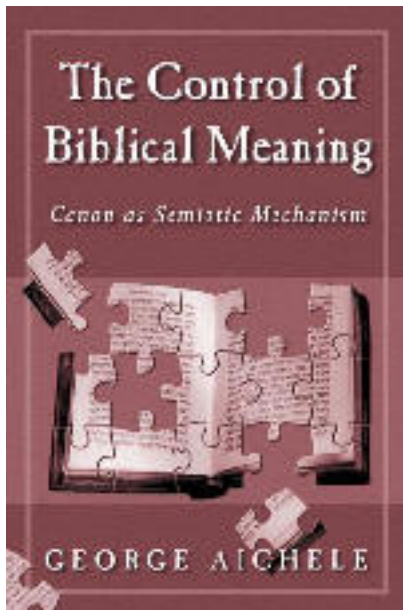


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**Aichele, George**

***The Control of Biblical Meaning: Canon as Semiotic Mechanism***

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From the emergence of canonical criticism in biblical studies to the canon wars in departments of comparative literature, the theory and practice of canon has been much debated in recent years. George Aichele's book is a sophisticated, wide-ranging, and provocative contribution to this debate.

The subtitle of the book signals Aichele's theoretical perspective: postmodern semiotics. The main title of the book signals his main thesis: the establishment of a canon is an ideological gesture, seeking the power to control the making of meaning by anyone reading a book within the canon.

After an introductory chapter, the book falls into two parts. Part 1, entitled "The Control of Denotation," deals with the many ways in which the biblical canon attempts to control the meaning of its constituent texts. Chapter 1, "A Semiotics of Canon," deals with semiotic theory and the ideology of canon. Here Aichele underscores the paradoxical tensions of the double Christian canon of Old Testament plus New Testament. Chapter 2, "The Technology of Text," addresses the media history of the Bible, from ancient oral culture to the digital age. Aichele argues that the establishment of the biblical canon went hand in hand with the triumph of the codex over the scroll, and as the codex is increasingly displaced today by digital, electronic media, the canon is likely also to

decline in influence. In Chapter 3, “Ideologies of Translation,” Aichele discusses Christianity’s heavy investment in a “logocentric” view of the language of the Bible. The meaning of the words of the Bible is commonly thought to be independent of the words themselves and hence reliably available to be translated from one language to another. Chapter 4, “The Imperial Bible,” addresses the Bible as a “classic” and as an instrument of imperial ideology.

After exploring in part 1 the ways in which the biblical canon attempts to control the denotations of biblical language, part 2, entitled “Wild Connotations,” explores instances in which the canonical efforts to constrain meaning break down, as unruly connotations overwhelm canonically domesticated denotations. In a series of brilliant, provocative readings, Aichele reads Old Testament passages over against New Testament passages (e.g., Babel vis-à-vis Pentecost), biblical texts within theoretical frameworks provided by semioticians or postmodern theorists (e.g., Umberto Eco, C. S. Peirce, and Roland Barthes), noncanonical literary texts juxtaposed with canonical texts (e.g., reading the Bible alongside literary texts from Franz Kafka and Lewis Carroll), and aberrant, “unorthodox” texts within the canon itself that chafe under the domination of their more conventional canonical neighbors (e.g., Mark and its “correctors,” Matthew and Luke).

In a final chapter Aichele considers “The Future of the Christian Canon.” The prospects for the canon are not promising, he suggests. Under the pressures of modernity, the canon has been unraveling for quite some time. In the last sentence of the book, he states: “As humanity moves deeper and deeper into the emerging electronic culture, the biblical canon, itself the product of premodern imperialism, will either be radically transformed or else dissolved entirely into something quite different” (231).

Aichele’s book has many strengths that make it a valuable addition to the literature on canon. His exploration of the inherent contradictions built into the double Christian canon is shrewd and insightful. It is good to be reminded of the clear purpose of the New Testament to subordinate and control the reading of what Christians have called the “Old Testament.” Aichele’s discussion of the semiotics and ideology of Bible translation is sophisticated and subtle. He is unquestionably correct to label as “logocentric” the age-old Christian understanding of the language of the Bible. It has indeed been a common Christian practice to try to break free from the concrete particularity of biblical texts in order to pursue a supposed transcendent meaning independent of the texts, which is thought to be endlessly translatable into one language after another. In good postmodern style, Aichele offers painstakingly close readings of biblical texts. For example, what do we make of the supposed christological title “son of man” in Mark, in light of the “sons of men” in Mark 3:28? If we are honest with ourselves, does not that plural form of the expression cast into doubt the meaning of the singular form? Finally, Aichele displays

deep insight into the media history of the Bible, from ancient orality to the current emergence of cyberculture. Seldom does one read a learned work on the biblical canon that ends with a foray through a cyberpunk sci-fi classic, such as Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash!* However, as Aichele notes, if we wish to understand where our culture, including the biblical canon, is headed today, one instructive signpost is science fiction, which is not so much a pointer to future possibilities as it is an indicator of present realities.

On other matters, I would respectfully take issue with Aichele. Although I would agree with many of his claims about the ambiguities and paradoxes of the biblical canon, the tenor of his book is too pessimistic for my taste. He claims that "the biblical canon is a very powerful force in the present world, and it functions in a primarily negative or reactionary way—that is, the canon *prevents* readers from freely reading the texts of the Bible" (12; emphasis original). I find this too negative and oddly one-sided, especially coming from a postmodernist who knows how to sniff out and deconstruct binary oppositions. Aichele himself repeatedly demonstrates that, besides being instruments of domination, canons are also engines for generating new meanings galore. Acceptance of the canon has hardly prevented countless Christian readers from constructing the most ingenious readings, all based ostensibly on the canon! I would have thought that Aichele's postmodern sensibilities would have led him to stress more the paradox of the canon as *both* an instrument of control *and* a generator of new and perhaps even liberating meanings (a paradox explored in a now classic article on canon by Jonathan Z. Smith, cited by Aichele).

Alongside a one-sided construction of the function of the canon is a surprisingly univocal understanding of Christian orthodoxy. It sounds strange to my ears to hear the usually subtle Aichele employ such sweeping expressions as "Christianity," "all Christians," and "according to Christian belief" (80, 82), as if Christianity were a single, undifferentiated phenomenon.

It often appears that Aichele is battling a straw man, a caricature of a domineering biblical orthodoxy. In spite of the centrality of the ideal of the canon in the rhetoric of much historical Christianity, there is good reason to question the material centrality of the canon in the everyday lives of most Christians through the ages. To consider only one example, Aichele credits the early Christian adoption of the codex with a key role in establishing the canon, since a single codex could contain the entire double canon of Old Testament plus New Testament. However, manuscript codices of the entire Bible are extraordinarily rare. It is not until the printing press is invented that it finally becomes feasible to construct a version of Christianity that claims to revolve around "The Bible," because the average Christian could at last hold the complete Bible in her or his hands. Yes, the canon was more or less fixed by the fourth or fifth centuries, but if most

Christians before Gutenberg could not read, and if those who could read were lucky to get their hands on only a few books of the canon, then in what sense was the canon for them really a canon?

Semiotics does not necessarily restrict itself to the consideration of human language, but semioticians do have a tendency to consider linguistic phenomena primarily, above other systems of signification. Consequently, a semiotic approach to the Bible has a tendency to foreground the words of scripture and the rhetoric about the words of scripture. As I ponder the future of the canon, however, I find myself wondering less about words and more about lives. Biblical religion, it seems to me, has always been more about living biblically—whatever that might mean!—than about the words written in the Bible. I agree with Aichele that the biblical canon has been under pressure for centuries and that it is probably in the process now of either fading away or, more likely, mutating into something radically different from what it has been. But to see what is happening in our midst to the biblical traditions, we need to look beyond the words in the texts, and beyond the rhetoric about the words in the texts, to see what is happening in the lives of people who are nourished, energized, and occasionally maybe even liberated by the biblical canon.