

*Caroline Vander Stichele*

## **Is Doña Quixote Fighting Windmills? Gendering New Testament Studies in the Netherlands**

In Memory of Esther de Boer (1959-2010)

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Zusammenfassung:

In diesem Beitrag geht es um eine Standortbestimmung der feministischen Exegese und der Gender Studies in der niederländischen neutestamentlichen Forschung. Im ersten Teil werden die Entwicklungen in der feministischen Exegese, in der Frauenforschung und den Gender Studies seit den sechziger Jahren aufgezeigt. Der zweite Teil legt den Fokus auf die Entwicklungen im Bereich der neutestamentlichen Forschung in den Niederlanden. Die Autorin kommt zum Schluss, dass die Zukunft der Bibelwissenschaften auf Grund der gesellschaftlichen Veränderungen in den Niederlanden in Gefahr ist. Dies betrifft auch den Fortbestand der feministischen Exegese und der Gender Studies im Bereich der neutestamentlichen Forschung.

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When I started thinking about the topic of this article, the image that came to my mind was a drawing of Pablo Picasso, showing Don Quixote and his servant Sanzo Pancho in front of a few windmills. This image relates to a famous scene from the book of Cervantes, in which Don Quixote thinks that the windmills he sees are giants. He attacks them in order to defeat them, but his lance is smashed into pieces by one of the sails of a windmill and he himself is thrown on the ground.<sup>1</sup> This particular episode gave rise to the expression “fighting windmills,” which means: to fight something imaginary, but also: trying to change something that is unchangeable.

“Fighting windmills”, however, is also the title of a song by the Dutch band, Golden Earring.<sup>2</sup> In this song Don Quixote is called Don Coyote and told that there is “no reward in fighting windmills.” Nevertheless, he is asked to “be so kind to blow another narrow mind.” The song ends with the optimistic line: “Anything, but giving in, fightin’ windmills, in the end you win, you win.”

Don Quixote is an ambiguous character, because he wants to change the world, and as a result, he can be interpreted as either a fool or an idealist, depending on one’s perspective. In what follows I apply the image of Don Quixote more specifically to

New Testament scholarship in the Netherlands: how about Doña Quixote? What possible or impossible task did she set herself and did she succeed or is she fighting windmills too? Two specific occasions triggered the following reflections. The first was the celebration of the tenth anniversary of *lectio difficilior*, the European Electronic Journal for Feminist Exegesis, at the joint conference of SBL and EABS in Tartu (Estonia) in July 2010. The second was the conference on ‘Gender in theology and religion: a success-story’, held in Groningen (the Netherlands) in January 2011.<sup>3</sup> Both occasions were highly reflexive events, looking back and asking what had been achieved over the years, in the past decade or more. The focus of both events was different in so far as feminist exegesis was at the center of the first event and Gender Studies at the second. The question of the relationship between the two is one of the issues I address in what follows. I do so by first mapping developments that took place in the field of biblical studies at large, before focusing on what happened more specifically in the field of New Testament Studies in the Netherlands. Finally, I will evaluate the current state of affairs in the field.

## 1. Doña Quixote in Biblical Studies

In her contribution to a volume on *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (2001), Joan W. Scott traces the developments in the field of women’s history that took place in roughly the past forty years. Her analysis serves as my starting point for discussing what I consider to be similar developments in the field of biblical studies.

Scott’s starting point is the common view that, “the emergence of women’s history as a field of scholarship involves [...] an evolution from feminism to women to gender; that is, from politics to specialized history to analysis.”<sup>4</sup> The underlying suggestion in this view is that over time the connection between scholarship and politics was lost. According to Scott, this interpretation is not only simplistic but also a misrepresentation of what happened in her field over the past decades. In her article she explains why that is the case.

As Scott notes, a first development took place in the sixties with the impact of the feminist movement on the academy. Women were encouraged to pursue an academic career and pushed for change, claiming that their interests were not represented, but the issues they put on the table were considered partial as well as political, and perceived as in opposition to established professional standards favouring impartial and disinterested investigation. Feminist scholars in turn challenged the opposition that was thus constructed between professionalism and politics by raising questions about

the kind of knowledge produced in the academy and about the standards used to determine professionalism.

In the following years women gradually made their entry in the field and as a result of their increased presence, women's studies emerged in the seventies as a separate area of research, in which women featured as both main subject and object of investigation. Notions such as 'her-story' as opposed to 'his-story' were developed to reveal the one-sidedness of dominant representations of the past. Traditional scholarship responded by disqualifying women's studies as 'ideological' and therefore lacking the necessary objectivity required for scientific work.

Scott observes that women's studies at that time assumed a separate, common identity as women, which made it possible to appeal to a shared experience of oppression. On the one hand, this assumption enabled the political agency of women, but on the other hand, it also consolidated the binary opposition between men and women. In the academy, the presumed difference of women legitimized the existence of women's studies, while at the same time also neutralizing it by giving it a separate place, outside the dominant discourse.

By the end of the seventies the presumed universality of women's experience became increasingly challenged by the awareness of the multiple differences between women. A reconceptualization was therefore needed and took place with the introduction of the concept of 'gender.' A lively discussion followed about its merits and problems.

Gender was perceived by some to undermine the basis for political action, as it problematized a unified notion of women's identity and experience. This issue in turn gave rise to a polarisation between those favouring 'politics' and those advocating 'theory.' The former group understood politics to deal with social realities and theory with texts, while the latter group claimed that the production of knowledge itself is a political issue and therefore needs to be scrutinized.

As women moved into positions of disciplinary power, several controversies took place within the field of women's history itself. Scott identifies three interrelated controversies: one about 'history' or 'theory', a second about 'universalism' or 'particularism', and a third about 'women' or 'gender.' A practical consequence of this last debate is the choice that was often made in the nineties to change women's studies programmes into Gender Studies programmes. In this debate the term feminism as a self-description largely disappeared.

Scott's article was published in 2001 and therefore it does not discuss what happened in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, it can still serve as a useful guide to map similar debates taking place in the second half of the twentieth century within the context of biblical studies.<sup>5</sup> Scott notes, for instance, that feminism initially

used a rhetoric of equality to further its agenda and to critique the exclusion of women from professions, among them the academy. This same rhetoric of equality was also present in the field of biblical studies, especially in relation to biblical texts that played a role in debates about the admission of women to church ministries during the seventies. Central to this rhetoric is that ‘women’ are considered to be equal to ‘men’. As Scott points out this discourse of collective identity produced a shared female experience that was basic to the women’s movement. This discourse was also prevalent in feminist approaches in biblical studies of that time period. Thus, for instance, Barbara Brown Zikmund states in her contribution to the *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* volume, that “the development of a feminist critical consciousness has moved from the innocent assumption that women’s experience was irrelevant to the conviction that it is normative.”<sup>6</sup>

As women gained access to the academy, they also put their issues on the scholarly agenda, one of them being the inclusion of women as object of research. As a result, women’s studies emerged as a field of its own to supplement ‘his-story’ with ‘her-story’. The notion of her-story also became fundamental to reclaiming women from the biblical past. In order to be representative, women have to be included in the total picture. This idea of ‘inclusivity’ is for instance expressed by Letty Russell who notes: “Feminist biblical interpretation has developed into two interdependent areas of research: *inclusive language* and *inclusive interpretation*.”<sup>7</sup>

With the identity politics of the eighties, however, a shift in focus took place from the category of ‘women’ towards the notion of ‘difference’. An important question thus became how to conceptualise the very real differences that appeared to exist between women. The monolithic category of ‘woman’, in reality often only referred to white, middle-class, heterosexual women. This critique was, for instance, expressed with regard to biblical studies by womanist scholars.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, a specific feature of feminist biblical studies in comparison with historiography was that the category ‘women’ most often also referred to *Christian* women. In this respect, Jewish scholars criticised the way Judaism often served as a negative backdrop for early Christianity. As Bernadette Brooten for instance notes: “Within the study of women and the cultural context of early Christianity, the assessment of the relative status of women in Judaism and Christianity is particularly problematic and therefore deserves special attention.”<sup>9</sup> Another distinctive element of feminist biblical studies, in comparison to historiography, is the importance of the concept of ‘liberation’. In her discussion of different hermeneutical choices that feminist biblical scholars make Carolyn Osiek observes that “as a biblical hermeneutic, liberationist feminism proclaims that the

central message of the Bible is human liberation, that this is in fact the meaning of salvation.”<sup>10</sup>

The results of the preceding decades of feminist biblical scholarship were published in a series of edited collections celebrating the anniversary of the *Woman's Bible* which appeared in 1895.<sup>11</sup> These collections witness both to the amount of research that was done in the meantime and to the number of women involved in the field by the early nineties. Several of these volumes do not just focus on the biblical literature, but also include extra-canonical literature, and thus move beyond the boundaries of the canon. In the same time period the emergence of Gender Studies and gender-related issues as well as a theoretical turn can be observed in numerous publications.<sup>12</sup> Simultaneously, postcolonialism was introduced in feminist biblical scholarship.<sup>13</sup>

That the boundaries between those different approaches and interests are far from fixed, is illustrated by a more recent collection of essays on Feminist New Testament Studies that appeared in 2005. In the introduction to this volume, Kathleen O'Brien Wicker, one of its editors, mentions issues that appear throughout the volume. From the terminology used, it is apparent that the categories of 'women', 'inclusion' and 'liberation' are still very prominent in feminist biblical discourse. For instance, with respect to 'liberation' she notes: "Many of the paradigms discussed in the essays suggest that feminist hermeneutics must be conceptualised and practiced as a liberation discourse, building upon the models that Latin American theologians have developed in their work."<sup>14</sup> What further characterizes this volume is the multiplicity of voices from around the world, expressing the growing awareness of the diversity of women within the discipline itself, and the impact of globalisation.

However, the volume also documents that, as Scott argued, there is no linear development from feminist-to-women-to-gender studies and that 'gender' is also used as a conceptual tool within feminist biblical studies.<sup>15</sup> So the boundaries between feminism and Gender Studies are less clear-cut as they may seem, both in historical as well as conceptual terms. Gender Studies can thus be seen as a further theoretical development generated by issues within feminist studies itself, such as the diversity of women's experiences and issues of identity that became more prominent in the nineties.

Still, notwithstanding this common ground, differences clearly exist between a feminist and a Gender Studies approach. Gender Studies problematizes and destabilizes identity-based politics based on a concept such as 'women'. Gender Studies also widens the perspective to issues of sexual difference at large, including biological and socio-cultural constructions of masculine and feminine identity as well as sexual orientation, and it resists an essentialist and a-historical understanding of the

correlating identities. To a certain extent Gender Studies thus shifts the focus away from ‘women’ as main subjects of action and inquiry, although the ideology-critical perspective remains. Political action is therefore still possible, but rather than limiting itself to ‘women’ its subjects may vary according to the issues at stake.<sup>16</sup>

Consequently, gender-critical approaches to the Bible focus on gender as it is constructed in biblical texts, by highlighting those features that relate to gender, sex and sexuality, paying special attention to the interconnected roles of ideology and rhetoric.<sup>17</sup> This reading strategy is also adopted in feminist interpretation, but the focus as well as the political agenda is different in that women are foregrounded as both subject and object of biblical interpretation. In so far as gender-critical interpretations problematize the concept of ‘women’ some tension therefore continues to exist between the two approaches.

Nevertheless, what Scott notes with respect to historiography also applies to biblical studies: “Many of those who use the term gender, in fact, call themselves feminist historians. This is not only a political allegiance, but a theoretical perspective that leads them to see gender as a better way of conceptualising politics.”<sup>18</sup>

## **2. Fighting Windmills in the Netherlands?**

The previous overview traces developments that took place in the United States, but these developments also informed those that took place across the Atlantic. In what follows I focus on the Dutch context, where I have been working for the past twenty-five years. The Netherlands are an interesting case for more than one reason. It was the first country on the European continent where women’s studies in theology obtained a place in the academy.<sup>19</sup> Sadly enough, however, the Netherlands are also at the forefront when it comes to more recent changes that have a negative impact on what has been achieved over the years. One such change is the process of secularisation in Dutch society at large that affects the theological faculties and departments at the universities, which are rapidly shrinking as a result both in terms of staff as well as student numbers. Another change is the use of a market-driven business model for the universities informed by similar models in the US and UK, leading to the erosion of the humanities at large, which also affects Theology and Religious Studies departments. As Martha Nussbaum notes in her incisive analysis of the current changes taking place in higher education: “The humanities and the arts are being cut away; in both primary/secondary and college/university education, in virtually every nation of the world. Seen by policy-makers as useless frills, at a time when nations must cut away all useless things in order to stay competitive in the global market, they

are rapidly losing their place in curricula, and also in the minds and hearts of parents and children.”<sup>20</sup> A third change is informed by restoration movements in protestant as well as catholic churches, that are hostile to the presence of feminist and other critical voices in the academy and in their own formation programs. All these changes result in the loss of job opportunities in the field of biblical studies. It is against this background that the following observations should be situated.

First of all, how one assesses the current situation of Gender Studies in biblical studies and especially New Testament Studies in the Netherlands, depends on how narrow or broad one defines Gender Studies. A broad definition would cover any approach that pays particular attention to how markers of sexual difference work to constitute and reinforce individual and social subjectivities.<sup>21</sup> A more narrow approach, however, would require an awareness and engagement of gender theories. Depending on the definition one advocates, the situation looks less (in the case of a broad definition) or more (when using a narrow definition) desperate in the field of New Testament Studies. However, before taking a closer look it is important to first get a better sense of the context by looking back at where we come from.<sup>22</sup>

The first dissertation in the Netherlands, written by a woman on the subject of women in the early Christian church, was defended a century ago, in 1913 at the University of Groningen, by Arnolda Constantia Eliana Gerlings (1875-1942).<sup>23</sup> Since then ten women graduated in New Testament Studies and one woman graduated in literary studies on the Gospel of John from a women’s studies perspective.<sup>24</sup> Although male scholars are usually more hesitant or reluctant to associate themselves with feminist theology or women’s studies than with Gender Studies, there are, however, some notable exceptions. Both Jan Willem van Henten and Piet van der Horst, for instance, published articles in the Feminist Companion Series, edited by Athalya Brenner.<sup>25</sup>

In 1994 a book was published entitled *Reflections on Theology & Gender*, co-edited by Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes and Athalya Brenner. In her contribution to this volume Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes advocated the development of a Women’s Studies Research Program in the faculty of Theology at Utrecht University. Explaining the provisional title of the program ‘Gender and Theology’ she notes: “The application of ‘gender’ to theology implies, first and foremost, the questioning of gender neutrality inside theology [...] ‘Gender and Theology’ takes the gendered situation of theology into account, and addresses itself to gender motivated reinterpretations of the texts and concepts which are used within the different disciplines of theology.”<sup>26</sup> This quote shows that, indeed, women’s studies and Gender Studies were not neatly separated as Scott suggests, since both concepts are used to somehow enlighten each other. Other contributions by Anne-Marie Korte and Rosi Braidotti in the same volume make clear

that the same holds true for feminist hermeneutics as well. As Korte observes, referring to theological women's studies and feminist hermeneutics, "in both approaches 'gender' is utilized as a relevant and fruitful category."<sup>27</sup>

However, what the aforementioned volume on *Theology and Gender* also documents is that, in the Netherlands, Gender Studies in theology is firmly rooted in feminist theology and women's studies, but also that the focus still predominantly is on women, even though the category of 'gender' itself is not restricted to women.

### *Where Are We Now?*

So what is the state of affairs more than fifteen years later? Already in 1994, Korte observed that things had not quite turned out as expected ten years earlier. "In 1985, she recalls, there was much hope that research in theological women's studies would soon be started in more structurally and institutionally organised ways within the universities."<sup>28</sup> However, that did not happen. Korte mentions three factors to explain why that was the case. First of all, she finds fault with women's studies itself for its radical aspirations. The other two factors are more structural: the "constant flow of academic reorganisations" and "the lack of investments."<sup>29</sup> That was her diagnosis in 1994. Unfortunately the situation did not improve in the following fifteen years. To the contrary, I would say.

As far as New Testament studies is concerned, what *did* happen in the years after, was the graduation in 1998 of Magda Misset-van de Weg at Utrecht University<sup>30</sup> and of Esther de Boer in 2002 at the Protestant Theological University in Kampen.<sup>31</sup> Both Magda Misset-van de Weg and Esther de Boer published on the topic of their dissertations in different venues, including the already mentioned *Feminist Companion Series*.<sup>32</sup> Some of my own work in the field was also published in this series.<sup>33</sup>

However, it should be noted here that the players in the field are basically still the same as fifteen years ago. There is hope for the future in that a generation of younger scholars is making its entry in the field, although it remains to be seen in light of the previous observations what their opportunities will be in the academy.

What are the reasons for this situation? I think the structural issues mentioned by Korte back in 1994 continue to play an important role. Since then more reorganizations have taken place and more can still be expected, since the whole field of Theology and Religious Studies in the Netherlands is in flux. As already noted, the field is actually shrinking and in crisis. As far as Biblical Studies is concerned, the switch that several universities have made from Theology to Religious Studies programs has in practice resulted in the marginalization and even disappearance of Biblical Studies, both Old Testament/Hebrew Bible and New Testament. Thus, most recently, in 2012, the



decision was taken to discontinue the joined Biblical Studies Master Program of the University of Utrecht and the University of Amsterdam, which resulted in the dismissal of the entire staff for Biblical Studies at University of Utrecht. Moreover, people who retire are often not replaced. As a result, there is no room for new appointments, which reduces the chances of especially younger women to find a job in the field. Also, as already noted by Korte, universities have not invested in women's studies and the same also goes for Gender Studies.

Apart from these larger structural issues which also affect Gender Studies in New Testament, on a more ideological level, it should be noted that the dominant discourse in New Testament is still firmly kept in place. Most of the research done can be identified as historical-critical in nature and although historical criticism is not 'bad' per se, what is notably absent here is any critical engagement of the method itself, not withstanding the important work done by feminist and postcolonial scholars in this respect.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, precisely because of its dominant position, it is still possible for male scholars to ignore ideology-critical work done in the field, including Gender Studies, and, as a result, these approaches remain marginalized.

*Is there Something Left to Celebrate? Or: What Has Been Achieved?*

The success of Gender Studies in New Testament can be measured in different ways. In my view, the most important of these are academic positions in the field, access to publications and wider impact beyond the academy. As far as the first issue is concerned, there are currently three women with positions in the field of New Testament and an expertise in Women's Studies/Gender Studies at a total of ten Dutch universities with programs in Theology and/or Religious Studies, more specifically Annette Merz, Magda Misset-van de Weg and Caroline Vander Stichele.<sup>35</sup>

As far as publications are concerned, venues for feminist work, women's studies or Gender Studies in the field of biblical studies have been virtually non-existent for a long time on the European continent. As Cheryl Exum notes, that was easier in the English-speaking world, especially in the USA.<sup>36</sup> In the Netherlands, an important academic venue for feminist theological work, including Biblical Studies, was the series *Proeven van Vrouwenstudies Theologie* of which eight volumes appeared between 1989 and 2005. International venues were the *Yearbook of the European Society of Women in Theological Research* and *lectio difficilior*, the European Electronic Journal for Feminist Exegesis, which went online in 2000. In *lectio difficilior* eleven articles appeared by scholars from the Netherlands, including eight by three New Testament scholars: Esther de Boer, myself and Peter-Ben Smit, who

teaches New Testament at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and does research on New Testament and gender, especially masculinity.<sup>37</sup>

This situation also explains why most academic publications by Dutch female New Testament scholars are in English. Here, an important venue for their work has been the *Feminist Companion to the New Testament*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine.<sup>38</sup> Since Dutch is a minority language, this has certainly helped to make their work more widely known. Most recently, a new online periodical has been launched at the University Utrecht, entitled *Religion and Gender*. The first issue of this refereed online international journal for the systematic study of gender and religion in an interdisciplinary perspective appeared in 2011. As noted in the introduction to this first issue, the journal “seeks to investigate gender at the intersection of feminist, sexuality, queer, masculinity and diversity studies.”<sup>39</sup> As such it opens new venues for work that relates to these areas of research, including the New Testament and Early Christianity. The third issue I want to address here has a wider impact beyond the academy. This is perhaps most difficult to measure, apart from the occasional lectures and publications for a wider audience. There is, however, one area that needs special mention here and that is bible translations. Both Annette Merz and myself have contributed to more gender-inclusive translations. Annette Merz was involved in the German project *Bibel in gerechter Sprache*, a translation aiming at justice with respect to gender, Judaism and social position, for which she translated Paul’s letter to the Philippians,<sup>40</sup> while I myself was involved in the New Dutch Bible Translation.<sup>41</sup>

Overall, one can say that the success of Gender Studies in New Testament has been rather modest. Gender Studies is still marginal to the concerns of the discipline as a whole. In my view, this outcome is neither unexpected nor surprising, if one takes into account that it is a critical discourse, pushing for change in the academy.

### *Widening the Scope Again*

The future of Gender Studies in New Testament is firmly tied to the future of the discipline and since the field is actually shrinking in the Netherlands, due to a number of reasons already mentioned, including reorganizations at the universities that affect the number of jobs available as well as the decline of the institutional churches, which were traditionally an important labor market for biblical scholars, there are less job openings to begin with. Moreover, theological programs at faculties or departments are increasingly either closed down or replaced by Religious Studies programs, where a place for Biblical Studies is much less obvious, but even these Religious Studies programs have a hard time surviving. In part, this is related to situation of the humanities as whole, which in turn is related to governmental policies regarding the

universities. This situation is informed by policies abroad, especially in the UK and the USA.

All these developments are far from gender-neutral, rather to the contrary. As Mary Evans points out “while women now have *access* to higher education, what shows little sign of changing is the domination of the universities by the interests of the male, public world. That world has changed in that it is now formally expected that universities are primarily about a contribution to the national (mixed) economy.”<sup>42</sup>

Evans discusses higher education in Britain, but a lot of her observations apply to the Netherlands as well. A recent agreement between the Dutch government and the universities for 2011-2015, for example, stipulates that financial means have to move to so-called top sectors. Those top sectors are not specified, but it is quite clear that Gender Studies will not qualify as such. Another important concept in this respect is that of “valorization” which is defined as the process of creation of value out of knowledge, which makes this knowledge available for economic and social use to be translated in products, services, processes and new economic initiatives.<sup>43</sup> Such statements raise serious questions about the role universities will be left to play in the future. Also the fact that the relevance of the humanities is being questioned is a reason for serious concern. It seems hardly accidental that precisely those disciplines that are considered ‘soft’ as opposed to ‘hard’ sciences are envisioned. As Pierre Bourdieu observes such distinctions are clearly gendered.<sup>44</sup>

### *Back to the Future...*

In an earlier draft of this essay I still ended on a more positive note, suggesting that it may be worth a try to fight windmills and that, as Golden Earring suggests, in the end we may win. In light of more recent developments, however, I see less reason for such optimism today. In my assessment, the survival of Theology or Religious Studies as an academic discipline is at stake in the Netherlands, because there is less and less societal support for its presence in the academy. This decline is also reflected in student numbers, something that is used by policy makers as a sign of its decreasing relevance. This is not just an issue for programs in Theology and Religious Studies though. A similar attitude can be noted with respect to other disciplines. Certain ancient and modern languages for instance also have very limited student numbers. Such programs are equally considered not profitable, and therefore unimportant by policy makers. As a result all these programs run the risk of being discontinued, which, as already noted, would be detrimental for the humanities at large.

Biblical Studies has a hard time surviving as an academic discipline in such an environment and has thus become an endangered species. People who are retired are

not replaced, including feminist scholars. The result is that younger scholars also do not get a chance to start an academic career in the field and that the whole discipline may be wiped out in a decade. The only way to survive may be for Biblical Studies to redefine itself in terms of cultural studies, as some scholars, such as John Lyons and Tim Beal already suggested.<sup>45</sup> That could make its position at least somewhat less vulnerable and contested than it currently is. It may, however, also be an opportunity to re-invent itself. Gender-critical issues can be part of such an endeavor. The crucial question however is, if there still is time to make such a cultural turn and/or if “resistance is futile.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (London: Penguin, 2003), 63-65.

<sup>2</sup> The song was recorded on the albums Golden Earring, *Contraband* (Polydor, 1976) and Golden Earring, *Live* (Polydor, 1977). It is also available on YouTube at: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txL8r3s\\_Mlk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txL8r3s_Mlk).

<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank Mathilde van Dijk and Anne Claire Mulder for inviting me to this conference and for their helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this article, as well the anonymous reviewer of this article, Magda Misset-van de Weg and Annette Merz for their comments and suggestions.

<sup>4</sup> Joan W. Scott, “Women’s History,” in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, edited by Peter Burke (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), 43-70, p. 44.

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the developments in feminist biblical scholarship, see: Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, “Mastering the Tools or Retooling the Masters? The Legacy of Historical Critical Discourse,” in *Her Master’s Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse*, edited by Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner (Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship 9; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 1-29.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Brown Zikmund, “Feminist Consciousness in Historical Perspective,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Letty M. Russell (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 21-29, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> Russell, “Liberating the Word,” in Russell, *Feminist Interpretation*, 11-18, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> See for instance Katie Geneva Cannon’s contribution to the Russell volume: “The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness,” 30-40.

<sup>9</sup> Bernadette J. Brooten, “Early Christian Women and their Cultural Context: Issues of Method in Historical Reconstruction,” in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, edited by Adela Yarbro Collins (Atlanta: SBL, 1985), 65-91, p. 72.

<sup>10</sup> Carolyn Osiek, “The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives,” in Collins, *Feminist Perspectives*, 93-105, p. 103.

<sup>11</sup> Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (eds.), *The Women’s Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992). A second edition of this volume appeared in 1998 and a third, revised and updated, edition in 2012. The first edition was also translated in Dutch as *Met eigen ogen. Commentaar op de bijbel vanuit het perspectief van vrouwen* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 1995). This translation was edited by Mieke Heijerman and Caroline Vander Stichele. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza with Ann Brock and Shelly Matthews (eds.), *Searching the Scriptures*. Vol.1: *A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 1993) and Vol.2: *A Feminist Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1994). In the first volume, an article also appeared on the situation in the Netherlands by Lieve Troch, entitled “Feminist Bible Studies in the Netherlands” (pp. 351-366), focusing on Feminist Bible study groups of women with no theological training. Later in the nineties a collection also appeared in German, entitled *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung*, edited by Luise Schottroff and Marie Theres Wacker (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998), which was translated and recently appeared in English under the title: *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> To name just a few examples: Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (Biblical Interpretation Series 1; Leiden: Brill, 1993); Bernadette J. Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (The Chicago Series on Sexuality, History, and Society; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991); *The Postmodern Bible*, edited by Elizabeth A. Castelli, et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Kathleen O’Brien Wicker, “Introduction,” in Kathleen O’Brien Wicker, Althea Spencer Miller and Musa W. Dube (eds.), *Feminist New Testament Studies: Global and Future Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1-15,

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p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> This can also be seen in the Feminist Companion Series over the years. Cf. Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (10 vols.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993-1996); *A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (2<sup>nd</sup> series; 9 vols., Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997-2001), followed by *A Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine et al. (13 vols.; London: Continuum, 2001-2010).

<sup>16</sup> For examples of such coalition politics, see Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, *Contextualizing Gender in Early Christian Discourse: Thinking Beyond Thecla* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 228. See also: Linda Nicholson, “Interpreting Gender,” in *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*, edited by Linda Nicholson and Steven Seidman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 39-67, p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> For examples of such readings, see: Todd Penner & Caroline Vander Stichele (eds.), *Mapping Gender in Ancient Religious Discourses* (Leiden/Atlanta: Brill/SBL, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> Scott, “Women’s History,” 44.

<sup>19</sup> Already in 1976 the *Landelijke werkgroep feminisme en theologie* (national workgroup on feminism and theology) was founded by Catharina Halkes and Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes. The group was a major force behind many initiatives that were taken over the years and an important source of inspiration for feminist theologians working at theological departments and beyond.

<sup>20</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. A. Crenny-Francis et al., *Gender Studies: Terms and Debates* (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 4.

<sup>22</sup> For an overview of feminist exegesis in the Netherlands, see Caroline Vander Stichele, “Feministische exegese,” *Internationaal commentaar op de Bijbel*. Deel 1, edited by Erik Eynikel et al. (Kampen: Kok/ Averbode: Uitgeverij Averbode, 2001), 346-351.

<sup>23</sup> Arnolda Constantia Eliana Gerlings, *De vrouw in het oud-christelijke gemeentelven* (Amsterdam: Kruyt, 1913). See also Freda Dröes, “Dr. Constance Gerlings. De ontwikkeling van een geëngageerd theologe,” in *Proeven van vrouwenstudies theologie*. Deel III, edited by Freda Dröes, et al. (IIMO Research Publication 36; Utrecht: IIMO/IWFT, 1993), 97-166.

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<sup>24</sup> Maria de Groot, *Messiaanse ikonen: een vrouwenstudie van het evangelie naar Johannes* (Kampen: Kok, 1988). Not all women who graduated worked from a feminist perspective or on topics related to women's studies.

<sup>25</sup> It should be noted, however, that Athalya Brenner played a major role in the fact that they did. Jan Willem van Henten, "Judith as an Alternative Leader: A Rereading of Judith 7-13," in A. Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna* (The Feminist Companion to the Bible 7; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 224-52. Pieter W. van der Horst, "Tamar in Pseudo-Philo's Biblical History," in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, edited by Athalya Brenner (The Feminist Companion to the Bible 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 300-304; Id., "Sarah's Seminal Emission: Hebrews 11.11 in the Light of Ancient Embryology," in *A Feminist Companion to the Hebrew Bible in the New Testament*, edited by Athalya Brenner (The Feminist Companion to the Bible 10; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 112-134. A rare example of Gender Studies done by a male scholar in New Testament Studies worth mentioning here is the work by Sjef van Tilborg on imaginative love in the Gospel of John. Sjef van Tilborg, *Imaginative Love in John* (Biblical Interpretation Series 2; Leiden: Brill, 1993). See also, more recently, Jan Willem van Henten, "Blaming the Women: Women at Herod's Court in Josephus' Jewish Antiquities 15.23-231," in *Women and Gender in Ancient Religions. Interdisciplinary Approaches*, edited by Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll, Paul A. Holloway and James A. Kelhoffer (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 153-175.

<sup>26</sup> Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, "Toward a Women's Studies Research Program in the Faculty of Theology, Utrecht University," in *Reflections on Theology & Gender*, edited by Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes and Athalya Brenner (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994), 9-19, p. 12. In the same contribution she mentions two research projects related to the cultural milieu of Early Christianity (p. 15). The first is the PhD project of Magda Misset-van de Weg on Sarah and Thecla as models of faith, the second a research project of Jan Willem van Henten on the book of Judith, entitled "Judith as a Female Moses" and included as an article in the same volume. Cf. Jan Willem van Henten, "Judith as a Female Moses: Judith 7-13 in the Light of Exodus 17, Numbers 20, and Deuteronomy 33:8-11," in *Reflections on Theology & Gender*, 33-48.

<sup>27</sup> Anne-Marie Korte, "The Birth of Aphrodite," in *Reflections on Theology & Gender*, 71-86, p. 78. See also Rosi Braidotti, "What's Wrong With Gender?" in *Reflections on Theology & Gender*, 49-70.

<sup>28</sup> Korte, "Birth of Afrodite," 74.

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<sup>29</sup> Korte, “Birth of Afrodite,” 74-77.

<sup>30</sup> Magda Misset-van de Weg, *Sara & Thecla: Verbeelding van vrouwen in 1 Petrus en de Acta Theclae* (1998). Her dissertation dealt more specifically with the representation of women in 1 Peter and the Acts of Thecla. A comparison between these two documents shows how the problem of the position of women in the early Christian churches was solved in different ways. In 1 Peter a submissive and obedient Sara is offered to women as an example, while Thecla appears as a servant of God who preaches the word of God.

<sup>31</sup> Esther A. de Boer, *The Gospel of Mary: Beyond a Gnostic and a Biblical Mary Magdalene* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement 260; London: T&T Clark, 2004), published in paperback under the title *The Gospel of Mary: Listening to the Beloved Disciple* (London: T&T Clark, 2005). In her dissertation Esther de Boer challenges the interpretation that the Gospel of Mary is a Gnostic document, because its dualism is less radical than Gnostic dualism. Important in terms of the role Mary Magdalene plays is that the text does not express a dualistic view on gender roles. Rather this Gospel is an early Christian text in which Mary Magdalene appears on an equal footing with the male disciples, without having to deny her female identity. As such, the way in which she is represented goes beyond her portrayal in both Gnostic and biblical documents.

<sup>32</sup> Magda Misset-van de Weg, “Sarah Imagery in 1 Peter,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Catholic Epistles and Hebrews*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine with Maria Mayo Robbins (A Feminist Companion to the New Testament 8; Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 50-62; Id., “Answers to the Plights of an Ascetic Woman named Thecla,” in *A Feminist Companion to the New Testament Apocrypha*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine with Maria Mayo Robbins (A Feminist Companion to the New Testament 11; Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 146-162; Esther A. de Boer, “The Lukan Mary Magdalene and the Other Women Following Jesus,” in *A Feminist Companion to Luke*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine with Maria Mayo Robbins (A Feminist Companion to the New Testament 3; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 140-160. See also her article in *lectio difficilior* 1/2000: “Mary Magdalene and the Disciple Jesus Loved” ([http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/00\\_1/m-forum.htm](http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/00_1/m-forum.htm)).

<sup>33</sup> Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele, “Gendering Violence: Patterns of Power and Constructs of Masculinity in the Acts of the Apostles,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (A Feminist Companion to the New Testament 9; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 193-209; Caroline Vander Stichele, “Re-memembering the Whore: The Fate of Babylon According



to Revelation 17.16,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff (A Feminist Companion to the New Testament 13; London: T&T Clark, 2009), 106-120.

<sup>34</sup> See further Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner (eds.), *Her Master's Tools? Feminist and Post-Colonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005) and chapter 4 on “Gender and the Modern Interpreter” in Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, *Contextualizing Gender in Early Christian Discourse: Thinking Beyond Thecla* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 137-178.

<sup>35</sup> Annette Merz holds an endowed chair in ‘Culture and Literature of Earliest Christianity’ at the Faculty of Humanities of Utrecht University. One of her research topics is ‘Women and Christian Origins.’ She has published on Phoebe (Romans 16) and is currently working on the Acts of Paul in which the character of Thecla plays a prominent role. See Annette Merz, “Phöbe, Diakon(in) der Gemeinde von Kenchreä – Eine wichtige Mitstreiterin des Paulus neu entdeckt,” in *Frauen gestalten Diakonie. Bd. 1: Von der biblischen Zeit bis zum Pietismus*, edited by A. M. van Hauff (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2007), 125-141; id., “Im Auftrag der Gemeinde von Kenchreä: Phoebe als Wegbereiterin der Spanienmission,” in *Tussen Caïro en Jeruzalem. Studies over de Bijbel en haar context*, edited by Bob Becking, Jan A. Wagenaar and Marjo C.A. Korpel (Utrechtse Theologische Reeks 53, Utrecht, 2006), 83-97; id., “Wie verändert die Genderforschung die Frage nach dem historischen Jesus?” in *Jesus – Gestalt und Gestaltungen: Rezeptionen des Galiläers in Wissenschaft, Kirche und Gesellschaft*, edited by P. van Gemünden, D. Horrell, M. Küchler (FS G. Theißen, Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus 100; Göttingen 2013), 581-606; id., *The Acts of Paul in Intertextual Perspective* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, forthcoming). Magda Misset-van de Weg is currently teaching New Testament at the Protestant Theological University in Kampen and I myself teach New Testament/Biblical Studies at the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Amsterdam.

<sup>36</sup> J. Cheryl Exum, “Where Have All the Feminists Gone? Reflections on the Impact of Feminist Biblical Exegesis on the Scholarly Community and Women’s Lives,” *lectio difficilior* 2/2010 – <http://www.lectio.unibe.ch>

<sup>37</sup> See for instance, Peter-Ben Smit, “Jesus and the Ladies: Constructing and Deconstructing Johannine Macho-Christology,” in *The Bible and Critical Theory* 2.3 (2006). Online at: <http://bibleandcriticaltheory.org/index.php/bct/issue/view/7>.

<sup>38</sup> For references see notes 27 and 28.

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<sup>39</sup> Anne-Marie Korte, “Openings: A Genealogical Introduction to Religion and Gender,” *Religion and Gender* 1 (2011), 1-17 – [www.religionandgender.org](http://www.religionandgender.org)

<sup>40</sup> Ulrike Bail et al. (eds.), *Bibel in gerechter Sprache* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006).

<sup>41</sup> Manuela Kalski, Anneke de Vries, and I screened the translation in progress for exclusive language. More important, however, was the effort we made to have the tetragrammaton JHWH included in the translation of the Hebrew Bible instead of the rendering with “Heer” (“Lord”, in small caps). We launched a campaign that made it into the Dutch media. Our efforts were partly successful in that a study edition of the new translation was published with the rendering JHWH for the tetragrammaton in the Hebrew Bible instead of “Heer”. Cf. *NBV Studiebijbel* (Heerenveen: Uitgeverij Jongbloed, 2008). On the tetragrammaton discussion, see further: Caroline Vander Stichele, “The Lord Can No Longer Be Taken for Granted: The Rendering of JHWH in the New Dutch Bible Translation,” in *Yearbook of the European Society of Women in Theological Research*, 9, edited by Susan Roll et al. (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 179-187; id., “Der Herr? Das geht nicht mehr? Die Wiedergabe des Tetragramms in der neuen niederländischen Bibelübersetzung,” in “*Gott bin ich, kein Mann.*” *Beiträge zur Hermeneutik der biblischen Gottesrede*. edited by Ilona Riedel-Spangenberg, Erich Zenger (FS Helen Schüngel-Straumann; Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 2006), 318-327 and id., “‘Hoe is uw Naam? Waar zijt Gij te vinden?’ Het vertalen van de godsnaam in een interconfessioneel project,” in *De Bijbel vertaald: de kunst van het kiezen bij het vertalen van de bijbelse geschriften*, edited by Klaas Spronk, et al. (Zoetermeer: Meinema/Kapellen: Pelckmans, 2007), 100-119.

<sup>42</sup> Mary Evans, *Killing Thinking: The Death of the Universities* (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>43</sup> Hoofdlijnenakkoord OCW-VSNU, 2011.

<sup>44</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *La domination masculine* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), 112.

<sup>45</sup> John Lyons, “Hope for a Troubled Discipline? Contributions to New Testament Studies from Reception History,” in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33 (2010), 207-220 and Timothy Beal, “Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures,” in *Biblical Interpretation* 19 (2011), 357-72. See also my own contribution “The Head of John and Its Reception or How to Conceptualize ‘Reception History’” in *What is this Thing Called Reception History?* edited by W. John Lyons and Emma England (New York: Continuum, 2013 forthcoming)

<sup>46</sup> This is a famous line from Star Trek uttered by Locutus of Borg: “Resistance is futile. Your life as it has been is over. From this time forward you will service us. You

will be assimilated.” See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZEJ4OJTgg8> The danger may well be a real one in the case of Biblical Studies, in that it loses its identity and ends up being assimilated by Cultural Studies.

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Caroline Vander Stichele is Universitair Docent (Lecturer) in Biblical Studies at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Amsterdam. She is co-author of *Contextualizing Gender in Early Christian Discourse: Thinking beyond Thecla* (T&T Clark, 2009) and co-editor of *Text, Image, & Otherness in Children’s Bibles: What is in the Picture?* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2012). She is currently working on a book about Herodias.