

**“Gender Studies has had a significant impact on the way we read the Bible.”**

## **A Critical Evaluation of Gender Critical Approaches to the Hebrew Bible**

### **Introduction**

Over the past several decades, Gender Studies has profoundly reshaped the academic interpretation of biblical texts. Emerging in response to the dominance of historically male-centred (patriarchal) scholarship, gender critical approaches have sought to expose the androcentric assumptions embedded both within biblical literature and within its traditional interpretation. Rather than treating gender as a marginal or purely social concern, feminist and gender critical scholars argue that gender is a fundamental category through which power, authority, and identity are constructed in biblical texts. This essay argues that Gender Studies has indeed had a significant impact on the way the Bible is read, particularly the Hebrew Bible, by challenging patriarchal norms, recovering marginalised voices, and reframing familiar narratives in ethically and theologically transformative ways. Through critical engagement with key texts such as Genesis 1–3, the story of Hagar (Genesis 16 and 21), Judges 4–5, and Judges 19, this essay will demonstrate both the strengths and limitations of gender critical approaches, ultimately affirming their enduring significance within contemporary biblical scholarship.

### **Gender Studies and Biblical Interpretation: An Overview**

Gender critical biblical interpretation developed alongside second-wave feminism in the latter half of the twentieth century. Early feminist scholars such as Phyllis Trible and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza sought not merely to add women into existing interpretive frameworks, but to challenge the ideological foundations of biblical interpretation itself. Trible famously described her work as a hermeneutics of suspicion, drawing attention to the ways biblical texts both reflect and reinforce patriarchal structures.<sup>1</sup>

Gender Studies in biblical scholarship encompasses a range of approaches, including feminist criticism, womanist criticism, and masculinity studies. While these approaches differ in emphasis, they share a commitment to interrogating how gender operates within texts and interpretive traditions. Crucially, gender critical scholars do not assume the Bible to be a neutral or divinely objective document; rather, they view it as a product of specific historical, cultural, and social contexts in which male dominance was normative.

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<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 1–9.

This methodological shift has had a profound impact on biblical interpretation. Traditional historical critical methods often prioritised questions of authorship, dating, and textual development, frequently overlooking the ethical implications of the text's portrayal of women. Gender Studies, by contrast, foregrounds questions of power, embodiment, silence, and marginalisation, thereby opening new interpretive possibilities and exposing long standing biases in biblical scholarship.

### **Re-reading Creation: Genesis 1–3**

Few biblical texts illustrate the impact of Gender Studies more clearly than Genesis 1–3. Traditionally, these chapters have been interpreted as establishing a divinely ordained hierarchy between men and women, with Eve's creation from Adam's rib and her role in the transgression of God's command serving as justification for female subordination. Such interpretations have historically underpinned theological arguments for women's exclusion from religious leadership and authority.

Gender critical readings challenge these assumptions by closely analysing the textual details and literary structure of the creation narratives. In Genesis 1:26–27, both male and female are created simultaneously in the image of God (*imago Dei*), undermining claims of inherent male superiority. Phyllis Trible argues that hierarchy enters the narrative only after the disobedience in Genesis 3, suggesting that domination is a consequence of human brokenness rather than divine intention.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, feminist scholars have re-evaluated Eve's role in the narrative. Rather than depicting her as morally weak or intellectually inferior, Trible highlights Eve's theological curiosity and agency. Her dialogue with the serpent demonstrates interpretive reasoning rather than deception or naivety.<sup>3</sup> This reading destabilises centuries of misogynistic interpretation that blamed Eve — and by extension all women — for humanity's fall.

Such re-readings exemplify the transformative impact of Gender Studies: familiar texts are not merely reinterpreted, but ethically re-evaluated. The creation narratives become sites of resistance rather than justification for patriarchy, illustrating how gender critical approaches reshapes theological understanding.

### **Hagar: Marginalisation and Intersectionality**

The story of Hagar in Genesis 16 and 21 further demonstrates the significance of Gender Studies for biblical interpretation. Hagar is an enslaved Egyptian woman whose body is used to secure Abraham's lineage, only to be cast out once she and her son become inconvenienced. Traditional interpretations often treat Hagar as a secondary

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<sup>2</sup> Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. 60–73.

<sup>3</sup> Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. 74–80.

character within the larger Abrahamic narrative, focusing instead on Sarah's role in the covenant.

Feminist and womanist scholars have challenged this marginalisation by foregrounding Hagar's experience of oppression. Athalya Brenner emphasises that Hagar's suffering cannot be understood solely in terms of gender, but must also be analysed through lenses of ethnicity, slavery, and power.<sup>4</sup> This intersectional approach — drawn from Gender Studies — exposes the layered nature of Hagar's exploitation.

Significantly, Hagar is the only character in the Hebrew Bible to name God ("El Roi," Genesis 16:13), a narrative detail that feminist and womanist scholars highlight as a striking affirmation of her theological agency. In a text overwhelmingly shaped by male voices and perspectives, Hagar's act of naming God represents a rare reversal of power, granting an enslaved, foreign woman interpretive authority over the divine encounter. Rather than functioning merely as a passive recipient of divine action, Hagar emerges as a subject capable of theological reflection, challenging assumptions that religious insight and authority are reserved for male or covenantal elites.

Gender-critical readings further emphasise that God's encounter with Hagar takes place not within the patriarchal household but in the wilderness, a space of displacement and vulnerability. This setting reinforces the marginality of Hagar's social position while simultaneously becoming the location of divine revelation and care. The text therefore complicates traditional covenantal theology by depicting God as attentive not only to Abraham and Sarah but also to those whom the covenantal family exploits. Feminist scholars argue that this portrayal resists an exclusively patriarchal alignment of divine favour, instead presenting a God who sees and responds to suffering that is both gendered and structural.

Moreover, the repeated expulsion of Hagar in Genesis 21 underscores the ongoing nature of her marginalisation, highlighting how her vulnerability is produced by systems of power rather than isolated acts of cruelty. Gender Studies draws attention to the ethical dimensions of this narrative, particularly the ways in which female bodies are instrumentalised for male lineage and then discarded once their usefulness has ended. Hagar's suffering exposes the costs of patriarchal social arrangements and challenges readers to confront the moral implications of such systems.

The story of Hagar therefore demonstrates how Gender Studies expands the scope of biblical interpretation beyond dominant figures and idealised theological narratives. By centring the experiences of the marginalised, gender critical approaches compel readers to grapple with uncomfortable questions concerning power, exploitation, and

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<sup>4</sup> Athalya Brenner, *The Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 15–28.

divine justice. In doing so, they reveal the Hebrew Bible as a site of both oppression and resistance, demanding ethically engaged interpretation rather than uncritical reverence.

### **Female Authority and Leadership: Deborah in Judges 4–5**

Gender Studies has also reshaped interpretations of female leadership in the Hebrew Bible, particularly in the case of Deborah in Judges 4–5. Deborah functions as prophet, judge, and military leader — roles traditionally associated with men in biblical literature. Yet older scholarship often treated Deborah as an anomaly or downplayed her authority by emphasising Barak's involvement in battle.

Gender critical scholars challenge these readings by taking the text's portrayal of Deborah seriously. Judges 4 presents Deborah as the primary agent of Israel's deliverance, while Barak's hesitation contrasts with her confidence and authority. J. Cheryl Exum argues that the narrative subverts patriarchal expectations by portraying female leadership as both legitimate and effective.<sup>5</sup>

Judges 5, the Song of Deborah, further reinforces this subversion through its poetic celebration of female authority, communal participation, and maternal imagery. Unlike the prose account in Judges 4, which already positions Deborah as a central figure, the poetic form of Judges 5 intensifies the challenge to conventional gender expectations by commemorating Israel's victory through the voice and perspective of a woman. Deborah is explicitly identified as a "mother in Israel" (Judg. 5:7), a designation that redefines maternal identity as a source of political and spiritual leadership rather than confinement to the private sphere. Gender-critical scholarship highlights how this imagery resists patriarchal assumptions that equate power exclusively with masculine, militaristic dominance.

Furthermore, the Song of Deborah destabilises traditional models of heroism by foregrounding collective action and divine agency over individual male achievement. While male warriors such as Barak are present, their roles are neither idealised nor centralised in the manner typical of heroic battle narratives. Instead, the song celebrates cooperation among tribes, the participation of women such as Jael, and the decisive intervention of God in securing victory. Gender Studies draws attention to how this narrative structure disrupts militaristic masculinity, presenting leadership as relational, communal, and theologically grounded rather than rooted in physical strength or male authority alone.

This re-evaluation of Deborah demonstrates how Gender Studies not only recovers women's presence within biblical texts, but also challenges deeply embedded

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<sup>5</sup> J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 35–48.

assumptions about leadership, authority, and gender roles in ancient Israel. By refusing to treat Deborah as an anomaly or exception, gender critical interpretations reveal alternative models of power operating within the Hebrew Bible itself. In doing so, they invite readers to reconsider how leadership is constructed and legitimised in biblical narratives, thereby expanding the interpretive possibilities available to contemporary scholarship.

### **Texts of Terror: Judges 19 and the Ethics of Reading**

Perhaps the most challenging contribution of Gender Studies to biblical interpretation is its engagement with texts of extreme gendered violence, such as Judges 19. The story of the Levite's concubine, who is gang-raped and dismembered, has historically been interpreted as a moral indictment of Israel's social collapse rather than as a narrative centred on female suffering.

Phyllis Trible famously categorised Judges 19 as a text of terror, arguing that traditional interpretations often perpetuate violence by silencing the woman at the centre of the narrative.<sup>6</sup> The concubine is never named, never speaks, and is treated as disposable by every male figure in the story. Gender critical readings refuse to sanitise this violence or excuse it as merely symbolic.

By foregrounding the woman's absence of voice and agency, Gender Studies forces readers to confront the ethical implications of reading such texts. Rather than asking what the narrative says about Israel, feminist scholars ask what it reveals about the normalisation of violence against women — both in the ancient context and in contemporary reception.

This approach has significantly altered the way biblical texts are taught and interpreted, emphasising ethical responsibility alongside historical analysis.

### **Critiques and Limitations of Gender Studies**

Despite its contributions, Gender Studies has not been without criticism. Some scholars argue that feminist interpretations risk imposing modern values onto ancient texts, thereby anachronistically judging societies with different social norms. Others suggest that gender-critical approaches sometimes prioritise ideology over historical context.

While these concerns merit consideration, they do not negate the value of Gender Studies. As Brenner argues, all interpretation is shaped by the interpreter's context;

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<sup>6</sup> Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 55–66.

claims of neutrality often mask unexamined patriarchal assumptions.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, gender critical scholars generally acknowledge the historical distance between modern readers and biblical texts, using this distance to highlight ethical tensions rather than erase them.

Another significant limitation of some early gender critical approaches lies in the tendency to homogenise women's experiences, implicitly treating "women" as a single, unified category. Early feminist biblical scholarship, shaped largely by Western and often white academic contexts, sometimes prioritised gender as the primary axis of oppression while underplaying other factors such as race, ethnicity, class, slavery, and colonial history. This risked reproducing new forms of exclusion even as it sought to challenge patriarchal readings of the biblical text.

In response to these concerns, womanist and postcolonial scholars have emphasised the importance of diversity, intersectionality, and cultural specificity within gender critical interpretation. Womanist scholars, in particular, have highlighted how the experiences of women in the biblical text — and of contemporary readers — are shaped by multiple, overlapping systems of power rather than by gender alone. Readings of figures such as Hagar have therefore been reframed to account not only for her gender, but also for her status as an enslaved, foreign woman, whose vulnerability cannot be fully understood through a singular feminist lens.

Postcolonial feminist approaches similarly draw attention to the ways biblical texts have been read and deployed within contexts of empire, domination, and resistance. By situating gender within broader social and political structures, these approaches resist universalising interpretations and instead foreground the complexity of women's lived realities in both ancient and modern contexts. Far from undermining Gender Studies, these developments have enriched gender critical interpretation by making it more self reflective, inclusive, and methodologically robust, ensuring that questions of power and marginalisation are addressed with greater nuance and sensitivity.

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, Gender Studies has had a profound and lasting impact on the way the Bible is read, fundamentally reshaping both the questions scholars ask of biblical texts and the ethical frameworks within which interpretation takes place. By systematically challenging long-standing patriarchal assumptions, gender-critical approaches have exposed the ideological interests that shaped traditional interpretations and have revealed how claims of theological neutrality often concealed deeply gendered power structures. Rather than accepting the biblical text as a passive reflection of divine will,

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<sup>7</sup> Brenner, *The Feminist Companion to the Bible*, p. 21-36.

Gender Studies insists on recognising it as a product of particular social, cultural, and historical contexts in which male authority was largely normative.

Through the recovery and re-evaluation of marginalised voices, gender-critical scholarship has brought renewed attention to figures who were previously overlooked, silenced, or interpreted in reductive ways. Re-readings of Genesis 1–3 have destabilised hierarchical understandings of creation and challenged narratives that blame women for human disobedience. The story of Hagar has been reframed as a powerful account of intersectional oppression and divine recognition, while the portrayal of Deborah has prompted a reassessment of assumptions surrounding leadership, authority, and gender roles in ancient Israel. Perhaps most strikingly, feminist engagement with texts such as Judges 19 has forced readers to confront the ethical implications of gendered violence in Scripture, transforming such narratives from abstract moral symbols into sites of moral accountability.

Importantly, Gender Studies has not merely added new perspectives to biblical interpretation, but has altered the discipline's methodological and ethical orientation. Interpretation is no longer understood as a purely descriptive or historical exercise, but as an act that carries moral responsibility. By foregrounding issues of gender, power, and justice, gender-critical approaches insist that how texts are read matters, both for contemporary theological reflection and for the lived experiences of readers shaped by biblical authority.

While Gender Studies is not without limitations, particularly regarding questions of anachronism and interpretive subjectivity, its contributions remain indispensable. By expanding the interpretive horizons of biblical scholarship, Gender Studies has ensured that questions of gender are recognised as central rather than peripheral to understanding the Hebrew Bible. In doing so, it has not only transformed how the Bible is read, but has also challenged scholars and readers alike to reconsider the ethical responsibilities that accompany the interpretation of sacred texts.

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