

*Susanne Scholz, Hanna Stenström, Klaus-Peter Adam, Hanna Tervanotko, Karin Tillberg*

## **A Scholarly Conversation about the Feminist and Gendered Study of the Hebrew Bible:**

### **A Discussion of „Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect“ at the EABS 2016 in Leuven, Belgium**

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#### Abstract

Die hier präsentierte Sammlung von Beiträgen dokumentiert das Panel „Feminist Approaches to the Bible“, organisiert von Susanne Scholz und Hanna Stenström bei der EABS-Tagung in Leuven im Sommer 2016. Die Diskussionsgrundlage dieses intensiven feministisch-theologischen Gesprächs bildete das dreibändige Werk *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect*, erschienen bei Sheffield Phoenix Press in den Jahren 2013, 2014 und 2016 (herausgegeben von Susanne Scholz). Die Beiträge von Klaus-Peter Adam, Hanna Tervanotko und Karin Tillberg reflektieren auf Grundlage dieses Werks Fragen moderner feministischer Exegese zwischen methodisch-hermeneutischen Errungenschaften und neuen Herausforderungen und Perspektiven.

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#### **Introduction**

##### **Susanne Scholz**

During one of the hottest and most humid weeks in the summer of 2016, the European Association of Biblical Studies (EABS) met at the Catholic University (Katholieke Universiteit) in Leuven, Belgium. The meeting was jointly held with the International Organization for Qumran Studies, and an illustrious group of about 400 scholars met in the classrooms and hallways of the Department of Catholic Theology from July 17-20. I had never before attended an EABS meeting, but I knew from my colleague, Dr. Hanna Stenström at the Stockholm School of Theology in Sweden, that our co-organized panel on “Feminist Approaches to the Bible” would be the only explicitly feminist session in the program book. In fact, it had been Hanna who, in the summer of 2015, had looked for other feminist exegetes

to co-organize a panel on feminist biblical studies for the upcoming EABS meeting in Leuven. Hanna, having attended previous EABS meetings, wanted to make sure that the 2016 meeting would feature a visible feminist scholarly presence. When nobody else jumped at the opportunity to organize a scholarly session on feminist biblical exegesis, I decided to help Hanna in her worthy cause. After a few emails back and forth, we decided to submit a proposal for a “one-year workshop” to the EABS team since we could not commit to a three-year research unit, the other option according to the EABS proposal guidelines.

The EABS proposal process is involved because a full proposal requires detailed explanations on the “rationale of the proposed research unit,” an “in-depth research plan and methodology,” and a description about “the important and originality of the research unit’s topic, and/or methodology, including comments on how it will advance the mission of the EABS.” Hanna and I decided to organize a scholarly conversation about the feminist and gendered study of the Hebrew Bible, within its intersectional manifestations. We wanted our research unit to engage “the feminist study of biblical literature, with a focus on epistemological, hermeneutical, and methodological questions.” The basis for the feminist scholarly conversation would be the three-volume series I had just completed editing. Entitled *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect*, the three volumes had been published by Sheffield Phoenix Press in 2013, 2014, and 2016. Volume 1 gathered feminist exegetical research on the various books of the Hebrew Bible, Volume 2 assessed feminist biblical scholarship organized by various social locations, and Volume 3 evaluated the use of various exegetical methods in feminist Hebrew Bible studies. A total of 45 contributors had produced informative, engaging, and comprehensive treatments on feminist biblical exegesis, as it has developed worldwide since the early 1970s. We hoped our proposed panel would provide the EABS audience with the opportunity to learn more about the three volumes and to hear competent scholars offer their reflections on epistemological, hermeneutical, and methodological concerns in regard to feminist biblical scholarship in general.

When the EABS team accepted our proposal, we invited three panelists to join us in Leuven in July 2016. We were delighted that the following three colleagues agreed to join our panel: Dr. Klaus-Peter Adam, a professor of Old Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in the USA, Dr. Hanna Tervanotko, an Academy of Finland post-doctoral researcher at the Centre of Excellence (“Changes in Sacred Texts and Traditions”) at the University of Helsinki in Finland, and Karin Tillberg, a doctoral student in Old Testament/Hebrew Bible exegesis at the Department of Theology at the Uppsala University in Sweden. We could not have wished for better contributors to bring the following three questions into conversation with the three volumes: First, what are the epistemological, hermeneutical, and methodological accomplishments of feminist Hebrew Bible interpretations? Second, what are the innovative, creative, and challenging new directions in the field of feminist biblical studies? Third, how does the field of feminist, gender, and queer

biblical studies intermingle with contemporary forces of globalization, neoliberalism, and corporate militarization, as they currently present themselves in politics, economics, culture, and religion?

Our three panelists offered succinct statements about the feminist study of the Hebrew Bible from their particular positions. Their papers include detailed, thoughtful, and critical engagement with selected essays published in *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect*. They also provide intriguing suggestions for future feminist exegetical engagement, as they make clear that much remains to be done in the pursuit of dismantling structures of gender domination, in its various manifestations, within Hebrew Bible exegesis and beyond. We are most grateful for the commitment of the journal editors to include the three panel statements by Dr. Adam, Dr. Tervanotko, and Ms. Tillberg in this issue of *lectio difficilior*.

**Susanne Scholz**, Ph.D., is Professor of Old Testament at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, USA. As a diasporic German feminist Bible scholar, she has published widely in the area of feminist Hebrew Bible studies located in the post-Holocaust and neoliberal economic world, as well as on the epistemological and hermeneutical theoretical implications of reading biblical literature today.

## **Klaus-Peter Adam**

“Why have we (had) little to say?” This is a sub-heading of Julie Kelso’s essay on feminist interpretation of Ezra/Nehemiah/Chronicles, in light of the lack of feminist scholarship on these particular biblical writings. My selected reading in the two substantial volumes that Susanne Scholz published and in which Kelso’s essay appeared led to a very different impression: Over the last 40 years Feminist colleagues have said and written substantial things on the Hebrew Bible. So much, that now is the time to reflect on the development and on the intermediate status of the field. This is the aim of Susanne Scholz’ three volume edition,<sup>1</sup> besides providing a guide to readers in this broad area of feminist Biblical exegesis: Volume 1 summarizes exegetical studies on selected books of the Hebrew Bible; volume 2 reflects on the social locations of discourses, volume 3 presents methodologies of scholarship. I will here reflect on selected aspects of the content of the first two volumes and then pose some questions.

The first volume includes fourteen articles. After the editor’s introduction, Helen Leneman introduces US protagonists of two generations of feminist biblical scholars since the 1970s, in the wake of Friedan’s 1963 book, “The Feminine Mystique”, including interviews with Phyllis Bird, Esther Fuchs, Carol Meyers and Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, and the second wave from the 1980s to 90s, including Athalya Brenner, Mieke Bal, Claudia Camp, Toni Craven, Danna N. Fewell and Carole Fontaine. With regard to the historical movement of feminist biblical studies, I was impressed by the movement’s overall impromptu-character that the volume unveils. Often, the requirements from young female scholars to teach in the area of women’s studies first prompted their in-depth interest in feminist biblical exegesis. For instance, in the case of Carol Meyers, it was fascinating to read how these necessities stimulated an idea of how to connect the biblical exegesis with feminist themes. The remaining 12 articles of the first volume follow the order of the canonical books of the Old Testament from Genesis to Daniel.

I mention four selected aspects and add one general comment.

First, I found the presentation of research on the individual biblical books most convincing when the essays presented the variety of interpretations in summaries in which they referred to readings along typical interpretive lines and adduced examples of exegetical problems that were paradigmatic for a particular book. In these cases the review of scholarship offers a well-organized road map to the non-expert whom the authors lead through well-trodden as well as newly found paths in the jungle of feminist exegetical research. For instance, the study on four selected aspects of feminist exegesis on Genesis offers a powerful example of the way in which this volume may guide the reader: First, Susanne Scholz exhibits trends in the analysis of Gen 2-3, starting with Mary Daly’s provocative 1973 study on the androcentric reception

history of the narratives along with its echoes in biblical studies. But she goes far beyond what one would expect when she includes glimpses into what she refers to as “proto-feminist scholarship” on this prominent biblical text, that had fought off misogynist readings, such as, for instance, of the late medieval exegete Christine de Pizan. A second part reviews studies on women in Genesis and a third presents the quest for the goddess, while a fourth looks at literary approaches that focus on the women (p. 33).

Second, another randomly chosen example of the collection is the ninth essay in this collection, Carleen Mandolfo’s study on Psalms and Lamentations. Neatly arranged in three parts along Ricoeur’s hermeneutical categories, Mandolfo presents studies on the world behind the text, that is, historical studies of the Psalms, the world in which the text is read today, and, finally, the world in the text, that is, studies that remain within the world of the Psalms or Lamentations. The clear organization of this article demonstrates both the variety in certain areas and the lack of feminist studies in others.

Thirdly, the present writer found it helpful when reviewers pointed to perspectives of future research. For instance, to the question of how to break down the disruption of binary gender-oppositions in order to disrupt the binaries upon which patriarchal discourse relies for legitimization of its hegemony (here in the area of the Psalms, in Mandolfo’s article, p. 201). As the reviewers of this collection of essays use a variety of methodologies, their suggestions for future research illustrate the potential of feminist studies in the Bible. Mandolfo, for instance, points out three aspects of individual laments labeling these Psalms as ‘potentially subversive literature’. First, because of their non-linear discourse mode, second, because of their experience-based world view rather than a logo-centric one, thirdly because of the polyphonic nature of the Psalms that resists the normative as well as the hegemonic discourses of theological dogma (p. 202-203). As non-specialist in feminist studies, these reflections of the authors’ own hermeneutical perspectives on a particular text offered relevant guidance.

Fourthly, the reviews of the variety of positions in feminist biblical studies offers a fresh perspective when it does not shy away from critical review of feminist research. Consider the debate about the hermeneutics of an “At-first-glance’ism” in Chronicles through Nehemiah. Julie Kelso’s stimulating article suggests that some feminist exegetes in the area her review covers, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles, use what she refers to as “at-a-first-glance” hermeneutics. They intentionally revert the impression of an obvious lack of females in the text into its opposite, claiming an abundance of women present.

Karrer Grube writes: “At first glance it seems that female figures and questions of gender difference play next to no role as regards the theme of this book. Hence there is almost no

feminist literature on this subject. Only a closer analysis and a questioning that gets below the surface of the text's intended statement reveal a different picture. The attempt to make 'the women' simply disappear from the concept of the book has not been successful. When we uncover the traces of their significance, we, at the same time, obtain a new insight into the book and its problems." (p. 275; quoted from a study of Karrer Grube, C., Ezra and Nehemiah: The Return of the Others, in: Schottroff, L. et al. (eds.), *Feminist Biblical Interpretation. A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2012, p. 192).

As a historian, Kelso criticizes this approach that assumes the absence of women is merely a false judgment of the texts based on a superficial encounter with them. By doing so, exegetes, says Kelso, refer to their attempts as bringing the women "out from the shadows" (Tamara Eskenazi, p. 277). In opposition to Karrer and Eshkenazi, Kelso points out that Ezra/Nehemiah does not mention more than two names of females, besides the reference to a number of anonymous female servants and singers who would not count as official returnees or *golah*; a reference to some un-named women who helped build the Jerusalem wall and, a prophetess Noadiah mentioned in 6:14 as an opponent of Nehemiah.<sup>2</sup>

Kelso, in a hermeneutical twist, develops a strategy that is the direct opposite of Karrer-Grube's. Kelso sees the root cause of the misinterpretation in the exegetes' attempt to read the biblical texts from a faith-perspective which leads to an attempt to "overstate the presence of women in texts that should rather be characterized critically as actively silencing women and the feminine." (287) Seen through Kelso's lens of a historian, reading biblical texts in the context of a "saving history/salvation history," is misleading (287). Instead, the fact that "barely even a handful of women is mentioned is precisely what should interest feminist scholarship." (287) This fact as such, pace Kelso, is a result of the complex modes of effective silencing at work in the text. More specifically, Kelso reveals two mechanisms of silencing in the biblical text: disavowal and repression. With the psychoanalytic reading mode of Luce Irigaray and Michelle Boulous Walker she assumes "that women are most effectively silenced through their association with maternity, because the maternal body itself as an origin of the masculine subject, is disavowed and oppressed." (288)

I found Kelso's point about the silencing of women convincing: I am not sure whether her assumption of silencing women through birth is the only plausible explanation, but for Chronicles and its genealogical approach it is certainly appealing – at least at first glance. But, most of all, I found it refreshing to re-think the reasons and the potential strategies of silencing women rather than trying to repopulate the biblical record with women that are not mentioned explicitly but supposedly existed. I found myself torn between the two perspectives Kelso presents. On the one hand, I appreciate biblical hermeneutics that read the texts in light of a contemporary discourse among the faithful within a modern discourse on feminism and religion. When reading the biblical text in light of its relevance and its meaning

as authoritative sacred scripture, that is, within the world in which the text is read today, exegetes intend to reflect on the biblical text as a meaningful witness of faith. This setting of a discourse that presupposes the relevance of scripture for today is most useful for practical purposes in ministry settings. Yet, at the same time, I highly value Kelso's call for historical honesty and for her rejection of a hermeneutic of suspicion in favor of hidden female presence.

The second volume takes up the lack of consideration of meta-level questions and of theoretical issues in biblical-feminist scholarship. The negligence among biblical scholars to discuss matters of theory is in sharp contrast to women's studies and gender studies. The volume opens up the discourse on social location. As useful as I found the first volume, the second may be of even more relevance for anchoring the contribution of feminist biblical exegesis in the more narrow sense within the global discourse of feminist exegesis at large. The book offers a multifaceted global perspective and demonstrates the varieties of feminist scholarship throughout the world. While North American and European voices are still the majority (9 out of 14 articles), it was intriguing to see how current feminist theory presents itself in other parts of the world. For the present writer, in a US-American context, the voices from the global South and East opened windows into different exegetical practices. A good example about the discourses on an entire continent is Mercedes Garcia Bachmann's contribution on contextual readings by Latin Americans. A number of fundamental insights are helpful for the North American scholar: Rather than considering something as "Latin America" from a perspective 30.000 feet above ground or from outer space, it should be broken down into its various regions and into a complex multitude of discourses held in various cultural and ethnic regions on this continent: "Argentines do not eat Burritos!" as Garcia-Bachman notes. And, there is much more to learn, from the network of "feminist theologians", called *teologanda* launched in Chile, to the Mexican scholar Elsa Tamez' leadership in the 1980s, to an awareness of gender injustice and an influx of gender theories in the 1990s scholarship. Garcia Bachmann adduces a number of sources, projects and debates and pedagogical efforts on the continent, such as the Roman Catholic Argentinian Teologanda project from 2003 with their manifesto "Mujeres haciendo teologias" "Women doing theologies," or the journal RIBLA (Rivista de Interpretacion Biblica Latino-Americana). Another example for a road map through the feminist discourse led on an entire continent is Musa W. Dube's report from a post-colonial perspective and a gender-theoretical perspective on the ways of reading the bible in light of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. Dube points out how, in her context, feminist biblical interpretation is operating in a field in which the cultural-critical and the post-colonial perspectives unveil the synthesis of Christianity with colonialism and with its mechanisms, such as, for instance, the ritual of baptism that for Christians in Africa signifies leaving behind African customs and any specifically African

identity – for both women and men, no matter of which skin-color.

I found the authors' suggestions that outline in which directions feminist biblical studies should move impressive. To my mind, feminist scholarship in biblical studies will be strongest and most convincing when, firstly, it opens itself to methodological diversity and detailed studies, secondly, when it defines its enemies as clearly as possible, be they androcentric thought, economic conservatism or other ideologies. Thirdly, feminist scholarship in bible will be most convincing when it keeps listening to sisters worldwide, for instance, when North America and Europe remain open to voices from the global south and east. Fourthly, with respect to biblical scholarship at large, I assume feminist biblical hermeneutics will be most convincing when it teams up as a joint venture between Old and New Testament scholars.

In conclusion, from a practical point of view, for the instructor and the student of biblical studies, Susanne Scholz' volumes fill an important gap. The tendency to compartmentalize feminist scholarship as a special field or as a special methodology of exegesis in the Hebrew Bible may lead to treating it as an aside-discourse, held apart from "serious" historical-critical exegesis. Now these three fine volumes enable the scholar in mainstream exegesis to more quickly refer to the larger discourses of feminist scholarship within the field and to offer these condensed reviews on four decades of biblical scholarship to the student in exegetical classes.

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**Hanna Tervanotko**

Dear colleagues,

I want to start by thanking the organizers of this session, Susanne Scholz and Hanna Stenström, for inviting me to join. When I, as a scholar who most of the time operates with texts, am invited to broaden my horizon to hermeneutics and methods and to explicitly think about the impact of my work in and for the society at large, it is both inspiring and challenging. I enjoyed reading through the two volumes of *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect* and reflecting both on the history and future of the feminist movement as well as my own take on feminism, in their light.

When Susanne and Hanna contacted the panelists, they asked us to elaborate particularly on three different questions and in what follows I will be focusing on those. First, I will elaborate on some of the epistemological, hermeneutical, and methodological accomplishments of the feminist biblical interpretations. Then I will share with you some of my own ideas on the most innovative, creative, and challenging new directions of the field. Thirdly, I will ask how the field of feminist biblical studies intermingles with contemporary forces (such as globalization) when it shapes contemporary politics. Finally, I will assess the relationship of feminist exegetical contributions to the newly emerging digital media environment.

In the first place, it is a scholarly commonplace to start any discussion by defining what we are talking about *exactly*. So, let me do so. What is feminist interpretation? While reading the two volumes of *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect*, my impression was that the volumes allow the contributing authors to suggest their own definitions. However, in the introductory section to Vol. 1, Susanne Scholz writes that the goal of feminist interpretation, and also of the present volume, is to “contribute toward the overall development of feminist biblical studies as an autonomous field and challenge biblical studies to make the work of feminist biblical hermeneutics more central than it currently is....” These words set a clear agenda for the volumes and specify that their goal is to foster and strengthen feminist interpretations. Elsewhere in the same volume, Scholz refers to feminist interpretations as a part of the larger movements for human justice in the world and an initiative to “theorize gender justice in the context of the field of the Hebrew Bible.” This bold statement opens for us even broader avenues. At the normative heart of feminism lies the belief that nobody should be disadvantaged because of their sex. What she implies is we should ask, to what kind of justice do we aspire. What is sufficient justice? Let me stop here for a moment to inquire in more detail about what gender justice is. This inquest is necessary in order to evaluate where we as Biblical scholars and feminist thinkers find our place on the way towards such justice.

The key element in establishing any gender justice is in the recognition of the instrumental role of institutions in providing equal opportunities. Such an approach, which stresses how it is the role of politics to foster equality among people, is often quoted as the *capabilities approach*. It has been proposed that the goal of governments should be to expand the real freedom to choose the kind of life people, both men and women, value. Capabilities are the means required to achieve this freedom, including rights such as the right to vote, the right to get an education, or the right to own property.<sup>3</sup> Yet, experience tells us that capabilities are only the most fundamental base for gender justice. Some scholars have insightfully pointed out that creating institutionally equal structures is not real justice when women's options for converting their resources into capabilities and power are more restricted than those of men because of the unequal state of gender relations, both socially and materially. Gender stereotypes and norms in contemporary societies help maintain this state of affairs. Therefore, even if *capabilities* themselves are even and just, the outcome of this fact regarding men and women still differs. The uneven treatments men and women encounter because of differences in levels of education, health, leisure, mobility, respect, and bodily integrity etc. results in our system inhibiting females from enjoying their equal capabilities in the same way as males. These observations call for an evaluation gender justice in even more nuanced ways.

Economist and feminist Stephanie Seguino argues that gender justice requires equality of relevant capability sets, equality in constraints on choice, and finally, equality of pay-offs to capability sets. She writes that “men and women should have the same opportunities to valuable doings and beings”. Whatever work is undertaken, pay-offs or rewards should not be influenced by gender. Yet she argues at the same time that justice should not require that men and women should pursue the same avenues in achieving those goals. As gender groups, men and women have the right to be different. Seguino calls this theory, which outlines the relations between the sexes beyond the created capabilities, and “opportunity-equality approach.”<sup>4</sup>

Taking these insights into account, Susanne Scholz statement in the introduction, that feminist interpretation is not only about gender but relates Biblical hermeneutics to wider justice movements, who call for equal opportunities for everyone, makes a lot of sense to me. A feminist who takes the calls for justice seriously, is found on the side of other marginalized groups, such as those discriminated because of race, sexual orientation or physical disability (some of these are indeed described in Vol. 2). As a third wave feminist myself, whose generation is often characterized by lack of specific goals or political inspiration, I appreciate this formulation and think it can open ways for a dialogue and collaboration with various groups working on social questions today. In my view, this approach characterizes the third wave of feminism: It is a movement of micro politics focusing, for instance, on queer theory,

gender roles, pornography, rape culture, reproductive rights etc. Its downside may be that it lacks one cohesive goal that would bring all feminists together, but it certainly has the potential to bring people with different political orientations together. I will give some examples for what I mean later in my paper.

I now turn more specifically to the accomplishments of the feminist biblical interpretations presented in Vol. 1 (my question no. 1). The collection offers two different perspectives on the achievements of feminist biblical interpretation. On the one hand, the authors, especially Scholz and Helen Leneman, introduce the readers to the success story of post 1960s-1970s feminism. In these few decades feminists have gone a long way. In terms of numbers, it is clear that many more women have entered in the field. The situation of my generation is very different from the experiences of the “founding mothers” of the discipline (e.g., Phyllis Trible, Esther Fuchs, Carol Meyers, and Katherine Doob Sakenfield) of and the prominent women of the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Mieke Bal, Athalya Brenner, Claudia Camp, Toni Craven, Danna Fewell and Carole Fontaine). One of my personal highlights of the annual Society of Biblical Literature meeting is the traditional women’s breakfast on Monday morning. Being in a big hall, full of female biblical scholars, literally hundreds of us, who represent all levels of academia, is incredibly empowering. You look around and none questions your belonging to this field. Even more so, it is evident that more and more women serve in executive roles of professional organizations. More and more organisatory bodies of conferences, boards of journals, committees etc. deem it important to have a balanced gender ratio.

Moreover, it is virtually impossible today to graduate from a Hebrew Bible/Old Testament program without having heard about feminist interpretation. In many countries, the students would have at least heard their teachers mentioning feminism (even if in a negative sense!). Finally, women are often no longer entirely alone with their questions. When we talk about feminist interpretation we tend to focus on women, but it is important to acknowledge that there is a growing number of men who are on board with us on this and who are the first to recognize their own privileges. Their presence in our conversations makes it clear that feminism is a *justice movement*, which does not concern women alone, but everyone. Vol. 1 offers a rich account of feminist exegetical accomplishments of each book of the Hebrew Bible. The authors demonstrate how at least a partial recovery of ignored stories has taken place. These interpretations aim at establishing a more nuanced image of women in the Biblical traditions. They detect the methods that have been used to marginalize women and by removing them, show how women can now be empowered. The authors ask what role, for instance, race and class have played in all this. Also, many contributors argue that the texts themselves do not have a bias against women, but the point of view of later interpreters of these texts has been influential for negative interpretations of female issues. Meanwhile, Vol.

2, titled “Location”, asks how cultural, geopolitical and societal positions influence our reading of the texts of the Hebrew Bible, and how, taking our varying locations into account we can work towards a more gender-just local reading. I am particularly impressed by the rich variety of contributions that demonstrate that even if the origins of feminist interpretation are often detected in a Western context, today it is truly a worldwide justice movement, which closely engages with contemporary questions relevant for each context.

Therefore, all in all, epistemologically, methodologically and hermeneutically we have achieved a great deal in a short time. It is very exciting to see that men and women from different cultural contexts pose the same questions. Earlier generations did not automatically have any encounters with feminist ideas. Today gender equality and justice mean different things in different parts of the world and to different groups of people. Despite the lack of cohesion that the feminist movement witnesses, our currently globalized world with its information technology allow us an awareness of the struggles in other parts the world, and participation in them. Thus, we are growingly more aware of the different feminist goals of the different societies in question. Having said this, I will next turn to reflect on some new directions.

The authors of Vol. 1 mention that some texts have been studied more broadly than others. Traditionally, books dedicated to women, e.g., Ruth, Esther, and Judith have received more attention than those that do not directly involve women. Recently, feminist scholars have pointed out how important it is to also look at the other texts, if we think of feminism as a movement of justice, and inquire what the power structures and hierarchies in texts like Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles etc. that hardly mention women are. I’m excited about contributions such as the feminist *Wisdom Commentary Series*, that takes this challenge seriously. I recently reviewed an excellent commentary on Haggai and Malachi written by Stacy Davis. I was impressed by how Davis could write an entire feminist commentary on texts which do not mention women at all, by focusing on other types of questions about justice (e.g. power structures) that the texts reflect that have crucial impact for feminist issues too.

The articles in Vol. 1 promote the idea of multiple interpretations. The authors clearly demonstrate how readers of biblical texts can by and large decide about what aspect they choose to discuss. The texts themselves offer hermeneutical multiplicity. My colleague from the University of Helsinki, Martti Nissinen often emphasizes the ancient texts as material objects and points out that the ancient texts do not speak or have a voice. Their authors may have had ideas and the present readers have others, but the *texts* are not agents and they don’t speak and have opinions. This observation could well be the motto of the feminist movement because it highlights the responsibility of the interpreter. The ancient author must have had

some ideas, and certainly gendered ones, but the modern readers can only have glimpses of what they were. Meanwhile the ideas of the modern interpreter are different. We can cautiously and responsibly choose which interpretations advance our goals for more just societies.

I myself have mostly written about the roles of women in extra-Biblical, ancient Jewish literary traditions, including the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. These literary corpora and their research histories have had a profound impact on my feminist thinking. First and foremost, these texts challenge the canonical history. They demonstrate that not only the texts that later became a part of the canon, were significant in antiquity but also other ones. This notion is significant when one realizes that the broader ancient Jewish compositions contain literary traditions of women that offer additional readings to the ones of the Hebrew Bible. They may have been as important and as often-read as those that later acquired canonical status. Women's history was not fixed in antiquity and it is possible that, like today, authors did not agree on everything. For instance, different versions of the Song of Miriam in Exodus 15 reveal that people had varying opinions on the contents of the song that Miriam uttered after crossing the Sea of Reeds. Was it just the repetition of the Song of Moses, or did her message contain more theological substance as in the version of the song preserved in the *Reworked Pentateuch*<sup>c</sup> (4Q365) of Qumran? As the Qumran version otherwise agrees with the MT it seems logical to take it as another version of the Pentateuch tradition. All in all, one thing seems certain: the ancient audience of the literary traditions of Exodus 15 interpreted in different ways.

Let me give you another example from the Exodus tradition. Over the years, I worked with Exodus texts focusing on Miriam and thinking about her as a model for feminist readers. Only recently I have stopped to consider the other women of the text, and especially Pharaoh's daughter, as a woman with whom one could identify. She is a woman of the ruling class and of wealth, and she adopts the Hebrew child. While Exodus 2 does not go into further detail, one of the earliest interpreters of the story, Philo of Alexandria, explains that Pharaoh's daughter was barren and desperate to have a child of her own. How many people around us can relate to the question of procreation in that way? I'm thinking about the world-wide booming fertility business and on international adoptions and the whole question of having the right to be a parent. Were the ancient authors aware of such questions? What makes Philo's interpretation even more interesting is that whereas he is usually known for his noticeable misogynist views, in this case, he presents Pharaoh's daughter as an independent educated woman, a character stronger than her husband. All in all, it is up to the reader to decide which side adopt: her representing the oppressive class, being only Moses' facilitator, or as an example of a woman acting on her own? Which interpretation is the more liberating

or can help us move in the direction of justice?

It is not irrelevant who the people analyzing the ancient texts are. I am convinced that those fields of Biblical exegesis which manage to incorporate men and women of different backgrounds stand the best chances to advance, be innovative and create new paradigm-shifting theories. In many ways, the future of several subfields of Biblical studies depends on whether or not they succeed in making themselves not only accessible but also attractive to different scholars. In my view, the field of Qumran studies is a good example of a field where not only men and women, but also different religious backgrounds and denominations, are equally represented. The fact that it is a relatively new field plays a major role in this. It is more difficult for women to enter in those fields of Biblical studies that have been established and occupied by men for long, and that hold firm research traditions than to have a role in newly established areas of Biblical scholarship. Even if women were not members of the original editorial team of the Dead Sea Scrolls, they quickly became members in it and thus the questions posed for the texts that derive from the Dead Sea Scrolls are problems formulated by both men and women. I am optimistic regarding interdisciplinary fields involving new methods, and new material findings etc. because women will find themselves at home in these new fields of research.

I am much less convinced about the future of some other areas of Biblical, because they remain exclusive men's clubs. We must remember what had been said in the past about gender justice, namely, that it is not necessary for men and women to operate the same avenues. As gender groups, men and women have the right to be different, yet whatever work is undertaken, pay-offs or rewards should not be influenced by gender. Therefore, it is not necessary that women are present in every subfield of Biblical studies. Yet, when we look at those subfields where women are still not full-players, some critical reflection is necessary: are women not actively involved in these areas because they do not want to be, or because their presence is still somehow hindered? If the latter, I am sad that not all colleagues have recognized the significance of inclusiveness especially in terms of reaching for the highest academic standards and I am not sure whether such short-sightedness can be fixed from outside.

Let me then turn to ponder some contemporary questions of feminist interpretation more closely. In this talk, I locate myself in present day Europe, which for me is between Finland, my native country, and Belgium, where I currently live. The past year has in many ways been very turbulent where European internal politics are concerned, and one of the hottest topics touches on the newcomers to our continent. From last fall millions of refugees have arrived in Europe and many are here to stay. As many of us have experienced personally, and other

witnessed more indirectly, the welcome has been mixed. Whereas many individual Europeans have been ready to welcome the strangers, thinking back to our own turbulent history, others' response has been less inviting. Racism and prejudice have become daily news and sadly, the level of hatred has not been only reflected in words, but also in violent actions.

All this has also had a clear gendered bearing. Feminists have pointed out the gendered language used in this discourse. Populist politicians express their willingness to help women and children, but not single men. It has become commonplace to judge men looking for asylum as traitors, who should have remained in their home countries to help the weak and protect their families. The underlying message here is a violent one; they should have remained in their home to fight. Men should choose an honorable death over a possible future in another country.

Moreover, in the new home countries, many people deem the arriving male refugees a threat for the local female populations. A popular opinion is that refugee men will take advantage of the liberated western women who naively do not understand how to keep a safe distance and protect themselves. Cases of harassment, where an immigrant man approached a local woman are much more widely covered in the news than similar situations where European men are involved. Such biased coverage results in even more negative attitudes, and in some cases to reactions that are not in proportion to the possible threat. For instance, in Finland some Finnish men have been so concerned about this situation that in many towns they have formed gangs that walk the streets to protect the female population. This type of action is very peculiar. It seems that the threat of foreign men taking advantage of white women is equal to the economic burden, which the accommodation of refugees lays on our society. Women's bodies are being used as instruments in intolerant politics.

Feminist interpretations have much to offer to reflect this situation. One can, for example, think about biblical marriage legislation. The laws themselves are written from the perspective of men, and even if they favor marriages between kin, a man can ultimately choose whom he wants. In a situation of a war, Deuteronomy allows marrying a beautiful captive woman, given that she is willing to follow a man's rituals. Moreover, various narratives present exemplary men marrying foreign women: Moses weds Zipporah, Joseph Asenath, and David Batsheba. Meanwhile, women do not marry whom they want. Their mating is ultimately a decision of their kinsmen. In light of the rhetoric used to talk about the refugees, I am compelled to ask, to what extent does this worldview still hold, or in other words, do some men feel that even in modern western societies they have some right and privilege to express their opinion on women's choices? At least on the level of accepted populist rhetoric, women are not as free as men.

Even more so, the texts that Phyllis Tribe classified as “texts of terror” provide an additional point of friction. Tragically, in the Bible, foreign men do not pose a threat to women in as disgusting ways as their closest kin do. Jephthah sacrifices his daughter for a military victory, Absalom rapes his sister Tamar and then throws her out of his house, and the Levite generously offers his concubine for a gang rape. Similarly, in our own contexts, the most obvious threats do not come from foreign “conquistadors,” but from our own settings. Going back to my previous example about the new self-appointed gangs who aim at protecting women, it has been shown that many of these men are themselves convicted felons for domestic violence. Therefore, the idea that these same men who violate women in their private lives are the first to “protect” them against the foreigners, draws us very far from the concept of justice that is in line with equal opportunities between men and women.

Finally, I was asked to elaborate on the impact that digital media has had on feminist interpretation. Above, I acknowledged how digital media has a positive impact in the field by facilitating correspondence between colleagues of different regions. Digital media decreases distances and makes networking accessible for everyone. Because of digital media, we can all learn from each other more easily. Moreover, I’m sure that digital media increases women’s opportunities to publish their work and to make it reachable to a wider audience. In sum, the digital media certainly offers potential for equal opportunities.

However, one cannot look at the positive outcomes without a critical eye. I have discussed this issue with quite a few colleagues and they all agree that women are not as free in this area as men. This is a point that specifies the difference between equal capabilities and equal opportunities. Female scholars have the same material possibilities to use digital media as our male colleagues. We use the same equipment, publish mostly in the same journals, and use the same methods. If we publish anonymously, it is virtually impossible to tell whether the author is a male or female. Nonetheless, when we put our faces and names out, a female scholar becomes much more easily a target of harassment and bullying. In other words, inside academia, inside a building (cf. house culture vs. appearing in public), it is ok for a woman to be present, but if she is outside, blogging and seeking attention for her ideas, it is easily viewed as looking for some kind of other attention as well. A female colleague who blogs said that whenever she posts, she receives photos and invitations to meet of unknown men as a response to her blogs, which by the way, concern strictly professional matters. I do not blog, but nevertheless, my experiences are somewhat similar. People who seemingly randomly contact me via my profile on my university website or my academia.edu profile and who somehow indicate that they do not seek professional exchange, are all men. I can easily conclude that ALL unprofessional contacts I have received throughout the years are from



men. By unprofessional I mean that the messages contain tones that I do not take as a part of regular conversations, or they contain nuances that I feel uncomfortable with. For instance, I was once sent an offensive Biblical quotation and the man who sent it to me asked me to tell him “as a feminist” what that passage tells about the role God assigned for women. I am really puzzled by such messages. I cannot really tell why they have looked me (or any other female colleague) out, and what they think they might gain from this exchange. Do they want to upset me? Do they imagine that contact could lead to some other type of exchange? I simply do not know and to protect myself from further harassment, I do ask them.

In sum, I want to compliment the editors and authors of *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect* for putting together this beautiful collection of articles. They demonstrate the long way that the feminist Biblical scholars have already made. While we can be proud of past scholarship, it is in the nature of feminist scholarship, as a movement towards justice, to aim at taking another step forward. Critical feminist reflection provides useful and powerful tools for analysis of our contemporary world, and in my view, it has a lot to offer for our complex societies including reflections on gender relationships, concepts of masculinity, and race.

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## Karin Tillberg

For my response in this panel, and to the books, I have chosen to focus on how feminist interpretation of the Hebrew Bible can function as an arena for activism and for fighting for women's rights, and how this needs to continue as we move forward. Secondly, I will discuss the use of theory within feminist biblical studies. One can say that I approach the books as stepping stones for discussing socio-political dynamics, as Susanne Scholz put it, rather than as a book review. For my title I have integrated the notion of intellectual activism, outlined by Patricia Hill Collins,<sup>5</sup> which she defines as: "...the myriad ways that people place in the power of their ideas in service to social justice (*On Intellectual Activism*, p. xi). In the book *On Intellectual Activism*, Collins, as a sociologist who rewrites and redefines many of the questions that had been posed in her field, describes how her seminal work *Black feminist thought* came about "[the book seeks] to provide an interpretive context for many of the experiences that I encountered as an African American woman" (p. 7). Similar things can be said of much of the work denoted "feminist interpretations of the Bible", where the experiences of different women have, to a great extent, informed feminist scholarship on the Hebrew Bible. Issues such as rape, domestic violence, motherhood and economic inequality (as in the case of inheritance) are all mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and have been studied at length by feminist biblical scholars. Today we rarely speak of "women's experience" as a key aspect of feminism, because as Third Wave feminism has shown, the notion of a shared sisterhood is very complex and complicated and often sees past issues of race, class or sexuality. It is good that "women's experience" as a sort of united, single entity has been questioned, but at the same time it is problematic that much work being done within gender theory today has cut itself off from reality, in a sense, and is often criticized of being too theoretical. Instead, we find that lived experience and social reality is a much bigger part of works branded postcolonial or queer, also in biblical studies. If we believe the motto of the women's liberation movement from the 1960's and 70's to be true; "the personal is political," we need to find a way back to linking the work being done in feminist biblical studies to lived experience. This means that we have to keep analyzing texts that oppress as well as those that liberate, since the Bible is still used as a weapon aimed at the Other. Thus, the ethical aspect of biblical interpretation that was the key for many scholars in the 1990s and early 2000s has to remain an integral part of studies concerned with issues of power relations and domination. We also need to be aware of the different social locations where biblical stories are being interpreted, how that affects research on those stories and how different academic ideals from around the world together can improve the study of the Bible.

In the second book in the series "Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect" the focus is on different social locations where the Hebrew Bible is interpreted. It has become

apparent to me in the reading of volume 2 that the different reading of the same stories of women in the Hebrew Bible makes it possible for women in different contexts to give meaning and discuss their own situations. This achievement is perhaps most clearly described in the discussion on the situation for women in South Asia (chapter 3), written by Monica Jyotsna Melanchton, and to some extent also in chapter 1 written by Musa Dube, about how women theologians have interpreted the Bible in different parts of Africa. In those chapters it is clear that the struggle for women's rights has not come as far as we sometimes think, and that the conditions of women in different parts of the world are appalling. Even in Europe today, and in very egalitarian countries such as my home country Sweden, the discussion of old questions such as free abortion has been rekindled and to date we have also never had a woman lead Sweden as prime minister. These issues point to a reality in which women are still struggling, especially when we take other aspects apart from gender into account in a more intersectional manner, such as class, sexuality, race and ethnicity or physical ability. I believe that the study of the Hebrew Bible can be used in the discussion on the condition of women, not just in confessional settings but also in the political debate.

I also believe that feminist activism in academia can be achieved, not only through what scholars choose to write, how they cite and more importantly, who they cite, but also how the reality for women scholars are and what can be done to change it. Furthermore, I believe that academia is an important site for intellectual activism, and that there are still important struggles to be fought. As Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza writes, quoted by Scholz in chapter 6, vol. 2, "feminist biblical scholarship must be informed by a hunger and thirst for social justice" (p. 146). Biblical studies as a field is still, to a great extent, male dominated, as is shown for example in the interesting statistics on SBL and AAR in Scholz's introduction of volume 1. As noted in there, feminist perspectives are not part of the mainstream curriculum, but still counted as a niche interest. In fact, from my own perspective, and I think you might agree with me, the backlash that affects us in society is also prevalent in academia and in the study of the Hebrew Bible. Feminist perspectives are, to some extent, "outdated" and other theoretical approaches gain more ground instead. I will return to this issue below. At the same time, women are still not equal to men in the academic setting. This problem begins with the "heads", i.e. there are not as many women as men in the field, not to mention how homogenous the group "scholars" is, and more so when we look past gender.

A major problem is that so-called feminist studies on the Hebrew Bible are not seen as mainstream. Feminist scholars have come up with very important insights into ancient societies as part of their work, as for example Carol Meyers' work on the family in *Discovering Eve*<sup>6</sup> or Gale Yee's findings on the political landscape of the Ancient Near East in her work on the marriage metaphor in Hosea, which is cited by Haddox in chapter 8, vol. 1, p. 182. However, because these works are labelled feminist, they are not as broadly read as

other, more “traditional” studies. I am not saying that these works should not be called feminist, I am merely stating a problem that lurks beneath such a label in the field of biblical studies. This can be related to what Pamela Milne, quoted by Scholz in chapter 6 of volume 2, says about the relationship between the women’s movement and biblical studies, where she claims that feminist biblical scholars often apply traditional methods to non-traditional questions.

A third problem relating to the inequality between men and women in biblical studies concerns something that is very clear from my perspective, but which might not be true for other places. I find that issues relating to power, theories and methods dealing with power structures and the role of marginalized groups in the texts is a “fashionable thing” within the humanities, and has been for some time. Unfortunately, to study who is actually being oppressed, or whose voice is being heard, is no longer a major subject for many scholars, but rather their main concern is more theoretical, and therefore more abstract. Furthermore, many male scholars do this type of research, and even though I think it is good that many voices are being heard I find it very problematic that male professors and lecturers, who do not live according to feminist values in their daily life in academia, but rather help to maintain the status quo and perhaps even contribute to the sexism prevalent in their institutions, can focus on questions of power and oppression in their scholarly work. This might sound like a luxury problem for feminist scholars, who are struggling to gain recognition for their research in a more traditional or conservative environment, but it is still an issue, which can be related to what Theresa Hornsby discusses when she talks about the relationship of gender studies to the neo-capitalist society in ch. 6, vol. 2.

However, I do believe that the use of theory and a deeper theoretical foundation for feminist biblical studies is part of the way forward. On p. 8 in the introduction of the first volume, Ester Fuchs is quoted as urging for more theoretical reflections in feminist biblical studies. When I first read this, I could not really believe it, as I think there is a large theoretical discussion going on which is integral to feminist biblical interpretation. The context for the quote by Esther Fuchs, as well as the whole chapter in volume 2 on social location and the need for deconstructive, decolonizing feminist interpretations of the Bible, makes it clearer that she is looking for a deeper, theoretically grounded debate within feminist biblical studies, that is concerned with an intersectional approach looking beyond gender as a sole category. This can be related to what she says in an interview conducted with her by Lenemann in chapter 1, volume 1 where she discusses whether gender should be understood as an umbrella-term, or as a subcategory. I understand her to mean that the focus today seems to lie on the latter, which is problematic. I agree with her that it is a problem if gender is only understood as a subcategory, and I find it instructive to look at gender studies, which have

become an arena not only for studies concerning women, but rather displays a plethora of perspectives all concerned with issues of power. This is especially true for the Swedish context, where “Lesbian and Gay studies” as an academic discipline has never existed, nor has research on masculinities ever been a separate field; it is studied as part of gender studies with feminist perspectives since its introduction into Swedish academia. The reasons for this are probably linked to how political feminism works in Sweden, with its close ties to leftist politics and Marxism, as well as anti-racist struggle and LGBTQ activism. Swedish feminist politics has also become dependent on gender theory, and is “intersectional,” a technical term used by politicians and law-makers in official documents. I would therefore claim that “feminism” as a political term is concerned not only with women’s issues, but with wider fields as well. I believe that this has informed gender studies and keeps doing so, although I find that the epithet “feminist” no longer as commonly used as before. This could be explained by the fact that it is still a loaded term. It could also mean exactly what Fuchs argues, namely that gender, or reading as women, is not the only important facet of feminism, and that other categories have to be taken into account as well, and this has already been done to some extent. As part of such a debate, I agree with Fuchs that a deeper theoretical discussion is necessary. Julie Kelso manifests the problem when in chapter 13 she claims that there are virtually no feminist studies on Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles. She is also right in saying that those that exist are not strictly feminist, and several studies surface each year, discussing “othering”, identity politics and power relations in the texts.

I like to briefly now point to my own doctoral project, where the overarching question guiding my study was, how are values and norms presented in the text, with special regard to the Outsider in postexilic texts? What is it in a text that makes it possible for us to understand the conventions and ideologies present in it? It was my aim, in this study, to find a way of studying conventions and norms in relation to language and, more specifically, language usage. I have let both linguistics, philosophy of language and critical theory inform this approach, since norms are something which in many ways affects all aspects of life but is perhaps most noticeable in the way we speak. My focus is on the Outsider, a character in which several intersectional categories manifest themselves, primarily ethnicity but also body and gender. In my work, I pay close attention to how theory can be integrated when reading texts. By this I mean mainly that questions of historiography, practice and social context can be discussed through a theoretical lens, and I show how this can be done. There is, however, a risk of succumbing to that which Yvonne Sherwood and Stephen Moore refer to as “methodolatry” and I agree with them that there is a danger of trying to turn theory into method. I also believe that there is a risk of using theory for theory’s sake if the theories used are not integrated in the reading and analysis of the primary material. I wish to use theory, as a way of reading and analyzing the texts in a different way. It is not my wish to let theory

control my study; “if theory is allowed to dictate approach and questions—that is, to serve as a method—then the result is not an inquiry but rather a demonstration,”<sup>7</sup> as Robert Hume notes. However, I do believe that power and attitudes are unspoken to a degree that they are impossible to trace without allowing oneself to form a hypothesis based on theoretical notions.

Much more can be said on the topic of feminist interpretation of the Bible. I have chosen in this paper to touch upon how feminist interpretation of the Bible can be used as a social space for intellectual activism, and as part of this, I have also discussed the use of theory as a vital part of the continued discussion. As I stated above, the use of theory sometimes becomes too abstract and closed off from reality, and thus it might sound strange that I have chosen to discuss activism on the one hand and theory on the other. However, I think they are both part of the future of feminist biblical studies, since I believe this to be the arena for critical, analytical and subversive work, whatever the focal point. However, if we wish to be able to do this we need to find strategies in daily life in academia where different approaches are welcomed and where sexist bias is made visible and overcome. As part of this enterprise, it is important to be realistic about how far we still have to go and we also need to help each other battle the obstacles to which a repressive environment can give rise, be it issues of combining an academic career with motherhood, or a heterosexist agenda or western perspectives taking precedence over all others. If we use feminist interpretation of the Bible as a political arena, I think that there will always be a future in it, since new questions will surface in society, that need to be discussed in relation to the Hebrew Bible as well.

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<sup>1</sup> All following page numbers apply to these volumes.

<sup>2</sup> Kelso harshly criticizes Marie Theres Wacker’s, Eskenazi’s and Karrer-Grube’s attempts of populating the worlds of Nehemiah and Ezra with women while actually, they are absent in the texts themselves. Kelso unveils the speculations about more unknown or unmentioned women as the attempt to make the biblical world filled with women: “When an entire essay is dedicated to focusing predominantly on the female figures and characters, those named and unnamed, the impression will always be that the biblical text is indeed replete with women.” (284)

<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Seguino, “Toward Gender Justice: Confronting Stratification and Unequal

Power.” The article can be found online under

<https://www.uvm.edu/~sseguino/pdf/justice.pdf> (last accessed 12/15/2016).

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Collins, Patricia, *On Intellectual Activism*, Philadelphia (PA) 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Meyers, Carol, *Discovering Eve. Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, Oxford 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Hume, Robert, *Reconstructing Contexts. The Aims and Principles of Archaeo-Historicism*, Oxford 1999, p.153.