

15 Feminist Scholarship

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The Bible is strangely full—and empty—of women. There is Eve, whose name means Life but who is 'born' of a man, and who, at least according to the 1 Timothy 2: 13–14 reading of Genesis, is a Pandora-creature, guilty of the first transgression. There are women who ensure that the plot continues to the next chapter: Esther and Deborah who fight for or deliver their people; the midwives in Exodus who save male Israelite babies, and Moses' mother, who saves one baby in particular; the women in Matthew who carry the news of the resurrection, as well as women such as Sarah, Rachel, Rebekah, Hannah, Manoah's wife, Ruth, Elizabeth, and Mary the mother of Jesus, who give birth to heroes and provide crucial links in the genealogical chain. There are women who are the victims of violence (Dinah, the Levite's concubine in Judges 19); exemplary women (the widow and her offering, the haemorrhaging woman who touches Jesus' garments); women in positions of authority (Hulda, Deborah, Prisca); dangerous women (Jael, Delilah, Herodias, and her daughter); women with strange peripheral roles (Lot's wife who turns into a pillar of salt, Abishag who acts as a human blanket in 1 Kings 1: 1–4). And there are metaphorical women, female symbols of the awful and the ideal: Woman Wisdom; the restored Jerusalem as city jewel and suckling mother (Isaiah 66); the church as bride of Christ; the whore-nation in the prophets; the 'strange woman' of Proverbs, whose lips drip with honey and whose speech oozes with oil ...

Even if feminist biblical criticism confined itself to texts about women (which it does not), evidently there would be plenty of material—and silences—to go on. And, as might be expected of a book written by many authors over several centuries and appropriately named 'the library' (*ta biblia*), the Bible by no means offers a homogeneous view of woman.

Over the last two centuries, and particularly over the last few decades, a whole new range of female 'characters' have emerged—Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Mary Wollstonecraft, Emmeline Pankhurst, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, to name just a few. And these figures, who have arguably had more opportunity to speak for themselves than their biblical counterparts, have posed considerable challenges to our per-

ceptions of society and justice. Some of the early views and demands of these women are now enshrined in Western law: few would deny a woman's right to vote, for example, or contest Emmeline Pankhurst's claim that 'a husband should not imprison his wife to enforce conjugal rights'. And because of the feminist movement and campaigns for human rights, there is increasing awareness of issues such as sex discrimination in the workplace, unequal pay, and unequal access to positions of power, or, more starkly, issues of wife-battering, or the lower social valuation of female children (resulting in less access to education, abortion, even child-death). The global women's movement has not only offered a different (and disturbing) perception of the world by compiling



The Rescue of Lot (Genesis 19: 23) by Gustave Doré, 1865. In the background the calcified figure of Lot's wife is to the right of the burning cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.



(Above) Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97) portrayed by John Opie c.1790. She was author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* and an anti-slavery activist in mid-19th-century America.



(Above middle) The former slave and abolitionist Sojourner Truth (1777–1883), originally Isabella Van Wagener, around 1860.



(Above right) Emmeline Pankhurst (1858–1928) around 1910. She was a prominent campaigner for women's suffrage in Britain.

evidence about women's lives, but has also questioned the very structures of epistemology—our ways of knowing and of seeing. Although there is no official feminist 'creed', the following two claims can be seen as foundational to the modern feminist movement:

1. Knowledge, religion, society, and human institutions are androcentric (male-centred). That which is considered to be normative, standard, or neutral is in fact skewed towards the interests of men. When feminists change words like 'mankind' to 'humankind', they are doing more than tweaking language. They are making the point that the interests, ideas, and beliefs of this alleged universal—man—do not represent their own interests, ideas, or beliefs, and that reading themselves into 'mankind' involves a dangerous kind of self-forgetfulness (or self-abnegation).

2. *Sex* is a biological given at birth, but *gender* (the templates we have in our minds of what it means to be 'masculine' and 'feminine') is something we learn from culture. The roles are not equally distributed: as Simone de Beauvoir famously put it in *The Second Sex*,

Woman is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other.

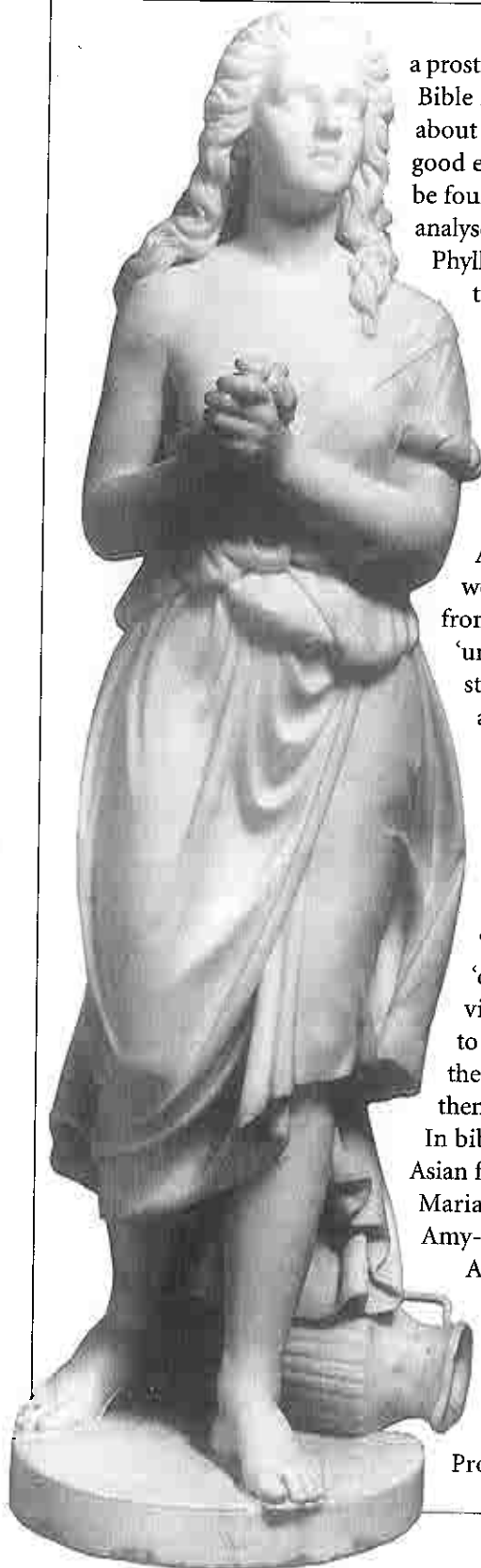
Western thought tends to be constructed around hierarchies in which one term is elevated and one demoted: pairs such as day–night, objective–subjective, active–passive, self–other, mind–body, and masculine–feminine. 'Woman' as a

category often acts as a negative mirror for positive male attributes: thus the characteristically emotional and passive female acts as a foil for the rational and active male.

Since these rather stark claims can make the issues seem more simple than they are, it needs to be stressed that feminism is not about the *absolute* and *conscious* victimization of women by men. Even in the most patriarchal societies, as Gerda Lerner notes, 'women are not totally powerless, or deprived of rights, influences and resources', and because men and women are born into a world and a way of seeing which habitually privileges the male over the female, the denigration of women is often unconscious, and complied with by women. Like all creeds and foundational statements, these are being constantly interrogated and reworked (the ideas of sex and gender in particular are currently very controversial). And of course no one is claiming that male and female genders are always everywhere the same: learning to be a woman in twentieth-century London is something very different to learning to be a woman in twentieth-century China or Iran, or, indeed, in ancient Israel.

As feminism exerts an increasing (and contested) influence on society, the difficult question asked by feminist biblical critics is how to work between these two bodies of knowledge—feminism on the one hand and the Bible on the other. The fact that traditional biblical scholarship tends to regard feminist questions as peripheral, and that mainstream feminist scholars studiously avoid the Bible (even as they engage with other patriarchal edifices, such as Freudianism) suggests a common perception that there is something absolutely incompatible about the Bible and feminism, and that both might be compromised and demeaned by even speaking to the other. As early as 1895, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the compiler of *The Woman's Bible*, speaks on the one hand of educated women who dismiss the Bible as having 'lost its hold on the human mind', and on the other of male biblical scholars who refuse to 'wipe the dew from their spectacles' and 'see that the world is moving'. Because many feminists and mainstream biblical critics regard feminist biblical scholarship as something of an oxymoron, feminist biblical critics are doing something doubly transgressive, doubly perverse. And it is a credit to their ingenuity that the conversations that they create between feminism and the Bible are more subtle than slanging matches and more interesting than sweet-talking mediation sessions.

There are almost as many ways of engaging the Bible and feminism in conversation as there are feminist critics. Though 'feminist biblical criticism' may suggest something homogeneous, monolithic, even a kind of bland sisterhood, the voices it encompasses are extremely diverse, as are the feminisms. For some, feminism is a position intricately theorized through the work of French psychoanalytic critics such as Hélène Cixous or Luce Irigaray; for others it is a label acquired simply through arguing for equality ('I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is,' wrote Rebecca West, famously. 'I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or



a prostitute.') For some, feminist biblical criticism is about reclaiming the Bible for women in Jewish or Christian communities; for others, it is about exploring the influence of the Bible on contemporary society. A good example of the 'dissonant buzz' in contemporary scholarship can be found in Ilana Pardes's study 'Creation According to Eve', where she analyses how Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Phyllis Tribble, and Esther Fuchs read Genesis 1-3, and sets up a round-table discussion between the critics.

The diversity of feminist biblical scholarship makes it clear that there is no universal category 'woman' with which to replace the abstract 'man'. Feminism has learned this in painful ways, as, attacked by African-American, 'two-thirds' world, and working-class women for its parochialism, it was forced to examine its own middle-class, white, myopic constructions of 'what women want' and 'who women are'. As early as 1892, the African-American activist Anna Julia Cooper protested that 'the coloured woman of today' occupies a 'unique position' in that she is confronted by both a 'woman question' and a 'race problem' and is an 'unacknowledged factor in both'. Elizabeth Cady Stanton demonstrated the problem in rather a different way when, even as she set about the radical work of compiling *The Woman's Bible*, she addressed herself to 'American women of wealth and refinement'—emphatically *not* the Chinese, Africans, Germans, and Irish, and lower-class women. Gradually critics are realizing that colour and working-classness and Jewishness (for example) cannot be added on to feminism as sub-categories ('I am a feminist, comma, black, comma, and working-class') but that 'feminism' is fundamentally shaken up, and changed, by each 'qualifying' identity statement. To demonstrate the difference of view, some African-American critics call themselves 'womanists', to distinguish themselves from a feminism that does not speak for them (this move mirrors the way in which feminists refused to see themselves properly represented in the so-called universal—man).

In biblical scholarship, the work of womanist, Latin-American and Asian feminist biblical critics such as Renita Weems, Teresa Okure, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, and Kwok Piu-Lan, and Jewish feminists, such as Amy-Jill Levine and Judith Plaskow, has exposed the white Euro-American Christian focus, even the anti-Judaism of early feminist work. A sense of the growing diversity and self-awareness of contemporary feminist criticism can be found in volume one of *Searching the Scriptures*, where critics from Latin America and Africa offer perspectives on the 'Bible' and 'feminism' in ways that problematize white Christian perceptions of both. Provocatively, the differences in power that can be seen among

women working on the Bible can also be found among women in the Bible: Sarah (the wife, the free woman) obviously has power over the Egyptian slave-woman, Hagar, which she wields quite freely in Genesis 16 and 21. Paul demonstrates the problem for Jewish women when, in Galatians 4: 21–31, he uses the inequality between slave and free woman, Sarah and Hagar, to describe the inequality between Christians and Jews, children of the promise and children of the flesh.

Given the plurality of voices in feminist biblical criticism, many attempts have been made to sift and categorize critics and plot them on some kind of spectrum. Since feminism is not a method but an *ideology* (within which there is considerable room for manoeuvre) attempts have been made to categorize critics ideologically. In feminist studies generally distinctions have been made between liberal feminists (who espouse a universalist view of human nature, a sense of the general sameness of human beings), radical feminists (who emphasize difference), and Marxist and socialist feminists (who focus on the social production of gender categories). In feminist biblical studies, ideological distinctions have been made using the Bible and theological tradition as a starting-point: Carolyn Osiek is interested in whether critics *collude* or *collide* with the biblical text and tradition, in whether they are 'loyalist' like Phyllis Trible or 'rejectionist' like Mary Daly (Daly achieved notoriety by, among other things, claiming that, were the positive material in the Bible to be collected together, there would be just about enough for a 'salvageable pamphlet'). But not only do such categorizations fail to do justice to the complexity of a single critic, and indeed the biblical canon, but they also tend to prioritize the Bible and the Christian tradition over feminism as the basis of judgement. Not only are such approaches reductive but they completely bypass the interests of a critic like Mieke Bal, who emphatically maintains that she does not treat the biblical text as a 'feminist manifesto', or a uniformly patriarchal document, and considers this a misleading question to ask of her own—or indeed anyone else's—work. Classification by methodology can be more helpful: since feminist biblical criticism uses as wide a range of methodologies as 'mainstream' scholarship, it is useful to know, for example, that Carol Meyers draws on anthropology and sociology, or that Elizabeth Castelli is influenced by post-structuralist literary theory. But since feminists often weave different approaches together, this kind of classification is in danger of producing Polonius-like descriptions of a critic as anthropological-sociological-historical-critical (Mieke Bal, for example, reads Judges through historical, anthropological, theological, and literary lenses). It also ignores the way in which feminism often transforms the methodologies that it uses, and how, as one feminist literary critic aptly put it, it is ideally 'responsive to all the critical schools and methods but captive of none'.

This introduction is more concerned with outlining a feminist critique of the Bible, and then describing how scholars work in the space opened up by that critique, than with classifying feminists ideologically or methodologically. That is, it concentrates on what is distinctive about a feminist approach—the difference of view. It begins by outlining the basis of the critique—the problems that the Bible and the interpretative tradition raise for feminist readers—and then it looks at

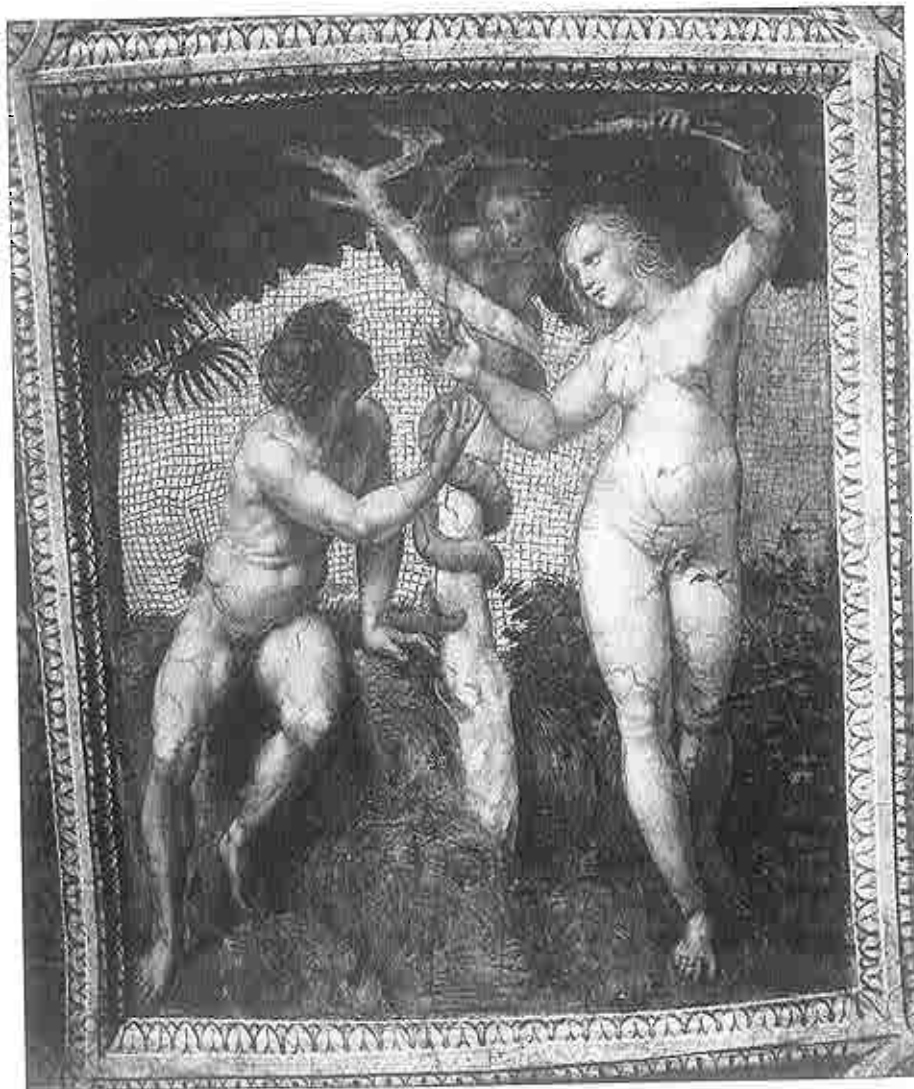
Hagar, portrayed by the black 19th-century American artist Edmonia Lewis, is presented in noble and dramatic posture, as opposed to the biblical account of her as a servant driven out by Abraham and Sarah.

ways feminist critics have found to engage with these texts. But these two sections are not about simply denigrating the tradition and then rehabilitating it: I hope to show that feminist critiques and responses are more diverse in their aims and their approaches than that.

CRITIQUE: SPEAKING AGAINST THE BIBLICAL TEXTS

Feminist criticism by definition begins with the critique. When the object of critique is the Bible it can be tempting to rush to apologetic before the problems are fully articulated. But to do this is to run the risk of not making it absolutely clear why a modern feminist reader often feels like an alien and stranger on the Bible's pages.

Adam and Eve, a fresco from the Stanza della Segnatura by Raphael, c.1508–11, presents the biblical story in Genesis 3 in a traditional manner.



The first phase of feminist critique, in biblical studies and theology as in other branches of the humanities, concentrates on exposing negative images of women, and in picking out texts that, to use Marie-Theres Wacker's wonderful play on Luther's phrase, would make 'right strawy epistles for the Women's Bible'. This process—known as *Images of Women* criticism—began when Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her team first began literally cutting out biblical passages about women and then exposing why the representations were problematic, and it is still a dominant feature of feminist biblical critique today. Outside the guild of biblical scholarship, the figure of Eve—spare rib, helper, derivative, bringer-of-sin-and-death-into-the-world—became iconic for the feminist movement (famously *Spare Rib* became the title of a 'Women's lib' magazine). Within the field, the critique went beyond Genesis 1–3, and engaged precisely with those less well-known texts, the ones barely preached on or discussed, the ones tucked away in dark corners of the canon. In Old Testament/Hebrew Bible studies, Phyllis Trible famously and painfully exposed four 'texts of terror'—the stories of Hagar, Tamar (daughter of David), Jephthah's daughter, and the Levite's concubine—women who are rejected, raped, murdered, cut up into pieces, and sacrificed in the fulfilment of a paternal vow. These texts so graphically militate against women's interests and women's bodies that they could be said to act as a rallying cry for women engaging with the Hebrew Bible (rather as the dismembered concubine's body in Judges 19 is meant to act as a rallying cry for the tribes of Israel to go to war).

As well as treating the lives of real women, the feminist critique has looked at the ways in which, to use Karen King's apposite phrase, biblical authors 'use women to think with'. One of the most notorious uses of woman-as-metaphor is the harlot-nation in the prophets: a metaphor applied to Israel, Judah, Samaria, and Nineveh, graphically detailed in Ezekiel 16 and 23, Hosea 1–3, Jeremiah 22: 20–3, and Nahum 3: 5–6, and critiqued by a whole host of feminist commentators including Mary Shields, Cheryl Exum, Athalya Brenner, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Renita Weems, and Fokkelein van Dijk-Hemmes. The marriage metaphor, in which God is male and the nation, or sin, is female, expresses a damaging inequality between genders; it also legitimates male violence against women as the relationship becomes 'pathological' (Frymer-Kensky) and the imagery turns (to use Athalya Brenner's provocative phrase) 'pornoprophetic'. The idea that God has the right to punish his sinful people may, as Renita Weems suggests, be a 'congenial theological point', but what about when that punishment gets entangled with highly disturbing language about lifted skirts, exposed genitalia, bared breasts, and the story of a woman who is stripped, beaten, starved, and paraded naked in the sight of her lovers (Hosea 2)? For some the language is innocuous because it is 'only a metaphor', but metaphors have a dangerous tendency to leak into reality, and 'some metaphors create more problems than they solve' (Weems). The Hebrew Bible itself demonstrates this when it shows how the metaphorical language of the rape of a city too often collides with the 'real' rape of the female inhabitants (see Judges 5: 30; cf. Deuteronomy 21: 10–14).

A feminist critique of the Bible cannot progress very far focusing only on concrete images of women; it needs to articulate the absence of women, the silence about women's lives. Phyllis Tribble focuses on texts where women are graphically, violently fragmented; Cheryl Exum articulates how women's *stories* are fragmented, and how they often have walk-on bit parts in the stories of men. Women are often peripheral, named only by possessive patrynomic, or as a man's possession—Jephthah's daughter, the Levite's concubine, Lot's wife. And not only is Yhwh a male God who deals primarily with males (he is the God of Abraham,

The Ten Commandments in their conventional abbreviated form appear beneath the crowns at the top and on the black curtain of the 'Ark' containing the scroll of the Torah in a synagogue.



Isaac, and Jacob rather than Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel) but the textual perspective is one of a male author addressing an audience of males. Sarah is painfully invisible from the narrative of the Akedah (Genesis 22) and the Ten Commandments, with their instruction 'not to covet your neighbour's ox, ass, or wife' obviously assume a male addressee who owns an ox, ass, and wife. (As well as uncovering texts that have always made readers uncomfortable, and articulating why they make them uncomfortable, feminist criticism is also about reading more familiar texts in unfamiliar ways.)



A portrayal of Sarah and her son Isaac from *Testament: The Animated Bible*. While Sarah is absent from the biblical account of the 'sacrifice' of Isaac (Genesis 22), the *Animated Bible* inserts her into the story.

In this illustration from a 1260 Psalter, one woman anoints the head of Jesus (Mark 14: 3–9) while another anoints his feet (Luke 7: 36–8). Feminists point out that both women are nameless in the narratives, even though their behaviour is praised as exemplary.

There are some passages in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible that, like Eve, seem to be absolutely iconic of the injustices challenged by the feminist movement. Leviticus prescribes forty days of uncleanness after the birth of a boy child and eighty after the birth of a girl, and values women at 30 shekels, men at 50—you can read these texts as starkly mathematical illustrations of gender inequality, even as an ancient example of differential wages (but for a different reading see Meyers, *Discovering Eve*). The Law of the Sotah in Numbers 5 painfully exposes double sexual standards with all the vividness and horror of medieval witch-hunts, and there is no clearer illustration of patriarchy than the Genesis genealogies in which fathers beget sons who beget more sons (as if women were somehow removed from the biological process, and daughters were never born). Texts like these are not only on a direct collision course with values that we think of as distinctively feminist, but they sometimes assault those basic understandings of equality and human rights that have been enshrined and normalized in law.

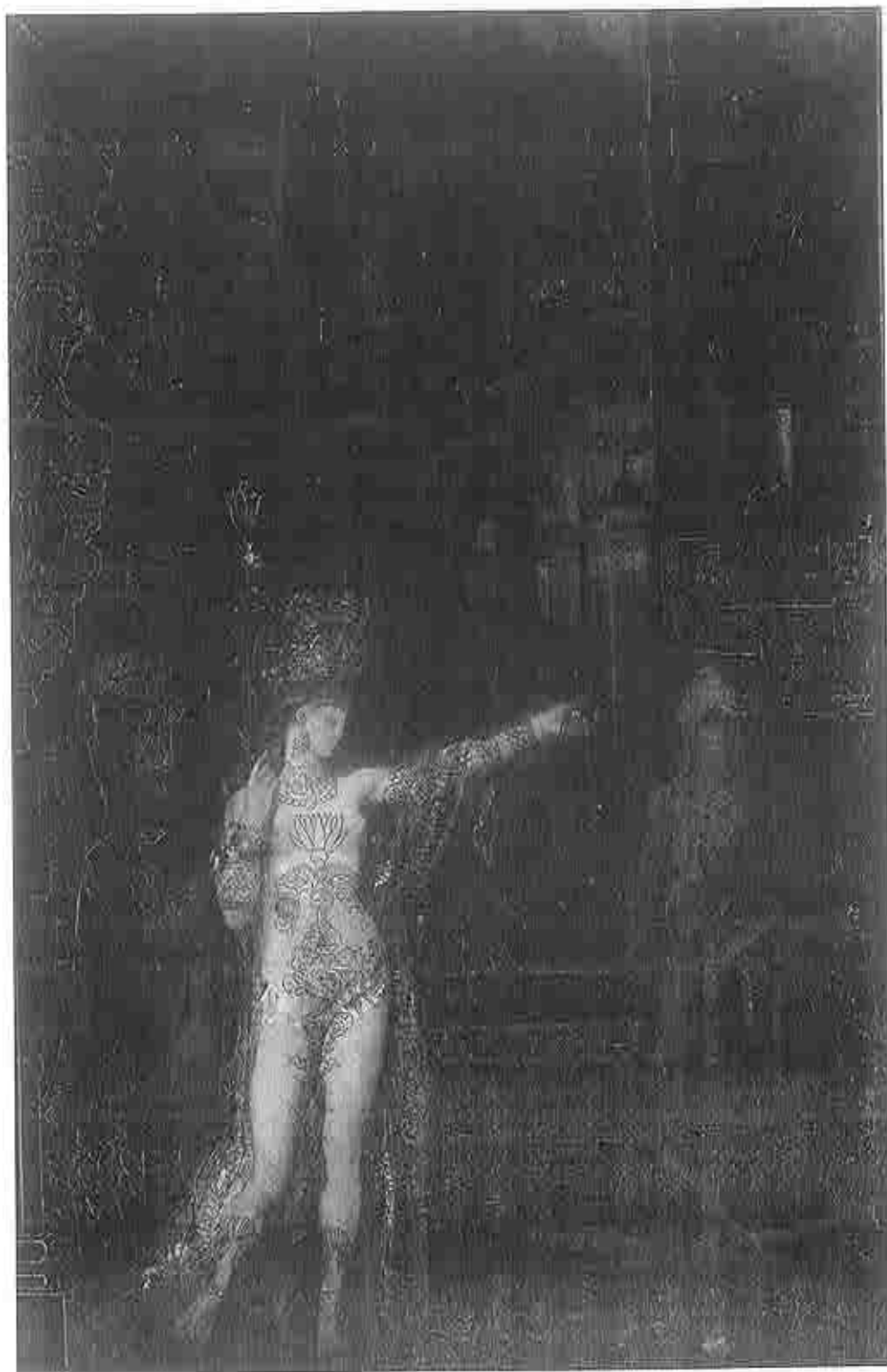
Lest a sense of discomfort with the Hebrew Bible propel us into a kind of feminist neo-Marcionism, scholars have also challenged the idea that the New Testament can be seen as a kind of proto-feminist refuge for women battered by their reading of the 'Old'. The New Testament does indeed reflect a different view of gender: it reflects the androcentric social structures of the Graeco-Roman world. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza warns the woman reader to proceed with 'caution' since the New Testament 'could be dangerous to [her] health and survival'; while Daphne Hampson warns that, though not a misogynist, the Jesus of the gospels is certainly not a feminist, even by the most minimalist definition. The story of the New Testament orbits around men—a male Christ, male disciples, male church elders, male authors or pseudonyms (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter) and male addressees (Timothy, Philemon), and passages like 1 Thessalonians 4: 4 assume a male audience just as naturally as the Ten Commandments when it talks of 'taking a wife for yourself'. Women looking for traces of women's roles in the early church are often employed in a process of *cherchez la femme*, picking at tantalizingly brief allusions, for example to the *diakonos* Phoebe in Romans 16: 1–2. Like their Old Testament/Hebrew Bible counterparts, female characters often hover in the background, in the sub-plot, and can also suffer from namelessness and anonymity: Matthew's Gospel may praise the woman who anoints Jesus, and may condemn Judas and Peter for their betrayal and denial, but, as Schüssler Fiorenza points out, the name of the betrayer is remembered, but the name of the faithful (female) disciple is forgotten. Moreover, in Luke's version the woman is described as a prostitute, an example of the sinners with whom Jesus interacts, rather than a prophetic figure anointing Jesus before his death. The New Testament, like the Old, has its more notorious 'strawy' texts, texts such as the pastoral epistles, which seem so keen to repress women's active roles. And occasionally these texts can themselves become 'texts of terror': Tina Pippin, for example, sees the Whore of Babylon (Revelation 17–18) as the bloody culmination of the woman-as-whore metaphor in the prophets, and is profoundly disturbed by the depiction of Rome as female, at the moment when



hate is most powerfully unleashed against her. Ephesians uses the conventional patriarchal household structures of the *paterfamilias* as a reflection of unity and harmony; Romans 7: 1–6 uses a wife's obligations to her husband as a metaphor for the obligation of Christians to the law, and so on. The examples may be less stark than in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible but, as Susan Durber points out, sexism may be most dangerous when it is at its least violent and obvious—when it simply seduces the reader into accepting a normal, male point of view.

If the Bible, as Phyllis Bird puts it, is largely a 'collection of writing by males from a society dominated by males', then so too is commentary. Feminist meta-commentary (or commentary on commentary) shows how the scholarly tradition has often unthinkingly reinscribed biblical prejudices against women, and in some cases written gender inequalities larger than in the original text. The garden of Eden has, as Trevor Dennis puts it, been crammed full of theological 'litter' that has made Eve into the 'devil's gateway', 'the unsealer of the tree', and 'the one who crushed the image of God' (as Tertullian sweetly put it). But other biblical characters have also been distorted: Sarah's laughter has been amplified and castigated; the Samaritan woman at the well has been described by commentators as a 'five-times-loser' or a 'tramp'; the woman who anoints Jesus' feet has been condemned for her 'hysteria'; while popular cultural interpretation has made Mary Magdalene into a prostitute, established Delilah and Bathsheba as culpable *femmes fatales*, and totally created the eroticized figure of 'Salome'. Sometimes male commentators have underplayed the roles of women: Phoebe, the *prostatis* (the feminine form of *prostates*, generally translated leader, chief, patron, guardian, protector), is usually denied the strong role that the text seems to give her; Junia (fem.) the *apostolos* in Romans 16: 7 undergoes a sex-change in modern translations to become Junias (masc.); while commentators explain the role of Prisca (co-worker with Paul, together with her husband Aquila) on the basis that perhaps she had special access to 'women's areas' (maybe she was the ancient equivalent of the Sunday school teacher). As well as exposing the androcentricism of scholarship, feminist metacommentary may also expose how male commentators are caught out by their own criticisms of the woman-in-the-text (Moore), or how, even as they condemn feminist criticism for its unscholarly subjectivity, they sometimes stray into subjectivity themselves (Sherwood).

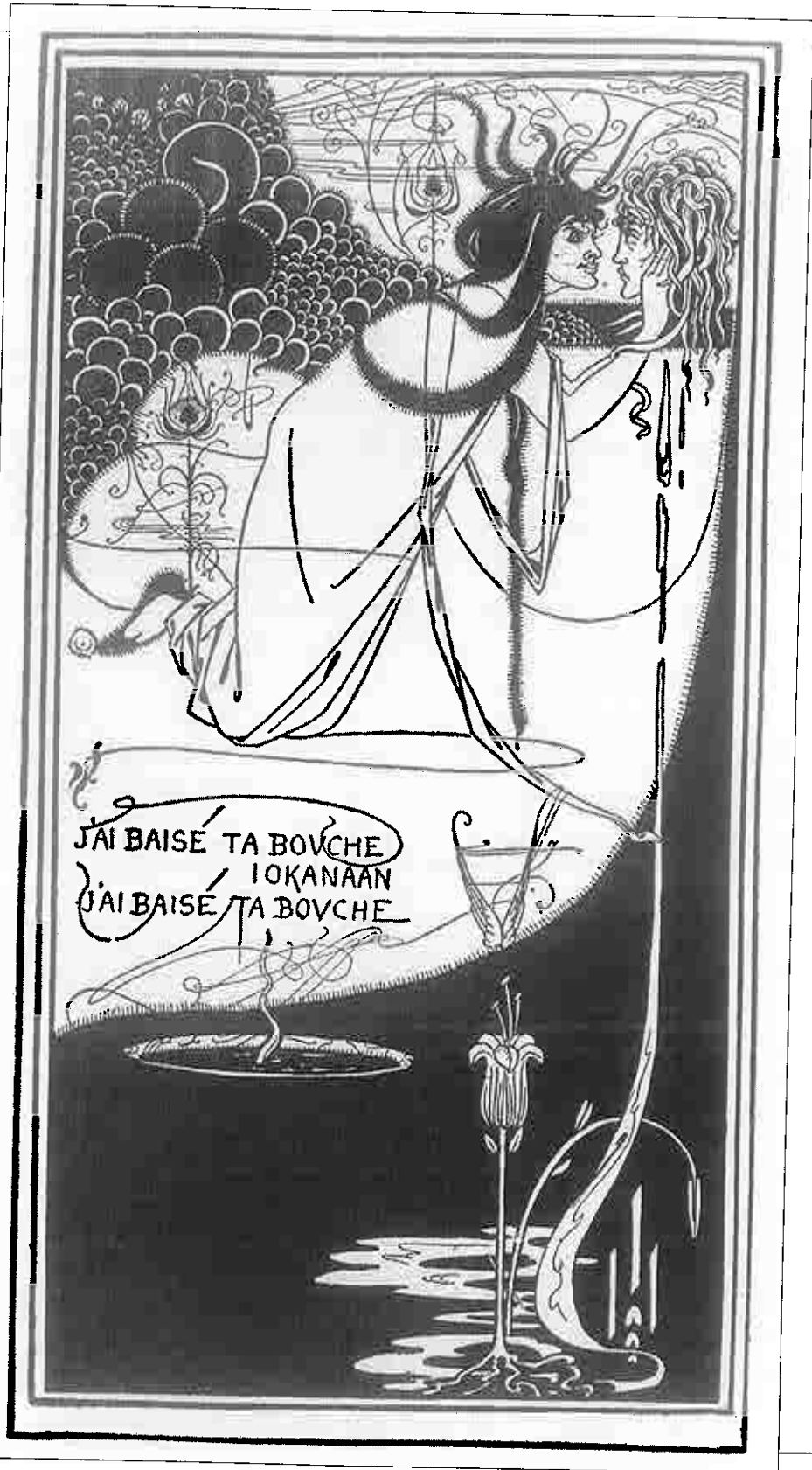
'Reading as a woman' is not something that comes naturally, instinctively, just by being a woman, because women are socialized to identify themselves with a male point of view. But critical reflection on the text can be a necessary act of self-protection from biblical ideology, a way of preventing oneself reading with, and so complying with, the scapegoating, denigration, and silencing of women. By training themselves to become resisting readers of the Bible, feminists have become among the first ideological critics, the first to articulate their difference from the biblical texts. The effect on 'the Bible' is disorientating: the book that is usually associated with liberation is shown to be, in some ways, unliberating; the book that has habitually been invoked to comment on society is critiqued from the standpoint of twentieth-century social values; and the visionary book is



The tattooed Salome, by Gustav Moreau (1826–98). Salome has become the embodiment of men's desires, and fears, about women.

Yvonne Sherwood

J'ai baisé ta bouche, Jokanaan, an illustration by Aubrey Beardsley in Oscar Wilde's *Salome* (1894) shows Salome holding the dripping head of John the Baptist, and representing herself as a gorgon.



shown to be myopic about women's rights and women's questions. Having articulated the tensions between the Bible and feminism, the critic can no longer assume that the voice of the biblical texts and tradition will merge with her own. But this is not the end of the conversation, but the beginning, as the feminist responses below show.

CONVERSATION: SPEAKING WITH THE BIBLICAL TEXTS

No feminist is prepared bleakly to catalogue women's oppression: all critics want to combat that oppression with strong, confident, women-affirming voices. For some critics, such as Mary Daly, or Daphne Hampson, these voices emphatically cannot be found in the text and the tradition, and the only strong female voice is the voice of the critic, breaking free and defining herself against an irredeemable legacy. Other feminist critics tease out positive voices from the text/tradition that they can relate to and magnify (although they would disagree as to the extent to which those voices were intended by the authors). For some this is a political and religious act, a way of staking a place in the Bible and tradition. For others it is a reflection of a different kind of belief—a belief that even a system like patriarchy has gaps and holes in it, and that traces of women's voices, and women's power, will inevitably leak through, even in the most androcentric of texts.

One of the most obvious ways of finding footholds in the biblical tradition is by identifying women-friendly role models and women-friendly texts. As a feminist critique has developed naming texts of terror, so an informal, positive canon-within-the-canon has also separated out. Many critics talk self-consciously of doing something magpie-like, of gathering up the most sparkling, attractive texts, like lost coins (Loades), or finding texts that are more 'bread' than 'stone'-like (Schüssler Fiorenza). The Song of Songs is for many a 'non-sexist' text, even an 'antidote to patriarchy': Tribble sees it as a kind of feminist paradise to compensate for an Eden that has gone sour for womankind. The book of Ruth can offer a similarly idyllic space: reversing the usual pattern, the husbands and fathers sink into the sub-plot (they die in the first few verses) and Boaz sits in the wings as Ruth, Naomi, and a female chorus take centre stage. The book of Luke is a book which foregrounds women; it praises them and offers a kind of equality of symbolism whereby for every male parable and male example there is an equal and opposite parable centred on a female character.

In addition to these book-length islands in a biblical sea of androcentricism, feminist analysis has also pointed to a whole group of exemplary, even powerful, female characters (Esther, Ruth, Abigail, the 'woman of worth' in Proverbs 31, the faithful women in the gospel parables, Lydia, Prisca, Phoebe) and has teased out other promising textual strands. Galatians 3: 28 offers 'the clearest statement of women's equality to be found in the Christian scriptures' (Briggs), while Hosea 4: 14 can be read as a timely antidote to Hosea 1–3, and the unequal metaphor whereby sin is female harlotry, but righteousness and constancy is male (Marie-Theres Wacker). Male leaders, in moments of compassion, mourning, or care are



Naomi entreating Ruth and Orpah to return to the land of Moab, by William Blake (1757–1827), is a reminder that the book of Ruth is a women-centred story.

described in maternal terms: Jesus is like a mother-hen (Matthew 23: 37–9; Luke 13: 34), Paul, in Galatians 4: 19, describes himself as a woman labouring for his children, and in 1 Thessalonians 2: 7 and 1 Corinthians 3: 12 casts himself as nurturing mother/wet nurse of the church. Promisingly for feminist theology, there even seem to be moments where female metaphors meet the image of God: the God of Hosea 11 is a maternal figure, teaching Ephraim to walk (Schüngel-Straumann), and Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah not only restore Jerusalem as radiant bride and suckling mother, but offer the radical images of God as midwife and woman giving birth (Isaiah 42: 14; 66.9). However, by far the most promising figure for feminist theology is Woman Wisdom, Hebrew *Hokhmah*, Greek *Sophia*, who appears in the book of Proverbs and ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus) as the female love-object of the male seeker after wisdom *and* as one who sits beside the

divine throne, as co-creator and beloved of God. These images of Wisdom, influenced by ancient oriental and Egyptian goddess cults, have become increasingly important in feminist scholarship, theology and liturgy (to appreciate the extent of the impact of Sophia, see the collection of essays in the section 'Revelatory Discourses: Manifestations of Sophia' in *Searching the Scriptures*, ii).

As this positive counter-canon has multiplied so have the voices of caution. Positive images of women do not always represent women's interests, warns Esther Fuchs, since female characters in male-authored texts 'reveal more about the wishful thinking, fears, aspirations, and prejudices of their male creators than about women's authentic lives'. Women in Luke may be numerous and exemplary, observes Jane Schaberg, but they are exemplary for their aptitude for 'following' and 'subordinate service' (roles which hardly challenge the roles of women under patriarchy); moreover, since women are often socialized to be unassertive and socially deferential, might it not be dangerous for them to read a gospel extolling humility, and directed at a male will-to-power? Pure proto-feminist utopias such as the Song of Songs may be dangerously overromanticized: at the end of Ruth our heroine disappears, once she has given birth to Obed father of Jesse father of David. With the possible exception of Wisdom, female metaphors for God, Jesus, and the apostles tend to reinscribe those traditionally 'feminine' attributes of compassion, kindness, caring, and motherliness, and so by celebrating them we may be unwittingly deifying woman's role as nurturer and carer.

In other disciplines in the humanities, such as English literature, feminist analysis has moved from critiquing representations of women in male-authored texts (Images of Women criticism) to a new emphasis on women's writing. The idea of canon has been challenged, and rediscovered authors, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Radclyffe Hall, have been put on the curriculum. In biblical studies and theology the decentring of the canon and an interest in writing by women has been expressed in different, less straightforward ways. The canon of study has been expanded (*Searching the Scriptures* is interested in potentially radical theological ideas in extra-canonical texts, as well as the New Testament canon, though obviously not on the assumption that these texts were written by women) and figures such as Hildegard of Bingen and the fabulously named Gertrud the Great have become rehabilitated in the history of interpretation. Within the canon, however, rediscovering women's voices is a far more tenuous business, since it is difficult to ascertain where (or even if) women's texts and traditions survive. Mary-Ann Tolbert tentatively makes the point that, given the spread of female literacy, 'it is not impossible that the author of Mark was female', while Athlaya Brenner and Fokkelein van Dijk-Hemmes propose that books like the Song of Songs show the influence of F (or female) sources.

Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes's suggestion that there are some F sources behind a dominant M (male) tradition is reminiscent of conventional 'source' studies—of Pentateuchal criticism's J, E, D, and P, or gospel-study's Q. They seem to be echoing source criticism, even as they do something radically new (they

never argue that women wrote these texts down, only that these texts seem to be strongly influenced by a woman's perspective). This kind of echoing and ingenuous reuse or redirection of mainstream critical methods is characteristic of much feminist biblical scholarship. Phyllis Tribble reflects the etymological remanœuvres that you find in many commentaries when, in a famous reading of Genesis 2–3 (in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*) she stresses the link between *ha-adam* (usually translated 'the man') and *ha-adamah* ('the earth') and suggests that the 'man' is actually an androgynous 'earth creature', who splits to become male and female. Tribble reads Genesis 2–3 as a mirror of the more egalitarian creation account of Genesis 1: 28, where male and female are created simultaneously and equally. And as Tribble mirrors the linguistic ingenuity of male commentators, and squeezes an egalitarian reading out of the word *adamah*, so critics like Carol Meyers, Phyllis Bird, and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza draw on historical-contextual approaches to uncover a less one-sided view of history. In *Discovering Eve*, Carol Meyers uses anthropological models to look at the influence of factors such as high female mortality rate, disease, economic and household structure on the lives of real-life 'Eves'; Phyllis Bird examines institutions of cultic prostitution and the religious activity of women; and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, in *In Memory of Her*, attempts to reconstruct the obscured role of women in the early church. These critics, and many others, attempt to create a space for women in history, a historical room of their own (which is often lacking in the text).

For many feminist critics it is important to argue using objective, mainstream methodologies, or versions of them, lest feminist critics be simply dismissed to a zone of 'creativity' and 'subjectivity'. Other critics, such as Alice Bach, are influenced by post-structuralist critiques of objectivity, and are involved in self-consciously re-imagining the texts from a woman's perspective (on the grounds that all scholarship, ultimately, is subjective). This kind of criticism can be rebellious and enthralling: what would Vashti's story sound like, or Gomer's or Potiphar's wife's? The stories may be playful, but the issues raised are serious: for example Balz-Cochois's Gomer 'talks' powerfully of her alienation from a male-oriented cult.

Though feminist conversations with the Bible have been productive in many ways, perhaps the most powerful theme to emerge is the idea that *the Bible begins its own critique*. Rosemary Radford Ruether, who describes her approach as a *feminist theology of liberation*, understands the prophetic tradition as a 'golden thread' running through scripture, and pulls at this thread to unravel the one-sidedness of biblical tradition. For many critics, the Magnificat and its Old Testament/Hebrew Bible prototype the Song of Hannah offer an important model for inversion and subversion, for lifting up the low and excluded, and questioning the authority of the mighty. Other critics fasten on to moments where women within the Bible arguably speak out against their own marginalization: moments such as the daughters of Zelophehad's interrogation of the inheritance law (Numbers 27: 1–11), or the questions of the Syro-Phoenician woman who argues her right for inclusion and, uniquely, bests Jesus in an

argument (Mark 7: 24–30). As Mary Ann Tolbert points out, Jesus has already taught others that religious customs should not stand in the way of doing good for those in need (Mark 2: 23–8; 3: 1–6); now the Gentile-woman-outsider pushes the principle and argues that social conventions should not do so either. Following her cue feminist critics outside the text also push biblical principles, by relentlessly pursuing the logic of the texts until they expose their own blind spots. For example, scrupulously following the logic of Luke, Jane Schaberg reasons that if the 'greatest' are those who serve, and if the models of service throughout the book are female, then surely women should be promoted to leadership. This process of following the logic of the text, and its liberating implications, beyond the text's own limits is increasingly becoming known as 'feminist deconstruction'.

THE FUTURE OF FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP

Feminist biblical scholarship, like feminist study in general, is constantly becoming more sophisticated, more expansive, as it builds on the work of previous generations. New fields of enquiry are opening up: critics are becoming increasingly interested in the afterlives of biblical women, in art, film, and popular culture, and the consideration of gender has inevitably led to questions about masculinity, homosexuality, and issues of power and inequality, as well as questions specifically limited to the 'female'. Yet even as the field is expanding, it also goes on, quite simply, articulating *why* the Bible is problematic for so many contemporary readers, and why feminist critics must ultimately be something more than a sort of special-interest group on the margins of the academy. After all, women are quite a distinctive 'minority'—the only 'minority' that makes up 52 per cent of the world.