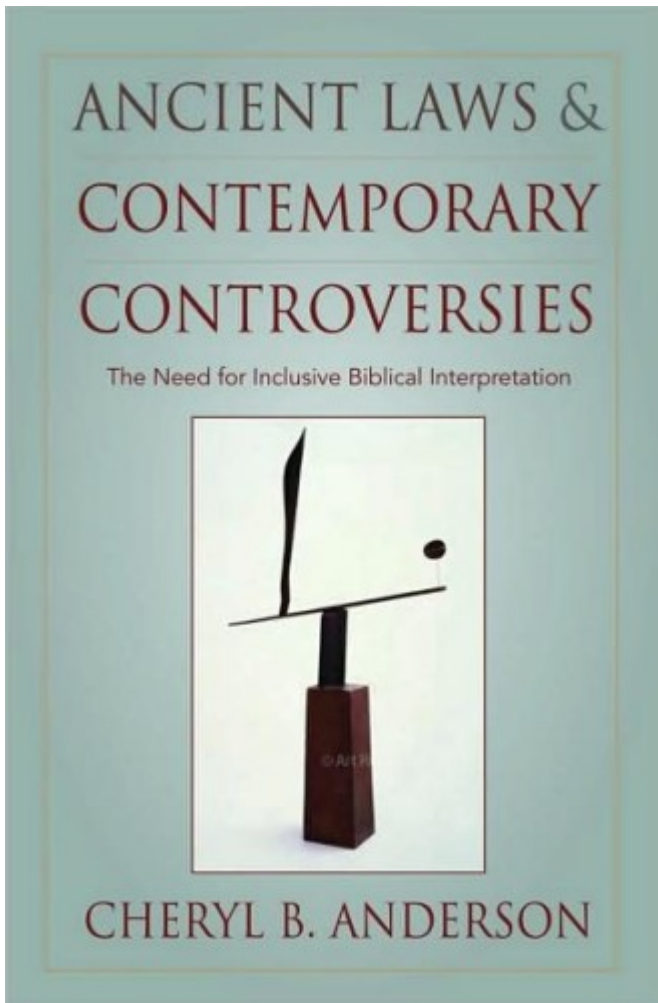


# A review of Ancient Laws and Contemporary Controversies

reviewed by [Thomas W. Ogletree](#) in the [November 2, 2010](#) issue

## In Review



## **Ancient Laws and Contemporary Controversies**

By Cheryl B. Anderson  
Oxford University Press

Some of the most difficult challenges confronting Christian commitments to an inclusive vision of human well-being involve the effective disclosure of well-established, taken-for-granted practices that unjustly subordinate, marginalize or exclude selected groups of people while reinforcing the interests of those in positions of power and privilege. Cheryl Anderson's project is to unmask practices of this kind, especially practices that have been justified by appeals to selected biblical texts.

She cites Audre Lorde's account of "mythical norms" in describing systems of thought that undergird problematic social practices—that is, ways of thinking that may be widely accepted but that nonetheless favor the privileged, in particular those who are white, male, heterosexual and financially secure.

Anderson examines a selected set of biblical resources that disclose the difficulty and urgency of fostering more inclusive processes of interpretation: ancient laws in the Pentateuch, narratives in the books of Ruth and Esther, synoptic accounts of Jesus' critical engagements with Pharisees, and undisputed Pauline epistles. She directs attention to laws in the Pentateuch that are offensive to many contemporary readers—in particular, laws that mandate subordinate roles for women within a patriarchal order, that sanction systems of slavery, that authorize the slaughter of defeated foes and that portray sexual contacts between males as perverse expressions of uncontrolled sexual desires.

Anderson associates her inclusive vision most closely with synoptic accounts of Jesus' Galilean mission. She stresses the prophetic substance of Jesus' message, especially his diligent outreach to those who were poor, "unclean," sick and outcast. She presents Paul's contributions in a more equivocal fashion. His gentile mission did embody an inclusive vision, embracing Jew and gentile, slave and free, and male and female as one people in Jesus Christ. He also collaborated with women leaders in his activities, and he embraced Onesimus, a runaway slave, as a beloved brother in Christ. At the same time he upheld subordinate roles for women in households and churches, and he advised slaves to remain content with their social placement.

Anderson reminds us of parallel complexities in the evolution of the U.S. federal democracy: the vote was initially limited to white male property owners, states were permitted to maintain slavery, and the rights of Native Americans were disregarded. Anderson acknowledges that the scriptures, unlike the Constitution, cannot be

amended. At the same time she stresses the fact that biblical texts do take on different meanings in changing social settings.

Anderson's primary goal is to advocate a hermeneutical ethic that can generate more inclusive readings of biblical texts with special attention to texts that have frequently been cited to legitimate the subordination and marginalization of particular groups of people. The central idea is that people who have been stereotyped as "the other" must be given meaningful opportunities to participate in interpretive processes. Indeed, ethically sound processes should be social and collaborative, with all participants having a voice in discerning the meaning of texts under study.

The underlying presumption is that biblical authority does not reside in the specific content of particular texts, nor can the meaning of these texts be reduced to the author's intention or to some reconstruction of their ancient meaning. Written texts require interpretation, and more than one reading may be plausible.

Anderson's list of ethical standards for inclusive biblical interpretation does include critical attention to the social and historical contexts that are reflected in particular texts, insofar as they can be credibly reconstructed. The contexts in question will invariably manifest taken-for-granted systems of order that were common to the ancient world, reflecting values that cannot be equated with the substance of the biblical message. Particular texts must be read, moreover, in comparison with other biblical texts that address analogous or overlapping themes.

Anderson contends that participants in collective processes of interpretation must make fully explicit their own social placements and consider how those placements might affect their understandings. They must also explain why they have chosen a particular interpretation of the text in question in comparison with other plausible options. Finally, they must engage in substantive dialogue with other participants in these interpretive processes, especially participants who might be differently affected by certain readings. They must be particularly sensitive to the harm that standard interpretations might inflict on those who have been marginalized, subordinated or excluded within prevailing social arrangements.

Anderson's project is by no means an unprecedented or original undertaking even though it remains highly controversial. It is distinguished by her effective integration of a broad range of resources that are pertinent to her central theses. She draws on

the contributions of prominent feminist scholars, such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Rosemary Ruether, Letty Russell and Mary Ann Tolbert; she examines with care the works of Dale Martin, Gary Comstock and Jack Rogers, all scholars who have called into question standard readings of biblical texts frequently cited to condemn homosexuality; and she takes account of energetic prophetic voices such as those of Howard Thurman, William Sloane Coffin and Steve de Gruchy.

She also engages a wide array of biblical scholars and suggests ways in which her approach to the scriptures might be rendered compatible with the perspectives of Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Wesley. She highlights their Christocentric understandings of the word of God and their attention to the power of the preached word in vibrant faith communities.

This is a valuable undertaking, especially in the attention it gives to patterns of exclusion associated with gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and social class. The study's primary weaknesses are related to its ambitious scope. She neglects Israel's covenant traditions and its distinctive prophetic legacy and thus provides an unduly negative picture of basic Old Testament teachings. Similarly, she does not adequately demonstrate how her relational approach to biblical interpretation can be rendered compatible with the perspectives of Luther, Calvin and Wesley. Nonetheless, she offers a compelling account of the inclusive promises of the Christian message, one highly pertinent to contemporary social realities.