

# Judith, Feminist Ethics and Feminist Biblical/Old Testament Interpretation

Helen Efthimiadis-Keith

## ABSTRACT

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This paper investigates the connections between the feminist ethics of care, justice, autonomy and the self in relation to certain practices in feminist biblical interpretation. Specifically, it investigates whether and to what extent some feminist/pro-feminist interpretations of Judith<sup>1</sup> have fallen foul of these ethics and become as limiting and oppressive as the predominantly androcentric ones that they seek to deconstruct. The ethics of care is then probed for alternative ways of reading Judith (and other biblical/Old Testament texts) in ways that are more caring towards the text, the interpreter, and the (ordinary reader) public/s.

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## 1. Introduction

It would seem that dichotomy and contradiction have plagued the history of research on every aspect of the book of *Judith*. For example, a number of prominent Church Fathers, such as Clement of Rome, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Jerome<sup>2</sup> have attempted to defend the book's historicity despite its flagrant and deliberate disregard for historical matters, while Capellus<sup>3</sup> disparaged it as "a most silly fable, invented by a most inept, injudicious, impudent, and clownish Hellenist"<sup>4</sup> because of its historical and geographical inconsistencies.

Similarly, some have decried the 'turgid style' of *Judith*<sup>4</sup> or rejected it on account of its supposedly lopsided structure,<sup>5</sup> while others, such as Craven "have

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- 1 "Judith" refers to the Book of Judith, whereas "Judith" refers to the heroine of the same name.
  - 2 R. H. Pfeiffer, *History of New Testament Times with an Introduction to the Apocrypha*, 1963 edition. (London: Adam and Charles Black), 291-292.
  - 3 M. S. Enslin, *The Book of Judith: Greek Text with an English Translation, Commentary and Critical Notes*. Edited with a general introduction and appendices by Solomon Zeitlin. Jewish Apocryphal Literature Series. (Leiden: E. J. Brill for Dropsie University, Philadelphia), 49.
  - 4 Pfeiffer, *History of New Testament Times*, 299.
  - 5 This is Dancy's position. See L. S. J. Alonso-Schökel, "Narrative Structures in the Book of Judith", in *Narrative Structures in the Book of Judith. Protocol of the Eleventh Colloquy: 27 January 1975*, edited by L. S. J. Alonso-Schökel (Berkeley, CA: The Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1975), 3.
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Dr Helen Efthimiadis-Keith is Lecturer in Classical Hebrew and Old Testament, Programme of Biblical Studies and History of Christianity, School of Religion and Theology, University of KwaZulu-Natal. <keithh@ukzn.ac.za>

hailed Judith as a masterpiece of artistic creation that is completely balanced in its bipartite structure."<sup>6</sup>

Some of the book's main characters have been dealt with in an equally dichotomous manner. Several commentators have regarded Achior as completely superfluous to the story proper, while most have hardly bothered to deal with him at all. Prior to Roitman's 1989 study,<sup>7</sup> the most positive statement on this character was penned by Moore. The latter described Achior as "a crucial character for uniting both sections of the book... a splendid study in contrasts and an effective foil for several of the book's characters," such as Holofernes and Judith.<sup>8</sup> Roitman restored Achior's dignity as a character by ably demonstrating that there is a "subtle complementarity"<sup>9</sup> between him and Judith as affects their effective functions. Roitman correctly concluded that Achior is "a kind of double or 'alter ego'"<sup>10</sup> for Judith. By far the most positive study regarding this character has been my own, which has demonstrated that Achior is "the unconscious representation of the collective Jewish psyche"<sup>11</sup> responsible for *Judith*, and so the book's effective protagonist, i.e. the character which "undergoes the most change in the story and to whom all the events in the narrative may be related."<sup>12</sup>

Without a doubt, the character who has attracted the most derision or praise has been Judith herself. For example, Bissel has found her to be morally objectionable on account of her deceptive tongue and deliberate sexual enticement "of a weak slave of his passions [Holofernes] that she may put him to death,"<sup>13</sup> and Shumaker regards her "heroism in some degree compromised"<sup>14</sup> by the false assurance that she provides Holofernes. By contrast, Clement of Rome hails her for her bravery, and others, such as Tertullian and Ambrose of Milan, praise her for her self-imposed celibacy.<sup>15</sup>

6 H. Eftimiadis-Keith, "Text and Interpretation: Gender and Violence in the Book of Judith, Scholarly Commentary and the Visual Arts from the Renaissance Onward", *Old Testament Essays* 15, no. 1 (2002), 65.

7 A. D. Roitman, "The Function and Meaning of Achior in the Book of Judith", in *Society of Biblical Literature 1989 Seminar Papers*. SBL Seminar Paper Series, edited by D. J. Lull (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1989), 540-549.

8 C. A. Moore, *Judith. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1985), 59.

9 Roitman, "The Function and Meaning of Achior", 542.

10 Roitman, "The Function and Meaning of Achior", 548-549.

11 H. Eftimiadis-Keith, *The Enemy is Within: A Jungian Psychoanalytic Approach to the book of Judith*. Biblical Interpretation Series, Vol. 67 (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004), 415.

12 Eftimiadis-Keith, *The Enemy is Within*, 144.

13 Moore, *Judith*, 64.

14 W. Shumaker, "Critique of Luis Alonso-Schökel on Judith", in *Narrative Structures in the Book of Judith. Protocol of the Eleventh Colloquy: 27 January 1975*, edited by L. S. J. Alonso-Schökel (Berkeley, CA: The Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture), 33.

15 Eftimiadis-Keith, *The Enemy is Within*, 29 and Moore, *Judith*, 64.

These dichotomous and contradictory interpretations are not in the least surprising, as *Judith* represents an unconscious communication of the national Jewish psyche (or a faction thereof) at its time of composition.<sup>16</sup> Unconscious communications, such as dreams and myths,<sup>17</sup> easily combine seemingly contradictory elements into, for example, a single character, without feeling it necessary to divide them into binaristic opposites.<sup>18</sup> The latter is the forte of the conscious psyche, which prefers 'neatly ordered' binaries that it can understand by categorisation and judgement.<sup>19</sup> As such, it is very difficult – if not impossible – for the conscious mind to perceive of historical facts combined in an unhistorical way or to embrace a heroine who is imbued with Judith's breathtaking mixture of 'good' and 'bad' characteristics. Finding it impossible to hold opposites in one (head-) space, the conscious psyche insists on offering judgement on the whole ('good-and-bad') based on the interpretation of one of its parts ('good' or 'bad').

In essence, patriarchal/malestream interpretation has colluded with the work of the conscious mind and disparaged *Judith*, its heroine, and/or some or all of its aspects by focusing on one component of the good/bad dichotomy. Hence, Victorian concerns for women's behaviour prompted Bissel's depreciation of Judith's morality on account of her deceptive tongue and sexually charged murder of Holofernes, while the sexual temptations facing a celibate clergy caused others to ignore her 'lapses in morality' in order to praise her for her self-chosen celibacy.<sup>20</sup>

This kind of collusion with the conscious psyche is not the sole province of patriarchal biblical interpretation. It also characterises many feminist/pro-feminist<sup>21</sup> interpretations of *Judith*. As such, some commentators have either weighed *Judith*/Judith and found her wanting in her usefulness for (a feminist ideal of modern) women, or hailed *Judith* as a feminist triumph within the ancient literature of its time (see section 2.). In this article, I should like to examine a number of these feminist/pro-feminist interpretations in order to determine whether and to what extent they may have become as limiting and oppressive as the predominantly androcentric ones that

16 Efthimiadis-Keith, *The Enemy is Within*, 415.

17 See C. G. Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*. The Collected Works of C G Jung, 7. Second edition, revised and augmented (1966). Second printing (1970). Translated by RFC Hull. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), 176-177.

18 See C. G. Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*. Meridian edition. Translated by RFC Hull. (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), 80.

19 See J. C. Engelsman, *The Feminine Dimension of the Divine. A Study of Sophia and Feminine Images in Religion*. Revised Edition. (Wilmette, Illinois: Chiron Publications, 1994), 17.

20 Efthimiadis-Keith, *The Enemy is Within*, 29.

21 This term is borrowed from Milne and refers to authors (and/or their works) who do not outwardly subscribe to any form of feminism but who attempt "to incorporate the results of feminist scholarship in their work" (P.J. Milne, "What Shall We Do With Judith? A Feminist Reassessment of a Biblical 'Heroine'", *Semeia* 62 (1993), 43. Available from EBSCOhost.

they seek to deconstruct.<sup>22</sup> This examination will be conducted against the backdrop of the feminist ethics of care, justice, autonomy, and the self. I will then probe the feminist ethics of care for alternative ways of reading *Judith* - and other biblical/Old Testament (OT) texts - in ways that are more caring towards the text, the interpreter, and the (ordinary reader) public/s.

## 2. Judith in the Feminist/pro-Feminist Camp

As Pamela Milne noted in 1993, Judith's "dangerous and daring role" in delivering her people "has drawn the attention of many feminist and pro-feminist analysts interested in the depiction of women in the biblical tradition."<sup>23</sup> Their analyses have offered differing and divergent assessments of this character's usefulness for the feminist endeavour. I should like to discuss some of these below and then evaluate them in the manner proposed above.

### 2.1. Positive feminist/pro-feminist evaluations of *Judith* and its heroine

On the more positive side, Nickelsburg found *Judith* "especially striking for its feminism" because the author chose a woman as its protagonist and "consistently depicted [her] as superior to the men with whom she is associated."<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Jordaan believes that a "mainly positive picture is painted"<sup>25</sup> of Judith despite her ambiguous nature. Reading *Judith* from a narrative-therapeutic perspective, he regards Judith's character and actions as a challenge to the dominant patriarchal narrative. The latter regarded the bodies of women and foreigners "as inferior and unable to do anything of value", an "ideological stance [which] proved to be ineffective in taxing times, like war, as men could not always provide answers and give direction to the nation."<sup>26</sup> When Judith enters the scene, an alternative narrative is introduced which "foreshadows the beginning of a more equal, inclusive society"<sup>27</sup> despite Judith's narrative domestication:<sup>28</sup>

22 Spatio-temporal concerns prevent me from discussing all the works on *Judith*/Judith. I will therefore restrict myself to those that have made the greatest impact on me in recent months and refer to some of the others in footnotes.

23 Milne, "What Shall We Do with Judith?", 41.

24 G. W. E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature Between the Bible and the Mishnah. A Historical and Literary Introduction*. (London: SCM Press, 1981), 108.

25 P. J. Jordaan, "Reading Judith as Therapeutic Narrative", *Vetus Testamentum Supplements*, 127 (2009), 336.

26 Jordaan, "Reading Judith", 340.

27 Jordaan, "Reading Judith", 341.

28 On the subject of Judith's 'domestication' see my discussion of Cornelius' work in 2.2. as well as my (and others') criticism of this notion in 3.1. and 4.

The book *Judith* challenged the status quo in various areas. The most prominent area was to show, in contrast with Jesus Ben Sira, the worth of women. Another area was in contrast to the social order regarding the inclusion of other people, like the Ammonites. A last area concerned the emancipation of slaves (Leviticus 25:46) and the inheritance by a widower's [*sic?*] family.<sup>29</sup>

Montley, who also acknowledges Judith's ambiguity, believes that this ambiguity is centred around Judith's "archetypal significance" in embodying "several archetypes whose influence in religion and art has been profound,"<sup>30</sup> viz. the Warrior Woman, the *femme fatale*, and the androgyne. The latter, as she correctly noted, is characteristic of "the original totality", the nature of many gods/goddesses, and original humanity (as per various nations' creation stories, including Genesis 1).<sup>31</sup> Cast in the light of these archetypal roles, Judith "embodies yet somehow transcends the male/female dichotomy" - as well as other patriarchal dualisms projected upon the natures of men and women - and "rises above the sexism of her author's culture."<sup>32</sup> Quoting Montley approvingly, Moore exalts, "Clearly, Judith is the feminist's kind of person!" He too locates "the striking appeal of the book of Judith" in the heroine's ability to transcend "conventional molds of masculinity or femininity."<sup>33</sup>

Narito's<sup>34</sup> evaluation is by far the most positive that I have encountered. Seizing upon the liberative aspects of *Judith*, Narito criticises androcentric assessments of this book because they fail to grasp "the lesson the writer wishes to convey, which is that God want people to be free from all forms of oppression and domination."<sup>35</sup> As with Jordaán, she regards the characterisation and deeds of Judith as "a critique to the Hebrew patriarchal structure that blocked the independence and leadership

29 P. J. Jordaán, "The Pendulum is Never Static. Jesus Sira to Jesus Christ on Women in the light of Judith, Susanna and LXX Esther", *Hervormde Theologische Studies* 65, no. 1 (2009), 180. Available from EBSCOhost.

30 P. Montley, "Judith in the Fine Arts: The Appeal of the Archetypal Androgyne", *Anima* 4, no. 2 (1978), 38. Available from EBSCOhost.

31 Montley, "Judith in the Fine Arts", 39-40.

32 Montley, "Judith in the Fine Arts", 40. Continuing with the theme of subversion, Sawyer ably demonstrates that "the elusive figure of Judith offers us a subversive, even anarchic, paradigm of gender play evident within the patriarchal meta-narrative of biblical tradition" (D Sawyer, "Gender Strategies in Antiquity: Judith's Performance", *Feminist Theology: The Journal of the Britain & Ireland School of Feminist Theology* 28 (2001), 24. Sep 2001. Available from EBSCOhost. The subversive nature of Judith is also noted by, amongst others, Levine (A-J Levine, "Sacrifice and Salvation: Otherness and Domestication in the Book of Judith", in "*No-one Spoke Ill of Her.*" *Essays on Judith*, edited by J. C. VanderKam (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1992), 17-30, especially 17-18.

33 Moore, *Judith*, 65-66.

34 Z. C. Narito, "The Book of Judith", in *Women of Courage. Asian Women Reading the Bible*, edited by O.C. Lee, M.J. Choi, S.A. Lee-Park, E. Kim, M. Rodriguez, and D. Goodsir (Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, Seoul, Korea: SaDang Publishing House, 1992), 53-62.

35 Narito, "The Book of Judith", 54.

of women.”<sup>36</sup> She further states that: “The book of Judith also spells out the empowerment of powerless women for peace-building, defined here as the struggle for freedom and liberation and the building of a new society of love, truth, justice, and peace.”<sup>37</sup> Narito’s work, written against the backdrop of “Valiant Filippina Women”<sup>38</sup> effectively urges people (women especially) of all backgrounds to emulate Judith’s behaviour by recognising societal oppression-dominance systems, taking a standpoint for the oppressed, and employing “well-planned strategies and tactics” to achieve their liberation.<sup>39</sup> If this includes violence, then so be it. After all, Judith achieved peace through violent means, and “it seems that God affirms her action... (13:18).”<sup>40</sup>

## 2.2. Negative feminist/pro-feminist evaluations of *Judith* and its heroine

Moore ends the section on Judith’s character with praise for the literary quality of *Judith*: “Of such diversity are literary gems made.”<sup>41</sup> While many contemporary analysts might agree with Moore on the literary brilliance of *Judith*,<sup>42</sup> there are those who would not be as enthusiastic as he regarding its feminist appeal. Stocker, Cornelius, and Milne (amongst others), fall into this category. While the works of these scholars openly acknowledge and praise certain anti-patriarchal aspects of Judith, they concur that Judith cannot be read positively from a feminist point of view. The juxtaposition of praise and anti-feminist conclusion can often be extremely stark.

Stocker, for example, contends that inasmuch as Judith is the avenger of Dinah/Bethuliah and “identifies Israel with her own person,” her chosen and enduring celibacy effectively “demonize[s] masculine sexuality” in the patriarchal garb of Holofernes.<sup>43</sup> Thus, “[w]hen Judith decapitates Holofernes – man, lover, ruler, commander – she beheads patriarchy.” This, however, poses a logical dilemma: “since God himself is a patriarch [*sic!*],” her destruction of patriarchal power in the form of Holofernes “inevitably” means that she challenges that of God.

This is why, despite its own thematics, the Book of Judith cannot afford to be feminist. It stresses that it is not Judith, but God, who has killed Holofernes - ‘by the hand of

36 Narito, “The Book of Judith”, 55.

37 Narito, “The Book of Judith”, 57.

38 Narito, “The Book of Judith”, 58-61.

39 Narito, “The Book of Judith”, 57-58.

40 Narito, “The Book of Judith”, 58.

41 Moore, *Judith*, 66.

42 T. Craven, “Artistry and Faith in the Book of Judith”, *Semeia* 8 (1977), 75.

43 M. Stocker, *Judith: Sexual Warrior. Women and Power in Western Culture* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1998), 8-9.

a woman' (16:6). She was merely an instrument of the true patriarchal power... When Judith's triumphal song exalts that 'the mighty one' was not defeated by 'young men' or 'sons of the Titans' or 'giants', but by a woman (16:7), the point is that he was defeated by a mere woman.... God... possesses the kind of power that requires no great armies and no muscles to exert itself. It just is. Ultimately, the weaker its instrument... the more manifest is the hidden hand that activates [it] beyond [its] own abilities. Judith's femininity is a sign that God's virility is no to be doubted or contested." Even so, avers Stocker a few pages later, "the myth of Judith is... a radical and feminist alternative to the oedipal myth, and to all that it signifies about the ordering of Western culture."<sup>44</sup>

Stark contrast indeed!

Cornelius, who analyses the rhetorical function of Judith's dual nature, concedes a number of positive factors about *Judith*/Judith and their rhetorical effect on their 'original' audience. For her, Judith's piety motivates the reader/audience to follow her example and may have "serve[d] to persuade" women that they too could play "an important role in God's people's lives – that women actually do have a role to play in a patriarchal world."<sup>45</sup> She also believes that "[for] ancient women, Judith's moving outside the limits of ancient patriarchy must have been a positive characteristic."<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, Cornelius finds the book and its heroine patriarchally flawed primarily because: a) "Judith's rhetorical skills were used to deceive and murder another human being";<sup>47</sup> b) "Judith turns back to patriarchy" in the end, "which must have been a positive outcome for all males"<sup>48</sup>; and c) women are presented as incapable of winning without the use of "a typical [*sic*] female thing such as beauty [and sexuality], a weapon of manipulation!"<sup>49</sup> "Unfortunately", writes Cornelius, "Judith does not become a liberated woman at all or does not rise into a position of prominence." Rather, "she returns to the private sphere and is reinscripted into androcentric Israel." As such, declares Cornelius, Judith "became a model for the typical subordinate role

44 Stocker, *Judith: Sexual Warrior*, 23.

45 E.M. Cornelius, "An Interpretation of the Rhetorical Power of the Dual Power of the Character of Judith", *Theologia Viatorum: Journal for Theology and Religion in Africa* 33, no. 3 (2009), 249.

46 Cornelius, "An Interpretation", 251.

47 Cornelius, "An Interpretation", 250.

48 Cornelius, "An Interpretation", 251. Levine, whom Cornelius ("An Interpretation", 256) also quotes in this regard, seems to have championed the idea of Judith's textual domestication and return to the world of patriarchy. Levine's concept of domestication has been taken up by many scholars, as witnessed, *inter-alia*, by the fact that her 1992 article, "Sacrifice and Salvation: Otherness and Domestication in the Book of Judith", has been published under the same title in 1995 and 2004 (Cornelius quotes from the 2004 version), and is essentially an elaboration of an article that she published in 1989, namely, "Character Construction and Community Formation in the Book of Judith" (see Efthimiadis-Keith, *The Enemy is Within*, 108-109 and Cornelius, "An Interpretation", 259). I have restricted the bibliographic entrance of her work to her 1992 article.

49 Cornelius, "An Interpretation", 254, 257.

of women in patriarchy” and the “glimpse of hope” which “emerge[d] for women, only... disappear[s] again.”<sup>50</sup> Worse still, she opines, Judith was there to make the ancient men laugh: “I think this text dares to state: ‘you did not really believe a woman can win by means of manly characteristics?’”<sup>51</sup> “Can you... imagine the ancient men laughing at how she only won because men would not dare to let a beautiful woman go by without using her?”<sup>52</sup>

Milne, whom I would like to quote at length, is perhaps the most negative. According to Milne, Judith is far from “a feminist heroine or a feminist’s heroine.”<sup>53</sup> Even though some of her actions are atypical of Jewish patriarchal culture,

[S]he is not a counter-cultural character, but remains very much a man’s woman... She repeatedly identifies with male models like Abraham... and Simeon... More than this, however, she identifies against female characters when she ignores the plight of Dinah [sic] and the Shechemite women... when she eradicates their individual identities... In short, the text presents *Judith as the very antithesis of a woman-identified woman*.

Moreover, as a “helper”... [she] effectively reinforces the patriarchal ideology that women are inferior and secondary by repeatedly making self-effacing... statements. Not only does she attribute all her success to the deity... but she makes a point of emphasizing the negative attitudes held by her Israelite/Jewish society toward women. In Jdt 9:9-10 she, not the narrator, draws attention to the added ignominy of being defeated by a woman...

In short, Judith is presented, and as a narrative character, presents herself virtually completely from a male, patriarchal perspective... [H]er very action is rooted in the dynamics of men’s fear of women’s sexuality...

... Judith liberates neither herself nor her countrywomen from the status quo of the biblical gender ideology.<sup>54</sup>

### 3. An Appraisal of Various Positive and Negative Feminist/Pro-feminist Evaluations of *Judith* and its Heroine

In recent years, I have come to question readings which find overwhelmingly in favour of/against the feminist ‘character’ of *Judith*/Judith and other biblical/OT texts. I am particularly interested in the kinds of ethics and personal motivations which might prompt them. For example, what prompts certain feminists/pro-feminists to unequivocally declare Judith a “feminist heroine” (see 2.1.) despite

50 Cornelius, “An Interpretation”, 256, 257.

51 Cornelius, “An Interpretation”, 255.

52 Cornelius, “An Interpretation”, 258.

53 Milne, “What Shall We Do with Judith?”, 55.

54 Milne, “What Shall We Do with Judith?”, 54-55, my italics.

the text's androcentric focus? The latter became clear to me through my own Jungian analysis of the book. My analysis showed, for example, that *Judith* could be read as an unconscious communication/dream in which Judith's individuation cycle exactly follows that of a man - despite her overt femininity. Given that Judith is the text's protagonist, the book's deep structure could be signifying that "salvation is to be found through the enactment of the male individuation cycle"<sup>55</sup>

Furthermore, I find it very interesting that men such as Nickelsburg and Moore, who do not outwardly ascribe to any feminist/pro-feminist persuasion, have penned some of the most explicitly *feminist* praise for the book. By contrast, female exegetes appear to be far more reticent to do so. As we have seen Stocker, who believes that *Judith* is "a radical and *feminist* alternative to the oedipal myth", also states that "despite its own thematics, the Book of Judith cannot afford to be *feminist*."<sup>56</sup> What could be the reasons behind this phenomenon? Could some form of personal/patriarchal guilt be underlying the men's interpretations? Could they be attempting to stem feminist aggression towards the biblical text and/or protect sacred literature (and why?)? Is it possible that the women are more keenly aware of the patriarchal machinations of the text, thus accounting for their reticence? Why is the most positive evaluation written by a woman, that of Narito, based on the liberative aspects of *Judith*, and why is this evaluation not specifically feminist in orientation? Could Narito, who advocates against androcentric interpretations of this book (see 2.1.), be letting her own contextual needs blind her to its androcentricity (if it is indeed androcentric, see n7)? Or, are those needs liberating her from a gendered reading to focus on the text's/heroine's redemptive qualities?

On the other side of the coin, all of the 'negative' assessments of *Judith* and its heroine are written by women who are overt in their feminist 'confession'. What prompts these interpreters to assess *Judith* in enormously negative terms despite its many subversive elements *and* the fact that Judith has served as a model for many women (such as Narito, above, and Charlotte Corday)<sup>57</sup> and men in their

55 Efthimiadis-Keith, *The Enemy is Within*, 410. It goes without saying that this too is merely an interpretation that requires further investigation. I am no longer as certain as I was then that *Judith* is, indeed, androcentric. I am beginning to think that the book is neither andro- nor gynocentric, but that it may rather be *theocentric* (see my future article in this regard).

56 Stocker, *Judith: Sexual Warrior*, 23, 8, my italics in both cases.

57 See Stocker (*Judith: Sexual Warrior*, 111-115) for Charlotte Corday's actions during the Terror phase of the French Revolution and her subsequent hagiography. Inspired by *Judith*, Corday entered the tent of the demagogue, Marat, by pretending to inform against his enemies. Not fearing her womanly frame and wishing to indulge his senses, Marat, like Holofernes, allowed Corday to enter his quarters. Seeing that he was "seated customarily in his slipper-bath - to treat a painful skin disease - he could offer little or no resistance" (Efthimiadis-Keith, *The Enemy is Within*, 16) when she mortally wounded him by stabbing him in the lung, thereby effecting liberation for her people.

people's liberation struggles? Could years of oppression at the hands of malestream interpretations be blinding them to the liberative aspects of the text? Or, has this oppression provided them with the acuity they need to guard against the text's androcentricity? What kind of personal feelings are involved in such readings? One cannot throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater! As I indicated in 2004, despite the text's androcentricity, "one cannot ignore the fact that Judith is a female character, as there is nothing accidental in dreams. Perhaps Judith's femininity and male individuation cycle transcend the issue of women's empowerment and depict something very close to Jung's heart, viz. the *hieros gamos* or marriage of the opposites – the ultimate aim of the individuation process"<sup>58</sup> in both men and women. From this perspective, the androgynous Judith may well be construed to serve as a powerful model for the (re-)integration of male and female elements in both men and women.

To my mind, making unequivocal judgements about the feminist value of a particular text/character entails collusion with malestream interpretations of the conscious psyche. The latter, as previously indicated, attempts to split composite dualities into separate elements (binaries) and judge the whole on the basis of one of its parts. Positive/negative is, after all, one of the dualities that has been projected on humanity in a gendered fashion, so that all that is positive is male and all that is negative is female. Since feminists have fought against the patriarchal endorsement of such binarisms, it may well be anti-feminist (and patriarchal!) to attempt any interpretation which does not allow the dualities of the text in question to speak for themselves. Moreover, feminist/pro-feminist interpretations that discard or unnecessarily laud biblical texts with regard to a feminist agenda are unethical for at least three reasons:

1. They completely eschew the generational contexts of such texts;
2. They close meaning in the same way that malestream interpretations do; and
3. They fall short of the feminist ethics of care, justice, autonomy, and the self.

In this section, I would like to offer my own exploratory thoughts on the above, trusting that they will engender (pardon the pun) honest self-examination in our endeavours at feminist biblical interpretation and move us forward in a way that takes greater cognisance of ourselves, our publics, and our texts.

### 3.1. *The text/s*

As Mouton correctly observes, the last number of centuries have seen a shift in hermeneutical emphasis from "text production" (the origins of the text), via "text

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<sup>58</sup> Efthimiadis-Keith, *The Enemy is Within*, 410.

preservation and mediation", to "text reception and interpretation".<sup>59</sup> This shift, which is also evident in *Judith* studies,<sup>60</sup> was logical and necessary to break the hegemony of "the scientist ethos of biblical scholarship"<sup>61</sup> – witnessed primarily in the supposed value-free inquiry of historical criticism.<sup>62</sup> In my opinion, however, each step has increased the distance between the text and the reader, to the point that some reader-interpreters are no longer interested in the genetic context of the text at all. As such, they have made certain a-historical and a-cultural errors by interpreting the text purely from their own contextual confines. A clear example of this is the accusation that Judith's characterisation colludes with patriarchal disdain for women in that she is depicted as a lying, deceptive, manipulative woman who killed a man through her beauty and feminine wiles.<sup>63</sup> As deSilva ably demonstrates, the use of deception and manipulation was clearly acceptable and even laudable in Judith's cultural context:

The ancient audience will not chasten Judith as they hear this story; they will chasten Holofernes for his foolishness for letting his guard down and being so quick and eager to believe that this outsider would betray her kin and nation to those that were strangers to her.<sup>64</sup>

And why? "The virtuous person protects the honor of his or her kinship at all costs, even if he or she has to lie repeatedly to do so."<sup>65</sup> Judith was fighting not only for her group's honor, but that of her God.<sup>66</sup> It was therefore not only acceptable but highly laudable for her to lie/deceive to achieve her aims. That much is obvious from the exalted praises which Judith receives upon her victorious return (Jdt 13:15-20, my italics, below). Note that the people's/Uzziah's praise to God and Judith follows immediately upon Judith's statement regarding her deceit/'trickery' in *Judith* 13:16:

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59 E. Mouton, *Reading a New Testament Document Ethically* (Boston: Brill, 2002), 8. Available from [www.questia.com](http://www.questia.com).

60 See Efthimiadis-Keith, *The Enemy is Within*, 1-2.

61 E. Schüssler-Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship", in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107, no. 1 (1988), 9. Available from [www.questia.com](http://www.questia.com).

62 For historical-critical issues and approaches to *Judith*, see Moore's 'Introduction' (*Judith*, 37-108), Efthimiadis-Keith, *The Enemy is Within*, 1-2, 6-23, and T. Craven, "The Book of Judith in the Context of Twentieth-century Studies of the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books", in *Catholic Biblical Review* 1, no. 2, 188-192. Available from EBSCOhost.

63 Cornelius, "An Interpretation", 254, 257.

64 D.A. deSilva, "Judith the Heroine? Lies, Seduction, and Murder in Cultural Perspective", in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2006), 59. Available from EBSCOhost.

65 deSilva, "Judith the Heroine?", 57.

66 deSilva, "Judith the Heroine?", 58.

- <sup>15</sup> Then she took the head out of the bag and showed it to them, and said, "See, here is the head of Holofernes... The Lord has struck him down by the hand of a woman.
- <sup>16</sup> As the Lord lives... *it was my face that tricked him to his destruction...*"
- <sup>17</sup> All the people were greatly astonished, and bowed down and worshiped God, and said with one accord, "Blessed art thou, our God, who hast brought into contempt this day the enemies of thy people."
- <sup>18</sup> And Uzziah said to her, "O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all women on earth; and blessed be the Lord God, who created the heavens and the earth, who has guided you to strike the head of the leader of our enemies.
- <sup>19</sup> Your hope will never depart from the hearts of men, as they remember the power of God.
- <sup>20</sup> May God grant this to be a perpetual honor to you, and may he visit you with blessings, because you did not spare your own life when our nation was brought low, but have avenged our ruin, walking in the straight path before our God." And all the people said, "So be it, so be it!"

As for the element of beauty and seduction, that was merely part of Judith's deceptive strategy. This is clearly demonstrated by the immediate juxtaposition of her prayer (Jdt 9:2-14), in which she requests that God would grant her Simeon's power of deceit to destroy the enemy, and her beautification ritual in *Judith* 10:1-4.<sup>67</sup> Witness further the association of beauty and deceit in *Judith* 13 (above) and *Judith* 16 (below, my italics):

- <sup>6</sup> But the Lord Almighty has foiled them by the hand of a woman.
- <sup>7</sup> For their mighty one did not fall by the hands of the young men, nor did the sons of the Titans smite him, nor did tall giants set upon him; but *Judith the daughter of Merari undid him with the beauty of her countenance.*
- <sup>8</sup> For she took off her widow's mourning to exalt the oppressed in Israel. *She anointed her face with ointment and fastened her hair with a tiara and put on a linen gown to deceive him.*
- <sup>9</sup> Her sandal ravished his eyes, her beauty captivated his mind, and the sword severed his neck.

Given the above, I suggest that the audience might have been laughing at Holofernes, rather than Judith!<sup>68</sup>

To return to my criticism, while it may well be true that the author is dead,<sup>69</sup> one cannot simply interpret the text at will. The "number of interpretations that can legitimately be given to a text are limited," as Schüssler-Fiorenza rightly states, if we are "to do justice to the text in its historical contexts."<sup>70</sup> By interpreting texts

<sup>67</sup> See Efthimiadis-Keith (*The Enemy is Within*, 222-231) for a detailed analysis of Judith's prayer according to the motif of deception and its relation to the sexual element in *Judith*.

<sup>68</sup> So too Sawyer (*Gender Strategies in Antiquity*, 16), contra Cornelius ("An Interpretation", 258).

<sup>69</sup> C.C. Park, "Author! Author! Reconstructing Roland Barthes", in *The Hudson Review* 43, no. 3 (Autumn 1990), 377-398. Available from EBSCOhost

<sup>70</sup> Schüssler-Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation", 14.

a-historically and/or a-culturally, we are falling short of the first feminist ethics that should, perhaps, inform our endeavours. I refer here to the ethics of *justice* and *care*, which I would like to discuss briefly before proceeding with what I perceive to be acts of injustice and a lack of care within feminist/pro-feminist interpretations of *Judith* and so other OT texts.

In my understanding, the feminist movement arose as a response of *justice* to the injustices committed against women. Similarly, feminist biblical interpretation arose as a *justice* response to the oppression women were subjected to through patriarchal appropriations of biblical texts. One might, therefore, have expected feminist ethicist-philosopher-psychologists to appropriate wholeheartedly an ethics of justice as the basis of feminist ethics. Ironically, this has not been the case. The earliest feminist ethicist-philosophers-psychologists have challenged the priority of justice amongst the social/moral virtues, "suggesting that justice is one value among many, and one that may need the presence of others in order to deliver its own undenied value."<sup>71</sup> In the main, they have reacted against the Kantian-Rawlsian versions of justice, "construed as respect for equal rights to formal goods" (e.g. having contracts kept, equal opportunities, and basic liberties), arguing that none of these goods can ensure that those "who have and mutually respect such rights will have any other relationships to one another than the minimal relationship needed to keep such a 'civil society' going."<sup>72</sup> In other words, these early feminist thinkers objected to the cold, almost robotic vision of humanity that Kantian-Rawlsian justice espoused. They argued that people are emotional and relational beings who need their emotional and relational needs met if "their rights, and respect for rights" are not to become compatible with great misery caused not only by "individual misfortunes and psychic sickness, but social and moral impoverishment."<sup>73</sup> For these early feminist thinkers, the kind of non-interference and individual autonomy which the Kantian-Rawlsian view of justice promotes is decidedly male in orientation and detrimental to both the individual and the society in which she/he lives.<sup>74</sup> Enter, therefore, the ethics of *care*, championed primarily by Harvard educational psychologist, Carol Gilligan.

Having conducted a series of interviews, in which she probed whether women

71 A.C. Baier, "The Need for More than Justice", in *Justice and Care. Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*, edited by V. Held (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 47. Available from [www.questia.com](http://www.questia.com).

72 Baier, "The Need for More than Justice", 51.

73 Baier, "The Need for More than Justice", 51.

74 Baier, "The Need for More than Justice", 52-53, and M. Friedman, "Beyond Caring: The Demoralization of Gender", in *Justice and Care. Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*, edited by V. Held (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 63. Available from [www.questia.com](http://www.questia.com).

exhibited a pattern of moral development different to that of men,<sup>75</sup> Gilligan concluded that women “speak in a different voice about morality itself and about moral maturity.”<sup>76</sup> For women, interconnection was a given, rather than a freely-contracted commodity, meaning that women “arrive at an understanding of life that reflects the limits of autonomy and control. As a result, women’s development delineates the path not only to a less violent life, but also to a maturity realized by interdependence and taking care.”<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, Gilligan discovered that, because care and connection are integral to women, “the major changes in women’s lives” seemed to involve “changes in the understanding and activities of care” rather than autonomy.<sup>78</sup> This discovery led Gilligan – and others who followed in her footsteps – to develop an ethics of care – understood as “a felt concern for the good of others and for community with them”<sup>79</sup> – and more communal understandings of the individual/self-hood and autonomy.

I do not wish to enter the discussion of whether and to what extent Gilligan’s views are based on correct/incorrect data analysis,<sup>80</sup> are informed by the patriarchal socialisation of women and men, may lead to further stereotyping and oppression, or to what extent her understanding of justice may be limited.<sup>81</sup> I also do not wish to enter into the debate about how and to what extent justice and care are interrelated. I wish merely to acknowledge the (complexity of the) interrelation between justice and care and draw out some of its implications for the types of feminist interpretation that I have described. I return, therefore, to my critique of some forms of feminist *Judith/OT* interpretation.

75 Kohlberg, upon whose research Gilligan’s interviews are based, had identified three stages of moral development, viz. a preconventional stage, manifested in a paramount need to please parental authority-figures, a conventional stage in which the individual tries to fit in with a group, and a post-conventional, critical phase in which conventionally accepted truths and requirements are tested in accordance with a (Kantian) sense of autonomy that requires, amongst others, a “respect for each person’s individual rational will” (Baier, “The Need for More than Justice”, 50). When Kohlberg’s questionnaires, which required mainly verbal responses to verbally sketched moral quandries, were administered to female and male subjects, it was found that female subjects generally scored lower than their male counterparts and that they reverted to “the lower stage of the conventional level even after briefly (usually in adolescence) attaining the post-conventional level” (Baier, “The Need for More than Justice”, 50).

76 Baier, “The Need for More than Justice”, 50.

77 Gilligan quoted in Baier, “The Need for More than Justice”, 50.

78 Gilligan quoted in Baier, “The Need for More than Justice”, 50). Thus, while men progressed morally in the way of autonomy and distance (as per Kohlberg, n6 above), women progressed in their understanding of care, “from merely pleasing others to helping and nurturing” (Baier, “The Need for More than Justice”, 50).

79 Baier, “The Need for More than Justice”, 48.

80 See Friedman, “Beyond Caring”, 63.

81 See Friedman, “Beyond Caring”, 63-67.

As previously intimated, by ignoring the historical/cultural context of biblical texts such as *Judith*, unequivocal/binaristic interpretations have already violated the justice principle. While this is a different type of injustice to that which was resisted by various liberation movements, including feminism, it is a form of injustice nevertheless. As Schüssler-Fiorenza might put it, such interpretations fail “to give the text its due,” thus betraying what she has termed “an ethics of historical reading”<sup>82</sup>:

Such a historical reading seeks to give the text its due by asserting its original meanings over and against later dogmatic usurpations. It makes the assimilation of the text to our own experience and interests more difficult and thereby keeps alive the ‘irritation’ of the original text by challenging our own assumptions, world views and practices.

While I am not at all advocating for the supremacy of historical-critical methods, I do wish to acknowledge the importance of a text’s historical/cultural background as ‘discovered’ by those and/or other methods. If *Judith* was written ca. 63 BC, as I have maintained,<sup>83</sup> then one cannot, to my mind, unequivocally state that the book is either pro- or anti-feminist. To do so would be wholly anachronistic, and fail “to give the text its due”. It would go against the grain of a text which seems to delight in presenting composite dualities and ambiguities as they are. The most one could allege is the possibility of a subversive element in *Judith*.<sup>84</sup>

Furthermore, in terms of the quotation by Schüssler-Fiorenza (above), making unequivocal statements about *Judith*’s feminist suitability would represent an attempt to do away with “the ‘irritation’ of the original text” by either smoothing over its androcentric interests or simply writing the entire text off. One such ‘irritation’, amongst many, is the fact that Judith returns home without assuming any overt leadership position. As we have seen in 2.2., this “domestication” of Judith is one of the textual reasons that prompts Cornelius to ‘write *Judith* off’ as patriarchally blemished despite the many positive aspects of Judith’s nature that she has noted.<sup>85</sup> But, the text cannot be written off. The ‘irritation’ is here to stay. We cannot commit texticide, no matter how much we might wish to.

Moreover, by trying to discard the textual irritant/s, we are betraying the profound hubris underlying our judgement. We are, in effect, boldly asserting “We are right! You are wrong! You have nothing to teach us” and closing the book on

82 Schüssler-Fiorenza, “The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation”, 14.

83 Efthimiadis-Keith, *The Enemy is Within*, 419.

84 See, e.g. Sawyer, “Gender Strategies in Antiquity”, 14-15, 17-24; Montley, “Judith in the Fine Arts”, 40; Levine, “Sacrifice and Salvation”, 17-18, and J.W. Van Henten, “Judith as Alternative Leader: A Rereading of Judith 7-13”, in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, edited by A. Brenner. The Feminist Companion to the Bible, 7 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 251-252.

85 Cornelius, “An Interpretation”, 244-251, 255-258.

that. We are not permitting *Judith* to challenge our “assumptions, world-views and practices”, and we are not giving ourselves the opportunity to be challenged by it. We are closing meaning for both ourselves and the text. Not only is this hubris, but it is also foolish. Denying ourselves the opportunity to be challenged means that we are denying ourselves the chance to grow, thus stultifying ourselves and our readings into obsolescence. Such is our lack of care towards ourselves and the text/s.

Similarly, it is both a sign of hubris and foolishness to try to smooth over the ‘irritation’. In so doing, we are domesticating the text (as some claim *Judith* has been), thus equally denying it the opportunity to challenge our “assumptions, world-views and practices” and denying ourselves the opportunity to be challenged by it. We are foolishly asserting that our values are better or higher than the ones we think we read in the text, i.e. than those of its context, and co-opting it patronisingly for our agenda. This too is texticide. This too is suicide. This too is un-caring injustice.

Having discussed our acts of injustice and lack of care towards the text and ourselves, I wish to turn to how such readings manifest injustice towards others and, more specifically, our reading public/s.

### 3.2 *The public*

As I have indicated above, unequivocal feminist judgements on *Judith* entail a travesty of justice and a lack of care at which early feminist ethicists might baulk. They also entail a profound level of disrespect towards the text/s and ourselves, which readily translates into a disrespectful and un-caring attitude towards our various publics. This is particularly true for our ‘ordinary reader’ public whom we are constantly trying to liberate, be it from pre-critical readings<sup>86</sup> or collusion with the patriarchal agenda of biblical texts. This too is a sign of hubris and, moreover, an act of closing meaning. It is as though we were the custodians of knowledge, the only ones who can correctly divine and apportion the significance of biblical texts. In so doing, we are essentially entrenching the sin of clericalism – we are telling others that they cannot interpret the Bible, that they indeed have no right to, and that we have to do it for them.

Clericalism, by definition, disempowers the people and turns them into “laity” dependent on the clergy. The basic assumption of clericalism is that the people have no direct access to the divine. The clergy monopolize the instrument of mediation between God and the laity. The clergy alone have authorized theological training; they alone are authorized to preach, to teach, to administer the Church. They alone possess sacramental power.<sup>87</sup>

86 D. Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Re-evaluation*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 17-18.

87 R.R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 206-207.

By unwittingly entrenching a new kind of clericalism, we are committing a double injustice: we are disempowering our public and making them dependant on us, *and* we are denying them the possibility of feeling “the power that lives in the book”<sup>88</sup> – however we may construe that power. There is neither justice nor care in that. We need to examine *why* we do *what* we do and *for whom*.<sup>89</sup> In short, we need to practice an “ethics of accountability”. Such an ethics of accountability cannot be construed only in terms of elucidating “the ethical consequences and political functions [of biblical texts] in their historical as well as in their contemporary socio-political contexts.”<sup>90</sup> It must also take account of the way that our readings affect those who read them. It is this concern that drove Patte to write his seminal work, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Re-evaluation*, in 1995. Like Patte, we too must examine our exegetical practices and discover whether, how, and to what extent they are hurting others.<sup>91</sup> As feminist biblical interpreters, we cannot hide behind our attempts to enlighten others with regard to the texts’ androcentric bias(es) and/or finding the liberative potential in biblical texts. While these attempts are both laudable and vital for the just transformation of our society, we need to examine *why* we undertake them and *for whom*. We need to examine and take responsibility for both our *motives* for engaging in feminist biblical interpretation and the *effects* that our writings are having on others. However, if we, as feminist biblical interpreters, see ourselves as the new custodians of knowledge and correct interpretation, thereby instituting a new kind of clericalism and closing meaning for others, then, I would suggest, our efforts are just as bad as the androcentric ones that we are trying to displace.

Neo-clericalism flouts an “ethics of accountability” precisely *because* it espouses the kind of individualistic, distancing autonomy that cannot be part of an ethical feminist agenda. If, for example, we dismiss a text such as *Judith* on account of (a) perceived patriarchal flaw(s), then we ignore an entire history of interpretations in which real women have used these texts for liberative purposes. Worse still, we deny these women. Similarly, when we hail *Judith* as a triumph of feminist theology, we ignore a long line of interpretation in which women have been urged to follow Judith’s supposed example of self-effacement<sup>92</sup> and subordination<sup>93</sup> or eschew her deceptive, sexually charged ways.<sup>94</sup>

88 Porter quoted in Schüssler-Fiorenza “The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation”, 3.

89 Similarly Mouton, *Reading*, 11-12 and G.O. West, “The Vocation of an African Biblical Scholar on the Margins of Biblical Scholarship”, *Old Testament Essays* 19, no. 1, 318. Available from Sabinet.

90 Schüssler-Fiorenza, “The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation”, 15.

91 Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation*, 9.

92 Milne, “What Shall We Do with Judith?”, 54-55.

93 Cornelius, “An Interpretation”, 256.

94 See Bissel in deSilva, “Judith the Heroine?”, 56.

This kind of disconnection from communal history endorses the type of non-communal, non-relational autonomy and liberal self-concept that early feminist thinkers saw themselves contesting.<sup>95</sup> It fails to take into account the social relationships between persons, between persons and texts, and between persons, texts, and historical reality. It acts with a kind of self-sufficiency and un-caring attitude that espouses disregard for the other and promotes distance and adversariness by leading people to regard one another and one another's interpretations as threats.<sup>96</sup> It presupposes and re-institutes a "dichotomy between autonomy and the collectivity"<sup>97</sup> that comes dangerously close to the kind of androcentric, disinterested scholarship (and objective fallacy) that feminist scholars have rightly challenged.<sup>98</sup>

Similarly, when we *state* our interpretations, instead of offering them for what they are, namely *opinions*, then we run the risk of approximating the kind of top-down androcentric interpretations we have tried to combat, and re-instituting the objective fallacy. This not only betrays a non-relational concept of autonomy and the self, but does violence to the text and to the reader, particularly the ordinary reader who still, to a great extent, relies on 'experts' to tell her/him how to understand the Bible correctly. For such a reader, opinions rather than statements would be more useful. Opinions do not close meaning as much as statements do. They are much more caring.

### 3.3 *The guild*

The criticism that I have levelled against overtly positive/negative feminist/pro-feminist evaluations of *Judith*/OT literature does not bode well for the future of feminist biblical interpretation:

First, as I have indicated, it is possible that our efforts in trying to liberate others from the tyranny of androcentric texts/interpretations have resulted in our flouting precisely the ethics that we may think that we have upheld, namely those of justice and care.

Second, it is possible that our interpretations close meaning for other readers, thus denying them the very rights of autonomy and selfhood that we have claimed as women in terms of interpreting sacred texts for ourselves. In this, we show

95 M. Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender Politics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 81-82. Available from [www.questia.com](http://www.questia.com).

96 Friedman, *Autonomy*, 82.

97 Nedelsky 1989 quoted in Friedman, *Autonomy*, 85.

98 See F. Klopfer, "Interpretation is All We Have. A Feminist Perspective on the Objective Fallacy", in *Old Testament Essays* 22, no. 1 (2009), 88-101. Available from EBSCOhost; Schüssler-Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation", 11; and E. Schüssler-Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 44. Available from [www.questia.com](http://www.questia.com).

a tremendous lack of care towards ourselves, our texts, and our various publics, be they other feminist/pro-feminist scholars, male and female members of the academy, students, ordinary secular readers, members of faith communities, or all of the above.

Third, it is possible that these acts of closing meaning undermine the subversive nature and intellectual rigor of our discipline (that of feminist biblical interpretation), thus affecting its credibility and sustainability and heralding its demise. By this I do not mean to suggest that feminist biblical criticism will someday cease to exist. I cannot imagine that happening in as much as I cannot envisage a totally just and egalitarian society; human nature will simply (or sinfully) not allow for that. What concerns me is that we will render our efforts obsolete,<sup>99</sup> for in closing meaning for others, we are essentially closing meaning for ourselves. In my opinion, this applies particularly to the faith-full communities and our disregard for what we have patronisingly labelled as their pre-critical interpretations. For, as many African theologians/Biblical scholars have averred, it would be “totally irresponsible”<sup>100</sup> to ignore the faith of the faith-full in our work. Rather, as West proposes in terms of the poor and working class, we should learn the art of allowing the faith-full to use us and our critical skills, in such a way that we serve them and do not distance ourselves from them and their various contexts.<sup>101</sup> Or, as Patte has put it, we should allow pre-critical interpretations to exist alongside their critical counterparts<sup>102</sup> – without judgement.

#### 4. Conclusion and Way Forward

In this paper I have contended that overtly positive/negative feminist/pro-feminist interpretations of/judgements on *Judith*/OT texts can lead feminist

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99 Lawrie voices a similar though rather different concern: “I hope that the spirit of feminist scholarship will continue to influence Old Testament studies. My fear is not so much that the feminist enterprise will collapse, but that its more or less total success will efface its legacy. Once much of what feminists fought to establish is taken for granted by male and female scholars alike, some will continue to hunt for ever subtler points to make and others will look for more pleasing arrangements of the existing furniture. In the absence of the passion and the vision, the exercise will come to resemble that of the latter-day source critics, pursuing sources within sources and glosses on glosses. Feminism is important in its own right; it is equally important as a pointer to what academic theology should never lose and is permanently in danger of losing” (D.J. Lwari, “Old Testament studies: ‘Quo vadis’?”, *Scriptura* 100 (2009), 1-14).

100 S. Nadar, “‘Texts of Terror?’ The Conspiracy of Rape in the Bible, Church and Society: The Case of Esther 2:1-18”, in *African Women, Religion and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, edited by I. Phiri, & S. Nadar (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 82.

101 West, “The Vocation”, 215. So too Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation*, 124.

102 Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation*, 121-122.

biblical interpreters to engage in the same meaning-closing endeavours as had characterised the androcentric interpretations which we have been contesting. I have argued that such meaning-closing endeavours flout the very feminist ethics upon which one could rightly expect them to be based, namely justice, care, autonomy, and the self. I have also demonstrated that they show a profound level of disrespect towards the text/s, the interpreters who pen them, and the various publics that such interpreters may have. In this final section, I would like to sketch possible alternatives to such meaning-closing endeavours that would, in my opinion, exhibit more care towards the text, the interpreter, and the public.

First, an autobiographical approach<sup>103</sup> which takes account of *and spells out* the interpreter's background, experience, *and* emotions<sup>104</sup> would be most helpful, both for the feminist biblical interpreter and the 'ordinary reader'. It would help us as interpreters to see that we do not interpret in a *personal* vacuum (we already know that we do not interpret in a socio-political vacuum). It would give us greater compassion (care) towards the ordinary reader, allowing 'space' for her/his interpretations alongside ours. Similarly, an autobiographical approach would help the reader to see that our interpretations are just that – *our interpretations*, which will give her/him the 'space' to present her/his own without fear of reprimand or 'getting it wrong'. Naturally, this suggestion requires a fair amount of personal introspection on our part. While this is something we may not be very keen to do, it must be done if we are to create space for others to write their own stories into the fissures of the biblical texts and keep the interpretative endeavour afloat.

A second point is closely related to the first. Identifying who we are and what our general background is (e.g. Black/White/Methodist/Pentecostal) is no longer enough. We need to put into practice the womanist principle which accepts "emotional knowledge as a legitimate category of academic analysis" without forsaking the "analytical skills and tools" of our discipline.<sup>105</sup> In other words, as feminist interpreters, we need to be aware of and state our emotional connection/disconnection to the text so as to understand *why* we may be seeing what we are seeing. In this way we will avoid falling into the trap of objective fallacy (or objective phallusy, as some would have it) and we will leave 'space' for others to share their experiences and interpretations of the text/s freely.

Third, a more caring approach to feminist biblical/OT interpretation would take seriously what we call pre-critical interpretations. It would realise that all

103 See West, "The Vocation"; P.J.W. Schutte, "When *They*, *We*, and the *Passive* become *I* – Introducing Autobiographical Biblical Criticism", *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 61, no. 1-2 (2005), 401-416; and S. Nadar, "Toward a Feminist Missiological Agenda: A Case Study of the Jacob Zuma Rape Trial", *Missionalia* 37, no. 1 (2009), 85-102.

104 See e.g. Nadar, "Toward a Feminist Missiological Agenda", 90-92.

105 Nadar, "Toward a Feminist Missiological Agenda", 90-91.

critical interpretations are essentially based on pre-critical ones,<sup>106</sup> and it would allow the latter to exist alongside the former.

Fourth, a more caring feminist biblical interpreter would put herself/himself and her/his tools in the hands of the faith-full community, in the way that Gerald West<sup>107</sup> is doing for the poor, the marginalised, and the working class.

Fifth, we need to couch our interpretations as opinions and not statements (see above). As we have seen, Cornelius writes *Judith* off on account of, amongst others, what she terms the heroine's "return to patriarchy".<sup>108</sup> This, however, is merely *an* interpretation, *an* opinion in a sea of possible interpretations/opinions regarding Judith's return to her home. Sawyer, for example, interprets this as a counter-cultural element in the light of Judith's independence:

Although by the end of the narrative Judith had retreated from the centre stage of Israelite politics, she remained active and assertive. She did not marry and have children... At the end of her life... she distributed her property herself... and she set her maid free. She remained the autonomous figure [that she was prior to returning to her home].<sup>109</sup>

As Klopper so beautifully puts it, "Interpretation is all we have."<sup>110</sup> This is a position of radical humility. We therefore need to avoid making pronouncements in objective-type speech without looking at the internal and personal circumstances that engender them. We should not forget that our supposedly objective approach may be just as dangerous as the patriarchy we are trying to shield people from.<sup>111</sup>

Sixth, we need to avoid making overt judgements on *Judith* and other OT texts for all the reasons referred to above. Primarily, we need to remember that these texts were not written in the modern era. To co-opt or dismiss them according to modern concerns entails an act of un-caring injustice against them, ourselves, and our various publics.

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106 Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation*, 101-107.

107 West, "The Vocation", 307-336.

108 Cornelius, "An Interpretation", 251.

109 Sawyer, "Gender Strategies in Antiquity", 23, see 19, 21.

110 Klopper, "Interpretation is All We Have", 88.

111 See Schüssler-Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation", 10.

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