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Where Have All the Feminists Gone? Reflections on the Impact of Feminist Biblical Exegesis on the Scholarly Community and Women’s Lives

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Zusammenfassung

Diese Überlegungen zum Einfluss feministischer Bibelexegese auf die Bibelwissenschaft und auf das Leben der Frauen wurden auf dem EABS/SBL Kongress in Tartu zur Diskussion gestellt. Den Podiumsteilnehmerinnen wurden folgende Fragen vorgelegt: Was bedeutet “feministisch” im Hinblick auf biblische Hermeneutik und Methode? Was hat die feministische Bibelwissenschaft erreicht? Welche Rolle spielt der Feminismus in der Exegese? Welche Auswirkungen hat die feministische Bibelexegese auf das Leben der Frauen?

Ohne den positiven Einfluss der feministischen Bibelkritik auf die Bibelwissenschaft zu verkennen, behaupte ich im Folgenden, dass der Feminismus selber (und seine Auswirkungen auf das alltägliche Leben der Frauen) an Boden verloren hat. Wenn aber der Feminismus keine soziale und politische Bewegung mehr ist und sein Programm mehr und mehr in einer postfeministischen Kultur ignoriert wird, gibt es dann überhaupt eine Zukunft für die feministische Bibelexegese?

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The Scholarly Community

I would like to begin by congratulating *lectio difficilior* on its tenth anniversary and by applauding all those who have given their time and energy to make the journal possible and successful. *Lectio difficilior* was founded in 1998/99 and went online in 2000 in response to the need for more venues where feminist scholars on the continent could publish their work, and it is a pleasure to see it celebrated at the SBL/EABS meeting for its accomplishments. I say ‘on the continent’ rather than ‘in Europe’ because the situation in the UK has been different. There have been more opportunities for scholars in the English-speaking world to publish feminist work, thanks largely to the feminist movement of the

70s ('second-wave feminism'), particularly in the USA. But it is not just publishing that has been difficult for feminist biblical critics. Even harder is conducting feminist research in an academic environment where, by and large, feminist criticism is not considered a valid, critical – and, most important, 'objective' – method of inquiry. This problem is still with us today. How many university graduate departments recognize – let alone *encourage* – students to write feminist theses, dissertations, *Habilitationsschriften*? There are, I think, more venues for publishing feminist biblical criticism than there were ten years ago. Books fare better than articles. If I ask myself, where would I send a feminist-critical article, *Biblical Interpretation*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* and *lectio difficilior* come to mind, but I am not sure where else I would try.

To answer one of the questions we were asked to consider – ***What does 'feminist' mean with regard to biblical hermeneutics and methods?*** – 'feminist' means taking as the starting point not the biblical text but rather the issues and concerns of feminism as a world view and as a political enterprise. Feminist criticism is, for me, defined by its critical stance, its position outside the ideology of the biblical text, for only when we step outside the Bible's androcentric ideology (or, theology) can we engage genuinely critical questions about what the text says – and does not say – about women, about its underlying assumptions about gender roles, about its motivation for portraying women in a particular way, and about what the text conceals and unintentionally reveals about the fact of women's suppression.

What are the achievements of feminist biblical criticism? Feminist criticism was the first postmodern criticism and has served as a model for others, among them materialist criticism, postcolonial criticism, gender criticism, queer criticism, minority criticism, disability criticism and other approaches to the text from a particular standpoint, such as class, race, ethnicity, social location. Feminism has made a difference in the field of biblical studies, and many scholars are now more attentive to gender issues. But I fear feminist biblical criticism has lost something of its critical edge, in part because it has been subsumed under gender criticism and cultural studies (which have their own agendas) before it has dealt adequately with its agenda (though it can play a vital role in these other areas). The great failure of feminist criticism in the field of biblical studies, in my view, has been the reluctance of many feminist biblical critics to apply a rigorous feminist critique to 'God'; that is, to the character 'God' as constructed by the biblical writers. Often, too often,

the character God is privileged and aligned with the interpreter's idea of a 'real' god, as if *he* can be neatly salvaged from an ancient patriarchal document by the exegete, who, like little Jack Horner plucking a plum out of his Christmas pie, extricates God while leaving behind the text's sticky patriarchal trappings.¹

What is the role of feminism in exegesis? Feminist biblical criticism is now an established method of inquiry, though not widely enough recognized in mainstream biblical criticism. Let me give just a couple of examples of how it has been, and continues to be, marginalized. The British Society for Old Testament Study, in its most recent publication assessing the field, *Text in Context: Essays by Members of the Society for Old Testament Study* (2000), has a chapter devoted to 'Feminist Study of the Old Testament'. This is due less to the recognition of the importance of feminist biblical criticism than to the fact that I was not willing to write an article that dealt with feminist criticism as one among other 'newer' methods, including recent research on gender, race, ethnicity and class. It will soon be time for another such volume, but I doubt feminism will have its own chapter. In a forthcoming three-volume continental publication (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) on the history of Hebrew Bible interpretation, there are twenty-four articles in the volume on the modern period, dealing with such topics as historical criticism, higher criticism, lower criticism, the work of Abraham Kuenen and Julius Wellhausen, Albert Eichhorn and Hermann Gunkel, institutions and social life in ancient Israel, law and ethics, form-critical and traditio-historical approaches, Pentateuchal studies, the prophets and the prophetic books, the Psalms and their cultic setting, forms and traditions, wisdom literature in the Bible and ancient Near East, and one article, of about 12,000 words, on approaches ranging from New Criticism to various types of postmodern literary and intertextual approaches, including feminist readings, which a colleague of mine is writing (a male colleague; most of the contributors are male). Clearly feminist interpretation merits attention, just not very much.

On the other hand, books like *Judges and Method* and *Mark and Method*, trade books aimed at students and now in their second editions, have chapters on feminist criticism, and, because they are written for students, they have the potential to influence the next generation, making them more sensitive to feminist issues and showing them ways of approaching the biblical text besides those of mainstream biblical scholarship.² The important *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung* (first edition, 1998; second edition,

1999),³ is now being published in English by Eerdmans, but eleven years after the second edition, I cannot help wondering why. Is feminist criticism the same as it was then? Possibly. A new edition of *The Women's Bible Commentary* (first edition, 1992; expanded edition, 1998) is now in preparation, but even here, it would seem, feminism cannot escape the burden of mainstream biblical interpretation.⁴ Contributors are asked to devote precious space to the same old traditional questions of name of book and place in the canon; contents, structure and composition; and historical context – the sort of thing that appears in numerous one-volume Bible commentaries already available.⁵

There are sessions at the SBL on feminist criticism, but they are far outnumbered by sessions on traditional topics. Out of 167 Annual Meeting program units, one is devoted specifically to feminist hermeneutics and one to gender.⁶ Of the International Meeting's 52 program units, there is only one specifically devoted to feminism or gender.⁷ There is, however, a session at this meeting devoted to an important new interdisciplinary and international feminist project, *The Bible and Women: An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History*.⁸

Maybe it is just a false impression I have, but it seems to me that feminism is not so visible on the exegetical agenda these days. I searched SBL's *Review of Biblical Literature* database for books with 'feminism' or 'feminist' in the title. As of 13 July 2010, *RBL* had published reviews of 4,974 books. Thirty-nine books had 'feminist' in the title, most of them in the influential *Feminist Companion to the Bible Series*, edited by Athalya Brenner and published by Sheffield Academic Press. Of these 39, ten were published in the last five years, two edited by members of this panel.⁹ Of 32 titles with the word 'gender', 16 have appeared in the past five years.¹⁰ I do not think these statistics prove that feminist criticism is on the wane, but I found them interesting (and I ask myself, why am I not using 'feminism' or 'feminist' any more in titles?). Is feminism passé or just a bad word? My own experience in arguing with friends over religion, politics, the monarchy and feminism has taught me that feminism is the most incendiary subject of them all. A recent article in *The Independent* on the appointment of Julia Gillard as Australia's new Prime Minister seems to bear this out. The article, which begins, 'Australia's new Prime Minister is used to male sexism, but the "soccer moms" could be a problem', explains: 'The thing is, Ms

Gillard, 48, is childless. What is more, she is unmarried. She lives with her boyfriend, a former hairdresser. By her own admission, she cannot cook. She is suspected of being an atheist – possibly even a feminist.’¹¹

Women’s Lives

What is the impact of feminist biblical exegesis on women’s lives? Negligible. Should we be praising our progress in feminist biblical exegesis, when feminism is dead, even deader than God, or at best moribund? I have witnessed its heyday and demise in my lifetime. In the 70s I was a graduate student in New York City and a feminist activist, and the effect we had on society was not just incredibly encouraging, it was exhilarating. Gender stereotypes were openly and widely challenged, equality became a serious political issue and this was reflected in some noticeable changes in the presentation of gender roles in the media. Currently, however, the advertising, modeling and music industries objectify women as never before, and the Internet provides pre-teens easy access to hard-core pornography.¹² Today in the UK I feel as though I am reliving the 60s: it is assumed – and reinforced by the media – that women are responsible for cooking, cleaning and raising children.¹³ A major difference is that now most have jobs too, but this is due more to economic factors than to feminism. As a result of the campaigns, protests and sit-ins of second-wave feminists, abortion became more accessible in the USA; however, a woman’s right to abortion continues to be challenged and remains a contentious issue, especially at election time. Conditions for women in the workplace have improved, women are more widely represented in business and the professions, on committees and decision-making bodies (look at the difference in the SBL, for example), and there is no question that opportunities for women are greater today as a result of the feminist movement. But many more women than men are still in part-time work,¹⁴ women’s wages continue to be below men’s,¹⁵ and women are still not represented in the higher echelons of business, professions and politics.¹⁶

An area where I thought, wrongly, that we were successful was in the elimination of sexist language (I am told that inclusive language was never a major issue in the UK, but I know it has been in Germany, for example). Particularly significant was the fact that both trade and academic publishers adopted policies calling for the use of inclusive language. The media, too, became more sensitive to language (even *Star Trek* changed its motto from

boldly going where no man had been before to going where no one had been before, and that bastion of chauvinism, *The New York Times*, which steadfastly refused to use the title ‘Ms’, eventually yielded to feminist pressure and adopted the title). We know that language influences the way we think, the way we understand the world around us. When children hear ‘man has done this’ and ‘man has done that’ and encounter ‘he’, ‘his’ and ‘him’ as the pronouns used to describe unspecified individuals (the reader of a book, the spectator of a film, the purchaser of a product, the witness at an event, etc.), surely at some level they draw some conclusions about which sex is more important. For my part, I can not hear ‘man’ and feel myself included, and I bridle every time I hear sexist language. This makes me a pretty miserable person, since sexist language is everywhere around us today. Once I could, but now I can only seldom read a book or newspaper, or watch the news, a television programme or a film, without hearing something about the accomplishments of ‘man’, the history of ‘man’, ‘man’s’ effect on the environment, the challenges facing ‘man’ today, and so on.¹⁷ These days Yale University Press can shamelessly publish books on *How Man First Saw the Earth* and *The Discovery of Mankind*,¹⁸ and increasingly publishers have ceased to implement rules about inclusive language.

Second-wave feminism’s language of equality and women’s rights has been co-opted by the media to become the language of power, and the power that is being sold to young women is the same old power, sexual power. You can have a career, a family, success (plenty of money) and be ultra-feminine at the same time. All you need is the right wardrobe, the right accessories, the right cosmetics and the right body. Unfortunately there is something wrong with your body, but you can fix it, by exercise, dieting, waxing, tanning and plastic surgery, all big industries.¹⁹ Whatever happened to improving your mind and your talents? Recent books on feminism and postfeminism lament the abdication of systematic political engagement on the part of women today and offer extensive evidence of the increase in sexism and the growing pressure on young women to conform to traditional sexual stereotypes. At present, these voices are in the minority.²⁰ In the postfeminist era, women have it all, or are told we have. My students, at any rate, and many of my acquaintances (and even some of my best friends) do not think feminism is an issue. If they are right about feminism, what future is there for feminist biblical exegesis?

As a brief addendum to these comments, which appear here in the form in which I presented them, I would like to thank the other panel members and, in particular, the

audience for a lively, stimulating, sometimes encouraging, sometimes discouraging discussion. I was especially struck by the very different situations in Norway (see Jorunn Økland's contribution to this panel discussion) and the UK, and encouraged to learn that an academic Centre for Gender Research can influence social and political policy. I was also impressed by the energy and enthusiasm of younger feminist scholars. A number of people raised issues that occupied second-wave feminists; e.g., being advised not to describe their work as 'feminist' lest they not get a job or have their work published (or, if published, taken seriously). That we continue to face problems second-wave feminist thought it had pretty much resolved shows how much a widespread, committed, politically engaged feminist movement is needed.

¹ When women are portrayed positively, we need to ask critically, whose interests are being served? Take, for example, the story of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael (Gen 21). Yes, it is significant that God takes an interest in an outcast who is both a woman and a slave and that Hagar, a woman and a slave, is the recipient of a theophany. But why is this story here? To make you feel better about the expulsion, which, as far as the biblical narrator is concerned, is necessary for Isaac and his descendants to be the 'true' Israel, the chosen people. How would you feel about Abraham, Sarah, and God (who is in favor of the expulsion), if the theophany to Hagar were not there? What the feminist critic can do is expose how difficult the biblical writer finds it to deal with the expulsion (see J. Cheryl Exum, 'The Accusing Look: The Abjection of Hagar in Art', *Religion and the Arts* 11 (2007), pp. 143-71, and 'Hagar *en procès*: The Abject in Search of Subjectivity', in *From the Margins 1: Women of the Hebrew Bible and Their Afterlives* [ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009], pp. 1-16). Stepping outside the ideology of a text, and that includes its theological ideology, enables the feminist critic not only to criticize that text's ideology but also to deconstruct it: to reveal the chinks in the text's ideological armor and show how the text undermines itself, and to expose the difficulty the text has in sustaining the positions (and oppositions) it espouses.

² Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (eds.), *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992; 2d edn, 2008); Gale A. Yee (ed.), *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995; 2d edn, 2007).

³ Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker, with assistance from Claudia Janssen and Beate Wehn, *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung* (Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1998; 2n edn, 1999).

⁴ Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992; 2d, expanded edn, 1998).

⁵ In the last year I have contributed to three one-volume reference works, all of which wanted standard information of this sort. Rather than endlessly repeating these discussions, why don't we try something truly different?

⁶ The Feminist Hermeneutics of the Bible Section and the Gender, Sexuality, and the Bible Group.

⁷ The recently formed Feminist Interpretations Section. My statistics are based on the words 'feminist', 'feminism', or 'gender' appearing in the name of the program unit.

⁸ See <http://www.bibleandwomen.org/EN/>.

⁹ Roland Boer and Jorunn Økland (eds.), *Marxist Feminist Criticism of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008); Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner (eds.), *Her Master's Tools: Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005). The other panel member, Silvia Schroer, has an edited volume with 'gender' in the title, *Images and Gender: Contributions to the Hermeneutics of Reading Ancient Art* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006). Two of these ten books published in the last five years were in the Feminist Companion series.

¹⁰ Of the 32 titles with 'gender' in the title, 25 appeared in the last 10 years. Of the 39 with 'feminist' or 'feminism' in the title, 11 appeared in the past 10 years.

¹¹ 'Never Mind the Men, Will Mums Take to Gillard?', by Kathy Marks, *The Independent on Sunday*, 27 June 2010, p. 35.

¹² Natasha Walter observes that the classic feminist critique of pornography has disappeared from view (*Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* [London: Virago, 2010], p. 107). She cites an interviewee, Carly Whiteley, as observing, 'It just starts so early. From when I was eleven or twelve I remember going round with my friend to her boyfriend's – he was older than us – and he would be watching porn on his computer. And then we always had stuff like *FHM* at home. But it's everywhere. I mean, if you put on the television every other music video has half-naked women dancing around. It's just like you don't have any choice – you feel that as you grow up you have to start dressing that way, acting that way – that there is no other way to behave' (p. 75).

¹³ The compelling argument of Dorothy Dinnerstein that, until nurturing and child-care patterns change, gender equality can never be achieved remains an important challenge to the sexual status quo (*The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* [New York: HarperColophon Books, 1977]). Alternatives to the nuclear family in the 70s, such as communes and collectives, seem to have been forgotten.

¹⁴ See Nina Power, *One Dimensional Woman* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books), pp. 19-20.

¹⁵ Women working in the UK earn on average 23% less than men

(<http://www.ukfeminista.org.uk/>); see also

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2009/jul/10/mothers-wages-fawcett-society>.

¹⁶ See Walter, *Living Dolls*, p. 209. In the UK women are greatly underrepresented in politics; the percentage of women in the UK parliament has slipped to number 73 in the International Parliamentary Union world league table, down 40 places in 10 years. These figures are taken from the International Parliamentary Union website (www.ipu.org) and can be downloaded from the Centre for Women & Democracy website (www.cfdw.org.uk). The Netherlands is 6, Norway 8, Germany 19, Switzerland 28, the USA is 91. One rarely sees female politicians criticized for their policies without attendant negative criticisms of their physical appearance and dress sense. For some sobering examples, see Walter, *Living Dolls*, pp. 119-22.

¹⁷ Dale Spender, in the preface to the second edition of her *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985 [first published in 1980], p. xiii), asks, ‘Will we have to be reclaimed by some future generation as we ourselves have had to reclaim past generations?’ It appears the answer is ‘yes’.

¹⁸ Robert Poole, *Earthrise: How Man First Saw the Earth* (Yale University Press, 2010) and David Abulafia, *The Discovery of Mankind: Atlantic Encounters in the Age of Columbus* (Yale University Press, 2009).

¹⁹ The message given to women, encouraged by television programmes in the UK such as *Ten Years Younger*, *Embarrassing Teenage Bodies*, *How to Look Good Naked*, is that self-esteem and happiness lies in looking better. (Channel 4 has just announced a new series of *How to Look Good Naked*, aimed at making over men; the culture of self-commodification is not just a feminist issue, though women remain its chief victims.) Many of these recent developments have been fuelled by the backlash against feminism; see Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women* (London: Vintage, 1992).

²⁰ It is encouraging to see a growing debate, but, unlike second-wave feminism, the debate does not seem to have much impact on contemporary culture; see, *inter alia*, Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (eds.), *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: SAGE, 2009); Kat Banyard, *The Equality Illusion: The Truth about Women and Men Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010); Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon, *Cultural Texts and Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); Susan J. Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message That Feminism's Work Is Done* (New York: Times Books, 2010); Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley, *Feminism in Popular Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2007); and the more popularizing Natasha Walter, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (London: Virago, 2010); Nina Power, *One Dimensional Woman* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009); Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune, *Reclaiming the F Word: The New Feminist Movement* (London: Zed Books, 2010). For signs of recent public debate, see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2010/jul/24/feminism-not-finished-not-uncool>; for some recent personal accounts of international feminist activism, see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/aug/15/meet-the-new-feminists>; and for those who want to know more about feminism in the UK, see <http://www.ukfeminista.org.uk/>.

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