

The Feminist Movement Meets the Old Testament

One Woman's Perspective

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The feminist movement came as an electrifying summons for me and many of my contemporaries in the last half of the twentieth century. It seemed like the voice of the Spirit beckoning our spirits to rise¹ and directing us to think and live differently. From the beginning the movement was a call to conversion. Feminist ideas broke in upon us all as a troubling disruption of the way things were and as an exhilarating revelation of how they might be. They gave us new understandings of ourselves, of our relationships, and of the lives of our mothers and our grandmothers before us. They stirred up vital energy to work for the well-being of future generations, and ultimately for the earth itself. For those of us committed to our religious faith, they also compelled us to rethink our beliefs about God, the Bible, and our religious institutions.

A SYMBOLIC NARRATIVE

The biblical story of the indebted widow about to lose her children in 2 Kgs 4:1-7 seems a riveting, if imperfect, tale for reflecting on the rise

Professor Katharine Sakenfeld was my teacher and is now my colleague and friend. She and I were part of a small group of women faculty and Ph.D. students at Princeton Theological Seminary who, during my years of study, met regularly to read feminist literature and to discuss our lives and our vocations as theologians and biblical scholars. It is a pleasure to write this essay in her honor.

1. With apologies to Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow for borrowing from the title of their important book *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979).

of the women's movement and its impact on biblical studies. In this story of enslavement escaped, of power gained, and of abundant life poured out upon women with too little of the world's goods, I see many analogies with the feminist movement of the late twentieth century.

A threatening world underlies the widow's story in 2 Kgs 4:1-7. The widow lives in extreme poverty. The text portrays her by what she does not have: no name, no food, and no way to protect her children from creditors coming to take them as payment for her dead husband's debt. Like all biblical stories, this one takes place in a social world much different from postindustrial societies familiar to us in the West. In the economic system of ancient Israel, there was no protection from creditors. They could come anytime to call in their loans, and they could charge any amount of interest on money or goods loaned to debtors. Sometimes to pay debts, families had to sell their property, their children (most often daughters), or even themselves into slavery or indentured servitude.

That the woman is a widow adds to the precariousness of her existence. A widow in the ancient world faced danger, hardship, and even death, particularly if she did not have adult sons to support her.² She was forced either to return to her father's house, where she would become a financial burden, or to make a living on her own. Perhaps like Ruth she might become a "day laborer" in the fields—a migrant worker, in our terms—or she might sell her daughters and sons, or even herself, into slavery of one kind or another. Facing the most dire circumstances, she might become a prostitute.

What sets this biblical story in motion is the widow's cry for help to the prophet Elisha. "Your servant my husband is dead; and you know that your servant feared YHWH, but a creditor has come to take my two children as slaves" (v. 1). Like her dead husband, Elisha is a member of a company of prophets. An exceptional character, he neither dismisses her plea nor treats her as if she were invisible. Instead, he honors the widow by hearing her, acknowledging her plight, and taking her appeal for help seriously. His questions continue to show respect to her even as they further reveal the danger in which she and her children reside. "What shall I do for you? What do you have in the house?" he asks. She replies to only the second question. All she has is "a jar of oil," and there is nothing to cook in it. But the little that belongs to her, her jar of oil, becomes the key to her survival and that of her children.

2. Paula S. Hiebert, "Whence Shall Help Come to Me? The Biblical Widow," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (ed. Peggy L. Day; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 125-41.

Elisha sends the widow to find help among members of her community. "Go outside, borrow vessels from all your neighbors, empty vessels and not just a few" (v. 3). Since it was women who did the cooking, I imagine these vessel-gathering neighbors to be women as poor and hungry as the widow herself. With generosity sometimes stunningly evident among the poor, these neighbors start bringing empty vessels and then keep bringing them. Next Elisha urges the widow to pour out the meager oil she has. We can imagine her as doubtful at first, unable to think how anything could happen from such a simple action of daily life. Her mind must expand to see the possibilities of new life. When she pours from her oil, she keeps pouring until all the vessels are filled and there is no emptiness left. After she reports this miracle to Elisha, he tells her to "Go sell the oil and pay your debts, and you and your children can live on the rest" (v. 7).

PARALLELS

It would be stretching the text way too much, of course, to say that this story fits the modern women's movement with any precision, especially since one of its main characters is a man who orders the woman around. Nonetheless, I find certain common elements.

Socioeconomic systems afflict women in antiquity as well as, of course, women in many parts of the world today, though in vastly different ways. Both modern and ancient women suffer from social and economic arrangements designed to benefit men and to exclude women. In this story, the widowed woman and her children face the double threat of starvation and enslavement by aggressive creditors. When modern feminist women began to analyze our common predicament, we realized that we, too, were excluded and demeaned simply because we were female. It seemed as if a multiarmed octopus kept us in our place with a set of tentacles that were economic, legal, spiritual, sexual, psychological, and theological.

The situation begins to change when the widow and modern feminist women seize the initiative and act for their own sake and the sake of their children. In order to survive, both behave with a boldness that society discourages in women. The widow calls out to a man for help, and her initiative transforms her from a passive victim of fate into an active figure. Similarly, modern feminists began to act on our own, as independent agents, participants in the wider world for the benefit of society.

For both the widow in 2 Kings and feminist women, new life appears because they gather in community. The widow's request for help from her neighbors invites their generosity and support, even though they seem to have as little as she. Her appeal to her neighbors turns the community of poor women into the sacred space in which God generously nourishes all. Something like the widow and her neighbors, modern women formed communities to share our emptiness and to rethink our difficulties in terms larger than our personal failures and inadequacies. In "consciousness-raising groups," women told of their hunger, fears, and self-doubts—and began also to discover strength and hope, to share our small jars of oil. Initially, at least, many feminists were bound together in a community of sisters coming back to life from partial or complete emptiness.

Both the widow and feminist women draw upon their own resources. When the widow begins to pour from the little oil she has, it flows and flows and flows. From that outpouring comes new life for her, her children, and perhaps even her neighbors. What she already has multiplies and becomes the space wherein God is the Pourer of divine generosity. Feminists, too, began to draw from our own lives, our inner resources, and our hidden strengths. We began to see our experiences as women to be different from, but of equal importance with, the experience of men. We realized that society promoted male experience as "normative," the ideal of the human, the model in nearly all avenues of thinking and acting. Instead of accepting a dualism that maintained sharp lines of demarcation between the sexes, we began to understand women's lives for their own sake, as a vast, barely explored arena for interpreting and re-imagining life in family, society, and church. We reflected on the contributions that women were already making to home, family, and society in the upbringing of children, care for the sick and elderly, and support for husbands. We realized painfully that society often ignored or belittled "women's work" and failed to compensate it justly.

The widow and modern feminists garnered cooperation from some men. In Elisha, the widow encounters a man who respects her and takes her distress seriously. When he asks her how he can help, he neither patronizes her nor fixes things for her. Instead, he acts as a wise friend and encourages her to act on her own. Even though, initially, many men were greatly threatened and perturbed by "uppity women," some modern men "got it." They saw the suffering of women and their hunger for a better world and, like Elisha, became allies in the effort

to change society. Sadly, only a few such men were to be found in the churches.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we realize that it is very difficult to generalize about women's present economic and social conditions because they vary greatly. One result of the women's movement was the distressing discovery that white middle-class women, the dominant feminist voices of the late 1960s and 1970s, wrongly understood their experiences as the norm for all women. Many of us unwittingly acted like those men who had diminished us by making their worlds and their experience the center of life and treating everyone else as invisible or deviant. It did not take long for African American, Latina, and Asian American women, and later women from the Two-Thirds World, to name their different situations and relationships also as places of feminist struggle, creativity, and theological reflection. Not only were their insights clearly equal to ours, but they were also necessary for our conversion from our cultural arrogance, as this book hopes to show. Still in its first flush, the feminist movement among mostly middle-class white women set out important themes that would later develop, drop out, or be rethought among many and varied groups of women around the world.

WOMEN'S WORLDS AND SEXISM

Sexism is a way of thinking and acting, as well as a set of social and economic arrangements, that benefit one sex and harm the other. Because we are all embedded in the way things are—that is, our worldviews seem like absolute truths rather than socially formed ideas—most people accepted the way things were before the women's movement brought them to light. The following are a few ways sexism diminished women's lives in the middle of the last century.

Women were second-class citizens of political, social, and religious institutions. We were excluded from many educational institutions, from professions, from sports training and competition, and from leadership roles everywhere, except within female organizations and sometimes the home.

Women who did work outside the home typically made half the wages for the same work as a comparably educated and experienced man, and women were routinely passed over for promotions and advancement.

Women and girls were too often perceived as "sex objects," valued primarily for their bodies and the satisfaction they gave to men. (I leave it to you to decide whether this has changed.)

Teachers, and also frequently parents, gave boys more attention and encouragement than girls, even in classrooms and homes run by women.

Women disappeared into marriages where they became subordinate to their husbands' finances and decision making, and sometimes became victims of physical violence at their husbands' hands.

Women had difficulty opening bank accounts separate from their husbands or fathers, establishing credit apart from their husbands, opening businesses, and protecting themselves economically in divorce in which women's household labor went unrecognized and uncompensated.

Society judged all women to be less strong, capable, and responsible than men. We were seen as more emotional, fickle, dependent, and in need of protection by men, by the law, and by religious institutions. Women's bodies were largely under the control of these institutions.

Economically deprived women were invisible.

But these examples from the recent past reveal only part of the story. The deeper cost of sexism for many Caucasian middle-class women was crippled personhood. Too often, we believed that we were less able, less talented, less suited for leadership roles, less adequate for contributing to the world than the men in our lives. Self-hatred and disdain for other women was one way women collaborated in sexism and misogyny. From girlhood on, many of us silenced ourselves to keep safe; we lost our voices and the courage to live our dreams. These inner attitudes are called "internalized sexism," akin to internalized racism. Both terms mean that the subordinate group absorbs and believes myths about itself that harm it and benefit the dominant group.

For many women, the feminist movement called us to conversion, to spiritual transformation, by shaking up what we thought to be true. It challenged our identities as women, producing critical thinking about relationships between the sexes and among women and about gender roles assigned to us because we are female. (The term "gender" usually signifies roles assigned to us by society because of our sex, whereas the term "sex" refers to biological reality.) And the feminist

movement also illuminated who we might become. A growing body of thought, it provided the theory necessary to analyze how society, culture, and church both defined and constrained us, and it created vision to work for a world more hospitable to women and children.

THE RISE OF FEMINISM IN THE GENERAL CULTURE

Feminism did not arise from discoveries in church and synagogue that half the world's population was oppressed, discriminated against, or excluded because of their sex. Nor did religious institutions notice biblical texts or religious traditions that actually challenge this sorry state of affairs—texts, for example, about God making humans in the divine image, or about Jesus' instruction to love your neighbor as yourself, or Paul's claim that in Christ there is neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, male or female. Rather, the call for change came from the general culture. The contradictions within the world of religion regarding women came into view only when women who had discovered feminism in the general culture began to emerge as teachers, ministers, lay leaders, and scholars.

Nor did the women's movement or feminist biblical criticism actually begin in the twentieth century. Throughout history, resistance to sexism appeared in brief, repetitive bursts that were quickly suppressed and forgotten.³ Hildegard of Bingen and Christine de Pizan were early commentators on the Bible from a "woman-focused" perspective.⁴ As early as the eighteenth century, Judith Sargent Murray cited a nonsexist interpretation of Genesis 2–3 in support of her efforts to establish schools for girls in the newly founded United States. In the nineteenth century in the United States, the women's movement had affinities and alliances with the movement to emancipate slaves. Both movements strove to recognize human dignity and to free people from various forms of oppression. Abolitionists like the Grimké sisters were drawn to the women's movement because their male colleagues belittled their views, even as they worked with them to free black slaves.⁵ African American women, such as Sojourner Truth and Anna Julia Cooper, focused on the emancipatory message of the biblical text as they challenged both racism and

3. Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteenth-century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

4. *Ibid.*, 142–46.

5. See Alice Ogden Bellis, "Feminist Biblical Scholarship," in *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (ed. Carol Meyers; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 24–32.

sexism. In 1895, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and a group of women produced *The Woman's Bible*.⁶ This shocking and clearheaded book surveyed each book of the Bible to expose its treatment of women—the ways it demeaned them or offered them hope. But it was ahead of its time, considered irreverent and too radical for most women and men, and so fell into general cultural forgetfulness.

My first encounter with feminist thinking was not with *The Woman's Bible* but with the eye-opening work of Simone de Beauvoir, aptly titled *The Second Sex*.⁷ A French philosopher, Beauvoir argued that women were secondary citizens of the world. Most lived what she called "imminent" lives within repetitive cycles of caregiving, more or less in the same fashion as their mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers before them—washing, cleaning, tending to others' bodily and emotional needs. She noted that women engaged the broader world only vicariously through the exploits and adventures of the men in their lives.

Men, by contrast, said Beauvoir, lived "transcendent" lives, outstripping or "transcending" accomplishments of their fathers before them, going out into the world, doing and discovering that which was not yet known or done. Despite later recognition that some men lived as repetitive and cyclical existences as women, Beauvoir showed how society inhibited and constrained even the most talented women. Women and girls had little opportunity to explore the world in their youth, undertake careers suited to their talents, or even imagine themselves in roles other than the traditional ones of wife and mother. For Beauvoir, men defined women, and women, in turn, displaced themselves to meet those definitions.

Virginia Woolf's compelling work *A Room of One's Own*, written in 1927, was rediscovered in the middle of the last century.⁸ Woolf proposed that every woman needs a room of her own and five hundred pounds a year, that is, enough money to be financially independent and able to pursue her own creative talents. In a similar vein, Betty Friedan, in her influential *The Feminine Mystique*, argued that women had forfeited their identity in a progressive dehumanization for a "comfortable concentration camp" of marriage and homemaking, where their own talents, yearnings, and hopes were persistently denied.⁹ The central

6. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Revising Committee, *The Woman's Bible* (New York: European Publishing Co., 1895–1898; reprint, Seattle: Coalition Task Force on Women and Religion, 1974).

7. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1953).

8. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth, 1938).

9. Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1963).

idea of these and other writings is that women are persons in their own right, entitled to independence and self-determination.

Among women, notions like these were life-altering and institution-changing, and the churches could not escape their influences, try though they did. Feminism spread like fire in a dry field because it named what many of us already knew about our lives but had neither language nor theoretical framework to name. Of course, these ideas plunged us into conflict with some women and men who believed that feminists were elitist (cut off from the lives of real women), antifamily, and antifemale. But despite vociferous backlash, social change was under way.

Mary Daly brilliantly applied Beauvoir's thinking to the church.¹⁰ She noted that even though women make up the majority of members in the churches and do massive amounts of work to keep the churches afloat, they tend to be accorded only second-class status. In most religious communities, women could not preach, lead worship, or serve in leadership roles that were not concerned exclusively with children. This is still the case in many churches, where—despite flowery rhetoric about women's dignity—women remain second-class citizens. The work of the liberation of women is still an ongoing battle around the world.

FEMINIST BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Feminist biblical interpretation emerges from these large societal changes and cannot be understood apart from them. Critical feminist scholarship is also born of the Enlightenment, the triumph of scientific thinking that moved from acceptance of the world as given to critical testing of truth according to scientific principles. Although contemporary feminists are frequently critical of forms of scientific thinking, the capacity to evaluate evidence, to locate it in historical context, and to subject literature to doubt are scientific tools used also in feminist biblical criticism.

Women began to read the Bible with feminist consciousness. The designation "feminist consciousness" refers to an awareness of women's subordination as unnatural, wrong, and largely determined by society rather than written into our bodies by biology alone.¹¹ Feminist women have some sense of sisterhood with girls and other women. They have

10. Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Boston: Beacon, 1985).

11. Lerner, *Creation of Feminist Consciousness*, 274.

learned strategies for self-determination and have begun to create alternative visions of the future. When feminist women began to study the Bible with such consciousness, many difficulties about reading it appeared that had previously not been apparent. The discovery of these problems was deeply disturbing for many believing women, but the problems themselves set out the initial agenda of feminist biblical scholarship.

Problems for Feminists Reading the Bible

1. The first problem women faced is that female characters are scarce in the Bible. Feminist women searched biblical texts for examples of women of faith, but soon discovered that female figures who might serve as models of faith are in short supply. Women appear rarely; they have been "disappeared," to use a term from Latin America to describe the forceful removal of people from a society. When women do appear in the text, as New Testament scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza frequently noted, they often emerge as glorified male versions of womanhood or as troublemakers who disturb "the history of salvation."¹² Frequently, women who are included in the text are nameless—unlike their male counterparts—as if the women did not matter to the writers and editors of the texts.

2. The Bible is androcentric. The term "androcentric" means "male centered." Women's experience, women's history, and women's spiritual struggles are either pushed to the corners of biblical pages or are altogether invisible, subsumed into androcentric texts. The Bible is written largely from male viewpoints—by men, about men, and, yes, largely for men. The result is that even when women do appear, they are portrayed through male eyes, and their images and behavior are filtered through male experience and bias.

3. Sexist language for people and for God excludes women. The androcentrism of the Bible remains the source of many bruising modern battles over sexist language. The concept of sexist language in biblical studies refers to way the Bible speaks about humans and God in male terms. Both testaments use predominantly male language to speak of the community of faith and of Jesus' disciples, as if they included

only men—sons of Israel, brothers, or other male roles that hide the presence of women. The original biblical languages generally exclude women from the communities of Israel and the church, but English translations were even worse, sometimes translating more generic words for "human" or "humankind" with male terms.

Biblical language for God is equally androcentric. The Bible usually speaks of God with male pronouns ("he," "him," "his") or in male roles like lord, king, judge, or father. But as Mary Daly so aptly put it, "If God is male, then the male is god."¹³ That means the biblical languages buttress male authority when they associate only men with God, making men God's stand-in on earth. Exceptions to this welter of male terms—for example, gender-neutral imagery for God in terms drawn from nature or in terms drawn from women's lives—were rarely noted by interpreters nor used in worship.

4. The texts encourage violence toward women. Even worse than its androcentrism, some biblical texts actually command the subordination of women, convey hatred of women (misogyny), or put God in the role as the abuser of women. Some texts appear to support and condone physical abuse of women and wives, and in some of the prophetic texts, God participates in and authorizes it (cf. Jer 13:22–27). Such texts have been used to condone domestic violence against women and children similarly to the way biblical texts were once used to support slavery.

5. The societies that produced the Bible were patriarchal and hierarchical. When feminist scholars delved more deeply into the social and cultural worlds of ancient Israel and early Christianity, other interpretive problems appeared. Not only are biblical texts androcentric and biblical languages sexist, but the social, economic, and political systems of the ancient world were patriarchal and hierarchical. The term "patriarchy" refers to social arrangements in which the *pater*, the father of the household, holds power over those in his extended family and household. In the ancient world, that included his sons, his wife, his daughters, freeborn men and their wives who worked for the household, and finally male and female slaves.

The way this authority is ordered is called "hierarchy." Hierarchy involves a top-down distribution of power. The man at the top can determine the fate of the ones below him, and his sons make decisions for their wives and slaves, and so on. In these arrangements, men always had power over women, even among slaves. In the story of the widow

12. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

13. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973), 9.

in 2 Kgs 4, no physical violence is perpetrated against the woman (though perhaps potentially against her children), but the social economic system is already treating her violently. The patriarchal world is economically, socially, and politically arranged to benefit men directly and to benefit their families only at the father's pleasure.

6. The history of interpretation is biased against women. The history of biblical interpretation did not fare well under the feminist gaze either. Interpretations usually overlooked women completely and accepted the Bible's treatment of them without question. Interpretation of the story of the widow in 2 Kgs 4 illustrates my point. Prefeminist commentaries barely notice the widowed woman at all, except as the object of the prophet's attention. Elisha, the male prophet and ally of the dead husband, was alone the important character for these interpreters. He shows concern for the widow not for her sake, but in fellowship with his deceased colleague, and only by extension for the husband's bereaved family. According to these earlier views, God's generous, miraculous care finds expression entirely through the work of the prophet and not by any action of the woman herself.¹⁴ The widow's actions go unnoticed.

7. These many problems faced by women raised the question of how the Bible can be theologically and spiritually authoritative for women. With all these issues confronting feminists who turn to the Bible for life and hope, the question of biblical authority jumped to the center of their theological conversation. If the Bible was used throughout history to maintain the oppression of both women and slaves, how can the Bible now be a word of God for women or for descendants of slaves? Must women leave biblical religion and look elsewhere for spiritual life?

Questions of the Bible's authority divided feminists. Some left biblical faith and religious institutions behind altogether, deeming them hopelessly mired in sexism and misogyny. Others shifted their interest to treat the Bible as reflective of ancient religion, holding little spiritual value for modern feminists but worth studying because of its historic and cultural import in Western culture. Still others pursued ancient goddess traditions in search of female images for the divine. But some feminist biblical scholars began the quest for new meaning, for new life, and for innovative ways of interpreting the Bible and claiming it for women of faith. With this sense of commitment, feminists began to change biblical studies from a male bastion oblivious to women's lives to a set of disciplines alive with power, authority, and insight. Through

14. See, for instance, John Gray, *I and II Kings: A Commentary*, rev. ed. (London: SCM, 1970), 491-95.

feminist labor and in conversation with other disciplines, feminist biblical study has produced an amazing flowering of creativity in feminist interpretation, criticism, and publication that is still in process.

Feminist Interpretation of the Old Testament

At first, feminist ideas came slowly into biblical studies in general and Old Testament studies in particular. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, for example, began to speak very gently of the biblical God as having feminine qualities, a point that won her much strife, for this was the beginning of cultural transgression, no matter how mildly stated.¹⁵ Phyllis Trible broke things open in biblical studies with her rhetorical-critical study of key Old Testament texts featuring women. In her book *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, she defined her work "not as a narrow focus on women but as a critique of culture in light of misogyny."¹⁶ This analysis even in these early days critiqued racism, ecological terrorism, class systems, and stereotypical notions of human sexuality.

Trible writes a feminist hermeneutic. The term "hermeneutic" means "interpretation" and derives from the name of the Greek god Hermes, the winged-footed messenger of Zeus. Hermes' task in the Greek Pantheon is to translate the mind of the high god into language understandable by humans. Biblical hermeneutics has the analogous task of "translating" the text's ancient linguistic, cultural, and literary worlds into terms understandable and useful to modern readers. Feminist hermeneutics of the Old Testament "translates" texts through women's multifaceted perspectives. It seeks both to discover meaning in texts and to create meaning from texts for the benefit of women. But feminist hermeneutics were not merely affirmations of the text. Since they began from a posture of suspicion in relation to women's lives, feminist interpreters engaged in a "hermeneutics of suspicion" that challenged, critiqued, and refused to accept some biblical literature at face value.

Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, whose career as scholar and teacher this book honors, mapped feminist efforts in the 1970s and early 1980s to interpret biblical texts.¹⁷ She named three directions or methodological

15. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Women, Men, and the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977).

16. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 7.

17. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Leroy Russell; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 55-64.

approaches then being used in feminist hermeneutics.¹⁸ These approaches are: literary readings in search of women in the text, readings that seek liberating themes in the text for the benefit of women, and historical/cultural readings that investigate the lives of women behind the text in their historical conditions.

The first efforts of biblical feminists to read the texts with feminist consciousness were to find stories and images of biblical women to serve as models of faith and inspiration for contemporary women. Literary critic Carolyn Heilbrun once wrote that women need stories of women's lives even more than they need exemplary women in the flesh.¹⁹ This is because uninterpreted human life is inchoate and chaotic; life requires ordering. Stories and poems, written or oral, organize experience and give meaning to our otherwise swirling existence. They interpret life, tell what is important, and provide grids for imagining our own lives differently. Modern biblical feminists searched precisely for such stories. They trolled the Scriptures, looking for women who had long been neglected as minor supporting characters in male-dominated narratives. Such studies retrieved biblical women, named and unnamed, and showed their struggles, their faithfulness, and their suffering.

To pay attention to Sarah and Hagar, Leah, Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah, Naomi and Ruth, to Rahab the prostitute and to Athalya the Queen was to discover that women had some significant place in the story of Israel. Their oppression and resistance, their survival and faith, and their particular heroic actions inspired and encouraged women to keep struggling. Recovery of these stories gave many women a sense of being included, albeit marginally, in the central texts of the faith, provided women with role models, and inspired us to keep looking for other women's stories.

It is partly this approach I used to tell the story of the nameless widow in 2 Kgs 4. I focus on her as the main character, seeing in her a model of courage, fidelity, and community building. I discover, in the concrete exertions of her daily life to feed and protect her family, the power of God made manifest.

But the good-women-in-the-Bible approach soon proved inadequate to address larger problems women encountered in turning to the Bible for insight and nourishment. For one thing, there are not that many biblical women to be found in major or even minor roles. But more impor-

18. See also her article published a year later, in which she applies the three approaches to the story of the daughters of Zelophehad (Num 27:1-11): "Feminist Biblical Interpretation," *Theology Today* 46 (1986): 154-68.

19. Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), 37.

tant, inspiring stories of women did nothing to undercut other stories that Tribble would memorably call "texts of terror."²⁰ These horrifying texts include accounts of violence against women raped, murdered, and sacrificed. Tribble studied the story of the priest's concubine (Judg 19), the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter to fulfill her father's foolish vow (Judg 11:29-40), and the double enslavement of Hagar as a sex worker in Abraham's family (Gen 16, 21), but "texts of terror" became a catchphrase for many other passages that express violence toward women and others, and to which the pro-biblical-woman approach cannot mount a strong response.

It soon became clear that the labor of biblical feminists must include critical analysis of the ways the Bible teaches misogyny and sexism to keep women in place. In response to these problems, feminists began to look for biblical teachings to counter women's oppression. Sakenfeld labeled the second approach, "Looking to the Bible Generally for a Theological Perspective Offering a Critique of Patriarchy," which refers to searches for texts and interpretations that, whether they mention women or not, could be used to construct feminist theology. "It approaches the Bible in the hope of recognizing what the gospel is really all about." Using Christian language, she declared this to be a search for themes "that bear witness to the incarnate Word of God."²¹

This second approach differs from the previous one in the attention it gives to biblical passages with liberating claims that can be appropriated for women. These themes might serve as important antidotes to, or cancellations of, texts that harm women: for example, the command to "love your neighbor as yourself" includes women as both agents and recipients of love, or the Genesis claim that God created all humans in the divine image is to assert an inherent equality and acceptance of everyone, regardless of their sex. Women turned this text into a claim for equality of opportunity, talent, and dignity for all people. Or one might think of exodus from slavery as women's movement toward liberation from bondage.

From this vantage point, the story of the widow in 2 Kgs 4 appears as a text about God's special care for women, children, and the poor. Through the actions of the widow, the prophet, and the community, God not only provides food to a needy woman and her children, but also encourages her to negotiate her way bravely and freely in the world, set-

20. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

21. Sakenfeld, "Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials," 39.

ting her up in business in accord with the biblical theme of *koinonia* (the New Testament word for fellowship or community). Letty Russell interprets *koinonia* as partnership in God's liberating action in the world.²²

Sakenfeld labeled the third approach of early feminist biblical scholarship "Looking to Texts about Women to Learn from the History and Stories of Ancient and Modern Women Living in Patriarchal Cultures." Rather than highlighting only texts viewing women in a positive light or looking for texts that support human liberation in general, this approach explores the realities of women's lives in antiquity as they illuminate texts. It attempts to reconstruct women's lost history. Such an approach draws on archaeological, anthropological, and cultural studies.

Working in both testaments, women scholars began a systematic investigation into the status and roles of women in antiquity. What was the actual historical situation of women behind the text, in the real lives of Israelite women or followers of Jesus? Could women's history be recovered, and how? What were the clues to women's actual lives to be found in the text? What were cultural, economic, political, and historical realities behind the text? Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, did extremely important work in New Testament studies in attempting to re-create the role of women who were followers of Jesus and early leaders in the community.²³ Some later examples of this approach include efforts to probe historical circumstances that produced the account of women as childbearers and men as agriculturalists (Gen 2-3),²⁴ or to investigate the historical lives of women in relation to Israelite law.²⁵ Phyllis Bird has studied historical conditions of women's roles as wives, as poor, as participants in worship, and as harlots. Her work uncovers bias not only in the text but equally among modern interpreters.²⁶

My account of the widow in 2 Kgs 4 draws briefly on this approach with its information about widows in ancient Israel and about the socioeconomic system that kept the widow and her children trapped as the consequence of the father's debt. Using this feminist approach means that no matter how terrible a text may be for women, it can provide a window into culture, bias, and misogyny useful for analysis and critique, and for knowing our past. But it soon became clear to feminist

22. Letty Russell, *Growth in Partnership* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981).

23. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*.

24. See Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

25. See Carolyn Pressler, *The View of Women Found in the Deuteronomistic Family Laws* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1993).

26. Phyllis A. Bird, *Misreading Persons and Misreading Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Overtures to Biblical Theology: Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

biblical scholars that reinterpretation, study of women's historical location, and the recovery of redemptive traditions for women in the texts were not enough.

Newer Approaches

Since Sakenfeld's early articles, the field of feminist biblical studies in general has exploded beyond our early imaginings. These three root approaches have burgeoned into a lush garden of publication and creative new approaches, changing along with the general field of biblical studies.

In accord with changes in gendered language occurring in the broader society, the Bible's use of sexist language for humans both in the original languages and in translations became a hot spot in the struggle for women's lives in the academy and in the churches. The New Revised Standard Version, with its gender-inclusive translation, was a response to these interpretive changes. For male terminology in the biblical text, it substituted more inclusive language for humans and avoided exclusively male terms, except where translating texts about specific males. Gradually, in many, but not all, synagogues and churches, inclusive language became normative for public worship and for proclamation.

Language for God has been a far thornier problem. Even though most believers hold that God transcends all human categories, including sex and gender roles, tampering with names like Father, Judge, King, and Lord, or even supplementing them with female or nongendered language, became a most disruptive matter among religious communities.²⁷ What is at stake for women in this argument is not only the supremacy of maleness implied by exclusive use of male terms, but also the absence of female representation in images of God. How could women find themselves in the Bible at all if it was an exclusively male domain?

I think the most important developments in feminist biblical studies correspond with movements called postmodernism and postcolonialism. "Postmodernism" is a slippery term in philosophy and cultural studies, but, at the very least, it means that our grasp on truth is inevitably shaped by our context. Feminist postmodern biblical studies includes many literary and sociological approaches, including reader-response analysis. My interest, though, is in its recognition that truth is always expressed

27. See Rosemary Radford Ruether's classic study, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

from a particular perspective, which means that the interpreters' social-economic contexts both limit and illuminate their understanding of texts. This recognition grew among feminists in the face of accusations within the feminist movement that our new and liberating discourse was liberating for white elite women who either ignored or dominated other women: poor women, women of color, women in other countries. Postmodern feminism continues the call to conversion; we need to be in conversation with, and to struggle with, many different interpretations at once so that the immense richness of texts might emerge.

African American women were among the first I heard resisting naïve assumptions underlying feminism. The question of women's experience did not yield the uniform picture that Caucasian middle-class women had assumed. Feminists initially overlooked African American women's history of slavery, their resistance to white supremacy, their historical awareness of power relations among the races and the sexes, and their dedication and concern for their men and for the poor in general. Novelist Alice Walker is credited with inventing the designation "womanist" for African American feminists. Some women's conferences became places of deep struggle as women sometimes argued bitterly with each other. But the call to conversion was the invitation to see the world through eyes of others so that God could be found among us all. Womanism undermines white supremacy and hidden prejudice, and often exhibits unflinching confidence in the Bible's power to call African American women and men forth from cultural slavery just as God rescued Israel from the chain gangs of Egypt.²⁸

Feminist biblical conversation expanded further in the United States as Latina women named their approach to feminist theology with the term *mujerista*, from the Spanish term for women. Latina women introduced to the larger feminist conversation their cultural appreciation of motherhood, and their sense that men, despite *machismo* attitudes, were linked closely with them in the United States, where most Hispanics were objects of bias, jokes, and exclusion and where their distinct cultural identities such as Mexican, Peruvian, or Puerto Rican were lumped together into one stereotype. Yet the cultural richness of these communities in which people are often bilingual and able to bridge two cultural worlds, often called "hybridity," brought new insight to biblical texts,

28. See, for example, Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sinner Away: A Womanist Vision of Woman's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988); and *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); and Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).

often noting how texts replayed the lives of women and spoke to their realities.²⁹

Jacqueline Lapsley might be called a postmodern feminist theologian of the Old Testament.³⁰ Her work challenges dismissal of faith-oriented feminist approaches as naïve or impossible, a point of view frequently expressed by feminist biblical scholars working in nonreligious university settings. Lapsley urges women and men to learn how to read Old Testament texts with more subtlety, with critical awareness, and with willingness to enter the text emotionally and find there an encounter with a complex moral world created by the artistry of narratives. Lapsley knows that texts are patriarchal and driven by patriarchal values, but she refuses to reduce them to ideology or to monolithic power systems. Instead, she argues, the Old Testament texts contain resistant voices and narrative strategies that complicate patriarchy because they are too rich in literary and theological meaning to be exhausted by sociological analysis. Because the text is patriarchal, sexist, and androcentric does not mean that it cannot also be a word of God for us when studied from other angles.

Katharine Sakenfeld embraced the many voices emerging in feminist interpretation, quickly recognizing the place of social setting in interpretation but also bringing in such voices to illuminate and challenge her own efforts. Her travels across several Asian countries in pursuit of women's ways of engaging and reflecting on Scripture created important themes in her commentary on the book of Ruth. She finds in it the story of displacement and survival, of struggles with motherhood and mothers-in-law, and of women's friendship across barriers of age and culture.³¹ Her work attends to the importance of class and cultural differences among women. Sakenfeld's travels taught her what many Western scholars are still learning, that the Bible is a word of fire and freedom in other parts of the world, especially among the poor and the excluded. The context of the readers' lives profoundly shapes interpretation, and poverty, exclusion, and suffering provide a most acute lens for discovering meaning in texts and for constructing new meanings. Her recent work *Just Wives?* reads stories of biblical women in an

29. See writings of Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, especially "By the Rivers of Babylon: Exile as a Way of Life," in *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, vol. 1, *Reading from This Place* (ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 149-63.

30. Jacqueline Lapsley, *Whispering the Word: Strategies for Reading Women's Stories in the Old Testament Theologically* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

31. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Interpretation; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999).

effort to include "voices of women different from my own predominantly white, upper-middle-class, North American setting."³² She intends in this work to create new levels of empathy and understanding among women from diverse worlds and to show how these worlds inform readings of the text.

It has long become clear through such postmodern approaches that honor many voices and multiple ways of interpreting that there is no single correct reading of a biblical text, nor is there one right, feminist interpretation helpful to all women. This recognition highlights the call to conversion I continue to find inherent in the feminist movement. In its multifaceted, many-voiced expressions, feminist biblical criticism not only calls men, churches, and societies to new openness to the Spirit pulsing through the lives of women, but it calls women to the same radical willingness to hear ourselves critiqued, to learn from the pain and struggles of other women, and to step aside from dominant centers of power for the sake of the flourishing of all.

The designation "postcolonial" refers to an increasingly strong critical response to Western imperialism and globalization in its cultural and economic domination of non-Western peoples. Postcolonial feminist biblical studies, which arise from lives of women who are from communities subjected to Western imperialism, expand feminist biblical studies yet again. Postcolonial feminists note that earlier feminists have shown little or no recognition of how they too are imperial subjects, that is, colonized by the imperialist culture of the West and, often despite the best of intentions, still working with inadequate self-understanding about their location in the world. Even those strong feminist theorists like Schüssler Fiorenza, who argue that patriarchy is the principal oppression and that imperialism is only one of its expressions, miss the larger point. As Musa W. Dube insists, for women of the Two-Thirds World "imperial oppression remains as real and persistent as the patriarchal one."³³

Gale A. Yee uses such an interdisciplinary postcolonial approach in her recent study, in which she investigates ways the Bible symbolizes women as figures of evil.³⁴ Yee insists that it is not enough merely to see

32. Katharine Doob Sautenfeld, *Just Wives? Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

33. Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 112. See also Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

34. Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Women as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

how patriarchy presents women as incarnations of the sinful; it is also necessary to see how these literary figures serve economic, class, and imperialist agendas. Such an approach emphasizes the need not only to study gender in regard to biblical texts but also to analyze matters of class, race, and power both in the text and in the interpreters. This, it seems to me, is a very difficult state of affairs, but it is also a promising one, not only for others but for ourselves as well.

The question about how the Bible can be a saving word for women remains a central one in the present global feminist enterprise. Surely, one of the firmest conclusions of modern critical biblical studies is that the Bible itself is thoroughly enmeshed in the social, political, cultural, imperialist, and religious worlds that produced it. Hence, God's word comes wrapped, shaped, and formed by its various cultures. It is the study of, the critique of, and the discovery of that word ever anew, under the power of the Spirit at work among the community, that drives feminist biblical studies among believers. It is an ever-thrilling and creative process.

This essay omits more about modern biblical feminism than it includes, but it expresses my perspective on feminist biblical interpretation as a continual opening out to broader arenas of meaning, self-knowledge, and struggle. At first, feminism seemed to explain my life completely in both its riches and its meagerness. But I later discovered that I needed other interpretive lenses to come to grips with my life as woman and as biblical interpreter. I needed family systems theory. I needed voices of women different from me to see how benefits came to me simply because I am Caucasian with a privileged education, with the securities afforded to middle- and upper-middle-class people. Later because of a teaching position in a school of foreign mission where the students represented some of the world's economically poor yet culturally rich nations, my eyes were opened to the realities of women and men in the Two-Thirds World and to immensely powerful, original, and challenging readings of texts that emerged from them.

Now I am grappling with the ethical questions of how to interpret Old Testament texts in light of current global imperialist realities. Can the saving presence of God, the forgiving and reconciling grace of God, and the life-enhancing, body-freeing, and spirit-enlivening power of God be known among us? How? Answering these questions remains the task of feminist hermeneutics in the twenty-first century. I invite readers of this book to join in the struggle.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

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PART ONE

Perspectives