**SLIDE 1:**

**“Appropriating Scripture in a Globalized World”**

 **Carol J. Dempsey, OP, PhD**

 **Professor of Theology (Biblical Studies) at the University of Portland, OR**

**SLIDE 2:**

 Since the Middle Ages when Dominic founded the Order, Dominicans have had a great love for Scripture. We have studied it, sat and prayed with it, used it for spiritual direction, sang its psalms in Morning Praise, Evening Prayer, and Compline. We have proclaimed it in liturgies, and we have even used it for retreats. As it was for the early Dominicans and as it is now for twenty-first century Dominicans, Scripture is one of the foundational elements of our lives and our lives in common together. Additionally, Scripture plays a unique role in the Catholic tradition. Catholics consider the Bible to be inspired and authoritative. Together with tradition, Scripture forms the foundation of Catholic Theology.

**SLIDE 3:**

 Dominicans, however, are not the only ones who have an appreciation for Scripture. Secular people all over the world read and appropriate the Bible’s stories and poems. The Bible has been shaped by many peoples’ political, social, economic, and theological perspectives and world views, and as a cultural document and a political artifact, the Bible continues to

shape our attitudes and theological perspectives today. Because readers give meaning to the text and therefore, there is no such thing as “the meaning of the text,” different cultures throughout the world will hear the biblical text—the Scriptures—in different ways.

 With the rise of the “new evangelization” with Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and the spread of the Christian Right and the Catholic Right, the reading of Scripture has become “personalized,” “privatized,” and “sentimentalized” (Scholz). We pray “with” the Scriptures to see how they can inform and transform our personal lives, and how we might be able to live out the Gospel.

**SLIDE 4:**

 We are now live in the twenty-first century globalized world. And our method of “reading with the text” for personal and spiritual enrichment and nourishment in order to live out the gospel needs to shift and change. We have to read the newspaper in one hand, and the Scriptures in the other hand. We need to have a deep understanding of our globalized world with its countless issues and injustices, and we need to bring the biblical text into this globalized world to determine how the Scriptures we love are contributing to those systems of thinking and acting that are causing discrimination and injustice in our world today. In other words, how are the Scriptures contributing to present-day patriarchy, kyriarchy, abusive hierarchy, racism, gender discrimination, heteronormatism, ethnocentrism, classism, ableism, anti-Semitism, imperialism, and marginalization in our world today?

**SLIDE 5:**

 It is no longer enough to read “with the text”; we have to read against the grain of the text, and we have to interrogate the text and see it from different perspectives. How do Asian, African, Latino/Latina, and other non-Eurocentric cultures hear the biblical stories? For too long, we have accepted a Eurocentric model of interpreting and hearing the Scriptures, and that has to change.

 We have to read and hear the Scriptures from the perspective of the marginalized. And we need to learn some of the newer methods of interpreting the text, such as post-colonial, feminist, liberationist, and gender theory (even though the Vatican has just come out with a document that rails against gender theory which, to my way of thinking, is totally discriminatory). We need to read and study the Scriptures from the perspective of the new cosmology, and we need to critique the language, the metaphors, and the images associated with the Divine that continue to influence our theological imagination and our spirituality. Now let’s look at some concrete examples.

**SLIDE 6:**

1. **The Book of Ruth: A Story About Ethnicity and Culture**
* The story offers a reflection on Israel’s relationship with the nations. This relationship is marked by a tension between inclusionary and exclusionary attitudes toward the “foreigner.”
* Ruth’s journey to full inclusion is not an easy one.
* Even though one of the story’s main themes is lovingkindness and hospitality, Ruth’s efforts to make a home in her adopted land are impeded by the people of Bethlehem’s resistance and indecision.
* Two features in the story signal a certain ambivalence with regard to Ruth. First is a recurring emphasis on her Moabite ethnicity (1:22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10). which underscores the tension between kinship and otherness. Second, other characters in the story continuously call into question and interrogate Ruth’s identity (1:9; 2:5; 3:9, 16). At the end of the story, however, Ruth the Moabite and Naomi, her Israelite kin, experience profound changes in their self-understanding, and new relationships are forged.
* The ambiguity concerning Moab comes to the forefront in the book of Ruth. The character of Ruth brings into focus the tension between kinship and ethnic difference. Ruth is a Moabite woman, but she insists on identifying herself with her Israelite mother-in-law, Naomi.
* Ruth and Naomi emerge as women in their own right, but in ways that highlight the tension between ethnicity and kinship/family.
* Despite Ruth’s identification with her Israelite mother-in-law (1:16), Ruth remains “Ruth the Moabite” or Naomi’s “daughter-in-law” throughout most of the narrative.
* Of note is the point that when Ruth and Naomi first appear in Bethlehem, none of the women speak to Ruth. They offer her relatively no hospitality. Their attention is on Naomi.
* The story of Ruth challenges our narrow exclusivism. As we know, exclusivism is an issue throughout human history. This story, when read through the lens of culture, speaks to our situation today: a global community deeply torn apart because of difference, with policies and structures in place that oppress and deny people their basic human rights. Even those societies that take pride in their multiculturalism oftentimes fail to recognize and insure the dignity of all their citizens.
* The book of Ruth, then, broadens our understanding of who neighbor is, who family is, and who is welcome in our midst and at our table.
* The book also challenges us to cross borders and to embrace difference. Dare we cross lots of borders? Dare we break through lots of walls? Dare we push all the boundaries that separate us unjustly one from another?

**SLIDE 7:**

1. **Story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in Genesis 16, 21: A Story About Ethnocentrism, Classism, Power, and Rape**
* In the story about the birth of Ishmael, six times Hagar is referred to as a “slave-girl.”
* She is called Hagar the “Egyptian,” but nowhere is Sarah called Sarah the Canaanite.
* Hagar is Sarah’s maidservant; she has no power.
* What Abraham does is essentially rape Hagar in order to produce a child, and a male one at that. As an Egyptian slave-girl, one not from the dominant culture, Hagar has no choice but to submit to Abraham who, in essence, rapes her. Women are pitted against each other; a male takes advantage of a marginalized female. And none of the traditional historical critical commentators comment on Hagar’s plight. Most of our preaching celebrates the fact that Hagar is able to provide Abraham with a son, Ishmael. But where are the preachers’ voices that speak to what happened to Hagar? Where are the preachers’ voices that speak to Sarah handing over Hagar to Abraham? Where is the preaching that speaks to ethnocentrism embedded in this text, or do we not recognize it at all because we are so use to having our focus on Abraham, Sarah, and the need for the fulfillment of a promise made by a male God to “his” male chosen one?
* The story is about power, the supremacy of one culture over another, racism, rape, ethnocentrism, and classism.
* And do we not see these issues still being played out in our globalized world today? The very fact that we celebrate Abraham and Sarah and do not see or perceive the plight of Hagar tells us that we read “with the text,” we read “with the powers” and not with the “marginalized.”

**SLIDE 8:**

1. **The Exodus Story: “The Meaning of Liberation from ‘His’ Perspective”: Comments/Interpretation by OT Biblical Scholar Susanne Scholz:**
* We have often celebrated the Exodus Story as a story of liberation, but is it really and for whom?
* “The few women who appear in the story perform typical roles: they care for children.”
* “The social laws in the text and regulations show how questionable it is to interpret the Exodus as a story of liberation.”
* “The laws governing male and female slaves, the death penalty, the relationships with foreign tribes, and the violent, bloody confrontations with the people of Egypt all stabilize a repressive and hierarchically organized concept of society. Liberation from such a concept is not part of the vision of Exodus.”
* “The image of God in the text doers not liberate; it instills fear. God commands, decides, becomes angry, punishes, even when there are hints of a less authoritarian and hierarchical image in the text.”
* “God does not communicate directly to the Israelites; God communicates only to Moses.”
* “The Israelites are set free by Moses and God but then they have to submit to God’s reign.”
* “In essence, the story gives prominent recognition to males, justifies male oppression, and thus supports male hegemony that is rampant in our world today.”
* “Just as in the Exodus story, contemporary societies are structured androcentrically and Western culture is influenced by biblical images and stories.”
* “In essence, the story is about male power, male hegemony, and male hierarchy—one male, Moses, having power over another male, Pharaoh, to free a people who must then be submissive to a male deity.”

**SLIDE 9:**

**4. Images of the Divine: Imperial Images: The God of the Empire (Isaiah 13-23)**

* Series of proclamations against nations: Babylon, Assyria, Philistia, Moab Damascus, Ethiopia, Egypt, Edom, Tyre
* The male deity God is going to destroy all these nations because of their many injustices. Justice is going to be established through violence.
* How can we not see that this is the same kind of situation going on in our world today with imperial leaders who are acting like “the Lord of Lords” and the “King of Kings”?
* And yet, we continue to celebrate a God of Justice, but whose God and what kind of justice?

**SLIDE 10:**

**5. Divine Theology of the Rapist:**

* Many biblical poems in the Prophets depict God as decreeing sexual violence upon women-cities who are punished for their misbehaviors
* Ezekiel 16: God is enraged by his wife’s infidelities and prescribes and executes the rape of his wife. The imagery suggests that the rape is a gang rape.
* How do such texts reinforce, justify, and condone sexual violence in our world today?

**SLIDE 11:**

6. **Heteronormatism**:

* The story of creation talks about the creation of the first two people. They are then identified as “male” and “female”; then we hear that the man will leave his father’s house and cling to his “wife.”
* What we have here is the binary expression of gender and sexuality. Genders and sexuality are defined, and then roles are assigned to them in the creation story and throughout the text. Women are essentialized, the worst being that of a “virgin.”
* Covenant relationship is then defined as a marital relationship between the male God and the female Israel. Heteronormative relationships, and above all, heterosexual marriages, are the norm in the Scriptures, though the Queer Bible Commentary offers other possibilities of interpretation for some of the Bible stories. So, how do our marginalized LGBTQI+ communities hear these texts? And is the God of the covenant their God? And what have we to say about this week’s Vatican document that makes a case against Gender Theory because it undermines “natural law” and the “institution of marriage”? As I said earlier, this latest document is totally discriminatory against the entire LGBTQI+ community, and because it is produced by the Congregation for Catholic Education (for Educational Institutions), it will affect the hiring practices, the curriculum, and the lives of our students in our educational institutions. On all counts, we Dominican women cannot remain unaware of or be silent about this horrific Vatican statement.

**SLIDE 12:**

**6. Gospels:**

* Image of Jesus as the “Good Shepherd” (taken from Ezekiel where God is portrayed as the one who will shepherd the wayward people).
* How often have we heard this image used in our church today? How often have we said, “We will shepherd this task”? Since when are God’s people called to leadership “sheep” that need to be led? We hear this image today in Pope Francis telling the priests to “smell like their sheep.” This imagery automatically sets the male priesthood over the laity, and once again, we are back to male hegemony, past and present.

**SLIDE 13:**

**7. Acts of the Apostles:**

* In the opening passages of Acts, we see that all the apostles are male.
* Acts 2:43-47 talks about holding all things in common---a key text for Dominicans. Then we hear in Acts 4:32-37 that the believers brought the proceeds from what they had sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. The apostles were all male; the early church was organized with males overseeing the various communities with a male preacher, Paul, instructing them how they should live their lives. Dominic founded our Order…a male. He defined for us the common life. He also defined how we would be structured. Today, the Nuns still have a male OP “over” them, and to some degree, all Dominican women, as progressive as we may be, are still functioning under the structure of a male Founding Father, and one that is incorporated into the male hierarchical church. What would Dominican women’s lives and congregations look like politically, economically, theologically, and spiritually if we redefined the structure of our lives as we redefine church and rid ourselves of the androcentric models we are currently embodying? These androcentric models keep us as “kept women” which we ourselves, as women, are perpetuating! These androcentric models are suffocating the life’s wind out of us literally and figuratively.

**SLIDE 14:**

**In Sum:**

 My NT colleague Sandra Schneiders once said, “The question for the twenty-first century is the God question.” She is absolutely right. How we understand the Divine, the Sacred Presence, is how we are going to understand life, our relationship to life, our relationships in life, and life on this planet. Much of the stories and poems in the Scriptures present us with androcentric, anthropocentric models and language for the Divine that bespeaks of male domination and hegemony, sexism, gender discrimination, racism, classism, and the long list I described earlier. Many of these images, models, and metaphors continue to be a part of our prayers, our liturgical music, our unconscious attitudes, the ways we live, the structures in our lives. Just think about how many times we say and sing the words “Lord” and “Father” in our prayers and liturgical hymns. We have made some progress with new inclusive language that we use for the Trinity, but we still have a long way to go.

**SLIDE 15:**

 As I said before, we are living in a model of Dominican life that has been defined by the Dominican men, even though we have made changes to it ourselves. We are existing in a church that is male defined. Our whole biblical, theological, and cosmological understanding has been male defined and male controlled, and it still is.

 If we are to be “Light of the Church,” the work to which we are called as Dominicans, then we have to be completely engaged in our globalized world; we have to listen to and respond to the Word of Life from the margins which includes the plight and suffering of Planet Earth. Our preaching and praying and living must be against the grain of our beloved Scriptures. If not, then we will remain forever “colonized” by “the Word of God,” texts produced by elite male writers, the Eurocentric male hegemony who interprets them and whose commentaries we are accustomed to reading, and a Church that keeps using the biblical text, among other resources, to control its theologians and its laity by writing doctrines and dogmas that are moribund at best and hypocritical at most.

**SLIDE 16:**

So, will we be “Lights of the Church” or merely candles in the wind?

**SLIDE 17…the end!**