

Feminist Scholarship on Women in the Bible

BY SHEILA KLOPPER

While acknowledging the difficult androcentrism of the Bible, the three books reviewed here also affirm its liberative and authoritative nature. They present a constructive way forward for modern interpreters who are committed to feminism and who maintain a high view of scriptural authority.

The roots of modern feminist biblical scholarship stretch back to the nineteenth century abolitionist movement and the struggle for women's suffrage, which is identified as the First Wave of Feminism. Most of the feminist interpreters in the nineteenth century were untrained lay people who were also active in social reforms. Christian abolitionists such as Lucretia Mott and Sarah and Angelina Grimké understood Scripture to be liberative. Their interpretations became the basis for actively opposing slavery and gender inequalities in America. Other nineteenth century feminists, such as the prominent suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, came to a different conclusion about Scripture. After a careful study of the Bible she concluded that it was largely responsible for the subjugation of women. She edited and helped author the *Woman's Bible*, which was a collection of commentaries designed to highlight biblical women and expose the patriarchalism of Scripture. The writers considered only the passages that dignified women as inspired divine truth. In this first phase of feminist biblical scholarship, feminists either naively regarded the Bible as affirming gender equality or pessimistically regarded it as patriarchal and thereby denied its authoritative nature.

The Second Wave of Feminism which emerged amidst the Civil Rights struggle of the 1960s spurred new work in feminist biblical scholarship that

was largely the labor of professional academics. Modern biblical scholarship utilizes historical criticism, which focuses on reading individual texts as ancient historical writings. The whole canonical nature of the Bible as God's word is overshadowed by a focus on Scripture as individual texts written primarily by men who lived in patriarchal cultures. Using historical criticism, feminists researched Scripture in an effort to highlight women and to reinterpret passages from a feminist perspective. Early on in the quest scholars such as Letty Russell, a theologian at Yale Divinity School, were optimistic that the real meaning of the text—one that affirmed gender equality—had been hidden by hundreds of years of androcentric and misogynist interpretations. Their task was to uncover the true meaning of those texts. To some extent this group of feminist biblical scholars was successful. From the Old Testament, they pointed to the female leadership of Deborah, who was a judge, warrior, and leader (Judges 4, 5). And they reclaimed the confident Shulammitte woman who overcame Eve's curse (Song of Solomon). From the New Testament they argued that Jesus affirmed a discipleship of equals, one in which Mary Magdalene was central. And they identified Paul's female co-workers, women such as the prominent apostle Junia (Romans 16:7) and the minister and leader Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2).

Nonetheless with every positive scriptural example that affirmed women, there seemed to be ten more patriarchal texts that countered those examples. In carefully scrutinizing Scripture as a historical and literary document, some feminist scholars were less optimistic of its egalitarian nature. It appeared that apart from doing interpretative gymnastics, the plain meaning of Scripture was still very androcentric and oppressive of women. There is the sickening silence of women such as Dinah (Genesis 34) and the Levite's concubine (Judges 19), both of whom were raped by men and presented by biblical narrators as merely male property. And in the New Testament there are passages such as Ephesians 5:22-24, which calls wives in the Church to be subject to their husbands and 1 Timothy 2:11-15, which forbids women to teach or to have authority over men. Feminist theologians such as Mary Daly ultimately concluded that patriarchy in the Christian tradition was not merely the fault of sexist interpreters of the Bible; Scripture itself was hopelessly oppressive of women, subjugating them repeatedly under male authority. It seemed clear that the Christian God was a male God who sent a male Son leaving little room for women in this salvation history except as the handmaiden of men. This group of revolutionary feminists rejected altogether Scripture as authoritative.

It is in this interpretative tug-o-war that the feminist authors of the three books in this review enter the conversation. The three books include Carol Meyers, ed., *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001, 608 pp., \$50.00); Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. Macdonald with Janet H. Tulloch, *A Woman's Place: House*

Churches in Earliest Christianity (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2006, 356 pp., \$21.00); and Andrew Sloane, ed., *Tamar's Tears: Evangelical Engagements with Feminist Old Testament Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012, 398 pp., \$44.00). Each share the task of identifying women in Scripture and viewing the ways that they have been presented, hidden, and treated by the Biblical authors. They are attentive to the female images of God and how that shapes modern understanding of the full humanity of women. The scholarship in each tries to imaginatively fill in the gaps where the narrator of Scripture leaves a woman silent or fails to view an event from the female's perspective. They accomplish this by utilizing such tools as historical, social, archaeological, and anthropological research. Where these scholars do their most constructive work is in interpreting individual texts in light of a theological or canonical perspective, a task that modern historical criticism resists. These books acknowledge the difficult androcentric nature of Scripture, but they also affirm Scripture's liberative and authoritative nature. As such they present a constructive way forward for modern interpreters who are committed to feminism and who maintain a high view of scriptural authority.

More than seventy experts contributed entries to the *Women in Scripture* dictionary. This volume aids feminist scholarship in four significant ways. First, it joins the monumental task of collecting, recognizing, and giving voice to over 800 named and unnamed women in Scripture (the largest group, not surprisingly, is unnamed women). Many of

these women have gone unnoticed by feminists even after four decades of careful research. Second, it offers historical and social background information on the women's lives and experiences. Third, accompanying the historical concern is the careful attention to the Bible as literature. The biblical authors made decisions about how they did or did not portray women. Therefore

each entry considers the passages as literature in an effort to determine whether sexism is encoded in the text itself. For example Mark 14:3-9 records the story of a woman who anoints Jesus' head. He prophesies that wherever the good news is proclaimed, her deed will be remembered. Ironically in this text, the biblical author does not name the woman, something the dictionary points out. The fourth contribution is the effort to identify false traditional

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interpretations of Scripture that still remain popular. For example many might be surprised to learn that Mary Magdalene, the most famous of Jesus' female disciples, has been regarded as a former prostitute in traditional history. Yet there is little scriptural evidence to support this claim. Instead she was a 'tower of strength' and the only women mentioned in all four Gospels. She provided economic support to Jesus and was present at his cross and resurrection, two of the most important events of the Christian faith.

In *A Woman's Place*, Osiek, MacDonald, and Tulloch have produced a socio-historical study of women within the house churches of early Christianity. Rather than simply interpreting New Testament passages, the authors rely on the research into ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman society that has taken place in such disciplines as sociology, anthropology, and archaeology. In this way the authors are able to paint a portrait of what life might have been like in the early church.

Rather than taking sides on whether or not women in the early church served as ministers or were treated as equals in the modern sense of the word, the authors are honest about the patriarchal constraints as well as the freedoms early Christian women experienced. There is evidence of a movement toward greater social freedom for women throughout the Roman Empire in the first century. Women in the house churches, which met at the crossroad of the public and private spheres, benefited from these emerging freedoms. The authors found evidence that women served as hosts, patronesses, teachers, and leaders, participating in all levels of communal life. Most women in the early church were married or widowed, rather than ascetics as was the case in later church history. For example, Acts, Romans, and 1 Corinthians identify Paul's co-worker Prisc(ill)a who was a wife, artisan, missionary, and foreign immigrant. She was likely of higher status than her husband, Aquila. But the book does not present a utopian vision of gender equality or assume that all house churches were egalitarian in their practices. Women experienced more restricted roles. The household codes of Ephesians 5:22-24 call women to be dutiful wives, subjected to their husbands. And certainly female slaves suffered their own unique restrictions.

Overall the book's greatest contribution is its effort to focus on the ordinary lives of women in the early church. It addresses such topics as what it must have been like to be a child or a female slave. It offers a picture of the house church in terms of its ministry leadership patterns and formal worship services, but also reconstructs it in terms of the females' perspectives. These women worked in trades, managed households, gave birth, nursed babies, hired wet-nurses, experienced the death of their infants, were abused by their masters, served as hostesses, and worked alongside others in Christian ministry.

Tamar's Tears provides a unique and equally valuable contribution to feminist biblical interpretation. This collection of essays is intent on interpreting the Old Testament in a way that is both feminist and evangelical. As feminists, the contributors affirm and promote the full humanity of

women. They neither argue that the Bible affirms gender equality in the modern sense, nor do they believe it prescribes a hierarchical model of complementarian male-female relationships. As evangelicals they affirm the Bible's authority for Christian faith and practice. *Tamar's Tears* does all this while wrestling with some of the most challenging scriptures faced by feminist interpreters of the Old Testament (for example, Genesis 3:16, Judges 19, and 2 Samuel 13:1-22).

Like most feminists, the authors of the essays in *Tamar's Tears* employ a hermeneutic of suspicion. That is, they approach Scripture aware of its androcentrism, asking such questions as: Why did the narrator tell the story this way? What was left out of the story and why? Who has the most to gain or to lose by the way this story is told? They are keenly aware that Scripture was produced in a patriarchal culture and is shaped by the narrator's perspective. However as evangelicals who believe that the Bible is divinely inspired, these scholars refuse to prioritize suspicion above trust. To that end the interpretive work in these essays affirms a hermeneutic of faith and retrieval. In other words the authors read each scripture passage with an eye to the story of God's redeeming and liberating work, which is a theme that emerges across the entire canon of Scripture.

For example, using a hermeneutic of suspicion, the feminist interpreter reading the Old Testament law that commands a raped woman to marry her rapist (Deuteronomy 22:28-29) recognizes that deep patriarchal structures existed in that culture. The modern reader is honest in saying Deuteronomy is not a text of liberation for women (or slaves or foreigners for that matter!). But the author also applies a hermeneutic of faith which recognizes that from a canonical view, God's perspective is not exhausted by any one narrator's perspective. Deuteronomy does not have the last or only word to say on the topic of women and marriage, something Jesus reminded his audience in reference to laws on divorce (Mark 10:2-9). Employing both a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutic of trust enables these authors to honor the Bible's authority while affirming the full humanity of women.

While *Tamar's Tears* and *A Woman's Place* tend to use academic terminology that may make them less appealing to a lay reader, *Women in Scripture* would be very beneficial to any church library. All three provide a helpful way forward for feminist Christians.



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