Preaching about Women in (and on) the Bible

BY F. SCOTT SPENCER

Since women experience and interpret the world differently from men, it would be nice if the viewpoints of women scholars were seriously considered in preaching today—not least in dialogue with women’s stories in the Bible.

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of hearing their concerns addressed *qua women*. Of course, many biblical-
theological and -ethical issues concern the universal human condition, female
and male. But whatever one’s view of the vexed biological and philosophical
questions surrounding gender similarities and differences, few would dispute
the common-sense observation that women experience and interpret the
world differently from men in some, if not many, respects. And it would be
nice if these “women’s viewpoints” were seriously considered in Christian
preaching today—not least in dialogue with women’s stories in the Bible.

But what’s a poor male preacher to do in his masculine body, mind, and
voice? How many times have we been told, “You just don’t understand!”? I
have lost count now in my almost forty years of marriage to a brilliant
woman, with whom I helped raise two daughters. I never had a chance.

Well here is a radical idea: we can listen and learn and sharpen our
empathetic skills. We can start with respectful attention to the women in our
lives and congregations. And from there we can proceed to read with open
minds about biblical women from the rich resources of feminist scholarship.
Here contemporary women (and a few men) commenting on the Bible
engage in critical and sympathetic dialogue with ancient women in the
Bible. Such conversation is especially worthy of men’s attention: let him
who has ears to hear, hear—without trying to dominate the discussion.

It is way past time to get over narrow, knee-jerk reactions to the word
“feminism.” Feminist biblical interpretation is not a passing fad or eccentric
fringe movement. Well into its fifth decade of professional practice, feminist
approaches to biblical study offer a wealth of insight from a wide range of
perspectives. Though bound together by core commitments to women’s full
equality and opportunity, feminist biblical scholars do not tow a single party
line and are as apt to argue with one another as with non-feminist interpreters.
The *Women’s Bible Commentary*, just released in an expanded third edition,
exemplifies the maturity, variety, and complexity of feminist biblical analysis
by an impressive cadre of women scholars. To be fruitful listeners and learners,
we men must give up on our arrogant claims to be purely “objective” or
“fair and balanced” readers. If feminist scholars have taught us anything, it
is that all of us bring ourselves—including our *gendered* selves—to the inter-
pretive process and must of necessity interact with different people and
alternative viewpoints in order to correct our blind spots. For my part, during
the past two decades of my academic career I have been repeatedly blown
away by the insights and inquiries of feminist biblical studies, often
responding, “I would never have thought of that. I never considered Eve or
Ruth or Jezebel or any of the several Mary’s or Joanna or Martha—or *God or
Jesus or the Holy Spirit*—that way before!” I do not always like or accept these
new perspectives, but I never fail to be stimulated by them. They inspire me to
try a little feminist preaching, teaching, and writing of my own about biblical
women—out of solidarity and sympathy with the baseline feminist goal of
affirming women’s full equality and opportunity in Church and society.
So how might we put this into practice? First and foremost, we should try to approach every sermon we preach with “raised consciousness” about women’s places (or absences!) within the focal biblical texts and how women in our congregations might respond to (or recoil from) these passages. That does not mean that every sermon should address “women’s issues” as such, about which we are hardly the most qualified spokespersons. But it does mean carefully thinking through—after considered listening to women congregants, ministers, and scholars—the implications for women’s lives concerning what we proclaim to be God’s authoritative word. This represents a banner case in the “ethics of biblical interpretation”:\(^5\): when we say, “the Bible says,” we are inevitably making a loaded statement with immense power to affect people’s lives for good or ill, depending on how faithfully, humbly, and lovingly we interpret the text. To take an extreme example, advising battered women to hang in there with abusive husbands because Christ took an unjust beating on the cross (cf. 1 Peter 2:20-23) constitutes profoundly unethical preaching.\(^6\)

Beyond incorporating women’s insights, feminist and otherwise, into our regular course of preaching, we might also consider occasional sermon series devoted to women characters in the Bible. While the pickings are slimmer for biblical heroines than heroes, they are not negligible. How about a series on “Women Prophets” such as Miriam (Exodus 15:20-21; Numbers 12), Deborah ( Judges 4:4; 5:1-31), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20), Mary and Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-56), the four daughters of Philip the evangelist (Acts 21:8-14; cf. 2:17-18), and, on the more suspect side, the so-called “Jezebel” in the church at Thyatira (Revelation 2:19-23)? I have not tried that yet, but I have recently preached a series on “Women in Jesus’ Life” that seemed to be well-received by the women (and most men) in the congregation. I titled the sermons: “And So and So Begat So and So”: Women in Jesus’ Past (Matthew 1:1-6, 16-17); “It’s Not Fair”: A Woman’s Dogged Pursuit of Justice (Mark 7:24-30); “Don’t You See this Woman?”: Lavish Love in Action (Luke 7:36-50); “Don’t You Care?”: Sister Angst (Luke 10:38-42); “Grant Me Justice!”: The Widow’s Might (Luke 18:1-8); and “Go Call Your Husband”: Jesus Meets a Six-Timing Woman (John 4:5-12, 16-19, 27-30).

Perhaps most appreciated by women was the fourth message on the famous Martha and Mary story.\(^7\) This is one of those rare women’s texts that modern preachers have frequently preached about—but not in a way that pleases many devout women. I have been struck in my classes and in congregations that I visit by how many mature women who have heard plenty of sermons, when given half a chance, express their dislike (some say hatred) for this little passage in Luke. What they are really lamenting is how the text has often been misused by preachers to squelch vocal-active Martha-types who bemoan their situation, and to keep women in their proper silent-passive places at Jesus’ feet, with Mary. Martha gets much more sympathy from women in the pew than Jesus seems to offer—or rather, than preachers who interpret Jesus’ response seem to offer. In fact, Jesus “does care” about
alleviating the stress (not the value) of Martha’s “much ministry” \((\textit{pollēn diakonian} \text{[Luke 10:40]})\) by effectively inviting her to participate with sister Mary in his teaching seminar. Overall, this vignette supports Luke’s wider emphasis on the merged \textit{diakonia} (ministry, service) of table and word, of hospitality and proclamation, of action and contemplation. Both Martha and Mary play “good parts” ideally \textit{combined} in all followers of Jesus—\textit{men} as well as women. Jesus himself represents the consummate diaconal model of servant-teacher, provider-proclaimer, Martha-\textit{and}-Mary.\(^9\) We preachers need to play a “better part” in balancing these roles.

NOTES

1 See the candid assessment of the “Current Status of Baptist Women in Ministry” in the special issue of Review and Expositor, 110 (forthcoming 2013), edited by Pamela R. Durso.


7 See the extended treatment of this story in Spencer, \textit{Salty Wives}, 145-189.

8 The Greek simply affirms that “Mary has chosen \textit{the good part} (\textit{tēn agathēn merida})” (Luke 10:42)—not necessarily the “better part” as the NRSV renders.


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