

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.

Preaching about women in the Bible has never been a strong suit of Christian pulpits. Part of the problem stems from the fact that historically the preponderance of pulpit speakers mediating the voice of God have been men. While this trend has been shifting in recent decades, resistance to women preachers remains deeply entrenched in some denominations. Apart from the fact that male ministers do not naturally identify with biblical women, neglect of preaching about these women is also partly due to the Bible itself. By and large, the Bible is a collection of androcentric writings by male authors embedded in a patriarchal culture. Its heroes are Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, Peter, and Paul, to say nothing of God's primary representation in masculine language and images.

I will not take space here to argue for full acceptance and support of female preachers and ordained ministers of God's word.¹ I chiefly address my fellow male Christian preachers who continue to dominate Sunday sermons—to a majority of *women* congregants, many of whom form the backbone of their local churches. And herein lies the prime reason for us men to preach about women in the Bible: we are called as pastors and other ministers to represent and communicate "the whole purpose of God" with as much empathy as possible to "*all the flock*, of which the Holy Spirit has made [us] overseers, to shepherd the church of God" (Acts 20:27-28). Preaching, though it is an intensely personal experience, is not exclusively about preachers' identities and interests. Baldly put, preaching is not a men's forum. If not granted their own pulpit voices, women certainly merit a full and fair hearing in the sense

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!"² 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.³ 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 interpretive 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.⁴

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" (*pollēn diakonian* [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 *diakonia* (ministry, service) of table and word, of hospitality and proclamation, of action and contemplation. Both Martha and Mary play "good parts"⁸ ideally *combined* in all followers of Jesus – men as well as women. Jesus himself represents the consummate diaconal model of servant-teacher, provider-proclaimer, Martha-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.

2 See Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990).

3 Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, eds., *Women's Bible Commentary: Twentieth Anniversary Edition*, third edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012).

4 See, for example, F. Scott Spencer, *Salty Wives, Spirited Mothers, and Savvy Widows: Capable Women of Purpose and Persistence in Luke's Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012); "Confessions of a Male Feminist Biblical Scholar," blog at <http://eerdword.wordpress.com/2012/12/18/confessions-of-a-male-feminist-biblical-scholar-by-f-scott-spencer/>, (accessed February 12, 2013); "Feminist Criticism," in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, second edition, edited by Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011), 289-325; and *Dancing Girls, "Loose" Ladies, and Women of "the Cloth": The Women in Jesus' Life* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

5 See, for example, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 107:1 (1988): 3-17; and Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

6 See Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "Every Two Minutes: Battered Women and Feminist Interpretation," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Letty M. Russell (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1985), 96-107.

7 See the extended treatment of this story in Spencer, *Salty Wives*, 145-189.

8 The Greek simply affirms that "Mary has chosen *the good part* (*tēn agathēn merida*)" (Luke 10:42) – not necessarily the "better part" as the NRSV renders.

9 See, for example, Luke 9:10-17; 22:24-27 ("But I am among you as one who serves (*diakonōn*)" [22:27]); cf. Acts 6:1-6.



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