

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

The artist who invokes “inspiration” in order to avoid answerability
has also misunderstood what is going on here.
Inspiration that does not tend to the cares of this life
is no inspiration at all; it is “possession.”¹

Introduction

In this final chapter I will do three things. First, I will offer a précis of what was discussed in chapters 2-4, with a particular focus on the circumscribed symptomatic subjectivity of women that 1 Peter constructs. Second, in an effort to pull together the various strands of thought developed therein, I will look at an application of “Daughters of Sarah” currently being taught to and claimed by some women in the United States. A brief analysis of the theological beliefs that undergird this interpretation of “Daughters of Sarah” will highlight how strikingly similar they are to what I have suggested in chapters 3 and 4 as being significantly non-life-giving and counter to the gospel of Christ. Thus, they are consistent with, or represent a trajectory of, the positivistic interpretations of this letter as discussed in the history of scholarship on this passage in chapter 1. Additionally, tying in this analysis to the project overall, such beliefs prove to engender the same tactics and/or rationalizations that protect victimizers and keep victims silenced and remaining in harmful situations. All of these dynamics are rooted in, and thus perpetuate, kyriarchal structures and systems of power relations. These matters are of concern to me in light of the way they are connected to the construction of women according to 1

¹ Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, 2.

Peter. Third, I will offer some suggestions as to how this approach to scripture might be most useful in moving forward with similar projects.

Précis of Findings

Chapters 2-4 addressed the rhetoric of the letter leading up to the household code, the components of collusion with kyriarchal structures that are found within the household code, and my understanding of the construction of women according to this passage.

In chapter 2, I chose to focus on the two specific labels, “refugees and immigrants” and “royal priesthood and holy nation,” and the command to “honor the emperor,” all in terms of their socio-political implications. The two labels, as they are applied to the same group of people, stand in stark contrast to one another, a seeming impossibility for one group to embrace. Though the first is “purely” a socio-political label, perhaps meant to be re-interpreted with religious or spiritual overtones, the second is clearly drawing upon both realms of terminology and structuration, the socio-political and the religious.

Furthermore, the socio-political implications of the label “refugees and immigrants” is taken for granted and becomes a part of what is overlooked within most subsequent malestream scholarship. Thus, this label itself has become an irruption, reminding the reader of daily realities of the initial recipients that have long since been ignored. Not surprisingly, the victorious and privileged status of “royal priesthood and holy nation” has been gladly taken up, by pastors and biblical scholars alike, in the intervening millennia.

The general categories of priesthoods and nations evoke realms dominated by men and male terminology and imagery. There is no space for some “other” non-elite male within the ranks of these royal and holy leaders. This label remains a part of the *habitus* of the movement,

and thus informs the structure of the community and the nature of the relationships within it. This is true, even in spite of the exhortation later in the letter for the elder and more spiritually mature men not to lord over the neophytes their privileged status.² These labels, then, added to the clearly kyriarchically driven exhortation to “honor the emperor,” heighten the socio-political aspects of the rhetoric of this letter and create a natural preface for the inclusion of the adaptation of the household code.

Chapter 3 focuses upon the various symptomatic irruptions within the household code itself, specifically in terms of the call to silent suffering, the command regarding outward adornment and attire, and the new identity of “daughters of Sarah” ascribed to all women who do not fear the thing that terrifies them. Not only does the combination of these three commands produce a conveniently compliant imperial subject, and heighten the distinction between “men” and “women,” it also justifies the judgment of character by external appearances and essentializes “women” in terms of a possession of the male head of the household.

The admonition to the husbands to “show consideration for their wives, paying honor to them as the weaker sex,” proves enlightening for this project, serving as a comparison to the silent submission that is expect of the wives. Regardless of how “egalitarian” or forward thinking the command to the husbands may have been at the time, the gap between being utterly submissive and showing consideration is a significant one. The cultural beliefs about “men” and “women” are thoroughly embedded within the commands, and are thus perpetuated by the text and materialized within the structures and relations of the movement.

All of these textual irruptions or symptoms bear the mark of collusion with the kyriarchal structure of Empire, in particular in terms of the way they are all aimed at controlling the roles and influence of women. Addressing the superficial realm of outward behavior ensures that all

² Schüssler Fiorenza, “1 Peter,” 390-1.

other actions and contributions will be similarly circumscribed. What is often taught today as (common sense) “proper and lady-like” behavior—quiet and submissive behavior, modest attire and being focused upon the male in one’s life—is clearly supported by this kyriarchal text, and both requires and perpetuates the false belief that women are possessions of men.

These components of collusion aid in turning the households of G*d into the foundation of the Kingdom or Empire of G*d, which is just as hierarchically or kyriarchically structured as the Kingdoms and Empires on earth. This critique of the components of collusion then leads into my analysis in chapter 4 of the construction of wives according to these same irruptions.

Drawing upon Hennessy’s succinct description of the materiality of knowledge—what we know informs what we do; what we do informs what we know—I look at what this text allows women to know and, in light of this knowledge, to do.

It seems to me that the essentialist view of women as producers and reproducers within the household defines the overall construction of women in 1 Peter. Not only are they confined to the roles allowed them within the household, but this realm becomes the primary, if not only, way for women to engage politically. Whereas her husband will have access, to some degree, to all realms of society, wo/men and wives are circumscribed within the household, which is ultimately controlled by the male head of the household. All realms of society in which they choose to be involved will be similarly determined or defined in terms of being submissive to a male authority.

It is not simply that the household roles determine the parameters of what a woman can know and do, it is that the control over and silencing of women that is required to maintain this kyriarchal order constructs women to be utterly subservient, and willing to accept abuse and exploitation as a form of their own theologically justified self-sacrifice. These women know

what it is to be afraid. They know that they belong to the man in their lives, and that the married and maternal state is their primary and necessary role. Thus, they are constrained to do not what is life-giving for themselves but must engage in maladaptive behavior, sacrificing themselves to *their* lord and master, the one to whom *they* belong: their husbands.

Given that these commands are part and parcel of the narrative that defines the Christian movement, and the role Christianity has had in developing the western world and the norms of its societies, they reach into the “psychic depths” of all of us, “men” and “women.”

Thus, I argue that the household code in 1 Peter stands within a stream of a particular worldview, one that has remained, in essence, the same for thousands of years. This domestic code, transformed for the particular situation of the house churches in Asia Minor, may not have been something new at the time, but it most certainly has not gone the way of other myths of the ancient world. No, it is one of many voices that affirm the subordination of women to men, this primary dynamic indicating that the whole of the system is shaped by a dominant/subordinate relation. The very symptomatic irruptions in this text have reproduced themselves within the ecclesial, social, political, and familial realms of the western world today.

The real dilemma, in my opinion, is that, at the end of the day, wo/men will do what they can to construct their own lives, to varying degrees, but they must do so within effectively circumscribed conditions and roles, for a woman cannot be defined *as woman*.³ So it is only through a role that upholds the kyriarchal system that wo/men can participate in this Christian movement.⁴ This is simply another layer of the fact that “normativity” is defined by male-

³ Kathy Davis and Sue Fisher, “Power and the Female Subject,” in *Negotiating at the Margins: The Gendered Discourses of Power and Resistance* (Kathy Davis and Sue Fisher, eds.; New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University, 1993), 3.

⁴ Boer, *Marxist Criticism of the Bible*, 38.

centered realities, thus the view of wo/men or construction of them as subjects is understood in terms of how they are “other” in relation to men and the components of malestream society.

Certainly, various denominational traditions will attend to the specifics of passages such as this one in 1 Peter in many different ways. Thus, my intention is not to “prove” that this particular passage is clearly materialized in all denominations, or even in some specifically named places. Rather, I am interested in noting in this next section how it *can* be materialized, and how a positivistic application of it will necessarily collude with imperialistic agendas. Just as the kyriarchal rhetoric of the texts that helped define the movement is what allowed “Christianity” to survive, so too do the positivistic and compliant interpretations of this and other new testament texts embrace or represent the imperialistic and colonizing, circumscribing and kyriarchal rhetoric of the texts. We are left to wrestle with the implications of the nature of this canon that so consistently constructs women within very limited and controlled situations and roles.

Daughters of Sarah Today

Knowing that certain groups of women, or male leaders, might be inclined to take this label, “daughters of Sarah,” somewhat literally, I decided to see what kinds of resources are available that use this rubric. Not surprisingly, there are several bible studies related to this name, many web-sites,⁵ and a short book of some significance.

⁵ The website of most interest to me, <http://house-of-hope.net/women/sarah/index.html>, is produced and maintained by Evangelical Christian women and has several topics for bible study ranging from physical and verbal abuse, to a series on “Daughters of Sarah” (interestingly the abuse topics do not fall under the Daughters series), to how to be a mother or what to wear. The “Daughters of Sarah” series is promoted as being: “Help for Christian wives of unsaved husbands & women who are hurting from a broken marriage or are married to men who are not Spiritual leaders in the home.” The section on “purity, reverence & modesty” addresses the inner beauty and outward adornment issue, closing with this thought: “Do you want God’s eyes and ears attentive to you or against

The book *Daughters of Sarah* is promoted on several websites.⁶ Though the on-line description of the book on the “Holy Spirit Treasures” website claims that the book offers a “foundation of womanhood that is not taught in most churches today,” I think it is safe to say that it is the *particulars* expounded by Genevieve White that are not taught. Many of White’s exhortations focus upon godly-living and biblical or “Christ-centered” submission, elements that are present in general forms in most denominations today. The difference, then, as noted by the reviewer mentioned above is that White is direct and explicit about her exhortations; in many churches they are referred to indirectly or veiled to varying degrees.⁷

“*Daughters of Sarah*”

There is a great chasm dividing my approach to scripture from that of Genevieve White, I will freely admit this difference from the start. The primary, and most significant, difference between us is that White reads and applies the scriptures positivistically, whereas I read and interpret with a hermeneutics of suspicion. There are two things that I know we have in common:

you?” As if all the commands to submissive behavior and chastisement regarding “modest” dress were not enough, the women posting this bible study close with a threat in the form of G*d’s protection being dependent upon their compliance with the explanation these women present of this passage (1 Peter 3:3-4). These women have re-deployed the rhetoric of the letter that draws upon the power granted one in a position of authority, they present their views as representative of true doctrine, and they bank on the persuasiveness of the topics of life and death, fear and safety. Another fascinating manifestation of “Daughter of Sarah” in the blog-o-sphere is found at the website: <http://megs.wordpress.com/2007/04/>. The title/name of this blog: “[Becoming a Daughter of Sarah](#): A missionary wife depends on the Lord while she learns to be like Sarah I Peter 3:1-6.” On this anonymous woman’s 100th blog she notes the following: “At this point in my life, the main role I am learning to fill is that of a wife. Someday, the role of a mother will come as well, but the wifely role will still come first. Because of this, I’ve decided to name my blog ‘Becoming a Daughter of Sarah.’ There are many places in the Bible that talk about a wife’s role, and one that I’ve studied lately is I Peter 3:1-6.” Even in the missionary field this woman still claims the role of wife as her identity.

⁶ Genevieve White, *Daughters of Sarah* (Columbus, Ga.: Brentwood Christian, 1991).

⁷ A review of this book by “Messianic Sephardic Princess” on www.amazon.com is telling. Note the terminology she uses to address G*d and ‘women’ in general: “Wow! I am single and bought this book thinking it was a book about being a Godly lady. Boy, did God have other plans for me! God used this lady to show me just how much I have not had an obedient and submissive heart to...Him!!! This book is not a "how-to" book or "12 steps to do this or that." It's a short book that gets straight to the point and cuts to the heart. The author gets honest and tells us ladies just how much we manipulate and ruin relationships and truly defines just what Biblical submission to authority is. It's of the will, of the heart, full of blessing, and ladies, will relieve YOU of pressure. It's a gem worth reading over and over again!”

the first is how seriously we take these texts; the second is that we are both concerned about what these texts tell women they can be, do, and know, which is compounded by the fact that we know women take these texts seriously as well.

When I begin to tease out the differences that inform our methods, however, I become aware of how deeply affective the kyriarchal ideologies of the past two thousand years have been. I am not able to settle onto one specific factor beyond what I have already noted that explains our different understandings of these texts.

For instance, the reason she reads positivistically is related to her firm conviction of being obedient to God's Word, as she reads and understands it, and the belief that it is *the* source for guidance and blessing in our lives.⁸ Her interpretation of the scriptures is also directly informed by her image of God and who she understands this God to be, how she can and should relate with God, and so on. These convictions, in turn, are related to the traditions and history of interpretation that she has inherited, no matter what denomination she may claim for her Christian identity. This inheritance, then, is directly influenced by the socio-political dynamics at each step of the development of the church, in particular in the western parts of the world. I could continue to list the related issues, but I think that I have made my point.

Thus, there are many aspects of her book that I could quote or respectfully summarize in order to analyze from a feminist, theological and/or materialist critical perspective.⁹ Instead of doing a full book review, however, I will simply describe the basic content of her book and

⁸ I am intentionally using the term "God" instead of my preference of "G*d" because White and others like her do indeed see the God of the Christian faith as a male deity. When I use the latter form, it is intended to be a reminder that I am not speaking about the kyriarchal, dualistically defined God that I envisioned for many years.

⁹ To be clear, what I mean by "respectfully" is that I think I could represent her thoughts in such a way that she would read them and agree that I have captured the general sense of her intention. I say this not out of arrogance, but because of the experience of having held such beliefs in the past.

engage with her interpretation of 1 Peter 3:6 as well as two practical applications of this passage that she regularly addresses for inquiring women.

The reason that I think this is a valuable endeavor for this conclusion is that, while White may represent an extreme position on matters of submission and obedience, her clear exposition of this text highlights the aspects of it that lend themselves to the construction of women/wives. As Rosemary Hennessy reminds us, discourses have materiality, and that materiality takes the form of what it is the discourse allows (in this case) women and wives to know and to do. These discursive social practices, in turn, structure our world and determine how we can or cannot engage with the world around us.¹⁰

The book itself is short, 101 pages, with an additional six pages for addressing fifteen questions she is most frequently asked. The book has thirty chapters that offer vignettes of women's stories and the author's understanding of "biblical obedience," which includes, but is not limited to, topics such as: submission, obedience, being the "helper," forgiveness, patience, adapting, repentance, a meek and quiet spirit, protection, and blessings. She also addresses some of the negative traits she associates with an un-submissive woman: false submission, manipulation, fear, criticism, "the Jezebel Spirit," self/rebellion, and unfaithfulness.

The page after the title page has an "amplified" (by the author) translation of 1 Peter 3:6: "It was thus that Sarah obeyed Abraham [following his guidance and acknowledging his headship over her by] calling him Lord (master, leader, authority). And you are now her true daughters if you do right and let nothing terrify you [not giving way to hysterical fears or letting anxieties unnerve you]." I almost stopped with this amplification, without even reading the first page, due to the ways this interpretation of 3:6 connects with the patriarchal and kyriarchal

¹⁰ Hennessy, *Materialist Feminism*, xii-xiv.

ideologies that I have been discussing in this dissertation. White is clearly within the trajectory of biblical studies that affirms the ultimate value of the prescriptions in this text.

Her explanation of how Sarah obeyed Abraham fits nicely with Xenophon's understanding of the husband/wife relationship. As White asserts, the husband is to teach and guide the wife in all matters; though she may assume responsibility for running the household, he will always be the ultimate authority.

When I move on to White's clarification of the implications of Sarah's calling Abraham "Lord," something that she thinks is a model for all godly women, I am immediately reminded of Fredrick Douglass's *Narrative* and the dynamics between the slaves and their owners. While I will admit to having become accustomed to thinking of a slave/master relationship in connection with using the terms "lord" and "master" in reference to Jesus, it is White's deep conviction on the topic of submission and obedience that sends my thoughts in this direction. Many times throughout her book the reader encounters beliefs strikingly similar to what Douglass narrates was expected of him.

White's explication of what it means not to let anything terrify you addresses only the superficial realm of anxieties and worries, which are common concerns in the discussion of women's struggles in conservative and evangelical circles today. While anxiety and worries can be debilitating and distracting, hers is a move that downplays any of the genuine terror that might have been behind this command, as I discussed in chapter 4, and treats any woman's fear due to a marriage (or partner) relationship as something that she is being inordinately "hysterical" about and has "let anxieties overwhelm her instead of allowing the peace of Christ to rule in her heart."

Each of the questions in the appendix, "Questions Most Often Asked," has its own irruption or symptom that belies women's frustration with being controlled, put down, and

disrespected; not being allowed to be their own person; and having to be fully submissive to their husbands no matter the situation. While each one of these questions point to “collusion with Empire”—mimicry of the authoritarian and domineering kyriarchal social structure, expectations, and relations of our culture—and women as circumscribed by “their place” in the home, I will note here only the two that relate directly to 1 Peter 3:6; they speak about spousal abuse. White acknowledges that this is the issue she has been asked about most often over the years. These two questions are:

1. *What do you say to a woman whose husband is abusing her?*
2. *Should a wife whose husband is abusing her leave the home?*

First, I must note my fascination at the fact that these are actually two separate issues for White. Her response to the first question is:

The principle is the same for a woman who is being abused as for the woman who is not. I would say, [‘]study all the scriptures relating to your role as a wife, particularly 1 Peter 2:18-25, 3:1-6. Pray and ask the Lord to show you if there is any area in the marriage where you are not fulfilling the Word of God. Be willing to look at yourself honestly and be willing to correct anything the Lord shows you. Take your eyes off your husband and put them on the Lord.[’]

In other words, the wife is a possession of her husband, and the ultimate issue for her to attend to is obedience to the Lord *through* him.¹¹ Being subject to the social and religious institution of marriage, even above her own needs and wellbeing, is also communicated in this interpretation.

While I can appreciate the fact that a person can only assume responsibility for one’s own actions, which to some extent justifies her focus on the wife, White’s response offers her followers no comfort, protection, or constructive advice appropriate for the situation. To the contrary, this response puts some or all of the blame upon the victim, which is a classic tactic of an abusive husband/partner. Her words instructing abused women to pray and to put their eyes

¹¹ White clarifies this piece several times in the book, most strikingly in the chapter “False Submission,” where she says, for example, to “submit yourselves to your husbands as unto the Lord” (11), and “yielding yourself to God through your husband is the way to a vital relationship with the Lord” (26).

on the Lord, instead of some action that will remove them from the situation, is tantamount to condoning the abuse.

In her introduction to the book, White begins by noting that the goal of every Christian wife and mother is to “make her home into a place of peace and tranquility,” which is a wonderful goal, it seems to me. The hermeneutics of suspicion warns me, however, to look for signs of true peace and signs of “imposed” peace, like the *Pax Romana* that was brought to/forced upon the Roman Empire by the Savior of their world. Then, I see that my hunch was not an over-reaction, when she makes this connection clear for us, stating that “the breakdown of homes” is at the root of the “deep trouble” that the US is in today. All it takes to make this change in the individual home, which will in turn affect the state of the US, is “a willingness to surrender to God, a willingness to learn His Word, and a willingness to obey what you learn, *no matter what the cost to yourself*” (7, italics added). Women/wives are exhorted to be martyrs, for Christ and for Empire/the US in their own homes.

Thus echoes the mantra of ancient imperial propaganda, reaffirming the central role of well-run households in upholding Empire. From where I stand and from what I have seen and experienced, I am willing to say that healthy families and safe, nurturing, loving homes are central to the well-being of people in this country and around the world. The difference between White and me on this matter is, primarily, what it is we understand is needed for these nurturing environments and what the “family” can (or has to) look like as a unit. We are both speaking ideologically, and the implications of our beliefs are socio-political at the core. By confining her study to the circumscribed realm of the home, however, White ignores the socio-political aspects of her applications of scripture. Her interpretation of scripture reflects the a-political

interpretations that are so common in many of the Christian traditions in the United States today, whether in pulpits, bible studies, counseling offices, or biblical scholarship.

Note that in her response to the first question she also includes the section addressed to slaves that most directly compares human suffering to the suffering that Christ experienced, and includes the idea that suffering for having done nothing wrong is a “grace” (*charis*) from God. This is a permissible inclusion for the context of wives because, according to her theological beliefs, any follower of Christ is also a servant or slave of Christ. The socio-political difference between the reality of the slaves addressed initially and her understanding of being a slave of Christ is somewhat irrelevant. As Schüssler Fiorenza has noted of biblical scholars on this section of 1 Peter, White also makes no comment on the lack of reference to Christ’s resurrection and ascension in this text.¹² Additionally, she does not refer to texts that affirm or address other parts of a woman’s life in order to have a range of texts informing the matter. In other words, the role of wife is primary and defines all other aspects of a woman’s life. This view of women is essentialist at its core.

White’s response to the second question (*Should a wife whose husband is abusing her leave the home?*) is:

I don’t know. I find nothing in the scriptures that encourages a wife to leave her husband. A great deal depends on the couple themselves. What is her definition of abuse? What leads up to the abuse? Where is she in her relationship to the Lord? Is the Lord telling her to leave? Is the Lord telling her to stay? I’ve been asked this question so many times. It’s probably the most asked question. Usually people ask it in relation to others. Very few have asked it in relation to themselves. I would suggest that a woman contemplating leaving examine the principle of submission outlined in this book and ask the Lord what she should do. I think she needs to follow her heart and not rely on someone else’s advice whether to go or to stay. I think any wife needs to be shown the uncompromising Word of God and make all her decisions accordingly.

¹² Schüssler Fiorenza, “1 Peter,” 391.

This response dismisses the effects of trauma and abuse on a woman in favor of adhering to texts that were written by and for men, within kyriarchal societies. While I understand that the devotion to Jesus Christ as Lord is something these women take very seriously, it is also done in a manner that reinscribes a kyriarchal relationship, even in their “personal” relationship with God, as I noted above. Text comes before life experiences. The true issue of an abused woman’s life is ignored and her cry for help is silenced by White’s response, just as the women addressed by this letter were initially silenced.

White’s honest admission that she would like to know how a woman defines abuse is another example of expecting the periphery/oppressed to be able to speak the language of the center/oppressor. A woman would need to put into words, using the “correct” words, an experience that often defies words.¹³ The person who is being mistreated is responsible to make her complaint fit within a form or description that makes sense to others, in their vocabulary—not hers. In effect, her complaint is invalidated and is *proved* to be the manifestation of “a hysterical woman” because she cannot clearly communicate the trial to a person who has never experienced the kind of abuse she endures on a regular basis. Thus, her complaint can be disregarded instead of seen as an irruption of the life-force within her that wills her to survive.

I do not know how White interprets this issue of women rarely asking on their own behalf, but it testifies to the fact that saying anything to anyone is a terrifying prospect, should it get back to the husband(/partner) and cause more trouble. That the woman who is the victim is silent in these exchanges should not surprise us, because, as Andrea Dworkin informs us, a

¹³ I refer the reader again to Barsky’s book on immigration hearings and his discussion of the gap that, by definition of traumatic experiences, exists between the experience itself and the victim’s narrative of it. Robert F. Barsky, *Constructing a Productive Other: Discourse Theory and the Convention Refugee Hearing* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1994).

woman in that situation “loses her language” because it ceases to mean anything.¹⁴ Telling a woman in such a situation not to seek the advice of others but to search the scriptures for what God is telling her resigns her to isolation, when she most needs support, and, when she is left with the “uncompromising Word of God,” she will most likely “realize” she should stay, as this is the message the scriptures give to women.

At this point, it is more meaningful for me to pull back from the details and to assess some of the theological underpinnings, as I understand them. Clearly G*d is male for this woman and for the women who hold to the “truths” she expounds. This one piece of information about her theological stance explains much of her teachings, since “if God is male then male is god.” Lines such as, “the Holy Spirit is your teacher,” and “allow the Holy Spirit to have His way with you [as you meditate on scripture],” clearly play into the model of a woman needing to be trained by a male—which echoes of Xenophon’s treatise and the many forms this sentiment has taken over the centuries—and encourage women to see themselves as the property of their superior(s).

Additionally, the phrase, “let him have his way with you,” is one that would never be affirmed in the setting of a first date (or within an ethically sound work environment), for instance, but is fully embraced when speaking of the way one is to relate (passively) to her God. This catch phrase is a manifestation of the fact that a woman is viewed as an object and is not granted the respect, dignity, and selfhood that all humans deserve. The domination/submission dynamics associated with patriarchy and kyriarchy are fully employed in this rhetoric; more painfully, it is justified theologically. The Godhead resembles an abusive husband, to whom we should all submit ourselves.

White has become an expounder of “the truth” regarding submission, and adherence to her understanding of it is equated with godliness and faithfulness to God through Christ. Her

¹⁴ Dworkin, *Life and Death*, 53.

definition of submission, if taken seriously, means that women are to subordinate themselves “as being secondary to and dependent on [their husbands], and adapt [themselves] to them.”¹⁵ She is deftly imitating the authoritarian and prescriptive nature of the authors of the new testament texts, and in so doing she is “in collusion with” the kyriarchal ideal for the structure of ecclesial gatherings and for the relationships between members of the people of God.

White’s comments about the behavior of women resorting to “manipulation, nagging, scolding and tongue-lashing” before they have fully submitted to their husbands stand out as symptomatic irruptions. Though she speaks of such tactics as un-Christ-like, her admission validates the fact that these women are acting out of frustration in not being in control of their own lives, of not having a say in what happens to them in their marriage relationship. For White this inner disruption is smoothed over by the woman/wife becoming fully submissive to her husband and reverent in her behavior. In other words, in relinquishing herself and her own dreams and desires, a woman will find fulfillment. The reverent wife/woman¹⁶ will be eager “to respect, defer to, revere [her husband] – to honor, esteem, appreciate, prize, and, in the human sense, to adore him, that is, to admire, praise, be devoted to, deeply love, and enjoy your husband” (21). This qualifier, “in the human sense,” is an important one, since this description does sound like the way many evangelicals worship God. There is a logical connection between the utter submission to husbands and to the male God that these women worship.

The problem is not just that God is male—and therefore male is God—but that the image of that God is made in man’s image, which means that it reflects the society and the roles and

¹⁵ A claim that God’s Word is “uncompromising” belies a belief that there is also one correct way to interpret all aspects of God’s Word. The bible is then a repository of truth and mandates, and has become a vessel for control over people instead of a source of inspiration.

¹⁶ I have felt the need to continue to use both terms in order to highlight the tension at work – the text and White in her interpretation of it are both solely referring to wives, yet the message is, ultimately, intended for all women. Just as the text only addresses wives, leaving other women out in the cold, White’s exhortations imply that other women should regard the married state as their goal.

expectations of men in that kyriarchal society in which the texts were written. The issue of submission to both a husband or male family member and the male God, then, becomes a central concern, as seen when women focus their bible studies upon their (primary) role as wife, use their home context (wife, mother, housekeeper, cook, carpooler, etc.) as their primary or only space that defines them as people, and become driven to make sure that other women fully grasp the depth of the implications of “biblical obedience/submission.”

Each of these manifestations, the last perhaps the most distinctly so, are symptomatic of the fact that the biblical images are either difficult to embody—contrary to a woman’s full personhood—or that some women simply do/will not adhere to them. Just as we see irruptions in the biblical texts that indicate a need for the early Christians to appear to be supportive of Empire by their actions, so too do we see women striving to fully embody, and instruct others to as well, the biblical construction of women as submissive wives. The kyriarchal system of the biblical texts will be upset if/when women/wives do not comply with their designated roles. This claim can be made as much of the first-century faith communities as of those in the twenty-first.

When we apply the seven questions that I proposed in chapter 1 to Genevieve White’s interpretation of 1 Peter 3:1-7, we get strikingly similar results to what I found in chapters 3 and 4. “Does she speak on behalf of wo/men or directly to them from a place of power over them? What does this piece tell us that wo/men can do and know?” White takes on the place of authority—much like the author of 1 Peter—by claiming to understand the truths of scripture, and backs her perspectives with the promise of blessing or curse, depending upon how a woman chooses to behave, again, just as the author of 1 Peter did. She learns to embody the voice of dominant authority from the texts she loves so dearly, the biblical texts themselves. She is

merely bringing into her current context the rhetoric and ethos of the texts that have defined her faith community and constructed her own subjectivity.

The second question, “What malestream language does White use that represses peripheral and non-normative language and experiences, and for whose sake?,” is worth discussing briefly. As noted above, White is compliant with the language of the biblical texts, thus she is steeped in malestream language, theological perspectives, justifications of domination/subordination relations, definitions of concepts and expectations of others—as seen in the need to define abuse—and so forth. Though she is actively participating in this kyriarchal system, and one would expect that she then benefits from it, this collusion with kyriarchy keeps this structure in place. Ironically, this system is ultimately detrimental to all people, but for those in power the fear of losing importance and control tends to override any sense of the need for justice and equality.

I will end this part of the analysis with the fourth question, “What explicit or implicit references to sexuality and other aspects of wo/men’s lives that are affected by these ascriptions and commands does White make?” In fact, there is no discussion whatsoever of sexuality, either in terms of healthy expressions of it within a marriage or of allowing the lack thereof or unhealthy experiences guide a woman or a couple into addressing the larger issues.¹⁷ White is compliant with the biblical texts, however, in that she does not acknowledge sexuality in any positive form in her book. By overlooking this aspect of a marriage relationship, she allows men (she would only recognize heterosexual unions) to be fully in control of it.¹⁸

¹⁷ In addition to sexual expression of various forms being an important aspect of human relationships, a couple’s sexual relationship is noted as a microcosm of their relationship in general. David Morris Schnarch, *Passionate Marriage: Love, Sex and Intimacy in Emotionally Committed Relationships* (New York: H. Holt, 1998).

¹⁸ She even refers to the “problem” of thinking of marriage in terms of a partnership: “If you want to have a fifty-fifty marriage you can. But you’ll be half a woman, and he’ll be half a man” (30).

Because she offers positivistic interpretations of these texts, White's applications of this passage mirror the construction of women that I have suggested in chapters 3 and 4. So, for White, just as we see in the text, the reality of abusive situations arising within this structure of relations between husband and wife, as constructed by the kyriarchal ideology of texts such as 1 Peter, becomes a symptomatic irruption that must be explained away or removed. It is symptomatic of the underside of the dominant/submissive structural relations—women acting out against unjust treatment and seeking to use their gifts and voices in spite of their social location— which rears its powerful head and gives White and others like her something that needs to be hidden or silenced.

It is in the most common irruption, according to White—the situation of abusive spouses/partners—that we find the most oppressive construction or restriction of women, because it must counter the power and strength of women when they act on their own accord. Indeed, the symptomatic irruptions in any text are indications of spaces for recovery as well as for materialist critical analysis.

My point in doing this analysis was not to claim that the specific image or identity of “Daughters of Sarah” defines all women in ecclesial traditions. The point is that this text and its kyriarchal ideologies are present in the Christian canon. While there are many congregations around the world that urge abused women to seek shelter and specifically reject such teaching as White's, there is no getting around the fact that passages such as this one are, in some sense, lurking in the collective consciousness of ecclesial traditions.¹⁹

¹⁹ I am certainly not the first person to suggest that a significant amount of the Christian scriptures may be beyond being able to be recovered in any positive and constructive way. At this point, however, I see the value in claiming these texts both for the source they are as an explanation of kyriarchal structures today and for the irruptions they contain that allow us to see the “underbelly” of kyriarchy. I note, with irony, that White admits that she sees the principle that women are to be “helpmeets” for their husbands throughout the Christian scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation (16).

In my reading of this text of 1 Peter (and its symptomatic irruptions), I find that it embodies kyriarchal ideologies of domination/submission, specifically between male/female as a microcosm of the imperial realm, and prefers obedience and superficial peace over tending to genuine life experiences and traumatic situations that are counter to the wellbeing of members of the faith communities. In the spirit of the quotation from Mikhail Bahktin, which opened this chapter, this is not the mark of inspiration but of possession.

As long as people feel the need to dance around, justify or reinterpret this text and many others like it, we will be able to see the tension at work within people as they wrestle with tradition and authority on one hand and what their lives tell them is life-giving and constructive on the other. A text such as this one stands as a reminder and protector of the kyriarchal system and all its attendant exploitative and oppressive power relations.

The Next Step

A text in non-biblical literature with an homogeneous and essentialized portrait of women or that mandates the silencing of them the way this passage of 1 Peter does can be easily noted and critiqued for its constrictive parameters for women. When it comes to a similar critique of texts in the Christian canon, however, the critique is not so easily heard, received, “allowed” or encouraged. The quality, or source, of the inspiration of scripture is deemed to be wholly Other than that of “secular” texts. As I have suggested in various ways throughout this project, the claim that biblical texts or their interpretations are “God-inspired” has the power of performative speech. Thus, the application of them becomes materialized in our lives and in the structures of our society, along with the requisite silencing and marginalization of “others” that is required to sustain them.

As a woman who has embraced such silencing to my own detriment, taught it to the detriment of others, and who witnesses it every day in various forms all around me, I am reminded of how deeply affective these texts have been and that they have a material reality today.

The battles that go on over women's reproductivity today are given solid grounding here in the scriptures, and the married, preferably maternal, state is therefore the most approved (ecclesiastically defined) role for women from the foundation of the ecclesiastical organization.

As Hennessy notes,

If we acknowledge, for instance, that the discursive struggles over woman's reproductive body in the U.S. now have less to do with women's "choice"—or even with abortion per se—than with the maintenance of a social order in which the few still benefit from the work of many, where power and resources are distributed on the basis of wealth not human worth or need, and women are generally devalued, we can begin to make sense of the contest over abortion from the standpoint of those who are already most affected by the legislation of women's bodies—the thousands of poor women who are also disproportionately women of color.²⁰

We should not be surprised to see women's reproductivity so closely associated with social order today, since it has been a focal concern since recorded history, both directly, as in the laws of a territory or anachronistically labeled "nation," and indirectly, as we see in this passage of 1 Peter. The question of the discursively constructed subject then applies to constructions within this new testament text as well as to the ways scholars, laity and the church have heeded or sought to deny the socio-political implications haunting its surface.

I look around me today and watch the battle over women's bodies, their presumably inherent right to do what they wish with their bodies in relation to other people, and their "right" to be able to have access to prophylactics. I see the government trying to decide how to handle social security in this country and hear vague resonances with commands and regulations

²⁰ Hennessy, *Materialist Feminism*, p. xvi.

recorded in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. I see that orphans and widows are still, to this day, members of our society who are stigmatized for being who they are, not even for something they have done but for the circumstances of life. Further, to the extent that widows were dependent upon their former husbands for their needs, the issue of how she will survive is still very real and present in our society. The fact that “some things never change” drives me to look at how we handle these ongoing socio-cultural realities: have we improved upon the reactions and institutionalized responses of our forebearers? Or are we simply repeating them, perhaps with our own style, but not in qualitatively or substantially different ways?

When irruptions in biblical texts are taken prescriptively, or positivistically as Genevieve White does, we end up reinscribing oppressive and exploitative relations within our socio-political structures. As Hartsock reminds us, the nature of the roles each person can have within a given social organization is determined by the nature of the overall ideology of the movement. If, however, we allow these texts to reveal to us the underside of kyriarchy, as the “Daughters of Sarah” example does, we might find a source of connection for those who are oppressed and, through their voices, the means to critique the social structure that creates their situation. The people who need empowerment receive it and become the source of new knowledges and engaged power that will create a different world.²¹

It is my hope that in “taking seriously” the biblical texts in ways I have suggested in this project we can allow them to speak to us in ways that are not simply prescriptive—which is the understandable application when every word is believed to be “inspired” by God—but foremost and primarily as lenses that allow us to see the kyriarchal power relations, irruptions of the struggle of wo/men to liberate themselves and those around them from oppressive socio-political

²¹ Nancy Hartsock, “Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?” in *Feminism/Postmodernism* (Linda J. Nicholson, ed.; New York: Routledge, 1990), 4, 171.

expectations and structures, and life-threatening (instead of life-giving) constructions of wo/men in them. We must face these demons of possession before we can exorcise them and embrace lives of fullness, mutuality, and wholeness for all people.