

WHAT MAKES A FEMINIST READING FEMINIST? A QUALIFIED ANSWER

Phyllis A. Bird

Neither my published work, nor the other forms of biblical interpretation in which I engage readily fit the description 'feminist reading(s)'. I therefore feel obliged to question the constraints imposed by defining the subject of discussion as 'a reading'. I could formulate my opinion differently by employing a broader understanding of 'reading', but I would still want to make the same points.

My answer to the question addressed to this panel requires definition of the terms 'feminist' and 'reading'. I understand feminism as a critical and constructive stance that claims for women the full humanity accorded to men, insisting that women be represented equally in all attempts to describe and comprehend human nature and that they be full participants in the assignment and regulation of social roles, rights and responsibilities.¹ Feminism articulates its gender-inclusive view of human nature and responsibility over against historical and contemporary systems of thought and social organization that make males the norm and give men, as a class, power and priority over women. It does this by focusing on women, moving women from the margins to the center of inquiry and action. Feminism begins with critique of existing patriarchal and androcentric forms of thought and organization, and commitment to the realization of alternative forms. It is thus a political movement for change,² grounded in social analysis and drawing on

1. Formulated negatively, feminism may be described as a commitment to assert the full humanity of women wherever that is denied, diminished or subordinated to male models.

2. For me, feminism is also theologically grounded and is central to my theological understanding. To insist that the movement is fundamentally political does not entail denial or qualification of its theological meaning. Nor does its theological grounding exclude common analysis and action with feminists of other or no religious persuasion. My theological understanding does affect my hermeneutics,

women's experience as the primary source for its critical and constructive work.³

There is no single feminist program or analysis. Feminist analysis and aims differ in relation to individual and class experience, intersecting loyalties and identities (such as ethnic, national and religious identities), understanding of the root problem, and view of scriptural authority or normativity. As a consequence, specific goals and strategies of feminist action will differ. There is also an essential openness and tentativeness in feminist constructions. When feminism moves from critique of oppressive systems and practices to vision and construction of new alternatives, it moves into the realm of the unknown, and its formulations must be constantly reassessed in the light of new experience.

How does such a movement find expression in biblical interpretation? I am dubious about the possibility or usefulness of identifying a feminist perspective or commitment with any readily discernible feature(s) of the content of a reading viewed in isolation from the circumstances of its production and reception. My initial response to the question addressed to this panel was to say that what makes a feminist reading feminist is a feminist reader—implying first the producer of the reading, and secondly, the recipient. I recognize that this is not wholly satisfactory; I can enumerate some signs that fit my own feminist understanding. But I want first to register my discomfort, as a feminist biblical interpreter, with the focus of the question on 'a reading'.

I assume that a 'reading' describes some form of literary (or possibly oral?) production in which a biblical text is interpreted for some audience—that is, it is not simply an immediate and private response to a text, but a communicative act that means to influence a wider audience. For me, the anticipated audience is critical to the production of the reading. A focus on the reading alone narrows attention to a single moment or element in a complex process of communication and does

however, especially when I interpret biblical texts within and for the community of Christian believers. As I shall argue below, the context of interpretation is decisive for hermeneutics.

3. It is also a modern phenomenon of the last two centuries, dependent on economic and technological advances in the West and a natural-rights philosophy grounded in biblical tradition, but now transformed into a global movement drawing upon a variety of cultural and philosophical traditions. The fact that the philosophical roots of the movement may be traced to biblical origins does not, in my view, justify retrojecting feminist perspectives into biblical texts.

not take account of the occasion, purpose or audience of the work. It makes a discrete literary product carry the full weight of the feminist interpretative agenda in dealing with the Bible or biblical texts.⁴

My complaint arises from the fact that my own approach to the Bible, as a feminist and as a Christian believer, is fundamentally dialogical, requiring as its first step an attempt to formulate the sense of the text in its ancient social and literary context—viewing the text as itself a response to a conversation in the author's own time, an effort to persuade an ancient audience of a new or alternative view. My response to the text comes only after I have clarified its terms—just as my response to a modern dialogue partner demands that I first attempt with all the means at my disposal to hear as accurately and as sympathetically as possible what he or she means to say. I do not imagine that I escape the hermeneutical circle by this sequencing or that my hearing is devoid of bias or interest; I only insist that my first obligation is to the text as a distinct voice, an other whose integrity must be respected in the same manner as a face-to-face conversation partner or a contemporary companion.⁵ Thus I want to separate analytically and operationally the

4. This narrower understanding of 'reading' identifies it with literary approaches to interpretation and observes a close identification of 'feminist' interpretation with such approaches, as exemplified in the text-immanent 'readings' of Phyllis Trible, Cheryl Exum, Danna Fewell and Mieke Bal. I am inclined now to extend my definition of 'reading' to encompass all forms of interpretation, following John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, rev. edn, 1996). Cf. also Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992). My concern remains nevertheless with those forms of interpretation that do not fit the narrower class of literary approaches.

5. I do not insist that this is the only way, or even *the* 'right' way, to approach the text. I do believe, however, that I have an ethical obligation to the ancient authors to try to hear them as they wished to be heard—despite a history of interpretation that has erased the author or constructed the author in its own image (the concept of canon does not, in my view, cancel the notion of individual authors, whose imprint is indelibly inscribed in the text). As a modern, historically conscious reader, with means of reconstructing the past (however limited), I believe I have an obligation to undertake such reconstruction as these means allow, even when the resulting message is at odds with the church's interpretation and/or my own sensibilities. That obligation is not substantially qualified by the fact that I can never know whether my reconstruction is 'correct' or even close to the 'original' intention (which can only be tested by alternative reconstructions). Nor is it

horizons of production and reception, even as I acknowledge their inevitable interpenetration. The model of dialogue better suits this aim than the model of 'reading' that collapses the two moments of interpretation.

A reading that attempts only the first descriptive and analytical task may not contain any clearly recognizable feminist message—although I do think that signs of feminist analysis may be observable in the categories and concerns of reconstructing the 'original' message. It may nevertheless play an essential role in feminist response to the text in preaching, Bible study, classroom discussion, and scholarly debate. Feminist aims may be served by readings that do not inscribe feminist messages or values in the text. A reading that contains no explicit feminist critique may serve feminist interests either by providing a springboard for feminist reflection or a fresh interpretation of a text aimed at eliciting broad discussion in which feminist voices may play a role. I see advantages in construing the arena of discussion as broadly as possible and the terms of debate as openly as possible, so as to move feminist interpretation out of the ghetto of exclusive feminist rhetoric. Feminist hermeneutics pertains to the whole work of biblical interpretation and not simply to productions that are recognizable as 'feminist readings'.

This is obviously not the place for a defense of historical-critical method, but in light of the widely accepted view that historical criticism is fundamentally antithetical to feminist epistemology and hermeneutics,⁶ I must at least insist that it is indispensable to my own diminished by recognition of multiple authors in the production of the present text (which makes the analysis of speaker and context more complex, but does not invalidate the model). See further below.

6. The notion of a tension between historical-critical scholarship and feminist biblical interpretation in the service of a movement toward social reform is the underlying theme of the volume of essays edited by Adela Yabro Collins, entitled *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (SBL Biblical Scholarship in North America, 10; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985). See esp. Collins, 'Introduction', pp. 3-4. The discussion in this volume is dominated by Rankine notions of 'scientific objectivity' that do not seem to me to be essential to distinguishing past and present meanings or to efforts to identify and control reader bias. I find Gordon Leff's views of historical 'objectivity' congenial, as cited from *History and Social Theory* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in 'Remembering the Past in Creating the Future: Historical-Critical Scholarship and Feminist Biblical Interpretation' (in Collins, *Feminist Perspectives*, pp. 43-63,

feminist understanding of Scripture. I find no tension between historical criticism and feminist commitment, between an attempt to view the past on its own terms and a commitment to change the terms of participation and discourse generated by that past. I see no reason why an attempt to enter sympathetically into the minds or consciousnesses of historical persons and empathize with their feelings, motives and actions should exclude critique and ultimate rejection of those views. Why should an ancient author be denied the critically sensitive hearing demanded by a modern speaker just because he or she cannot speak back? The fact that all historical interpretation, as all cross-cultural interpretation, will fail to represent the other fully or adequately is no reason to abandon the attempt. Dismissal of historical criticism simply means that unexamined assumptions are read into the text. Historical criticism makes no claims concerning the normativity, or representativeness, of the ancient texts; in fact, it alerts readers to the dangers of such assumptions by considering the perspective, location and interests of the ancient author (including class, gender, religious party, etc.).⁷

An underlying problem in much of the debate concerning methods of interpreting biblical texts is differing, and often unstated, assumptions about the normativity of the text, more particularly assumptions about the way in which Scripture exercises authority for contemporary belief and practice. Strategies of interpretation are related to notions of the nature and consequences of biblical authority. Without attention to this question discussions of hermeneutical options, feminist or other, remain relatively meaningless, in my view, and fraught with misunderstandings.

With this too-brief excursion into method let me now attempt to identify some signs of feminist orientation in readings of biblical texts,

p. 49), and I generally concur with Schüssler Fiorenza's reformulation of the criterion of objectivity when she describes historical judgments as 'intersubjectively understandable and intersubjectively verifiable' ('Remembering the Past', p. 53). I also agree with her in regarding the Bible as a thoroughly androcentric document, but I do not find this sufficient reason to deny it authority as a source for Christian faith—or feminist theology. No historical writing, or experience, has escaped this cultural conditioning. See Bird, 'The Authority of the Bible', in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, I (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), I, pp. 33-64.

7. Feminist critique joins historical-critical analysis in insisting that the texts that carry the sacred message are human, historically and culturally conditioned vehicles. Feminist analysis of patriarchy is essentially a historical-critical understanding. It needs to be sharpened as a hermeneutical tool, not blunted or discarded.

confining my attention to the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible.⁸ For me, the essential signs or ingredients of feminist interpretation are *systemic analysis* of gender relations and a *critique* of relationships, norms and expectations that limit or subordinate women's thought, action and expression. Highlighting of women alone, either as heroines or victims, does not constitute feminist interpretation, in my view, if it lacks systemic analysis. On the other hand, gender analysis alone, without critique of the asymmetrical distribution of power and prestige within the society is not feminist interpretation, although it may be essential to a feminist reading.

If the combined criteria of systemic gender analysis and critique of androcentric and patriarchal privilege establish a reading as feminist, or at least as indispensable to such an identification, the adequacy of the reading must still be tested. Feminist readings can distort ancient meanings to suit modern sensibilities and needs. Are such readings acceptable if they serve feminist goals? What standards of judgment are to be used in assessing readings? Must all readings be accorded equal value? Whom does the reading serve? Who is a competent judge of a reading? Who is a competent reader? For me, these are the critical questions. I have not tried to answer them, because they lie outside the bounds of this assignment.⁹ I venture, however, to suggest two further criteria for judging a feminist reading:

(1) It must make sense of women's experience, or 'ring true' for women readers. Here one must immediately ask, Which women?, and recognize the danger of simply conforming to the perceptions of contemporary Western women, European-American women, or other interested parties. Since this danger exists in all readings, however, it can only be controlled by engaging the broadest audience possible and by encouraging dialogue between women of different class and cultural

8. I must note briefly that where readings of biblical texts are carried out within or for religious communities, there is no common or neutral language to describe the earliest canon of Scriptures (again the issue of audience is critical to interpretation).

9. I recognize as feminist, readings and analyses with which I disagree, as, e.g., treatments of women in patriarchal societies that view them as powerless victims, failing to see how they profit from the system and exercise power within it (cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Remembering the Past', pp. 58-59), or treatments of women's status that equate economic contribution with social recognition and power.

experiences. In the final analysis the rule holds: women have preferred, place as judges of a feminist reading.

(2) Ultimately it should make sense to men as well. Feminism, and feminist interpretation, is not idiosyncratic, concerned only with female history and female nature, but aims to provide a more adequate account of our gendered human nature and history. Feminist reading should strive, I believe, for universal acceptance (recognizing that no interpretation gains such assent)—even if it seeks only the emancipation and empowerment of women. Its power lies in exposing the limits and distortions of past and prevailing readings and conceptions. I do not underestimate the difficulty of creating a shared world-view—especially where biological and socio-cultural factors are so inextricably intertwined—but feminist goals cannot be achieved by women alone. Feminism is concerned with wholeness, which can only be achieved through dialogue/interchange in which women have positions of power. Feminism seeks to enable that dialogue by empowering women.¹⁰

A final note on tactics and content of feminist reading. Feminist aims in biblical interpretation may find expression in a wide variety of ways depending on the audience, occasion and desired effect of the reading. Shocking exaggeration or assuming a view opposite to that expressed in the text may achieve recognition of previously unseen or misinterpreted gender perspectives in the text. Lifting up women alone to create a history of biblical women may serve to provide an essential sense of a female past for women (and men) accustomed to viewing the Bible as essentially male history.¹¹ Feminist midrash can provide a bridge from patriarchal past to feminist future by recasting biblical accounts. Imaginative reconstruction to fill the silences of the text with unseen or unheard women can bring recognition of the limits and biases of the sources so they are not read unconsciously as inclusive. And inclusive readings can claim the whole history and literature for women whether that was the original intention or not. This is hardly an exhaustive

10. One of the consequences of the patriarchal monopoly of power for social planning is that women are often unable to envision larger goals and may be trapped by a 'victim' mentality or an encapsulated sense of self and world. But they may also be freer to dream the 'impossible'.

11. While I rejected such constructions above, I recognize the usefulness of partial and counter treatments in contexts where full analysis is impossible. For laywomen deprived of biblical images of women by a canon and lectionary that contain few images of women, such selective readings may convey an essential feminist message of identification and empowerment.

catalogue of approaches, but it brings me back to my original point that feminist reading is determined by criteria that lie outside the reading itself. These various ways of reading in the service of feminist aims represent different ways of understanding the role of the Bible for the reader. That remains a critical question for determining the adequacy, usefulness or credibility of a reading.

WHAT MAKES A FEMINIST READING FEMINIST? ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

Pamela Thimmes

For several months I asked colleagues, friends and students the question this topic asks me, 'What makes a feminist reading feminist?' Apart from a few serious attempts at fumbled articulation, modest lectures about asking questions that require neat generalizations and playing to type, and even a few silent stares, my hopes for probing questions and ideas and/or musings that might spark the imagination remained unfulfilled. Perhaps this is a customary response to questions of methodology. Why is this question so difficult to answer? Why do attempts to answer it raise many more difficult questions?

Since this is a question about interpretation, my responses come from a particular socio-political framework: first, my own response recognizes *difference* (there is no such thing as one feminism or a single voice for women); secondly, it comes from a particular social location. The adage 'What you see depends on where you stand', can refer to questions of methodology as much as to the act of writing, or to reading strategies and interpretation. So my own reading and interpretation comes from a particular social location—some of my personal locators mirror majority positions in the academy and society, and some locators clearly position me as a minority in both the academy and society. These locators serve as the lenses through which reading and interpretation proceed.

The question at hand, 'What makes a feminist reading feminist', is a methodological question. In a search for a starting point I moved beyond the friends/colleagues interview mode to a review of the literature in both biblical studies and literature. It became evident that, while methodological questions marked the early years of feminist literary theory and feminist biblical hermeneutics, until recently there was less attention given to describing and clarifying method, and more emphasis

on praxis, literally *doing* feminist hermeneutics.¹ In retrospect, both the diversity of approaches and the continual movement from theory to praxis exemplifies the nature of the discipline. In important ways the development of literary feminism is similar to the development of feminist biblical hermeneutics, and as a practitioner who has had a foot in both disciplines I find myself moving easily back and forth between literary theories and biblical methods in my own reading and interpretation. As a result, I see that similar questions are of concern in both areas. For example, Nina Baym notes, 'Perhaps the central issue in academic literary feminism right now is theory itself'.² Similar sentiments are voiced in feminist biblical hermeneutics, but they are framed in terms of cautions. Alice Bach warns, 'Feminist criticism must remain fluid, not fixed, so that each of us can contend with the ripples and waves of the dominant culture, diving into language to recover everything that is duplicitous and resistant and confounding'.³

In response to the question 'What makes a feminist reading feminist?' my own thinking moves in a circular pattern, encompassing a

1. For example, in literary theory, see Diana Fuss, 'Reading like a Feminist', *differences* 1 (1989), pp. 77-92; Joyce Quiring Erickson, 'What Difference? The Theory and Practice of Feminist Criticism', *Christianity and Literature* 33.1 (1983), pp. 65-74; Elizabeth Gross, 'What is Feminist Theory?', in her *Feminist Challenges: Social and Political Theory* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986); Nina Baym, 'The Madwoman and her Languages: Why I Don't Do Feminist Literary Theory', in her *Feminist and American Literary History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), pp. 199-213; Josephine Donovan (ed.), *Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1975); Mary Eagleton (ed.), *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader* (New York: Blackwell, 1986); Elaine Showalter (ed.), *Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn (eds.), *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 1986).

In biblical studies see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), as well as *Bread Not Stone* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984); Janice Capel Anderson, 'Mapping Feminist Biblical Criticism: The American Scene, 1983-1990', *CR* (1991), pp. 21-44; Mary Ann Tolbert, 'Defining the Problem: The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics', *Semeia* 28 (1983), pp. 113-26; and 'Protestant Feminists and the Bible: On the Horns of a Dilemma', in Alice Bach (ed.), *The Pleasure of her Text: Feminist Readings of Biblical and Historical Texts* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1990), pp. 5-23.

2. Baym, 'The Madwoman and her Languages', p. 199.

3. Bach (ed.), *The Pleasure of her Text*, pp. ix-x.

number of ideas and presuppositions that find clarity only in partnership with the other elements contained in the circle. This paradigm is marked by particular elements that serve as arcs constituting various portions of the circle and is, at root, an ecological paradigm. That is, no element in the circle works independent of the other elements; rather, this interdependent relationship is what constitutes the circle, and the circle is the methodological enterprise. I see four elements necessary in feminist hermeneutics:

- (1) *Feminism*—is a political category understood and practiced as a liberation movement, critiquing the oppressive structures of society;⁴ (2) *Experience*—is not simply a *construct*, it also *constructs*;⁵ (3) *Culture* (social location)—mediates our experience, and thus our worldviews or paradigms; (4) *Reading/Interpretation (Language)*—language is more than simply a non-material tool, it is an expression of a particular understanding of reality.⁶ It is in language that social locators (gender, race, class, etc.) are first noticed and first submerged.⁷

These elements function together seamlessly in the methodological enterprise, as I understand it. However, I will try to make some specific comments that will clarify the question at hand and the interrelationship of the elements.

I understand *feminism* as both a political term and as a political category because it is, essentially, a liberation movement that not only critiques the oppressive structures of society but, by its various voices and

approaches, works for transformation.⁸ As a political category feminism grew and grows out of *women's* experience and makes explicit the interconnections among all systems of oppression. Liberation movements work for justice, and ultimately for transformation. So, just as feminism affirms and promotes the full humanity of women it rejects and denies anything that diminishes the full humanity and equality of women,⁹ as well as sexism, racism, classism, ageism, or any other dominance pattern that seeks to separate, alienate and oppress. From the beginning feminism has offered a broad-based critique built from the experience of women, but not exclusive to women. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza suggests,

A 'feminist' reading... must time and again rearticulate the categories and focus its lenses of interpretation in particular historical situations and social contexts. It may not subscribe to a single method of analysis nor adopt a single hermeneutical perspective or mode of approach. It also may not restrict itself to one single reading community or audience.... At stake here is a theoretical shift from the paradigm of domination to one of radical equality. Emancipatory movements have to create discursive communities based on shared assumptions and values that define boundaries and validate claims to authority.¹⁰

The ideology that motivates critique (against paradigms of domination) and advocacy (toward a paradigm of radical equality) is an ideology that deconstructs *and* constructs. It is this ideology that is foundational to feminist hermeneutics. However, feminism as both critique and ideology raises a number of questions for feminist interpretation: Because a scholar is a self-defined feminist, does that mean any interpretation offered by that scholar is feminist? Does the gender of the interpreter automatically presume a feminist or non-feminist reading? Is a

8. Schweickart reminds us, 'Feminist criticism... is a mode of *praxis*. The point is not merely to interpret literature in various ways; the point is to *change the world*. We cannot afford to ignore the activity of reading, for it is here that literature is realized as *praxis*. Literature acts on the world by acting on its readers'. See Patricio P. Schweickart, 'Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading', in Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patricio P. Schweickart (eds.), *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts and Contexts* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 39.

9. Lety Russell (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), p. 16.

10. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Transforming the Legacy of *The Women's Bible*', in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction*, I, p. 18.

4. Tolbert, 'Defining the Problem', p. 115.

5. Robert Scholes, 'Reading Like a Man', in Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (eds.), *Men in Feminism* (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 215.

6. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (trans. R. Howard, New York: Hill & Wang, 1975); Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes, and Control*, I, *Theoretical Studies towards a Sociology of Language* (4 vols.; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 2nd rev. edn, 1974); Roland Champagne, 'A Grammar of the Languages of Culture: Literary Theory and Yury M. Lotman's Semiotics', *Literary History* 9 (1977-78), pp. 205-10; Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975); Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (trans. G.C. Spivak, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); *idem*, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in R. Macksey and E. Donato (eds.), *The Structuralist Controversy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970); Joshua A. Fishman, *Readings in the Sociology of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970).

7. Bach (ed.), *The Pleasure of her Text*, p. xii.

particular reading strategy or interpretation feminist because feminists agree that it is? Does placing women's experience, ideas, values, & visions at the center of an interpretation make that interpretation feminist?¹¹ These, and other questions seem to be part of the methodological minefield, part of the contested territory that the academics continue to crawl through in defining, appropriating and utilizing feminist hermeneutical perspectives.

Within the last decade there has been an ongoing conversation about the centrality and importance of *gendered* reading in feminist hermeneutics, bringing this question to the fore. Privileging women's experiences, voices, values, concerns, differences and critiques is the heart of feminist hermeneutics, and will remain so. Gender is a fundamental organizing category of experience and reading is a social activity that involves a complex interweaving of 'structures of power, gender and identity'.¹² We now know that gender is central to any reading experience, and there is provocative research that argues that because the framework of literature (in terms of what is considered classic, good or canonical literature) has been driven by male paradigms, that is, a patriarchal conceptual framework (a situation analogous to the biblical 'canon'), women have been *immasculated* by the very reading process in which they participate.¹³ There are also indications that men, reading literature written by women and expressive of women's experience, have a difficult time engaging in and

appropriating the framework necessary to the reading and interpretation of those texts.¹⁴

On the one hand, some would argue that revisionist reading or reading *against* patriarchal texts offers little protection.¹⁵ But what happens to the reader in the reading experience? Harold Bloom cautions, 'You are or become what you read [my emphases]'.¹⁶ In many cases, the female reader must construct herself as *Other*, when she is required to identify with the male as universal and dominant in a text.¹⁷ In reading, 'what we engage are not texts but paradigms'.¹⁸ Thus the feminist reader, reading biblical texts, is required to be a resisting reader. Kolodny explains, 'we read well, and with pleasure, what we already know how to read; and what we know how to read is to a large extent dependent upon what we have already read (works from which we developed our expectations and learned our interpretative strategies)'.¹⁹

On the other hand, revisionist readings, reading against the text 'can remind us of the powerful effects readers have on texts, and conversely of the powerful effect texts have on readers...'.²⁰ Schweickart notes, 'Feminist criticism... is a mode of *praxis*. The point is not merely to interpret literature in various ways; the point is to *change the world*. We cannot afford to ignore the activity of reading, for it is here that literature is realized as *praxis*. Literature acts on the world by acting on its readers.'²¹ Joyce Erickson agrees and adds, 'for both feminist and

11. For a discussion that asks many of these questions and provides various views on each question, see Eagleton, *Feminist Literary Theory*, pp. 149-54.

12. Nancy K. Miller, 'Archaeologies: The Woman, the Text and the Critic', in Nancy K. Miller (ed.), *The Poetics of Gender* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 272. Also see Bonnie Zimmerman, 'What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism', in Greene and Kahn (eds.), *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, pp. 177-210. Reading, says Annette Kolodny, is a 'learned activity... inevitably sex-coded and gender-inflected', quoted in Elaine Showalter, 'Critical Cross-Dressing: Male Feminists and the Woman of the Year', in Jardine and Smith (eds.), *Men in Feminism*, p. 119.

13. The term was originally coined by Judith Fetterley in *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). See Schweickart, 'Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading', pp. 49-50: 'a crucial feature of the process of immascultation is the woman reader's bifurcated response. She reads the text both as a man and as a woman. But in either case, the result is the same; she confirms her position as other'.

14. See the section Annette Kolodny devotes to structures of signification and reading in 'Dancing through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of Feminist Literary Criticism', in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, pp. 148-219. Elaine Showalter joins the conversation herself when she reports, 'Heath concludes that a man reading as a feminist always involves a strategy of female impersonation. But is there not also a mode of impersonation involved when a woman reads as a feminist, or indeed, when a woman reads as a woman?', 'Critical Cross-Dressing', pp. 128-29.

15. See Hélène Cixous, 'Language conceals an invisible adversary because it's the language of men and their grammar', in 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs* 1 (trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, Summer 1976), pp. 875-93.

16. Harold Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p. 96.

17. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Janice Capel Anderson, 'Literary-Critical Methods', in *Searching the Scriptures*, p. 251.

18. Kolodny, 'Dancing through the Minefield', p. 153.

19. Kolodny, 'Dancing through the Minefield', p. 154.

20. Erickson, 'What Difference?', p. 71.

21. Schweickart, 'Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading', p. 39.

Christian [biblical] critics the high value accorded literature and art is linked to the conviction that they have the power to affect human life, a power that extends into the future.²²

These two positions offer plausible arguments. Reading is not done in a vacuum and the activity of reading imperils the status quo. For me the question of what 'reading' we do as biblical critics concerns, not only what reading is, but what it *does* to the reader and to the community in which it is read. The old, often asked question, 'does the text construct the reading subject or does the reading subject construct the text?'²³ has a place in a discussion about gender and reading. Diana Fuss suggests,

In reading... we bring (old) subject-positions to the text at the same time the actual process of reading constructs (new) subject-positions for us. Consequently, we are always engaged in a 'double reading'... in the sense that we are continually caught within and between *at least two* constantly shifting subject-positions (old and new, constructed and constructing) and these positions may often stand in complete contradiction to each other.²⁴

Is feminist hermeneutics, then, a reading strategy, a methodology, that because of its origins, history, and context, can only be done by women? Is gender the only determiner of feminist reading? Fuss notes that 'feminism seems to take for granted among its members a shared identity'.²⁵ If feminism is understood as a political construct, then fidelity to the ideology must be borne out in the praxis, that is, in the methodologies utilized. For me, then, what makes a feminist reading feminist has less to do *today* with the gender of the person offering the reading and more to do with the coherence the reading has with a feminist ideology. However, I make this statement well aware that there are serious problems inherent in both the appropriation of feminism by men, and with the assumption that men can read like women. Showalter notes that this functional view of reading might be both superficial and politically suspect—can feminist reading be reduced 'to a cognitive skill easily transferable to male texts or critical theories?'²⁶

22. Erickson, 'What Difference?', p. 71.
23. Fuss, 'Reading Like a Feminist', p. 86.
24. Fuss, 'Reading Like a Feminist', pp. 86-87.
25. Fuss, 'Reading Like a Feminist', p. 77.
26. Showalter, 'Critical Cross-Dressing', p. 119.

Experience, culture and reading/interpretation are difficult to separate in the feminist methodological circle because all are mediated through *social location*. For me, *social location* means that the paradigms or world-views we hold are a result of complex patterns including a number of factors that provide a lens focusing and shaping experience, from which is abstracted a particular view of reality. These factors include gender, age, race, religion, education, class, sexual orientation, physical abilities, geography, environment, politics, culture and family. The result is a socially constructed world-view that indicates *place*, or *where I stand*. Mary Ann Tolbert reminds us, 'most of us (though not all) have multiple *perspectives* from which we may interpret texts... We do not exist in one social context but many'.²⁷

If the four arcs I propose are facets of a feminist reading, the relational nature of these elements serves as a model for the process of reading/interpretation that characterizes a feminist reading. As feminists we bring a shared ideology to the discussion, as well as a variety of interpretative strategies for reading. We need to be reminded that we never *just* read, that we always read *from somewhere*,²⁸ and that 'reading is, after all, a learned skill, taught according to conventional rules devised by the cultural elite of any literate society. It is thus a kind of socialization into the values and stereotypical roles expected by that society'.²⁹ There are among us many voices and many *somewheres*, a diversity of experiences, a diversity of readings, and in an ecological framework, diversity is the life-force of the system. We might better ask the methodological question in light of this diversity, 'What makes *feminists' readings* feminist?'³⁰

Earlier I noted that feminist hermeneutics has been primarily concerned with the practice of reading. Is there a difference between the theory and practice of feminist hermeneutics? I think not. If we argue there is a difference, we concede that theory is an esoteric luxury and an elitist pastime that has alienated itself from its roots.³¹ As a

27. Mary Ann Tolbert, 'Reading for Liberation', in Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (eds.), *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), I, p. 274.
28. Fuss, 'Reading Like a Feminist', p. 89.
29. Tolbert, 'Reading for Liberation', p. 274.
30. 'Only by emphasizing the differences and multiplicities of knowers and known can hierarchy and dominance be overcome', Anderson, 'Mapping Feminist Biblical Criticism', p. 26.
31. See Bayim, 'The Madwoman and her Languages', p. 199; 'Feminist

liberation movement founded out of the oppression of women, feminist hermeneutics, in practice and theory, and in partnership with other feminist perspectives,³² not only works for justice but is actively engaged in transformation—it not only *deconstructs*, it *reconstructs*, and it *constructs*.

At the beginning of this essay I spoke about the parallel routes traveled by literary feminism and feminist biblical hermeneutics. Literary feminists frequently speak about 'second-wave' feminism as the 'discovery that women writers had a literature of their own...'³³ and now feminists speak about the 'third wave'. If we, as biblical scholars, can talk about a 'second wave' in feminist hermeneutics, it is very different from that of literary feminists. We cannot claim a 'literature' (in the canonical sense) of our own. Increasingly, though, and particularly with the publication of expressly feminist commentaries and introductions, feminist biblical hermeneutics has moved into a new arena. I would suggest that 'third-wave' feminist hermeneutics is at hand, if not here, the time when feminist monographs, commentaries, dictionaries, etc. that deal with the entire canon (and non-canonical literature) will sit side-by-side on library shelves with the androcentric voices that have dominated the cultural landscape. However, I suspect (and hope) that by the time that horizon is realized we will see that biblical studies has been revolutionized by a multiculturalism that exemplifies both the value of diversity and the importance of social location in any hermeneutic, the foundation of which was laid by feminist hermeneutics.

hermeneutics oscillates between two perspectives: pluralism and legalism. The pluralist perspective recognizes that the very act of reading implies interpretation, and with any number of readings and individuals engaged in readings, there will be a variety of interpretations—one expects the unexpected and diversity is encouraged. The legalist perspective attempts to 'locate the correct positions and marshal women within the ranks'.³⁴ Of the two perspectives, the pluralist position has dominated biblical studies. Bayim continues, 'As for recent literary theory, it is deeply legalistic and judgmental. Infractions—the wrong theory, theoretical errors, or insouciant disregard for theoretical implications—are crimes. Pluralists "dance"; theorists "storm" or "march"'. pp. 199.

32. Bayim, 'The Madwoman and her Languages', p. 204.

33. Elaine Showalter, 'Introduction: The Feminist Critical Revolution', in *The New Feminist Criticism*, p. 6. Also see Nina Bayim's assessment of the 'second wave': 'Matters for Interpretation: Feminism and the Teaching of Literature', in *Feminism and Literary History*, pp. 214-15.

READING THE BIBLE WITH AUTHORITY: FEMINIST INTERROGATION OF THE CANON*

Mary Ann Tolbert

No issue arouses more acrimonious debate among Christians, especially Protestant Christians,¹ than the problem of the authority of the Bible. From the fundamentalists' cry of inerrancy to the liberals' designation of 'classic text', each group, each denomination, indeed, one often thinks, each individual Christian upholds a competing view of the Bible's function, use, and particularly its present authority over the lives of believers. For Christian feminists, the question of the Bible's authority is notoriously troublesome because it has been appealed to so often as providing a divine mandate for their second-class status within many church structures. Texts as diverse in historical origin, language, and viewpoint as Genesis 2-3, 1 Tim. 2.11-15; 1 Cor. 11.2-16; 14.33-36; and 1 Peter 3.1-6 have been used as proof that women's submission to men in home, church and society at large is the revealed plan of God. Yet, the difficulty women have with the issue is just a recent example

* Portions of the argument have appeared—sometimes in a more developed form—in other articles I have published over the last decade. See esp., 'A Response from a Literary Perspective', in R.A. Culpepper and F.F. Segovia (eds.), 'Literary Perspectives on the Gospel of John', *Semeia* 53 (1991), pp. 203-12; 'Afterwords: Christianity, Imperialism and the Decentering of Privilege', in F.F. Segovia and M.A. Tolbert (eds.), *Reading from This Place. I. Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 347-61; and "'A New Teaching with Authority': A Re-Evaluation of the Authority of the Bible", in F.F. Segovia and M.A. Tolbert (eds.), *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998).

1. In the discussion which follows, I will be addressing the issue of biblical authority primarily as it occurs in Christian circles and indeed in Protestant Christian circles. There are clear differences between the ways biblical authority functions in Protestant Christianity and the use, authority and understanding of Tanakh in the various forms of contemporary Judaism.