Phyllis Trible on Feminist Biblical Interpretation

Phyllis Trible, one of the most influential voices of feminist biblical scholarship, provided an excellent example of the way in which feminism and biblical interpretation can lead to the reading of culture and the text in ways that have been overlooked or suppressed by previous methods of biblical study. Her interpretations of passages represent a classic illustration of modern feminist biblical interpretation.

Born and bred in a land of patriarchy, the Bible abounds in male imagery and language. For centuries interpreters have explored and exploited this male language to articulate theology: to shape the contours and content of the Church, synagogue and academy; and to instruct human beings—female and male—in what they are, what rules they should play, and how they should behave. So harmonious has seemed this association of Scripture with sexism, of faith with culture, that only a few have even questioned it.

Within the past decade, however, challenges have come in the name of feminism, and they refuse to go away. As a critique of culture in light of misogyny, feminism is a prophetic movement, examining the status quo, pronouncing judgement and calling for repentance. In various ways this hermeneutical pursuit interacts with the Bible in its remoteness, complexity, diversity and contemporaneity to yield new understandings of both text and interpreter. Accordingly, I shall survey three approaches to the study of women in Scripture. Though these perspectives may also apply to “inter-testamental” and New Testament literature, my focus is the Hebrew Scriptures.

When feminists first examined the Bible, emphasis fell upon documenting the case against women. Commentators observed the plight of the female in Israel. Less desirable in the eyes of her parents than a male child, a girl stayed close to her mother, but her father controlled her life until he relinquished her to another man for marriage. If either of these male authorities permitted her to be mistreated, even
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abused, she had to submit without recourse. Thus, Lot offered his daughters to the men of Sodom to protect a male guest (Genesis 19: 8); Jephthah sacrificed his daughter to remain faithful to a foolish vow (Judges 11: 29–40); Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar (2 Samuel 13); and the Levite from the hill country of Ephraim participated with other males to bring about the betrayal, rape, murder and dismemberment of his own concubine (Judges 19). Although not every story involving female and male is so terrifying, the narrative literature nevertheless makes clear that from birth to death the Hebrew woman belonged to men.

What such narratives show, the legal corpus amplifies. Defined as the property of men (Exodus 20: 17; Deuteronomy 5: 21), women did not control their own bodies. A man expected to marry a virgin, though his own virginity need not be intact. A wife guilty of earlier fornication violated the honour and power of both her father and husband. Death by stoning was the penalty (Deuteronomy 22: 13–21). Moreover, a woman had no right to divorce (Deuteronomy 24: 1–4) and most often, no right to own property. Excluded from the priesthood, she was considered far more unclean than the male (Leviticus 15). Even her monetary value was less (Leviticus 27: 1–7).

Clearly, this feminist perspective has uncovered abundant evidence for the inferiority, subordination and abuse of women in Scripture. Yet the approach has led to different conclusions. Some people denounce biblical faith as hopelessly misogynous, although this judgement usually fails to evaluate the evidence in terms of Israelite culture. Some reprehensibly use these data to support anti-Semitic sentiments. Some read the Bible as a historical document devoid of any continuing authority and hence worthy of dismissal. The “Who cares?” question often comes at this point.

Others succumb to despair about the ever-present male power that the Bible and its commentators hold over women. And still others, unwilling to let the case against women be the determining word, insist that text and interpreters provide more excellent ways.

The second approach, then, grows out of the first while modifying it. Discerning within Scripture a critique of patriarchy, certain feminists concentrate upon discovering and recovering traditions that challenge the culture. This task involves highlighting neglected texts and reinterpreting familiar ones.

Prominent among neglected passages are portrayals of deity as female. A psalmist declares that God is midwife (Psalm 22: 9–10): “Yet thou art the one who took me from the womb; thou didst keep me safe upon my mother’s breast.” In turn, God becomes mother, the one upon whom the child is cast from birth: “Upon thee was I cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me thou hast been my God.” Although this poem stops short of an exact equation, in it female imagery mirrors divine activity. What the psalmist suggests, Deuteronomy 32: 18 makes explicit: “You were unmindful of the Rock that begot you and you forgot the God who gave you birth.”

Though the Revised Standard Version translates accurately “The God who gave you birth,” the rendering is tame. We need to accent the striking portrayal of God as a woman in labour pains, for the Hebrew verb has exclusively this meaning.
(How scandalous, then, is the totally incorrect translation in the Jerusalem Bible, “You forgot the God who fathered you.”) Yet another instance of female imagery is the metaphor of the womb as given in the Hebrew radicals **ribi**. In its singular form the word denotes the physical organ unique to the female. In the plural, it connotes the compassion of both human beings and God. God the merciful (**rahum**i) is God the mother. (See, for example, Jeremiah 31: 15–22.) Over centuries, however, translators and commentators have ignored such female imagery, with disastrous results for God, man and woman. To reclaim the image of God female is to become aware of the male idolatry that has long infested faith.

If traditional interpretations have neglected female imagery for God, they have also neglected females, especially women who counter patriarchal culture. By contrast, feminist hermeneutics accents these figures. A collage of women in Exodus illustrates the emphasis. So eager have scholars been to get Moses born that they pass quickly over the stories that lead to his advent (Exodus 1: 8–2: 10). Two female slaves are the first to oppose the Pharaoh; they refuse to kill newborn sons. Acting alone, without advice or assistance from males, they thwart the will of the oppressor. Tellingly, memory has preserved the names of these women, Shiphrah and Puah, while obliterating the identity of the king so successfully that he has become the burden of innumerable doctoral dissertations. What these two females begin, other Hebrew women continue:

A woman conceived and bore a son and when she saw that he was a goodly child she hid him three months. And when she could hide him no longer, she took for him a basket made of bulrushes... and she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds at the river's bank. And his sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him. (Exodus 2: 2–4)

In quiet and secret ways the defiance resumes as a mother and daughter scheme to save their baby son and brother, and this action enlarges when the daughter of Pharaoh appears at the riverbank. Instructing her maid to fetch the basket, the princess opens it, sees a crying baby, and takes him to her heart even as she recognizes his Hebrew identity. The daughter of Pharaoh aligns herself with the daughters of Israel. Filial allegiance is broken; class lines crossed; racial and political difference transcended. The sister, seeing it all from a distance, dares to suggest the perfect arrangement: a Hebrew nurse for the baby boy; in reality, the child’s own mother. From the human side, then, Exodus faith originates as a feminist act. The women who are ignored by theologians are the first to challenge oppressive structures.

Not only does this second approach recover neglected women but also it reinterprets familiar ones beginning with the primal woman in the creation story of Genesis 2–3. Contrary to tradition, she is not created the assistant or subordinate of the man. In fact, most often the Hebrew word **tzer** (“helper”) connotes superiority... thereby posing a rather different problem about this woman. Yet the accompanying phrase “fit for” or “corresponding to” (“a helper corresponding to”) tempers the connotation of superiority to specify the mutuality of woman and man.
Further, when the serpent talks with the woman (Genesis 3:1-5), he uses plural verb forms, making her the spokesperson for the human couple—hardly the pattern of a patriarchal culture. She discusses theology intelligently, stating the case for obedience even more strongly than did God: “From the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, God said: ‘You shall not eat from it, and you shall not touch it, lest you die.’” If the tree is not touched, then its fruit cannot be eaten.

Here the woman builds “a fence around the Torah,” a procedure that her rabbinitic successors developed fully to protect divine law and ensure obedience.

Speaking with clarity and authority, the first woman is theologian, ethicist, hermeneut and rabbi. Defying the stereotypes of patriarchy, she reverses what the Church, synagogue and academy have preached about women. By the same token, the man “who was with her” (many translations omit this crucial phrase) throughout the temptation is not morally superior but rather belly-oriented. Clearly this story presents a couple alien to traditional interpretations. In reclaiming the woman, feminist hermeneutics gives new life to the image of God female.

These and other exciting discoveries of a counter-literature that pertains to women do not, however, eliminate the male bias of Scripture. In other words, this second perspective neither disavows nor neglects the evidence of the first. Instead, it functions as a remnant theology.

The third approach retells biblical stories of terror in memoriam, offering sympathetic readings of abused women. If the first perspective documents misogyny historically and sociologically, this one appropriates such evidence poetically and theologically. At the same time, it continues to look for the remnant in unlikely places.

The betrayal, rape, murder and dismemberment of the concubine in Judges 19 is a striking example. When wicked men of the tribe of Benjamin demand to “know” her master, he instead throws the concubine to them. All night they ravish her; in the morning she returns to her master. Showing no pity, he orders her to get up and go. She does not answer, and the reader is left to wonder if she is dead or alive. At any rate, the master puts her body on a donkey and continues the journey. When the couple arrive home, the master cuts the concubine in pieces, sending them to the tribes of Israel as a call to war against the wrong done to him by the men of Benjamin.

At the conclusion of this story, Israel is instructed to “consider, take counsel and speak” (Judges 19: 30). Indeed, Israel does reply—with unrestrained violence. Mass slaughter follows; the rape, murder and dismemberment of one woman condones similar crimes against hundreds and hundreds of women. The narrator (or editor) responds differently, however, suggesting the political solution of kingship instead of the anarchy of the judges (Judges 12: 25). This solution fails. In the days of David there is a king in Israel, and yet Amnon rapes Tamar. How, then, do we today hear this ancient tale of terror as the imperatives “consider, take counsel and speak” address us? A feminist approach, with attention to reader-response, interprets the story on behalf of the concubine as it calls to remembrance her suffering and death.

Similarly, the sacrifice of the daughter of Jephthah documents the powerlessness
and abuse of a child in the days of the judges (Judges 11). No interpretation can save her from the holocaust or mitigate the foolish vow of her father. But we can move through the indictment of the father to claim sisterhood with the daughter. Retelling her story, we emphasize the daughters of Israel to whom she reaches out in the last days of her life (Judges 11:37). Thus, we underscore the postscript, discovering in the process an alternative translation.

Traditionally, the ending has read, “she [the daughter] had never known man. And it became a custom in Israel that the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year” (11:40). Since the verb become, however, is a feminine form (Hebrew has no neuter), another reading is likely: “Although she had never known a man, nevertheless she became a tradition [custom] in Israel. From year to year the daughters of Israel went to mourn the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite, four days in the year.” By virtue of this translation, we can understand the ancient story in a new way. The unnamed virgin child becomes a tradition in Israel because the women with whom she chooses to spend her last days do not let her pass into oblivion; they establish a living memorial. Interpreting such stories of terror on behalf of women is surely, then, another way of challenging the patriarchy of Scripture.

I have surveyed three feminist approaches to the study of women in Scripture. The first explores the inferiority, subordination and abuse of women in ancient Israel. Within this context, the second pursues the counter-literature that is itself a critique of patriarchy. Utilizing both of these approaches, the third retells sympathetically the stories of terror about women. Though intertwined, these perspectives are distinguishable. The one stressed depends on the occasion and the talents and interests of the interpreter. Moreover, in its work, feminist hermeneutics embraces a variety of methodologies and disciplines. Archaeology, linguistics, anthropology and literary and historical criticism all have contributions to make. Thereby understanding of the past increases and deepens as it informs the present.

Finally, there are more perspectives on the subject of women in Scripture than are dreamt of in the hermeneutics of this essay. For instance I have barely mentioned the problem of sexist translations which, in fact, is receiving thoughtful attention from many scholars, male and female. But perhaps I have said enough to show that in various and sundry ways feminist hermeneutics is challenging interpretations old and new. In time, perhaps, it will yield a biblical theology of womanhood (not to be subsumed under the label humanity) with roots in the goodness of creation female and male. Meanwhile, the faith of Sarah and Hagar, Naomi and Ruth, the two Tamar and a cloud of other witnesses empowers and sober the endeavour.

Comment

Feminist critiques of traditional Christian doctrines have become an accepted aspect of mainstream theology since about 1980. Those critiques have often dealt
with the perceived difficulty of the “maleness” of God – as in the images of God as “father” or “shepherd” – or of Jesus Christ. In this article, Phyllis Trible looks at a number of women role models in the Old Testament, and attempts to explore both the role of women in Old Testament narratives, and how the patriarchal context of the Old Testament militates against allowing women to have the prominent roles that modern western society has come to expect of them and for them.

Questions for Study

1. What are the main roles allocated to women by the Old Testament, according to Trible in this article?
2. How does Trible set about “reclaiming the image of God female” in this situation?
3. Set out and critique the three main feminist approaches to the study of women in the Old Testament that Trible identifies in this article.