

Reading the Bible as a Feminist

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Abstract

This work provides a brief introduction to feminist interpretation of scripture. Feminist interpretation is first grounded in feminism as an intellectual and political movement. Next, this introduction briefly recounts the origins of feminist readings of the Bible with attention to both early readings and the beginnings of feminist biblical scholarship in the academy. Feminist biblical scholarship is not a single methodology, but rather an approach that can shape any reading method. As a discipline, it began with literary-critical readings (especially of the Hebrew Bible) but soon also broached questions of women's history (especially in the New Testament and Christian origins). Since these first forays, feminist interpretation has influenced almost every type of biblical scholarship. The third section of this essay, then, looks at gender archaeology, feminist poststructuralism and postcolonial readings, and newer approaches informed by gender and queer theory. Finally, it ends by examining feminist readings of Eve.

Keywords

feminist biblical interpretation – womanism – intersectionality – gender archaeology – postcolonialism – poststructuralism – gender theory – queer theory – masculinity – Eve

Preface: The Bible in the Hands of an Angry Man

In 2002, Warren Jeffs became the spiritual leader of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS), a polygamist Mormon sect. Although the FLDS has been disavowed by the mainstream Mormon Church, it remains a large community with about 10,000 members inhabiting insular compounds primarily in Utah, Arizona, Texas, and Colorado. Beginning in

2005, Jeffs was subject to a number of sexual assault charges in Arizona, Utah, and Texas, including accomplice to rape for forcing a 14-year-old girl into marriage with her older cousin. He was also charged with the rape of several girls, the youngest of whom was 12 years old at the time of the assault. In addition to the criminal charges, Jeffs faced civil suits for the expulsion of young men and boys from FLDS communities and for the sexual abuse of his nephew. He escaped to Canada to avoid arrest but was later apprehended; in 2011 he was sentenced to life in prison plus 20 years on two felony sexual assault charges.

During his trial, Warren Jeffs waived his right to have a lawyer and then later fired his entire defense team. He submitted only two items as evidence: the Book of Mormon and the Bible. He called only one witness who read passages from the religious texts. Jeffs did not deny arranging marriages and having sexual contact with young girls; his only defense was that he was simply following scripture. The government, therefore, was infringing upon his Constitutional right to freedom of religion. He also testified on his own behalf—a testimony that consisted primarily of a sermon on polygamy and religious freedom. While the prosecutor was presenting the state's case, Jeffs repeatedly interrupted the proceedings with objections about how his freedom of religion was being violated (Bennion 2012: 27–34).

Although few outside of the FLDS would condone his behavior, the case does bring the problems of biblical sexual ethics and religious freedom into sharp relief. Was Jeffs simply following scripture in his marital and sexual practices? Or, at least, was he following his religious community's understanding of scripture, a community that was established in the early twentieth century? Is the community's interpretation reasonable and grounded in the text? If he was following scripture, is that an adequate defense of the ethics of his acts? Is that an adequate defense of the legality of his acts? Are there limits to religious freedom in a democracy that enshrines that freedom in its Constitution? Can the state intervene in the sincere practice of someone's faith? Are there times when we most certainly do not want to follow scripture? Are there times when the state needs to limit religious freedom? How do we decide, both as individuals and as citizens?

Warren Jeffs is not the only person who has cried "religious freedom" when morality and practice run afoul of either law or custom; he is not the only person to use the Bible to defend beliefs and actions. There has been increasing attention in the United States and worldwide to freedom of religious practice and many of the controversies about religious freedom pertain to issues that have also been a concern to feminists: birth control, abortion, child marriage, same sex marriage, LGBTQ civil rights, violence against women and children, violence against LGBTQ peoples, sexually transmitted diseases and

their prevention, codes of modesty, the education of girls, female genital mutilation, women in leadership positions. Religion can be a powerful force for change, but it is an equally powerful vehicle for conservative attitudes, especially around issues of gender and sexuality. In most cases, those arguing on the side of religious freedom are advocating conservative, traditional “family values” and sexual ethics. For example, The Liberty Council, associated with Liberty University Law School, founded by the evangelical leader Jerry Falwell, is a nonprofit organization in the United States that does pro bono legal work for the cause of religious freedom. It focuses primarily on abortion and LGBTQ issues—specifically seeking to limit birth control, outlaw abortion and same-sex marriage, and block any expansion of civil rights as they pertain to LGBTQ people (www.lc.org). In short, they have a decidedly anti-feminist agenda clothed in the language of religious freedom. Recently, they have championed the cause of Kim Davis, the Kentucky county clerk who refused to allow anyone in her office to issue marriage licenses after the Supreme Court ruled in favor of marriage equality. How can we understand the ways in which the Bible intersects with feminism, religious freedom, and legal rights? What does feminist interpretation have to offer to these increasingly polarized and vitriolic controversies not only in the United States but also around the world?

Feminist interpretation of scripture is not just an academic exercise but is deeply committed to both the personal and the political. As we explore the richly textured landscape of feminist interpretation, we will also see the ways in which our biblical interpretations are shaped by and in turn shape our culture, our politics, and our lives even in the most intimate ways. This research guide begins with a brief history of feminism in the United States—the place out of which feminist biblical criticism as an academic discipline first arose. The second part or section will, then, chronicle the development of feminist approaches to the scripture. As the discipline matures, it expands outward, reshaping other methodologies. In particular, Part 3 will explore the effect feminist approaches have had on historical investigation, poststructuralist and postcolonial interpretations, and the related developments of gender and queer criticisms. Finally, the last part or section will look at interpretations of Eve. For millennia, biblical arguments for the subjection of women have been grounded in the Adam and Eve story. Consequently, feminist readers have often turned first to Eve and the creation stories to subject them to their own analysis. Attention to Eve thus provides exegetical examples of feminist reading in action. How does one read the Bible as a feminist? There is not a single way, but a commitment to gender justice opens up the text to a myriad of understandings and insights. Under the feminist gaze, the Bible blossoms in ways both familiar and strange.

Part 1. What is Feminism?

Feminism is a philosophy, a political movement, a field of intellectual inquiry, and a worldview. In its essence, feminism is the belief that women and men are equal, and feminism is the movement to create a world of equal treatment and equal opportunity. As bell hooks opens her book on the subject, “Simply put, feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks 2000: 1). However, there is no single definition of feminism that has a wide consensus because people have different views about what constitutes sexist oppression, the origins of sexism, and the best methods of dismantling that sexism. As a movement that is rooted in women’s experience, it necessarily encompasses as many definitions as there are women’s experiences. Feminism, then, is an umbrella term that covers a range of perspectives about gender justice for women and men.

Sexism is prejudice and discrimination based upon a person’s sex. Distinguishing between sex and gender was central to feminism as it developed in the mid-twentieth century, even though those definitions and distinctions became increasingly more contested by the end of that century. As biologist and feminist theorist Anne Fausto-Sterling notes, “The more we look for a simple physical basis for ‘sex,’ the more it becomes clear that ‘sex’ is not a pure physical category. What bodily signals and functions we define as male or female come already entangled in our ideas about gender” (Fausto-Sterling 2000: 4). With that caveat, it is helpful to begin with a basic definition of sex and gender, even though as we proceed, those definitions will change and the distinctions between the two will get murkier. Sex is a biological designation which addresses the role in reproduction: both plants and animals can have a sex. In the human community, a male is a person with a penis, testicles, and all of the concomitant hormones associated with these organs. A male contributes sperm in the process of heterosexual reproduction. A female is a person with a vagina, ovaries, a uterus, and all of the concomitant hormones associated with these organs. A female contributes the ovum in the process of reproduction; she also provides the place for conception, and then nourishes and protects the developing fetus. In addition, human females, like all female mammals, produce milk to feed the newly born infant. Sex roles vis-à-vis the biological processes of reproduction are clearly delineated and any variation has been understood as a pathology in need of medical intervention.

In stark contrast to sex, gender is a culturally constructed and historically variable set of beliefs about what constitutes proper behavior for males and females, as well as what it means to be masculine or feminine. Gender includes beliefs about dress, hair styles, bodily postures, sexual attitudes and behavior,

career choices, personality traits—in fact, almost every aspect of identity can be scripted in terms of the prevailing cultural attitudes about what it means to be a man or a woman. In the West, traditional traits of masculinity have included strength, intelligence, self-control, lack of emotionality, rationality. Men wear their hair short, do not wear skirts or dresses, or cross their legs when they sit. Their role in the family is to work outside of the home and be the primary provider of material goods. Gender scripts can even dictate the minutiae of personal taste: for example, real men drink beer and relish red meat. Traditional traits of femininity have been associated with the body as opposed to the mind or spirit, and include weakness, emotionality, and irrationality. Women have long hair, wear skirts or dresses, cross their legs when they sit, and generally try to take up less space in any environment. They are not athletic nor are they interested in sports. Every woman loves children, and a woman's role in the family is to be the nurturer and caregiver, even if she also works outside of the home. As real men consume beer and steak, women prefer salads and fruity alcoholic drinks.

How does having a penis make you bad at housework? Or, more to our point about biblical interpretation, how does a man use his penis to give sermons, teach, or interpret the Bible? How does a vagina contribute to one's ability to cook? Or detract from one's ability to run a business, a country, or (to return again to biblical proscriptions) a church? Whereas the prevailing theory of gender difference was, for centuries, that differences between men and women were rooted in biology (whether the site of that difference be heat, fluids, brains, hormones, or genes), one of the fundamental insights of feminism is that these differences are a product of culture and society (Alsop et al. 2002: 14–27). As Simone de Beauvoir famously states, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (Beauvoir 1973: 301). One may be born with certain genitalia, but how those genitalia then translate into a wide range of beliefs, behaviors, personality traits, and capabilities is a matter of intense gender socialization. For feminists, every human being is equally capable of experiencing the full range of emotions, likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses. Classifying people according to external genitalia (sex assignment is determined either at or right before birth, simply by looking between the legs) may be as arbitrary as classifying people according to eye color.¹

1 And perhaps similarly difficult—where is the precise line, after all, between hazel and brown eyes; should the many shades of brown each receive its own classification? As Fausto-Sterling documents, genitalia (particularly the genitalia of newborns) is trickier to categorize than our dualistic sex system can admit (see especially 2000: 30–77).

Not only do gender stereotypes work to limit the full capabilities of individual men and women, but gender stereotypes are not neutral—masculine traits are valued more highly than feminine ones. Stereotypes result in hierarchies that have implications for women in the public sphere, in the workforce, and in the home. Men rule in every setting. In the broadest use of the term, “patriarchy” refers to any society that is male-dominated. Men as a group have ruled over women as a group in all (or almost all—there may be some exceptions) known societies. “Patriarchy” means literally “father-rule,” and more narrowly defines any society organized according to kinship systems where power over family and community is invested in the father. Whereas some feminists contest the usefulness of the concept of patriarchy in its broadest sense (Alsop et al. 2002: 73–74), the biblical world (especially the world of the ancient Israelites) was certainly a patriarchy in the narrowest sense. Therefore, patriarchy remains an important political and social classification for analyzing biblical stories and societies.

Feminism challenges sexism wherever it is found and in whatever form it takes. It works to dismantle gender stereotypes of men and women, and notions of masculinity and femininity that constrain. Feminism works on valuing a wide spectrum of personality traits and capacities, not limiting them to certain types of bodies. Not only does feminism address cultural attitudes, but feminism also works on taking down barriers to gender equality, whether those barriers are *de facto* or *de jure*.

Because of the specific cultural and legal contexts of any given society, feminism has a variegated history; it has developed in different countries at different times, foregrounding different issues. Western feminism is not the only game in town, but it has been a contributing force worldwide. Roughly corresponding to larger international movements, there have been three waves of feminism in the United States, the context out of which the foundational works of feminist biblical interpretation emerged.² The first wave of the feminist movement began in the nineteenth century, as an outgrowth of the abolitionist movement. Having been denied the ability to address the assembly at the World Convention on slavery in London in 1840, activists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott returned to the States determined to fight for both

2 There are limitations to organizing the women's movement in three waves. The wave metaphor has been critiqued for the implication that there was a singular feminist vision from the beginning, and that little happened to advance equal rights in between waves. In other words, much of the complexities of the movement are obscured (see Nicholson 2010). However, it still proves a useful heuristic device, especially for understanding the development of feminist interpretation of scripture.

abolition and women's rights. They organized the first women's rights conference in the U.S.A. at Seneca Falls in 1848. Although the Seneca Falls convention called for a variety of social and legal changes, including demanding equality in religious organizations, as the first wave gained momentum, the primary issue became political suffrage—feminists advocated for a woman's right to vote. Universal suffrage was finally achieved in 1920 with the ratification of the nineteenth amendment to the Constitution.

The women's movement did not end in 1920. With the accomplishment of voting rights, and the advent of major world events like the Great Depression and two World Wars, however, the women's movement did have a much lower profile. There were still issues and activists—most notably Alice Paul wrote and worked for the Equal Rights Amendment and Margaret Sanger championed reproductive rights—but there was not a single unified movement again until the 1960s. Much like the first feminist wave grew out of the abolitionist movement (they shared both activists and ideologies), the second feminist wave grew out of and was intertwined with the civil rights movement. Despite having the right to vote for decades, women were still underrepresented in politics and in the professions, without equal economic opportunities and equal pay for equal work; they were regularly fired for pregnancy and they lacked consistent access to birth control or safe abortions; some women were forcibly sterilized; there were no legal protections or shelters for domestic abuse victims; no laws against sexual harassment or marital rape; divorce was difficult and divorce settlements generally favored men. From the bedroom to the boardroom, from the kitchen to Congress, women were at a disadvantage.

The second wave of feminism addressed a wide array of issues and led to a transformation of society. Legal victories included the right to birth control and abortion, equal pay, pregnancy non-discrimination legislation, laws that better addressed domestic abuse and rape, no-fault divorce, the recognition of workplace sexual harassment and marital rape as crimes, Title IX which prohibited gender discrimination in education, and equal access to credit. In conjunction with the legal successes, second wave feminism helped drive a sexual revolution which challenged the moral double standard and created a culture more open about sexual practices. In general, second wave feminism insisted that “the personal is political” and therefore encouraged women to see their experiences as part of a wider culture of sexism. Consciousness-raising groups, where women would gather together to discuss their lives, problems, thoughts, and feelings, were essential for women in connecting their own problems with larger societal ills. These groups took individual unhappy women and bound them together into a movement of feminist activists. Second wave feminists taught us all how our lives, even in their most intimate moments, are shaped

by cultural forces; it gave us all the power to use those experiences to advocate for social and cultural change.

African American and other women of color have always been involved with the feminist movement, from its earliest days in the nineteenth century. However, because of racism both within and outside of the movement, women of color have not always felt that their contributions were adequately recognized or their issues attended. The first and second waves certainly had important leaders and activists who were not straight, white, and middle-class; however, white, middle class women wielded a disproportionate amount of power in the movement, and consequently issues that pertained more directly to them got a disproportionate amount of attention (e.g., access to abortion rather than an end to forced sterilization). Works like *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by Chicana feminist activists Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (2015), provided a platform for radical women of color—Latina, Asian American, Native American, African American—to call attention to the ways in which racism, classism, heterosexism, and sexism intertwined, as well as to confront the racism of white feminism. (This collection was originally published in 1981, and has since undergone four editions.) In addition to the groundbreaking work she authored (1987), Anzaldúa edited another work called *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras* (1990); this edited volume was intended as a kind of sequel to the 1981 classic that Moraga and Anzaldúa edited, so the conversation among women of color might continue, and white women might be invited to come in, listen, and learn.

As a result of the tensions within the women's movement between white women and women of color, some African American women have felt more comfortable with the term "womanism" instead of "feminism." "Womanism" is a term coined by Alice Walker. She defines it thus:

From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*. 2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire

people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.” 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*. 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.

WALKER 1983: XI–XII

“Womanism” is a term that has many nuances, and different women have resonated with different aspects of Walker’s definition. Some have regarded it as synonymous with black feminism or as a supplement to it, while others have understood it to replace feminism all together. Some have embraced the term, while others have rejected it (see Junior 2015: xi–xxi for a fuller discussion of womanism’s history and reception).

Like the problems that emerged around issues of class and race in the feminist movement (and sometimes as a part of them as witnessed by Moraga and Anzaldúa, both Chicana lesbians), the second wave sometimes found itself at odds with the gay liberation movement because of both homophobia internal to feminist organizations and fear of the homophobia of society at large. In an infamous speech in 1969, Betty Freidan, the then-president of the National Organization of Women (NOW), urged the feminist movement to disassociate itself with “the lavender menace,” by which she meant lesbians, their organizations, and their political causes. Such association, she argued, would provoke negative media attention and discredit NOW’s work for equal rights (Mottier 2008: 108–109). The lesbians of NOW did not, however, back down and, within a couple of years, NOW had re-affirmed the legitimacy of lesbian causes within the larger feminist movement. Feminism is a big tent movement without a fixed definition, one that is in creative tension with other movements of liberation, constantly changing through external pressures and self-critique.

The third wave emerged in the 1990s as younger feminists felt that the previous generation no longer represented their perspectives and experiences. Fault lines around issues of race and ethnicity, LGBTQ inclusion and rights, and what has come to be called the “feminist sex wars” (pitting especially anti-pornography activists against feminists with more open views on sex work) resulted in a new burgeoning of the feminist movement. The term “third wave” was coined by Rebecca Walker (daughter of Alice Walker) in a pivotal essay published in *MS. Magazine* (Walker 1992: 41). Third wave feminists see

themselves as a more diverse coalition, not only racially, ethnically, and sexually, but also in terms of experiences and activist issues. Third wave feminists are more “sex-positive,” embracing a range of sexual expression (including butch-femme and BDSM sexualities) and affirming the right of a woman to participate in the sex industry. They are more inclusive of LGBTQ issues and generally think more complexly about gender identity and sexual orientation. For the third wave, not only is gender a construct, but so is sex and sexuality; for them, individual identities are fluid. There is not just two of anything.

Politically, third wave feminists work toward many of the same issues their foremothers did (Baumgardner and Richards 2000). There may be laws that address equal pay for equal work, reproductive rights, and sexual assault, for example, but the full promise of these laws has yet to be realized. Other issues, such as universal child care and family leave, are still on the feminist agenda. Racial justice and civil rights of LGBTQ people are at the forefront of third wave work. For examples, feminists were involved in the movement for marriage equality (Bilger 2015). The hashtag Black Lives Matter was started by three women—Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors (www.blacklivesmatter.com/herstory)—and women continue to be central in the movement; both men and women make explicit links between Black Lives Matter and feminist politics in general (see Williams 2014 and Cooper 2015). Celebrities such as Beyoncé, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichi, and Lupita Nyong’o intertwine feminist issues and racial justice. Adichi and Nyong’o do so with sensitivity to the ways in which these issues also cross national borders. Gender is no longer a sufficient category of analysis but must also include other aspects of identity like race, ethnicity, nationality, class, and sexuality. In short, both intersectional and transnational analyses are hallmarks of third wave feminism.

What does this all have to do with reading the Bible? With each new wave of the feminist movement, there has been a concomitant examination of biblical scripture, motivated and influenced by whatever ideologies of feminism are dominant. Since the Bible has been a key source for sexist ideas and practices, it has also been both a target of critique and a tool for challenging these ideas and practices. What does it mean to read the Bible as a feminist? What is feminist interpretation of scripture? What does the Bible look like when it is in the hands of an angry woman or, even better, many angry women?

Part 2. The Bible in the Hands of Angry Women

Ever since the Bible came to be, women have always engaged it. We see this engagement in the stories and histories recorded in the Bible itself—from Eve

to Huldah, from Anna to Phoebe—women read, interpret, prophesy, and pass on the words of scripture. We see it in the literature that follows—even alongside the most misogynistic passages of the “church fathers” or the Talmudic rabbis, there are other stories about women that indicate that they were reading and interpreting themselves, despite any barriers they might have faced. Does this mean that every time a woman picks up the Bible and reads, it is a feminist act? Not every woman espoused what would later be called “feminist”³ ideals but perhaps there is something “feminist” in simply picking up and reading. As a field, feminist interpretation of scripture emerged in the 1960s, but there are important predecessors upon which all feminist interpreters build their work.

Gerda Lerner opens her seminal essay, “One Thousand Years of Feminist Bible Criticism,” with this observation: “Whatever route women took to self-authorization and whether they were religiously inspired or not, they were confronted by the core texts of the Bible, which were used for centuries by patriarchal authorities to define the proper roles for women in society and to justify the subordination of women: Genesis, the Fall, and St. Paul” (Lerner 1993: 138). Indeed, the Bible has been a vexing obstacle in the progress of women’s rights. Yet, women have always read and considered and talked about scripture. Women have too often accepted the sexist and misogynist sentiments that are found in the Bible, but women have also found ways to read around such sentiments to find their own strength and inspiration in its words. For many women, throughout time, the Bible has been a source of profound empowerment. In fact, Lerner avers that “long before organized groups of women challenged male authority, the feminist Bible critics did just that” (Lerner 1993: 139). In other words, the first feminists found their voice and expressed their critique of sexist culture through their reading, preaching, teaching, and writing on the Bible, not just in the content of their interpretations but also in the very act of interpreting. They claimed a certain authority grounded in the Bible which was, ironically, denied to them by the Bible (and its male interpreters).

Lerner identifies the first feminist biblical interpreter as a woman named Helie, who, in the second century, engaged in a biblical debate with a judge over whether or not she should be forced to marry.⁴ She wanted to remain a virgin for Christ and the judge ultimately granted her wish, based upon her astute

3 The word “feminism” was first applied to the movement for women’s rights in 1895.

4 In the *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters*, Latin poet Faltonia Betitia Proba (ca. 320–370) takes pride of place. Her *Cento vergilianus de laudibus Christi* offers bold political critique alongside advocacy for Christianity; she addresses biblical stories from creation through the Gospels (Irwin 2012: 412–14).

biblical exegesis (Lerner 1993: 140). She stood up to the patriarchal authority of the family and the state and defied conventional feminine roles, both in her refusal to marry and in her discourse with the judge hearing her case. Such examples can be multiplied. The doctrine of virginity can certainly be critiqued from a feminist perspective (particularly in the ways it is rooted in negative attitudes toward sexuality and in the denigration of the body, especially the female body); however, celibacy in Christianity did open new opportunities for women for education, financial stability, and independence, freeing them from marriage where most of their legal rights were subsumed by their husband and where child-bearing was a physically taxing and even dangerous endeavor. Some of the women who took advantage of these opportunities wrote stunningly progressive discourses on biblical texts and theology—like Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) (Lerner 1993: 53–64, 142–43; Young 2012: 259–64) and Julian of Norwich (ca. 1342–ca. 1416) (Sutherland 2012: 299–304).

Other women who did follow the more conventional paths of wifedom and motherhood also took up the scriptures. For example, Christine de Pizan (1364–ca. 1430) is one of the earliest feminist writers. Widowed in her early twenties with children to support, de Pizan turned to writing to earn her living. In her writings, she challenges conventional understandings of Eve, and through Eve all women. Eve's creation was not defective; instead, she was an equal companion to Adam. Her actions did precipitate the Fall, but Mary brought salvation into the world. Whereas women are proclaimed inferior, de Pizan catalogues the violence and treachery of men and argued that women were actually morally superior (Kvam et al. 1999: 236–41). In her major feminist work *Le Livre de la cité des dames* (1405), de Pizan makes frequent and positive reference to biblical heroines (Lerner 1993: 145–46; Wisman 2012: 128–30). Her sharp wit and incisive critique were brought both to the defense of women and to the defense of the Bible.

The nineteenth century proved a remarkably fruitful period for female biblical interpreters, corresponding with the first wave of feminist activism in the United States and the rise of feminist movements throughout the world. In the West, following the Reformation, women's writings increased because of “women's increased literacy and education and access to the Bible and the publishing world” (Taylor 2012: 5). Moreover, there was a cultural shift: men had been the primary teachers of children in the home (as fathers and tutors), but the nineteenth century gave rise to a valorization of motherhood, which included the idea that mothers should impart religious truths and instructions to their children. The home became a “separate sphere” dominated by women, and Bible reading was likened to breast-feeding—“intimate, emotional, and all-encompassing” (McDannell 1995: 81). As reflected in some of the sentimental

art of the era, a mother would sit surrounded by her children, reading from the Bible and instructing them in its ways. The rise of Methodism also played a role because the denomination gave women greater power to preach and speak publically about the Bible, and Methodist seminaries first gave women equal access to religious education. For example, Antoinette Brown finished the divinity degree at Oberlin College's seminary in 1850 (although they did not confer the degree upon her, because she was a woman, until 1878). She held a position in a Congregationalist assembly and was ordained in 1853, becoming the first woman ordained in the United States; she later left this position and became a Unitarian. Brown published critical essays about the Bible, and was active in the abolitionist, temperance, and suffragist movements (<http://www.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/OYTT-images/NettyBlackwell.html>; Zink-Sawyer 2012: 79–82). Finally, the birth of modern biblical criticism also influenced women and many nineteenth-century interpreters were connected to male scholars and publishers through marriage or blood (Taylor 2012: 11–12). Not all of these women espoused ideas that were feminist. Some used their newly found opportunities to promote the submission of women and declaim their natural and God-given domestic role. But many others did read the Bible through feminist lenses.

Anna Julia Cooper also received a degree from Oberlin College (in 1884) as well as a Ph.D. from the Sorbonne (in 1925). She combined a commitment to gender equality with one to racial equality; her first major feminist address was “Womanhood a Vital Element in the Regeneration of a Race” in 1886. She built her arguments for equality on the person of Jesus and the message of the Gospels, especially Jesus's greatest commandment (Matt. 22:37–39) and the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37). She even revised the parable to reflect the situation of African Americans in the United States at the turn of the century (Baker-Fletcher 1993: 41–44). Cooper was an early advocate of what is now called intersectional analysis—for her, race, class, and gender were intertwined and inextricably bound.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the principal founder and most out-spoken activist of the first wave, believed that

the chief obstacle in the way of woman's elevation today is the degrading position assigned her in the religion of all countries—an afterthought in creation, the origin of sin, cursed by God, marriage for her a condition of servitude, maternity a degradation, unfit to minister at the altar and in some churches even to sing in the choir. Such is her position in the Bible and religion.

From a letter to E. H. Slagle, dated December 10, 1885; as quoted in GRIFFITH 1984: 210

As one of the main foundations for sexism, both in what it states and in how it is interpreted, the Bible was a target for Cady Stanton. Her plan to write a critique of biblical scripture was controversial even among other suffragists. Susan B. Anthony and Carrie Chapman Catt tried to persuade Cady Stanton to abandon the project. Cady Stanton attempted to develop a team of female academics and women involved in the church, but there were not many who accepted her invitation. Most did not disagree with Cady Stanton's perspective, but were worried that such a project would jeopardize their careers (Griffith 1984: 211).

In 1895 (two weeks after her eightieth birthday), Cady Stanton published the first full-length feminist critique of biblical scripture, *The Woman's Bible*. Alice Odgen Bellis defines feminist interpretation of scripture as "reading texts with sensitivity to sexist oppression" (Bellis 1994: 14),⁵ something at which Cady Stanton excels. In the end, she did find a few other women to assist in her research and writing, but the work was primarily authored by Cady Stanton herself. Always foregrounding concern over sexist oppression, her method is an eclectic blend of historical and literary methodologies, informed by advances in biblical scholarship like the Documentary Hypothesis. She offers remarkably trenchant critique of certain biblical passages, but she is not dismissive of the entire Bible. She even lauds certain passages, like the first creation story in Genesis 1, for their enshrinement of gender equality. Cady Stanton personally believed in the androgyny of God, regularly referring to God as both Mother and Father in her own personal prayer practices (Griffith 1984: 210) and arguing that Gen. 1:26–27 indicates that "there was consultation in the Godhead, and that the masculine and feminine elements were equally represented" (Cady Stanton 1974: 14). She was keenly aware of how even the most modest political proposals to aid women were blocked by religious and biblical argument, making gender hierarchies "God-created" and "God-commanded." Cady Stanton regarded the Bible without pious prejudices but, instead, with a profound sense of social justice.

The first part of *The Woman's Bible* caused a public uproar, but one that was very good for sales. The book went through seven editions in the first six months (Griffith 1984: 212). Cady Stanton courted scandal, believing that it was necessary to further the political cause which, from her perspective, had stalled. She was, however, indignant and dismayed by the response from the National American Women Suffrage Association (NAWSA). After hours of heated debate, the younger members, led by Chapman Catt, successfully passed a

5 Note that Bellis changes this definition, substituting "gender" for "sexist oppression" in the second edition (2007: 18).

censure resolution distancing themselves from both the work and the author. They believed that in attacking Christianity and the Bible—and thus opening herself up to charges of blasphemy and heresy—Cady Stanton had put the cause of suffrage in jeopardy. Indeed, *The Woman's Bible* did continue to be referenced in anti-suffrage literature, all the way through the final vote for ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in Nashville, Tennessee in 1920 (Kern 2001: 4–5). The members of NAWSA primarily focused on getting women the vote, and they worried that Cady Stanton's stridency and radicalism would discredit the entire movement.

Cady Stanton was undeterred. Two years after the first part of *The Woman's Bible* was published, she published the second part. The scandals only strengthened Cady Stanton's commitment to the feminist critique of biblical scriptures; more women, in fact, got involved in the research and writing of the second part. But her work did put a wedge between her and other activists, not only the younger ones but also her long-time friend Susan B. Anthony. Part of the controversy was not just that Cady Stanton critiqued the Bible and Christianity. The feminism of the nineteenth century was one grounded in women's moral authority: namely, women were naturally more ethical and more pious. Therefore, their voices needed to be heard and they should have access to the political process. By the end of her life, Cady Stanton had completely rejected the idea of women's natural moral superiority. As Kathi Kern notes, Cady Stanton believed that “a platform for women's political liberation could never be built upon the faulty foundation of religious faith because it would not bear weight. The corrosive principle of women's subordination was sealed into every plank: the church, the clergy, and the Bible” (Kern 2001: 3). Cady Stanton's attack on the Bible was also an attack on ideologies fundamental to Victorian culture and the suffrage movement.

We see here an illustration of a classic feminist dilemma. Cady Stanton was not just concerned with a single issue, but with the full array of sexist cultural mores and legal and economic barriers. She was not just concerned with the results but also with the roots of sexism. She believed that nothing would change until the underlying ground of sexism was challenged and she accurately identified that ground as, at least in part, biblical. What does a feminist movement focus upon: the particular political issue at hand or the deeper roots of the problem? How does feminist activism proceed: without compromise or more pragmatically, working within the system, cautious about alienating possible allies? Looking back at *The Woman's Bible*, an additional tension comes to the fore. Despite Cady Stanton's understanding of the dignity and equality of all people, she was not immune to racist, classist, and anti-Semitic prejudices; she was not immune to assuming a “universal” woman's experience

that was really just a reflection of her own particular life. In critiquing sexist bias, some interpretations are laced with biases of their own, especially those of race, class, and religion. These types of tensions and inconsistencies have also been endemic to the feminist movement from the beginning and are a constant call to self-reflection and self-critique. As important as it is to remember Cady Stanton's work, it is also crucial, following Schüssler Fiorenza, to transform its legacy by breaking canonical borders, including the voices of women of color and other marginalized women, and problematizing the very category of "woman" and "the feminine" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1993a). The tensions are not to be resolved but instead become part of the very woof and weave of feminist interpretation of scripture.

Despite or maybe because of the revolutionary nature of Cady Stanton's biblical work, it caused immediate scandal and sensation but did not have a lasting effect for the field of biblical studies. It did not spawn a new movement of feminist biblical readings, nor did it inspire a new generation of women to become Biblicists. Slowly, though, women were starting to enter the professions of biblical studies, biblical archaeology, and even ministry and the rabbinate. Although nothing in her work is explicitly feminist, or even focused on women in scripture (save some writing on Ruth), Louise Pettibone Smith (1887–1981) was one of the first prominent female biblical scholars and was the first woman to publish in the flagship journal of the Society of Biblical Literature (Smith 1917). Regina Jonas (1902–1944) was the first woman ordained as a rabbi, in Germany in 1935. She used the Bible and the Talmud to mount her halakhic argument for women's ordination (von Kellenbach 2001: 244). In both Europe and the United States, women were reading, speaking, and interpreting scripture, advancing women's position either through explicit argument or implicit presence.

Just as the first wave produced feminist biblical scholarship, so did the second wave—and this time to lasting effect. In 1968, James Muilenburg delivered a seminal address as president of the Society of Biblical Literature entitled "Form Criticism and Beyond," subsequently published in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* (Muilenburg 1969). Beginning with an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of form criticism, Muilenburg calls for moving from historical analysis to what he terms rhetorical criticism, what is now more broadly classified as literary criticism. He argues for the value of "understanding the nature of Hebrew literary composition, in exhibiting the structural patterns that are employed for the fashioning of a literary unit, whether in poetry or in prose, and in discerning the many and various devices by which the predications are formulated and ordered into a unified whole" (Muilenburg 1969: 8). Muilenburg does not see his approach as replacing more traditional historical

methodologies, especially form criticism, but he does maintain the importance of close attention to the language of the text for supplementing interpretation (Muilenburg 1969: 18). His presidential address inaugurated a major shift in how biblical studies were conducted, opening a whole new avenue for exploration and interpretation. There is nothing feminist about Muilenburg's proposal; however, Muilenburg's literary approach inspired a student who would not only honor her teacher through championing his methodology but also surpass him in groundbreaking work of her own. Muilenburg trained Phyllis Trible.⁶

Trible is the mother of modern feminist interpretation of scripture. John Collins writes, "Phyllis Trible, more than any other scholar, put feminist criticism on the agenda of biblical scholarship in the 1970s" (Collins 2005: 78). Earning her Ph.D. in 1963 with a dissertation on Jonah, Trible soon turned her attention to the issues of feminism in the Bible and in the church. In her first major article on the subject, Trible proposes "to examine interactions between the Hebrew Scriptures and the Women's Liberation Movement" (Trible 1973: 30). Rather than submitting to the male domination promoted by scripture, and rather than throwing the Bible out and leaving her faith tradition, Trible seeks to hold on to the one without letting go of the other. For Trible, "the hermeneutical challenge is to translate biblical faith without sexism" (Trible 1973: 31). She critiques the Bible but she also finds passages in the Bible itself which disavow sexism, specifically the under-attended but rich feminine imagery for God in the scripture, and the theme of liberation in the exodus story and beyond. In fact, she claims that she is not so much interpreting as exposing a "depatriarchalizing principle" already operative in the biblical text itself (Trible 1973: 48). For Trible, much of the sexism of which the Bible has been accused is a result of the bias of the interpreter and she excels at subjecting common traditional interpretations to withering critique. She then demonstrates the possibilities of the text through non-sexist readings. She is particularly persuasive in her reading of the Adam and Eve story (Genesis 2–3), on which I will comment more below. Trible also brought forth long neglected passages from scripture that presented a more egalitarian picture, such as the Song of Songs. Trible takes these three movements—feminine imagery for God, a re-reading of Genesis 2–3, and a new focus on the Song of Songs—as the backbone of

6 Trible describes her own indebtedness to Muilenburg thus: "There [Union Theological Seminary] I fell under the spell of James Muilenburg, whose sensitivities to the literary and theological dimensions of scripture changed my life" (Trible 1994: ix).

what will be her major work, now a classic in feminist interpretation: *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Trible 1978).⁷

Trible pays meticulous attention to the language of scripture, images, Hebrew roots, and syntax (rhetorical criticism remains her primarily methodological approach). In so doing, she shows, for example, that even though God is primarily figured in masculine language (king, warrior, father, judge), God is not figured exclusively in masculine language. She charts out the “journey of a metaphor” that begins when she demonstrates how the word רֶחֶם (“womb”) becomes in the plural רַחֲמִים (“compassion,” “mercy,” “love”), and then רָחַם (“to show mercy”), and רַחוּם (“merciful”) (Trible 1978: 33).⁸ Both men and women are described in the Hebrew Bible as having רַחֲמִים (literally “wombs” but meaning “compassion”), and it is also one of the more important character traits of the divine. God’s “womb-like compassion” is frequently referenced. In fact, only God, no other creature, is described as being רַחוּם (“merciful”) and given a common title, “merciful and gracious” (e.g., Exod. 34:6; Pss. 86:16, 111:4, 145:8; Neh. 9:17; Joel 2:13; 2 Chron. 30:9; Jon. 4:2) (Trible 1978: 38). Trible argues for translations that allow this aspect of the words of mercy and compassion to be as clear in the English as they are in the Hebrew. For example, she advocates explicitly naming God’s womb and referencing God’s “motherly-compassion” instead of the English “inner parts” and “mercy,” neither of which capture the connection the Hebrew words have to women and female body parts (Trible 1978: 45).⁹ Trible goes on to highlight other passages where God is described in feminine language—midwife, birthing and nursing mother. Even the designation *El Shaddai* (אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי), usually rendered into English as “God Almighty,” literally means “God of the mountains,” a word also associated with “breasts” (Trible 1978: 61). How different would our images of God be if the English alluded to God’s womb and God’s breasts the way that the Hebrew does? If having a womb is the language in Hebrew for having compassion, and God is described repeatedly as a being with great compassion, what are the implications of ascribing an exclusively female body part to the characterization of

7 For an appraisal of *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* on the occasion of its twenty-fifth anniversary, see articles by Samuel E. Balentine, B. Diane Wudel, and Jennifer L. Koosed in *Lexington Seminary Quarterly* 38 (Spring 2003). The journal also includes a reflection by Phyllis Trible (2003). The articles are based upon the proceedings of a session of the Southeastern Regional Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature on March 15, 2003, organized by Jerry L. Sumney.

8 In Arabic, the word for “womb” is also the word for “compassion.” “Compassionate” is the most frequently named characteristic of God in the Qur’an, which lends the divine being a decidedly feminine aspect in the Qur’an as well. See Sells 1999: 20–21.

9 Her translation of Jer. 31:20c is “Therefore, my womb trembles for him; I will truly show motherly-compassion upon him.”

God? By returning to the original Hebrew without the sexist bias of translator, Tribble uncovers a rich trove of feminist resources in passages that depict God in terms of feminine language.

Despite the fact that Tribble champions biblical faith and seeks to show that much of the feminist criticism of the Bible is really criticism of the Bible's translators and interpreters, she does not flinch from exposing the places where the Bible truly is androcentric and sexist. In her book *Texts of Terror*, she confronts the Hebrew Bible's most violent and misogynist passages (Tribble 1984). Tribble analyzes the stories of Hagar (Gen. 16:1–16; 21:9–21), David's daughter Tamar (2 Sam. 13:1–22), the Levite's concubine (Judg. 19:1–30), and Jephthah's daughter (Judg. 11:29–40). She names the horror of the sexual use of slaves, incest, rape, and murder—the violence of strangers against women and the violence of families against women. She insists that one cannot just dismiss these stories as part of a more brutal past or use them to bifurcate the scriptural representation of God—a wrathful God of the Old Testament and a merciful God of the New Testament. Neither can one appeal to Christian theology by subsuming them into the suffering of the cross or redeeming them through resurrection. All of these strategies smack of “Christian chauvinism”; the evidence of history does not demonstrate an improvement in women's lives with the advent of Christianity (Tribble 1984: 2). Instead, Tribble evokes the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel as “a paradigm for encountering terror” (Tribble 1984: 3–5). We must confront these stories and the sexism and misogyny they represent, but hold on to them in order to galvanize our commitment to justice and equality. We will be wounded by the struggle but it is only by holding on that we have the possibility of blessing. Combining feminism, which Tribble defines as “a critique of culture and faith in light of misogyny” (Tribble 1984: 3), with literary criticism results in a potentially powerful tool for judgment, repentance, and renewal.

What Tribble does for the scholarship of the Hebrew Bible, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza does for the New Testament. After a handful of important articles on feminist theology and on women in the New Testament and the early Christian movement, Schüssler Fiorenza published her most important and formative work—*In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (1983). Schüssler Fiorenza takes the New Testament story of the woman who anoints Jesus with nard, breaking the jar and pouring it over his head as her model. In Mark 14, an unnamed woman pours expensive perfume over Jesus's head and is rebuked by the disciples. Jesus defends her actions, even implying that she has understood his mission (that he will soon be killed) better than the disciples. He declares, “Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told,

in memory of her" (Mark 14:9). In her actions and Jesus's words, the woman becomes a model for perfect discipleship, surpassing even the Twelve. And yet, even as her act is recorded, her name is not.

Schüssler Fiorenza combines a feminist liberation theological perspective with close readings of texts in order to reconstruct the earliest years of the Jesus-following movement. Unlike Tribble, historical reconstruction is an essential aspect of her project. In her readings, Tribble is concerned with images, metaphors, and ideologies, not history; Schüssler Fiorenza does not just remain in the text but also wants to reclaim early Christian history for women (for Schüssler Fiorenza's own analysis of Tribble and their differences, see Schüssler Fiorenza 1983: 19–21). The story of the anointing woman in Mark 14 reveals that women were present in the Jesus movement from the very beginning and that their participation had theological import. However, the way the story is preserved in the Gospels also reveals that the biblical text is androcentric: it is told from a male perspective and the narrative is focused on male characters and male concerns. Schüssler Fiorenza upholds the importance of sacred scripture but locates *revelation* in the life and death of Jesus, not in the Bible (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983: 41). Rather than reflecting transparently the history of Jesus and the community that surrounded him, the New Testament texts reflect the biases of its human authors who "have manufactured the historical marginality of women" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983: 52). Consequently, the biblical text as a source for both history and theology must be approached cautiously. In the language of Schüssler Fiorenza, it must be read with a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983: 56). The Bible does not tell the full story; it even attempts to conceal the full story, especially when it comes to the story of women.

As Schüssler Fiorenza declares, "Androcentric texts and documents do not mirror historical reality, report historical facts, or tell us how it actually was." At the same time, "A careful analysis of their androcentric tendencies and patriarchal functions . . . can provide clues for the historical discipleship of equals in the beginnings of Christianity" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983: 60). Biblical texts are not only a record of the marginalization of women but also provide the evidence for their inclusion. The exegetical process begins with suspicion but moves toward creative historical reconstruction, one that takes both women's oppression and women's agency seriously.¹⁰ Feminist sociological models

10 Schüssler Fiorenza summarizes the four moves in feminist methodology thus: the hermeneutics of suspicion, the hermeneutics of historical interpretation and reconstruction, the hermeneutics of ethical and theological evaluation, and the hermeneutics of creative imagination and ritualization (1992b: 790).

prove particularly fruitful for Schüssler Fiorenza's project for they allow inter-sectional analyses of class and gender.

In the end, Schüssler Fiorenza proposes that the early community that formed around Jesus in his lifetime and immediately following his death was an egalitarian Jewish renewal movement, which understood the βασιλεία (she uses the Greek in order to move away from the patriarchal implications of the word "kingdom" in English) as belonging to the poor.

As a feminist vision, the *basileia* vision of Jesus calls all women without exception to wholeness and selfhood, as well as to solidarity with those women who are the impoverished, the maimed, and outcasts of our society and church. It knows of the deadly violence such a vision and commitment will encounter. It enables us not to despair or to relinquish the struggle in the face of such violence. It empowers us to walk upright, freed from the double oppression of societal and religious sexism and prejudice. The woman-identified man, Jesus, called forth a discipleship of equals that still needs to be discovered and realized by women and men today.

SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA 1983: 153–54

Such a community reveals the essence of God—radically inclusive, gracious, loving, good. The theological paradigm that Schüssler Fiorenza finds most resonant is from the wisdom traditions and she understands Jesus to be the emissary and prophet of God-Sophia (1983: 130–35; cf. the fuller explication in Schüssler Fiorenza 1994).

Schüssler Fiorenza turns to the letters of Paul and Acts in order to reconstruct the early movement after Jesus's death. What began in full equality of women and men (as witnessed in the women who led house churches and were named as leaders, deacons, and apostles in the epistles) and with new opportunities for women through the celibate lifestyle soon began to move back into more hierarchical structures, theologies, and social relations. Schüssler Fiorenza sees the baptismal formula of Gal. 3:28 as the supreme expression of the initial egalitarian impulses of the earliest stratum of the movement. It ends all forms of division and domination, especially those based on sex and class. It is not just a statement of a spiritual equality, but a declaration of communal equality: "It proclaims that in the Christian community all distinctions of religion, race, class, nationality, and gender are insignificant. All the baptized are equal, they are one in Christ" (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983: 213). Galatians 3:28 is not just a statement about the ways in which the early community understood and configured itself, but it is also a theological statement about how

equality is the intention of the divine; it is a prophetic statement that issues a critique of any Christian practice that denies this equality. In this model of feminist interpretation of scripture, exegesis, history, theology, and activism come together.

As both Tribble and Schüssler Fiorenza demonstrate, even though much of feminist interpretation focuses on women, the broader agenda is to identify the marginalized in the text. For this reason, Schüssler Fiorenza often uses the term “kyriarchy” instead of “patriarchy” in order to underscore the interlocking oppressions manifest in imperial contexts (Schüssler Fiorenza 1992a: 115–17). Attention to multiple levels of oppression is also a prominent aspect of womanist readings of biblical scripture. As Renita J. Weems writes, the “challenge for marginalized readers in general, and African American women in particular, has been to use whatever means necessary to recover the voice of the oppressed within biblical texts” (Weems 1991: 73). Weems was the first African American woman to earn a Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible,¹¹ and she is a foundational scholar in womanist biblical interpretation (see Junior 2015; Smith 2015; and Byron and Lovelace 2016 for histories of womanist biblical interpretation). Her first book, published even before she completed her Ph.D., is also the first book to identify itself as womanist biblical interpretation: *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women’s Relationships in the Bible* (Weems 1988).¹² The work is not a scholarly monograph, but is instead written for African American Christian women in Bible studies (Weems 1988: viii-ix); nevertheless, it is informed by academic feminist biblical criticism. Weems writes that she “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” (Weems 1988: ix). This is, in fact, what she means when she calls the work “womanist”—an exploration of biblical characters, rooted in both feminism and African American experience, and committed to the inclusion of everyone in the journey toward salvation. Each chapter looks at a biblical pairing from either the Old Testament or the New Testament—Hagar and Sarah, Martha and Mary, Vashti and Esther—and then imaginatively

11 Weems earned a Ph.D. in Old Testament from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1989. Clarice Martin was the first African American woman to earn a Ph.D. in New Testament (1985 from Duke University). Both are equally foundational for womanist biblical interpretation.

12 In the second edition of the book (Weems 2005), however, the word “womanist” has been removed. The second edition is subtitled *Understanding the Timeless Connection between Women Today and Women in the Bible*.

reconstructs the women's thoughts, feelings, and motivations (all of which are generally absent from biblical text). Weems examines not just the gender dynamics but also issues of ethnicity and class. She does not remain solely in the biblical text or context, but moves back and forth between then and now, here and there, connecting the issues that the story raises with contemporary people and contemporary situations. For example, in her discussion of Sarah and Hagar she discusses the situation of domestic workers, noting that she is the child of domestic workers and the descendent of slaves, and yet, she is now in the position of employing domestic workers herself. The complex ways in which race, class, and gender configure and re-configure relationships are explored through the text and through autobiography (Weems 1988: 11). By allowing each biblical woman to speak, complicated emotional terrain is also mapped. She references the atrocities mothers commit against other mothers and their children: the assault against children infected with HIV as they attempted to continue going to school; the assault against African American children as they walked into formerly all-white schools during the process of desegregation (Weems 1988: 15). Throughout history, privileged women have insulted, oppressed, and exploited other women and their children.

Weems, who is also an ordained African Methodist Episcopal minister, has written mostly for a lay Christian audience. Her one major scholarly monograph, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (1995), is informed by the concerns that she identifies with womanism, but it does not use the term.¹³ Her very interest in the prophetic metaphor of the promiscuous woman, threatened, beaten and raped for her misdeeds, is because she is an African American woman, “whose identity often evokes complicated, contradictory reactions within audience” (Weems 1995: 9). Texts that condone “violence against socially marginalized women” are clearly a concern. Yet, it is not just the violence that attracts Weems's attention but also the hope of love and reconciliation, which is also at the heart of the marriage metaphor. Her careful literary analysis—including sections on metaphor and how metaphor works—is grounded in an explication of the historical context of the prophets. Weems's exegesis is nuanced but, like Trible's approach to her “texts of terror,” she does not look away from the violence against women inscribed in the text.

Trible, Schüssler Fiorenza, and Weems are not just interested in sex and gender in the scriptures but always also concerned with the ways in which the

13 *Battered Love* was preceded by the article “Gomer: Victim of Violence or Victim of Metaphor?” (Weems 1989). In this article, Weems does identify herself as a womanist biblical scholar in a footnote (1989: 90 n. 10).

texts and their interpretations affect women and men in the world. As Weems proclaims,

[I]f biblical scholarship is relevant to the way we live our lives today, if it has the potential to change the course of history, and if there are people who continue to read the Bible as a resource for modern living, then it is my responsibility as a woman and an African American to make certain that the scholarship I engage in as a biblical scholar does its part to work toward the larger project of critical, yet creative wrestling with biblical God-talk.

WEEMS 1995: 11

Such is the hallmark of feminist biblical criticism.

Another notable similarity between these three foundational exegetes is their faith. Tribble, Schüssler Fiorenza, and Weems are critical of the sexism and the misogyny of the traditions of biblical interpretation and of the church (from Protestant and Catholic perspectives), but all three are also committed to Christianity and work to reclaim biblical faith for feminism. All feminist biblical scholars are concerned with the effects of the Bible in the world and in ethically responsible exegesis; however, not every feminist biblical scholar finds the work of reclamation possible or even desirable, as Tribble, Schüssler Fiorenza, and Weems do. Much like feminists can be broadly classified as either liberal (those who focus on reforming the systems that already exist) or radical (those who focus on dismantling the systems), feminist biblical interpreters also regard the Bible, along with Judaism and Christianity, as either redeemable in some way or hopelessly irredeemable. For obvious reasons, some of the most adamant rejectionists are not biblical scholars at all. Mary Daly, for example, argues that the Bible and the religious traditions that hold the Bible as authoritative are sexist and misogynistic to their core; consequently, there is no way to participate in these traditions and not perpetuate the oppression of women (and others). Daly offers a critique but then moves on to develop post-Christian spirituality and ethics (see especially Daly 1973). Esther Fuchs, while also presenting work that is consistently rejectionist, still does engage the biblical text (see, e.g., Fuchs 2000). As feminist biblical criticism has continued to develop, there are even feminist scholars for whom the question of faith and the authority of the Bible is simply not important. They work on biblical texts only as influential cultural products, and the dilemma of rejection or reclamation plays no role in their interpretive work.

Clara Schumann, in the nineteenth century, wrote, "I once thought that I possessed creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not

desire to compose—not one has been able to do it, and why should I expect to?” (a letter from Clara Wieck to Robert Schumann, shortly before their marriage, as quoted in Beer 2016: 2; she expresses similar sentiments in later letters as well, see Beer 2016: 229). Historically, women have been denied the ability to be producers of culture and knowledge. Even when they have managed, against all odds, to become interpreters, writers, and artists, their voices have remained isolated from the larger history of the tradition. There had been hundreds of female composers before Schumann and yet they remained largely unknown. Their music played for a moment and then faded into silence, leaving Schumann feeling isolated and unsure (Beer 2016). Women have been biblical interpreters ever since there has been a text to interpret. And yet, until recently, their contributions remained unknown and therefore unable to provide a model or ground for the next woman who takes up and reads. An essential component of the feminist project is to recover these lost readings so that each woman can take her rightful place in the history of interpretation, and so future interpreters can build on the work of those who came before. From Helie to Weems, the past of feminist interpretation of scripture provides a rich and variegated foundation on which to stand.

Part 3. The Field Expands

Although it is deeply rooted in literary analysis, feminist interpretation of scripture is not bound to such methodologies. As feminist interpretation has expanded, it has moved into every other approach used to investigate the biblical text. Explicitly feminist work can be found in historical critical work, archaeology, psychoanalytical readings, Marxist interpretations, structuralist and post-structuralist approaches, reception history, ideological criticism, sociological analyses (for a recent overview of the variety of feminist methodologies, from history to cultural criticism, see Scholz 2016). In this sense, feminist interpretation is less a method with particular steps to follow as one reads and more a prism through which all methods can be refracted and re-configured. What binds these disparate modes of inquiry together—and what could be more different than archaeology and deconstruction—is a dedication to the basic premises of feminism as a philosophy and a political orientation: a fundamental belief in the equal importance of women to a story and to a society, attention to the marginalized voice whatever the sex/gender, sensitivity to the role experience plays in one’s perspective, and a commitment to gender justice. Feminism has been one of the most transformative political and intellectual movements in human history and it has certainly transformed biblical

studies, so much so that even approaches that are not explicitly feminist can hardly ignore the issues that feminists have raised. Researchers regularly look at the dynamics of gender, sexuality, class, race and ethnicity; attend to marginal voices; and have a greater awareness of how readers' perspectives shape the interpretation. Feminism has also opened up opportunities in the academy and in religious institutions for all women and also for men whose identity deviates from the white, heterosexual, middle to upper class, able-bodied, Christian norm. Standard notions of leadership and authority change just by having an African American woman standing in front of the classroom, a white gay man at the pulpit, a Jewish woman on the *bimah*.

As feminist criticism has expanded into the twenty-first century, it is marked by the perspectives of third wave feminism. Many of the questions of the first feminist interpreters revolved around the great women of the Bible, focusing on female characters and asking whether certain texts were good or bad for women. With womanist readings, questions emerged about what constitutes "women's experience"—for example, Sarah and Hagar are both women but their roles in the story are vastly different because they are marked by different ethnic, religious, and class identities. These differences shape the different gender ideologies and sexual codes embedded in the story. Third wave feminism also underscores the importance of intersectionality and transnational analysis. "Intersectionality" is a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her critique of feminist and antiracist theory, both of which often missed the experiences of black women because of their "single axis framework." An intersectional analysis does not just "add" an aspect of identity into the mix, but instead attends to the complex ways different aspects of identity interrelate to produce different experiences. As Crenshaw notes, "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism," or any other discrete aspect of identity (Crenshaw 1989: 140). Transnational analysis focuses on the way systems of oppression and exclusion function across national borders; it is especially attuned to the effects of globalization, transnational corporations, international politics, and colonial intrusions. Both intersectional and transnational lenses have been applied to feminist biblical scholarship.

Another important distinction between second and third wave feminism that has implications for feminist biblical studies is third wave's greater attention to issues of gender (instead of women) and sexuality. The feminist sex wars took place throughout the 1980s and revealed deep fault lines among feminists in their approaches to pornography, prostitution, and other forms of sex work and sexual expression. Andrea Dworkin, Catherine MacKinnon, and Susan Brownmiller were particularly outspoken opponents of pornography and

prostitution, understanding them both as forms of violence against women. Their analysis was extended, then, to a broader critique of male sexuality as inherently violent and exploitative, even naming consensual penetrative intercourse as a form of assault (Mottier 2008: 66–69). Women who participated in the pornography industry (even those making pornography for women), and women who performed sex work were disregarded. They were viewed as having internalized patriarchy to such a degree that they were willing participants in their own oppression. These “sex-negative” feminists also critiqued butch-femme lesbianism and sadomasochism. Other feminist activists, including feminists who worked in the sex industry or identified as either butch or femme, disagreed. Gayle Rubin, Carol Vance, and Susie Bright, for example, defined themselves as “sex positive” feminists and rejected the simplistic generalizations about sexuality presented by the anti-pornography and anti-prostitution movements (Mottier 2008: 69–70). Instead, they offered a much more complex and nuanced understanding of pleasure and power, and a more inclusive approach to women’s experiences. In general, third wave feminists identify with the “sex-positive” ideologies of the feminist movement.

As the sex wars raged, there were a number of concomitant shifts that happened in the field of women’s studies and the politics of feminism around issues of sex and sexuality. The gay and lesbian liberation movement that began in the 1960s was sometimes in concert and sometimes in tension with the women’s liberation movement. In the academy, nascent gay and lesbian studies gave birth to a more comprehensive (and in some ways even more radical) “queer theory,” a term that was coined in an essay by Teresa de Lauretis (1991). Masculinity studies also began to develop, again sometimes in concert and sometimes in tension with women’s studies (Kimmel and Messner 2013: xviii). Queer studies and masculinity studies fall under a much broader rubric of gender studies. Together, intersectionality, transnational analysis, and gender studies highlight the complexity of identity and power. Together, they produce new approaches to traditional fields as well as new avenues for feminist inquiry. The effects of these new ideas and approaches have been particularly felt as feminist biblical studies expands into all aspects of historical study and as it explores the range of vistas opened by poststructuralism.

Archaeology

Feminism’s engagement with historical methodologies has developed and deepened. Some of the most important developments have been in the field of archaeology. As conducted in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth centuries, archaeology focused on major historical events and monumental

buildings. Archaeologists in the field uncovered and explored pyramids and palaces, wars and revolutions. The discipline of biblical archaeology first sought to correlate the Bible with the artifacts that were discovered while digging in Israel; later, when such correlations proved difficult, the discipline attempted to understand the history of Israel through a much more nuanced understanding of the relationship between text and artifact (Mazar 1990: 10–21, 31–33; Dever 1985), sometimes even setting the biblical account aside altogether (cf. Davies 1992). Even so, the focus on big architectural structures and big events continued. Digs at places like Jericho focused on the walls and evidence of battles; in Megiddo, the palaces and gates; in Jerusalem, evidence of the splendor of the united monarchy. However, following a major paradigm shift in the discipline of archaeology in general as well as the development of new research techniques and technologies, archaeologists began to seek out information about what the rest of a society was doing while kings built monuments and generals fought wars. Domestic spaces and everyday tools replaced palaces and luxury goods for many in the field.

The “new archaeology” that emerged in Israel in the late 1970s focuses on “explaining the social structures of societies, as well as exploring the relationship people have had with their environment. The goals include finding out how a society as a whole (not just its political leadership) functioned” (Rast 1992: 4; cf. Dever 1985: 49–53). Ethnographic parallels and systematic theories of culture are particularly important, as is a greater use of the scientific method (with explicit definition of presuppositions, research goals, testable hypotheses, and reproducible data). Archaeological research is now configured as an interdisciplinary enterprise and expeditions regularly include “geologists, paleoethnobotanists, physical anthropologists, zooarchaeologists, and palynologists, in addition to the usual field archaeologists, surveyors, persons skilled in drafting, photographers, and ceramic experts” (Rast 1992: 5). When history is constructed as a succession of major political, economic, and military events, it necessarily focuses on elite men and thus ignores most of the society’s population: namely, almost all of its women and even many of its men. The situation has been particularly acute in Syro-Palestinian archaeology which has been fueled by attention to and interest in the biblical text. The Bible spends little time on common, everyday people and places; instead, it recounts grand stories about kings and empires, prophets and priests, temples and palaces, exiles and battles. Because of the Bible’s theological bias for the people of Israel—an otherwise small and insignificant people inhabiting a tiny, resource-poor, strip of land along the Mediterranean coast—these stories take on a grandeur that is not reflected in the archaeological record. Most of the first archaeologists in Israel shared the Bible’s theological bias, and so were focused on proving the

veracity of the biblical report and the importance of Israel. What did it matter to them how bread was made or who used the tools of textile production scattered all over tells and other dig sites? When history is re-conceptualized as including the actions of all members of the society, everyday lives, and popular culture, then women are included too, not only in equal measure but sometimes as the dominant force.

There is nothing explicitly feminist about the new archaeology. In fact, new archaeology has been subject to the same feminist critique as other approaches to archaeology, specifically anthropocentrism in its choice of research questions, the erasure of women in its reconstruction of the past, and the assumption that gender relations are stable, even biological (Wylie 1997: 81–83; cf. Conkey and Spector 1984: 5–14). Silences and stereotypes in archaeological knowledge reflect the marginalization of women as producers of that knowledge: there is a “link between workplace inequities and androcentric bias in the content of research” (Wylie 1997: 84). New archaeology has also been critiqued from a feminist perspective for its objectivism and positivism (Wylie 1997: 85–86). Despite its focus on cultural systems, especially social stratification and community or household organization, the earliest iterations of the new archaeology failed to factor gender into its analysis (Wylie 1997: 92). But by shifting to cultural systems and taking a more holistic approach, new archaeology has held much promise for gender analysis and has produced data for feminist research.

One of the assumptions that many people have of any ancient society, but especially of biblical societies, is that they were hopelessly patriarchal and horribly oppressive to women (a common idea is that women were “property” or treated like “chattel”). Whereas there were many ways in which women’s lives were circumscribed on account of their sex, it is not accurate to say that they had no power or control over their own lives.¹⁴ Twenty-first century people must be careful not to impose ideas about women’s roles that arose in modern, industrial societies back onto ancient communities, which operated under very different economic and political principles. As aforementioned, starting in the nineteenth century, with the rise of industrialization and the development of a significant middle class, the idea of “separate spheres” arose. With this ideology, men were to work outside of the home and women were to remain within the home as a kind of “angel in the house.” This notion was a powerful shaper of gender roles and ideologies, many of which we contend with

14 To talk about all women as chattel also obscures the fact that there were people who were actually property: slaves. The life of a slave (male or female) was quite different from the life of a free woman and the two should not be conflated.

even today. It was not, however, a part of the ancient Israelite, early Jewish, or early Christian understanding of masculinity and femininity, or male and female roles. Instead, most industry took place *within* the home. Not only was the family the primary economic unit of the society, but the family was also responsible for producing almost all of its own necessities. This meant that women were inextricably and centrally involved in providing for the family—especially in food production and preparation—and in producing any goods that the family might use for barter or trade. Domestic spaces are still under-attended, but the research that has been done demonstrates the wide range of activities that took place within the walls of a home and courtyard.

In the archaeology of ancient Israel, Carol Meyers is one of the most important researchers who has focused on issues of everyday life and material culture, especially the everyday working life of women.¹⁵ She has called for the gendering of Syro-Palestinian archaeology, which would include the investigation of domestic spaces, the connection between the artifact and who would have used the artifact, the reconstruction of gender roles, and the analysis of gender relations based upon the archaeological information (Meyers 2003: 38). Focusing on the archaeology of agricultural and domestic spaces in pre-monarchal Israel, Meyers has challenged many of the assumptions people bring to the understanding of gender in ancient societies. Common misperceptions of ancient women include the ideas that women were to be quiet, subservient, veiled; they were oppressed, devalued, inferior; tasked primarily with care-giving and confined to the home (Meyers 2003: 31). Women are defined negatively against the men. Yet, through the demonstration of the economic value of “women’s work” in ancient agrarian contexts, integrating written texts, artifacts, and ethnographic information, Meyers paints a picture of the gender roles and relations in ancient Israel that is complex and multi-faceted.

Men and women’s roles were differentiated, and, as with any sex differentiation, there were certain hierarchies that operated in the organization of the household and society. However, women’s work was essential to the economy of the family and therefore highly valued. In subsistence economies, it is necessary for all people to contribute to the material wellbeing of the household. These communities cannot afford anyone—including children—to be unproductive. Economic power leads to other kinds of power. Meyers specifically examines bread production and women’s religious culture. In our culture, we tend

15 In fact, the first paper that called for an explicitly feminist approach to archaeology cited an early article by Carol Meyers as an example of the kind of work the authors were advocating (Conkey and Spector 1984: 20, although note the misspelling of Meyers’s name there).

to associate kitchen work with women's subservient position in the household. Yet, as Meyers argues, "by turning aside the present notion that kitchen work is menial and marginal, important aspects of women's roles in food preparation in premodern societies can be ascertained" (Meyers 2003: 39). People obtained over half of their daily caloric and nutritional intake from bread and other cereal products, and the production of this foodstuff was both time-consuming and labor-intensive. The fields of grain production appear to have been male-dominated (although they were not exclusively male spaces since women also contributed their labor to the planting and harvesting processes), but the work of bread production was female-dominated. Women were responsible for the grinding by hand of the grains, the mixing and kneading of the dough, and the baking of the bread. The work was long and tedious. Evidence from material remains, texts, and cross-cultural comparison indicates that women worked together to accomplish the task. Adolescent girls and adult women of a family, neighbors and relatives would grind and bake together in shared courtyards. Such work, then, helped to form familial and community bonds (Meyers 2003: 40–41).

How does bread-making, then, translate into power? Meyers distinguishes between the types of power available to women and men in any given society. She names the power that women wielded inside of their families, grounded in their contributions to the economy of the household, "informal power," which she contrasts to the more visible, "formal power" men wielded. She points out that "issues of household power in pre-modern agrarian society are typically resource based and involved labor output, expertise in technologies, and control of foodstuffs" (Meyers 2003: 42). In these scenarios, informal power is often just as important as the more formal power held in the hands of adult men. This informal power manifests itself in several different ways: social power within the household which would have included the power of decision-making; personal power and a sense of importance and worth within the family; and sociopolitical power obtained through the social networks that developed due to the communal nature of bread production. This sociopolitical power in particular would have made them valuable partners in the regulation of the community—they would be among the first to know about problems in other households (e.g., illnesses, resource issues), they would play a central role in brokering marriages and in identifying quarrels that might need more formal interventions (Meyers 2003: 42–43). Rather than marginalization through relegation to the kitchen, the "kitchen" was clearly a locus of power for women in Iron Age Israel.

Feminist approaches to archeological research as well as other forms of feminist historiography have also been transformative of our understanding

of other eras in biblical history. Feminist historians have documented women's roles in ancient Israel, early Judaism, and early Christianity and, therefore, have provided a fuller and more accurate picture of everyday life for both men and women in these eras. Such understandings also demonstrate that the biblical text is complicated, often engaging in polemical and prescriptive rhetoric rather than providing transparent description of gender realities (Matthews 2014: 235–36). Feminists have led the way in decentering the canon by looking at other written sources—non-canonical texts, inscriptions, magical incantations, medical texts, and more—to explore gender and sexuality (Brooten 1982, 1996; Burrus 1987; Kraemer 1988, 1992; Pagels 1989; Levine 1991; Schüssler Fiorenza 1993b; King 2003; Schaberg 2004). Feminist work is interdisciplinary and multi-dimensional, all of which results in a rich “heteroglossia” (Castelli 1994) of approaches, methods, and results.

Poststructuralism

Poststructuralism is an approach to knowledge that reaches across many fields, including both feminist theory and biblical scholarship. As the name implies, poststructuralism is rooted in and grows out of structuralism, another broad theoretical approach that crosses disciplines in both the humanities and the social sciences. First emerging in linguistics but then adeptly applied to anthropology and folklore studies, structuralism is essentially a theory about communication. People create relationships between disparate objects that facilitate interaction and exchange. These systems of relationship include language, myth, and story, as well as political and social arrangements. All aspects of culture are comprised of these structures and systems of communication and thus all aspects of culture can be understood in terms of the principles of structuralism. Poststructuralism builds on many of the insights of structuralism, but offers a trenchant critique as well. Poststructuralism probes beneath the surface to uncover the underlying relationships and meanings of any given text or cultural system. Like structuralism, poststructuralism also understands language as a system of differences; however, structures and systems are not ahistorical and cross-cultural, existing inherently in human psychology and manifesting similarly in societies around the world. Rather, according to poststructuralism, structures and systems are always also systems of exclusion, organized according to patterns of power and control (Aichele 2016: 6–7; Koused 2008: 499–501).

A particularly relevant example for feminism can be seen in the understanding of binary opposition. According to structuralism, a fundamental human impulse is to divide the world into binary oppositions: day/night; heavens/earth; spirit/matter; inside/outside; man/woman. These relationships aid

understanding and the binary structures then form a kind of scaffolding upon which other systems can be built. What poststructuralism points out is that these oppositions are not neutral; rather, there is always a hierarchy implied in the binary. One side is always valued more than the other, and those on the superior side have a vested interest in maintaining the hierarchy. The process of creating the categories and hierarchies is masked so that they appear to be natural and self-evident. Yet, as poststructuralism also points out, the binary oppositions are unstable. Each side of the opposition is only meaningful in terms of its opposite; each term is dependent upon the other for its definition. After all, what does “day” mean without the attendant definition of “night”? This observation is particularly acute with the binary man/woman. In patriarchal societies, men define ideal masculinity over and against femininity. Thus, whereas men are strong, intelligent, and rational, women are weak, foolish, and emotional. Men are associated with the mind and spirit, whereas women are mired in the body and materiality. Through these binary oppositions, men seek to exclude from themselves attributes that society devalues. What a post-structuralist analysis reveals is that, since the definition of the one is dependent upon the definition of the other, men can never completely exclude the feminine. The mutual dependence undermines the one term’s purported superiority. The interrelationship is exposed and the hierarchy is undermined, or, in the language of poststructuralism, the binary opposition is deconstructed (Bible and Culture Collective 1995: 122–23).

Deconstruction is only one, albeit a common, form of poststructuralism. It is especially useful for the reading of texts (“text” is defined expansively within poststructuralism to include various kinds of social constructs and symbolic representations). Deconstruction often begins with the exclusions in the text:

Deconstruction seeks out those points within a system where it disguises the fact of its incompleteness. Its failure to cohere as a self-contained whole. By locating these points and applying a kind of leverage to them, one deconstructs the system. This amounts neither to destroying nor dismantling the system in toto, but rather demonstrating how the (w)hole, through the masking of its logical and rhetorical contradictions, maintains the illusion of its completeness.

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Ultimately, poststructuralism is suspicious of all grand narratives, but seeks to uncover the exclusions, ambiguities, gaps, inconsistencies, and contradictions in any given system (for a more in depth discussion of poststructuralism and the Bible, see Aichele 2016).

Feminist theory and biblical scholarship have had an uneasy relationship with poststructuralism. Some have embraced the method and the philosophy; others have issued scathing rejoinders (for an early collection of essays on both sides of the debate, see Nicholson 1990). Poststructuralism provides a powerful critique of gender ideologies and binary sex/gender systems; however, in deconstructing the binary opposition of man/woman, the very category of “woman” is also deconstructed. Feminism has long embraced the idea that femininity and masculinity did not comprise a set of fixed characteristics that arise naturally from female and male bodies; yet, poststructuralist understandings go beyond this model of social constructivism to challenge not just the content of the categories but also the very categories themselves. What does feminism mean, then, without the subject “woman”? Is political action sustainable without an overarching understanding of women’s identity and women’s experience to fuel the fight and give coherence to the program? Isn’t it suspicious that just when women and other marginalized people are claiming the power of identity and agency, intellectual (mostly white, male) elites are calling these very notions into question? Embracing both the promise and the peril, poststructuralist approaches to gender create a third way that is neither essentialist nor constructivist (Fuss 1989; Tolbert 2000: 101–103). The combination of poststructuralism and feminism has had profound effects on feminist theory and feminist (biblical) interpretation.

Feminist biblical scholars have engaged theorists such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault, Eve Sedgwick, and Judith Butler. Feminist poststructuralist work has been done by Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn (1993), Yvonne Sherwood (1996), Tina Pippin (1999), Jorunn Økland (2005), Jennifer Koused (2006), Erin Runions (2001, 2014), Joseph Marchal (2006), Teresa J. Hornsby (2006), Fiona Black (2009), and Rhiannon Graybill (2016)—although some of these engagements trespass into other categories such as queer criticism, masculinity studies, postcolonialism, Marxist criticism, and cultural studies. As poststructuralism challenges the very nature of categories, it is difficult to demarcate precise borders between these approaches that intersect with and lay adjacent to poststructuralist perspectives. Poststructuralist understandings have helped generate intersectional analysis, critical race theory, and postcolonial criticism. Poststructuralist work has also opened feminism up to gender and queer theory, interpretation, and activism.

Postcolonial Interpretation

Feminism is not an invention of the United States, or even of the West. Rather, there have been important feminist movements that have emerged in various

locales all over the world. Feminist biblical interpretation necessarily has its longest and deepest roots in Europe and North America simply because these have been the areas dominated by Christianity and (by a much lesser extent) Judaism, the two religions that read the Bible. As Christianity spread through colonial expansion, other people came into increasing contact with the biblical text. In recent decades, the voices of women and men from Africa, Asia, Latin America, Australia, as well as native peoples from all over the world have been heard and a distinct field of postcolonial feminist interpretation has emerged.

Literary critics were the first to theorize a postcolonial method of reading texts. Edward Said's groundbreaking work *Orientalism* (1978) established postcolonial critical analysis. Said argues that the Western imagination has created the "Orient" as a repository for all that the West wants to exclude from its own definition (Ashcroft et al. 2007: 153–54): where the West is rational and controlled, the Orient is emotional and sensuous; where the West is dynamic and advanced, the Orient is static and backwards. In short, the West creates an Eastern "Other." These ideologies of the West's superiority are then used to justify the political and military intrusions into the Middle East and Asia. At the same time, colonial discourses are neither stable nor absolute; power is not uni-directional (Foucault is an important foundation in postcolonial analysis); and the cultures of the colonizer and the colonized are not pure. Homi K. Bhabha (1994) introduces the concepts of ambivalence, mimicry, and hybridity in the colonial encounter. For Bhabha, the rhetoric of the colonizers betrays ambivalence—the subject peoples are considered inferior but also desirable. In addition, the subject peoples are ambivalent about the colonizers—there is resistance but also adoption and adaptation of the colonizer's culture (Ashcroft et al. 2007: 10). People of the colonized society take on the culture and values of the colonizing society in a process called "mimicry." Behavior imitating the colonial oppressor is often decried, but Bhabha points out the potentially subversive power of mimicry, especially since mimicry is also a form of mockery. In addition, the fact that colonized peoples can adopt Western culture undercuts any notion of essential differences and, therefore, deconstructs the very ideologies upon which colonization is based. Bhabha also underscores that cultural exchange works both ways. A colonized society neither maintains its original native culture nor succumbs fully to the hegemony of the colonizer's culture; the colonizer is also changed in the encounter. In the new contact zone (or "third space"), there is a creative and dynamic interaction between the two; both construct and become dependent upon each other. Bhabha calls this process "hybridity" (Ashcroft et al. 2007: 108–11). Hybrid identities are complex and shifting.

Before the writings of Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak had already brought gender analysis to postcolonial criticism. In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1985) she critiques the notion of the subaltern in postcolonial studies (Ashcroft et al. 2007: 200–201). The subaltern, a term first used by Antonio Gramsci then later developed by Ranajit Guha as the founder of the Subaltern Studies group, names the inferior groups who are subjected to the elite dominant culture. Spivak notes a certain essentialism in postcolonial discussion of the subaltern, one which she thinks is inescapable, because this group is always defined by its relationship to the elite. She uses gender, then, as a critical intervention to disrupt subaltern studies and further explore her question, noting that women have been invisible both as subjects and objects of colonial and postcolonial histories. Ultimately, she concludes that the subaltern cannot speak, at least not in a pure manner, outside of the colonial systems it seeks to overturn. These three theorists—Said, Bhabha, and Spivak—provide the theoretical framework for postcolonial feminist biblical studies (Tan 2014: 283). Although not all postcolonial biblical scholarship is poststructuralist, postcolonial theory is, as evidenced by Said, Bhabha, and Spivak, fundamentally informed by poststructuralism.

Postcolonial perspectives first entered biblical studies through the work of Fernando Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah. Postcolonial biblical studies begins with an understanding of social location and real readers. “Real readers” include people who are not academically trained in biblical studies, but encounter the Bible in religious communities or other non-academic spaces. Biblical scholars can be “real readers” too, insofar they do not hide behind a mask of scholarly objectivity but, instead, recognize how their social locations and agendas shape their interpretations. This insistence on the importance of social location—that who you are influences how you read—overlaps with feminist interpretation in their foregrounding of the reader. In addition, Segovia proposes three “postcolonial optics” through which to read biblical texts (Segovia 1998: 56–63). First, there is the recognition that the bulk of the Bible was actually written by subject peoples struggling to maintain their own identities despite the imperial regimes under which they lived. The Hebrew Bible first emerged in its present form as a result of the Babylonian conquest and subsequent exile. Texts continued to be written under Persian and Greek rule. Hellenization produced a hybrid identity for Jews both in the land and in the diaspora, albeit in different ways. In the first and second centuries, Jesus and his followers forged communities in opposition to Roman rule. Empire has left deep marks (even wounds) in the biblical text. Second, postcolonial criticism charts the ways in which the Bible has been used as an instrument of colonial oppression, justifying the policies of Western imperialism and even

providing methods of subject(ificat)ion as missionaries became one wing of a larger violent colonial enterprise. Third, in the hands of the subaltern, the Bible becomes a way to resist imperialism as colonial subjects wrest the power of the scriptures from the hands of their oppressors and read for themselves. These “voices from the margin” challenge the very notion of center and periphery as they bring new insights to the biblical text and issue new challenges to the vision of justice in the world.

While postcolonial biblical critics like Segovia and Sugirtharajah are certainly open to feminist perspectives (Segovia even lists “women from the West” and the “Two-Thirds World” as part of the resistance to the center that has arisen in biblical studies [Segovia 1998: 62]), Musa Dube and Kwok Pui-lan have been instrumental in the development of a specifically postcolonial feminist criticism of the Bible. Dube, for example, has pioneered biblical interpretation from an African feminist perspective. In her first major work, Dube uncovers colonizing ideologies in the New Testament (specifically looking at Matthew), and constructs a method by which these ideologies can be decolonized (2000). Given her own experience of the Bible about a liberating and benevolent God but being employed as a weapon of conquest throughout Africa, she discusses how the production of texts in general, ancient and modern, has been an essential element of imperialism (Dube 2000: 48). Is there a space, then, for feminist anti-imperialist readings of the Bible? Dube finds such a space in the African Independent Churches. The African Independent Churches (AICs) began as an alternative to the Christianity controlled by white, Western men; it is thus a challenge to the racism, sexism, and cultural chauvinism of missionary Christianity. AICs are open to traditional African religiosity and give particular emphasis to the Spirit (or *Semoya*). For Dube, reading the Bible to and with the women of the AICs (most of whom are illiterate) produces an encounter with the Spirit which taps into the liberating potential of the biblical text and facilitates the work of decolonization.

Dube’s work highlights many aspects of postcolonial feminist biblical criticism. There is both critique and recovery; it names the Bible’s imperialist ideologies but also notes the ways in which the scripture resists those same ideologies. There is also an openness to non-Christian theology and ritual. Feminists in general move outside of the canon, but feminists in postcolonial contexts do so in even more radical ways, going outside and beyond even non-canonical Jewish and Christian materials to include the scriptures and practices of other world religions (Buell 2014: 304–305). For Dube, African religious and cultural traditions like veneration of the ancestors (Dube 1999), divination (Dube 2001b, 2006), and storytelling (Dube 2001a) inform Christian interpretation and theology. She is also committed to reading the Bible with ordinary,

non-academic readers and listening to their interpretations. Finally, she is active in the world, not just in the academy (see Dube 2005 for her work on AIDS in Africa). In her reading, Dube insists on her hybrid identity: “a black Motswana African woman” (Dube 1996: 10) who earned her biblical studies degrees in the West; she is also a Methodist who is not only involved in African Independent Churches but also indelibly marked by the indigenous religions of her home.

It is difficult to sharply demarcate “Western” from “global” feminist approaches, especially since postcolonial criticism insists that all participate in and are affected by imperialist ideologies. Postcolonial feminism has affinities with other feminist approaches, particularly ones that emphasize liberation. Kwok especially notes the interconnections between Schüssler Fiorenza’s work and postcolonial criticism, “because both emphasize the decolonizing task of biblical hermeneutics and the process of conscientization” (Kwok 2009: 191). Schüssler Fiorenza has read and been deeply influenced by biblical and theological scholarship from feminists outside of North America and Europe, and has actively worked to support women in religion all over the world (Mitchem 2009: 200). Always sensitive to the interlocking oppressions of patriarchy and imperialism (hence, her coining the term “kyriarchy”), Schüssler Fiorenza has also increasingly turned her attention to sustained postcolonial analysis in her own work. In *The Power of the Word*, she explores “not only how the power of empire has shaped and affected Christian scriptures, but also how it still shapes our self-understandings today,” especially in and through the writings of Paul (Schüssler Fiorenza 2007: 6). Joseph Marchal, another white Western scholar, insists that neither feminist nor postcolonial criticism “will live up to its critical potential if it fails to adequately grapple with the intersecting dynamics of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and empire” (Marchal 2008: 3). He too focuses on Paul, arguing that “both Paul’s letters and Pauline scholarship are the results of imperially gendered activities” (Marchal 2008: 4). In the hands of people all over the world, postcolonial feminist criticism of the Bible provides the tools for sharp political critique.

Postcolonial feminist biblical criticism is, however, subject to critiques of its own, even from a feminist perspective. In a special roundtable discussion on anti-Judaism and postcolonial criticism, Amy-Jill Levine notes that “in their effort to name and so to overcome kyriarchal elements in their own cultures, feminist postcolonial biblical scholars often re-create the dichotomizing rhetoric of the Bible and many of its interpreters. Specially, these readers identify the evil of their own circumstance as an elitist Judaism, which both they and Jesus oppose” (Levine 2004: 91). Positioning Jesus as a liberator, even as a feminist, over and against an oppressive, calcified, legalistic Judaism is deeply rooted in

traditional Christian exegesis, historical-critical biblical scholarship, liberation theology, and some early feminist readings (see Plaskow 1978). It is also reproduced in some postcolonial feminist interpretations (see Levine 2004: 92–94 for multiple examples). Levine then goes on to explore the causes and propose some cures for this “disease.” Ultimately, anti-Judaism in postcolonial contexts is a “Western export” (Levine 2004: 96). It is learned in Western academic classrooms, shipped out when students earn their degrees and return to their home countries, and then comes back when they write and publish in the venues of biblical scholarship. Since the origin is the Western classroom, the site of treatment must be there as well. Levine proposes, among other ideas, requiring New Testament Ph.D. programs to include classes on Second Temple Judaism; including religious prejudice alongside the list of other “sins” like racism, sexism, classism, and ethnocentrism; understanding and giving Jewish cultural practices sympathetic treatment; and recognizing Jewish voices as part of the conversation in postcolonial critique and hence including them in postcolonial collections (Levine 2004: 96–98). Taking a note from postcolonial criticism itself, “reading with” Jews would be an effective way to begin eradicating anti-Judaism from feminist postcolonial writings on the Bible. In her response to Levine, Kwok especially welcomes this invitation and issues an invitation of her own: she invites Jewish feminists to enter into conversations with the people in postcolonial contexts, so that all can begin to understand the pain and the suffering of the other (Kwok 2004: 104). In this way, then, “we can confront our prejudices and strengthen mutual understanding for our common struggle for greater peace and justice in the world” (Kwok 2004: 100).

As Yak-hwee Tan states in her assessment of the field,

[W]ith the end of formal colonialism, the rise of postcolonialism, and the continued impact of imperial culture everywhere in the form of neocolonialism, postcolonial feminist biblical criticism attracts a diverse group of interested biblical scholars using multifaceted approaches to interrogate imperial reality in its different forms and guises.

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For feminists in the West, especially white feminists, postcolonial analysis has provided a way to explore their own ambivalent social location as both part of the dominant culture and subject to its gender ideologies—and hence as simultaneously victimizers and victims. For feminists in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, postcolonial analysis provides the means for confronting, resisting, and transforming oppressive ideologies. In today’s globalized world where both people and knowledge move back and forth across borders and identities

are formed in complicated socio-political contexts, postcolonial feminist perspectives make the kind of ethical demands necessary for the creation of a world of equality and justice for all.

Gender and Sexuality

Much feminist analysis still focuses on women both in and out of the text, but a growing number of feminist biblical scholars have begun to move beyond the traditional understandings of the category of “woman” and have engaged gender analysis, queer interpretation, critical masculinity studies, and even transgender biblical readings. The call for papers for the 2016 meeting of the Women’s Caucus of the American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature reflects these new possibilities. The theme is “Crossing Boundaries: The Transformation of Feminist Scholarship,” and the sections include new books on gender, intersectionality, transnational, transgender, and other queer approaches to religion and its sacred texts. The transformation of feminist scholarship, fueled in part by the challenges of poststructuralism as well as the political commitments of twenty-first-century feminism, has tested the very limits of what feminism means and who feminism is for. As Deryn Guest asks in her study of the new gender criticism and its relationship to feminist biblical scholarship: “Will these prove to be two distinct (though overlapping) methodological approaches, or might it be that we are on the verge of something virtually unthinkable for those who have been committed to feminist biblical scholarship—that it is time for it to give way to a new day dawning?” (Guest 2012: 7–8).

Gender criticism and gender studies is a very broad field that is “theoretically rich”—shaped by feminist theory, queer theory, postcolonial theory, and critical approaches to masculinity, race, and class (Guest 2012: 8). Gender studies tends to be more inclusive of different voices, including those who have had an uneasy (sometimes even hostile) relationship with women’s studies or the women’s movement. The field proves a more hospitable space for work on and by men (gay and straight), lesbians, bisexuals, intersex people, and transgender people (Guest 2012: 10–11). Taking a few notes from poststructuralism, gender studies uses the tools of various theoretical perspectives but also interrogates them; it includes a vast array of identities but also understands them to be discursively produced and performed (Guest 2012: 11–12). In the early years of the twenty-first century, gender studies began to emerge in the study of the Bible as a way to both broaden and sharpen the critique (cf. Rooke 2007), drawing from queer biblical interpretation and biblical scholars’ growing interest in masculinity (Smit 2017).

An important theoretical partner for gender criticism and queer criticism, including how they manifest in biblical studies, is Judith Butler. In Butler's groundbreaking work *Gender Trouble* (1990), she interrogates the links among sex, gender, and sexuality that form the basis of the heterosexual matrix. She makes two key observations. First, she reverses the standard social constructivist understanding of the relationship between sex and gender. Instead of understanding the construction of masculinity and femininity as a result of having two types of bodies that fall neatly into two categories—male and female—Butler proposes that we classify bodies into two categories because we have already constructed two genders. In other words, binary gender categories are not the *result* of a fixed dimorphic biology but rather the *cause* of such an understanding of biology (Butler 1990: 6–7). Second, she argues that “so-called heterosexual conventions” as an element of homosexual identity and practice (e.g., butch/femme) do not reaffirm the naturalness of heterosexuality. Rather, the replication calls attention to the constructed character of both: “gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy” (Butler 1990: 31, emphasis original). In these two moves, Butler dismantles the connections forged among sex, gender, and sexuality that appear in society as natural and inevitable.

What is gender if not a fixed set of characteristics arising from a particular body? What is gender if not a culturally constructed set of practices affixed to certain bodies? Then what? For Butler, gender is neither biologically determined nor culturally constructed, as it is usually understood. Rather, gender is a *performance*, a particular set of characteristics, desires, affects, and gestures that are repeated over and over again, so much so that they seem natural, even feel natural, to the body that enacts them. It is the performance of gender that creates gender identity—the doer is formed by the doing (Butler 1990: 25). The body is not a given but a set of politically and socially generated boundaries (Butler 1990: 33). Influenced by poststructuralist notions of language, especially the concept of iterability (from Jacques Derrida), Butler proposes that the process whereby we become gendered beings is also the process whereby the categories are disrupted. When one repeats, the repetition is never exact; when one performs, the performance always changes. The same actions in different contexts produce different meanings. To illustrate, Butler focuses on drag performances (Butler 1990: 136–39) and lesbian butch/femme roles (Butler 1990: 123–24). In both, there is a dissonance between the gender presented through clothing, speech, mannerisms, comportment, et cetera, and the anatomical body. This dissonance denaturalizes the categories, demonstrates their interdependence, and can also open up spaces for resignification and subversion.

In concert with Butler, queer politics and queer theory insist “on the variability of desire, such that there is no necessary line-up between bodily shape, gender identification, and sexual desires and practices” (Alsop et al. 2002: 96). As queer theory is brought to bear on biblical studies, queer interpretation takes on several distinct albeit interrelated forms. First, heeding the call of postcolonialists and others who underscore the importance of social location for biblical interpretation, queer interpretation can be defined as biblical readings done by people who identify as queer (gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people, and more), especially as that identity influences both the questions they ask the text and the answers they derive (Stone 2001: 19). However, as Ken Stone points out, there is no singular “queer” identity and no simple connection between identity and experience (Stone 2001: 21–22). Gay men and lesbians, for example, both experience same-sex desire but their similarity of experience may end there. In addition, queer theory is also a means for interrogating identity and experience, destabilizing any clear demarcation between “man” and “woman,” “homosexual” and “heterosexual,” “queer” and “non-queer” readers. There are not just two but an infinite variety of genders, sexes, and sexualities. In the end, queer biblical scholarship, whether done by those who identify as queer or by those who identify otherwise, takes a critical stance toward normalizing discourses, especially ones around sexual practices and sexual identities. Queer theory includes critical analyses of sex and sexuality but also goes beyond just being an iteration of sexuality studies. Rather, “an important aim” for queer studies is “to interrogate how certain norms are created and enforced . . . particularly given how people socially construct the meaning of something like ‘sexuality’ differently with and through gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, age, ability, and national or colonial factors” (Marchal 2014: 262). As categories and their combinations proliferate, the very notion of categorization is undermined.

Biblical scholars have made forays into queer theory and interpretation (in addition to those already cited, see Goss and West 2000; Moore 2001; Runions 2003; Martin 2006); there is now even a one-volume queer commentary on the Bible available (Guest et al. 2006). Until recently, neither feminist nor queer studies has focused extensively on the lives and experiences of transgender and intersex people.¹⁶ In fact, transgender and intersex issues have often been

16 Transgender is a term applied to a wide range of gender non-conforming identities, including but not limited to people who undergo some kind of bodily alteration through hormones and/or surgery. Intersex refers to a person born with sex characteristics that do not fall clearly into “male” or “female” categories, including but not limited to ambiguous external genitalia, chromosomes that do not align with visible sex organs, variety

met with hostility (see Guest 2012: 57–63, and Hornsby and Guest 2016: 6–7 for an account of the antagonism between feminists and both transgender and intersex people). This is, however, beginning to change; socially, politically, and philosophically, there is a growing recognition that there are a wide variety of bodies in the human community, and many differences in how people experience their bodies. In biblical studies, Teresa Hornsby and Deryn Guest have written the only full length work that outlines a transgender and intersex hermeneutic (cf. Marchal 2011). Hornsby and Guest propose that the history of biblical interpretation is deeply embedded in assumptions about a two-sex, two-gender system and the naturalness of heterosexuality. Instead of reading through the lens of heterosexist ideology, the authors draw on transgender theory (or trans theory) and the experiences of intersex and transgender people to dismantle the two-sex/two gender system that forms the heterosexual matrix (Hornsby and Guest 2016: 19). New understandings and assumptions about bodies, gender identity, and sexual expression, then, produce new interpretations of biblical texts. Hornsby and Guest begin with a reading of Genesis 1 that emphasizes the power of תְּהוֹמוֹת—the deep, dark abyss out of which all of creation originates. Guest writes,

Trans* people do not fit into the world of Gen[esis] 1 except, as I will argue, as individuals whose fluidity threatens the narrator's ideology of a God-ordained, ordered, binaried world. Reading backwards permits me to undo creation, to resist the assumptions and desires of the biblical narrator and to find in that primordial mix a surprisingly fruitful way of reconsidering our relationship with it, one that might allow chaos a voice. The rationale for doing so lies in the need to take ethical responsibility for biblical interpretation; that we question texts that make some lives unspeakable—that is, lives that are not routinely permitted to speak for themselves in theological discussions, and unspeakable in the sense that those lives are often plunged into the abject.

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in internal reproductive organs, or hormonal irregularities. Transgender and intersex activism are two distinct movements, sometimes in concert and sometimes at odds with one another. In particular, intersex activists object to being lumped into monikers like LGBTQI without adequate attention to distinct intersex issues and experiences. The primary objective of intersex activists is the right not to be subject to involuntary medical intervention, rejecting the very notion of “corrective” surgery, whereas trans activists often focus on the right to have surgery, arguing that it is corrective. In other words, sometimes trans and intersex activism work at cross-purposes.

The chapter proceeds with an eclectic method that deftly draws together grammatical analysis, philosophical theory of the abject and the monstrous, accounts of carnival freak shows and artist exhibitions, and historical-critical biblical scholarship. Attention to תהוֹם unsettles boundaries and underscores the creative power of chaos; attention to the dark and undifferentiated at the core of creation challenges the myth of the self-contained and stable body, and brings us to a recognition of our own strangeness and our own vulnerabilities. Hornsby and Guest continue to focus on transitions and transgressions, places where the body does not conform to dominant heterosexist ideologies, as they read 2 Samuel 6, Kings 9–10, and Revelation. Their book is not a critique of biblical perspectives on transgender and intersex issues, but rather a reading that presents the Bible as a resource for thinking about the world in fluid, open, and non-binary ways.

Gender criticism and queer criticism, in the ways they overlap and in the ways they are distinct, often offer a more radical critique of biblical scripture and biblical authority than many interpreters (even feminist interpreters) are comfortable with. Any biblical interpretation has implications for theology and biblical authority for those who have faith commitments to the text; as Guest writes, “a gender critique, with its opening of the categories of gender, sex, and sexuality to radical deconstruction, including the character of the deity who is gendered and queered just as much as the other characters of biblical literature, takes us to a very different place than Tribble’s depatriarchalized scripture” (Guest 2012: 22). Describing Yahweh as a “top” (Boer 2001) or entangled in a love triangle with David and Jonathan (Jennings 2001; cf. Jennings 2005) has burst any constraint that traditional piety or reverence may have afforded. Shaking off such constraints brings us into very productive territory because, through the lens of gender and queer criticisms, the Bible is more surprising and more unsettling than many traditional, even more traditional feminist, understandings allow.

A recent revision of the classic *Judges and Method* demonstrates the ways in which gender criticism sits alongside feminist criticism. In the 1995 edition, J. Cheryl Exum presents feminist interpretation of biblical texts by focusing on a selection of passages from the book of Judges (Judges 4–5, 11, 13–16, and 19) and foregrounding the question, “whose interests are being served?” (Exum 1995). From Exum’s feminist perspective these stories all betray a fear of women and women’s sexuality—a fear that leads to violence against women. The recognition of gender violence in the Bible can contribute to the political enterprise of feminism since the eradication of gender violence is a key plank in its platform. Exum outlines the questions feminist criticism asks,

demonstrates the reading method of feminism as she pursues those questions, and finally notes how her reading can be brought to bear on the larger world where these fears of women and women's sexuality have violent consequences for real women, not just characters in a text.

In the 2007 version of *Judges and Method*, Exum's essay still represents an important way of reading Judges but the new edition has been supplemented by a chapter on gender criticism written by Ken Stone (Stone 2007). After a clear and succinct explanation of the origins and commitments of gender criticism (including its debt to and differences from feminism, queer theory, and masculinity studies), Stone engages a reading of Abimelech in Judges 9. In particular, Stone focuses on the gender ideologies assumed in the text and how these ideologies are unstable. Masculinity is clearly associated with male bodies but it is also not automatic—a man can fail to be masculine, as Abimelech does when he loses the battle and is killed by a millstone hurtled down from a tower by a woman. Gender criticism allows for the analysis of Abimelech, the woman who killed him, and even the instrument of his death (for millstones are indeed “gendered”). The plot, characterization, and symbolism all contribute to the gender ideologies encoded in the story. But even as certain gender ideologies are encoded, they are also exposed as being incoherent and unstable (note here the essential contribution of poststructuralism to gender criticism). If a man can be “un-manned,” then what does it even mean to be a man? Where are the clear connections between men and masculinity, women and femininity? Where are the firm boundaries between these categories? Feminist criticism can and sometimes does question its own categories, but this destabilization of categories (even as they are used for analysis) is a distinguishing feature of gender criticism.

Gender criticism does not supersede or replace feminist criticism; instead, like Stone's chapter in *Judges and Method*, it serves as a supplement. Like all supplements, it both supports and challenges. To return briefly to Judith Butler, Butler's work marks some of the primary differences between feminist and gender theory. By calling into question not just gender binaries but the binary of bodily sex, Butler destabilizes the very category “woman” upon which feminism is built. By showing how there is no pure space outside of the dominant power structures on which to stand and critique, Butler implicates feminism in everything it opposes (Hornsby 2006: 71–75). Gender criticism issues a fundamental challenge to the very ground of feminist criticism. At the same time, gender criticism exposes and corrects some of the absences of feminism, offering a more expansive theoretical “tool kit” that includes critical masculinity studies, queer studies, trans and intersex studies, gay and lesbian studies

(Guest 2012: 150). In the best spirit of feminism, academic work is brought to bear on the world, and gender criticism offers a radically inclusive vision of the human community.

Part 4. Eve: The Mother of All Feminist Interpreters

In the beginning, God created sexism . . . or, so the history of biblical interpretation would have us believe. When asking questions about the nature of men and women, gender roles, and sexuality, there has been more ink spilled over interpretations of the two creation accounts in Genesis than any other biblical passage. The weight placed upon these few chapters, even upon a couple of verses in these passages, is considerable. Both Jews and Christians have sought to understand what it means to be human, including what gender, sex, and sexuality mean (or should mean) through these verses for millennia.¹⁷ The stories of the first people are not just about individuals; instead, they are regarded as stories about all people, giving insight into human nature, God's intentions, and the very order of the universe. They were not always thus regarded. In the Bible itself, creation is an important theme. Over and over, the biblical text asserts that the Israelite God Yahweh is responsible for all of creation. Creation is such a monumental and defining event that the story is told over and over again (e.g., Genesis 1, Genesis 2–3, Psalm 104, Proverbs 9, Job 38). And yet, not once are Adam and Eve referenced after they give birth to the next generation in Genesis 4 and 5, not once is any law or ethic grounded in the story of the first humans. The use of Adam and Eve as paradigms, especially as paradigms of proper gender roles and relations, emerged in the Second Temple period and became established in Christianity during the second century CE. The creation stories in Genesis have exerted tremendous power over the Western imagination ever since.

Genesis opens with two creation stories: Gen. 1:1–2:4a and Gen. 2:4b–3. In the first account, God creates the whole world—from light to human beings—in six days and rests on the seventh. Man and woman are created at the same time as the last act of creation, both equally in the image of God, both given the same command to be fruitful and multiply and subdue the earth (1:26–30).

17 The story of Adam and Eve, if not the Genesis account itself, is important to Islam as well. For a comprehensive source book on interpretations of Adam and Eve from c. 200 B.C.E. through the twentieth century and in all three monotheistic traditions, see Kvam et al. 1999.

The story then begins again in Genesis 2. In this story, the order of creation is more haphazard. From a pre-existing dry and dusty earth, God forms a man in order to work the soil (2:7). Then, God creates vegetation and plants the Garden of Eden. When God observes that it is not good for the man to be alone, God creates all of the animals, none of which are sufficiently compatible with the man. So, God puts the man to sleep and performs an operation of sorts as God pulls the woman from his rib (or side). The man is delighted (2:18–24). Although not named immediately, this is the creation of Adam and Eve.

Elements of the first creation have been important in understandings of human nature, especially the idea that we alone of all creatures are in the image of God. When it comes to issues of gender, sex, and sexuality, however, the emphasis has been almost exclusively on Adam and Eve in the second story. The myth does not end with Eve's creation. Instead, the story continues in Genesis 3 with the entrance of the snake. When the Garden was planted, Adam was informed that he could eat of any of the produce of the trees but he could not eat of the tree in the middle of the garden, the tree with the interminable name: "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:16–17). The consequences of breaking this commandment would be death. When the snake sidles up to Eve a few verses later, it contradicts God's command and provides an alternative understanding of the consequence of eating the fruit of this tree: "you shall not die but, instead, your eyes will be open and you will know good from evil, like God" (Gen. 3:4–5). "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate" (Gen. 3:6). They immediately recognize that they are naked and when they hear God walking in the cool of the day, they hide themselves. The chapter ends with a series of curses levied at the snake, the ground, the man, and the woman. The snake is cursed to slide along on its belly, and enmity is placed between the snake and the woman for the rest of time; the woman is cursed with pain in child-bearing and is made subservient to her husband; the ground is cursed with brambles; and the man is cursed to work the hard and unyielding land until he dies and returns to it (Gen. 3:14–19). Adam and Eve are then banished from the Garden, lest they also find and eat of the "tree of immortality." They make their new home, with their new awareness of the world, east of Eden.

One cannot overemphasize the importance of this story in the history of gender ideologies (Stewart 2012: 46). In Christianity, an interpretation of Adam and Eve is presented in the New Testament itself: "Let a woman learn in silence and full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a

man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty" (1 Tim. 2:11–15). The interpretation supports gender hierarchies, and mandates silent and submissive behavior for women in the community. By the fourth century, Christian theology also developed the idea of original sin, a wound in human nature that inclines us to sin from the moment we are born, a sin that continues to stain the soul and can only be washed away by the blood of Jesus through baptism. Eve's act, then, is not just a mistake that alters the course of her life; it is a sin that alters the course of human history. It does not just result in her banishment from Eden; it closes off the gates of eternal life to all people until Jesus comes to open them again. As Eve becomes the paradigm for all women, all women then came to bear the responsibility for original sin and its consequences. These ideas about sin and salvation were a cornerstone of early and medieval Christian theology (Kvam et al. 1999: 108–248; Lerner 1993: 140–42).

Neither Judaism nor Islam developed a notion of original sin, and therefore do not make Eve (and by extension all women) responsible for altering history, deforming human nature, and imperiling salvation. However, Eve is still negatively assessed in ways that have consequences for women and their roles. In Judaism, "the rabbinic Eve became tremendously important to Jewish women in subsequent centuries" (Kvam et al. 1999: 74; see also Aschkenasy 1986 and Bronner 1994). In Islam, Eve is never mentioned by name in the Qur'an and both the man and the woman are equally culpable for the disobedience that results in humanity's fall. Still, a gender hierarchy in Islam is based on the idea that men were created to rule and women to be ruled: "Men are protectors of women, because God has made some of them excel others and because they spend their wealth on them. So virtuous women are obedient" (4:34; see Kvam et al. 1999: 178–84 for other relevant Qur'anic passages). Passages about the first woman in the Qur'an become the basis for laws about women in Islamic societies (Kvam et al. 1999: 185–203).

Summarizing the popular ideas about Eve and therefore all women that emerged in the monotheistic traditions, especially in Christianity, Phyllis Trible enumerates:

A male God creates first man (2:7) and last woman (2:22); first means superior and last means inferior or subordinate.

Woman is created for the sake of man: a helpmate to cure his loneliness (2:18–23).

Contrary to nature, woman comes out of man; she is denied even her natural function of birthing and that function is given to man (2:21–22).

Woman is the rib of man, dependent upon him for life (2:21–22).

Taken out of man (2:23), woman has a derivative, not an autonomous, existence.

Man names woman (2:23) and thus has power over her.

Man leaves his father's family in order to set up through his wife another patriarchal unit.

Woman tempted man to disobey and thus she is responsible for sin in the world (3:6); she is untrustworthy, gullible, and simpleminded.

Woman is cursed by pain in childbirth (3:16); pain in childbirth is a more severe punishment than man's struggles with the soil; it signified that woman's sin is greater than man's.

Woman's desire for man (3:16) is God's way of keeping her faithful and submissive to her husband.

God gives man the right to rule over woman (3:16).

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Trible notes that “this misogynous reading has acquired a status of canonicity so that those who deplore and those who applaud the story both agree upon its meaning” (Trible 1978: 73). Eve looms large in the history of sexism in the West, especially the Christian West. Consequently, Eve is often the first biblical figure to be addressed by feminist interpreters.

According to Gerda Lerner, the first woman-focused alternative interpretation of Eve comes from Hildegard of Bingen, the medieval nun and mystic. Although she does regard Eve as weaker than Adam because of her creation out of flesh rather than earth, Hildegard also regards the time in Eden as one of equality and mutuality between the sexes (Lerner 1993: 142–43). Christian de Pizan offers an even bolder reconsideration of Eve and, therefore, the nature of women and the relationship between the sexes. De Pizan was a writer who got embroiled in a verbal contest with Jean de Meung, author of *Roman de la rose*, a popular book that mocked women. As a part of this public debate, de Pizan wrote in 1405 *The Book of the City of Ladies*, which included numerous passages interpreting the Bible, including a discussion of Eve. Combining Genesis 1 with Genesis 2, de Pizan asserts that the woman was created in the image of God; she was also created out of Adam's side, thus implying equal companionship. In addition, de Pizan argues, the woman was created out of “the noblest substance which had ever been created: it was from the body of man from

which God made woman.” Created out of the noblest substance made her even nobler and therefore her place in creation did not make her secondary but instead superior. Her sin of eating the fruit provided the opportunity for Mary to lift humanity even higher than it would have been otherwise (Lerner 1993: 144–45; cf. de Pizan’s 1399 “Letter of the God of Love” in Kvam et al. 1999: 237–41). Christine de Pizan’s defense of women inaugurated a conversation in Europe about the relationship of the sexes that lasted centuries. A common theme was Eve’s superiority based upon her creation from a superior substance and a reevaluation of Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit—either it is an essential step on the road to salvation or it shows Adam as more culpable than she (Lerner 1993: 145–60).

In the Americas, Sarah and Angelina Grimké were among the strongest and earliest voices for women’s equality, and they built their argument in part on an interpretation of the Adam and Eve stories. Both were passionately committed to the abolition of slavery and to women’s rights. After being repeatedly censored for her public speaking in support of abolition, Sarah penned in 1838 *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, which was “the most radical feminist work of her time” (Lerner 1993: 160). She asserted the equality of men and women in their creation, and the equality of men and women in their sin. Adam and Eve may have fallen from innocence, she writes, “*but not from equality*” (emphasis original, as quoted in Kvam et al. 1999: 342). She then shifted the understanding of the pronouncements in Genesis 3 about Adam’s rule over Eve: these verses are not curses that are proscriptive, commanding gender hierarchy and women’s obedience; instead, they describe the consequence of the sin. All men and all women owe obedience only to God.

One of the most memorable speeches that uses biblical argument to advocate for both the abolition of slavery and the equality of the sexes is Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” Sojourner Truth (ca. 1791–1883) was born Isabella Baumfree, a slave in New York state. Freed when the New York legislature emancipated all enslaved peoples within its borders, she later became an activist and a Christian evangelist. Addressing the audience at the Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851, Truth mounted an ardent argument for women’s full participation in the political process by pairing Eve and Mary. Instead of citing Eve’s role in the advent of sin to argue that women should be excluded from public roles, Truth highlights Eve’s power: “Well if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again” (quoted in Pope-Levison 2012: 510). Mary, then, demonstrates the power of women to turn the world back around. Truth notes that Jesus came through God and Mary; therefore, men had nothing to do with bringing salvation into the world (Pope-Levison 2012: 510). In this way, Truth turns around the conventional negative

interpretation of Eve in order to demonstrate the power of women; she takes the common Christian understanding of Jesus as taking away original sin to vacate the curse on women.

The most complete feminist reading of the biblical scripture until contemporary biblical criticism was *The Woman's Bible*. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other members of her Revising Committee were well-versed in the biblical scholarship of the nineteenth century, much of which is still foundational for biblical understanding today. She begins her commentary on Genesis with Genesis 1:26–28, verses that treat men and women with full equality. Cady Stanton even goes further than human equality to note that the image of God is linked to the idea of gender differentiation: “If language has any meaning, we have in these texts a plain declaration of the existence of the feminine element in the Godhead, equal in power and glory with the masculine. The Heavenly Mother and Father!” (Cady Stanton 1974: 14). As she correctly notes, there is nothing in this first creation story to imply that men and women are anything other than equal. Ellen Battelle Dietrick, an active member of Cady Stanton's committee, adds comment to this passage. Dietrick was a suffrage activist who worked closely with Cady Stanton. She was also deeply concerned with the biblical and religious underpinnings of sexism, both in its intellectual and political manifestations. Not only did she join Cady Stanton in the writing of *The Woman's Bible*, but she also wrote *Women in the Early Christian Ministry*, which examined women's leadership roles in the early church and advanced an argument for women's liberation in her own day (Dietrick 1897). In *The Woman's Bible*, Dietrick notes the importance of recognizing that Genesis 1 and Genesis 2–3 are two different, contradictory stories from two different anonymous authors—she quickly dismisses the notion that Moses wrote the Torah and, instead, sketches the approach of the Documentary Hypothesis.¹⁸ Given two separate and contradictory stories (both of which cannot be true), Dietrick challenges women to choose for themselves which story is “more worthy of an intelligent woman's acceptance” (Cady Stanton 1974: 18). For her, it is clear that the first story embodies the truths of creation and the second is a result of human manipulation.¹⁹

18 Dietrick was a notable amateur Biblicalist. In *The Woman's Bible*, Dietrick makes the suggestion that much of the Hebrew Bible was composed in the Hasmonean period. She may be the first to argue this dating (Gruber 2003).

19 Specifically, Dietrick blames “some Jew” for the misogyny she sees in Genesis 2–3 (Cady Stanton 1974: 18). Anti-Judaism in the service of feminism has a long history in biblical interpretation.

Instead of an account which crowns women with dignity, power, and glory equal to men's, the second account depicts women as a "mere afterthought" whose only purpose is to keep men company (Cady Stanton 1974: 20). Even so, Cady Stanton offers a sympathetic reading of Eve's character. The woman is motivated by a thirst for knowledge and not greed or vanity; she is more positively portrayed than her husband (Cady Stanton 1974: 24; cf. pp. 26–27 for an entry by Lillie Devereux Blake). Cady Stanton also incorporates scientific understandings regarding the evolution of humanity (Darwinism) and the development of civilization. There have been matriarchies and patriarchies, she suggests, soon there will be an amphiararchy, where men and women are equal (Cady Stanton 1974: 25). In many ways, the exegesis of Cady Stanton and Dietrick is bold and innovative, sounding many of the themes that second wave feminist biblical interpreters will explore decades later. Their exegesis also covers the same ground as women had for a thousand years. After she sketches some one thousand years of feminist biblical criticism, Lerner remarks, "As one looks back at this unknown, monumental effort one is struck above all by the repetitiveness of the process. Over and over again, individual women criticized and re-interpreted the core biblical texts not knowing that other women before them had already done so" (Lerner 1993: 165). Instead of being able to build upon the work of predecessors, women had to expend valuable intellectual energy and waste time and effort on re-inventing interpretations that had already been thought, written, and published.

One of the great steps of progress in feminist intellectual history, as we move into the second wave of feminism, is that women are more integrated into the historical process and the feminist voices of both women and men are, therefore, preserved, read, studied, and debated. As we look at the interpretations of Eve that emerged with Tribble and beyond, what we see is a conversation that spans decades as each new interpreter picks up not only Genesis, but also a growing body of feminist work on Genesis. Each feminist adds her or his voice to this community, no longer a lone voice crying out in the wilderness.

As the first major feminist biblical interpreter, Phyllis Tribble tackles the traditional interpretation of Eve head on (Tribble 1973, 1978). Her basic thesis is that there is no sexism or misogyny in the text itself, but both result from the bias of translator and interpreter. As per her method of rhetorical criticism, Tribble subjects Genesis 2–3 to a careful and close reading, grounded in the Hebrew. The creation of the first person is not the creation of the first *man*. Rather, Tribble points out that God creates an אָדָם out of the אֶרֶץ—an earth creature out of the earth (Gen. 2:7). The word אָדָם in Hebrew can mean "man" (male person) but it can also mean "human being"; the latter is how Tribble translates

the word. She argues that the earth creature is sexually undifferentiated and that creation is a process whose story unfolds in the narrative (Trible 1978: 80).

The creation of the woman is also the creation of sexual differentiation and the creation of love. Contrary to traditional English translations, God does not seek to create a “helper” for the earth creature. Rather, Trible renders עֵזֶר as “companion,” because “the English word *helper* suggests an assistant, subordinate or inferior, while the Hebrew word *’ezer* carries no such connotation. To the contrary, in the Hebrew Scriptures this word often describes God as the superior who creates and saves Israel” (Trible 1978: 90). The writer of Genesis 2, however, did not intend to suggest that the woman was going to be either inferior or superior by using the word עֵזֶר. The very next word כְּנִגְדּוֹ, or “corresponding to,” implies identity and equality. God wanted to give the אָדָם an equal and appropriate partner.

When none of the animals suffice, God puts the אָדָם to sleep and removes the rib from the side. Out of the side, God builds up the woman. Her creation changes the very body of the earth creature. When she is brought before the creature, the אָדָם proclaims her name אִשָּׁה (“woman”), because from אִישׁ (“man”) she was taken (Gen 2:23). From the one earth creature, both man and woman are created, simultaneously not sequentially (Trible 1978: 97–98). The man has not named the woman as an act of possession and control; rather, the man has recognized sexual differentiation. Eros, desire, love has entered into the world (Trible 1978: 100). The woman was not created inferior, to be subordinate to and serve the man. Any interpretation of inferiority is a result of the sexism of the translator and the reader, not any inherent sexism in the text. Life for the man and the woman changes, however, in the next scene. Disobedience enters into the story and disrupts the order of the world and the relationship between the sexes.

Earlier in the narrative, the אָדָם is instructed not to eat of the fruit from the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen. 2:16–17). The serpent initiates a conversation with the woman, although the narrative uses plural verbs. The serpent may be talking directly to the woman but it includes the man in its queries, as if it assumes that she is the spokesperson for the two. Her answer does not just repeat the command of God, but adds to it as well—not only are they not to eat but they are also not permitted to touch the fruit—thus guaranteeing obedience. As Trible contends, “The response of the woman to the serpent reveals her as intelligent, informed, and perceptive. Theologian, ethicist, hermeneut, rabbi, she speaks with clarity and authority” (Trible 1978: 110). Even when she decides to follow the serpent’s advice and disobey God, she does not do so out of ignorance or weakness. She carefully considers the words of the serpent and contemplates the fruit of the tree.

The woman, then, finds the tree physically appealing, aesthetically pleasing, and above all, sapientially transforming. She is fully aware before she eats, her vision encompassing the gamut of life. Moreover, she does not discuss the matter with her man. She acts independently, seeking neither his permission nor his advice. At the same time, she is not secretive, deceptive, or withdrawn. In the presence of the man she thinks and decides for herself.

TRIBLE 1978: 112–13

There is nothing in the story to suggest inferior intellectual or moral capabilities; in fact, quite the opposite. It is the man who has the more problematic character. As the text makes clear (although traditional interpretations obscure), the man is standing next to the woman during the entire exchange with the serpent. He says nothing. The woman eats and hands him some of the fruit as well. He says nothing. He too eats. He is silent and passive; unlike the woman, the text gives its reader no access to his thought process. The implication is that he was not thinking much at all. Tribble writes, “If the woman is intelligent, sensitive, and ingenious, the man is passive, brutish, and inept” (Tribble 1978: 113).

The third scene upon which the tradition of women’s subordination is built is the scene where God confronts the human couple and punishes them for their disobedience. The traditional understanding is that the woman is primarily responsible for the crime and that she (and therefore all women for all time) is punished with painful childbirth and subordination to her husband (and to all men by implication). Tribble first shows how both the man and the woman are questioned by God (“the trial”) and how they confess their own actions and implicate others in the transgression. There is both “individual accountability” and “mutual responsibility.” Their judgments are equal (Tribble 1978: 127). Second, Tribble shows how the punishment of the serpent is constructed differently than either the punishment of the woman or the man. For example, the serpent’s punishment is called a “curse” but the human couple’s is not. She is not more responsible than any other party involved and her punishment is not greater. Third, Tribble does a close reading of God’s pronouncements on both the man and the woman. She concludes that the pronouncements have a dire effect on the relationship between the two. No longer will they live in harmony, equality, or mutuality. Hierarchy has indeed been introduced into the human community; where desire once brought them together, it has now been corrupted through division and domination. Tribble argues that these are not curses nor even punishments, but rather *consequences* that affect the two equally. The man is corrupted through becoming a master just as the woman is

corrupted through becoming a slave. “Truly, a love story has gone awry” (Trible 1978: 139).

Is the blame for the sexism of the story to be laid at the feet of the translator and the interpreter, thus absolving the ancient Hebrew storytellers and writers? Trible has a very strong argument, especially in her discussion of the creation of the woman. In no way does second seem to imply secondary; in no way does helper mean subordinate. But the problems of sexism are not completely solved by Trible’s analysis. Does “helper” really imply no inferiority? Are the pronouncements against the couple really just consequences? Is it really just as bad to be a master as it is to be a slave? There are certainly negative consequences for men in the gender hierarchies of society (and as researchers turn to issues of masculinity, the harm traditional ideas of masculinity do to boys and men become increasingly more evident), but is it really the same degree of harm as besets girls and women? Are the pronouncements as neutral and equal as Trible argues?

David Clines responds directly to Trible’s argument in his article, “What Does Eve Do to Help? And Other Irredeemably Androcentric Orientations in Genesis 1–3” (1990: 25–48). As indicated by the subtitle, Clines challenges one of Trible’s fundamental points—that the Hebrew word for “helper” does not imply inferiority. After surveying the passages in the Hebrew Bible that use the word, Clines concludes that “though superiors may help inferiors, strong may help weak, gods may help humans, in the act of helping they are being ‘inferior’” (Clines 1990: 30–31). Clines finds further challenge to Trible’s argument about the word “helper” when he seeks the answer to his title question: “What does Eve do to help Adam?” In the story, Adam does two tasks: he tends the garden and he names the animals. Eve is involved with neither. The only task for which Adam *needs* Eve is the task of procreation, hence “the narrative’s emphasis on nakedness, on the man cleaving to the woman, and on their being one flesh” (Clines 1990: 35). Adam does not say, “Now I have someone to help me with the weeding,” or “Now I have someone with whom to have deep conversations.” Rather, he says that he now has someone he can cling to, implying sexual congress. So, for Clines, from the beginning, the woman is just there to gestate and give birth. The androcentric orientation of the text simply cannot be redeemed, no matter how much a reader may disagree that a woman’s God-given purpose is to bear children, and no matter how much a reader may want the Bible to support feminism. Clines, then, reads backwards through the creation accounts, systematically dismantling egalitarian readings, even the egalitarian reading of Genesis 1:27—the first creation story that so many feminists have highlighted. In the end, it is a matter of biblical authority and ethical reading. Rather than regarding the Bible as an

authority that dictates dogma, the Bible should be read as a resource that can, in conjunction with ethical principles, inspire the best of humanity (Clines 1990: 48).

As the debate between Tribble and Clines demonstrates, much feminist analysis has been focused on the question of whether the Bible is inherently androcentric and sexist, or if the sexism is a result of the biases of the translators and interpreters. At least in terms of the creation accounts, Clines places the blame for sexism squarely on the biblical text itself; Tribble looks elsewhere and sees more culpability in the people who have picked up and read, for centuries, through a lens distorted by sexism.

Since Eve is a literary character and not an historical figure, feminist approaches to Eve have been dominated by literary methods, but historians have also turned to Eve, asking what she can tell us about the lives of ancient Israelite women. Carol Meyers, foremost among feminist historical interpreters, goes to Israel with a shovel, the Bible, and feminist analysis all in hand. Meyers uses archaeological data in conjunction with interpretations of Genesis 2–3 to reconstruct the lives of ancient Israelite women at the beginning of the Iron Age. She begins her book on the subject with one word: “Eve” (Meyers 1988: 3, 2013: 1). The name alone evokes centuries of stories, attitudes, arguments, and images. She is iconic, and yet, Meyers wonders if we really know her. Meyers proposes investigating Eve, not as a literary figure or archetype, but as a product of the experiences of people living in Iron Age Israel. She is particularly concerned with the ways in which ordinary women lived their lives. Meyers published her book *Discovering Eve* in 1988, when feminist research (especially in archaeology and anthropology) was sparse. She began a revision of the book years later but soon realized that so much had changed in terms of resources and her own thinking that her plan for a revision transformed into a whole new study, published under the name *Rediscovering Eve* (2013). Although the analysis is certainly both broader and deeper, resulting in a much richer and more detailed portrait of the lives of ordinary Israelite women (and men), her basic theses have remained the same.

Meyers roots Eve in the ground—quite literally. The ordinary Israelite in the Iron Age would have spent most of his or her time managing the land in order to obtain both food and water. Adam and Eve are indeed “earth creatures” in more ways than one. In an agrarian subsistence economy, the labor needs were great. Women would have worked alongside the men, both in the home and in the fields, along with the additional labor of bearing children and attending to the needs of the young. Even though children occupied women’s time when they were very young, ultimately children meant more hands to work the fields

and help produce food. In such a setting human fertility was just as important as the fertility of the soil, and both were linked in language and in the imagination. For Meyers, “the fact that the survival of most Israelite agrarians required the strenuous effort of all members of a household provides the relevant context for looking at the Eve of the Genesis tale” (Meyers 2013: 58; see Meyers 1988: 47–71 for a full picture of agrarian life in Iron Age Israel). Eve is a product of the experiences of people whose livelihoods, even their very lives, moved to the rhythms of the seasons and the cadences of the agricultural cycle.

How does our understanding of Eve and the Genesis story change when we situate her within this Iron Age context? First, readers should recognize that the story of the first couple functions as an etiology—a story that explains the origin of something, whether cultural custom or natural feature. Genesis as a whole is, in fact, rife with etiologies about everything from the Israelite custom of circumcision to the appearance of rainbows. Genesis 2–3 is an etiology about the “harsh reality of life in the agrarian highlands” of the land of Israel (Meyers 2013: 70). Eden, with its abundant waters from rivers and dew and its lush vegetation, was the exact opposite of the terrain of Israel’s highlands. The soil of the highlands was (and is) rocky and arid, the hills difficult to cultivate, water limited mainly to rain during the winter, and vegetation meager. For a subsistence farmer, Eden is paradise. Second, Hebrew words—their connotations and denotations—are important to understanding the story. Like Tribble before her, Meyers focuses on certain Hebrew words whose English translation fails to capture (or even changes the meaning) of the original language. For example, Meyers too looks at the word אָדָם (“earthling”) and its association with אֶרֶץ (“earth”); how the gendered terms אִישׁ (“man”) and אִשָּׁה (“woman”) are used; and the more accurate rendition of עֶזְרָתוֹ כְּנַגְדּוֹ (“counterpart” or “powerful counterpart”) and צִלְעַת (“side,” not “rib”) (Meyers 2013: 71–76). Different images and a different understanding of the relationship between humanity and the earth, sexual dimorphism, and gender hierarchy emerge when the Hebrew is more accurately rendered.

The heart of Meyers’s interpretation of Genesis is her re-translation of Genesis 3:16. As she points out, “no single verse of the Hebrew Bible is more troubling for issues of gender relations and women’s role than Genesis 3:16” (Meyers 2013: 81). Meyers subjects the four lines that comprise this verse to very close scrutiny. Beginning with the typical translations, she works through each and every word, turning it and turning it for every possible meaning it could yield (Meyers 2013: 88–97). She then places these lines within the context of agrarian Iron Age Israel, reading the curses as the line that forever divides paradise from reality. Her proposal for an English translation is:

I will make great your toil and many your pregnancies;
 with hardship shall you have children.
 Your turning is to your man/husband,
 and he shall rule/control you [sexually].

MEYERS 2013: 102

Instead of a redundancy in sentence one, as it is typically translated, Meyers sees two separate pronouncements, one about work and one about reproduction (Meyers 2013: 89–90). She also understands the second sentence as dependent upon the first one. Because the woman has now been told she will have many pregnancies and that they will be difficult (the pain will include both physical and mental anguish), all in addition to her other labor, she may be disinclined to have sex with her husband. The second sentence, then, guarantees that the first will happen. Despite the risks, the woman will still feel sexual desire for her husband and he will be in charge of her sexual and reproductive capacities. Meyers thus limits the reach of his rule; the man is not in charge of all matters pertaining to his woman, but only those that relate to sex and reproduction (Meyers 2013: 96).

Situating Meyers's translation within the context of Iron Age Israel and pairing the verses about the woman with the verses about the man, the etiological function of the pronouncement becomes clear. A picture of the hardships of life in Iron Age Israel emerges. Men must work a hard and unyielding land; women must also work the land, in addition to having multiple pregnancies. What is necessary for survival, given the environmental and demographic realities of the central hill countries, is now given the status of divine mandate. Their religious worldview explains and justifies their everyday life. Eve is not Everywoman for all time; she is Every Israelite woman in the Iron Age. The "curses" are descriptive of a particular time and place and not universally proscriptive.

Gale Yee also situates the story of Adam and Eve within a particular historical context and then reads accordingly, but both her method and context differ from Meyers. Where Meyers relies on archaeological data to go along with a close reading of the text, Yee employs ideological criticism, which deftly integrates materialism, Marxism, feminism, as well as historical and literary analysis (see Yee 2003: 9–28 for a full explanation of her methodology). Where Meyers understands Genesis 2–3 to reflect Iron Age realities, Yee argues that the story is written as Israel is transitioning from the socio-economic structures of the Iron Age to the more hierarchical and rigid political structures of monarchy. The divide that opens up between humanity and divinity when Eve

tastes the fruit is really a representation of the class divisions between men as the society becomes more segmented, and kings emerge to rule the general populace. The story uses gender division and conflict to mask the class division and conflict that is happening in the society (Yee 2003: 78). As they bear class conflict upon their backs, not only Eve but all women become associated with evil in the Bible, and subsequently in the religions that emerge from the Bible.

Rather than seeking an original meaning, whether found in the text itself or in the socio-historical situation out of which the text arose or some combination thereof, Mieke Bal, a literary scholar well versed in biblical interpretation, takes an approach informed by poststructuralism. In Bal's reading of the Bible, it is neither "a feminist resource" nor "a sexist manifesto" (Bal 1987: 1). Meaning is not fixed by either traditional notions of the Bible as the word of God or by modern literary theory. Instead, she wants to highlight difference. Even when there is something that could be called a "dominant reading," there are always a multitude of alternative readings, and what different interpretations demonstrate is that all interpretations are arbitrary and that dominance is not "unproblematically established" (Bal 1987: 2–3). In her reading of Eve, then, Bal looks for the places that undermine the dominant negative understanding of Eve, the parts of the narrative that differ from the traditional Christian reading of Eve's secondary creation and sinful character. Again, Bal is not trying to rehabilitate Eve and establish a feminist story of creation; rather, she is uncovering the ways in which the dominant reading lacks coherence and must suppress other aspects of the text.

First, Bal argues that the אָדָם created in Genesis 2:7 is a sexually undifferentiated earth creature, not a man. Reading the reader in addition to reading the text, Bal asks, "What makes readers assume this creature is male? What, by another equally strange twist, makes them assume that this mistaken priority implies superiority?" (Bal 1987: 114). The אָדָם is presented without many of the expected marks of character: it has no name, no clear sex, it does nothing. Readers, then, fill in the blanks and create the superior man of the dominant tradition. Second, Bal argues that the creative act in Genesis 2:18–22 is the creation of man and woman simultaneously, parallel to their creation in Genesis 1:27 (Bal 1987: 118–19). Although these points are similar to the ones Tribble makes, Bal does not share Tribble's theological commitments, and therefore has a different understanding of how the plot unfolds, especially God's role in the disobedience of the first humans.

Next, Bal turns to the story of the woman's "fall." Counter to the dominant reading that sees her as intellectually and morally weak, Bal highlights the parts of the narrative that showcase her intelligence and independence, her courage

to embrace history and the human condition, and her power over both the man and God (Bal 1987: 119–25). Bal also questions God’s character, noting that God hid the truth of the forbidden fruit, and that God responded to the man and woman in fear and defensiveness (Bal 1987: 124–25). Now that action has been taken, character can be established, and the “curses” of Genesis 3 weave an interrelated web of roles and relationships among the woman, the man, the earth, and God. These roles and relationships are neither God-ordained through creation nor do they naturally arise. They must be articulated and instituted: a man must be productive and a woman must be reproductive. Almost as an afterthought, male dominance is connected to female desire (Bal 1987: 126). Finally, at the end of the story, proper names can be given; and full differentiation between man and woman, between human and divine, can be made. Through their names, “Eve is imprisoned in motherhood” (Bal 1987: 128); Adam is forever linked to the earth (Bal 1987: 129). Bal takes a semiotic approach throughout, focusing on the process of writing and interpreting, denying any single meaning to the story or to the analysis. Without a single, clear, and coherent meaning—without truth—“women can creep in, and rewrite themselves back into the history of ideology” (Bal 1987: 132).

Although written before the field really emerged, with her use of literary theory and her refusal of stable meanings, Bal’s work is sometimes discussed as a precursor to gender criticism (Hendel et al. 2010: 73).²⁰ Deborah Rooke, who edited an early volume of biblical studies essays that employ gender criticism, also begins with Eve. Eve is the first of the “second sex,” a powerful archetype in the Western imagination (Rooke 2007: 12–13). Alongside Adam, she establishes what it means to be human, including what it means to be male and female. Informed by the psychoanalytical theory of French feminists Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous (especially Irigaray’s concept of mimesis which Rooke presents as an important tool in gender criticism), Rooke traces out a story of becoming an autonomous human: “the option for autonomy taken by Eve in the form of the forbidden fruit allows for a form of ‘becoming’ human that is immanent rather than transcendent, from ‘within’ rather than from ‘without’” (Rooke 2007: 12). Desire plays a significant role in the creation

20 Notably, Hendel includes a chapter on gender and sexuality in his edited volume of methods for reading Genesis, but deliberately excludes feminist interpretation because it is an “advocacy reading” (Hendel 2010: 7). Feminist critics do engage in advocacy readings and do not deny their ideological commitments; however, feminist critics also maintain that other kinds of scholarship are also ideologically driven despite protestations to the contrary. For more analysis of *Reading Genesis* and Hendel’s position on feminist interpretation, see Koused 2013.

and expression of this autonomy. Eve desires the fruit and the knowledge it promises to provide. The knowledge will make her like God, so taking the fruit into her body is taking divinity inside, making it immanent. She gives the fruit to Adam, who also then takes divinity into his own self. “At once both created by God, in the image of God, and created through and by herself [through the decision to eat the fruit], she manifests the tension of experiencing the divine without and within: submission versus autonomy” (Rooke 2007: 16). Desire also is part of the male-female relationship and after the fruit is eaten, it is linked to the power Adam will wield over Eve. The choice for autonomy, then, introduces both Adam and Eve to the harsh realities of the adult world, and yet it also allows for a more dialogical relationship between the genders and also between humanity and God. Rooke presents gender criticism as broadening the lens of feminist criticism (Rooke 2007: 17), yet in her analysis and in the articles that follow in the book, the emphasis is still on the female characters. Gender criticism certainly has the potential to both broaden and sharpen the analysis, but the pull of conventional feminist interpretation is strong.

Some of the more successful gender critiques of the creation stories are ones that also employ queer criticism. Genesis 2–3 does not just enshrine particular gender roles and relationships, but also presents a view of human sexuality that is equally influential. Ken Stone has written extensively on the creation accounts from a queer perspective, not just in the sense that he is writing self-consciously as a gay man but also (and especially) in the ways he challenges normative views of sex and sexuality in his readings. Stone points out how an important element in understanding both creation accounts is what Monique Wittig calls “the heterosexual contract”: namely, the assumption of binary sexual division and the concomitant assumption that the two sexes are meant to have sex with one another (Stone 2006: 49). In Genesis, the heterosexual contract is not a social construct that has changed over time, but essential to human identity; it was created by God and established at the beginning of creation. Heterosexuality and the two-sex system upon which it depends, then, becomes natural and God-ordained. The heterosexism of the scriptures goes deeper than just a handful of prohibitions about same-sex sexual behavior. Since Wittig understands the heterosexual contract as damaging to women, both creation accounts promote an underlying sexism that is sometimes obscured by their ostensibly egalitarian elements.

However, influenced by both Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, Stone asks if the creation accounts really are a stable and coherent foundation for compulsory heterosexuality. He proposes looking at the stories for their “weak points”—places of instability and ambiguity. Stone writes, “While such a re-reading can never turn Genesis into a queer manifesto, it may reveal potential

openings for queer contestation of the heterosexual contract or, in any case, of biblical justifications given for that contract” (Stone 2006: 50). For example, Stone refers to the interpretation of the אָדָם as a sexually undifferentiated earth creature, as argued by both Tribble and Bal. Whereas there is a very strong argument for this interpretation, it is not without its problems. First the term אָדָם continues to be used after the creation of the woman to refer only to the man. Second, the male identity of the אָדָם is presupposed in the couplet spoken by the man immediately after the creation of the woman describing how woman was taken out of man (Gen. 2:23). Finally, there is continuity between the task the אָדָם is created to perform (tending the garden) and the punishment the man is subjected to after eating the forbidden fruit (agricultural labor). Stone does not attempt to advocate one interpretation of the אָדָם over the other; rather, he sees this ambiguity as evidence of the difficulties in trying to presuppose a condition while simultaneously creating a story of its origin. For Stone, the writer of Genesis 2–3 wants to “presuppose and promote compulsory heterosexuality and male domination,” which results in an incoherent text with many interpretive problems (Stone 2006: 58). A similar conundrum emerges around the issue of heterosexual desire. Does heterosexual desire, at least for the woman, arise naturally within her as a part of her created nature or is it a consequence of her disobedience? If heterosexual desire naturally arises out of binary sexual division, then why must it be commanded in Genesis 3:16? As Stone notes, the text betrays a certain anxiety about women’s desire for men.

Desire is difficult to control. How can one guarantee that desire will fix on the proper object? Although not much of a concern in sexual ethics today, in the biblical world one of the gravest sexual transgressions is sexual contact between human and divine beings (see Knust 2011: 153–63). The negative consequences of such out-of-control desire is dramatized in Genesis 6:1–4, where the sons of God have sex with the daughters of humans to produce a race of giants that, at least in part, provoke God into bringing down the flood waters. We see this again in Genesis 19, where the angels are threatened with rape and God responds by raining fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah. Sexual desire that crosses the humanity-divinity divide results in immediate destruction. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz explores the less dramatic but by no means less consequential anxiety about a homoerotic charge between the men of Israel and the God of Israel who is almost always figured in masculine terms (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994). Influenced by Freud, Eilberg-Schwartz argues that certain passages are “overdetermined” by the hard work of denying and suppressing any homoerotic relationship between the men of Israel and their male God. Stone wonders if Genesis 2 could be another one of these texts. He asks, “Is it possible, then, that the representation of Yahweh’s search for an appropriate

partner for Adam is the reflex of a felt need, on the part of the text's writer, to preclude the possibility of this sort of homoerotic relationship?" (Stone 2006: 59). The ambiguity about the sexual identity of the אָדָם before the creation of woman is also a way to tamp down any homoerotic speculation about the intimate relationship between the אָדָם and the creator.

In the end, the אָדָם is at least ambiguous in its gender identity, perhaps male but perhaps something different altogether. Indeed, in any reading of Genesis 2, God did not first create Adam and Eve, but instead first created this single creature that does not neatly fit within the two-sex binary system that is the basis for the heterosexual contract. As a "strangely gendered human character," the אָדָם creates a space for other differently gendered human beings—gay men, intersex people, transgender and transsexual people, lesbians, bisexuals, anyone whose sexual or gender identity does not neatly fit (Stone 2006: 63). Gender subversion, then, may very well be "authorized" by this creation account. Instead of giving us a story that celebrates the heterosexual contract, Stone, by focusing on the text's contradictions and inconsistencies, gives us a more complicated story where binary sexual division is not primary, where heterosexual desire is not guaranteed, and where the human creatures must be forced into the institutions (such as marriage) that mandate and regulate heterosexuality. The androgyne at the beginning of creation provides an alternative history of the human condition and, like the undifferentiated chaos in Genesis 1 (Hornsby and Guest 2016: 21–44), "troubles the waters" of any singular understanding of sex, gender, or sexuality.

"Eve is complicated" (Schneider 2008: 169) not least for the millennia of interpretation—theological, in popular culture, and academic—that has accrued around her. Eve still intrigues us and provides the ground out of which feminist readings emerge. We wrestle with her and her legacy, sometimes rejecting it and sometimes embracing it, sometimes just sitting with it and allowing all of its questions and contradictions simply to be. The history of feminist interpretation begins with attention to Eve, and she is also the first woman (even the first person) to interpret God's words. In her response to the snake, Eve "puts a fence around the Torah" by expanding on the prohibition to eat, adding a prohibition to touch. There is another aspect of Eve for which feminists are in her debt. She is the paragon of the curious. Eve was given a rule but instead of blindly obeying that which had been handed down to her from figures of (masculine) power and authority, she considered the evidence and made an independent decision. God and man told her "no"; she decided otherwise, consequences be damned. In many ways, she represents what is quintessentially human—"to be the curious one, the seeker of knowledge, the tester of limits" (Niditch 2012: 31)—and what is even more quintessential to the

feminist activist and scholar. Eve, the mother of all living. Eve, the mother of all feminist interpreters.

Conclusion: Flying Away with Lilith

An argument could be made about Eve's feminist credentials; no argument is necessary when it comes to Lilith. Lilith has been embraced by feminists as the "take-no-prisoners" counterpart to Eve. Since the 1970s, she has been rehabilitated and held up as an example of uncompromising feminism, and her name has escaped the confines of religious story to venture into multiple arenas of popular culture. *Lilith* is the title of a Jewish feminist magazine founded in 1976 (subtitled *Independent, Jewish, and Frankly Feminist*); a music fair of female solo musicians and female-led bands which toured during the summers of 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2010; a character in feminist science fiction (see Osherow 2000 for a discussion of Lilith in C. L. Moore's "Fruit of Knowledge" and Octavia E. Butler's *Dawn*). In a host of songs, poems, and stories (Dame et al. 1998), this figure of Jewish myth and legend has been celebrated for her pluck, her refusal to submit to either Adam or God, and the deep anxiety such independence and strength produced as witnessed by her traditional characterization as a night demon.

From whence did this feminist warrior come? In ancient Near Eastern mythology (Sumerian, Akkadian, and Babylonian), Lilith was a minor deity associated with the night. In the Bible, there may be one reference to her in Isa. 34:14, a prophetic oracle that condemns Edom: "Wildcats shall meet with hyenas, goat-demons shall call to each other; there too Lilith [also commonly translated "night monster," "night creature," and "screech owl"] shall repose, and find a place to rest." From at least three thousand years ago, Lilith was a supernatural creature to be feared. Incantations written on amulets and in bowls protect women in childbirth and their new-born infants from Lilith's attacks. The Talmud characterizes her as a flying night demon who assaults men when they sleep by themselves (Handy 1992: 324–25; Fontaine 2000: 531). The fullest mythology about Lilith is from the medieval text, *The Alphabet of Ben Sirach* (ninth century). Early rabbis noticed the discrepancy between the first creation account and the second, especially in the details about the creation of woman. Was the woman created at the exact same time as the man, through the generative power of God's voice (Gen. 1:27)? Or was the woman created after the man, formed out of his rib (Gen. 2:22)? In *The Alphabet of Ben Sirach*, an ingenious proposal was made for reconciling the two stories. There was only

one creation of man, but two different women were made in Eden. The first woman was named Lilith.

Lilith considers herself equal to Adam because of their simultaneous creation. Consequently, she expects to be treated with equal respect and regard; specifically, she refuses to lay under him during sex and instead proposes that they should lay side by side. Adam does not agree, so Lilith utters God's ineffable and magical name, and flies away out of the Garden. From a feminist perspective, her argument for the equality of the sexes as well as her act of rebellion place her firmly within the feminist camp. Of course, the rabbinic tellers of Lilith's tale did not esteem her so favorably. Adam complains to God about her behavior, and God sends the angels to find her and bring her back. She refuses and, as a punishment, 100 of her children die every day. She becomes a night demon, responsible for a host of maladies (Rivlin 1998: 7–10). Because her own children die, she steals other people's babies, and thus Lilith provides a reason for high infant mortality rates in pre-modern societies. Lilith also steals sperm from unsuspecting men in order to impregnate herself, and thus Lilith provides an etiology for nocturnal emissions.

Foundational for the modern feminist rehabilitation of Lilith is Judith Plaskow's midrash on the Genesis creation stories (2005), one of her earliest works that was originally published in 1972. Plaskow takes the traditional Jewish interpretive practice of midrash and redeploys it as a means for exploring feminist issues. What does the myth of Lilith look like when Lilith is regarded as a hero instead of a demon? Lilith's acts of rebellion are regarded positively as acts of independence, strength, and self-respect. Eve was created to be a wife and helper, and was generally happy in those roles, "though she occasionally sensed capacities within herself that remained undeveloped" (Plaskow 2005: 31). Eventually, Eve catches a glimpse of another creature who looks like she does but lives outside of Eden. She is curious, so she climbs an apple tree whose branches stretch over the wall, and she swings herself over to the other side. When Eve and Lilith find each other, they ask: "Who are you?" and "What is your story?" (Plaskow 2005: 32). Eve and Lilith form the first bonds of sisterhood as they tell stories, laugh, and cry together. For Plaskow, rather than being enemies, Eve and Lilith provide a powerful model of the transformative power of women's community.

Perhaps Eve and Lilith, in Plaskow's retelling, also provide a powerful model of feminist interpretation of scripture: women asking other women (both textual and historical), "Who are you?" and "What is your story?" Men have listened in, and have joined the conversation as well. The books and commentaries proliferate: from Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* to the multiple

editions of the *Women's Bible Commentary* (Newsom et al. 1992, 1998, 2012); from the voluminous *Feminist Companion* series in both the Hebrew Bible (Brenner 1993-) and the New Testament (Levine 2000–2010) to the emerging *Wisdom Commentary* series (Reid 2015-). There are a number of hallmarks of feminist biblical criticism, but essentially it is a reading method that foregrounds the ethical and political commitment to the equality of all people, particularly in terms of sex, gender, and sexuality. Such a commitment leads to an interest in exploring the lives of women in the biblical world, the characterization of women as well as the ideologies of masculinity and femininity in the story world of the Bible, and the implications of such histories and ideologies on the political cause of equality in the contemporary world. Feminist readings acknowledge first and foremost that there is no such thing as an objective, neutral stance. Who you are influences how you read and that so-called objective readings usually serve the interests of male-domination in religious institutions, the academy, and society at large. The truth about the role of the reader produces greater attention to and understanding of the ways in which different aspects of identity intersect with and shape the gendered experience, both inside and outside the text.

Feminist biblical interpretation is not a closed method but deeply influenced by feminist theory in all disciplines, from literary criticism to philosophy, from historiography to psychology, and beyond. It explores the Bible sometimes in concert and sometimes in tension with related criticisms, like critical race theory, postcolonial interpretation, gender criticism, masculinity studies, and queer criticism. It can be and has been deeply critical of the past and the present; some feminist interpreters advocate equal access whereas others call for more radical transformations. Regardless, ultimately, feminist biblical interpretation is oriented toward a hopeful future where people's lives are not determined by their genitalia, where they are not judged by their choice of clothing or hair style, and where they are free to love and be loved. In an ending hinted at by Plaskow's midrash, feminism's future is wherever Eve and Lilith, Adam and God, men and women, gods and monsters all join hands to rebuild the world.

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