

The Bible

Feminist & Queer Approaches to
Scripture

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SCM

Feminist & Queer Approaches to Scripture

It is the opinion of most feminist theologians that the church has, historically, marginalised and silenced women, and that it has employed well-recognised techniques for doing so. One of the ways in which this has happened has been through the systematic writing out of women from scripture and history – that is to say they are omitted from the text, or when they are there they are read through patriarchal eyes.

Virtually all work in feminist theology owes something of its method to the approach developed by Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorini, which consists of four elements:

The Hermeneutic of Suspicion

A feminist reading doesn't take at face value the implication that women were not present or took a purely supporting role, but asks where the women are and what they are doing. As feminists we hope to restore women to Christian history, but also restore the history of Christian beginnings to women. This method does not rely on finding new sources, but rather concerns itself with reading the sources we have through different eyes. All of this requires historical imagination, which allows us to use other information of the day to cast a suspicious eye on texts that seem to imply that women were not present or active.

Proclamation

Feminists see liberation as a theme that runs like a thread through the books of the Bible, and as the core of Jesus' message. We therefore have a duty to proclaim those parts that are oppressive to women as being contrary to that message.

Remembrance

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Creative actualisation

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sources and other evidence from the same period which sheds more light on them.

With that methodology as a starting point, many feminist scholars have focused their attention on the biblical texts where women are specifically mentioned. The influential and provocative *Texts of Terror*, by Phyllis Trible, asked, 'What should we do with biblical texts that portray violence to women?' Should they really be read in church as part of an illuminating canon for the faithful? Lot offering his daughters to the crowd in order to protect his male guests, the Levite colluding with other males to bring about the rape, murder and dismemberment of his concubine, Amnon's rape of Tamar are all texts that give a clear message: the inferiority of women and their status as owned by men. This is compounded by the texts about the cleanliness or otherwise of women and the price of virginity. What are contemporary women to do with such texts – surely they cannot be conveying God? The problem that has been exposed through this approach is still hotly debated – does it mean that the texts are useless, only useful as an historical record of the bad old days, or are they still the word of God?

Amongst those not willing to abandon the texts to the traditionalists, there is also a group of scholars concerned to recover the female aspects of deity hidden in scriptural texts. This involves concentrating on neglected passages, reinterpreting those more familiar, and always having an eye to new understandings from historical and linguistic analysis. In the Hebrew Bible we have many references to God as female: the psalmist declares that God is a midwife (Psalms 22:9–10); at times God is mother (Deuteronomy 32:18) – this text is often translated as 'fathered you' but this is an inaccurate rendering of the Hebrew verb. God the merciful and compassionate mother is also witnessed in Jeremiah 31:15–22. In addition, of course, we have a huge body of work on the nature and role of Lady Wisdom in creation and the ongoing nurture she provides in the growth of Jewish spirituality.

In large part other feminist biblical scholars have built on the methods of Schüssler-Fiorenza and Trible by applying those methods to a wide range of texts. We see a growing body of work involved in the recovery of women from patriarchal interpretations of texts, which results in rereading the origins of

both Judaism and Christianity. However, the jury is out as to whether this is a worthwhile exercise, since some believe the tradition is so patriarchal that even providing alternative ways of reading will not fundamentally alter the tradition itself. The position of Schüssler-Fiorenza and others remains the same: it is their tradition too and they will not hand it over to those who would use narrow and excluding methods of interpretation – interpretation after all is always political!

This is glaringly obvious when we turn our attention to queer readings of the bible. Queer readings should not be confused with gay and lesbian readings, which have a slightly different angle to them. Queer theory questions the nature of gender itself, and so one of the purposes of queer readings would be to ask whether the assumptions regarding the creation of gender that we have are in any way biblically justified. Of course there is a relationship between queer and gay and lesbian readings, in that homophobic reading is only possible if one has very fixed gender boundaries.

The recent biblical work of Theodore Jennings Junior, a married Methodist biblical scholar, proposes a gay-positive reading of scripture which does not assume the heterosexual orientation of characters in stories or the 'normative' nature of marriage and family relations between people. However, the author is not concerned with establishing a gay identity for Jesus; rather, he wants to think outside that box as well. He wants to read in such a way as to liberate all, gay and straight, from the narrow confines of the dualistic binary opposites of male and female gender construction; binary opposites that do not necessarily lead to life in abundance and the full embrace of our rich and complex humanity. This is queer at its most challenging.

Amongst Jennings' extensive biblical analysis is an interesting and illuminating treatment of the Gospel of Matthew. Jennings is interested in the way that the author uses the story of the Centurion's Lad (Matthew 8:5–13), which he thinks is deliberately provocative. Matthew uses the word *pais*, not *doulos* which is used by Luke; the former means 'boy', 'lover' or 'boyfriend' while the latter means 'slave'. Is this a mistake by Matthew? Jennings does not think so, as he points out the whole Gospel is radical and so would talk of boyfriends... Jennings' argument is placed within an understanding of the Gospel as a whole. For example, when Matthew talks of the

magi he is defying Jewish custom which demands that such sorcerers be despised. Far from despising them, they are placed centrally as being those who recognise and pay homage to Jesus. In the same vein, when he introduces the reader to the Syrophenecian woman she is referred to as a dog, kunariois, a cultic prostitute, and one connected with a sexual irregularity, yet here is a woman who is shown as the one with insight, the one who pushes on Jesus' own understanding. So to also have pederasty, through the introduction of the Centurion's boy, would complete the trio of things that the orthodox Jew would shy away from. It is also to place these questionable aspects at the centre of a new theology pointing to participation in the new creation. It is really queering the pitch!

The readings suggested by Jennings are troubling to gender roles that underpin patriarchy, heterosexism and masculinist understandings. Jennings suggests that it is far too simple to suggest that Jesus was gay, since that reading is a way of falling back into the binary opposites that it is suggested need to be overcome. However, we do see that Jesus had close and affectionate relationships with men, particularly the beloved disciple, that would challenge standard masculinist understandings of gender.

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