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Susanne Scholz*

Reviewing “Feminist Interpretation of the Bible in Retrospect” (ed. Susanne Scholz)

A Panel Discussion at the SBL 2017 Annual Meeting in Boston (MA)

Margaret Aymer and Richard D. Weis

Introduction

The current flourishing of varieties of feminist interpretation among religious organizations and in the academy has been going on since at least the 1970s, and has grown to display an amazing diversity of emphases and forms. At the same time, much work still needs to be done. The appearance from Sheffield Phoenix of Susanne Scholz’s three-volume edited work, *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect*,¹ by its breadth of coverage and its conscious attempt to reflect on the work of past decades, offered the Feminist Hermeneutics of the Bible Section of the Society of Biblical Literature an opportunity to assess the distance feminist interpretations have traveled in the last 40–50 years and where we should focus energy for the future. The following papers share the reviews offered by five colleagues at a panel session at the SBL Annual Meeting in Boston, Massachusetts, on Sunday, November 19, 2017, and Prof. Scholz’s response. The reviewers represent an array of feminist perspectives that is diverse in race/ethnicity, nationality/culture, gender, age, and stream of religious tradition. The reviews probe not only a variety of dimensions of Prof. Scholz’s work, but also a variety of points of progress and ongoing issues in feminist interpretation.

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Carol J. Dempsey

My first response to Susanne Scholz for her magnificent edited three volume work entitled *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect* is “Congratulations!”— Congratulations on work so sorely needed in the field of Biblical Studies. You and all of your contributors have pulled together decades of inquiry into the Hebrew Bible from feminist perspectives, and in doing this task, you have shed light on the sheer brilliance, passion, and creativity of women scholars from around the globe. Your work is no small feat, and the collective volumes are a first of its kind. To the many contributors of Professor Scholz’s volumes, I say, wholeheartedly, “thank you!” – Thank you for your insight, your knowledge, your piercing and curious inquiry into familiar and not so familiar biblical texts. The fruits of your labor are succulent, and you have graced us all, scholars and non-scholars, with an awareness of how far feminist biblical scholarship has come, where it still needs to go, and what in our world still is in need of deep change and transformation with regard to attitudes, mindsets, systems, structures, institutions, the stories that have been told, and the stories yet to be told and which need to be told.

As I was reading through each chapter, page by page, in each of the three volumes, I found myself being wonderfully enlivened by the sheer energy that exudes from each chapter, each volume, and I thought to myself: “My, my, we women truly can change the course of thinking.” And if we can change the course of thinking, how much more can we change the course of history, and the world in which we live with all creatures, both human and non-human. Just look at what we have done to biblical scholarship in a remarkable short amount of time! And now, the time is at hand for feminist interpreters of the Bible to keep moving forward in the field and also outside of the elite world of academia so that the new world order so beautifully envisioned by the poet of Isaiah can become more of a reality and less of a prophetic vision. And so, I will now turn to the volumes themselves and make, what I hope, will be some fair comments on work that deserves the academy’s deep respect and honest gratitude.

Volume 1: Biblical Books

In the “Introduction: The Past, the Present, and the Future of Feminist Hebrew Bible Interpretation,” Scholz makes the point that from this first volume “we learn that there is still little dialogue among the various feminist interpretations” (vol. 1, p. 9). I would agree with this simple, astute point. The past years of feminist biblical scholarship have seen the development of methods and approaches. These various methods and approaches have been used, often quite successfully, to explore texts in an effort to expose biases, injustices, and downright oppressive attitudes, images, or metaphors embedded in the prose and poetry of the

Hebrew Bible. We now live in a world, however, that calls for a deeper integration of knowledge that draws upon an interdisciplinary understanding of life and its many facets and issues. Foundational to this interdisciplinary understanding of life is dialogue. The same is true for feminist studies on the Bible that needs to move beyond seeing a text from solely a womanist perspective or a literary approach or a comparative-historical method.

The time has come to bring the various interpretations, as well as the interpretative methods and approaches of feminist scholarship, into dialogue with one another. Before this integration of methods can happen, however, perhaps feminist scholars first have to be in dialogue with each other to understand fully each other's method and approach and how a single text can be heard from a variety of perspectives. How lively a text could become when heard from a feminist meta-method approach whereby similar and divergent views on a text can be heard together and pondered anew as in the case of Genesis 34.

The task is daunting because it would require a biblical feminist scholar to be cognizant of all the feminist methods and approaches when examining a text. Perhaps it would be easier if the analysis of a text involved two or more feminist scholars in dialogue with each other and with each other's method(s), with the scholars then approaching the text from various perspectives that have been integrated as a result of the scholars' dialogue. Think of a prism. Only when we can see its many different sides with different rays of light shining on and through the prism can we appreciate fully the beauty of the prism. A biblical text is like a prism; the feminist methods, approaches, and perspectives are like the rays of light. Only when different feminist methods, approaches, and perspectives simultaneously shed light on a text can the text be seen in all its spectral colors. The new Wisdom Commentary Series tries to do some of this integration with its single authorships, co-authorships, and its contributing voices. Thus, this simple observation that Scholz makes about the little dialogue among the various feminist interpretations was a point worth noting.

In several of the chapters of this volume, the contributors, including Scholz, comment on "God." How the "Sacred Presence" is portrayed in the Hebrew Bible and the language associated with this "Sacred Presence" has long been an interest of mine, especially since I approach the Bible in general and the Hebrew Bible in particular from a faith perspective. In her chapter entitled "Image, Status, and Regulation," Amelia Devin Freedman makes clear that feminists note that the biblical God is heavily referenced with male terminology. Scholz makes the point that "feminist interpreters wonder whether the characterization of a male God was a major factor in women's societal oppression" (vol. 1, p. 49). Issues about the "Sacred Presence" as a male Deity have given way to women reclaiming goddess traditions, and debates on this topic wait to be tackled by feminist scholars. Rabbi Suzanne Singer is troubled by the statement in Exodus 10:1 that God had hardened Pharaoh's heart which led to a night of horror for the Egyptians which Jews, Singer states, must never forget. Such a night of

horror, she continues, is celebrated yearly in Jewish Passover observances, and she makes the plea that “[a]s we recall at our Seder table the wonders of God performed for us, we must remember the price the Other paid for our liberation” (vol. 1, p. 64). Cheryl Kirk-Duggan pushes the point even further. She calls readers to think about the Egyptians’ plight who were Pharaoh’s subjects, and the premeditated, sacrificial murder of the Egyptian first born (vol. 1, p. 64). Both Singer and Kirk-Duggan thus suggest that “readers must approach the Exodus motif with open eyes, attentive to the high human cost of the divinely authored liberation that it depicts” (vol. 1, p. 64).

The image of a male deity must be a major factor in women’s societal oppression for three reasons. First, the biblical God wields power by sending judgment upon innocent people who are victims of their own political regimes’ needs. Second, this kind of God sanctions the murder of little Egyptian babies for the dual purpose of setting the Israelites free from Egyptian bondage and as an act of getting back (*lex talionis*) at a Pharaoh who had once ordered the death of Hebrew baby boys. Third, the biblical deity is more powerful than all the diviners, sorcerers, and gods in the land. The kyriarchal images for the biblical God are especially disturbing since the metaphors describing the covenant between the deity and the people assumes marital imagery with God as the faithful yet scorned husband on the one hand and Israel/Zion/Jerusalem as the unfaithful wife deserving of being hedged up, battered, ridiculed, and called “whore,” “harlot” on the other hand.

This Deity liberating one group of people from oppression at the expense of the lives of others embodies liberation theology at its very worst. Singer’s plea for Jews, and by extension, for all people to remember how liberation for Jews happened is a refreshing reminder of just how feminists hear the biblical text from the perspective of the victim, the disenfranchised, and the innocent one. What kind of God would do such things? Who is this God? And is this the God we want to place our faith in? Perhaps a better image for God is a female one? But would it be really?

I am reminded of Carleen Mandolfo’s work on *Daughter Zion Talks Back to the Prophets: A Dialogic Theology of the Book of Lamentations* (2007). Mandolfo opens the door to dialogue about how the biblical text portrays God metaphorically. She dares to question and to critique this biblical God because she recognizes that the God of the text, especially the God of the prophetic texts, is a metaphorical construction that can be challenged and deconstructed not only to undermine the authority of the text but also to allow the community of readers and believers search for a new understanding of God beyond the biblical tradition. Without a doubt, the God of the Bible is historically, socially, culturally, and theologically conditioned and to take the image of God literally is to do a disservice to the text and to the Sacred Presence whom we have labeled “God.” The metaphorical portrait of God is a theme of interest for Sandie Gravett.

In her chapter on “Biblical Metaphors as Part of the Past and Present: Feminist Approaches to the Books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel,” Sandie Gravett brings the image of God into sharper view. She draws on the thought of feminist theologian Sallie McFague who observes that “the problem with introducing a feminine dimension to God is that it invariably ends with identifying as female those qualities that society has called feminine. Thus, the feminine side of God is taken to comprise the tender, nurturing, passive healing of aspects of divine activity” (vol. 1, p. 166). Gravett notes that the prophetic literature contains a whole host of female images for God, particularly in First and Second Isaiah, thus giving McFague’s argument credence. Gravett rightly points out that “some feminist exegetes are eager to identify representations of the divine as both fertile and nurturing” (vol. 1, p. 168). Gravett then draws the views of Kathleen S. Nash into the conversation. For Nash, the female imagery in the prophetic literature is problematic. She argues: “If the male YHWH can provide a mother’s love for Israel, there is no need for a divine mother” (vol. 1, p. 168). Gravett suggests that the male God “takes on all the gender,” crowding out the need for a goddess (vol. 1, p. 168).

Another concern of feminists who deal with the image of God in the prophetic texts is the pattern of violence and reconciliation, which is suggestive of an abusive relationship. Ezekiel 16 and Hosea 1–3 are classic examples of this pattern. Such a pattern in the context of human-divine relationships can indeed influence how humans relate to God or have chosen not to relate to God. In short, the biblical portrayal of God is problematic for feminists, but the adaptation of a female image for a male image or the move into the direction of goddesses may be helpful only for some feminists. In the broader reality, however, the portrayal of God in the Bible and the understanding of who God is are a problem. Feminists would do well to liberate “God” from the text and from the gendered metaphors in which the “Sacred Presence” is encased. Feminists would also do well to explain that the God of the Empire reflects the social, political, and theological agenda of the biblical writers who were, presumably, all males. Those feminists who read the biblical text as Scripture need to find new ways to approach the difficult portrait of God in the Hebrew Bible. I remain unconvinced that male or female metaphors and their related characteristics adequately capture the Spirit that breathes life into all that exists. In the context of our contemporary world, we can see more and more that the commander-in-chief – the one who acts like a bully, who brandishes a sword amidst words of judgment and threat, and who also bends down to feed babes like a mother (see Hosea 11) – is really a God we have fashioned in our own image, according to our own likeness.

While I found all of the chapters in the first volume to be wonderfully crafted and offering a wealth of knowledge and wisdom at every turn of the page, the chapter that struck a particular

chord with me are Sandie Gravett's discussion on "Biblical Metaphor as Part of the Past and Present" and Susan E. Haddox's essay on "Engaging Images in the Prophets: Feminist Interpretations of the Book of the Twelve." By citing and discussing the contributions of many feminists working in the area of metaphor and the prophets, both authors expose the violence embedded in the metaphorical language, particularly when cities are described as women or as wives, not to mention the family metaphors, and specifically the parental metaphor. One of the voices contributing to Haddox's analysis is Julia O'Brien who questions the theological implications of the parental metaphor:

In demonstrating that the image of God the Father reinforces not only scripts about gender but also scripts about parenting, ideological critique challenges "simple fixes" to the metaphor. Simply substituting "she" or "mother" for "he" and "father" or even speaking of the divine as gender-balanced Father/Mother, might indeed challenge certain gender stereotypes, but it does not address the inherent dangers of the parental metaphor (vol. 1, p. 185).

Haddox also offers some possible new directions that feminists might take. They include developing additional ideological and theological perspectives that illuminate various prophetic texts and reveal the prophetic voice within those texts laden with gendered metaphors.

Volume II: Social Locations

Of the three volumes, this second volume is the one I found most interesting because the context of one's social and cultural location always shapes how one hears a biblical text. Hearing biblical texts from diverse feminist perspectives and approaches in relation to diverse social locations makes for exciting readings and brings to fruition Scholz's statement that "the Bible needs to be liberated from its captivity to one-sided white, middle-class, male interpretation" (vol. 2, p. 4).

Additionally, in her chapter entitled "Beyond Colonialism and Postcolonialism: Feminist Readings of the Bible in East Asia," Wai Ching Angela Wong proposes a feminist biblical hermeneutics that calls for "solidarity and resistance to the dominating biblical discourse of the West, not only on the basis of anti-colonialism but also in terms of a commitment to exploring our collective historical, political, cultural, and religious complexities" (vol. 2, p. 49). What a wonderful experience my students have when they read new ideas contained in feminist commentaries, book chapters in feminist works, and journal articles that interpret biblical texts from feminist perspectives. Too long have they been reading commentaries by white, male, European, and American scholars that debate dates, philology, settings, and authorship. These commentaries rarely touch on the importance of gender, class, race, ecological, cultural, and sexual concerns that my students from different global social locations and cultures always raise when they read the biblical text. If the biblical text is to

have any impact on our world today, then its interpretation needs to be brought into dialogue with all human and non-human life. Musa W. Dube's marvelous essay entitled "*Talitha Cum Hermeneutics: Some African Women's Ways of Reading the Bible*" offers thoughts from Teresa Okure who observes: Life as the starting point and abiding context of hermeneutics is not only important; it is the reality that imposes itself. Emerging and liberative trends in biblical studies (Third World, women's feminist, womanist, reader-response hermeneutics and inculturation) require that readers address their life situations as part of interpreting scripture. The biblical works themselves are records of people who struggled to understand the meaning of their life in relation to God. (vol. 2, p. 26)

For Okure, a "life-centered hermeneutics is grounded not only in God as the creator of life but also in God as the author of the good life" (vol. 2, p. 26). For those feminist scholars who view the biblical text as scripture, Okure's insight has profound merit.

In her essay entitled "Engaging Women's Experiences in the Struggle for Justice, Dignity, and Humanity: Hebrew Bible Readings by South Asian Women," Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon suggests that the most viable method for feminist readers in South Asia currently is "reading in juxtaposition" or "reading cross-textuality." Such a method focuses on the transformation of life. I agree with Melanchthon's suggestion. I add that such a method is viable not only for South Asia but also for all other countries around the world since the transformation of life involves all creation. These essays are just a few highlights of a volume rich in thought, challenge, and new directions for biblical interpretation, including an essay on a feminist hermeneutics of respect for Judaism and a discussion on female Bible characters from a feminist Muslim stance.

Volume III: Methods

The brilliance of this volume is Scholz's vision of bringing together the many methods of feminist interpretation. The contributions that each feminist scholar makes to this volume is unparalleled and provides a compendium of knowledge that showcases each method, each perspective. One could say that this particular volume is the crowning jewel of the collection. What makes this volume informative and accessible is the fact that each method is defined and then it is employed to analyze a particular biblical text.

The conversation between Scholz and Milne on methods and methodology portrays a rich dialogue between two feminist scholars, one who assesses the texts as sacred witness and one who does not; one who is glad to see the Bible's influence decline in Western countries and one who regards the Bible's decline as regrettable. In response to both positions, I am more inclined toward Scholz's position. I do regard the Bible's decline as regrettable, and I do see the biblical texts as sacred witness. The various biblical stories give us a window into the

human condition with all its beauty and depravity, a human condition that remains forever embraced and graced by an enduring Love that pulsates at the heart of all creation, all life. I agree with Scholz that “feminists destabilize, subvert and deconstruct traditional interpretations in such a way that religious and secular readers will be less able to remain silent about rape” (vol. 3, p. 33) and other horrific injustices. Like Edward Albee’s *Zoo Story*, the Bible is a looking glass that shows us who we are as human beings. It also teaches us the deep need for ongoing transformation within all walks of life. By exposing the injustices and oppressive attitudes and metaphors within the biblical text, interpreters of the text help to ground the Bible in lived reality. Too often the text is viewed as a “spiritual text,” a “holy text,” and a “sacred text” whose words are to be taken literally and heeded. For too long, the stories have not been held up for ongoing critical theological reflection. I consider the text to be a sacred witness to the reality of life and people’s search for and attempt at describing the Divine, even though this description looks more like a description of ourselves than anything else. A healthy critical interpretation of the biblical text can shake people out of their drunken religious stupor and inspire us to change either the course of history or to allow it to continue as it has for centuries with people chopping off one another’s heads like Judith did to Holofernes and David did to Goliath.

Carol L. Meyers’ chapter on “Beyond the Bible: Archaeology, Ethnohistory, and the Study of Israelite Women” should be read by scholars and non-scholars alike. Meyers reminds us that the biblical text cannot be taken literally with respect to the roles of women in the ancient world. A feminist ethnohistorical approach is indispensable because it not only “problematizes the biblically-based supposition of female subservience” (vol. 3, p. 89) but also because it exposes unconscious attitudes of oppression written into the text from the time when biblical writers and editors shaped the stories and poems. Such an approach puts biblical literalism and fundamentalism “on notice” because, as Meyers asserts, “looking beyond the Bible will enable us to see the Bible more clearly” (vol. 3, p. 90).

Finally, among the many other wonderful chapters is Caroline Blyth’s essay on “Engaging with Cultural Discourses: Cultural Feminist Criticism in Hebrew Bible Studies.” Engaging the biblical text with cultural discourse allows interpreters and listeners of the text to hear the text beyond the “cloistered” walls of academia. Cultural Studies firmly anchors the biblical text in the realities of everyday life. After all, the biblical text is a window into everyday life, and much of what went on in the ancient world is still going on today despite all of our advances in technology, communication, and interpersonal skills.

In sum, this volume is a teaching and learning tool not only for readers new to feminist interpretation but also for students and seasoned scholars in the field. Each contribution offers new insights into familiar stories, revealing to us a little more about ourselves as a human

community and what needs to be done within us and among us if we are to become “a holy people.”

In Conclusion

The purpose of these three volumes comes clear through Professor Scholz’s own words: “The series as a whole contributes to the present task of describing, explaining, and evaluating what has been done in feminist biblical exegesis. All three volumes intend to assist feminist exegetes in building upon the feminist achievements as they stand today” (vol. 1, p. ix). She acknowledges that much more work waits to be done in feminist Hebrew Bible studies. In one sense, Professor Scholz, by means of her three volumes, laid a solid foundation upon which future feminist interpreters can continue their studies, and thus she now passes the torch to a new generation of feminist scholars who must take up the mantle if women are to have a transformative presence and voice in a world that is increasingly growing more patriarchal and hierarchical as the days go by with nation upon nation jockeying for position on the political scale and in the global arena. Scholz reminds us that “feminist readers have thus aimed at changing society’s structures of domination, envisioning a society built on justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. Theirs is the comprehensive goal going far beyond the field of biblical studies” (vol. 2, p. 3). Women and men who have a feminist perspective and approach to the biblical text and life in general have no other choice right now than to keep rolling up our sleeves in the spirit of our sister Rosie the Riveter. Our world waits for the new order to be born, and who better can bring it to birth than today’s feminists who understand what it means “to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly” with the One whose transformative energy, pulsating in the midst of all life, longs to make a new heaven and a new earth, of which Isaiah speaks, more of a lived reality and less of a prophetic dream.

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Wil Gafney

I'd like to begin by congratulating Dr. Scholz on this flowering, towering accomplishment in feminist biblical scholarship. The scope of the trifecta is impressive and accessible. In addition, the covers are lovely. It is obviously impossible to review all three volumes in any detail in this forum so my text selection, as in much of biblical interpretation, will be necessarily eclectic. I also want to acknowledge that I understand the production of the project has its own story and did not begin in its entirety with Dr. Scholz.

This already sizeable three-volume project understandably does not address the essential linkages between feminist scholarship, intersectional hermeneutics, or related disciplines as Scholz indicates in the introduction. Rather, the authors sketch out the contours of the discipline and illustrate ongoing conversations about methods and trajectories in feminist biblical studies. For example, there is still conversation around whether simply (or not-so-simply) focusing on women's characters is feminist or feminist enough, or whether a feminist project must work towards transformation or reformation, as in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's "emancipatory-radical democratic paradigm" (vol. 1, p. 60). The collection is a useful compendium, a good representation of the last forty years of feminist biblical scholarship. My primary concern about the project is the underrepresentation of marginalized voices, particularly womanist voices with what appears to be a single black voice per volume and similar representation of Asian and Latina voices.

A recent experience with an older, senior white feminist colleague taught me that it does not go without saying that womanism is feminism. From Alice Walker's 1980 articulation, "Womanist encompasses feminist."² From her classic 1983 definition, a womanist is "[a] black feminist or feminist of color."³ Among my definitions are, "A womanist is a black woman whose feminism is so rich, deep, thick, broad, and wide, it moves beyond the mere self-interest of paler feminisms to embrace the wellbeing of the whole community.

Womanism is brash, bold, and brazen—like the forehead of a whore. Womanism is womanish and talks back—with a hand upon her hip."⁴ And: "Womanism is feminism with swag."⁵

Womanism hails from the same eras as feminism, nurtured in part by hostility in white feminist spaces. Scholz observes: "Feminist exegesis expands in the 1980s when voices of 'otherness' become increasingly vocal. For the first time, African American women scholars join the interpreters from south Africa and other African countries" (vol. 2, p. 127). Missing is the foundational womanist text written by Renita Weem and entitled *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible*.⁶ It should also be noted that womanist biblical scholarship does not begin with publication or discovery.

While womanist scholarship is acknowledged and included within a number of individual essays and in a single womanist essay, in Volume 3 by Karen Fletcher-Baker—a theologian,

not a biblical scholar—the significance of womanist biblical scholarship to the feminist biblical scholarly guild is not sufficiently indicated. Womanist biblical scholarship is feminist biblical scholarship. I note there are cognate African feminist voices in at least two of the three volumes, Madipoane Masenya (ngwan’ a Mphahlele) in Volume 1 and Musa Dube in Volume 2—due to its focus on social locations, the second volume is far and away the most diverse. Yet there is not a single African American womanist biblical scholar among the forty-four essays of all three volumes.⁷

I am now turning to the individual volumes in uneven detail.

Volume 1: Biblical Books

The first volume undertakes the difficult and necessary task of sketching out the contours of the field of feminist biblical studies. The volume begins with a fascinating series of excerpts from interviews with feminist biblical scholars who were shaped in part by the Women’s Movement of the 1960s and 1970s curated by Helen Leneman in an essay entitled “Genealogies of Feminist Biblical Studies: An Interview Report From the 1970’s Generation.” She interviewed Phyllis Bird, Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, Esther Fuchs, Carol Meyers, Mieke Bal, Dana Fewell, Athalya Brenner, Carol Fontiane, Toni Craven, and Claudia Camp. The influential works of Phyllis Trible and Fokkeli van Dijk-Hemmes are referenced repeatedly. Noticeably absent are womanist and feminist scholars of color, for example, Renita Weems and Gale Yee.

The first volume ably surveys feminist Hebrew biblical scholarship of the current era. It traces the pattern of feminist engagement with the Hebrew text, revealing its gluts and lacunae for a potential map to future projects and steering investigators to underserved texts. The essay on Genesis, one of the most commented upon texts by feminists, is a useful starting point for the analysis of feminist scholarship no matter its placement in the canon. The survey of approaches to Genesis reveals more work on female characters—mothers, goddesses, etc.—than on systems of power and domination (vol. 1, p. 58–61), a bellwether for Scholz of the future of feminist scholarship on the Hebrew Bible. Scholz’s essay, “Eve’s Daughters Liberated? The Book of Genesis in Feminist Exegesis,” makes clear that the future of feminist work is in “the intersectionality of the multiple dimensions of social relationships and subject formations in Genesis and the histories of interpretation.” (vol. 1, p. 59)

Amelia Devin Freedman’s emphasis on the “multivocality” of feminist biblical scholarship in “Image, Status, and Regulation: The Feminist Interpretive History of Exodus to Deuteronomy” in the next chapter pairs well with Scholz. Freedman offers a useful look at the diversity of feminist approaches to the text, if you will, making room at the table, a characteristic of womanism.⁸

Given the immensity of the feminist scholarly catalogue on Judges, and what I believe to be the over-familiarity of this corpus and its interrogators, I moved to Lai Ling Elizabeth Ngan’s treatment of the Samuel material, “Class Privilege in Patriarchal Society: Women in First and Second Samuel.” I concur with Ngan’s assessment that much of the feminist literature on the corpus focuses on the five named women, Hannah, Michal, Tamar, Abigail and Bathsheba. It is thus unbalanced, for instance, leaving Abigail underexplored (vol. 1, p. 120). However, Ngan neglects my work on Abigail in *Daughters of Miriam* (vol. 1, p. 140–149). Like Scholz, Ngan offers criticism of scholarship that focuses solely on dominant female characters or does not question the “patriarchal assumptions” and the framing of the text, and she too advocates for more nuanced “dialogic” readings (vol. 1, p. 134).

Because my just published volume, *Womanist Midrash*, was too late for consideration in this three-volume series, I was particularly interested in the essay on “‘Queens’ and other Female Characters: Feminist Interpretations of First and Second Kings” written by Julie Faith Parker. Parker begins an impressive list of the named and unnamed women, derived from the dictionary edited by Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer.⁹ It would have been useful to have a reckoning of how well explored or neglected these characters are in feminist biblical scholarship.

Parker’s approach subverted the inherent hierarchy and patriarchy in the moniker and content of Kings. The essay focuses on female characters marginalized in the Israelite tradition, goddesses, unnamed women and girls before it moves to major named figures like Jezebel and Bathsheba (vol. 1, p. 136). When Parker discusses Asherah, she helpfully illustrates the import of ancient Near Eastern scholarship on feminist biblical scholarship. Perhaps a subsequent volume to this series could address interdisciplinarity and intersectionality. Then, work on Jezebel in particular would benefit from being in conversation with womanist scholars and black feminist scholars inside and outside of biblical studies. Such works ought to include Melissa Harris-Perry’s *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* that explores the Jezebel trope applied to African American women, Tamura Lomax’s forthcoming “*Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Black Religion and Black Popular Culture*,”¹⁰ or my own work. Parker also observes that texts featuring various roles for female characters open up possibilities for readers to read from their own social location (vol. 1, p. 148).

Volume 2: Social Locations

The second volume explores “gender as a social location” in a variety of global and hermeneutical settings (vol. 2, p. 8). The “sampl[ed] continental geographies” include African East Asia, South Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America (vol. 2, p. v–vi). The “sampl[ed] hermeneutical locations” include Jewish, lesbian, disability, eco-feminism,

secular, Christian post-Shoah, evangelical Christian and Muslim (vol. 2, p. vi–vii). These essays are by design and necessity deeply contextual, foregrounding the issues of each location, continental and hermeneutic as illustrated by Teresa Okure’s premise that “life” is “the starting point” of hermeneutics (vol. 2, p. 25; cf. footnote 39). I can see myself adopting this volume for a course in feminist biblical interpretation at any level and I would have students read every essay.

Volume 3: Methods

This volume explores some of the most significant methodological approaches to the Hebrew biblical text by feminist scholars. These approaches are grouped as being “behind,” “within,” and “in front of the text,” with two chapters as the prolegomena on methods as hermeneutics (vol. 3, p. v–vii). This is the longest of the three volumes with eighteen essays to the fourteen of the other two. In her introduction to the volume, Scholz pushes against the nearly unquestioned acceptance of post-Enlightenment malestream exegetical methods demonstrated by their, our, use of them, with, and without modification (vol. 3, p. 3). The subtitle of her introduction makes Scholz’s position abundantly clear; it is: “About the Lack of Theoretical Debate on Method in Feminist Exegesis” (vol. 3, p. 2). I can see myself using the introduction and the essays in the prolegomena section with my doctoral students.

Scholz’s prodding in the Introduction and first chapter, entitled “On Methods and Methodology in Feminist Biblical Studies: A Conversation” (with Pamela J. Milne) made me reconsider how I use the terms method and methodology, perspective and hermeneutics. (vol. 3, p. 19) In my Womanist Biblical Interpretation class we talk about womanism as a hermeneutic, not as a method, as it is suggested in this volume. But we have not articulated why. Further, I have not differentiated between method and methodology as Scholz encourages us using Esther Fuchs’ work (vol. 3, p. 3–4).

In her chapter “Sexual Politics as an Interventionist Interrogation: the Israelite and Foreign Woman in Feminist Exegesis,” Esther Fuchs takes up the issues of method and methodology. She observes that many readings on Israelite women construct them in binary opposition to foreign women. Thus, Fuchs aims to “move the feminist discussion of biblical texts from sexual to textual politics, namely, to questions of purpose, investment and orientation of the nation as narration (vol. 3, p. 50). I found these foregrounding conversations very useful and look forward to spending more time with them.

Before I close, I return to womanist biblical scholarship addressed in part by Karen Baker-Fletcher’s essay in Volume 3, “Seeking Our Survival, Our Quality of Life, and Wisdom: Womanist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible.” Baker-Fletcher offers a multidisciplinary

overview that traces the lineage of womanist engagement with the Hebrew Bible from the fields of theology, ethics, and biblical studies while she also finds the term used in “sociology, literature, theater and film, media studies, psychology, history and anthropology” (vol. 3, p. 225; cf. footnote 2). Her analysis is not limited to womanist biblical scholars because womanist interpreters of the Hebrew Bible are not limited to Hebrew biblical scholars, as she indicates in one of her subtitles: “We, Too, Are Hebrew Bible Interpreters: Womanist Mothers in Hebrew Bible Scholarship” (vol. 3, p. 230). The footnotes are helpful to readers trying to navigate multiple claims from multiple voices in womanism. I will assign this essay in the final class of my Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics class.

As I consider “What’s next,” I raise a question from the students in my Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics class: “How is woman defined, particular now that we have expanded, including non-binary understandings of gender?” To that I add my own question: “Can we define woman without being cis-arrogant or trans-antagonistic.” These are questions for the next volume.

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Christl M. Maier

I thank Susanne for the tremendous work she has done in editing these three volumes of forty-six essays, among them three and a half essays from her own hand plus three lucid introductions. I would also like to thank David Clines and his team from Sheffield Phoenix Press for their unrelenting interest in feminist interpretation. When I first read the main title, I stumbled over the wording “in retrospect,” wondering if it is already time to look back. Are we not at the beginning of the feminist endeavor? Yet then I realized that, indeed, if we start counting in the 1970s, feminist biblical interpretation is almost fifty years old, and so it is time to evaluate what has been achieved so far and what still needs to be done.

Several audiences come to mind for the three volumes. They are important for teaching and introducing students to the hermeneutics, methods, and intricacies of feminist interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. Hopefully, our colleagues who are not yet familiar with the feminist way of reading the Bible may get interested in these volumes. I also imagine that feminist biblical scholars who want to check what has been achieved in the various sub-fields or specific biblical books, and I count myself among this third group. As the need to focus on specific topics and particular discourses is ever more pressing for university professors like myself, I am grateful for these volumes that offer surveys and in-depth studies to specific questions. For all of these audiences, the subdivision of the volumes in biblical books, social locations, and methods is extremely helpful and an appropriate way of ordering the field.

How should one review forty-six essays in fifteen minutes? Well, it is an impossible task and one must pick and choose according to one’s interests. Accordingly, I will only briefly deal with volume I and talk more about the other two volumes.

Focusing on Female Biblical Characters

Volume 1 follows an already established pattern that summarizes the state of research for one or more biblical books.¹¹ This arrangement has perhaps grown out of the *Feminist Companion to the Bible Series*, edited by Athalya Brenner; they are organized by biblical books.¹² The pattern is also applied in the *Compendium of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker, published in German in 1998 and translated into English in 2012.¹³ The essays of Volume 1 demonstrate that those biblical books on narratives about women are more prone to feminist readings than books of poetry or books without female characters.¹⁴

A second observation: the focus on female characters and women’s lives is still in the foreground although feminist theory has moved towards an intersectional approach that examines the reciprocity of several categories of oppression. In the introduction Scholz mentions a third point, namely “the general lack of theory in feminist exegesis” and a dearth

of “self-reflective and meta-level interrogations into ... implied epistemological and political research procedures” (vol. 1, p. 8). I fully agree, but at the same time, I think there are at least three plausible reasons for this situation. First, within 2,000 years of biblical reception history, fifty years are a relatively short time. Second, due to the hegemonic historical-critical approach, feminist readings of the Bible have been marginalized from the beginning, with many attempts to silence feminist scholars and hinder their academic careers. Even in the mid-1990s, my benevolent mentor advised me not to acknowledge my feminist perspective in the preface of my dissertation because such self-disclosure would lead to the verdict “ideological,” i.e. understood as an illegitimate approach, before colleagues would even pick up the book.¹⁵ I was aware, of course, that scholars like Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza called for deep theoretical reflections. Yet apart from the academy, at least in Germany, feminist readings have emerged in the churches in Bible studies and adult education. Alternative interpretations have been crucial but more debates about theory would have further alienated our audiences.¹⁶ Third, by reading the second volume on social locations, readers learn that the contexts of feminist biblical interpreters are varied in every part of the globe and theory is usually not the most pressing issue.¹⁷

Acknowledging the Social Location of Scholars

What in Western Europe and North America is called as first-, second-, and third-wave feminism and perceived as an ever growing awareness of differences, intersections, and theoretical work is a fictitious and highly constructed narrative of progress. If one takes seriously the assessment of feminist interpretations on the other continents, as they are discussed in Volume 2, one has to acknowledge that all of these phases exist simultaneously, and their sequence is not even fixed. The breathtaking descriptions of women’s struggles in East Asia and South Asia, for instance, confirm once more that “gender” is only one category among many, and often it is not even the most pressing one in women’s struggle toward a life that is not daily threatened by starvation, violence, and death.¹⁸

Not only in this respect, however, are the contributions to Volume 2 inspiring and illuminative. The essays of Esther Fuchs and Pamela Milne reveal some tensions between feminist exegetes who identify as non-denominational or non-religious and others who work in church-related institutions and for a Christian constituency. While Fuchs compares a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion and a feminist post-secular deconstruction of biblical texts,¹⁹ Milne addresses the debate on secular readings.²⁰ Although they do not say so explicitly, their reflections imply that a deconstructive secular criticism is more radical, and that feminist scholars with a denominational or religious background limit their critique on the Bible unduly and are less active in the political arena. For instance, in the first volume, Julie Kelso accuses some colleagues of a recuperative reading of Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles that, in

her view, is “misleading” and “anti-feminist.”²¹ While I concur that the Bible is androcentric and the product of a kyriarchally-structured world, I think it is detrimental to quarrel about who is more feminist or the right feminist, especially since feminism has so many facets and various social locations – as the three volumes under review aptly demonstrate. We may challenge each other’s arguments or controversially discuss hermeneutical issues, as Katharina von Kellenbach does in her reflections on a feminist post-Holocaust hermeneutics of the Hebrew Bible.²² There will always be different readings of any given Bible passage. Our conversation will yield more effective results if we first appreciate each other’s position.

Focusing on Theory and Methodology

After almost fifty years, I think that theoretical grounding is absolutely necessary, especially in those academic contexts, in which feminist exegesis has gained some standing. My impression is that not only feminist studies in other disciplines of the humanities, but also queer studies and postcolonial studies have led to more theoretical considerations. Leading critical reflections beyond the binary of male/female and asking for a refined epistemology, Deryn Guest is mentioned several times in these three volumes as a pioneer of these more theoretical horizons.²³ Thus, I would like to focus on the third volume on methods. In her stimulating introduction, Scholz reflects upon the lack of theoretical debate on method in feminist exegesis. She argues that many feminist scholars adopt the method in which they trained during their doctoral studies, pursue during their career, and mostly refrain from discussing the reasons for their preferences.²⁴

Scholz also laments that most feminist interpreters use text-based methods, and not, for instance, participatory research or comparative case studies or cross-cultural analysis of bible readings (vol. 3, p. 9). Scholz describes the situation appropriately, but I think that most of us are text-based because the Bible is first of all a text, and an ancient one, too, a fact that rules out any direct questioning of its authors and complicates any sociological analysis of the community from which it emerged. I do not find the multitude of text-focused approaches regrettable but appropriate to the object of study. What I find regrettable, and here I concur with Sarah Shectman’s essay, is the fact that feminist scholars often disregard the historical dimensions of the biblical text.²⁵ In searching for reasons for this neglect, Shectman rightly points out that there is “a dearth of historically reliable information about women in the Bible” (vol. 3, p. 55). Moreover, “feminist historians are often caught between feminism’s rejection of the notion of objectivity and a historian’s desire to chronicle historical reality” (vol. 3, p. 58). Finally, feminists “are less interested in the composition history of the Bible, a primary concern of historical-critical scholarship” (vol. 3, p. 69) because they consider source- and redaction criticism to be androcentric tools. Nevertheless, Shectman maintains, and I fully agree, that feminist scholars have to use these methods if they seek to reconstruct

the lives of women in antiquity, their histories, and their contributions to ancient Israelite society. It is interesting to note that most of the scholars Shectman names as protagonists of feminist historical research are either feminists from the first generation, such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Phyllis Bird, Carol Meyers, and Susan Ackerman, or European scholars trained in historical-critical methods like Irmtraud Fischer, Hennie Marsman, Hanna Stenström, and Kristin de Troyer.

That the task of feminist historiography and socio-historical location is difficult and complex becomes clear in Carol Meyer's impressive overview on archaeology and ethnohistory,²⁶ and by Johanna Stiebert's fine introduction to the use of anthropological approaches.²⁷ Both essays plausibly outline that these fields are huge, their methodologies complicated, and their methods so specialized that it is almost impossible for any biblical scholar to comprehensively apply them and still focus on the biblical text. As Rebecca Hancock shows, comparative analysis is important as it investigates ancient Israel and its scriptures within ancient Near Eastern cultures and religions.²⁸ At the end of her essay, she cites Marianne Kartzow who pleads for an intersectional approach that explores how categories of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, disability, and age are interlinked and reinforce each other.²⁹ If feminist scholars are not willing or able to contribute to this multi-dimensional research, their questions will not be included. In my view, the only way out of this impasse is to collaborate across disciplines and to bring a feminist perspective to archaeology, ethnohistory, anthropology, and comparative historical criticism.

There is no Specific Feminist Method of Interpretation

The question whether there is a specific feminist method of Bible exegesis has been contemplated during all of these years. In a vividly written dialogue, Pamela J. Milne and Susanne Scholz contend that there is much confusion and lack of definition of the terms “method” and “methodology” within feminist biblical interpretation.³⁰ Especially Milne pleads for a clear distinction of these terms. She defines methodology as a meta-level debate of “systems of methods, principles, and rules for regulating a given discipline” (vol. 3, p. 22). In difference, method is a “systematic procedure or mode of inquiry” (vol. 3, p. 22), such as form criticism or narrative analysis. What makes a reading feminist is, therefore, not the choice of a particular method but of methodology as well as the hermeneutics and goals that shape the inquiry. In Milne's view, feminist scholars should not only disclose their theoretical assumptions that inform their research but also “the motivation that led to an interpretation” (vol. 3, p. 25) and their “underlying commitments” (vol. 3, p. 26). Milne explains: “If our work is feminist, we need to say why and how it is feminist. We need to show how it will contribute to improving the lives of women and how it contributes to the feminist movement

in general. ... This is the kind of methodological discussion that would make feminist exegesis more readily appreciated by those outside the field of biblical studies.” (vol. 3, p. 33). I am glad that this conversation is included in Volume 3, and I would fully concur with Milne and Scholz that there is not “the one” feminist method because a feminist perspective is a matter of methodology, not method.

The helpful distinction between methodology and method becomes obvious in several essays in this volume on methods, such as in Karin Baker-Fletcher’s overview on womanist approaches to the Hebrew Bible³¹ or Jeremy Punt’s essay on postcolonial feminist Hebrew Bible criticism.³² It would have been important for the contributors of the volume to be aware of the difference between methodology and method, especially since some contributors discuss epistemology and methodological questions but still conflate them with “method”, such as Nicole Ruane,³³ and Tina Pippin.³⁴ Yet Ruane also follows Milne when she asserts that feminist scholars “need to be clear about the implicit and explicit politics of their work” (vol. 3, p. 259).

Most essays in this volume on methods provide clear explanations about the various methodologies that always mentions the leading scholars in the field and their work. I find particularly informative Roland Boer’s article on Marxist feminist criticism³⁵ and Caroline Blyth’s essay on cultural feminist interpretations of the Hebrew Bible.³⁶ I also find it essential to discuss the limits and gaps of a particular approach. Since all the essays are written by experts of the respective approach, this volume is a highly valuable anthology of current methodologies to be considered not only in retrospect but also as they present themselves today and may be further developed in the future. By collecting and editing these essays on methods, Scholz has greatly contributed to the theoretical debate in feminist biblical exegesis.

Next Steps

What are the next steps in feminist interpretation of the Hebrew Bible? As the essays demonstrate, there are different issues to be tackled with regard to the different regions and social and hermeneutical locations. I think that we as feminist exegetes from all over the globe, should strengthen our existing networks and build new alliances in order to move the feminist interpretation of the Bible and feminist activism forward. I only dare to speak for my own context in the German academy and the German Protestant church context. For my location, it would be fruitful to focus on methodology and intersectional analysis, which will include more conversations and collaboration with feminist colleagues from other secular disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, and political studies. I would also like to engage more with queer theory and postcolonial approaches. On occasions such as this annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, I appreciate the conversations among the international groups of colleagues, and I hope that future sessions of the program unit

“Feminist Hermeneutics of the Bible” will take up some of the issues as they have arisen from this panel.

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Tyler D. Mayfield

I want to express my thanks first to Dr. Scholz for her editorial work on these three volumes. They represent a tremendous amount of editorial guidance and concern. I count at least 46 essays in total. These volumes exemplify a valuable snapshot of the past and present conversations in feminist interpretation. Each essay, almost without exception, takes seriously the notion of “retrospect” that is found in the series title, *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect*. The contributors work hard to tell a focused but full story of feminist interpretation, to establish “genealogies of knowledge,” as Scholz calls it in her introduction to the first volume. This is the first strength of the volumes. I hear underneath these dozens of essays a shared message and value around the importance of listening to and learning from the last forty years of feminist interpretation. I hear an invitation to the next generation of feminist biblical scholars to learn from previous discussions. And while, even with three substantial volumes, the work does not constitute an exhaustive treatment of feminist interpretation, there is, I would argue, a wide-ranging quality to the volumes taken together. To review this collection, I want to focus on Volumes 1 and 3 and look at them as a whole product, taking all the essays together to highlight two interpretive issues.

The First Volume: Biblical Books

I begin with the first volume in the trilogy. It has the subtitle “Biblical Books.” These fourteen essays survey the remarkable work of feminist biblical scholars. Each essay moves biblical book by biblical book of the Hebrew Bible so that all of the essays provide a history of feminist interpretation of each biblical book. As I read through the volume, I imagined using these essays in my theological classroom, given their ability to summarize substantial amounts of the history of feminist scholarship on any given book. Instead of assigning several articles related to the multiple different characters, I would select one essay from this volume to give students a survey on the various interpretive options. In addition, the excellent footnotes lead readers further into the feminist discussions on the various biblical issues, topics, and texts.

Of course, fourteen essays on the whole Hebrew Bible do not cover every biblical book in its own essay. We find that Genesis has an entire essay devoted to its feminist scholarship, whereas the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are brought together in a single, impressive essay. The Song of Songs is also treated in one essay, but Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are treated together. An excellent treatment of wisdom literature brings together the feminist works on Proverbs, Job, and Qoheleth. These editorial decisions make good sense, as individual essays for each individual biblical book would have probably

severely limited some discussions, say, on Genesis. So, I am not here to second guess what seems to me to be a reasonable layout for the volume. What I do wish to point out is the fact that, according to this review of feminist interpretation in retrospect, certain landscapes in the Bible have been investigated more than others. We all know this issue well. It indicates that we have more work to do, and that is great because many of us have more essays and books we want to write! But allow me to explore this issue further.

Many, if not most, of the surveys of feminist scholarship in these volumes focus on individual passages such as laws about sexuality, individual women such as Sarah and Hagar, or individual topics such as prophetic marriage metaphors within given biblical books. How might feminist interpretation attend to both these concerns, namely specific passages within biblical books prominently featuring women and larger literary contexts such as whole books or even multiple books? How might we see individual female characters as in ongoing need of serious attention since androcentric and heteronormative readings of biblical women are still around, while noting that these female characters exist within larger stories or frameworks that expand to the level of a biblical book or even the Hebrew Bible as a whole? In other words, does a feminist reading of Exodus pay attention to Puah and Shiphrah or Miriam and Zipporah only? You get the sense from this volume that, yes, feminist scholars pay a great deal of attention to any one of these characters. But what about a feminist exegete applying a feminist lens to a broader set of issues by moving through every chapter of Exodus? (Is this, by the way, a place where the Wisdom Commentary series could help us?) Or how about taking all the women together in Exodus? I also wonder if this volume somehow deemphasizes the amount of feminist interpretation that transcends the boundaries set up by biblical books, the feminist work that occurs across several biblical books.

As I look in retrospect at what feminist biblical interpreters have accomplished so far, this first volume demonstrates rather intensely that feminist interpretation has generally emphasized a segmented approach to biblical texts. I think that this type of reading was completely necessary to address feminist concerns and to call for gender justice concerning the lack of treatment regarding women in biblical texts. If after forty years of feminist interpretation we still feel like we need another article on individual female characters, then I hope feminist interpreters will write it. But I also hope that feminist biblical scholars will apply their feminist lens to broader and broader portions of the text, not turning away from female characters but situating them in larger and larger literary contexts.

The Third Volume: Methods

The third volume on “methods” is particularly to be celebrated for displaying the truly diverse methods used by feminist biblical scholars. From historical, archaeological, and

anthropological to the literary to womanist scholarship, ideological criticism, queer interpretation, postcolonial work, masculinity studies, feminist interpreters are clearly engaging a myriad of methods. In fact, the first and second volumes contain fourteen essays each and the third one includes eighteen essays. I am interpreting the larger number of essays in the third volume as an indication of the desire by the editor to display abundantly the variety of methods at work in feminist exegesis. The volume is organized around the familiar interpretive schema of “readings behind the text,” “readings within the text,” and “readings in front of the text.” It is interesting to note that five essays relate to the first and historical category, three essays are in the second and literary category, and eight essays are in the third and cultural category.

In her introduction, Scholz lays out one of the central questions for this third volume. She observes that feminist Hebrew Bible scholars have not been particularly engaged in conversations about method. They have tended to use the methods of their training, whether the methods were historical, literary, or cultural, without reflecting too much on exactly how the preferred method fits with the feminist interpretive goals.

The layout of the third volume, with all its many methods and this general lack of explicit attention to method in feminist biblical scholarship, leads me back to the old question of whether feminist criticism is in fact a method. To help us think through this question, I recommend the first essay in this third volume. It is a conversation between Pamela Milne and Susanne Scholz about methods and methodology. They state that feminist scholars sometimes use terms such as method and methodology interchangeably, and they agree that feminist criticism should not be called a method. It would be interesting to hold a panel discussion—and maybe this has happened and I missed it—that reflected on just this single essay and the questions of method versus methodology, feminist criticism as method or methodology, and what makes a feminist reading feminist. Since the three volumes are concerned with a retrospective look, they helpfully demonstrate that in the past scholars have not agreed on these issues, that feminist interpreters do not always use precise terminology in their analysis, and that they often write in order to interpret a particular text using their preferred method without reflecting on these larger interpretive issues.

I am not interested in going forward by getting all feminist interpreters on the same page. That sounds boring and unfeminist. But I am interested in conversations related to these questions. Sometimes I wonder about the relationship between feminist criticism and our actual method, which has its own history and epistemology. Do we see feminist criticism as a supplementary interpretive move that we place as an additive to our actual method? Or does feminist criticism change the way we use our method? In other words, does feminist criticism change the object of our study to women and women’s lives or does it change the method itself—historical, literary, or cultural? In other words, do we see methods as tools that are neutral and

thus of use to feminist interpreters or can methods be in need of feminist critique?

In conclusion, let me ask my main question this way: if feminist criticism is a methodology that employs many methods, as Milne and Scholz assert, how do we decide which methods are available or suitable for feminist critics to use? And what might happen if we use feminist theory to critique particular methods, to uncover how a method's assumptions are rooted in patriarchy?

Many thanks again to Dr. Scholz for her years of work on this project. We are grateful for her contribution.

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Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon

To state the obvious, many scholars will surely draw inspiration from the three volumes edited by Professor Susanne Scholz. I congratulate Professor Scholz for the effort she has put into the production of these three very rich and valuable volumes. If I were to use an Indian expression, I would say that the volumes are overflowing with “*rasa*.” The word *rasa* literally means “juice” or “essence.” According to classical aesthetic theory, in a well-written book or work of art, all the nine *rasas* such as love/beauty (sexual pleasure), laughter, sorrow, anger, heroism/courage, terror/fear, disgust, surprise/wonder and peace or tranquility are evoked in measure appropriate to the subject at hand. I will admit that the volumes and their contents did not provide sexual pleasure, but certainly aroused appreciation, surprise, hope, challenge and also some disappointment.

Writing a response to these volumes is a daunting task, primarily because of the depth and the breadth of the contents. The pleasure of the text, namely the Hebrew Bible, and a commitment to issues surrounding gender was clearly the principle impetus for the writers in these volumes. They have all been successful in informing us of the state of feminist interpretations on the Hebrew Bible, of interpretations done in particular social locations (although not always stated), and the array of methods and approaches used. The volumes braid together the milestones and achievements, methods, approaches, and hermeneutics used by female and some male scholars, and they have in effect highlighted the difficulties and the complexities of feminist biblical interpretation. The three volumes are an important “institutional” resource and they contribute most significantly to sustained conversations and debates on gendering biblical studies and the pains and pleasures of both the doing and the institutionalization of feminist biblical studies. The volumes and their contents have pushed me, a feminist biblical scholar, and my scholarship and feminist activism to debate the volumes’ compulsions and challenges. Since it is impossible in this short space and time to offer a detailed response to each of the rich chapters that compose the three volumes, I have chosen to respond to a few key issues that have been highlighted by the editor in the introductions to each of the volumes. I respond to these issues from my own social location as an Indian woman with commitments to marginalized communities in Asia and more particularly India.

Feminism?

First, what is it that makes a work feminist? The editorial does not propose a working definition of feminism that binds these volumes. It is only in Volume 3 that Scholz offers definitions that others have articulated and she makes clear how contested the concept is (vol. 3, p. 5–6). Therefore, I ask what makes these volumes feminist? A definition is perhaps

needed to ensure that readers become aware of what is included and not included. Are these volumes presented as “feminist” because the majority of the authors are women? Is it because they have written about gender/women in the Hebrew Bible? Are they feminist because they are ideologically feminist? I had to test these essays against my own understanding of what constitutes feminism. A feminist approach recognizes that the tiered and hierarchical organizing of society is crucial for the maintenance of the social order, that to live lives marked male and female and transgender/bisexual is to live different realities. More importantly, to be a feminist is to be “occupying” the peripheral/marginal, relatively powerless position with reference to every dominant space that consumes the space at the center.³⁷ Feminism is a “political” stance of life—a consciousness that sees from the position of marginality, one that a person has deliberately chosen to occupy. It is a gesture of subversion towards domination. It destabilizes and disorders the established field, resists homogenization, opens up multiple possibilities rather than shutting them off. To be a feminist is also to recognize that apart from gender-based injustice, there are multiple structural inequalities that lie beneath the social order (the intersectionality of gender, race, class, caste, nation, colonized/colonizer, earth). A feminist believes that change and transformation is possible, and works for its possibility at whatever level.

The contributors to the three volumes echo many aspects of the above understanding of feminism. For example, Stratton (vol. 1, p. 105–106) helpfully reminds us of Exum’s proposal that “feminist readers have to start the interpretation process not with the biblical text but with the concerns of feminism as a worldview and a political enterprise” (vol. 1, p. 105). Stratton continues: “Feminist interpreters ask questions like: How are women portrayed? Who has power, and whose interests are being served? Hence, feminist readers expose the strategies by which men have justified their control over women and they try to understand women’s complicity in their own subordination. Interpretation involves not merely a descriptive process but also requires a stance outside the Bible’s androcentric ideology.”

The contributors have employed feminist convictions as defined by feminism, and they have deconstructed and resisted the hegemonic interpretations of the biblical text. They have also revealed that feminism is not the isolated achievement of an individual woman. I am not sure if they see themselves in the way I describe them. But the contributors as women/feminists have written as though they are part of the history that has produced them as individuals and as a group. They have inserted themselves into centuries of thick, textured narratives of struggles and celebrations in both the biblical text and possibly their own histories; they have remembered heroes and our foremothers, both named and unnamed. They have noted and written to gradually transform the field of biblical studies decisively and to shift old markers forever.

In the introduction to Volume 1 Scholz writes: “This volume contributes to the effort of making visible their work, exploring the range and depth of feminist exegetical scholarship thus far, and recapturing the early optimistic spirit in feminist work that regarded biblical interpretations as part of the larger justice movements in the world” (vol. 1, p. 10). The volume succeeded in fulfilling this aim. The essays map the formation of feminist biblical interpretation by gathering, retrieving, reviewing, and evaluating a past that makes sense from a feminist perspective. The volume engages with the past into the present and provides a base upon which to position the future.

Crossing borders

Second, I want to consider who is included and not included in this “feminist” project. I would have appreciated inclusion of more feminist scholars and more engagement with feminist works from the two-thirds parts of the globe in Volume 1 and Volume 3. For instance, the essay by Helen Leneman, “Genealogies of feminist Biblical Studies: An interview Report from the 1970’s Generation” (vol. 1, p. 11–32), does not mention any scholars from spaces outside the Western world. In contrast, writers examining the impact of feminism in theology and biblical studies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America will always acknowledge the positive and inspiring impact of North Atlantic first-wave feminists for the growth of their own consciousness as feminists and in their engagement with the bible. Volume 1 includes the diverse voices of Madipoane Masenya (Africa), Yael Shemesh (Israel), Julie Kelso (Australia), David M. Valeta (male), Fiona Black (Canada), and Lai Ling Elizabeth Ngan (Asian-American), besides others from the USA. Yet the absence of a Womanist or African American exegete in this list is glaring. I also note the sparse and insufficient engagement of their voices as well as of voices from outside of the North American and the European contexts. I was hoping, for example, to find some references to Asian interpretations of texts in First and Second Samuel in Ngan’s analysis and retrospect, but there was none. This reminds me of Randall Bailey, the African American Hebrew Bible scholar, who criticizes those who rest their conclusions only on white Western sources. I am aware of the problematic roles that are thrust upon a non-Western individual when she and her work enters the orbit of certain kinds of academic concerns and discursive practices pursued supposedly and predominantly only in the West. But feminist biblical interpretation is not a project of the West alone. Two-thirds world feminists/womanists should be recognized as crucial partners of mainstream Western feminist voices engaged in biblical criticism, as critical interlocutors of strategies at work in versions of feminist academic multiculturalism. Two-thirds world feminist/womanist scholars make critical interventions not only in mainstream Western biblical interpretation but also in our two-third’s world discourses about the bible within our contexts and communities. We have experienced that our interventions

have not always been accepted as “scholarship,” that our “methods” have been downplayed and the relevance of our interpretations questioned. However, we live in times when the dominance of biblical scholarship in the West is challenged, and this challenge has contributed to the breakdown of the North Atlantic dominance of biblical studies. It is therefore important to improve the range of texts we attend to and the issues we take seriously. We must include a range of marginalized voices into the feminist biblical debates since they offer important social and political perspectives, observations, and insights. Feminist biblical studies would certainly benefit from heeding the voices and challenges posed by two-thirds world women and postcolonial scholars, such as Kwok Pui-lan and Musa Dube, as suggested by Stratton (vol. 1, p. 80–109). They stress the importance of considering “all of the women and marginalized peoples of the world in our scholarship” and to “become decolonizing readers,” to “demonstrate a conscious adoption of resistance to imperialism” in order to “build true conversations of equal subjects in our postcolonial and multicultural world,” and to use our scholarship and “disciplines for liberation causes” (vol. 1, p. 107).

Scholz observes that there is “still little dialog among various feminist interpretations.” This much needed conversation can be facilitated with an intentional commitment to including diverse and global voices alongside traditional or Western feminist biblical interpretation in the retrospect. After all, the project of feminism has no borders. It is a project of inclusion, a project of hearing voices from spaces that are often ignored and marginalized. I would like to believe that we belong to patches of different colors, tones, and patterns, all detached, and yet sewn together. Feminism is akin to a patchwork quilt, giving equal attention to issues faced by bourgeois feminism, rural feminism, the LGBTQT movement, the dalit movement, domestic workers, and victims and survivors of sexual abuse and the like. I think such an understanding of feminism is perhaps lacking in these volumes since the collection focuses largely on works produced by Anglo women and men. Some years ago, I evaluated a thesis on texts from the Hebrew Bible. Many women in the two-thirds part of the globe had written on them, as the issues raised by these biblical texts bear many similarities to experiences of women in traditional cultures. All women experience abuse and violence but subjugated and marginalized and minority women experience abuse and violence in far greater intensity and breadth in the two-thirds world. Some of what these interpreters from non-white contexts say has universal significance, and their insights call for justice for all women and perhaps help even men preserve their humanity. However, the thesis writer paid no attention to the voices of these women interpreters. Her defense was that “I wanted to attend to only feminist contributions!” I rest my case.

This observation also raises for me the issue of the place of oral cultures and the privileging of written sources. There are many native, vernacular, and informal reflections on the biblical texts by women. Feminist interpretations of biblical texts in the two-thirds part of the globe

are largely informal that do not always use the formal tools of biblical methodology and exegesis. Developed largely outside biblical scholarship and the academy, these grass-roots readings are feminist. The challenge for us within the academy is to extend our inquiries beyond academic institutions and practices and to include potentially provocative sites such as film, fiction, art, and poetry. Such readings are full of hermeneutical and exegetical insight that may contribute to the transformation of the androcentric worldview, especially by implicitly advocating for a “hermeneutics of suspicion.” Finding these written and oral voices requires commitment and patience because they are not always easily available in publications familiar to the academy. Yet they do exist and they play a significant role in transforming women’s lives both inside and outside the church and the academy.

Theory

Third, I call attention to the place of theory in feminist biblical interpretations. In Volume 1, Scholz writes that feminist biblical studies have not reached a “theoretical-feminist paradise” (vol. 1, p. 9). I am not as worried about this issue, since I am not a strong theoretician myself. However, I recognize that there is some theory at work that undergirds each of the essays even if it is not made explicit. Can we speak of an implicit theoretical underpinning in these works? Would it have helped for the editor to analyze and name the theoretical foundations for each essay? Essential and important as theory is to help structure and construct the work, critical theory for theory’s sake is unhelpful. I find it more appealing to see a theory tested, implemented, and employed toward a purpose; and this is not as apparent in all the essays.

Locations

Fourth, in my own work I am very concerned about the significance of social location. Scholz writes in Volume 2: “In the mid-1990s...feminist interpreters looked back at a very long tradition of identifying their readings within their gender locations although they did not usually use explicitly the terminology of ‘social location’, in contrast to minoritized scholars who located themselves in their various socio-political, racial, ethnic, and class-differentiated contexts. However, the theoretical acknowledgment has encouraged feminist interpreters to clearly name their ‘social locations’ defined by various intersectional categories although some feminist scholars still hesitate to acknowledge the locatedness of their work, perhaps for fear their work might be rejected as ‘eisegesis’” (vol. 2, p. 5). This last sentence bothers me a bit because it refers to the reason why mainstream academics ignore much of our contextual work. But it also means that works which are not forthright about the context/location from which they are written are considered to have “universal” value, whereas those that are explicit about their social location have only “particular” value. Confining feminist biblical

scholarship to the question of the status of women alone strengthens the field, thus rendering it as a safer question against the more threatening questions and issues of contextually conscious readers who interrogate the field of feminist biblical studies. I strongly believe that minority readings also push the edges of biblical interpretation and their concerns need to be heeded.

What saddens me is the dismal lack of engagement with socially located readings and interpretations. For several years, I have co-edited the SBL series, “International Voices in Biblical Studies,” and it has required much effort to convince prospective authors that contextual interpretations are as valid as the others. I was forced to state repeatedly that the series is no less important than others of the SBL. Even those who do contextual work often hesitate to publish their work with a series that is transparently “pro-context.” It has been an interesting experience so far to see who offers to review our volumes. An insider to the publishing world once remarked that there is no market for contextual works, especially from the two-thirds world, and if published, reviewers will be “gentle” to not offend the sensibilities of the authors. How can we foster a healthy debate between the so-called mainstream feminist biblical scholars and those of us who speak from specific contexts? While contextual feminist scholars engage academic and mainstream feminist interpretations of the biblical text, the same is not true in the reverse, as is evidenced to some extent in these volumes as well.

Analyzing traditional and orthodox ideas about gender roles, inequity, racial/caste discrimination, corruption, and power abuse in communities and the church through engagement with the biblical text comes with some professional risk. Our works are often considered personal, value-laden, and political, as if they did not belong in the arena of “faith” or “scholarship.” Yet, somehow, not paying attention to the realities and conditions of the marginalized in the world is not regarded as personal, value-laden, and political. Thus, the support of the status quo within both the church and the academy continues, and many issues are rejected, silenced, or ignored. But as feminist and systemic thinkers we are aware that it is impossible not to communicate or call attention to this reality. If we did not do so, we would actually condone violence and narrow exegetical options, political and economic oppressions, and social frustrations that communities of women experience daily.

By having a volume on social location in a three-part project, the editor has impressed upon the wider academy that feminist contextual biblical interpretations are not “epistemological judgments” or driven by “value judgments” but that they are “academic,” “scholarly,” and worthy of attention. The volume asserts the importance and- significance of social-location exegesis for the wider academy. Thus Volume 2 calls attention to the value of “engaged” and

“organic” scholarship. It brings to the fore the magnitude of one’s social location, and it highlights that one’s interpretive strategies and theoretical frameworks need to be disclosed in biblical studies. The placement of the social-location volume between the first volume on “Biblical Books” and the third volume on “Methods” is, I think, “prophetic.” Its position in the middle bridges the three volumes, thereby exposing the strengths and the lacunas when seen through the lens of context. The second volume thus encourages feminist biblical interpreters from marginal geographies of varying oppressed identities to assert the definitions of our field and to challenge the discipline’s emphasis on “objectivist positivism” and “scientific value-detachment.”

Volume 2 brings political energy to the task of feminist biblical interpretation because it insists on engaging with the socio-political and cultural contexts in the broadest possible sense. The inclusion of the Middle East (Palestine), the Caribbean, and the Pacific would have made the section on “Continental Geographies” more complete. Yet the volume has much value, and it is representative of a scenario in which academic trends and fashions are changing with bewildering speed. Its significance lies in the questions raised, the evolving methodologies, and the care with which the findings have been elucidated with a remarkable combination of restraint, conviction, and confidence. The picture that emerges is one of complexity if not of troubling contradictions.

Our marginal histories, politics, and cultural considerations are respectfully woven together in this volume. The distinctiveness of an interpretation remains distinctive only when we allow the unique features of one’s experience to converse with the biblical text. Having said that, it is important to be aware and cautious of the fact that the views included in this volume are those of an elite social group at a particular historical moment. They should not become the defining components of the “worldviews” of the included contexts. It is essential that we reflect how the actual religious practices, spiritual understandings, and scriptural interpretations of various groups of women, oppressed castes, and socially and culturally marginalized groups challenge and subvert rather than endorse the views found in the essays. An uncritical appreciation may obstruct understanding the place of these “cultural positions” within the moral and political fabric of their social contexts, and obscure their ideological functions as justifications for practices or institutions that have been unjust and exclusionary and worked to dis-empower and marginalize a great many of the inhabitants of the cultural contexts under consideration.

Methods

Fifth, I also want to comment on the methods as they are adopted by feminist biblical scholars. Scholz states that feminist scholars use “standard exegetical methods that they have inherited from the field and have adopted them for feminist biblical commentaries, feminist

historical constructions of ancient Israelite society and feminist cultural analysis of gender, androcentricism and issues of sexuality” (vol. 3, p. 3). The array of these methods, as used by feminist biblical scholars, have been very effectively showcased in this third volume. The volume recognizes that academic research facilitates diverse forms of economic, social, and cultural imperialism/domination by shaping and legitimating policies that entrench existing unjust power relations. In other words, biblical interpretation and the choice of method are not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions. Methods and our use of them are politically and ideologically driven.

Hence, my concern that comes from reading this volume relates to the significance of these methods for the marginalized and unlettered communities of women. I am aware of how difficult it is to discuss methodology and marginalized communities in the same breath. How might we use these methods in service for marginalized communities such as dalit women? The suitability of a method for marginalized communities can be determined only with an analysis of forms and structures of domination, and an awareness and understanding of the complex ways in which biblical interpretations are deeply embedded in the multiple layers of imperial, colonial, patriarchal, and casteist practices. Perhaps, related but equally significant questions are: Does a marginalized woman appreciate what we do within the academy? Do our ideals of biblical interpretation concur with theirs? In simple terms, what are the perspectives of marginalized on methodology? The deconstruction of the text/story and the uncovering of underlying texts are insufficient, for none of that helps people improve the current conditions or prevents the marginalized from continued oppression. The past, our local and global stories, the present, our communities, cultures, languages, social practices, current and extant interpretations of the Bible are all spaces of marginalization, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope. It is from these spaces that we need to address biblical interpretation within the wider framework of self-determination, decolonization, and social justice. The method should assist us to analyze and evaluate the roots of social construction and distortion as they appear in the social and cultural worlds, especially to people who create, intensify, or reinforce discrimination, injustice, and subjugation that shape the manner we approach and interpret the biblical text.

What is also particularly interesting is Scholz’s statement that feminist biblical interpreters do not always provide reasons for their choice or use of a particular method (vol. 3, p. 2). I see this absence arise out of at least two issues. One issue relates to the way the bible is received, namely as “literature” or as “scripture.” The other issue relates to the purposes for which one interprets the bible. One might argue that the distinction between literature and scripture is artificial, as for instance David Clines maintains, or that the Bible is understood better if it is first read as literature. I do not discount the validity of these responses. I agree that there are

advantages to reading the bible as literature as it enhances our understanding of it. Yet there is a difference between those who view the bible as literature only and those who also regard it as scripture, or vice versa. For those who see it as literature only, the validity of a method lies in how it opens up the text. For those who see the bible both as literature and scripture, they want to understand not only the text but also how it might edify our living and being. They read the bible to transform women's lives and to bring systemic and structural changes, and they seem to be much more attuned to critically assess the functionality of a method as well as to explain and justify their use of a method. These readers are also quite forthright in setting out the hermeneutical principles that will be employed: resistance, liberation, life, and transformation, to name just a few.

It is thus important to understand the space in which our issues and methodologies intersect. It is also important to situate the development of counter-practices of biblical study within both our critique of Western knowledge and the movements of resistance. Informed by critical and feminist evaluations of positivism, I vote for methodologies that disrupt the rules of the research game toward practices that are respectful, ethical, sympathetic, and useful versus racist, casteist practices and androcentric attitudes, ethnocentric assumptions, and exploitative research. This, of course, deserves a lot more reflection. For now, we need to make space for wider ranging approaches towards understanding the issues, the approaches, and the methods employed by feminist interpreters of the Bible. This also means that feminist biblical scholars should recognize the use of non-formal methods that are imaginative, such as “vernacular readings,” that are characteristic of local culture and communication processes and are distinguished from “metropolitan readings” that assume a “working universality.”³⁸

Conclusion

In conclusion, I affirm that these volumes draw attention to the ways in which feminist biblical interpretation has developed through dialogues, sometimes discordant, with other disciplines, with the women's movement and other complex political scenarios, and, of course with the institutions that provide patronage. What is evident is the dynamism of the field, with challenges to facile consensus. While these readings, approaches, and locations from which women scholars read the text may be disruptive, we need to recognize their potentially productive and fruitful nature, as we are compelled to interrogate our own locations and vocations continuously. This process can be disturbing, disrupting, but it is certainly not stagnating. The volumes lead us into visualizing alternative scenarios of feminist biblical studies, even as making these visions real may appear to be a daunting challenge. The volumes give hope that patriarchy/kyriarchy is not as indomitable as we think. As women, we are aware that patriarchy/kyriarchy is an assembling of structures in which we all participate both consciously or unconsciously. However, if we consciously refuse to participate in it, the

structures will be hindered from closing their gates with a pleasing click. Susanne Scholz's three volumes disorganize the settled field of biblical studies, and they open up multiple possibilities within the arena rather than closing them off. Yes, feminist biblical scholarship is far from finished! Through the formation of a field of knowledge with the name "Feminist Biblical Studies" new routes and roots of knowledge about and by women have been and are still to be discovered. Thank you, Professor Scholz, for including me in this venture and for your persistence to see this project through.

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Susanne Scholz

Response

I would like to thank the members of the Feminist Hermeneutics of the Bible Section for sponsoring and organizing this panel discussion on my three edited volumes. It is a great honor to me and my contributors. I also would like to express my collegial gratitude to the five panelists who agreed to spend time reviewing and commenting on the books. Thank you for your generous commentary, evaluation, and feedback. As the editor, I thank you in the name of all of us who contributed to the books. I also would like to mention my original co-collaborator, Rachel Magdalene. We started our work together in the summer of 2009 when Rachel realized that this is not a project for her to do all by herself. We were beginning to plan volume 1, telling everybody to submit their essays by the deadline, then the essays started coming in and I started the editorial process, but then Rachel's professional life took a rough corner. In March 2012, we agreed that it would be best if I continued our work alone because Rachel had so much else on her plate. This was a difficult moment for me and I am sure Rachel felt worse. But this is what happens to feminist scholars! Life takes over. We support each other and pick up the pieces wherever they are and bring them to a conclusion. Rachel, I thank you for your original effort to get this mammoth project off the ground, and I hope you are proud of what I made of it since March 2012. You stated in an email in February 2013, after I told you I had submitted volume 1 to the publisher, that it "warms" your heart to know that "the end of vol. 1" is at hand (email from 2-13-2013). I admit it was a ton of work to get the three volumes done. I am also very happy that "the trinity" is also available in paperback since this November. Hallelujah indeed.

Changing the course of thinking

Carol, thank you for your very generous appreciation of the three volumes. I love your statement with which I agree fully: "My, my, we women truly can change the course of thinking. And if we can change the course of thinking, how much more can we change the course of history, and the world in which we live with all creatures, both human and non-human." It makes me happy to think that the three volumes encourage feminist, womanist, and *mujerista* scholars, in our various intersectional manifestations, to take ourselves and our own projects seriously, more seriously than any other tempting research opportunity perhaps, and to get busy in dialoging with each other. I am also fully on board with your idea that our scholarly dialogue will ask a lot of us. It will not suffice anymore that you or I or a third scholar interpret a text as each of us see it. Rather, we need to develop "feminist meta-methods approaches," so that "similar and divergent views on a text can be heard together and

pondered anew.” Because, as you suggest: “Only when different feminist methods, approaches, and perspectives simultaneously shed light on a text can the text be seen in all its spectral colors.”

In fact, the third volume on methods taught me yet another dialogical component: what if we moved beyond our discipline’s text-obsessed focus to exegetical explorations far beyond the study of the text behind, within, or in front of the text and learned from other feminist methodologies? How about we learn to use feminist methodologies we do not yet employ in feminist biblical exegesis, such as “participatory research, ethnography, discourse analysis, comparative case study, cross-culture analysis, conversation analysis, oral history, participant observation, and personal narrative”³⁹? Other feminist academic disciplines can teach us quite a bit on these kinds of inquiries into feminist knowledge as a contribution toward social change. Why have we as feminist Hebrew Bible exegetes limited ourselves to text-based methods so hegemonic in the field of biblical studies? Why have we not developed participatory research methods? Why have we not relied on comparative case studies or cross-cultural analysis in our work? Asked differently, why has feminist Hebrew Bible exegesis remained within the range of methods traditionally employed in the field of biblical studies and not attempted to boldly go where few Bible exegetes have gone before? I would like our feminist conversations to discuss these issues and questions. Carol, you are thus absolutely right in your assessment: I too consider Volume 3 “the crowning jewel” of the three-volume series. And I am the first to admit that in the early stage of developing the three-series volumes with Rachel, I was opposed to the third volume’s topic. I said: “An entire volume on ‘method’? Rachel, what’s ‘feminist’ about *that* kind of volume?” When she left the project, I worried how I would pull off a volume that I did not really want to do. Yet, in the end, it was the best thing that happened to me. So yes, I fully agree with you: “The contributions (of Volume 3) that each feminist scholar makes...is unparalleled and provides a compendium of knowledge that showcases each method, each perspective.” Is it not amazing that feminist biblical scholarship, a field so obsessed with methods, has yet to produce more than one volume on its feminist use of methods? This is amazing in itself, and for sure feminist exegetes of all stripes need to put their heads together and critically assess their use of methods, the distinction to methodologies, and the distinction or similarities to the notion of hermeneutics. Although I do not yet pass the torch to anybody, I would hope that we will develop our feminist conversations and collaborations in a way that take seriously and build upon the foundation of these three volumes.

Womanism is feminism

And then Wil, thank you for your astute comments. I agree entirely with your reminder that womanism is feminism. We are talking “umbrella terms” here and not divisive terminology. I could also live with using womanism from now on, although my sense is that at the moment womanism is the term mostly preferred by African American feminist and women scholars. Could I call myself a womanist without being charged with appropriating a term not meant to be used by a diasporic German, naturalized US-citizen, white-European, post-Holocaust feminist exegete? When I originally learned about the US-American politics of terminology in Bev Harrison’s and Delores Williams’s course on Feminist and Womanist Theologies and Ethics at Union Theological Seminary back in the mid-1990s, I remember very well the heated debates between the black and white US-American feminist and womanist students of theology. Several of the white women cried and several of the black women got very angry. The classroom was often in upheaval over terminology, concepts, and who can say what. Perhaps we need to find this kind of honesty with each other again, but then perhaps we just need to find collaborative and dialogical projects because I agree with you: “(womanist) biblical scholarship does not begin with publication or discovery.” In my view, it begins with relationships and conversations about issues that matter to individual participants or groups of participants. But participants are needed! And let me tell you, especially for volume 1, it was no easy feat to find willing contributors. In fact, Volume 1 was perhaps the hardest to put together.

Wil’s last two questions might encourage such a collaborative and dialogical project. She asks: “How is woman defined, particular now that we have expanded (our) non-binary understandings of gender?” And: “Can we define woman without being cis-arrogant or trans-antagonistic?” In fact, I do not think we can research the concept of “woman” or “women” in the plural anymore in our Christian-right’s culture without clearly articulating why we study “woman” or “women” in the Bible. Otherwise, we essentialize the concept and accommodate our biblical readings into a biologically situated, heteronormative, and religious-right agenda. I would welcome our conversation, our dialogue, and even collaboration on this highly relevant question: How shall we as feminists, as womanists, and *mujerista* scholars read biblical texts with womanist, feminist, *mujerista* concerns in mind?

Challenging the status quo

I would like to address yet another issue that is dear to my feminist biblical heart and that also shows up in Christl’s, Tyler’s, and Monica’s comments.⁴⁰ It has to do with the institutional power of academic gatekeepers who have cemented their exegetical superiority and authority by ignoring innovative exegetical developments, including feminist exegesis. The hegemonic

architecture of academic and religious institutions is not friendly to feminists in any field but the ease with which feminist Bible scholarship is sidelined is remarkable. I also observe that potential feminist interpreters often choose to advance their careers by following the path of least resistance. They avoid having anything to do with feminist biblical exegesis or explicitly feminist topics. Sometimes, they move into essentialist work on biblical women, and as a result essentialist books are common today. They disregard critical gender theories, and they reinforce the common misperception that feminist exegesis focuses on biblical “women.” Thus, it is obvious that not every biblical interpretation on women, gender, or sexuality advances feminist and queer aligned thought and exegesis. Esther Fuchs has probably written the most on this exegetical trouble. In several publications, she explains that the essentializing, naturalizing, and universalizing hermeneutical assumptions, prevalent in scholarly treatments on biblical women, are rooted in neoliberalist thought.⁴¹ Unsurprisingly, such scholarship is welcomed in neoliberal, corporatized, and technocratic institutions of higher education and the publishing industry. As Henry A. Giroux describes the effects of these forces when he states: “Four decades of neoliberal policies have resulted in an economic Darwinism that promotes privatization, commodification, free trade, and deregulation. It privileges personal responsibility over larger social forces, reinforces the gap between the rich and poor by redistributing wealth to the most powerful and wealthy individuals and groups, and it fosters a mode of public pedagogy that privileges the entrepreneurial subject while encouraging a value system that promotes self-interest, if not an unchecked selfishness. Since the 1970s, neoliberalism or free-market fundamentalism has become not only a much-vaunted ideology that now shapes all aspects of life in the United States but also a predatory global phenomenon.”⁴²

The neoliberal policies of privatization, commodification, deregulation, and “financialization”⁴³ have had a profound impact on higher education today. They decrease democratic education and reduce the value of critical thinking, as Giroux observes: “The neoliberal paradigm ... abhors democracy and views public and higher education as a toxic civic sphere that poses a threat to corporate values, power, and ideology.... Similarly, critical thought, knowledge, dialogue, and dissent are increasingly perceived with suspicion by the new corporate university that now defines faculty as entrepreneurs, students as customers, and education as a mode of training.”⁴⁴

In short, the market-driven corporate dynamics of higher education instrumentalize academic work for commercial purposes and financial gains. It includes neoliberal scholarship on biblical women and thus pertains to feminist (biblical) scholarship. There is little incentive to expand teaching and research into particularly innovative and creative directions that do not foster, advance, and communicate hegemonic views on the Bible and gender.

Nevertheless, feminist biblical scholars *must* continue developing biblical studies as an international, interreligious, interracial, and intercultural intellectual field of research. We need to provide critical insight into the structures of domination as they pertain to biblical interpretation. We have to consider the intersections of gender, race, class, physical abilities, nationalism, colonialism, or heteronormativity, and we should provide intellectual rationale and analysis to global struggles for justice. We also need to insist on developing biblical studies as an academic location that critically investigates the manifold sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and religious conditions that require feminist change. We have to articulate sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and religious alternatives, and recognize existing divisions, including those based on gender, as asymmetric power relations that have profoundly defined, limited, and distorted the interpretative work in biblical studies. It is thus urgent that we collaborate with each other and to do whatever we can to build institutions and research agendas that open up spaces for the next generation of feminist Bible scholars, teachers, and readers. Tat-Siong Benny Liew calls for “intercommunal conversations across minority groups,”⁴⁵ and womanist exegetes, Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace, affirm “that interpreting sacred texts cannot be done independent of the communities with whom we read and to whom we are accountable.”⁴⁶ In my view, feminist exegetes need to be part of these conversations. We need to be connected to our communities of accountability. In fact, many feminist and genderqueer Bible scholars have already reached out and engaged in this kind of “multipolar or multicentric” discourse, despite the difficulties of establishing it within our own institutional locations. In sum, those of us creating feminist alternatives to the kyriarchal status quo in biblical studies need to insist that biblical studies is feminist biblical studies, and vice versa, even when some universities, colleagues, and publishers ignore, sideline, or marginalize feminist biblical studies even today.

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¹ Susanne Scholz (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible in Retrospect* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013–2016).

² Alice Walker, “Coming Apart,” in: Laura Lederer, *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* (New York: Morrow, 1980), 100.

³ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi.

⁴ Sermon excerpt from Wil Gafney, “You Have the Forehead of a Whore” (unpublished, 2017).

⁵ @wilgafney, Twitter, 2017.

⁶ Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women’s Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego, CA: LuraMedia, 1988).

⁷ There are fourteen essays in Volume 1, fourteen essays in Volume 2, and eighteen essays in Volume 3.

⁸ Wil Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 1–2.

⁹ Carol Meyers, Tony Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer, *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: Eerdmans, 2000).

¹⁰ Melissa Harris-Perry’s *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Tamara Lomax, *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Black Religion and Black Popular Culture* (forthcoming).

¹¹ Susanne Scholz, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect, 1: Biblical Books* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013).

¹² Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (16 vols.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993-2001).

¹³ Luise Schottroff and Marie-Theres Wacker, eds., *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung* (Gütersloh: Kaiser and Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998, 2nd ed. 1999); *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature* (trans. Lisa E. Danhill et al.; GrandRapids/ Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012).

¹⁴ Scholz makes this observation in her introduction (vol. 1, p. 7).

¹⁵ Scholz observes the hesitation of some feminist scholars to admit the locatedness of their work, see Scholz, “Introduction,” (vol. 2, p. 5). I think that most scholars acknowledge their social location, but not all of them dare to disclose it.

¹⁶ The situation is different in other parts of the world, see, e.g., the strong influence of the secular feminist movement in India as described by Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon, “Engaging Women’s Experiences in the Struggle for Justice, Dignity, and Humanity: Hebrew Bible

Readings by South Asian Women,” (vol. 2, p. 51–69, esp. p. 54–56, 67). In contrast, feminist readings in Latin America emerged within the churches and out of liberation theology; see Mercedes L. García Bachmann, “Thirsty Enough for Feminist Biblical Interpretation: Contextual Readings by Women from Latin America,” (vol. 2, p. 97–117, esp. p. 102).

¹⁷ Scholz, Susanne, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect, II: Social Locations* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014).

¹⁸ Cf. Wai Ching Angela Wong, “Beyond Colonialism and Postcolonialism: Feminist Readings of the Bible in East Asia,” (vol. 2, p. 28–50); Melancthon, “Engaging Women’s Experiences” (see note 16), p. 51–65.

¹⁹ Cf. Esther Fuchs, “A Feminist Hermeneutics of Resistance: A Jewish Response to Interpretive Hegemony,” (vol. 2, p. 151–87, esp. p. 153–54). Fuchs argues on page 154 that “no single approach can claim to be more or less feminist based on its genealogy, but rather on the extent to which one or the other has been adapted and adopted by feminist critics.”

²⁰ Cf. Pamela J. Milne, “Feminist-Critical Scholarship from Secular Perspectives: The Hebrew Bible in the Context of Women’s Lives in this World,” (vol. 2, p. 234–49).

²¹ See Julie Kelso’s harsh critique on interpretations by Eskenazi, Karrer-Grube, and Wacker in her essay, “Reading Silence: The Books of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah, and the Relative Absence of a Feminist Interpretive History,” (vol. 1, p. 268–89, esp. p. 280 “plain misleading”), p. 281 (“outlandish and largely unsupportable statements”), p. 283 (“a frustratingly anti-feminist stance”).

²² Cf. Katharina von Kellenbach, “Cultivating a Hermeneutics of Respect for Judaism: Christian Feminist Interpretations of the Hebrew Bible after the Holocaust,” (vol. 2, p. 250–68).

²³ Cf. Jane Everhart, “Women Who Love Women Reading Hebrew Bible Texts: About a Lesbian Biblical Hermeneutics,” (vol. 2, p. 188–204, esp. p. 195–98); further references to Guest are in Volume 2 (vol. 2, p. 88–89, 139; vol. 2, p. 254–55, 314, 318, 321–22).

²⁴ Scholz, Susanne, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect, 3: Methods* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2016), 5.

²⁵ Sarah Sheckman, “Back to the Past: An Overview of Feminist Historical Criticism,” (vol. 3, p. 55–73, esp. p. 55).

²⁶ Carol L. Meyers, “Beyond the Bible: Archaeology, Ethnohistory, and the Study of Israelite Women,” (vol. 3, p. 74–90).

²⁷ Johanna Stiebert, “Within and Without Purity, Danger, Honour, and Shame: Anthropological Approaches in Feminist Hebrew Bible Studies,” (vol. 3, p. 111–35).

²⁸ Rebecca Hancock, “Advantages and Challenges: Comparative Historical Criticism and Feminist Biblical Studies,” (vol. 3, p. 91–110).

²⁹ Cf. Hancock, “Advantages,” 110.

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- ³⁰ Pamela J. Milne and Susanne Scholz, “On Method and Methodology in Feminist Biblical Studies: A Conversation,” (vol. 3, p. 19–34).
- ³¹ Karin Baker-Fletcher, “Seeking our Survival, Our Quality of Life, and Wisdom: Womanist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible,” (vol. 3, p. 225–42).
- ³² Jeremia Punt, “Dealing with Empire and Negotiating Hegemony: Developments in Postcolonial Feminist Hebrew Bible Criticism,” (vol. 3, p. 278–303).
- ³³ Nicole J. Ruane, “When Women Aren’t Enough: Gender Criticism in Feminist Hebrew Bible Interpretation,” (vol. 3, p. 243–60, esp. p. 243).
- ³⁴ Tina Pippin, “Biblical Women as Ideological Constructs toward Justice: Ideological Criticism as a Feminist/Womanist Method,” (vol. 3, p. 261–77; esp. p. 277) and in her title.
- ³⁵ Roland Boer, “Modes of Productions and Reading Labors on the Margins: Marxist Feminist Criticism of the Hebrew Bible,” (vol. 3, p. 326–44).
- ³⁶ Caroline Blyth, “Engaging with Cultural Discourses: Cultural Feminist Criticism in Hebrew Bible Studies,” (vol. 3, p. 364–79).
- ³⁷ I am reminded here also of Scholz’s argument made in defence of Dinah in Genesis 34, where she claims that a feminist would always take the side of the victim. Susanne Scholz, *Sacred Witness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 30.
- ³⁸ R. S. Sugirtharajah, “Introduction and Some Thoughts on Asian Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Biblical Interpretation 2* (1994) 251–263.
- ³⁹ Nancy A. Naples, “feminist methodology”, in George Ritzer (ed.), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology (vol. iv)* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 1701–6, here 1702.
- ⁴⁰ For full disclosure, I did not receive the review of my three colleagues on time to develop my specific response to their comments.
- ⁴¹ For an introduction on neoliberalism, see, e.g., Manfred B. Steger and Ravi K. Roy, *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- ⁴² Henry A. Giroux, *Neoliberalism’s War on Higher Education* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2014), 1.
- ⁴³ For the latter dynamic, see the important analysis by Costas Lapavistas, *Profiting without Producing: How Finance Exploits Us All* (Versos, 2013).
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.
- ⁴⁵ Tat-Siong Benny Liew, “What Has Been Done? What Can We Learn? Racial/Ethnic Minority Readings of the Bible in the United States,” in *The Future of the Biblical Past: Envisioning Biblical Studies on a Global Key*, ed. Roland Boer and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: SBL, 2012), 282–283.
- ⁴⁶ Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace, “Introduction: Methods and the Making of Womanist

Biblical Hermeneutics,” in *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse*, ed. Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2016), 15.

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