious studies, history, and hermeneutics. Additionally, the book, which will be written in accessible and non-technical language, is targeted at educated lay readers, especially those with connections to the Christian church, who are interested in biblical disputation over important social issues and wish to gain a historical and rhetorical perspective on such debates.

To help me identify key figures and texts in these debates, I will consult available histories of the time periods and controversies I am examining (Chilcote 2001; Harvey 2012; Kerridge 2002; Lindberg and Numbers 2008; Rayside and Wilcox 2011). Many of the primary sources I will analyze are in English or in English translation, with several of the older works in Latin, a language I am proficient in. A number of these primary sources can be readily accessed through anthologies and library and archival collections. As a Baltimore, Maryland resident, I am within driving distance of several collections that hold relevant material, including those at the University of Maryland where I am an alum, the Library of Congress and Catholic University in D.C., the United Methodist Church Archives at Drew University in New Jersey, and the Presbyterian Church (USA) archive at the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia. I am also able as necessary to visit farther flung collections such as the Southern Baptist Historical Archives in Nashville.

### Chapter Outline

In the introductory Chapter 1, “Biblical Reversals in Christian History,” I survey the scholarship on interpretive U-turns in the church’s history and explain that this scholarship neglects the central role of argument. I offer this book as a much-needed corrective to show that changes in how the Bible is

interpreted result from a dynamic, dialogic, rhetorical process that occurs over time. I review the rhetorical method of the interpretive stases, which I use to analyze this process in the book's five cases.

Chapter 2, "Redefining Usury," begins by exploring the most common biblical arguments against charging interest on loans circulating in Europe in the sixteenth century. I then turn to the writing of John Calvin, the first major Christian figure to argue against this tradition. By narrowing the scope of the term *usury* to exclusively refer to excessive interest and by arguing that the ancient Jewish economic situation significantly differed from that of Early Modern Europe, he opened up space for more economically innovative practices. I contrast his arguments with Martin Luther's, which defended the traditional view and on the whole were less favorable to emerging capitalist conventions, and explore why arguments like Calvin's ultimately were more persuasive.

In Chapter 3, "The Ambiguous Heliocentricity of the Bible," I consider the debate over the motion of the earth among seventeenth century Catholic thinkers. Galileo offers the most famous defense of a heliocentric model of the universe. I analyze his biblical arguments and set them against the larger scientific and hermeneutical context. A key interpretive move appears to have been the argument that the Bible was ambiguous about the motion of the earth, the sun, and other heavenly bodies. By arguing that the Bible could be read to support either a geocentric or heliocentric view, defenders of the latter view could advance science as the arbiter of this controversial question. The chapter traces how the debate evolved from this point eventually leading to an embrace of Copernicanism by the Catholic Church.

In Chapter 4, "Resolving the Bible's Inconsistencies on Women's Preaching," which I will compose during the fellowship period, I examine the Methodist debate over women's preaching in the nineteenth century. Because advocates against women's preaching appealed to a number of biblical passages that seemed to expressly forbid women from speaking in church, advocates for women's preaching had to point to other passages that clearly showed it was permitted. Their responses consequently introduced inconsistencies into the biblical text that they could then resolve to their advantage. Although recent scholarship has begun to carefully investigate this debate, my book is the first

to argue that the problem of resolving contradictions was the primary frame for this debate, with advocates for women's preaching in the Methodist church ultimately prevailing.

The nineteenth to twentieth century evangelical Protestant debate over the equality of blacks and whites following the Civil War is the focus of Chapter 5, "Uniting Letter and Spirit for Racial Equality." The two sides of the debate were largely split along different hermeneutical approaches, with literalists generally in support of racist policies like segregation and non-literalists generally in support of equality. Arguers attempting to persuade evangelical Protestants of racial equality had the challenge of appealing to a literalist hermeneutic. I analyze how various arguers overcame this challenge by reinterpreting the Bible so that a literal reading would support racial equality resulting in a virtually unanimous condemnation of racism by Protestants by the end of the twentieth century.

Chapter 6, "Reading between the Lines for an Ethic of Sexuality," studies the recent and on-going debate within mainline Protestant denominations over the acceptability of homosexuality. Although scholars generally depict the debate as a clash over the letter versus the spirit of the text, the closer rhetorical analysis presented in this chapter reveals a more complex picture. Due to the paucity of passages that explicitly discuss same-sex relations and the limited nature of these passages, both sides have drawn on a wide range of verses in order to infer a biblical sexual ethic that supports their positions. I therefore argue that this debate represents a clash, not between a literalist and a non-literalist hermeneutic, but between two inferred ethics of sexuality. As I will show, each side works to persuade its audience that its inferred sexual ethic clearly emanates from the biblical text while the other side's is a gross distortion.

In the conclusion, Chapter 7, "Patterns of Interpretive Change in the Last Five Hundred Years of the Church," I take stock of the five presented case studies and identify patterns in the interpretive arguments that led to each biblical reversal. I also note common situational affordances or constraints that influenced the efficacy of different argumentative strategies. In addition, this chapter will make some preliminary comparisons between the examined case studies and other contemporary controversies, offering observations and predictions about the development of these current debates. The book ends with

a meditation on the central role of argument in biblical interpretation specifically and textual interpretation more generally.

### Work Plan

My plan for summer 2017, the fellowship period, is to begin work on the manuscript by composing Chapter 4 on the reversal of the Methodist position on women's right to preach. I have chosen to start with this chapter because a number of the key primary sources in this public debate have been identified by scholars of women's preaching and are easily accessible through anthologies and library repositories, physical and digital. Once I have collected these primary works, I will trace the chronological and dialogical connections between them, identify the main interpretive issue at the center of this debate, analyze the kinds of interpretive arguments interlocutors used to support their positions, map how these arguments evolved over time, and ultimately discern the interpretive steps in this argumentative exchange that led to the reversal. After I complete this chapter in summer 2017, I will continue working on the manuscript in the fall. In spring 2018, I have a guaranteed semester of research leave, and will use this time along with summer 2018 to complete three more body chapters of my manuscript. By this time, I will have one more body chapter, the introduction, and the conclusion to write, all of which I will draft by summer 2019. By the end of summer 2019, I should have a completed draft of the manuscript to send to key academic publishers of rhetorical and religious scholarship for review.

By studying the *rhetorical* history of biblical interpretation, *How the Bible's Meaning Changes* will illuminate how some of Western society's most pressing questions were debated and resolved with respect to its most influential text, the Bible. My book will also offer insight into the argumentative mechanics of other interpretive debates, past, current, and future, over culturally significant texts, whether scripture, law, or literature. Although arguments over texts have received little systematic, fine-grained scholarly attention, they deserve a central role in the study of public debates where the outcome of the dispute depends on the persuasiveness of the interpretation.

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