

Unit 5

Contemporary Contextual Approaches

Biblical Interpretation has been over centuries primarily the domain of a rather narrow selection of the world's population, namely men (gender), white (ethnicity) from the West. This dominance has been challenged from various perspectives over the last thirty years as the awareness has been growing that such a limited group can hardly represent the meaning of the Bible for 'the rest of the world'. Thus approaches which consciously locate themselves within specific groups of people (e.g. women) and/or interpret the Bible with a specific interest (e.g. liberation) have emerged. This led to a growing number of new approaches to the Bible which cannot all be dealt with in this module. The two that are included here are thus a very limited selection of a wide range of diverse recent approaches from a variety of perspectives.

5.1 Feminist Interpretation

Awareness of gender issues in the New Testament and New Testament interpretation emerged as early as the middle of the 19th century. In 1895 and 1898, influenced by the anti-slavery campaigns in the USA and the UK, a group of activists around Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) edited the 'Woman's Bible' in the USA. The passages of the Bible compiled in this volume were selected according to an early hermeneutical framework of suspicion which took note of the particular (male) gendered perspective of biblical texts, and thus of the issue of presuppositions in interpretation. This early example of a gender conscious interpretation of the Bible did not exercise a lasting or widespread influence at the time and the issue of interpreting the Bible, and the New Testament in particular, from a specifically feminist perspective only re-surfaced in the late 60's and early 70's of the 20th century. Scholars had focussed on the role of women according to the NT prior to the emergence of feminist approaches, but rather than addressing the issue of hermeneutical presuppositions in interpretation, they focussed on particular texts on women. Research into the history and role of women in the New Testament and its first century context continues to constitute a significant aspect of feminist research until today; however, a critical feminist perspective only developed in the aftermath of what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in her groundbreaking book *Bread not Stone* (Boston: Beacon 1984) identified and labelled as the 'Hermeneutics of suspicion'. Distinct from earlier approaches, the discourse of biblical interpretation, and the bible itself were perceived as entirely entrenched within male oriented and male dominated perspectives, which thus not only decisively shaped the role of men and women in church and society but the paradigms of thinking and acting in society as such. Women's voices, experiences, and perspectives, are thus neither represented in New Testament texts nor in their interpretation. Feminist interpretation informed by a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' searches for the silenced voices and hidden history of women in the text. A main focus lies in uncovering these submerged voices and at the same time revealing dominating and oppressing traditions in texts and their interpretation. One of the implicit presuppositions of the earlier feminist approaches (70's to 80's) was the notion of a universal female experience of silencing and

oppression. Women from non-white, non-Western traditions challenged some feminist interpretations as implicitly racist and/or anti-Jewish. A new wave of feminist interpretation emerged in the 80's and 90's of the 20th century making it obvious that feminist interpretation is characterized by diversity rather than universalism. Womanist and mujerista interpretation drew attention to the perspective of Afro-American, Afro-Caribbean, and Hispano women, whereas the voices of Jewish feminists alerted Christian feminists to traps of anti-Judaism in New Testament interpretation which they often had taken over from male interpretive traditions. The necessity of self-critical assessment of hermeneutical presuppositions within feminist and gender sensitive approaches also became obvious. Thus feminist interpretation cannot be described as one single approach to, or method of, interpretation but has rather developed into 'a set of interrelated perspectives' (Day&Pressler 2006:xi), which include a wide range of disciplines and methods. Literary criticism ranges alongside historical-criticism, social-science, sociology, critical theory, political science etc. Some aspects however can with confidence be described as being shared by most feminist approaches:

Along with other approaches (e.g. postcolonial) feminist interpretations perceive themselves not as an additional method for analyzing a text but actually as a paradigm shift in that it is assumed that any approach is *contextual*, that is, shaped by its *social location* (gender, race, class, sexual orientation, age etc). As a logical consequence 'masculist' approaches have emerged recently.

This implies that attention needs to be paid to the *hermeneutical presuppositions* (which are influenced by the context of the interpreter) which guide any interpretation. The notion of objectivity or of a text speaking for itself is perceived as a stance which cannot be upheld whatever perspective of interpretation is advocated.

Particularity and diversity are thus inherent aspects of the process of interpretation which itself is perceived as an ongoing conversation over the meaning of a text. Another dimension shared by most feminist approaches is their awareness of, and relation to, contemporary issues in church and society. New Testament interpretation is seen and practised not as an innocent or detached purely academic discipline but in its potential and actual impact on the lives of men and women in church and society. Interpretations and the ethical responsibility for the impact/effects they may produce cannot be separated from each other. Feminist interpretations are concerned interpretations, concerned especially but not exclusively about the fate of women.

Essential Readings:

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| **Marie-Theres Wacker | 'Feminist Exegetical Hermeneutics'
In Luise Schottroff, Silvia Schroer, Marie-Theres Wacker eds., <i>Feminist Interpretation: The Bible in Women's Perspective</i> . Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 1998, pp 36-62 |
| **Kathy Ehrensperger | 'Changing Perspectives: Feminist Hermeneutics and the Debate on Anti-Judaism'
In Kathy Ehrensperger, <i>That We May Be Mutually</i> |

Encouraged: Feminism and The New Perspective in Pauline Studies. London, New York: T&T Clark International 2004, pp. 19-27 (**incorporated in Unit 1 of this module**)

- **Sharon Ringe** 'An Approach to a Critical, Feminist, Theological Reading of the Bible',
In *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible*. Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine eds. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1997, pp.156-63
- **Kathleen O'Connor** 'The Feminist Movement Meets the Old Testament: One Woman's Perspective' in L.Day&C.Pressler (eds.) *Engaging The Bible in a Gendered World*. Louisville,KY: Westminster/John Knox Press 2006, pp. 3-24.
- ** Sheila McGinn** 'Feminists and Paul in Romans 8:18-23: Toward a Theology of Creation' in C.Grenholm&D.Patte (eds.) *Gender, Tradition and Romans: Shared Ground, Uncertain Borders*. New York, London: T&T Clark 2005, pp.21-37.
- ** Adele Reinhartz** 'John, Gender and Judaism: A Feminist's Dilemma', in G.Gelardini (ed.), *Kontexte der Schrift* Bd. I. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2005, pp.182-195.
- Ann Loades** 'Feminist Interpretation'
In Barton J. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998 pp. 81-95
- Kathy Ehrensperger** 'Feminist Criticism' in Gooder P. *Searching for Meaning*. London: SPCK 2008, pp.135-43.
- Further Readings**
- Ehrensperger Kathy,** *That We May Be Mutually Encouraged: Feminism and the New Perspective in Pauline Studies*. London, New York: T&T Clark International 2004
- Ehrensperger Kathy,** *Paul and the Dynamics of Power: Communication and Interaction in the Early Christ-Movement*. London, New York: T&T Clark International 2007
- Day Linda, Pressler Carolyn (eds.),** *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katharine Dobb Sakenfeld*. Louisville, London: Westminster/John Knox Press 2006.
- Schottroff Luise, Schroer Silvia, Wacker Marie-Therese,** *Feminist Interpretation: The Bible in Women's Perspective*. Minneapolis,MN: Fortress Press 1998

Schüssler Fiorenza Elisabeth, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*.
Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 2001.

The series edited by Amy-Jill Levine *Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings*. (Some volumes are published by Continuum and some by Pilgrim Press) is a very useful tool and entry collection for all New Testament books.

Questions to consider:

In what ways do feminist approaches challenge other approaches to interpreting the Bible ?

How do feminist approaches contribute to interpretations of the Bible which are helpful in the contemporary context ?

5.2 Postcolonial and Cross-Cultural Interpretation

Since the roots and moorings of critical biblical interpretation have been embedded in and emerged from Western European and North-American cultures, non-Western people for a long time were not included in the discussions and debates involved as these approaches to the Bible had hardly anything to do with the context and experience of their lives. The issues and concerns in question, the contents to be studied, the hermeneutical presuppositions and interpretative frameworks applied in the analysis of biblical texts have been and still are mainly dominated by Western paradigms. Fernando F. Segovia emphasizes that '...the problem is not only one of different contents and modes of discourse but also one of sociocultural perception and attitude. one must keep in mind the dynamics of hegemony and colonialism – the relationship between the center and the margins, the dominant group and the subordinate groups, the majority group and the minority groups. Colonial discourse and practice function largely in terms of binary oppositions: a primary opposition of center/margins engendering and supporting a number of other oppositions, such as superior/inferior, civilized/savage, advanced/primitive – all coalescing in the end in the traditional geographical opposition of the West/the rest. Consequently, ethnic and racial minorities, coming as they do from non-Western cultures, enter not only an alien context in biblical studies but also an alienating context.....' ('Racial and Ethnic Minorities in Biblical Studies' in *Ethnicity and the Bible*. Mark G. Brett ed. p.485) A growing number of scholars of divergent non-Western background have challenged the hegemony of Western dominated discourse of Biblical Interpretation and developed alternative readings from different social locations. The earliest of these approaches is Latin American liberation theology which did not begin as an academic perspective but emerged out of 'base communities' and the experience of crushing poverty and oppression of the members of these communities and their pastors. They read the Bible from their particular socio-economic context and found texts which disclosed themselves as texts of liberation supporting a process of emancipation and empowerment. Theologians and biblical scholars such as Gustavo Gutierrez and Leonardo and Clodovis Boff formulated parallel to these movements principles of Liberation Hermeneutics and Theology. From around 1990 in a related movement, interpretations from Asian, African and Latin American and particularly from indigenous people's contexts and perspectives began to emerge. The (Western) colonizers' interpretations were critically examined, but also forms of interpretation which were rooted in the respective people's social and cultural context were developed which means that a radical shift in perspective was not only identified but encouraged.

Essential Readings:

- **Pablo Richard 'Biblical Interpretation from the Perspective of Indigenous Cultures of Latin America (Mayas, Kunas and Quechuas)'
In *Ethnicity and the Bible*. Mark G. Brett ed. Leiden: Brill 1996, pp297-314.

- **Richard A. Horsley** 'Feminist Scholarship and Postcolonial Criticism: Subverting Imperial Discourse and Reclaiming Submerged Histories'
In *Walk in the Ways of Wisdom*. Shelley Matthews et.al.eds. Harriburg,PA: Trinity Press International 2003, pp.297-317
- **Fernando F. Segovia** 'Racial and Ethnic Minorities in Biblical Studies'
In *Ethnicity and the Bible*. Mark G.Brett ed. Leiden: Brill 1996, pp. 467-492
- **Juan Escarfuller** 'Repudiating Assimilation in Reading Romans 9-1: A Latino Theologian Locates His Cultural-Religious Hybridity' in Yee Khiok-khng (ed.), *Navigating Romans Through Cultures: Challenging Readings by Charting a New Course*. New York, London: T&T Clark 2004, pp.137-167
- **Khiok-khng Yeo** 'Paul's Theological Ethic and the Chinese Morality of Ren Ren' in C.Cosgrove, H.Weiss, K.K.Yeo, *Cross-Cultural Paul: Journeys to Others, Journeys to Ourselves*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2005, pp.104-140
- ** Philomena Njeri Mwaura** 'Feminist Biblical Interpretation and the Hermeneutics of Liberation: An African Woman's Perspective', in S.Schroer, S. Bietenhard (eds.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 2003, pp.77-85
- In Gooder Paula, *Searching for Meaning*. London: SPCK 2008, chapters 18-22, pp. 152-191

Further Readings:

- Fernando F.Segovia *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View From the Margins*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 2000.
- Daniel Patte et.al.eds. *Global Bible Commentary*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon 2004

Questions to consider:

In what ways do postcolonial approaches challenge other approaches to interpreting the Bible ?

In what ways do non-Western approaches contribute to interpretations of the Bible which are helpful in the contemporary context ?

