

Judges
A Feminist Companion to the Bible
(Second Series)

edited by Athalya Brenner

Theme Three: The Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter
A. 1. Jephthé's daughter is isolated. Judg. 11:39. *Pamplona Bible*.
2. Bucher, plate 178.
3. Harburg F87V.

B. 1. The Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter. Anonymous. Spiegel Menschlicher Behaltnis (Mirror of Human Salvation), Augsburg. Anton Sorg. 1476.
2. TTB, LXXXI, part ii, p. 90.
3. Munich Bayerische Staatsbibliothek; The Newberry Library, Chicago, IL.

C. 1. The Sacrifice of the Daughter of Jephthah. Anonymous. 1476. Speculum Humanae Salvationis (Mirror of Human Salvation), German, Basel. Bernhard Richel.
2. TTB, LXXXI, part ii, p. 29.
3. Berlin Kupferstichkabinett; Pierpont Morgan Library, NYC; Schr 5274. Wilhelm Ludwig Schreiber, *Un catalogue des incunables à figures imprimés en Allemagne, en Suisse, en Autriche-Hongrie, et Scandinavie* (two parts; Leipzig, 1910-11) [i.e. vol. 5 of his *Manuel de l'amateur de la gravure sur bois et sur métal au XVe siècle*.]

D. 1. The Sacrifice of the Daughter of Jephthah. 1481. Spiegel Menschlicher Behaltnis (Mirror of Human Salvation), Speyer. Peter Drach.
2. TTB, LXXXIII, part iv, p. 22.
3. Munich Bayerische Staatsbibliothek; Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of Prints, NYC; Pierpont Morgan Library (H14935), NYC.

E. 1. Jephthah sacrifices his daughter according to his vow.
2. Cockerell, *Old Testament Miniatures*, p. 77.
3. Pierpont Morgan Library. Codex 638.

Delilah is a woman whose name has entered the communal consciousness. People who have not heard of Abishag, or Michal, or Tamara, have heard of Delilah. Not only have they heard of her, they believe they know the type of woman she was. *Chambers' Dictionary* has this entry under 'Delilah': 'the Philistine woman who befooled Samson: a courtesan: a temptress: an alluring object.' Delilah appears because she tempted Samson, 'befooled' him, made a fool of him. Elizabeth Wurtzel writes: 'Delilah's centuries-old superstardom and sex-symbol status has been accorded only because she brought this strong man down.'² Samson is, of course, the strong man. Indeed, *Chambers' Dictionary* has an entry for him also. It reads: 'an abnormally strong man (from the Hebrew champion of Judges xiii-xvi)'.³ There are no dictionary entries for David, or for Elijah or Isaiab; Abraham is mentioned without reference to the biblical character. Samson appears because of his strength. Delilah appears because of her relationship to Samson, and her name is given as another word for a woman who tempts, who allures, who is sexual. Delilah continues to hold an allure. Samson was, apparently, fascinated by her. Scholars still are. Wurtzel admits in her book that 'bad girls', particularly bad girls who are bad in sexual ways, usually suffer for it, and yet she describes her fascination with the character Delilah: 'From the time I first learned about Delilah when I was ten or eleven years old in elementary school, I wanted to know more'.⁴ She notes, 'Delilah to me was a sign of life', '[s]he was sexy and wild and got her way, even if it

Introduction

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DEILAH: A SUITABLE CASE FOR (FEMINIST) TREATMENT?

did all come crashing down on her head in the end'.⁵ Delilah continues to be a focus for speculation. Because she has been so much discussed and analysed, she provides an ideal starting point for discussions of methods of biblical interpretation, particularly methods of feminist biblical interpretation.

Why Does Delilah Fascinate?

So why does Delilah fascinate? Primarily because of the nature of the story. It has been observed that⁶

The most important qualities of this type of woman are beauty, sensuousness, intelligence, self-assurance, cunning, and persistence. All these qualities are used to bring about the fall of a man previously thought to be infallible and unbeatable. The basic scheme pits feminine wiles against masculine strength, clever stratagems against physical prowess, words versus mute action.

In fact,⁷

the story contains many motifs capable of development—patriotism versus individualism, man's strength versus woman's cunning, religious vocation versus sensuous entanglement.

She also fascinates, I think, because there are certain unanswerable questions about Delilah, which provide food for speculation. For example, was she wife or harlot? It is often assumed that Delilah was a prostitute, but the text nowhere states that she was (although this assumption itself says something about interpreters). What does the name 'Delilah' really mean? Why is the biblical text ambiguous about whether she is a Philistine or an Israelite? Exam rightly points out that we cannot simply assume (as so many commentators do) that the woman is a Philistine. Delilah has a Hebrew name. From where does she originate? She lives on the boundary between Israelite and Philistine territory. The text presents at least the possibility that Delilah is an Israelite. Why does she simply fade out of the narrative after Samson has been captured? Each of these questions is open to more than one answer. There is an ambiguity about Delilah in the many silences regarding her in the biblical text. But the ambiguity may be deliberate,

5. Wurtzel, *Bitch*, pp. 44 and 45.
6. D. Solle, J.H. Kirchberger and H. Haag, *Great Women of the Bible in Art and Literature* (trans. J.H. Kirchberger; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 138.
7. Solle, Kirchberger and Haag, *Great Women of the Bible*, p. 141.
8. J.C. Exum, 'Samson's Women', in *idem, Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (JSOTSup, 1993), pp. 61–93 (69).

reflecting the ambiguity of the woman herself, her behaviour, her relationships, her position in society. For these reasons, she is both discussed and pointedly not discussed, by both traditional and feminist biblical scholars.

SMITH *Delilah: A Suitable Case for (Feminist) Treatment?* 95

One can see why Delilah has been described as stereotypical. Whether one regards her positively or negatively, her behaviour is not unusual. Her whole story conforms to a pattern. Wurtzel describes the story of Samson and Delilah as 'the archetypal story of cross-cultural love between members of warring nations: this is Romeo and Juliet... Essentially, the story of Samson and Delilah is one of fatal love, where someone is bound to die'.⁸ Feminist commentators have thus been left with a choice: ignore Delilah as a character and concentrate on other biblical women who are more amenable to reinterpretation in a more positive way; or acknowledge and attempt to explain her more negative traits. The first option—ignoring Delilah—is a tempting one and some feminists have ignored her. This is not simply a matter of avoiding a difficult text because of laziness or incompetence. It is tied up with perceptions of what is the task of feminist biblical scholarship. It could be argued that energies would be better spent on other passages whose reinterpretation could be used for the benefit of women, particularly those who are members of worshipping communities or undertaking academic study. It could also be argued that if the text about Delilah really is extremely negative, focusing further attention upon it runs the risk of reinforcing the androcentric and misogynistic misconceptions about the biblical text that feminist biblical scholars hope to help eradicate. Often, the factors underlying a decision about whether or not to be selective about biblical texts are questions not only about the texts themselves, but about the nature of feminist biblical scholarship, and about feminism itself. Having said this, being selective about texts, for whatever reasons, lays one open to charges of exclusivity, prejudice, scholarly cowardice, or even dishonesty. Feminist interpreters have treated the story in a wide variety of ways. I shall be returning to some of these interpretations of Delilah below.

Why should there be so many different ways of seeing this woman? The answer lies, I think, in the nature of biblical interpretation, and of feminist biblical interpretation. We believed, in the early days, that there ought to be one 'feminist interpretation' of a biblical story. We have learned that this is not the case. In fact, women calling themselves feminist biblical interpreters, in the nature of biblical interpretation, and of feminist biblical interpretation, are returning to some of these interpretations of Delilah below.

'feminists' hold a variety of different viewpoints. Also, women hold- ing what are traditionally believed to be 'feminist' views do not call themselves 'feminists' at all. When we look at the history of feminist biblical interpretation, it is possible to see how differing approaches to the text are possible. The different ways in which feminists have responded to the story of Delilah reflect some of the developments in feminist interpretation of the Bible over the last few decades.

The Beginnings of Feminist Interpretation of the Old Testament

Several possible ways of looking at biblical texts have emerged in feminist writing. They may loosely be described as follows: that the Bible is not as patriarchal and as negative about women as has sometimes been assumed; that the Bible is indeed patriarchal, but is re- deemable, providing its context is taken into account; and that the Bible is irredeemable and should therefore be disregarded. Obviously, there are scholars whose work overlaps between one or more of these categories and various subdivisions within them, but this description gives an overall picture.

Feminist biblical interpretation began with scholars who were com- mitted to their work and to the Bible, but who found it difficult to reconcile their feminism with what they believed the Bible to contain. Phyllis Trible, whose groundbreaking book, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, appeared in 1978, writes this in the Foreword to the book:

I realized that the theology which informed my life was inadequate for addressing the concerns of students; not was it wholly satisfying for me. Ironically, the mighty acts of God in history proved wanting, and the ensuing years have heightened that deficiency.¹⁰

She goes on:

Using feminist hermeneutics, I have tried to recover old treasures and discover new ones in the household of faith. Though some of these treasures are small, they are nonetheless valuable in a tradition that is often compelled to live by the remnant.¹¹

One more quotation from Trible's 1978 work:

Among the blessings of this day has been deepening interest, in my part, in interdisciplinary study. This interest expresses itself in various ways throughout the manuscript: literary criticism flavors the text from

10. P. Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Overtures to Biblical Theology, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. xv.

11. Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. xvi.

beginning to end, psychoanalytic terminology appears in one section; and existentialism, philosophical hermeneutics, structuralism, and Zen Buddhism figure here and there. Though these idioms are not the lan- guage of Zion, I welcome their contributions to my understanding, even as I remember the beneficial presence of Ruth the Moabite in the faith of Israel.¹²

Trible's work came as a breath of fresh air to women struggling to combine their faith and their feminism and others soon followed her lead. Although *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* was critiqued and found wanting in some respects,¹³ its importance continues to be ac- knowledged. It showed a new way of looking at biblical texts and Trible's work on Genesis 2-3 opened the door to looking at other texts about women in a new light. However, it soon became apparent that not all the misogyny and androcentrism that has been found in bib- lical passages relating to women could be put down to inadequate methods of interpretation. It became clear that however full of hope feminists were at the discovery of the work of Trible and others like her, such as Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, with their bringing of texts about women into the foreground and highlighting how much other factors in an androcentric world had influenced their interpretation, it had to be acknowledged that some texts simply could not be reinter- preted positively. Something more was needed and attempts were made to redeem and reclaim such texts. The obvious example of this is Trible's second important book, *Texts of Terror*. In this book, she stories of women are retold. Trible acknowledges that there are sad victims' in the Bible. Indeed, they are tales of terror with women as herself, and '[a]ncient tales of terror speak all too frighteningly of the present'.¹⁵ Other books appeared, such as Carol Meyers' *Discovering Eve*¹⁶ and others looking for overall themes that counteract the effects of individual passages.

12. Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. xvi-xvii.

13. See, for example, D.J.A. Clines, 'What Does Eve Do to Help? And Other Irredeemably Androcentric Orientations in Genesis 1-3', in D.J.A. Clines, *What Does Eve Do to Help? And Other Reading Questions to the Old Testament* (JSOTSup, 94, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), pp. 25-48.

14. P. Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 1.

15. Trible, *Texts of Terror*, p. xiii.

16. C. Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

needed were ways of exploring new methods and their implications. However, exploring new methods also has its limitations. As Pamela Milne has pointed out,²³

We initially attempted to locate the patriarchy problem in interpretation. But the more work we did, the more evidence we found that pointed to the Bible itself.

One way of dealing with this, Milne suggests, is to focus more on the reader than on the biblical text itself.²⁴

...every text has gaps or silences and...every author assumes readers bring some knowledge to their reading. Readers actually create new texts by combining their knowledge with what they encounter in the written text. This development in thinking seems to offer a new possibility to feminists who want to salvage the authority of the Bible. The strategy is to relocate meaning away from the text to the reader or the process of reading.

There is, however, a fundamental problem for feminist readers using the argument that their own 'reader response' to a text is a valid one. This is that they also have to allow the validity of other readings, and her contemporaries of literary critical methods had as its background a thorough grounding in traditional scholarship. It sometimes seems as if those with no such grounding who simply approach the text and deal with it in a superficial way present a house built on sand rather than one built on rock. The house built on sand is held up by ideology and willpower and if those are undermined, then the whole edifice will fall.

The process of feminist interpretation began by simply reading the Old Testament and rediscovering within it stories of women that had hitherto been neglected. Many biblical stories about women were 'rediscovered' by feminists and the assumptions underlying what had previously been said about them analysed and critiqued. Furthermore, many of these stories were then reinterpreted in the light of feminist insights. Books appeared, with the purpose of showing that many of the negative statements that had previously been made about women of the Bible had their roots in the androcentric world-views of commentators rather than in the biblical text itself. Thus, the positive

23. P.J. Milne, 'No Promised Land: Rejecting the Authority of the Bible', in H. Shanks (ed.), *Feminist Approaches to the Bible* (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1995), pp. 47-73 (p. 65).

24. Milne, 'No Promised Land', p. 66.

aspects of biblical women were emphasized, such as the leadership of Deborah, independent behaviour by Sarah, and so on.

This process is what led to the questioning of why and how this neglect had come about. This in turn led to a questioning of traditional scholarly method and the validity of its apparent claims to 'objectivity'. Feminists working in other areas had begun to observe the ubiquity of androcentric values and norms and their insidious effects on the lives of women and these insights were utilized by feminist biblical scholars. They began to suggest that texts about women had been misunderstood and that led to an examination of the academic and cultural contexts in which such misunderstandings had occurred. It needs to be reiterated that such an analysis would not have been possible had the feminist scholars concerned not been trained in traditional methods and thus understood the ways in which they were used.

There began to be a reassessment of texts relating to women, whether these were narratives about women, laws pertaining to women, or metaphorical language and feminine imagery. It was perhaps inevitable that some texts should have received more attention than others, particularly at first. *Tribble's God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* has a large section on Genesis 2-3, and this became of the use that has been made of it from 2 Timothy onwards. It is no coincidence that Brenner's edited volume, *A Feminist Companion to Judges*,²⁵ should have its largest section devoted to the same chapter. More positive portrayals of Old Testament women were set against negative ones. Part of this process involved setting narratives and legal texts in the wider context of the Old Testament and the ancient Near East. This would not have been possible had Old Testament study generally not begun to move away from ever more detailed examinations of linguistic matters and towards a more holistic approach. As already noted, feminist criticism could not have happened without the advent of literary criticism and reader response methods. In my view it also could not have happened without the background of canonical criticism and structuralism. All such methods reflect the belief that although the Old Testament reflects a patriarchal, even misogynistic society, it is redeemable by feminist interpretation and reinterpretation.

25. A. Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Genesis* (The Feminist Companion to the Bible, 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

However, for some feminists this was not enough. Other questions began to be asked. Is the biblical text inherently and irredeemably patriarchal? Linked to this were questions about whether it was possible to free readers from centuries of redeeming the biblical text in any way. In fact, the 'text' as we have it, includes the history of its interpretation. And although at first feminist biblical scholars concentrated on interpretation by other biblical scholars, latterly, other scholars, notably J. Cheryl Exum and Alice Bach, following in the footsteps of Mikee Bal and other cultural interpreters, included in the history of interpretation 'all cultural representations of biblical motifs and characters. As Exum points out in *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*,²⁶ 'As a woman and a feminist, I have something at stake in the cultural representations of biblical women'. The responses to this varied, according to the context of the person concerned. Some feminists in the Christian tradition decided that the only option was to become post-Christian and discard the Bible altogether. These feminists argued that the Bible was not only irrelevant, it was positively dangerous. Here is Daphne Hampson, writing in 1990:²⁷

Such textual analysis [i.e. feminist interpretation], undertaken with a feminist pair of eyes, is uncovering the depth at which sexism must be seen to be present in the text. It shows to be totally naive claims that the problem of the patriarchal nature of the biblical literature could be solved by for example substituting certain female words for male words, or concentrating on those stories which contain women. The text is the product of a sexist, indeed, misogynist, culture: the presuppositions of a patriarchal world are written into it. Moreover, such texts are the more dangerous in that they affect us at a subconscious level. The fact that the narrator evaluates the story from a patriarchal perspective only compounds the issue. There is, one must conclude, little that can be done. Yet these texts are read as sacred texts.

Millie states:²⁸

There is a significant need for feminist critical analysis of the Bible and its effects on our society, but I doubt we will be perceived as serious feminist people as long as we try to fit the notion of an authoritative sacred canon into a feminist paradigm. The more important task, in my view, is to situate our work more centrally within the ongoing struggle for women's equality.

26. J. C. Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted* (SOTSup, 215; Gender, Culture, Theory, 3; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), p. 11.
27. D. Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (SOTSup, 215; Gender, Culture, Theory, Blackwell, 1990), p. 92.

Millie, like Hampson, sees a conflict between being a feminist and seeing the Bible as an 'authoritative' text. Both would, I think, place their commitment to feminist ideals and values above any claims the Bible might have over them. Millie writes:²⁹

A non-confessing feminist discourse, rather than subordinating the feminist perspective, subjects the biblical text and tradition to evaluation in non-confessional contexts. Feminist biblical scholars who are working in non-confessional contexts might well promote dialogue with other feminists by emphasizing this and by making a greater effort to articulate the feminist goal or purpose [whatever that may be] of their work.

But whereas Hampson advocates disregarding it altogether, Millie suggests that biblical study is essential for the continuing feminist struggle. This view is shared by those, such as Mikee Bal, Cheryl Exum, Alice Bach and others, who approach the Bible as a cultural artefact. They begin from the premise that

It is not simply a matter of the Bible influencing culture; the influence takes place in both directions. What many people know or think they know about the Bible comes from more familiar representations of biblical texts and themes in the popular culture than from study of the ancient text itself.³⁰

While broadly agreeing with this statement, I would wish to add: often, but not always, as I think this is a factor that is too frequently overlooked.

This consciousness of the place of the Bible as part of the wider culture and the need for feminism to critique that culture as a whole, has led some feminists to look through their feminist eyeglasses at the Bible in the context of that wider culture. J. Cheryl Exum, in *Plotted, Shot and Painted*, examines the ways in which biblical women such as Delilah and Bathsheba are portrayed by filmmakers; Mikee Bal had already brought the insights and methods of the study of literature to the Bible, in *Murder and Difference*,³¹ and Ilona Kashkow has used 'a

28. Millie, 'No Promised Land', p. 70.
29. P. J. Millie, 'Toward Feminist Companionship: The Future of Biblical Studies and Feminism', in A. Brenner and C. Fontaine (eds), *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp. 39-60 (58).
30. Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, pp. 7-8.
31. M. Bal, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Centre, and Scholarship on Siera's Death* (trans. M. Gumpert; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); see also, M. Bal (ed.), *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Life in the Hebrew Bible* (SOTSup, 81; Bible and Literature Series, 22; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989).

feminist-psychoanalytic approach' to some biblical texts in her book, *The Phallacy of Genesis*.³² However, these new developments and perspectives need themselves to be subject to scrutiny, since they call into question much that has gone before in feminist interpretation of the Old Testament and even, implicitly, the integrity of the scholars engaged in it. As such their work could have powerful implications for the future of feminist Old Testament scholarship.

The approach of scholars such as Bal and Exum acknowledges the Bible's importance in the shaping of Western patriarchal ideology, and studies it precisely because of this importance. Such scholars accept that the Bible is a sacred text for some, but do not take it as such for themselves. This view completes the separation of the Bible from the worshipping community. However, if used on its own, it is ultimately sterile. It is perhaps significant that in her Preface to *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, Exum thanks Alice Bach 'for saying "it doesn't have to go anywhere"', because, in fact, it could be argued that, ultimately, Exum's work does not 'go anywhere'.³³ Once you have analysed every single biblical text relating to women and every single cultural artefact making reference to those texts, and discovered them to be irredeemably patriarchal, where do you go next? There is also a basic confusion underlying much of the work in this area. It is argued that the underlying text is deeply misogynistic, written by males from a male perspective, and with male readers in mind, and yet there seems to be in much of their work an air of general condemnation of artists, authors and filmmakers for reinforcing such images in their portrayals of biblical women. It should not really surprise us that they do so. Hollywood may be 'larger than life', but the whole point is that it starts from 'life'. In fact, there is something of a parallel in speaking of the Bible. The Old Testament stories are derived from a culture that was in many ways patriarchal and androcentric, and that, in my view, moved over time further and further towards outright misogyny, for various reasons. It would be surprising indeed if the writings of that time did not reflect that wider cultural context, and the knowledge that they do reflect it should give us hope in the signs of redemption that have been found for feminists in the biblical text, since they indicate that if a progression in one direction is possible, it is also possible in the other direction.

32. I. Raskow, *The Phallacy of Genesis: A Feminist-Psychoanalytic Approach* (Lithary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

33. Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, p. 15.

Much useful work has been done by cultural critics such as Bal, Bach and Exum in uncovering the reinforcement of negative images of biblical women in the arts and the media, and one would have assumed that the logical progression from their work would be that there should be a call to a return to the Old Testament so that the record can be put right. If, as so many would claim, the Bible does indeed contain similar seeds of their own subversion? While works of art, and literature and films have emphasized and reinforced certain aspects of biblical portrayals of women, there are other aspects, of equal importance, that also need to be brought into the foreground. Nevertheless, the whole tenor of the work of Exum, Bach and others is that there is no hope. The more works of art and aspects of popular culture, such as films, are examined, the more misogyny is to be found in them. Bach makes an assumption that the biblical text, like the 'meta-texts' derived from it, is inherently misogynistic and biased against the interests of women, and that it is only with the help of scholars such as herself and others like her that women can be rescued from being victims of this ideological conspiracy. This appears to contain within it a further assumption—that those readers, female or male, who do not perceive this overwhelming and irreparable bias within the biblical texts and the cultural artefacts based upon them, are somehow stupid, ignorant, deluded, or merely the tools of the patriarchal establishment. The problem is that if one believes that the biblical text is riddled with patriarchy, androcentrism and misogyny, then everywhere you look for it in the Bible you will find it. There needs to be a clearer distinction made between the world in which the biblical text took its form and the text itself, even granting that the two are obviously interconnected. The Bible reflects something of the world-view that prevailed at the time it was written, as well as contributing to its construction. It also, obviously, has contributed to the world-view of Western culture and scholars are right to point this out. Nevertheless, there seems to be no recognition of the possibility that 'misogyny' then took different forms from 'misogyny' today. It is assumed that what constitutes 'patriarchy', 'androcentrism', and 'misogyny' is a constant, even though these concepts have only been actively formulated and explored in the twentieth century. Further, the terms 'misogyny', 'androcentrism' and 'patriarchy' are not synonymous and we have not yet explored fully the possibility that the Bible (and its

being misogynistic. This is an area that needs more attention.

Exum's stated aim in her book *Plotted, Shot, and Painted* is to explore how our culture reads texts and visual images of biblical women.³⁴ Competent though it is, there are serious questions to be asked about her work and its relevance to biblical scholarship. Although Exum pays lip service to the fact that '[she is the] main instance of how a reader or viewer responds, since I know my experience best',³⁵ she gives the distinct impression that she believes her own interpretation of cultural representations of biblical women to be the only valid one. This tendency is increased in the work of others, such as Bach, who has commented: 'A central cause of women bearing the weight of patriarchy is to be found in the biblical portraits of women'.³⁶ Her book is an attempt to demonstrate the truth of this statement. In fact, there is a serious question in my mind about whether the work of such scholars should be regarded as either biblical scholarship or feminism, even though Bach's work is described by her publisher as 'a shift in the paradigm of biblical study'³⁷ and Exum's *Plotted, Shot, and Painted* appears in the *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*. It needs to be asked whether the work of those dealing with 'the tropes and figures of the Bible [that] reside in the collective unconscious of Western culture as well as in the conscious streams of moralizing that drench our popular media'³⁸ can really be classed as biblical interpretation at all, feminist or otherwise. There is a wider question here about whether there should be boundaries about what can and what cannot be classed as 'biblical interpretation' and what they are. How far does one have to move away from the biblical text for the study of something other than the Bible? There is also a question about whether work that has at its heart a denial of the perceptions and experience of women readers of texts or metatexts can be termed 'feminist', since feminism has at its roots the acknowledgment of the validity of the experiences and perspectives of women. This area also needs to be explored, since, clearly, there are women who would describe themselves as feminists who do

34. Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, p. 11.
35. Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, p. 11.
36. A. Bach, *Women, Seduction and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 1.
37. Bach, *Women, Seduction and Betrayal*, back cover.
38. Bach, *Women, Seduction and Betrayal*, p. 1.

not see the biblical text as irredeemably androcentric and misogynistic. There are also alternative ways of interpreting many of the cultural artefacts that have been deemed as perpetuating male-centred perceptions of the Bible. Where one cultural critic sees evidence of a (detrimental and oppressive) 'male gaze', another may well see something very different, and even liberating. There is, further, as I have already noted, an inherent inconsistency at the heart of all studies rooted in 'reader response' criticism and postmodernist biblical interpretation. If all readings have equal validity, then overtly patriarchal and misogynistic readings have to be counted as potentially valid, even by feminists, however offensive such readings may appear.

Bach writes:³⁹

A majority of feminist intellectuals have freed themselves from the religious biases first planted in the Garden that continue to teach androcentrism as God's law. But this is not enough to change a culture.

However, there needs to be some clarification here about the task being undertaken. Either the culture is being described and analysed or attempts are being made to change it. There can be no doubt that these two tasks are interrelated, but they are nevertheless distinct, and should be distinguished.

The underlying assumptions about biblical stories and characters and cultural artefacts derived from them (such as films, paintings, etc.) that lie behind the work of some cultural critics, could, if taken to their logical conclusion, have profound implications not only for feminist biblical interpretation of the Bible, but also other methods of interpretation. Such an agenda can have negative consequences in two particularly significant areas: the work of feminist biblical scholars and the status of the Bible for members of worshipping communities. If the Bible and every subsequent interpretation of it is, by definition, irredeemably sexist and even misogynistic, any form of feminist biblical scholarship becomes impossible and the work of all feminist scholars to date is called into question as being either naive or deliberately misleading. Further, suggesting that the Bible cannot be regarded as in any way authoritative for any community whose mode of existence is tied to the Bible as an authoritative document (however that may be interpreted, and it could include a whole spectrum of worshipping communities from the fundamentalist to the exceedingly liberal).

Further, while Exum declares, possibly rightly, that even texts about women are written by males with a male reader in mind, it is extraordinary that she should imply that not until now has this been realized. Although it may not have been expressed in the same language, it is surely the case that the first female readers to have looked with feminist eyes upon the Bible—going back even beyond Iribio to Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her co-workers in the production of *The Woman's Bible*, published in 1895—were doing just that: reading with women's eyes, and gradually becoming aware of the implications of what they were reading. And as they read and interpreted what they read, and critiqued the tradition of interpretation that had been handed down to them, they began the process of undermining those layers that had accrued over the centuries. In fact, there is a good pedigree for such an approach. Surely, the whole concept of midrash is that the tradition is there to be debated and explored.

Nevertheless, rather than advocating a constructive return to the text, which is where feminist biblical interpretation began, and which seems a sensible place for all biblical scholarship to begin, many scholars seem to be conveying the distinct impression that they have already made up their minds that the text is irredeemable. Rather than discard the Bible, as Hampson does, they continually pick over it, looking for more and more examples of patriarchal bias and misogyny. They will never see a redeeming feature and discount all efforts to demonstrate that they exist, or can exist. Such an approach can be helpful as a contribution to a wider engagement with biblical texts, particularly a wider feminist engagement. It has little value as a method used in isolation.

One of the first tasks undertaken by feminist biblical scholars was the rediscovery of biblical women. The trouble is, I think, that feminists were not sure whether they wanted to rediscover Delilah, that mixture of strength and weakness; a woman using all those 'feminine' weapons we most deplore—tears, nagging, sexual attraction—and yet achieving her aims by doing it. It has to be admitted that Delilah's behaviour brought her financial independence, surely something to be applauded by feminists! But we are made uncomfortable by Delilah using the limited power that she has, particularly her sexual power, so effectively, and doing so in ways that are stereotypical and seen as negative according to feminist 'orthodoxy'. In fact, Delilah is a 'type', one of a line of noteworthy seductresses frequently assigned to a

Feminist Interpretation of Delilah

strong hero by legends and folktales.⁴⁰ She represents a particular view of women that has been castigated by the patriarchal establishment and feminists alike and that sits uneasily in a feminist context. Post-feminists might be much more comfortable with Delilah's behaviour!

So what methods are available for feminists to use in dealing with the story of Delilah? Is it possible to say that the Bible is not as negative and patriarchal about Delilah as has sometimes been assumed? Those who have taken this route believe so. They are in effect saying that while at first glance it may seem that Judges 16 is about a strong man, if the story is carefully read, it can be seen that it is also about a strong woman. One suggestion is that⁴¹

It is possible that the original Samson legend was invented by the Philistines, for whom Delilah thus becomes a patriotic heroine.

Lillian Klein has made a similar point, suggesting that from a Philistine point of view (and Klein assumes that Delilah is a Philistine), she may be seen as 'a resourceful woman, possibly a heroine to her own people', in spite of perpetrating 'an age-old and repugnant ruse: using a man's love to bring him down'.⁴² Klein also comments, 'Delilah cannot be faulted for serving her people'. Thus, even if one accepts that the biblical writer has a negative perception of Delilah, it is still possible to redeem her to some extent by emphasizing some of her positive qualities. Another method feminist interpreters have used when considering biblical women has been seeing stories from the point of view of a woman participant or observer. Thus, it can be argued that seen from the perspective of a Philistine woman, Delilah can be seen as an example of a woman who is patriotic and shows initiative. It may well be the case that from the biblical writer's point of view, Delilah is one of the women 'who endanger the society in which they live to the point of physical destruction',⁴³ but seen from another perspective she is a positive model of female independence, imagination and self-sufficiency.

40. Solle, Kirchberger and Haag, *Great Women of the Bible*, p. 138.
41. L.R. Klein, 'The Book of Judges: Paradigm and Deviation in Images of Women', in A. Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (The Feminist Companion to the Bible, 4; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), p. 66.
42. Klein, 'The Book of Judges', p. 65.
43. A. Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), p. 113.

Danna Nolan Fewell is one of those who believes that Delilah has been given a bad press. She comments:⁴⁵

Delilah is rarely examined in her own right. Because Samson is often labelled a hero, Delilah is cast in the role of a villain who brings about the downfall of God's chosen. Delilah, however, is more than an (un?) supporting actress. In this part of the story, the spotlight is hers. Of all the women in Samson's story, she alone is named. Once introduced, she initiates the action. It is her desire that drives the plot; Samson is merely a respondent. The woman is the focus of the reader's attention. Delilah's identity is not bound to any man. Introduced simply by name, she is a woman who takes care of herself. She conducts her love affair with Samson and her business affairs with the lords of the Philistines without any father, brother, or husband acting as mediator.... Delilah, a woman without father, brother, or husband to support her, secures for herself financial stability.

Others have also noted Delilah's independence. Lillian Klein notes⁴⁶ that 'Delilah is presented as an unusually independent woman who engages in direct commercial enterprises with men and uses her sexuality to tangible advantage'. However, in Klein's view⁴⁷ this is used by the biblical writer in a negative way, since because 'Delilah, the woman [Samson] loves, betrays him for the lowest of purposes: a price. To the Israelite reader, Delilah is depicted as worse than a prostitute'. In fact she is 'the female climax in Judges' cyclical sequence of flawed characters'. Nevertheless, it does need to be said that while independence, and particularly financial independence, is desirable for twentieth-century women, this was not necessarily the case in ancient Israel. A woman without male support may well have been seen as an object for pity rather than congratulation. Delilah appears to have been an independent woman,⁴⁸ and to have had a mind of her own. However, the attributes of independence and knowing one's own mind, while positive ones to twentieth-century eyes, were not necessarily so to the biblical writers. Further, the biblical account is written from the point of view of the Israelites, not that of the Philistines (which is why Rahab is honoured in the Bible, while Delilah is not).

45. D.N. Fewell, 'Judges', in C.A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK, Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), pp. 67-77 (pp. 73-74).
46. Klein, *The Book of Judges*, pp. 55-71 (62).
47. Klein, *The Book of Judges*, pp. 62-63.
48. Ekum points out that 'she is not identified, as biblical women typically are, in relation to a man, usually, their father or husband. She appears to have her own house, but how she came by it is not revealed' (Ekum, *Plot, Shot, and Painted*, p. 181).

even though her sexual behaviour is questionable). In any case, this method is open to the objection that viewing Delilah in a positive light is only putting a different 'gloss' onto the story. A feminist reading is not necessarily helpful to women if it merely ignores their shortcomings and bad behaviour and only permits mention of behaviour and characteristics that are 'acceptable' from a feminist point of view. Attempts to suggest that it is possible to read the story of Delilah in a more positive way can have only a limited success. However, it is possible to acknowledge Delilah's shortcomings, but argue that she is very much a victim of her time, and, given the limited possibilities open to a woman who apparently has no male protector on hand, as was customary, she does very well. Such a method attempts to 'redeem' the text from its original patriarchal setting and the patriarchal 'overlay' of years of interpretation. This involves looking at the history of interpretation of Judges 16. Nevertheless, the biblical text portrays various negative aspects of Delilah's character, and one cannot with honesty, attribute all of the negative associations Delilah has had to patriarchal and misogynistic misrepresentations of the text, arising out of the world-views of the commentators. She does wine, wheedle and pester Samson. She does take money for betraying him to the Philistines. She does use the fact that he finds her sexually alluring to her own advantage.

Those who see Delilah negatively include, as one might expect, some very traditional authors. Many of those writing for a more devotional audience ignore Delilah, possibly because they find her too difficult to deal with in such a context. Others see in her a grim example. Here is H.T. Sell, in a 1925 book, *Studies of Famous Bible Women*, in a chapter entitled 'Delilah: A Temptress':⁴⁹

Delilah is a type of 'The Undesirable Woman'. She is a wrecker wherever she is and she is in every community. In her we search in vain for any conscience in regard to what she does or any pity for her victims.... All her fascinations, and she has many, are exerted for the purpose of mutilating and destroying everything that is worth while in those upon whom she fixes her regard.... It is the same old story through the ages. The methods of this woman, of this evil sort, remain unchanged.... Why is this story in the Bible? It is not a pleasant one. It is sordid to the last degree.

49. H.T. Sell, *Studies of Famous Bible Women* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1925), pp. 38-40.

And so Sell continues. As far as this author is concerned, there is no question that there might be another way of looking at this narrative:⁵⁰

This story is left to make its own impression. There is no summing up. There is no moralizing. There is no preaching a sermon. The tale is sufficient in itself.

This view is echoed by Arthur Cundaal, in his 1966 commentary:⁵¹ 'The hypocrisy of Delilah, pretending to love but all the time plotting the death of her love, can be left without comment'.

J. Cheryl Exum, writing as a feminist, would argue that these two authors have caught exactly the agenda of the biblical writer in writing about Delilah and Samson's other women in Judges 14–16. This is, she suggests,⁵² 'to control women and justify their subjugation'. Even what might be seen as one of Delilah's strengths—her powerfulness—is seen negatively by Exum since, she argues, women's power (which the biblical writer's perception that 'Women's sexuality must be controlled. In order to reduce its threat, women's behaviour must be regulated'. This thought echoes Nancy Tischler, who is very harsh about Delilah, describing her⁵³ as 'the cynical manipulator of sensuality' and making 'deliberate and calculated' choices. Tischler also makes the comment:⁵⁴

The multiple forms that the Delilah figure has taken suggest that it is one of the concepts of the female which haunts man and frightens him. She is no harmless plaything or mindless drudge; she is a real threat to his masculinity and his mission.

At first sight, Judges 16 might appear to be an absolute gift to those who wish to reject outright the relevance of the Bible for women, and for those approaching the story from a 'gender and culture' perspective. The narrator portrays Delilah as a woman who is prepared to lie, betray and use the fact that a man finds her sexually attractive to

50. Sell, *Studies*, p. 44.
51. A.E. Cundaal, *Judges: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC, London: Tyndale Press, 1966), p. 177.
52. Exum, 'Samson's Women', p. 62.
53. Exum, 'Samson's Women', p. 89.
54. Exum, 'Samson's Women', p. 89.
55. N. Tischler, *Legacy of Eve*, p. 77.
56. Tischler, *Legacy of Eve*, p. 77.

achieve her aims. Such a picture is not one that feminists would wish to have associated with women. Further, representations of Delilah in paintings, films and literature have intensified the portrayal of her as 'a temptress par excellence'.⁵⁷ Exum comments:⁵⁸

Delilah has become a trope for the *femme fatale*, the woman fatal to man—sexually irresistible, at once both fascinating and frightening, and ultimately deadly.

Exum examines representations of Delilah in paintings, Hollywood films, literature and musical works, such as Handel's *Samson*. She puts forward a convincing case for saying that there is masculine, and even anti-women bias in all the representations of Delilah in art and popular culture that she considers. Nevertheless, Exum's analysis falls short on many points. It is by no means certain that all those who see Delilah as a temptress and a seducer have seen either the paintings or the films that she mentions. They are more likely to have seen the advertisement for Weetabix, a breakfast cereal, that features Samson and Delilah. This piece of delightful nonsense, while it shows how advertisers assume knowledge of the story in the public's mind, nevertheless completely corrupts the story, because Samson escapes his fate, having eaten a sufficient amount of the appropriate breakfast cereal! (The fact that the story was considered sufficiently accessible to a television audience to make the advertisement commercially viable says a great deal about how far it has entered the culture and collective consciousness.) Exum also appears at times to be colluding with those she condemns since, while she gives an interpretation of the biblical story that shows how inaccurate many of these representations are, she ultimately moves away from the biblical text to cultural representations of it, thus focusing attention away from the text itself. She asks, 'Can women ever win, either in the biblical text or in its literary, musical, or visual afterlives? If not, why not?'⁵⁹ Her implied answer is that women never *can* win, and so there is no genuine search in her work. She already knows the answer.

It is also possible to take a more neutral view, suggesting that the narrative portrays Delilah and Samson as having both negative and positive qualities. My own view⁶⁰ is that this ambiguity about the

57. Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, p. 176.
58. Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, p. 176.
59. Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, p. 8.
60. C. Smith, 'Samson and Delilah: A Parable of Power?', *JOT 76* (1997), pp. 45–57. My research for this *JOT* article led me to write the current one, as I became fascinated by the different ways in which feminists had interpreted Delilah.

characters reflects other ambiguities within the biblical narrative that leave many questions open, and that the story of Samson and Delilah is, above all, a story about power—who has it, who uses it, and how it is used. As I have argued in a *JSTOT* article,⁶¹

while the narrative certainly does reflect the values and preoccupations of the patriarchal society from which it arose, it does not so much reinforce them as leave open the possibility that they may be questioned... Thus, while Exum may be correct when she says that 'Women's subordination to men is, after all, considered to be the natural state of things', it is not necessarily the case that this text (Judges 13–16) has as an underlying theme that 'the oppression of women is taken for granted' for all time.

I believe that Judges 16 is above all about the use and misuse of power by humans and deities and that both Samson and Delilah are seen as wielding power and also being manipulated by others who are more powerful than they are. Such a view is not incompatible with the feminist agenda. Questions about power have long been important ones for feminists. Much of our history has involved critiquing the structures of power within society and how they have operated to the detriment of women, and there is no reason why portrayals of the use and misuse of power within the Bible should be exempt from such analysis.

So where does that leave us? I think the problem is that feminist biblical scholars, for various reasons, have become far too dualistic in their thinking. And this may seem an odd thing to say in this context, as one of the accusations that has been levelled at the patriarchal establishment, particularly the academic establishment, is that it is thinking is dualistic. And yet it somehow seems that we are being offered a choice: either be a feminist, and admit that the Bible is an androcentric, misogynist document that has as its primary purpose the facilitation of the oppression of women and the maintenance of patriarchy; or continue to attempt to reinterpret the Bible and give up all notions of calling yourself 'feminist'. And yet Heather McKay has rightly warned us:⁶²

Feminist strategies can only succeed if they are not assumed to contain all that is best in scholarship and if they prevent the critical pendulum from swinging too far towards a single-mindedly feminist stance.

61. Smith, 'Samson and Delilah', p. 48.
62. H. McKay, 'On the Future of Feminist Biblical Criticism', in Brenner and Fontaine (eds.), *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible*, pp. 61–83 (81).

So, is a feminist reading of the story of Delilah possible? Of course, but it may take many forms. A feminist biblical scholar is no different from any other biblical scholar. To be a *biblical* scholar she must start with the text. What does it tell us? It is a story that is universal, that has echoes of many other stories from many other cultures and ages. It tells of a woman with whom a strong man falls in love. He is so besotted with her that he will give her anything—even the secret of his strength, which must, of necessity, put him in her power. On the positive side, Delilah is a woman who achieves something that many others have failed to do: she brings about the downfall of the great Israelite hero. Feminists can point to this positive achievement. They may also deplore the methods that Delilah used. However, it would be appropriate to analyse *why* she operated in this way. What were the constraints on her that limited her ability to act in any other way? Were they directly related to her being a woman and the constraints on women of the time? Discussion of such matters is surely a feminist task. The fact that Delilah has been portrayed by filmmakers and others for so many centuries tells us something about the enduring quality of her story. It also tells us something about the importance of the Bible for our society and its influence on our lives. *How* she has been portrayed tells us something else about our own culture and the factors that have shaped us, and particularly about those who can be regarded as the shapers of our society. Nevertheless, examination of such depictions is a matter of feminist analysis rather than that of the feminist biblical interpreter. The task is important, but it is not the only one, and should not be seen as superseding all other methods of feminist biblical interpretation. The insights of those studying the history of cultural use of biblical images have something to offer to the biblical scholar, but they are not biblical scholarship. In the same way, the emphasizing of positive aspects of biblical stories concerning women, particularly in situations where the Bible is seen as authoritative, is legitimately the task of the feminist biblical scholar. As is the analysis of those texts which *cannot* be seen positively. What is needed here is a collaborative approach, and it is ironic that I should have to call for it, since one of the aims of feminists has ostensibly been to promote collaborative ways of working and show that they can be as effective as traditional, more competitive ways. Whether Delilah was delicious, as traditional, more competitive ways. Whether Delilah was delicious, as collaborative ways of working and show that they can be as effective

delightful and delectable or deceitful, despicable and debauched—or maybe all of these—is for us all to decide for ourselves. I only ask that we listen to each other while deciding, and, even if we do not return completely to our feminist roots, at least remember them.

GOD OF LOVE/GOD OF VENGEANCE,
OR SAMSON'S PRAYER FOR VENGEANCE,

Renate Jost

1. Introduction

The formulation of my title alone may be seen as offensive from a feminist point of view, since its language itself (especially with the German masculine article in the original) may strengthen the notion that God is male. In fact, I take the position that God transcends all gender roles; but, because the word 'Goddess' recalls feminine divinites in ancient cults and in other cultures, and still does not take us beyond the dichotomy of genders, I will for the time being retain the word 'God'.

In traditional Christian theology, the supposed 'God of vengeance' in the 'Old Testament' is regularly contrasted with the 'loving God' of the 'New Testament'.¹ But even a superficial glance at the texts shows that, quite apart from the fact that the God of the First Testament is also the God of the Second Testament, the witnesses of the Second Testament also testify to a 'God of vengeance' (cf. Rev. 6.10; 19.2) or refer uncritically² to depictions of a 'God of vengeance' in the First Testament (e.g. to Deut. 32.35-36 in Lk. 21.20-24 and Rom. 12.19-20).³

1. For examples, cf. Erich Zenger, *Ein Gott der Rache? Feindpaarinnen verstehen* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1994), ET *A God of Vengeance?* (trans. Linda M. Maloney, Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996), pp. 13-22.

2. On this see Zenger, *Ein Gott*, pp. 63-69.

3. In some feminist circles it is the Goddess to whom limitless love and gentleness are ascribed: cf., for example, E. Sorge, *Religion und Frau: Weibliche Spiritualität in Christentum* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1985), p. 52. But texts that speak of the worship of goddesses show that they too can be linked with revenge and violence. In addition to the goddess of vengeance explicitly mentioned in Acts 26.4, let me refer here merely to the warlike features of the goddesses 'Anat'—cf. M.-T. Wacker, 'Gefährliche Erinnerung: Feministische Blicke auf die hebräische Bibel,' in M.-T. Wacker (ed.), *Theologie feministisch: Disziplinen, Schwerpunkte, Richtungen* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1988), pp. 14-58 (42-52); Astaré and Innana/Ishhtar—cf., for example, Kaiser (Otto Kaiser, et al. [eds.], *Texte aus der Umwelt des Alten Testaments*