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Chapter 1

The Patriarchal Bible

Few would deny that the Bible is an overwhelmingly patriarchal book. The opening chapters of Genesis (Gen. 2–3) strike the keynote of woman's inferiority, and it is a note that subsequently resonates throughout Scripture. The biblical traditions reflect a predominantly androcentric world-view which relegates women to the margins and assigns to them a subordinate role in the religious and social life of Israel. The patriarchal ethos is reflected in various complexes of tradition, ranging from the legal texts to the narratives, and from the prophetic texts to the sayings encountered in the wisdom literature.

The Legal Tradition

The laws contained in the Pentateuch appear to be addressed to a society in which only the male was regarded as a legally responsible person. The commandments of the Decalogue, for example, are framed in the second person masculine form,¹ and their content suggests that they were directed at the adult male heads of households who possessed children, cattle, land and servants (Ex. 20:1–17).² It was only in exceptional cases that women became the subject of legislation (cf. Ex. 21:7–11, 22–5; 22:16–17); for the most part the law did not address them or even acknowledge their existence.³

That the Pentateuchal laws reflect an exclusively male perspective is evident from several enactments. The laws concerning vows, for example, presuppose that women were under the authority of their father before marriage (Num. 30:3–5), and under the authority of their husbands after marriage (Num. 30:6–15), for the vow made by a daughter or a married woman needed the consent of the father or husband to be valid, and if such consent was withheld the vow was regarded as null and void. The inferior position of women is also clear from the laws pertaining to inheritance in the Hebrew Bible, for property was regularly transmitted through the male line, and daughters were permitted to inherit the property of their fathers only if there were no male heirs (Num. 27:1–11; 36:1–12).⁴ That the male was treated more favourably than the female is also evident from the slave laws, for the Hebrew male slave was automatically released after six years of service (Ex. 21:2), but no such freedom was permitted the female slave (Ex. 21:7).⁵

The subordinate position of women was equally apparent in Israel's cultic legislation, for only males were entitled to serve as priests, and although women were not excluded from cultic observances (Deut. 12:12; 31:12), they were generally regarded as inferior participants in the worshipping community.⁶ Central to Israel's cultic laws was the concept of ritual purity, and here, too, significant distinctions were drawn between men and women. According to Lev. 15:16–24, all bodily discharges of males and females were unclean; however, whereas the discharge of a man's semen rendered him unclean only 'until the evening' (v.16), a woman's menstrual discharge rendered her unclean for seven days (v.19). Moreover, after the period of uncleanness was over, both men and women were expected to bring offerings to the priest at the sanctuary, but whereas the men could bring their offerings 'before the Lord' (v.14), the woman who brought an offering was restricted to the entrance of the tent of meeting (v.29), the implication being that only men could come into the divine presence. Also only the male was required to 'wash his clothes and bathe his body in fresh water' (v.13) before approaching the sanctuary; such symbolic cleansing was not required of the female, presumably because she would not be appearing directly before God.

The distinction between male and female was also evident in the laws concerning purification after childbirth, for a woman who had given birth to a son was regarded as unclean for only seven days, whereas if she had given birth to a daughter she would have been regarded as unclean for fourteen days; moreover, in the former case, the mother had to wait for a further thirty-three days before she could participate again in the worship of the sanctuary, whereas in the latter case she was debarred from the sanctuary for twice as long (Lev. 12:2–5).

That the male was more highly regarded than the female is further confirmed by the law of Lev. 27:2–8, which places a monetary value on persons who had dedicated themselves to God. The ruling prescribed that men aged between twenty and sixty were required to pay fifty shekels in order to be released from their vow to perform cultic service, whereas women of the same age were required to pay only thirty shekels. Such monetary discrimination applied to other age groups, too, and a consistently lower value is assigned to the female as opposed to her male counterpart. How the Priestly writers arrived at their calculations is not known, but the discrepancy between male and female is usually taken as a tacit statement of the relative values assigned to each in the culture of ancient Israel.⁷

But nowhere is the woman's inferior position more apparent than in the laws governing marriage and sexual relations, for these are clearly formulated from a male perspective and reflect male interests. For example, in the laws concerning the rape of a virgin who was not engaged to be married,⁸ the real victim was considered to be her father, and it was he who received the appropriate monetary compensation.⁹ His daughter's plight

was further aggravated by the fact that she was required to marry her assailant and – to make matters even worse – he was subsequently prevented from divorcing her (Deut. 22:28–9).¹⁰ That a woman's sexual and reproductive functions were regarded as the legal property of her father or husband is also implied in the law contained in Ex. 21:22, which concerns a pregnant woman who was accidentally hurt and who suffered a miscarriage as a result; in this case it was the husband who was to be compensated for the loss of the unborn child.

The inequality between male and female was further emphasized by the fact that a man was entitled to expect his future bride to be a virgin, though there was no indication that his own virginity had to be intact when he married.¹¹ If the bride, on her wedding night, could not establish her virginity, she was regarded as having shamed her father and was liable to be stoned to death for her sexual misdemeanour (Deut. 22:13–21).

The double standard applied by the biblical law to men and women was particularly evident in the regulations concerning adultery. Adultery was defined by the law as sexual relations involving a married woman. A husband who had extramarital relations with an unmarried woman, a concubine or prostitute was not regarded as an adulterer; his action constituted adultery only if he had sexual intercourse with another man's wife.¹² Such extramarital relations were regarded as so serious that a jealous husband who merely suspected his wife of infidelity could subject her to a humiliating ordeal that was supposed to prove her guilt or innocence (Num. 5:11–31).¹³ Significantly, the husband suffered no penalty if he was found to have accused his wife unjustly,¹⁴ and no parallel ritual was prescribed if a wife suspected her husband of being unfaithful. The laws governing divorce were similarly weighted in favour of the husband, for the dissolution of marriage was regarded in Israel as an exclusively male prerogative.¹⁵ Deut. 24:1 placed the initiative entirely in the hands of the husband, and the law permitted him to repudiate his wife and write her a bill of divorce for no reason other than that he had found in her 'some indecency'.¹⁶

It is clear from the above résumé that the laws in Israel presupposed a social system in which women were disadvantaged and in which they did not generally possess rights commensurate with those of their male counterparts. Before marriage, the woman appears to have been under the authority of her father, and after marriage she was under the authority of her husband. Biblical legislation seems to confirm that 'from childhood to old age, the Hebrew woman belonged to the men of her family' (Trible, 1976, p.964). It seems highly ironic that the very law codes which demanded such high standards of justice and fairness for the poor and defenceless, and which seemed particularly concerned to protect the vulnerable and underprivileged, appear to have done so little to uphold the dignity, status and self-esteem of women in Israel.

Biblical Narratives

In its emphasis on women's inferiority and submissiveness, the narratives of the Hebrew Bible in many ways complement the biblical laws. In Gen. 2, God is depicted as creating man first, then all the lower animals, and finally – almost as an afterthought – he creates woman to relieve man's loneliness and to serve as his helper (vv.20–23). Thus, from the outset of the Hebrew Bible, the male is regarded as 'the original human prototype' whereas women are viewed as 'secondary and auxiliary beings'.¹⁷

The subsequent story of Israel is narrated from a predominantly male perspective. Women are often mentioned in the biblical narratives in a perfunctory manner, and usually appear as minor characters in a plot that revolves mainly around the male protagonists. It is almost invariably the men of Israel who are assigned positions of power and influence in society, while the woman is usually mentioned only in her capacity as wife or mother, her primary value residing in her ability to produce (preferably male) offspring. It is true that a few characters, such as Miriam and Huldah (both of whom are regarded as 'prophets') and Deborah (who is depicted as a 'judge' and military strategist), did manage to achieve positions of pre-eminence, but they were very much the exceptions that proved the rule. By and large, the narratives reflect a society in which women were perceived as secondary citizens who were excluded from positions of status and authority.

On the domestic front, the biblical narratives confirm the impression gleaned from the biblical laws that marriage in Israel was far from being a partnership of equals. The wife was expected to remain monogamous, whereas similar fidelity was not required of her husband, who was entitled to take a second wife or a concubine (as did Abraham, Jacob, David, Solomon and others). A man's wife was expected to address her husband as 'master' or 'lord' (cf. Gen. 18:12), the implication being that he 'owned' her in much the same way as he owned his slaves, herds and land (cf. Ex. 20:17; 21:4). Significantly, the word used in the Hebrew narratives for 'marry' is *lāqah* (lit. 'to take'), implying that the bride was viewed as a possession to be 'acquired' by her husband. That women were viewed in terms of their 'property' value appears to be confirmed by their presence in lists of booty commonly taken in war (cf. Deut. 20:14; 1 Sam. 30:2, 5; 1 Kgs 20:3, 5, 7; 2 Kgs 24:15) and by the fact that wives were counted along with concubines, silver and gold as an index of a man's wealth (1 Kgs 10:14–11:8; cf. Bird, 1974, p.64).

Many biblical narratives confirm that the father exercised complete authority over his daughter. For example, Lot offered his two daughters to the men of Sodom in order to save his male guests from their lust (Gen. 19:8); Reuel, the Midianite priest, gave Moses his daughter, Zipporah, as a wife (Ex. 2:21), without any suggestion that she was consulted; Caleb promised to give his daughter in marriage to whoever succeeded in

destroying Kiriath-sepher (Judg. 1:11–15); and Jephthah sacrificed his daughter in order to keep an oath which he had made to God (Judg. 11:29–40). That daughters were regarded as the possession of their fathers is evident from the fact that they could be bartered for economic gain; their marriage was a matter of negotiation and financial arrangement between the groom and the father of the bride (cf. Gen. 29:18–20; 34:12). Even among royal families, marriage was often a matter of political expediency, and the woman does not appear to have had any role in the negotiations (cf. 1 Sam. 18:17–29).

The biblical narratives also appear to confirm the subordinate position of women within the religious realm. The covenant community was defined as the community of the circumcised which constituted 'every male among you' (Gen. 17:10), and it was the male heads of household who normally represented their families in matters of religious ritual, such as the offering of sacrifice. Thus, for example, in Judg. 13:19 it is Manoah who prepares and offers a sacrifice on behalf of his wife, and in 1 Sam. 1:4 it is Elkanah who sacrifices at the shrine of Shiloh, distributing portions of the sacrifice to his wife and children. Moreover, it is quite in keeping with the male bias of the Israelite cult that the priestly office was confined to males.¹⁸ Although women were not excluded from participating in the worship of the community, the narrative tradition suggests that they assumed only a marginal role. They served 'at the entrance of the tent of meeting' (Ex. 38:8; 1 Sam. 2:22) and, while the precise nature of their service is unclear, it is probable that they functioned as temple servants, performing various kinds of domestic tasks.¹⁹

Of course, care must be taken not to overemphasize the inferior role assigned to women in the biblical narratives, for there are certainly instances where they appear to have acted with considerable courage, independence and initiative (cf. Num. 12:1–2; 2 Sam. 6:12–23). Moreover, there were probably subtle changes in the status accorded to women over the period during which the Hebrew Bible came to be written. Nevertheless, the biblical narratives do tend to confirm and amplify the inferior role attributed to women in the legal tradition.

The Prophets

The prophets of Israel and Judah often single out women as especially responsible for behaviour which they deemed to be unworthy or morally unacceptable. Amos, for example, castigated the upper-class women of Samaria ('the cows of Bashan', as he called them) for enjoying a comfortable, luxurious and self-indulgent lifestyle at the expense of the poor and helpless (Am. 4:1–3). His contemporary, Isaiah, likewise condemned the flamboyant, ostentatious behaviour of the wealthy women of Jerusalem, who walked around displaying their finery for all to see (Is. 3:16–17). Two

centuries later, Ezekiel inveighed against women who prophesied 'out of their own imagination' and who ensnared the people with their lies and divination (Ezek. 13:17–23). Significantly, both Ezekiel and Jeremiah regarded women as the main culprits in the religious apostasy of the people: it was they who wailed for Tammuz outside the temple (Ezek. 8:14), and it was they who presented offerings to false gods and who worshipped the queen of heaven (Jer. 44:15–23).

Further, the prophets deploy female imagery in such a way as to affirm the traditional gender stereotyping of women as physically weaker than men and as dependent on them for their protection and support. Jerusalem (the 'daughter of Zion'), for example, is depicted as a helpless female in need of male rescue (Lam. 1:17; 2:1, 10, 18–19). She is depicted as vulnerable and destitute without a husband and ashamed of being without children (Is. 54:1–6).²⁰ Babylon is similarly personified as a 'virgin daughter' who is foolish, weak and completely at the mercy of an omnipotent and all-powerful deity (Is. 47:1–15; cf. Darr, 1994, pp.169–74).

Moreover, when the prophets use the marriage metaphor to depict the nature of the relationship between God and his people, the husband (God) is always viewed in a positive light whereas the wife (Israel) is almost invariably viewed negatively (Brenner, 1995b, p.26). In Hosea, for example, God is described as the steadfast, supportive, loving husband, while the Israelites are depicted as his sexually promiscuous and wayward wife. While God (the husband) had fed, clothed and protected his wife (cf. Hos. 2:8–9), she had turned to other lovers for support and had abused the marriage relationship that should have been based on mutual loyalty and trust (Hos. 2:5). In a similar vein, Jeremiah describes the nation's religious apostasy in terms of the once faithful bride who had dishonoured her husband (Jer. 2:1–3:5). The marriage metaphor is also used to depict the people's attempt to forge alliances with foreign countries, and images related to female sexuality are deployed to denounce policies that the prophets deemed to be foolish or dangerous. In two lengthy oracles, Ezekiel portrays Jerusalem (Ezek. 16, 23) and Samaria (Ezek. 23) as Yahweh's adulterous consorts, who had acted in a most depraved manner and who had betrayed their husband's love and trust by offering their sexuality to strangers.

By emphasizing how grossly illicit and unreasonable had been the wife's behaviour, and how patient and long-suffering had been her husband, the prophets were able to justify the punishment which was to be inflicted upon her. Just as the husband was legally within his rights in retaliating against his wayward wife, so God was justified in retaliating against his unfaithful people. He had suffered shame and humiliation on account of their promiscuous and wanton activities, and any act of retaliation on his part was regarded as perfectly warranted and legitimate.²¹ Disturbingly, the punishment inflicted by the husband often takes the form of physical violence against his wife, and in their lurid descriptions of the wife's chastisement the prophets' use of sexual imagery occasionally borders on

the obscene. In Hos. 2, for example, the husband (God) threatens to strip his wife (Samaria) naked and expose her before her lovers (vv.3,10). Jeremiah similarly compares his country's impending destruction to the shame, humiliation and indignity suffered by a woman whose skirt is snatched above her head and whose private parts are exposed to the public (Jer. 13:20–27). Deutero-Isaiah portrays Babylon as a woman who faces the threat of public exposure and shaming, and who will become the object of contempt and disgust (Is. 47:1–3). But of all the prophets it is Ezekiel who gives the most vivid and detailed description of the nature of the wife's (in this case, Jerusalem's) punishment. Here, explicit sexual language is invoked to describe the fate that awaited her: she is battered, ravaged, abused, disfigured, stripped and publicly humiliated (Ezek. 16:35–52; 23:22–49). In such passages there is not the faintest glimmer of sympathy for the wife; on the contrary, it is implied that, owing to her debauchery and dissolute behaviour, she had brought such punishment upon herself.

By their use of such imagery, the prophets contributed to some of the most vividly misogynist material encountered in the Hebrew Bible. It is striking that the prophets, so often regarded as the great champions of justice in ancient Israel, did so little to challenge sexual oppression, and that those who seemed most concerned about the exploitation of the poor by the rich should have been so oblivious to the exploitation of women which their own words would almost certainly have fostered.

The Wisdom Literature

The wisdom literature similarly displays a disparaging view of women, either by regarding them as nothing more than objects of male desire or by linking them specifically with folly or wickedness. Derogatory remarks about women abound in the Book of Proverbs, where they are variously described as garrulous (22:14), querulous (19:13), idolatrous (2:17), noisy, ignorant and foolish (9:13). A beautiful woman without good sense is likened to 'a gold ring in a pig's snout' (11:22). The contentious woman is like 'a continual dripping on a rainy day' (27:15; cf. 19:13), and it would be better to live in an attic (21:9; 25:24) or in a desert (21:19) than to have to share a house with her.²²

Of particular concern to the sages was the danger posed by the 'strange', 'foreign' or 'loose' woman (Heb. *'iššā zārā*), who was intent upon leading unsuspecting young men astray (Maier, 1995; 1998, pp.92–108). She is described as accosting her victim in the square or the market-place and lying in wait at the corner of the street, under the cover of darkness, to entice him into her house with the promise of pleasure and enjoyment (Prov. 7:10–27). At first she appears to ooze seductive charm; her speech is 'smoother than oil' and her lips are like 'honey', but she eventually turns out to be 'bitter as wormwood' (5:1–4). Many pragmatic warnings are found in Proverbs

designed to guard men against her alluring ways. Such women, it is suggested, should be given a wide berth, for those who indulge their desire will be reduced to ruin and will lose their dignity and honour (5:9), not to mention their hard-earned wealth (5:10).

Of course, the view of women presented in the Book of Proverbs is not entirely cynical and pessimistic, for it also contains some positive images of the role and influence exercised by the female. For example, the negative image of the 'strange', 'foreign' or 'loose' woman finds its positive counterpart in Lady Wisdom, and the vices of the former are in many ways counterbalanced by the virtues of the latter (cf. Yee, 1995a, pp.110–26). Further, the mother is occasionally depicted as a teacher who plays an important part, alongside the father, in the nurture and education of her child (cf. 1:8; 6:20). Moreover, the acrostic poem in Prov. 31:10–31 is a paean of praise to the dutiful, wise and compassionate wife, who possesses sufficient authority to direct the servants of her household (v.15) and who is even depicted as engaging in commercial transactions (vv.16, 18, 24). But even in such passages as these the woman's contribution is largely confined to the domestic sphere (spinning, weaving, sewing: vv.13, 19, 22), and such power and influence as she commands are exercised within, and for the benefit of, her family. Although she engages in some activities traditionally associated with the male, such as buying and selling land, her energies are directed at establishing the economic viability of her household, and her behaviour is motivated by the will to gain the praise of her husband and children (vv.12, 28). While it is true that she possessed some measure of authority, it is clear that the real influence was wielded by her spouse, for it was he who had the privilege of sitting among the elders of the land and it was he who was entitled to participate in the important deliberations at the 'city gate' (v.23). Thus, even passages in Proverbs which praise women cannot altogether hide the distinctly patriarchal perspective of the book (see below, p.77).

Koheleth is also commonly regarded as exhibiting a decidedly unflattering attitude towards women, and his anti-female sentiments have sometimes been taken as an indication that he was an unashamed misogynist (cf. Fox, 1989, p.238). Discussions of Koheleth's attitude towards women have tended to focus on Eccles. 7:26–9, which contains comments reminiscent of the statements concerning the 'strange', 'foreign' or 'loose' woman in the Book of Proverbs. Although the passage is obscure, its general drift is reasonably clear. Women are regarded as inherently devious, prepared to use their feminine wiles in order to ensnare their man. The heart of the female is likened to a 'net' and her hands are compared to 'fetters'; clearly, she is dangerous, and any entanglement with her will prove 'more bitter than death'. Only the devout will succeed in escaping her clutches; sinners will inevitably be taken in by her charm. Koheleth claims that his search for an honourable and principled woman had proved futile: 'I have found one man in a thousand worthy to be called upright, but I have not found one woman among them all' (v.28).²³

The Book of Job is also dominated by a male perspective, although in this instance the patriarchal bias manifests itself by consigning woman to the margins, virtually to the point of ignoring her existence. The numerous dialogues contained in the book are all uttered by men (Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, Elihu) and it is finally a male God who responds to Job's lament (Job 38–41). The verbosity of the male debaters in the central poetic section of the book (Job 3–37) stands in sharp contrast to the silence of Job's wife, whose words are confined to one verse, relegated to the narrative framework (2:9).²⁴ She is represented as urging Job to 'curse God',²⁵ but the advice which she proffers to her husband is summarily dismissed, and it is made clear that he will have no truck with such foolish and dishonourable woman-talk. Indeed, her words appear to be merely a foil to allow Job to occupy the moral high ground by affirming his belief that the suffering which he has endured was an expression of God's sovereign will: 'Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?' (2:10). Not surprisingly, after her initial appearance, Job's wife disappears from view and is all but eliminated from the rest of the book. She is not even named, and although she was afflicted by the same disasters as those which befell her husband (1:13–19), her suffering and loss are not mentioned or acknowledged. That she was viewed as little more than Job's personal possession is evident from a remark which he himself makes in his great confession in chapter 31. Here, Job swears that, if he had committed adultery, then he would willingly let his wife become the sexual property of another man (31:9–12). Of course, the point of the passage is that Job was innocent of all such wrongdoing, but the implication is that, had he been guilty, it is his wife who would have been made to suffer the penalty for an offence which *he* had committed against *her*! Such statements indicate the patriarchal perspective which viewed woman's sexuality as the property of her husband.

The above brief overview of the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible suggests that Israel's sages were much preoccupied with women and gender issues. Their world-view was clearly androcentric, and although there are some positive representations of women in the wisdom literature, they do little to ameliorate the predominantly negative view of female sexuality found among the sayings of the wise. Women are either regarded as untrustworthy and potentially fatal for man's well-being (Proverbs, Koheleth) or else their very existence is marginalized or ignored (Job).

Feminist Biblical Criticism

In view of the prevailing androcentric emphasis of the Hebrew Bible, it is hardly surprising that feminist biblical critics have generally regarded it as one of the founding texts of patriarchy.²⁶ They argue that the values of Western culture have been inspired, directly or indirectly, by the Bible in its various canons and translations, and while they readily concede that various

factors have contributed to the establishment of patriarchal power and influence in society, they believe that it would be wrong to deny or minimize the role that the Bible has played in shaping peoples' thoughts and perceptions and in reinforcing sexist attitudes and structures (cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, 1984, pp.xi-xii; 1985, p.129).

Perhaps nowhere have the effects of patriarchal power and influence been more in evidence than in the institutions of the church and synagogue. The statements of Paul concerning the silencing of women in the assembly (1 Cor. 14:34-5) continue to be cited in arguments to prevent women from being ordained and to exclude them from positions of leadership and authority in the church. Similarly, within Judaism, women who feel called to be rabbis often find themselves barred from such vocations and prevented from participating fully in the religious life of the Jewish people (cf. Christ and Plaskow, 1979, p.3; Plaskow, 1990, pp.61-2). Such discrimination, of course, is by no means limited to the religious establishment, for, as many feminist biblical critics have observed, it is equally prevalent within the secular surroundings of the academy.²⁷ Indeed, concern has been expressed for the long-term viability of feminist scholarship in biblical studies on the grounds that female scholars identified with the feminist cause continue to be unfairly discriminated against because of the supposedly 'radical' views which they embrace (cf. Milne, 1997, pp.43-4).

While it is generally recognized that the ways in which women have been made to feel inferior to men is a complex psychological and sociological problem, feminist biblical critics believe that the teaching of the Bible concerning the role of women has been a significant contributory factor. Part of the problem, of course, lies in the authority invested in the Bible as a sacred text. If the Bible had been read like any other book, its teaching concerning women would have carried little authoritative weight. But the fact is that the Bible has not been read like any other book; rather, it has been regarded over the centuries as the repository of divine truth, and its guidance has been sought and accepted by vast numbers of people throughout the world. Consequently, its teaching concerning the role and status of women has been accepted without question as part of the divinely established order.

Feminists who are also Jewish or Christian scholars thus find themselves in the frustrating position of having to accept as binding and authoritative texts that appear to be incompatible with some of their fundamental beliefs and principles.²⁸ Their predicament has been well expressed by Letty Russell: 'Are they to be faithful to the teachings of the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian scriptures, or are they to be faithful to their own integrity as whole human beings?' (1985a, p.137). Some feminist scholars, faced with such a dilemma, have opted to reject the biblical teaching altogether; regarding it as irredeemably patriarchal and inherently hostile to women (see below, pp.23-5). Most, however, prefer to view the biblical text as a challenge that must be faced, for they believe that the present-day understanding of the biblical role of women may have far-reaching

implications for the rights, responsibilities and role of women in society generally. By addressing the biblical text directly they aim to challenge its assumptions concerning women's cultural marginality and religious subordination, and they believe that, in the process, the role of women in the formal structure of institutional religion can be radically changed. In this way, feminist biblical scholarship is brought into direct contact with issues of current concern, and feminists see themselves as part of a collective enterprise that has as its ultimate goal the elimination of sexual stereotypes and the transformation of cultural values.²⁹ For them, it is not enough merely to raise awareness of the baneful effects the Bible has had on the position of women in society; rather, the biblical material must be analysed, critiqued and, if necessary, resisted, for they believe that only thus can modern religious institutions be changed and social mores redefined.

One of the first feminist scholars to call for a critical examination of the role that the Bible has played in the degradation of women in Western culture was Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902).³⁰ She claimed that every form of religion had denigrated women, but it was primarily the Bible that had kept them in subjugation throughout the centuries and been responsible for denying them some of their basic rights and freedoms. Because of its profound religious and cultural authority, the Bible had been one of the most important influences in defining the status and role of women in society, and so deeply ingrained in the Western psyche was its teaching that it had continually proved to be a formidable barrier to the development of female liberation. Whenever women had complained about their lack of citizenship, or demanded equal access with men to theological training and to the ordained ministry, opponents of women's suffrage had used the Bible as ammunition against them: 'When in the early part of the nineteenth century, women began to protest against their civil and political degradation, they were referred to the Bible for an answer. When they protested against their unequal position in the church, they were referred to the Bible for an answer' (1895, p.8). In brief, the Bible had been used as divine authority for discriminating against women and for justifying their subordination to men.

It was this realization that prompted Cady Stanton, towards the end of the nineteenth century, to initiate her ambitious project, entitled *The Woman's Bible*, much to the indignation of the church and, indeed, the community at large.³¹ The aim of the project was to unmask what she perceived as the church's misuse of the Bible and to highlight its invidious role in the oppression of women. Cady Stanton pleaded with the female scholars of her day to contribute to the project, reminding them that 'your political and social degradation are but an outgrowth of your status in the Bible' (1895, p.10). Significantly, however, few responded to her plea, and Cady Stanton lamented the fact that female scholars who were versed in the techniques of biblical criticism did not wish to be associated with her project on the grounds that they feared that their academic reputations would be

compromised and that their scholarly ambitions would be thwarted (1895, p.9). Nevertheless, *The Woman's Bible* eventually appeared, in two volumes, in 1895 and 1898, and it contained a compilation of all the sections in the Bible which were of particular relevance to women, accompanied by an appropriate, often acerbic, commentary. Not surprisingly, most of the commentaries on the various passages were written by Cady Stanton herself.

Despite Cady Stanton's labours, however, progress in feminist criticism of the Bible was painfully slow. It was not until 1894 – almost fifteen years after its foundation – that the Society of Biblical Literature voted in favour of admitting its first female members. The fact that there was seemingly little opposition did not betoken a change of heart on the part of its male membership; it merely indicated that the number of women who wished to be admitted was so small that they were not considered as posing a serious threat to the male scholarly establishment (Bass, 1982, pp.6–12). The earliest female members did not deliver papers to the Society, nor did they publish articles in the Society's prestigious journal. Only in the second decade of the twentieth century did women begin to make serious contributions to the academic study of the Bible, and even then their contributions were never self-consciously 'feminist'. During the first half of the twentieth century, gender issues were evidently not regarded as acceptable topics for scholarly deliberations, and consequently feminist biblical studies remained at the periphery of academic discourse (Bellis, 2000, pp.24–5). They were generally regarded with an element of disdain, and viewed as little more than a quixotic indulgence in a harmless, but ultimately irrelevant, hobby-horse.

Such a view, however, changed dramatically during the latter half of the twentieth century. The resurgence of the women's movement in the 1960s not only revived women's struggle for political and civil rights but also gave rise to feminist biblical studies as a new and exciting intellectual discipline. Volumes such as Phyllis Trible's *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (1978) and the anthology *Religion and Sexism* (1974), edited by the Roman Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, introduced many women to the new possibilities opened up by feminism for reading and understanding the Bible. Interest developed in what it might mean to read the Bible self-consciously as a woman, and how women in communities of faith should respond to the patriarchal emphasis of Scripture. By the late 1970s, feminist studies had become a recognized area of biblical inquiry and were included in the curricula of many universities and theological seminaries. Since then, the output of feminist biblical scholars has been prolific and sympathy for the type of approach which they advocate has steadily grown within the scholarly guild.

It is true that some feminist biblical scholars, notably Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, complain that the 'woman question' continues to be neglected in what she calls 'malestream' biblical scholarship (1999, pp.3, 33), but the fact is that feminist study of the Bible has by now become a

significant area of modern research.³² One indication of the popularity of the discipline is the wealth of 'feminist companions' to the Bible which continue to appear from the press, and the influence of feminist biblical criticism is clear from the fact that standard works of reference on the Bible and biblical interpretation now include articles on 'feminist theology' as a matter of course.³³ Significantly, when Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe published in 1992 *The Women's Bible Commentary* (the title of which was a tribute to Cady Stanton's work a century earlier), there were enough female scholars to provide analysis of the relevant passages of every book in the Bible.

Although modern feminist critics (who are predominantly, though not exclusively, female) have approached the Bible from different perspectives and with different presuppositions, there is general agreement among them that the first step in feminist criticism must be an honest recognition 'of how deeply implicated in an oppressive ideology is the Scripture of our own religious communities' (Fewell and Gunn, 1993, p.20). Feminist scholars recognize that there are serious issues in the Hebrew Bible which must be addressed and profound questions which must be answered. How should women react to the repressive and androcentric aspects of the biblical text? How should they broach a document that appears to legitimate patriarchal structures of domination and reinforce cultural stereotypes? How should they respond to texts that are regularly trotted out to emphasize the female 'virtues' of silence and submissiveness? How should they conceive of a deity who is represented almost exclusively in male imagery? The aim of the next chapter will be to examine some of the ways in which feminist scholars, past and present, have sought to respond to these difficult and seemingly intractable problems.

Notes

- 1 Frymer-Kensky (1992, pp.53–4) argues that the second person masculine form 'you' in the Decalogue is inclusive of both men and women, but the injunction in Ex. 20:17 ('you shall not desire your neighbour's wife') strongly suggests that the personal pronoun refers to men only. Similarly, in the so-called 'casuistic' laws, which typically begin, 'If a man ...' (cf. Ex. 21:7, 20, 26) the term for 'man' in the Hebrew is not the generic term 'ādām but the exclusive masculine term 'iš.
- 2 The fact that the wife is mentioned between the 'house' and the 'slave' in Ex. 20:17 is regarded by some feminist biblical critics as particularly galling, notwithstanding the fact that in the Deuteronomic version of the Decalogue (Deut. 5:21) she is mentioned first (cf. Brenner, 1994b, p.257).
- 3 For the view of some post-biblical feminist scholars that patriarchal religion has erased women from history and made them 'non-beings', see Schüssler Fiorenza (1983, p.xviii). Her own tongue-in-cheek definition of feminism is 'the radical notion that wo/men are people' (1999, p.84, n.5).
- 4 See Davies (1981b, pp.138–44, 257–68). The legislation preventing women from inheriting property may have had far-reaching consequences, since it is probable that only those in possession of their own land could be regarded as full citizens with the

- right to participate in the local assemblies (Davies, 1989, pp.361–2). On the rights of daughters to inherit property, see below, pp.89–91.
- 5 The law governing the release of slaves was subsequently emended in Deut. 15:12 to include both male and female slaves.
 - 6 On the role of women in the cult, see Bird (1987, pp.397–419).
 - 7 Cf. Clines (1990b, p.45). Meyers (1983, pp.585–6; 1988, p.171) argues that the sums accurately reflect the relative economic value of males and females at different stages of life. Thus men aged between twenty and sixty would have been at the most productive stage of their lives, whereas women of this age would have been preoccupied with child-bearing and child-rearing and would have had less time to devote to activities that might bring financial gain to the household.
 - 8 Deut. 22:23–7 concerns the case of a violated betrothed woman, while Deut. 22:28–9 deals with the case of the violated unbetrothed woman. For the view that these laws are not concerned with 'rape' according to the modern definition of the term, see Pressler (1994, pp.102–3).
 - 9 The requirement to pay fifty shekels (Deut. 22:29) merely underlines the economic value of the daughter; once she had been sexually violated, she was clearly not regarded as such a good economic asset as she had been prior to the attack. See Pressler (1994, p.104).
 - 10 The law of Ex. 22:16–17 permits the father to determine whether his raped daughter should be given in marriage to her assailant, but Deuteronomy leaves no option and prescribes that the rapist must marry his victim. A similar directive is found in the Middle Assyrian Laws (Tablet A, pg.55), where the rapist is expected not only to recompense the father of the victim but also to marry her. See Pritchard (1955, p.185).
 - 11 Millett (1969, p.48) observes that in primitive societies the virginity of a woman was important for her intended husband, since it was 'a sign of property received intact'.
 - 12 For a discussion of the sanctions which applied in ancient Israel in cases of adultery, see McKeating (1979, pp.57–72). Adultery by a married woman was regarded as a particularly heinous offence in Israel since it violated a man's absolute right to the sexuality of his wife and placed his paternity in question. This was potentially destabilizing in a society governed by patrilineal kinship structures. See Yee (1992, p.198), Frymer-Kensky (1989, p.92).
 - 13 On the so-called 'trial by ordeal', see Davies (1995, pp.48–57), Brichto (1975, pp.55–70), Frymer-Kensky (1984, pp.11–26), Bach (1993b, pp.26–54).
 - 14 This seems to be the meaning of the phrase 'the man shall be free from iniquity' in v.31. Some have suggested that these words refer not to the woman's husband but to her adulterous consort (cf. Brichto, 1975, p.63), but this seems unlikely, for Hebrew law prescribed the death penalty for both the man and woman found guilty of adultery (cf. Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22).
 - 15 The rabbis, who were very aware of the injustice of this non-reciprocal arrangement, sought to mitigate its effects by legislating that the husband must not divorce his wife rashly (cf. Plaskow, 1990, p.62).
 - 16 The precise meaning of the ambiguous term 'indecent' in Deut. 24:1 was much discussed by the rabbis. Shammai took it to refer to adultery, whereas Hillel interpreted it to mean anything displeasing to the husband. The view of Hillel prevailed, and the husband was entitled to divorce his wife 'even if she spoiled a dish for him' (cf. Stagg and Stagg, 1978, p.51; de Vaux, 1965, p.34).
 - 17 See Ruether (1975, p.15). A different reading of the role of the male and female in the Genesis story is provided by Tribble (1978, pp.72–143); see below, pp.101–3.
 - 18 It is usually thought that one of the reasons for the exclusion of women from the priesthood was that their menstrual periods were considered to have rendered them unclean (cf. Lev. 15:19–33) and would have caused the sanctuary to be defiled. See Vos (1968, p.193).
 - 19 Bird (1987, p.406) surmises that their work consisted of the preparation of cultic meals,

- the cleaning of the cultic vessels, and the sewing of vestments and other textiles for cultic use.
- 20 For the use of such imagery in the book of Isaiah, see Sawyer (1996, pp.213–14). Weems (1995, p.45) regards such imagery in a positive light (cf., also, Stone, 1992, p.90), but in so far as it portrays women as victimized and dependent it is arguable that it merely serves to perpetuate a patriarchal ethos.
 - 21 Cf. Weems (1995, pp.62–3). Dijk-Hemmes argues that Ezekiel's depictions of the perverse and lewd behaviour of the two metaphorical sisters in Ezek. 23 were designed to impress upon his audience that they did indeed 'deserve the utterly degrading and devastating treatment to which they are exposed' (1993a, p.168).
 - 22 As Fontaine (1992, pp.150–51) observes, the fact that there are no counterbalancing statements concerning the misfortune endured by women who had to live with violent or abusive husbands indicates how one-sided and biased are the views of the authors of Proverbs, who tended to make women the scapegoats for all incidents of domestic discord.
 - 23 Some have attempted to play down Koheleth's contempt and disdain for women by exploiting the grammatical ambiguities of the passage (for a discussion of such attempts, see Christianson, 1998, pp.109–36). However, as Fontaine has remarked, 'interpreters should not and cannot ignore the very real, negative effects on the lives of actual women that the "plain sense" of this text, read over the centuries, created' (1998, p.168).
 - 24 See Klein (1995, pp.186–200). The six words attributed to Job's wife in the Hebrew text are expanded in the LXX into a speech in which she speaks passionately about Job's suffering and her own. There is no reason, however, to suppose that this represents the original text.
 - 25 By uttering such a statement, Job's wife emerges as a kind of mouthpiece for Satan (cf. Job 1:11). Augustine famously claimed that she here plays the role of *diaboli adjutrix*, Satan's unwitting ally. See Pechansky (2000, pp.223–8). For a discussion of Job's wife from a feminist perspective, see van Wolde (1995, pp.201–21).
 - 26 The term 'patriarchy' is defined by Gerda Lerner as 'the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general' (1986, p.239). It does not imply that women are totally devoid of rights, influence and resources, but holds that it is men who usually wield power in all the important institutions of society.
 - 27 Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, argues that female scholars identified with the feminist cause are still professionally discredited: 'As one of my colleagues remarked about a professor who had written a moderate article on women in the Old Testament: "It is a shame, she may have ruined her scholarly career"' (1983, p.xvi).
 - 28 As Plaskow (1990, p.ix) has observed, Jewish feminist scholars dwell 'in a state of self-contradiction'. On the 'terrible dilemma' faced by Christian feminist scholars, see Tribble (1973, p.31), Sakenfeld (1985, pp.55–64).
 - 29 Schüssler Fiorenza argues that feminism is nothing less than 'a women's liberation movement for social and ecclesiastical change' (1984, p.5).
 - 30 For a discussion of Cady Stanton's contribution to feminist biblical studies, see Wacker (1998, pp.3–7), Schüssler Fiorenza (1993b, pp.1–24).
 - 31 In 1896, even the National American Suffrage Association – which Cady Stanton had co-founded – officially repudiated any connection with *The Woman's Bible* on the ground that it did not wish to offend its membership.
 - 32 For surveys of recent developments in feminist biblical criticism, see Sakenfeld (1985, pp.55–64), Anderson (1991, pp.21–44), Bach (1993a, pp.191–215), Exum (2000, pp.86–115).
 - 33 See, for example, Middleton (1990, pp.231–4), Sakenfeld (1993, pp.228–31).