

## FIVE LOAVES AND TWO FISHES: FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

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WHEN THIS JOURNAL began its life a half century ago, feminist hermeneutics was an unrecognized subject. In the U.S. the first wave of feminism had passed: the voices of women were restrained. Emerging from the great Depression, the nation hovered between two wars, without inclination to explore matters of gender. The theological enterprise reflected the culture.

Such reflection continues in our time, when a second wave of feminism influences the North American scene.<sup>1</sup> Over recent years *Theological Studies* has published articles and an entire issue on the topic.<sup>2</sup> This anniversary volume pursues the interest as the present article explores feminist interpretation and the Bible, specifically the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>3</sup> The study begins with an overview of feminism, proceeds with a sketch of biblical theology, and concludes by joining the subjects to consider offerings and make overtures.

### AN OVERVIEW OF FEMINISM

For the second wave of feminism, the date 1963 was pivotal. Betty Friedan voiced the voices of countless women with the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*.<sup>4</sup> Symbolically and substantively this book re-

<sup>1</sup>Note that the image of waves implies continuity between the periods. For background see A. S. Rossi, ed., *The Feminist Papers* (New York: Columbia University, 1973); J. Hole and E. Levine, *Rebirth of Feminism* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1971); S. M. Rothman, *Woman's Proper Place* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

<sup>2</sup>See the issue subtitled "Woman: New Dimensions," *TS* 36 (1975) 575-765. See also, e.g., A. E. Carr, "Is a Christian Feminist Theology Possible?" *TS* 43 (1982) 279-97; J. H. Martin, "The Injustice of Not Ordaining Women: A Problem for Medieval Theologians," *TS* 48 (1987) 303-16; E. A. Johnson, "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female," *TS* 45 (1984) 441-65.

<sup>3</sup>Nomenclature for the canon shared by Judaism and Christianity is currently a much-discussed issue weighted with theological import. This article recognizes, though does not solve, the problem. It intentionally refrains from using the designation "Old Testament" except where the description is proper to report views of others. For discussion see J. A. Sanders, "First Testament and Second," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 17 (1987) 47-49; E. S. Frerichs, "The Torah Canon of Judaism and the Interpretation of Hebrew Scripture," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 9 (1987) 13-25.

<sup>4</sup>B. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963).

opened the question of female and male. Its contribution belonged to a tumultuous year. The assassination of John F. Kennedy marked a time since which "nothing has been the same."<sup>5</sup> The bombing of a black church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four little girls, underscored the evils of a racist society. Upheaval characterized the nation. Within that context feminism was hardly an isolated phenomenon.

From 1963 on, many women and some men began to examine the *status quo*, pronounce judgment, and call for repentance. They espoused a prophetic message. *The Church and the Second Sex* by Mary Daly (1968) brought a distinctly religious voice to the movement.<sup>6</sup> Like its secular counterpart, this speech multiplied abundantly.<sup>7</sup> While feminism may have first appeared no more than a cloud the size of a woman's hand, in time it burst forth as a storm of controversy and as spring rain reviving life. A brief analysis of emphases, especially as they relate to theology, stages our discussion.

As a hermeneutic, feminism interprets existence. Though not monolithic in point of view, it focuses on gender and sex.<sup>8</sup> The word "gender" pertains to masculine and feminine roles as culturally perceived (rather than grammatical categories). More narrow in scope, the word "sex" denotes the biological distinction between male and female. While sex is given and for the most part unalterable, gender is constructed within particular societies and, theoretically at least, can be deconstructed. Historically, societies have used gender and sex to advocate male domination and female subordination. The term "sexism" denotes this ideology that fosters a system called patriarchy. Acquiring a definition beyond classical law, the word "patriarchy" describes the institutionalization of male dominance over women in home and society at large. Male authority does not necessarily imply that women have no power or that all women are victims. Patriarchy has assumed diverse forms. To name the many manifestations constitutes one task of feminism.

<sup>5</sup>This sentiment has been uttered repeatedly by countless Americans, most recently during commemorations of the 25th anniversary of the assassination, Nov. 22, 1988.

<sup>6</sup>New York: Harper & Row, 1986. In an autobiographical preface to the reprinting of this book (1975), Daly disowns it, charting her "change of consciousness from 'radical Catholic' to post-christian feminist."

<sup>7</sup>For a sampling, a decade after Daly's work, see *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. C. P. Christ and J. Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979).

<sup>8</sup>See M. Gould and R. Kern-Daniels, "Towards a Sociological Theory of Gender and Sex," *American Sociologist* 12 (1977) 182-89. For a helpful exposition of these and other terms, see G. Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University, 1986) 231-43. Cf. R. Radford Ruether, "Sexism as Ideology and Social System: Can Christianity Be Liberated from Patriarchy?" in *With Both Eyes Open: Seeing beyond Gender*, ed. P. Altenbornd Johnson and J. Kalven (New York: Pilgrim, 1988) 148-64.

In talking about sexism and patriarchy, feminism not only describes but convicts. It opposes the paradigm of domination and subordination in all forms, most particularly male over female, but also master over slave and humankind over the earth.<sup>9</sup> Sex, race, class, and ecology intertwine as issues. Theologically, the rule of male over female constitutes sin. This hierarchy violates the integrity of creation "in the image of God male and female" by denying full humanity to women and distorting the humanity of men. Consequently, both sexes suffer. Sexism as ideology and patriarchy as system must be exposed and rejected. In assuming this stance, feminism shows its prophetic base.

Prophecy calls for repentance. Beginning with a change of consciousness in individuals, it becomes a changing of society. Some feminists seek reform and others transformation.<sup>10</sup> However the issue develops, repentance bespeaks a future vision of wholeness and well-being for female and male. But feminists do not facilely claim this future. They know sexism is insidious and obstacles are numerous.

The designation "prophetic" engenders other observations. First, by definition prophetic movements advocate. This activity neither distinguishes nor demeans feminism but rather characterizes all theologies and methods.<sup>11</sup> For centuries church, synagogue, and academy have advocated patriarchy: the way things are and ought to be. In exposing their bias, feminism evokes a different hermeneutic. Second, as the generic term "prophecy" covers multiple perspectives, so the singular "feminism" embraces plurality and diversity. Time, place, culture, class, race, experience—these and other variables yield particular expressions of a shared cause. Though particularities induce conflict and contradiction, they serve a salutary purpose. It pertains to a third observation. Prophetic movements are not exempt from sin. Feminism struggles with this awareness. Jewish feminist theology, e.g., detects anti-Jewish sentiments in some Christian formulations.<sup>12</sup> Third World feminists criticize the

<sup>9</sup>For a substantive statement of feminist theology, see R. Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983); also A. E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

<sup>10</sup>This distinction resonates with the sociological categories of central and peripheral prophets. Cf. R. R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 21–88.

<sup>11</sup>At places in the current discussion this point seems to be missed, with the word "advocacy" assigned to feminism, as though it were, for better or worse, distinctive. Cf., e.g., the unsigned editorial in *Interpretation* 42 (1988) 3–4; in these two pages some form of the word "advocacy" appears no fewer than seven times to describe feminism and its proponents, but not once to characterize its critics. Yet they too advocate.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. J. Plaskow, "Christian Feminism and Anti-Judaism," *Cross Currents* 28 (1978) 306–9. For a sampling of the diversity within Jewish feminism, see "Feminist Consciousness

privileged positions of class and race that afflict First World feminism.<sup>13</sup> African-American women, claiming the identity "womanist," challenge white feminists.<sup>14</sup> On individual levels experiences of women differ, yielding diverse witnesses. Eternal vigilance is necessary. In announcing judgment on patriarchy and calling for repentance, feminism needs ever to be aware of its own sins.

This prophetic note concludes the overview of feminism; a sketch of biblical theology begins. The shift is jarring, as far as the east is from the west. Later, connections are forged.

#### A SKETCH OF BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Biblical theologians, though coming from a circumscribed community, have never agreed on the definition, method, organization, subject matter, point of view, or purpose of their enterprise. Drawing upon earlier studies, Johann Philipp Gabler (1787) formulated the discipline for the European world, particularly the German scene.<sup>15</sup> He deemed it a historical and descriptive undertaking distinguished from the didactic and interpretive pursuit of dogmatic theology. At the same time, he related the two fields by making biblical theology the foundation of dogmatics. For about a century afterwards the discipline flourished in disputation. Even the label "biblical theology" became suspect. Some scholars advocated the unity of Scripture; others separated the Testaments. The designation "Old Testament theology" emerged to specify a Christian bias that not infrequently disparaged the Hebrew Scriptures. Interpretive approaches began to contend with descriptive. Searches for unifying themes brought disunity. The concepts "universal" and "unique" vied for supremacy. Organizational differences furthered debate as chronologies of biblical content clashed with categories of systematic theology. Before the end of the 19th century, then, biblical theology had developed in myriad ways compatible and incompatible.

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Today, Roundtable: The Women's Movement," *Tikkun* 2 (1987) 40-46; also J. Plaskow, "Standing Again at Sinai: Jewish Memory from a Feminist Perspective," *Tikkun* 1 (1986) 28-34.

<sup>13</sup>See L. M. Russell et al., eds., *Inheriting Our Mothers' Gardens: Feminist Theology in Third World Perspective* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978).

<sup>14</sup>The term "womanist" derives from A. Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983) esp. xi-xii. Cf. P. Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow, 1984).

<sup>15</sup>See J. Sandys-Wunsch and L. Eldredge, "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980) 133-58. For a history of the discipline, with ample bibliography, see J. H. Hayes and F. C. Prussner, *Old Testament Theology: Its History and Development* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985).

Thereupon followed 40 years of wilderness wanderings (1880–1920). Emphasis on history of religions threatened the discipline by promoting environmental rather than theological perspectives. But over time changes in the European climate, especially the impact of war and the rise of Barthian theology, revived interest. Two articles from the 1920s represented the discussion. Otto Eissfeldt argued for the legitimacy, yet discontinuity, of historical and theological approaches to the OT.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, Walther Eichrodt maintained that an irreconcilable separation was neither possible nor desirable.<sup>17</sup> He rejected Eissfeldt's description of OT theology as solely normative and interpretive. Like Gabler, he defined it as predominately descriptive and historical, even while acknowledging a role for faith.

The year Germany came under National Socialist control (1933), Eichrodt produced in Basel the first volume of his theology, with the second and third in 1935 and 1939.<sup>18</sup> He himself made no explicit hermeneutical connections with the political scene. He described the discipline as giving "a complete picture of the Old Testament realm of belief." This picture formed the center panel of a triptych. On one side, religions of the ancient Near East showed comparatively the uniqueness of the OT. On the other, the NT produced a theological union through the concept "the kingdom of God." Judaism Eichrodt denigrated. A "systematic synthesis" defined his method. Of the organizing categories—God and the People, God and the World, God and Humankind (*Mensch*)—the first was basic. Covenant constituted its symbol. Though largely a product of 19th-century thought, this formulation dominated biblical theology into the latter half of the 20th century.

Quite a different paradigm emerged in the work of Gerhard von Rad.<sup>19</sup> Volume 1 of his theology appeared just a little over a decade (1957) after the defeat of Germany in World War II; Volume 2 followed three years later (1960). Like Eichrodt, von Rad made no explicit hermeneutical connections with the political scene. Form criticism and tradition history inspired his approach. Rather than positing a center (*Mitte*) for the theology or using systematic categories, he appealed to Israel's own testimonies about Yahweh's action in history. The first volume inter-

<sup>16</sup>O. Eissfeldt, "Israelitisch-jüdische Religionsgeschichte und alttestamentliche Theologie," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 44 (1926) 1–12.

<sup>17</sup>W. Eichrodt, "Hat die alttestamentliche Theologie noch selbstständige Bedeutung innerhalb der alttestamentlichen Wissenschaft?" *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 47 (1929) 83–91.

<sup>18</sup>In English translation the three volumes became two; see W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961, 1967).

<sup>19</sup>For the English translations, see G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962, 1965).

preted the Hexateuch, the Deuteronomistic History, and the Chronicler's History, to conclude with Israel's response in the Psalter and the Wisdom literature. The second volume investigated prophecy as God's "new thing" in the land. A brief look at apocalypticism led to the final section, tracing the OT into the NT. Von Rad declared this movement the *sine qua non* of the enterprise. Without it, one had instead the "history of the religion of the Old Testament."

If Eichrodt be the 'aleph, von Rad symbolized the tau of a prolific era in the history of biblical theology. During this time male German Protestant scholarship controlled the agenda. Its demise came through factors intrinsic and extrinsic to the discipline. Brevard S. Childs has chronicled these matters as they pertain to the North American scene.<sup>20</sup> Suffice it to note Childs's date for the end of this extraordinary period: 1963. From the perspective of this article, the timing is uncanny. That same year Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique*.

In the last 25 years (1963–88) no major OT theologies have dominated the field.<sup>21</sup> Yet the subject has grown through experimentation. It includes conversation between sociology and theology,<sup>22</sup> discussion of canon,<sup>23</sup> and development of bipolar categories for encompassing scriptural diversity.<sup>24</sup> More broadly, biblical theology has begun to converse with the world.<sup>25</sup> To pursue this expansion in reference to feminism requires a few summary observations about the discipline throughout its 200-year history.

First, biblical theology (more often OT theology) has sought identity, but with no resolution. Over time the discussion has acquired the status of *déjà dit*; proposals and counterproposals only repeat themselves.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>20</sup>B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970).

<sup>21</sup>But see, e.g., R. E. Clements, *Old Testament Theology: A Fresh Approach* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978); for a theology spanning both Testaments, see S. Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

<sup>22</sup>See N. K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979) 667–709.

<sup>23</sup>Cf. B. S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), and J. A. Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

<sup>24</sup>See W. Brueggemann, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, I: Structural Legitimation," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 47 (1985) 28–46; idem, "A Shape for Old Testament Theology, II: Embrace of Pain," *ibid.* 395–415.

<sup>25</sup>Numerous volumes in the series entitled *Overtures to Biblical Theology*, published by Fortress (Philadelphia) from 1977 to the present and on, demonstrate the conversation. Overall, this series rejects the limitation of historical description to explore normative meanings. Distinctions between biblical theology and hermeneutics often collapse. Two recent titles illustrate the point: S. H. Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee: Images for Ethics and Christology* (1985), and J. G. Harris, *Biblical Perspectives on Aging: God and the Elderly* (1987).

<sup>26</sup>See H. Graf Reventlow, "Basic Problems in Old Testament Theology," *Journal for the*

Second, guardians of the discipline have fit a standard profile. They have been white Christian males of European or North American extraction, educated in seminaries, divinity schools, or theological faculties. Third, overall, their interpretations have skewed or neglected matters not congenial to a patriarchal point of view. Fourth, they have fashioned the discipline in a past separated from the present. Biblical theology has been kept apart from biblical hermeneutics.<sup>27</sup>

Challenges to this stance now come from many directions. Liberation theologies foster redefinition and application.<sup>28</sup> Issues such as ecology, medical ethics, creationism, and spirituality press for dialogue. Racial, religious, and sexual perspectives also enter the discussion. African-Americans, Asians, and Jews, e.g., shape the discipline differently from traditional proponents.<sup>29</sup> In short, biblical theology, by whatever definition, method, or point of view, must grapple with contemporary hermeneutics. This recognition leads to connections between feminism and biblical studies.

## FEMINIST HERMENEUTICS AND BIBLICAL STUDIES

### *Perspectives and Methods*

Joining biblical studies in the early 1970s, feminism has brought gender to the foreground of discussion.<sup>30</sup> It has exposed the androcentric bias of

*Study of the Old Testament* 11 (1979) 2–22; cf. J. Barr, “The Theological Case against Biblical Theology,” in *Canon, Theology, and Old Testament Interpretation*, ed. G. M. Tucker et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 3–19.

<sup>27</sup>For attention to the period since 1945, see George W. Coats, “Theology of the Hebrew Bible,” in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters*, ed. Douglas A. Knight and Gene M. Tucker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 239–62.

<sup>28</sup>See, e.g., José Porfirio Miranda, *Marx and the Bible* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1974); J. Severino Croatto, *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981); Elsa Tamez, *Bible of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1982); Willy Schottroff and Wolfgang Stegemann, eds., *God of the Lowly: Socio-Historical Interpretations of the Bible* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984).

<sup>29</sup>For the developing conversation between Judaism and biblical (“Old Testament”) theology, see esp. J. Levenson, “The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism,” in *The Future of Biblical Studies*, ed. R. E. Friedman and H. G. M. Williamson (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987) 19–59; idem, “Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology,” in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel*, ed. J. Neusner (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 281–307. Cf. M. H. Goshen-Gottstein, “Tanakh Theology: The Religion of the Old Testament and the Place of Jewish Biblical Theology,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion*, ed. P. D. Miller, Jr., et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); also R. Rendtorff, “Must ‘Biblical Theology’ Be Christian Theology?” *Bible Review* 4 (1988) 40–43.

<sup>30</sup>For a historical investigation, see D. C. Bass, “Women’s Studies and Biblical Studies: An Historical Perspective,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 22 (1982) 6–12; cf. E. W. Saunders, *Searching the Scriptures: A History of the Society of Biblical Literature*

Scripture and scholarship. Different conclusions result.<sup>31</sup> Some feminists denounce Scripture as hopelessly misogynous, a woman-hating document beyond redemption. Some reprehensibly use patriarchal data to support anti-Jewish sentiments. They maintain that ascendancy of the male god Yahweh demolished an era of good-goddess worship. A Christian version holds that whereas the "Old" Testament falters badly, the "New" brings improved revelation. Some individuals consider the Bible to be a historical document devoid of continuing authority and hence worthy of dismissal. In contrast, other feminists despair about the ever-present male power that the Bible and commentators promote. Still others, unwilling to let the case against women be the determining word, insist that text and interpreters provide more excellent ways. Thereby they seek to redeem the past (an ancient document) and the present (its continuing use) from the confines of patriarchy.

Whatever their conclusions, feminist biblical scholars utilize conventional methods in studying the text. Historical criticism, form criticism, tradition history, literary criticism, sociology, anthropology, archeology, history of religions, and linguistics—all these and others illuminate the document, contributing variously to theological formulations. Though traditionally tied to patriarchal interpretation, the methods produce different results when feminist hermeneutics appropriates them. A sampling indicates the terrain.

Working as a historical critic, Phyllis Bird has called for "a new reconstruction of the history of Israelite religion, not a new chapter on women."<sup>32</sup> A first step seeks to recover "the hidden history of women." She has contributed to this immense task in two articles examining women in ancient Israel and in the Israelite cult.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Jo Ann Hackett locates her research in "the new women's history."<sup>34</sup> It attempts

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1880–1980 (Chico, Cal.: Scholars, 1982). For an overview of some recent developments, see K. Doob Sakenfeld, "Feminist Perspectives on Bible and Theology," *Interpretation* 42 (1988) 5–18.

<sup>31</sup>Recent collections exemplifying or discussing many of these conclusions include *The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics*, ed. M. A. Tolbert (Chico, Cal.: Scholars, 1983); *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. A. Yarbro Collins (Chico, Cal.: Scholars, 1985); *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. L. M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985); *Reasoning with the Foxes: Female Wit in a World of Male Power*, ed. J. C. Exum and J. W. H. Bos (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988).

<sup>32</sup>P. Bird, "The Place of Women in the Israelite Cultus," in *Ancient Israelite Religion* (n. 29 above) 397–419.

<sup>33</sup>The above note identifies one article; for the other see "Images of Women in the Old Testament," in *Religion and Sexism*, ed. R. Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) 41–88.

<sup>34</sup>J. A. Hackett, "Women's Studies and the Hebrew Bible," in *The Future of Biblical Studies* (n. 29 above) 141–64.



to recover the stories of females in their own right rather than measuring them by the norms of male history. In an examination of Judges 3–16, e.g., Hackett explores the leadership roles of women during a period of decentralized power. Paucity of evidence, difficulty of analysis, and resistance from established scholarship lead her to a pessimistic assessment about the impact of such work on so-called mainline scholarship.

More sanguine about the possibilities, Carol Meyers has recently prepared the first book-length study of Israelite women.<sup>35</sup> Using the tools of social-scientific analysis combined with the new archeology, she seeks “to discover the place of women in the biblical world apart from the place of women in the biblical text.”<sup>36</sup> She argues that “the decentralized and difficult village life of premonarchic Israel provided a context for gender mutuality and interdependence, and of concomitant female power.”<sup>37</sup> She sharply questions the validity of the description “patriarchal” for ancient Israelite society. Yet to be tested, this revisionist thesis enlarges options within feminist biblical scholarship.

Literary analyses also show the diversity. In considering the mother figure, Esther Fuchs avers that the Bible is riddled with “patriarchal determinants.”<sup>38</sup> It “uses literary strategies in order to foster and perpetuate its patriarchal ideology.”<sup>39</sup> By contrast, in a close reading of the Exodus traditions, J. Cheryl Exum detects “positive portrayals of women.”<sup>40</sup> Examining mothers of Israel, she finds “strong countercurrents of affirmations of women” within the “admittedly patriarchal context of the biblical literature.”<sup>41</sup> Thus she calls for “reassessment of our traditional assumptions about women’s roles in the biblical story.”<sup>42</sup> A similar view governs the work of Toni Craven.<sup>43</sup> She compares Ruth, Esther, and Judith, recognizing the social dominance of the male in these

<sup>35</sup>C. Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University, 1988).

<sup>36</sup>Ibid. 23.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid. 187.

<sup>38</sup>E. Fuchs, “The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (n. 31 above) 117–36.

<sup>39</sup>Idem, “Who Is Hiding the Truth? Deceptive Women and Biblical Androcentrism,” in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (n. 31 above) 137–44.

<sup>40</sup>J. C. Exum, “‘You Shall Let Every Daughter Live’: A Study of Exodus 1:8–2:10,” in *The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics* (n. 31 above) 63–82.

<sup>41</sup>Idem, “‘Mother in Israel’: A Familiar Figure Reconsidered,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (n. 31 above) 73–85.

<sup>42</sup>Idem, “‘You Shall Let Every Daughter Live’ ” 82.

<sup>43</sup>T. Craven, “Tradition and Convention in the Book of Judith,” in *The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics* (n. 31 above) 49–61. See also idem, “Women Who Lied for the Faith,” in *Justice and the Holy*, ed. Douglas A. Knight and Peter J. Paris (Atlanta: Scholars, in press 1989).

stories but nevertheless asserting that "within this patriarchal milieu, the three women emerge as independent, making their own decisions and initiating actions in unconventional ways." Of whatever persuasions, these and other literary readings provide an exegetical base for theological reflection.

Feminist scholars who specialize in Wisdom literature also provide data for the theologian. With a multidisciplinary approach, Claudia V. Camp has explored female wisdom in Proverbs.<sup>44</sup> Viewing "woman Wisdom" as metaphor, she has isolated roles and activities within Israelite culture that influenced this personification. They include the figures of wife, lover, harlot, foreigner, prophet, and wise woman. The research joins the efforts of historians, sociologists, and literary critics.

This sampling, focused on the Hebrew Scriptures, concludes with three books that differ widely in interest, approach, and purpose but share a common grounding. Particular experiences motivated their authors. Unlike traditional male scholars, feminists often spell out hermeneutical connections between life and work. Citing an episode within her Jewish heritage as pertinent to her study, Athalya Brenner probes the familiar thesis that, as a class, women in Scripture are a second sex, always subordinate and sometimes maligned.<sup>45</sup> Her approach covers social roles and literary paradigms. Writing as a womanist, Renita J. Weems "attempts to combine the best of the fruits of feminist biblical criticism with its passion for reclaiming and reconstructing the stories of biblical women, along with the best of the Afro-American oral tradition, with its gift for story-telling and its love of drama."<sup>46</sup> Recounting unpleasant experiences within Roman Catholicism, Alice L. Laffey has prepared a "complement" to standard introductions of the OT.<sup>47</sup> She approaches texts, for weal or woe, with the principle "that women are equal to men." However scholarly judgments measure these works, the experiences that prompted their authors and the methods they employ show yet again the diverse terrain of feminist biblical studies.

All these samplings but hint at perspective and methods. Studying Scripture from the viewpoint of gender, feminism explores ideas and advances theses shunned in traditional interpretations. Conventional methods produce unconventional results. Not all of them will endure.

<sup>44</sup>C. V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: Almond, JSOT, 1985).

<sup>45</sup>A. Brenner, *The Israelite Women* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985).

<sup>46</sup>R. J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away* (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988). The combination proposed gives more weight to storytelling than to biblical criticism.

<sup>47</sup>A. L. Laffey, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988). Regrettably, factual errors mar this book.

Yet the ferment can be salutary, for the storehouse of faith has treasures new as well as old. They necessitate the perennial rethinking of biblical theology.

### *Overtures for a Feminist Biblical Theology*

As a student of Scripture, I read biblical theology from duty and sometimes delight. As a student of feminism, I read feminist biblical scholarship from duty and sometimes delight. And then I ask: Can feminism and biblical theology meet? The question seems to echo Tertullian, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" After all, feminists do not move in the world of Gabler, Eichrodt, von Rad, and their heirs. Yet feminists who love the Bible insist that the text and its interpreters provide more excellent ways. And so I ponder ingredients of a feminist biblical theology. Though not yet the season to write one, the time has come to make overtures.

At the beginning, feminist biblical theology might locate itself in reference to the classical discipline. Assertion without argumentation suffices here. First, the undertaking is not just descriptive and historical but primarily constructive and hermeneutical. It views the Bible as pilgrim, wandering through history, engaging in new settings, and ever refusing to be locked in the past. Distance and difference engage proximity and familiarity.<sup>48</sup> Second, the discipline belongs to diverse communities, including academy, synagogue, church, and world. It is neither essentially nor necessarily Christian. Third, formulations vary. No single method, organization, or exposition harnesses the subject: an articulation of faith as disclosed in Scripture. From these points of reference feminism takes its first step.

1) *Exegesis*. Mindful of the androcentricity in Scripture and traditional biblical theology, feminist interpretation begins with exegesis. It concentrates on highlighting neglected texts and reinterpreting familiar ones. The approach does not guarantee the outcome. Exegesis may show how much more patriarchal or how much less is a text. I start with passages that exhibit the latter.

Prominent among neglected passages are female depictions of deity.<sup>49</sup> Hebrew poetry describes God as midwife and mother (Ps 22:9 f.; Deut 32:18; Isa 66:13). The Hebrew root *rh̄m*, meaning womb in the singular and compassion in the plural, provides an exclusively female metaphor for the divine that runs throughout the canon. Supporting contexts

<sup>48</sup>See E. Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107 (1988) 3-17.

<sup>49</sup>See P. Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978). Throughout the discussion I draw upon this book.

strengthen this meaning. Thus, Jer 31:15–22 constitutes a poem replete with female imagery. It moves from the mother Rachel weeping for her lost children to the mother Yahweh promising to show mercy (*rh̄m*) upon the virgin daughter Israel.

Among familiar passages, depictions of deity may require reinterpretation. Hosea 11 illustrates the point. Verses 3–4 describe God the parent teaching Ephraim the child to walk, picking him up, and feeding him. Patriarchal hermeneutics has long designated this imagery paternal, even though in ancient Israel mothers performed these tasks.<sup>50</sup> Reclaiming the maternal imagery affects yet another verse (11:9). After announcing judgment upon wayward Ephraim, the Deity returns in compassion. A poignant outburst begins, "How can I give you up, O Ephraim!" It concludes, "I will not execute my fierce anger . . . for I am 'ēl and not 'îš, the Holy One in your midst." Traditionally, translators have understood the words 'ēl and 'îš to contrast the divine and the human. Though correct, the interpretation misses the nuance. Rather than using the generic 'ādām for humanity, the poet employs the gender-specific 'îš, male. Thus the line avows: "I am God and not a male."

This translation makes explicit a basic affirmation needed in ancient Israel and the contemporary world. By repeatedly using male language for God, Israel risked theological misunderstanding. God is not male, and the male is not God. That a patriarchal culture employed such images for God is hardly surprising. That it also countenanced female images is surprising. If they be deemed remnants of polytheism, the fact remains that nowhere does Scripture prohibit them.

Shifting from depictions of deity to the human scene, feminist hermeneutics highlights neglected texts about women. The Exodus narratives provide several instances. So eager have traditional interpreters been to get Moses born that they pass quickly over the stories leading to his advent (Exod 1:8–2:10). Two midwives, a Hebrew mother, a sister, the daughter of Pharaoh, and her maidens fill these passages. The midwives, given the names Shiprah and Puah, defy the mighty Pharaoh, who has no name. The mother and sister work together to save their baby son and brother. The daughter of Pharaoh identifies with them rather than with her father. This portrait breaks filial allegiance, crosses class lines, and transcends racial and political differences. A collage of women unites for salvation; with them the Exodus originates. But existing biblical theologies fail to tell the tale.

<sup>50</sup>Cf., e.g., "The Divine Father," in J. L. Mays, *Hosea* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 150–59; also H. W. Wolff, *Hosea* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 197–203. For a recent attempt to hold fast to the paternal image, even while acknowledging the maternal, see S. Terrien, *Till the Heart Sings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 56 f.

Likewise, these theologies neglect the distaff conclusion of the Exodus story (14:1-21). The figure Miriam provides continuity between beginning and end. First appearing discreetly at the Nile River, later she reappears boldly at the Reed Sea. With other women she leads Israel in a triumphal song. Though biblical redactors would rob Miriam of her full voice by attributing the Song of the Sea to Moses (Exod 14:1-18) and only a stanza to her (15:20-21), historical criticism has recovered the entire song for Miriam.<sup>51</sup> Feminist hermeneutics utilizes this work to show a conflict of gender embedded in the text. Miriam counters Moses. In time she questions his right to be the exclusive speaker for God (Numbers 11). Though the establishment censures her, fragments in Scripture yield another view. Unlike their leaders, the people support Miriam (Num 12:15). At her death nature mourns; the wells in the desert dry up (20:1-2). Centuries later Micah proclaims her a leader equal to Moses and Aaron (Mic 6:4). Jeremiah alludes to her prominence in his eschatological vision of restoration (Jer 31:4). Ramifications for biblical theology run deep when neglected Miriamic traditions emerge to challenge the dominant Mosaic bias.<sup>52</sup> Small things undermine patriarchal faith.

Even as it recovers neglected texts about women, feminist interpretation re-examines familiar ones. Gen 2-3 is a prime example. Contrary to conventional understanding, this narrative does not proclaim male domination and female subordination as the will of God. Attention to vocabulary, syntax, and literary structure demonstrates no ordering of the sexes in creation. At the beginning "Yahweh God formed the human from the humus" (Gen 2:4b). Sexual identification does not obtain. At the end this creature becomes female and male in the sexually explicit vocabulary *ššā* and *šš* (Gen 2:21-24). They are bone of bones and flesh of flesh, the language of mutuality and equality.<sup>53</sup> No concept of complementarity sets roles for them. The troublesome word *'ezer*, usually translated "helper" and applied to the woman as subordinate, actually connotes superiority. The phrase "corresponding to" or "fit for" tempers this connotation to signal equality.

But with disobedience the mutuality of the sexes shatters. In answering the serpent, the woman shows theological and hermeneutical astuteness. She interprets the divine command faithfully and ponders the benefits of the fruit. By contrast, the man is mindless and mute. Opposing

<sup>51</sup>See esp. F. M. Cross, Jr., and D. N. Freedman, "The Song of Miriam," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 14 (1955) 237-50.

<sup>52</sup>See P. Tribble, "Bringing Miriam Out of the Shadows," *Bible Review* 5 (1989) 14-25, 34.

<sup>53</sup>See W. Brueggemann, "Of the Same Flesh and Bone (Gen. 2, 23a)," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32 (1970) 532-42.

portraits yield, however, the same decision. Each disobeys. The judgments that follow disobedience describe, not prescribe, the consequences. Of particular interest is the description, "Your desire is for your man, but he rules over you" (Gen 3:15). This condition violates mutuality. Thus it judges patriarchy as sin, a judgment that Scripture and interpreters have failed to heed.

Despite the passages cited thus far, feminist exegesis does not hold that all neglected and reinterpreted texts turn out to be less patriarchal than usually perceived. (Indeed, some feminists would disavow altogether the hermeneutics pursued here, to argue that patriarchy controls all biblical literature.) Exegesis also shows how much more patriarchal are many texts. The sacrifice of the daughter of Jephthah, the dismemberment of an unnamed woman, the rape of Princess Tamar, and the abuse of the slave Hagar constitute but a few narrative illustrations.<sup>54</sup> In prophetic literature the use of "objectified female sexuality as a symbol of evil" forms another set of passages.<sup>55</sup> Hosea employed female harlotry to denounce wayward Israel in contrast to the male fidelity of Yahweh (Hos 1-3). Ezekiel exploited the female with demeaning sexual images (Ezek 23; 36:17). Zechariah continued the process by identifying woman with wickedness and envisioning her removal from the restored land (Zech 5:7-11). Legal stipulations also evince an overwhelming patriarchal bias.<sup>56</sup> Addressed only to men, the law viewed woman as property with concomitant results (Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21). While not excluded altogether from cultic functions, females were deemed inferior participants, obeying rules formulated by males. Not a few feminist exegetes find it sufficient to expose and denounce all such texts, asserting that they determine the biblical view of woman. Others recount them on behalf of their victims, thus establishing memorials in the midst of misery. However they are treated, such passages pose the question of authority—a central issue for all biblical theologies.

2) *Contours and Content*. Beyond exegesis, the next step envisions the contours and content of a feminist biblical theology. Following neither the systematic-covenant model of Eichrodt nor the tradition-historical model of von Rad, it would focus upon the phenomenon of gender and sex in the articulation of faith. Without thoroughness and with tentativeness, the following proposals come to mind.

a. A feminist theology would begin, as does the Bible, with Genesis 1-3. Recognizing the multivalency of language, interpretation exploits the

<sup>54</sup>See P. Tribble, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

<sup>55</sup>See T. D. Setel, "Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (n. 31 above) 86-95.

<sup>56</sup>See Bird, "Images of Women in the Old Testament" 48-57.

phrase "image of God male and female," relating it positively to Genesis 2 and negatively to Genesis 3.<sup>57</sup> Allusions to these creation texts, such as Hos 2:16–20, would also come into play. This passage envisions a future covenant between God and Israel that disavows the hierarchical ordering of husband and wife. To base understandings of gender in mythical rather than historical beginnings contrasts what female and male are and are meant to be with what they have become. Creation theology undercuts patriarchy.

b. From a grounding in creation, feminist interpretation would explore the presence and absence of the female in Scripture, also taking into account relevant literature of the ancient Near East. Organization of this material remains unsettled. Narratives, poetry, and legal formulations need to be compared; minor voices, hidden stories, and forgotten perspectives unearthed; categories of relationships investigated. They include kinship ties of daughter, sister, wife, aunt, niece, and grandmother; social and political roles of slave, mistress, princess, queen mother, prostitute, judge, prophet, musician, adulterer, foreigner, and wise woman; and religious functions in cult, theophany, and psalmody.

c. Though it awaits sustained research, Israelite folk religion would become a subject for theological reflection. Denied full participation in the cult, some women and men probably forged an alternative Yahwism. What, e.g., is the meaning of worship of the Queen of Heaven (Jer 7:16–20; 44:15–28), of inscriptions that link Yahweh and Asherah,<sup>58</sup> and of female figurines at Israelite and Judean sites? What effect does folk religion have upon the character of faith, particularly debate about the unique versus the typical? Probing differences between the orthodoxy of the establishment and the religion of the people might bring the female story into sharper focus.<sup>59</sup>

d. Feminist theology would be truly biblical in exposing idolatry. Under this rubric it investigates language for God. Juxtaposing verbal images, animate and inanimate, shows that Scripture guards against a single definition. Further, passages like the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22), Elijah

<sup>57</sup>Contra P. Bird, " 'Male and Female He Created Them': Gen 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation," *Harvard Theological Review* 74 (1981) 129–59, a study that assigns the text but a single meaning and that a narrow one (procreation). Such restriction the text imposes neither upon itself nor upon the reader.

<sup>58</sup>See Z. Meshel and C. Meyers, "The Name of God in the Wilderness of Zin," *Biblical Archaeology* 39 (1976) 11–17; W. G. Dever, "Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntillet 'Ajrud," *Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research* 255 (1984) 21–37; J. M. Hadley, "Some Drawings and Inscriptions on Two Pithoi from Kuntillet 'Ajrud," *Vetus Testamentum* 37 (1987) 180–213.

<sup>59</sup>Cf. P. D. Miller, "Israelite Religion," in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters* (n. 27 above) 201–37.

on Mt. Horeb (1 Kgs 19), and selected prophetic oracles (e.g., Isa 43:18 f.; Jer 31:22) demonstrate that no particular statement of faith is final. Without rewriting the text to remove offensive language, feminism opposes, from within Scripture, efforts to absolutize imagery. The enterprise uses the witness of the Bible to subvert androcentric idolatry.

e. Similarly, the pursuit would recognize that although the text cannot mean everything, it can mean more and other than tradition has allowed.<sup>60</sup> Warrant for altering words and meanings runs throughout the history of interpretation and translation. No small example lies at the heart of Scripture and faith: the name of the Holy One. When Judaism substituted *Adonai* for the Tetragrammaton YHWH, it altered the text. "Thus is written; but you read." Christianity accepted the change. The authority of believing communities superseded the authority of the written word.<sup>61</sup> *Mutatis mutandis*, feminist theology heeds the precedent in wrestling with patriarchal language. The verb "wrestle" is key. In the name of biblical integrity, interpretation must reject facile formulations; in the name of biblical diversity, it must reject dogmatic positions. And like Jacob (Gen 32:22-32), feminism does not let go without a blessing.

f. Biblical theology would also wrestle with models and meanings for authority.<sup>62</sup> It recognizes that, despite the word, *authority* centers in readers. They accord the document power even as they promote the intentionality of authors. To explicate the authority of the Bible, a feminist stance might well appropriate a sermon from Deuteronomy (30:15-20). The Bible sets before the reader life and good, death and evil, blessing and curse. Providing a panorama of life, the text holds the power of a mirror to reflect what is and thereby make choice possible. Like the ancient Israelites, modern believers are commanded to choose life over death. Within this dialectic movement, feminism might claim the entire Bible as authoritative, though not necessarily prescriptive. Such a definition differs from the traditional. In the interaction of text and reader, the changing of the second component alters the meaning and power of the first.

<sup>60</sup>Cf. A. Cooper, "On Reading the Bible Critically and Otherwise," in *The Future of Biblical Studies* (n. 29 above) 61-79.

<sup>61</sup>An appeal to canon as the prohibition to alteration is questionable, because canonization is a fluid as well as stabilizing concept, subject to the continuing authority of believing communities, including the power of translators; *pace* P. A. Bird, "Translating Sexist Language as a Theological and Cultural Problem," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 42 (1988) 89-95.

<sup>62</sup>See L. M. Russell, *Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987); C. V. Camp, "Female Voice, Written Word: Women and Authority in Hebrew Scripture," in *Embodied Love*, ed. P. M. Cooley et al., (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 97-113.



These tentative proposals only initiate a discussion that seeks to join feminist hermeneutics and biblical theology. The descriptive and historical task would explore the entire picture of gender and sex in all its diversity. Beyond that effort, the constructive and hermeneutical task would wrestle from the text a theology that subverts patriarchy. Looking at the enormity of the enterprise, critics of all persuasions might well ask, "Why bother?" After all, east is far from west; Athens has nothing to do with Jerusalem. At best, constructive interpretations offer no more than five loaves and two fishes. What are they among so many passages of patriarchy? The answer is scriptural (cf. Mt 14:13-21). When found, rightly blessed, and fed upon, these remnant traditions provide more than enough sustenance for life.